Imagining Otherwise: Designing and Implementing a High School Writing Center

Sheldon Cale Krieger

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

IMAGINING OTHERWISE:
DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

BY
SHELDON C. KRIEGER
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
MAY 2022
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Thank you to my homes-away-from-home for cheering me on in those summer days, winter weekends, and long nights: Jake Melnick’s, Replay, Rocks, and Lark (especially Ralph, Glenn, and Miss Vivian). You have been a refuge in the madness of this project, and I appreciate you all.

Thank you to all my former students, colleagues, and leaders who have put me on the path to the work in this study. Lydia, thank you for being the perfect first mentor and for setting me up for success all these years later. Theresa, Pat, and Colleen, thank you for being the best supports a first-year teacher could have ever asked for all that while ago. Angelica, thank you for being a solitary force of support and understanding in our time together. And my past cohort members at Teachers College and Penn, thank you for the camaraderie through those years and beyond.
To my current students, colleagues, and administration, thank you for your help and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you for supporting and championing our school’s writing center, especially this school year as it goes through its growing pains. Thank you to the English department in particular for their friendship; the joy and the laughter have meant everything all these years. A special thank you to Gabby and Justine for being especially loving and understanding as colleagues and friends as we continue to navigate the new terrain that is education these past few years. And, a huge show of gratitude to Kate for her love and support, both in and out of this study.

To my chosen family: Alexa, Meg, Nikki, and Rothy. I cannot believe you all have put up with me and this craziness for so long. Through the forgotten trip to LA (Where we even there?), the mountains of dishes and laundry, the worst night ever, and our ever-evolving family dynamics, I love you all more than you will ever know.

And finally, to my parents and my grandparents who allowed me the opportunity to fly out of the nest, and to seek out my own life and my own corner of the world when I was younger. I know it was not easy for you, and I hope you know I am forever appreciative for giving me the space to be myself and to pursue everything I have in my life. Your selfless love and support have never been lost on me, and without it none of this would have been imaginable. Thank you.
DEDICATION

To the seven writing center instructors who were kind, creative, and willing enough to help launch our space and community for our school.

Without you all, this would never be.
EPIGRAPH

“To call for imaginative capacity is to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise.” - Maxine Greene
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the work of planning and opening a new high school writing center in a school with a student population predominantly of students of color. The action research study occurred over the first twelve weeks of the writing center opening to better understand how such work might begin to disrupt oppressive systems and structures inherent in the school site as well as education at large. The arts-based methodology included daily reflective journals, a series of four collages, and document analysis. The study utilized critical imagining as its theoretical framework by combining tenets of critical race theory (CRT) with elements of imagination from the works of John Dewey, C. Wright Mills, and Maxine Greene. The findings indicated that the practical work of the new writing center required the new writing center director to demonstrate flexibility, center students and community, and focus on messaging and advocacy. The findings also demonstrated that the use of critical imagining helped to view students as leaders, and to balance strategy with hope.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Path to Applewood High School’s New Writing Center

I had always enjoyed school, but it wasn’t until sixth grade that I discovered writing as a particular strength. That year, through a combination of winning a grade-level essay contest and publishing one of my poems in the school newspaper, I learned that I was a writer. Throughout middle school, I continued to jot poems and musings in a notebook I carried with me everywhere, a stubby golf pencil shoved in its spiral and shoved deep in my back pocket. In high school, I opted into the semester-long creative writing class not once but twice – an unprecedented choice in scheduling, and a bit discombobulating to the teacher who had to revise her curriculum so as not to be too redundant my sophomore year. I did not care either way; I loved that class more than any other.

In high school, I further fostered my identity as a writer by serving as the editor-in-chief of the school’s annual literary magazine. For the first two years in the role, I was the only member of the magazine’s staff, a one-man literary cavalcade essay marching toward our annual publication, until I finally persuaded two close friends to join senior year. That year, I also participated in a national writing contest, for which I received an award. From that, I was asked to apply to a full-ride scholarship for a creative writing program at a southern university, which I applied for despite knowing my eyes and heart
were set on the northeast and The City as my means of getting out of my sleepy hometown. Perhaps most rewarding, however, was when my AP English teacher shared my with the class as an exemplary model, making particular note of authorial moves that, quite frankly, I was unaware I had even made.

So, when I arrived to my university the next fall to discover I was required to take a mandatory two-semester course on essay writing, I was neither displeased nor perplexed. After all, I enjoyed writing; and my writing had been noted and even celebrated throughout my schooling up until then. How bad could it be?

As it turns out, my first semester in college was pretty bad. Not only did I skate by in my other courses such as Egyptian history and nutrition by getting high C’s and low B’s on my papers, but in that particular course on writing essays, I received the first biting criticism of my writing in my academic career. My language was too flowery, my ideas unclear – my identity as a writer was broken and uncertain. After years of honing my craft and building my very sense of self through my writing, it no longer seemed a viable source of strength. I was shaken.

My second semester in the course, I had a different professor. I remember two things about this class in particular. First, he mandated one-on-one meetings with him to go over each of the three papers due that semester. During those meetings, he went beyond providing feedback on what to fix or how to fix it. Rather, he asked questions and appeared more curious to understand exactly what I was trying to say in my paper. Second, he had positive feedback for my writing. What seemed a complete shift from the first semester with the other professor, this new mentor championed my writing, my
voice, and my ideas – and he even encouraged me to submit two of my three pieces for publication in the school’s annual essay anthology. (I did, but neither were published. It was disappointing, sure, but his insistence on submitting both pieces was more validation than I needed.) As I moved ahead in my coursework, I found my identity as a writer reinvigorated. So much so, I went on to pursue graduate and now doctoral work, finding myself increasingly inspired in my writing as well as open to continuing to grow as a writer and an academic.

About halfway through my doctorate work, I was sitting in my doctoral seminar course when a discussion of academic writing began. I sat rather quiet, not yet willing to share my own painful collegiate introduction to the writing fold. Instead, I listened to a distinguished professor share her experience of being torn down by her own professor as a college freshman as he disparaged her writing as a student of color from a local public school. My head pivoted to a peer in our program teaching freshman at our university saying how her current students’ writing was well below what she would expect of entry-level college students. And then I realized my own students were caught somewhere between these two experiences: my students are students of color about to enter their post-secondary careers, and as such I was realizing in that moment how ill-prepared they may find themselves when facing their own papers the fall of their freshman year – and how diminished their own personal identities as writers might very well become (if they were not already after years of schooling).

I decided something had to be done.
It began with a simple, short email to my principal. *Have we thought about possibly starting a writing center?* Of course, in his response I found myself newly charged with figuring it out: *Have I ever thought about possibly starting a writing center?*

I was not sure at first. It seemed like a massive undertaking, and one I was not sure I was actually equipped to handle. After all, I had never worked in a writing center before, let alone organize one from the ground up. But, I accepted the challenge disguised as an invitation, and I set to work piecing together an action plan to try and get a brand new writing center off the ground for our school. My work as a high school writing center director had begun.

**Background of Problem**

In the past ten years, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS-ELA) have developed into the primary tool to inform literacy curriculum and instruction. Today, they are used by 41 states to indicate what skills all students are responsible to demonstrate by the time they graduate high school to be considered proficient for college and career. The writing standards are first divided into ten anchor standards, which are then scaffolded in greater detail and complexity across grades K-12. More specifically, the writing standards hold students accountable for writing across genres and disciplines, exhibiting the ability to communicate their ideas and experiences to their audience as specific to the purpose and task. To do so, the writing standards also highlight the importance of students dedicating both time and effort to their writing by completing many different writing tasks over the course of each school year (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2019).
Of course, these standards are only indicative of the importance of writing in students’ post-secondary lives. In addition to supporting students’ reading skills and content knowledge (Wilcox, 2015), writing is also connected to students’ ability to successfully apply to college as well as effectively gain salaried employment (Olson, Matuchniak, Chung, Stumpf, & Farkas, 2016). Yet, despite the importance of writing for continued success in and beyond high school, as Zumbrunn, Marrs, and Mewborn (2016) indicate, writing is a massively challenging task for students, leaving them with feelings of frustration and being overwhelmed. Additionally, writing instruction can be difficult for teachers, either through a lack of preparation in their teaching programs (Zuidema & Fredricksen, 2016), the inability to find professional development opportunities regarding writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2013), or a conflict between the professional learning and their own identities as writers, thereby inhibiting their ability to grow their teaching practice (Lillge, 2019). Student learning as writers is also impacted by systemic inequalities such as tracking and focusing on standardized test scores (Estrada & Warren, 2014).

These concerns ultimately impact students’ writing proficiency by the end of their high school careers. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) at Grades 8 and 12 for Writing in 2011, only 27% of all high school seniors demonstrated their ability to perform at or above proficiency (Nation’s Report Card, n.d.). Through disaggregation by students’ race and ethnicity, and the type and location of the school, as well as for students with disabilities and English learners (ELs), the data demonstrates that Black and Latinx students, students with disabilities, and ELs,
as well as students in public schools and schools in cities, performed lower on the writing test than their counterparts (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

NAEP Writing 2011 Results for Grade 12 Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Score</th>
<th>At or Above Proficiency Level (≥173)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Disability Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified as Student with Disability</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Identified as Student with Disability</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Learners</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not English Learners</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although this data is from a single national writing test, it suggests that the challenge of writing tasks combined with the issues around the teaching of writing disproportionately impact vulnerable student populations at a troublesome rate, indicating that these particular student populations are far less prepared for college and career than is just.

**Statement of Problem**

Applewood High School is a neighborhood high school on the north side of a large, midwestern American city. At the time of the study, the school served 1,365 students in grades 9-12. Demographically, the high school is largely considered diverse by comparison to other high schools in the city. The student population is 70.7% Latinx, 12.5% White, 10.2% Black, 3.2% Asian, and 3.4% other. Additional statistics include students from low-income households (72.8%), students with disabilities (16.9%), and ELs (9.2%). Although it is a traditional neighborhood high school intended to draw from its enrollment area (which is in the top five neighborhoods regarding per capita income in the city and predominantly White), the school’s student population primarily commutes from outside the enrollment area and from most neighborhoods throughout the city.

The average SAT score at the time of the study was 929, nearly 20 points below the district’s average (948) and more than 65 points below the state’s average (995). In terms of graduation, the school’s graduation rate (85.0%) was almost seven percent higher than the district’s rate. Yet, the college enrollment rate was 2.0% under the district average, while the school’s college persistence rate was 2.3% higher than the district average. Given these measures in addition to other factors including attendance rates and
fresmen on-track rates, the school was rated as in good standing with the district, though this was a decrease in the school’s rating from two years prior.

In terms of programming, Applewood High School offered a traditional, college prep curriculum enhanced with STEM programming, which included an innovation technology lab installed two years ago. Core subject classes were being tracked across five levels: self-contained classes for diverse learners; inclusion model classes for diverse learners with co-teachers; standard academic level classes; honors level classes; dual credit courses offered through a partnership with a local community college; and AP level classes. School-wide, Applewood offered 16 AP level classes the year of the study, including the new AP Capstone course that was being initiated that particular school year. At the time, Applewood was only one of 21 high schools in the city—and one of the only neighborhood high schools—to do so.

During the study, the only academic support offered to students outside of those teachers who were willing to provide their own time outside of class was a tutoring program exclusively for 9th grade students. Over the previous four school years, the school’s freshmen on-track team had developed the program, which was offered two days each week for one hour after school. The program was run by a staff of five teachers, paid for their time, and it was solely intended for the four core subjects. However, Applewood did not yet offer programming to address the academic needs of all students across grade levels and across all subjects.

As a school community, Applewood framed student success through the lens of preparing them for college, career, and community, expanding the common notions of
academic preparedness to also acknowledge the social role of education in democratizing students as Dewey was fond of. Given my own educational experiences as well as my tenure as teacher across school contexts and with many different colleagues and collaborators, I had come to understand writing as an integral part of post-secondary success across all potential avenues for students. Yet, writing, no matter the context, has proved to be an extremely taxing and overwhelming task for anyone and everyone, including myself, my peers, and my students. Still, in general, we lacked ample resources to better develop these vital skills at Applewood across disciplines and across grade levels in support of all students. Understanding my own struggle with writing in college, my colleagues’ problems with the same, and my students’ current abilities as well as their future aspirations, I broached the topic of starting a writing center with my administration. Framing it as a resource to not only meet our students’ academic needs, but to also serve as a setting to foster collaboration and community, I was charged with designing and implementing Applewood’s first ever writing center.

Applewood High School boasts a school model that supports students’ college, career, and community readiness, specifically through a rigorous interdisciplinary program. Over the prior three years under the current administration, the staff’s professional development has focused on developing rigor across the curriculum and other ways to ensure students’ postsecondary success. Yet, additional student supports outside of class continued limited at best when such resources could greatly improve students’ learning experiences. Per a state-wide survey of teachers, students, and parents administered at every K-12 school annually, there had been overall drops in the
categories regarding the level of instruction and the level of support by nine points and 18 points, respectively, at Applewood in the past five academic years. Additionally, in May of the previous school year, a group of teachers and administrators volunteered to conduct empathy interviews with select 9th and 10th grade students. These interview protocols asked questions regarding students’ sense of feeling valued and feeling diminished, as well as ideas of what would improve the school community as a whole. This staff-run, student-focused process yielded a major trend of students wanting themselves to do better, but also expressing that they did not yet know how to do so. In regards to student writing, there was no current local data regarding student writing at Applewood since there was not yet interdisciplinary discussion of writing instruction or practice across departments or grade levels. Even in the English department, despite an attempt to initiate vertical alignment of certain Common Core State Standards across grade level teams last summer, I have perceived our work around developing writing tasks and teaching as inconsistent, both as a department and as course teams.

**Purpose Statement**

Though a far-reaching and complex problem far beyond the scope of a single study, through the creation and implementation of a student-staffed writing center after school, I hoped to provide a resource that could begin to provide some level of support for students that could help Applewood deliver on its promise of aiding students in their preparedness for their post-secondary lives by better supporting them in developing their skills and identities as writers. As such, the writing center was primarily designed to help grow students’ writing skills through a process-focused program. Additionally, by
building the writing center around a model of peer tutoring, students could strengthen their abilities to collaborate and problem solve. Most importantly, given the student population Applewood serves, it was important that students were provided the resource of a writing center that both values and uplifts their voices and ideas, while simultaneously giving them an outlet to grow and support their educational agency.

**Positionality**

As action research that utilizes a critical lens in examining the work of creating and opening a new high school writing center with and for students of color, it was crucial for me to acknowledge my various positionalities and roles in the research. Here, I start by examining my experience as a practicing educator. Then, I explore my emerging understanding of my role as researcher. Finally, I inhabit my positionality as a White man in the educational field.

**As Practitioner**

During this study, I was in my fourth year as an English teacher at Applewood High School. Overall, it was my tenth in year in the classroom, having previously taught at a turn-around neighborhood high school and alternative high schools in Philadelphia, as well as at a contract charter high school and a selective enrollment high school in Chicago. At Applewood, I have taught various levels of 9th and 10th grade English; during this particular school year, I taught four sections of 10th grade English. The previous year, I stepped into the role of course team leader for the sophomore English team. In that role, I was tasked to lead the team in revising the English 2 (10th grade English) curriculum
with specific focus on rigor and vertical alignment to the other levels of English courses, as well as in support of our school’s targeted instructional area of critical thinking.

In addition, I had previously served as the English department representative on the school’s instructional leadership team for two years before this study. This team’s goal was to support the professional development of the staff in regards to instruction that bolstered students’ critical thinking. However, I had chosen to step down from that role the year of this study to focus on other initiatives at the school, including the writing center and our school’s burgeoning Equity Team. Starting just the year prior, this team began to work toward integrating social justice work into other aspects of our school’s systems. There, I began an initiative known as the Equity Forum, a monthly program that functioned as an informal professional learning community to provide a space after school for staff to gather and have a text-based discussion and share their experiences with a focus on race and other social justice issues. All staff were invited and welcome to join, each receiving that month’s article, with no attendance boundaries or minimums.

Given my many roles at Applewood, there are implications for how and why I found myself leading the writing center program. Primarily, as an English teacher, I have always gravitated towards the teaching of writing in the discipline as I find it affords opportunity for student voice, identity exploration, and reflection that other parts of the discipline do not lend themselves as easily. Of course, I am sure this affinity for teaching writing influenced me to broach the idea of starting a writing center with my administration in the first place. I also believe that my ongoing involvement in equity
work in our school community underscored both why and how I had chosen to undertake
the work of opening this writing center with a critical lens to the work it must entail.

But, I also think that my various pre-existing roles also highlight a natural
inclination for leadership and social justice inherent in this particular study. Applewood
was the first school in which I had worked that has allowed me to step into a teacher-leader role. In the three years prior, I had been given the opportunity to informally expand on this role by supporting overall school development in ways common to teacher leadership such as connecting the staff and the administration, leading professional learning for my peers, and supporting school development (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). According to Werner and Campbell (2016), such teacher leadership increases feelings of support and care among the staff, encourages professional growth, and impacts change within the school community. This prior experience with teacher leadership would certainly inform my role in the writing center. However, my recent participation in leading the Equity Forum has also positioned me as an advocate for work that disrupts our inequitable educational system, and through this study I began to better understand how these particular values and beliefs unfold in this particular practice.

As Researcher

Prior to my doctoral program, I had completed two Master’s programs, each of which required a thesis. My first program concentrated on the teaching of English, and the topic of my final thesis was a case study of one student’s experience with two different types of writing instruction. More specifically, I sought to better understand how the student, as a young Black man, responded to writing instruction that valued Black
English versus writing instruction that valued standardized written English (SWE). This process was my introduction to research, namely qualitative research. In addition to my findings in the study that suggested the student preferred the instruction valuing his innate voice more though he aimed to become more proficient in academic English—downtown English as he called it—particular seeds were also planted that have continued to inform my research orientation. In particular, I recall heeding the advice of maintaining a manageable data set, which informed my decision to pursue a case study then as I am sure it influenced my choice data in this study. Also, and more importantly, I remember being told that research is not about proving anything; in this sense, researchers should enter their studies with open minds and a willingness to explore the subject at hand. I found this echoing throughout the study as I wanted to embrace the action researcher stance, knowing that it would require me to continuously develop this research as it emerged.

In my second graduate program, I studied school leadership, which, despite not having pursued an administrative position, gave me the confidence and skills to fulfill my teacher leader roles. Through the intensive one-year program, we developed our final study over the course of the entire year. For that informal study, I chose to examine the experiences of four colleagues in a new professional learning community (PLC) utilizing aesthetic education practices. Participants not only experienced aesthetic education as part of their professional learning, but they were encouraged at the end to incorporate aesthetic practices into one of their own lessons. As a researcher, this experience broadened my scope by including multiple participants, thereby pushing me with my data
collection methods. Moreover, my experience with this second thesis demonstrated my belief in imagination and aestheticism as a vehicle for learning and knowledge – a belief certainly salient in this study as it informs my theoretical framework and data collection.

Together, these prior studies provide insight into how I showed up as a researcher in this study – my interests, as well as my values and beliefs. Yet, the formality of this current study as a dissertation complete with a committee, proposal, IRB, and defense intimidated me throughout the process. I still consider myself only an emerging researcher at best. I see the value and need of research in the education field, and in particular I am drawn to types such as action research that seem the most directly impactful for students and schools. But because of this stance, I still identify more strongly with my practitioner stance than I do as a researcher. Being aware of this, I worked to address the duality of my roles both as practitioner and as researcher throughout the study.

**As a White Male Educator**

I grew up in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. I am an only child, and growing up there were few kids in my neighborhood around my age, and those that were close in age were not close friends of mine. At school, I tended to be on the quieter, more studious side. Over the course of my elementary and high school years, I was friendly with all of my peers but usually only had a few close friendships. I always loved school itself, and learning. But, nearing high school graduation I began to sense a certain discomfort with myself and felt out of place. At that age, I began recognizing my sexuality as a gay man, and although I never came out to anyone beyond my best friend, my developing identity
weighed on me at the time. I knew there was much more beyond the sleepy suburb I had known all my life. I decided that going to college would be my chance at escaping and seeing more of the world. It would be a chance to become more of myself as I was beginning to understand who that was, and to hopefully find somewhere I felt I more naturally fit.

I ended up pursuing my Bachelor’s in New York City. Having loved school and admiring many of my teachers throughout my life, it was a natural choice for me to pursue English education as my major. The education program at New York University was designed so that freshman students would be observing classrooms from their very first semester. I was excited to take this next step.

My first classroom observation was at a public high school in midtown Manhattan. As I walked through the hallways and into class, I felt an immediate ping of discomfort: I was the only White person in the room. I looked around at the array of Black and Brown faces, not much younger than my own, and I felt out of place again – but even more so. My own high school years rushed back to me, and I suddenly realized how homogenous my high school and my neighborhood truly were. I even recalled when my high school’s standardized test scores were first reported by race and ethnicity how, next to African American, it was listed as “not enough data.” In this new setting, I found myself as such: “not enough data.” The discomfort switched to fear as I realized I could never be an effective teacher in this setting, frightening scenes of Dangerous Minds and Freedom Writers playing in my mind. While I continued observations throughout the
semester, I applied to switch majors, which was ultimately denied and I stayed in the education program uncertain of my future as a possible teacher.

Over the course of my undergraduate studies and student teaching, however, my identity and confidence as a future teacher continued to develop and grow, fostered by grounding relationships with others in my program and our professors. Upon graduating, I pursued teaching jobs in major cities, where I ended up in Philadelphia in majority Black schools. As time went on and I gained more and more experience, the initial discomfort and fear of that first day of observations waned more and more. But, as I continued teaching in these schools and eventually schools in Chicago with larger Latinx populations, I found myself still battling elements of White emotionality (Matias, 2016). Through this, I continued growing and developing as an educator, and in particular as I studied theories of whiteness, critical race theory (CRT), and culturally responsive pedagogy. I have since developed a strong stance as a “co-conspirator” for my students and families of color, which informs both my teaching and instruction as well as my collaboration with colleagues and administration (Love, 2019). This lens of teaching has now become the prominent view of how I see my work as an educator.

In this study, my positionality as a White male educator plays an important role. While the action research presented here centers my work as a new writing center director, and I am a White male educator, it is not a study of my whiteness because I feel that doing so would ultimately detract from the work I seek to do in the writing center – work that is inherently and importantly student-focused. Instead, I am naming this positionality, and I am aware of this positionality as it informs the work; but I am framing
this study around critical imagining, with its elements of CRT and theories of imagination, to highlight how my work in the writing center must be tackled as a valuable resource for high school students of color as a potential source of transformation and disruption needed to address the common inequities they face in schools rather than a glimpse into my own lived experience of such work as a White male educator. In doing so, the current study seeks to strike a balance of focusing on my work in designing and implementing this new writing center while maintaining the emancipatory interest of critical action research (CAR).

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used *critical imagining* as its theoretical framework. Critical imagining utilizes crucial tenets of critical race theory (CRT) with elements of imagination as a means to understand and analyze my work with and for students of color as a White male educator in the role of new writing center director. As its own framework, CRT has its roots in Critical Legal Studies, which examines how the structures and practices of the American legal system informs the larger inequitable structures at work in our society. In education, CRT emerged in response to the progress and reforms of the 1980’s as a means for educators to better understand the educational experiences of students of color in ways that could oppose and disrupt the traditional hegemonic structures of the American school system. Critical race theorists work under the tenets that: racism is normalized in our society; race is socially constructed and accumulated historically; racism is structural and intersects with other forms of oppression; history and context are vital in understanding racist structures; the lived experiences of people of color and
counternarratives are invaluable sources of information; CRT is both pragmatic and idealistic; and CRT aims to erase all forms of oppression (Delgado, Matsuda, Lawrence, and Crenshaw, as cited in Litowitz, 2016; Delgado, as cited in Litowitz, 2016; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Sefancic, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2013). In examining racism, and the role of whiteness in particular, CRT also houses the concepts of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and interest convergence (Bell, 1980). The former concept considers the strong connection between property rights and race, including curriculum and education, while the latter concept examines the ways in which racial progress ultimately serves to congruently advance the White population.

With the important work and concepts of CRT in mind, critical imagining incorporates the concept of imagination as a means to address the practicality of work to be done, a humble attempt to begin making the theory more practical in my work in the writing center. For Dewey, imagination is akin to learning itself as knowledge is produced via a symbiotic relationship between one’s imagined image and the action taken to make that image a reality (Chambliss, 1991). By recognizing what is missing, we imagine and then act. Mills (1959) proposed the sociological imagination, which accounts for the overlap between our personal lives and experiences, and public contexts and histories that surround us. This intersection allows for many different viewpoints, and these viewpoints allow us to push boundaries and try new combinations in imaginative ways. Greene (1995) also explores different forms of imagination, including the poetic imagination and the social imagination. The poetic imagination allows us to interact with artworks in ways that open us to new understandings and possibilities; the social
imagination channels that transformative energy to our society to envision different for our world and for ourselves. Together, these different notions of imagination share the idea that imagination functions as a means for us to consider otherwise and, more importantly, for the betterment of our society and our world.

In bringing imagination into direct conversation with CRT, critical imagining served as the framework for this study in which I wanted to examine the work I did as a White educator to improve the educational experiences of my students of color. Inherently, the work connected to the tenets of CRT, specifically as an aim to transform the traditional educational paradigm that oppresses and marginalizes these students. But to do the work itself, I had to make use of imagination. Therefore, critical imagination helped to begin framing the undertaking of starting up a new high school writing center as a creative vision, a means meant to disrupt racism in our educational practices as well as a way to raise up student voice and increase their agency.

**Research Design**

For the design of this study, I drew from both action research and arts-based methods. In doing so, the goal of this research design was to closely align to the study’s framework, critical imagining. By designing the study to be art-based action research, I connected both the everyday, living-breathing work of the writing center to its idealized, theoretical work explored through the lens of critical examining in this study.

**Methodology**

This study was designed as arts-based action research to examine the work involved in developing a writing center with and for students of color in my high school
community as a White educator. At its very core, this study was qualitative in its nature due to its use of nonnumerical data points to understand the work entailed in this new and emerging resource for students (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). One key data source was a set of visual collages created from various print and other materials in response to themes and ideas present in my practitioner-researcher journals, another key data source. The use of collaging made this study a form of arts-based research (ABR). ABR serves as a means for researchers to utilize the arts, either through engagement with or creation of art, to better understand the topic (Leavy, 2018; Rolling, 2013).

Additionally, this study was a form of action research given that I aimed to improve my educational practice through an inquiry approach, which ultimately aiming to serve as a resource and insight for other practitioners to apply to their own work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Action research utilizes cycles of inquiry to accomplish this work. One such model from Hingley (as cited in Pine, 2009) underscores the cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection with the goal of continuous improvement. Thus, I used Hingley’s model for this particular study as a means to drive this work towards such continual growth and betterment.

**Research Questions**

To meet the purpose of the study, I developed the following research questions:

- How do I design and implement a new writing center that seeks to disrupt educational inequity and racism experienced by students of color?

- In what ways does my critical imagining shape the work of a new writing center in its first 12 weeks?
Significance of the Study

As a body of research and literature, studies and articles regarding work around writing centers has been consistently increasing in the past few decades. Yet, much of the literature on writing centers focuses on universities and colleges given the history of the field. Therefore, studies of writing center directors themselves, including Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson’s (2016) collection of the experiences of new writing center directors, largely emphasize those working in post-secondary contexts. Research in secondary school contexts also primarily concentrates on international schools and non-profit organizations working in high schools.

This study addresses the need of understanding working to design and implement a new writing center meant to serve students of color in a traditional public high school setting given the current lack of research in such contexts. Writing centers are an invaluable resource for students across contexts, but can be particularly important in supporting students of color and multilingual students (Ashley & Shafer, 2006; Grimm, 2009). However, given that writing centers are still primarily seen in post-secondary institutions, educators in high schools need to take on the important work of developing and providing such a resource in their own school communities to better serve their students academically as well as better prepare them for their post-secondary lives.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Three major assumptions belied this study. First, I was working with the assumption that writing is, in fact, a key factor of post-secondary success whether one pursues a career, college, or participates broadly in their community. The root of this
assumption came from my personal experience in college and career, notably as a White man, but also connected to much of what has been shared by my colleagues and peers in schools in which I have worked and graduate programs which I have attended. As such, I focused in on this particular skill to try and better support Applewood’s student population in hopes that they would be better prepared for their post-secondary ventures than in the past.

Secondly, I was under the assumption that as a White male educator I could tackle critical race work and research. One important tenet of such work emphasizes the importance of counternarratives and the experiences of people of color. While I could not specifically honor this tenet in this particular study given its perimeters, I worked with other tenets of critical race theory. Perhaps most tangibly, this study utilized the tenet concerning the duality of pragmatism and idealism. Through my critical imagining of otherwise for my students of color, I focused my work with the writing center as a resource and support to transform their educational experience.

Lastly, there was the assumption that my intended audience would be able to transfer the knowledge gained from my own study to their own practices in their own contexts. As action research, it was important that the work tried to connect to a broader audience so that it would not just serve the purpose of informing my own practice but theirs as well. Additionally, awareness of and attention to my specific context was of the utmost importance. Therefore, I had to assume that my audience would be able to extrapolate from my self-reflection and exploration to transfer to themselves, their classrooms, their schools, and their teaching.
One limitation of this study was its scope being contained in one specific high school context at Applewood. The context of the study was limited by focusing on one particular high school with its unique history and individual student population. Therefore, the work of transference now falls on the behalf of the audience. Similarly, the action research presented here was singular in its focus on my work as the individual director of Applewood’s new writing center. Therefore, the research is limited to the preparation, decisions, actions, and problem solving I did myself over the course of the study.

Another limitation of the study was its focus on students of color and attempting to disrupt their experiences of racism in school. Given the student population at Applewood, the study could have also concerned the experiences of English learners and students in the special education program, given these two populations make up 9.2% and 16.9% of the overall student body, respectively. However, this particular study focused on the work of the writing center as it related to Applewood’s students of color as the most significant portion of the population at 84.1% of the student population.

One final limitation of the study was the multiplicity of my roles. Given the design of the study, I was working simultaneously as a practitioner, a researcher, and (very humbly) an artist. Because I served in these multiple roles, the research design, data analysis, and findings are all presented here through my individual lens. My positionality across these roles undoubtedly filtered the data and findings through my lens given my specific experience in my specific context at Applewood High School.
While these factors served as limitations in this study, they also served as delimitations particularly crafted to serve the purpose of this research. First, this study was specifically designed as action research to focus on my work as an emerging writing center director. Because there is a gap in the literature on writing centers covering this work in high school contexts, this study was intentionally designed with this focus to help address this need in the research. My hope was that by sharing the experience in my specific context, other high school teachers would be compelled to take up similar work in their own schools, specifically if they work in schools serving students of color. Second, the timeline of the study was crafted to cover the opening of the new writing center. Because the purpose of the study was to examine my experience in designing and implementing this new student resource, it was crucial that this study take place in the opening weeks of the writing center to best capture this experience. Lastly, a delimitation of this study was its use of arts-based methods. My research of current literature on writing centers did not include any arts-based research. Provided the intent of ABR and its benefits as a methodology, its use in this study was specifically intended to bolster the reflection imperative to the cycles required in action research.

**Definition of Terms**

**Imagination**

For this study, the term *imagination* is used to refer to one’s ability to consider otherwise, to picture other potential ways that ultimately inform one’s actions as a means to make those images and ideas a reality, as informed by Dewey (Chambliss, 1991). Imagination is informed by considering multiple perspectives, especially at the
intersection of the personal and public (Mills, 1959). Imagination is also shaped by our experiences and perceptions, including when we engage with and create art (Greene, 1995). More specifically, imagination in this study is used in a critical sense, similar to Greene’s social imagination, as a way to produce ideas that can better serve and support students of color; these ideas then taking form in actions to an attempt to be transformative and enact change to improve the learning experiences of these students. This framework, critical imagining, is detailed further in the second chapter.

**Students of Color**

Over 80% of the student population at Applewood High School consists of Latinx, Black, and Asian students. To best represent these students with respect to their races and ethnicities while also avoiding homogenized terminology such as urban, diverse, marginalized, and underserved, all of which connotate color in their use in educational research and practice, I am using the term students of color in this study. Just as my experience is informed by being a White man, so too are our students educational experiences at Applewood shaped by their racial and ethnic identities. To both preserve and respect the students at Applewood, while also maintaining the true diversity of the school population, the term students of color is utilized in this particular study.

**Tutor**

For this study, the term tutor is used in reference to those students who staff writing centers and work directly with the other students who seek support for their writing. Tutors are the ones who do the direct work with the student clientele in a writing center. Based on the model the writing center uses, a tutor may be different from program
to program. In some writing centers, tutors are full-time staff or faculty at the school, or perhaps work as the writing center director as well. At others, tutors are from outside the school community, coming from non-profit organizations or from colleges and universities through various partnerships. The writing center at Applewood High School uses a peer-tutoring model (Kent, 2006). Therefore, in this study, tutors refer to the eight Applewood students who applied to be part of the first cohort this school year.

**Writing Center**

For this study, writing center refers to a program in a school setting where students receive help with their writing. Though historically writing centers emerged in universities and colleges through professor-led writing labs (Lerner, 2010), over the past few decades they have evolved into a variety of forms in a variety of contexts, including high schools. In essence, writing centers allow for students to develop their writing skills, their pieces of writing, and their writing identity through processes of feedback and collaboration.

**Standardized Written English (SWE)**

As explained by Greenfield and Rowan (2011), there is an inherent difference in language that is spoken and language that is written. In my experience, student writing that adheres to the typically expected grammatical rules for English is referred to as “Standard Written English.” However, Greenfield and Rowan complicate this expected terminology given the ever-flexible nature of language because “Standard English,” the language we purport to teach in school, the language many purport to be superior to other ways of speaking, the language progressive
educators insist is necessary to ensure the survival and success of students of color, is … an abstraction. (p. 42)

Therefore, they suggest using the term “standardized” when referring to such forms of English to underscore how we determine which forms of the language will carry power and privilege. As such, I will use the term “standardized written English” in place of the more typical “Standard Written English” throughout this study as it best aligns to the critical imagining that frames this study and the aim of the action research itself to disrupt oppressive systems of inequity in schools through the creation of a writing center. Given that both terms have the same acronym, standardized written English will sometimes still appear as SWE.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to best understand the work inherent in starting a new writing center in a high school with and for students of color. In particular, through this research, I hoped to consider the ways in which such work could serve to disrupt the inequity of our educational system so that we can better serve and support our students of color and other traditionally marginalized student populations. With this arts-based action research, another goal was to understand the ways in which critical imagining functions to both inform and understand the work at hand.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The following dissertation is arranged in four additional chapters. In the second chapter, I provide an overview of the body of literature on writing centers, including their history as an educational institution, their role in multicultural education, and the roles of
writing center directors. In the second chapter, I also include an overview of the study’s theoretical framework, *critical imagining*. In the third chapter, I outline the study’s methodology, which includes an overview of arts-based action research and its various components. In the fourth chapter, I analyze the data from my practitioner-researcher journals, collages, and document analysis. And in the fifth chapter, I share my findings from the study, including recommendations for other high school educators seeking to design and implement resources such as writing centers for students of color.

**Key Points**

Writing centers are an invaluable resource for students given their numerous benefits academically as well as socially and emotionally. Yet, writing centers are not yet as prevalent in high schools as they should be, still residing largely in colleges and universities. This holds especially true for students of color at all levels. For writing centers to play a larger role in high schools, particularly those school communities that primarily serve students of color, we need educators who are willing to tackle this transformative work from the ground up. However, there is not yet enough literature on what such work looks like. This study serves as one mere example of what I experienced in such work as a White male educator attempting to address such a need in my own school community.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

While the literature regarding the theory and practice of writing instruction is expansive, I have always been most intrigued by the exchange between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow, and the seemingly oppositional nature of their approaches. Through Bartholomae’s (1985) approach, student writers are inherently a part of academia, either “to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a special discourse” (p. 135), with the result being student writing dictated by the rules and expectations of professionals and academics, such as literary critics. Bartholomae argues that while he does not expect his students to be experts such as literary critics, he believes that they must be able to navigate the semantics of literary critics to fit in with the dominant discourse at play, particularly when writing.

Contrarily, Elbow (1983) promotes freewriting as a means to generate original, critical thinking in his writing pupils. By embracing this more organic approach to the writing process that celebrates students openly (and often messily) thinking onto the page by writing without initial concern for errors, organization, or correctness, Elbow posits that students are able to think both creatively and critically because the revision occurs after the ideas in the draft are generated, rather than as the student is writing, which can block those ideas from ever being expressed in the first place.
In a published exchange between the two, Bartholomae analyzes the differences between the two academics’ approaches as a matter of trust: “Peter wants his students to ‘trust’ language and implies, rightly, that I would teach a form of mistrust. The word I would use for mistrust is *criticism*” (Bartholomae & Elbow, 1995, p. 84). For Bartholomae, this requires students to fully immerse themselves into the academy, fully embracing the knowledge and forms of writing traditionally valued in these predominantly White, patriarchal academic settings. As such, this requires corrective feedback as dictated by the discipline in which the student is participating. Elbow rebukes this by acknowledging that people primarily learn without teachers and formal instruction, and therefore language and writing should be the same. Freewriting allows students to “discover that their heads are full of language and ideas … and they discover they can get pleasure from writing” (p. 89).

Perhaps more so than other seminal works regarding writing instruction by Moffett (1988), Flower and Hayes (1981), and Emig (1977), the ongoing debate between Bartholomae and Elbow has shaped my identity as a writing teacher because it forced me to reconcile my beliefs about why we write, for whom we write, and the feedback needed to grow as writers. This debate continues today in my classroom as I try to navigate some semblance of balance between pushing students to think critically and creatively through freewriting practices, while also helping students participate with literature through disciplinary literacy.

Given my background, when I broached the idea of starting a writing center at my school, I believed I had a solid foundation as an English teacher to do so. As I began to
prepare my proposal for the administration, however, I quickly realized I had stumbled into a whole realm of research on a formalized discipline of which I had been completely unaware. As a new writing center director, I uncovered a wealth of studies and articles regarding writing centers that helped to frame my positionality and my problem as a novice director in a first-year writing center. While some publications examined the work of high school writing centers, given the history of the field and its origins in universities, the majority of studies on writing centers focused on their work in higher education. Though different in context, these studies and articles have been included in this literature review in an attempt to ensure that important concepts that can be transferred from one setting to the other are considered. Likewise, much literature regarding the functionality of writing centers exists almost as guides to how to achieve the work. Although such literature is typically not part of literature reviews, given the nature of my study and my attempt to begin a writing center at my school, I feel that such literature is valuable as it inevitably plays a role in shaping my understanding of the work at hand.

In the following literature review, I begin by framing issues inherent in my study by way of the history of writing centers; the theory, practice, and outcomes of writing centers; and the intersection of writing centers and matters of multiculturalism and inequities. I then analyze the current literature on writing center directors and administration to aptly place this study in the overarching body of research on writing centers. Finally, I include an overview of my theoretical framework, critical imagining, through which I approached this study as a means to explore and examine the ways in
which I, as a White male teacher, worked with and supported my students of color through the work of our school’s nascent writing center.

**Overview of Writing Center Research**

Although writing centers as we currently know them emerged in the 1950’s, scholarship and research regarding writing centers began to establish itself as a field with the publications of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* and *The Writing Center Journal* in 1977 and 1980, respectively (Lerner, 2014). Since then, the field has continued to grow and expand, but in doing so has experienced some growing pains. In particular, there is concern with the lack of empirical research, or RAD (replicable, agreeable, and data-supported) research (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Driscoll & Perdue, 2012; Lerner, 2014).

Given its history as well as its connection to the International Writing Centers Association as its official publication, *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* is the primary focus of consistent publication and scholarship in the field. As such, it is also the focus of how scholarship on writing centers has progressed in the last 40 years. Lerner (2014) completed a study of the publication’s citations between 1980 and 2009, which included 241 articles and a total of 4,095 citations. The findings indicate that the articles are predominantly from single authors who cite sources primarily from *WCJ* itself, and that these cited sources, with few exceptions, largely occur just once. This suggests that the flagship source of scholarship in the field of writing centers has a limited audience of current writing center practitioners writing for themselves and one another. Lerner also finds that 80% of the publication’s authors appear in the journal just once, suggesting that the field is still not yet established enough to be taken seriously, instead serving as a
stepping stone for these practitioners and researchers to study in other more well-known fields such as composition studies.

Like Lerner, Driscoll and Perdue (2012) utilize WCJ for an essay exploring the role of RAD research in the journal over the course of its history. Upon analyzing 270 articles in WCJ, Driscoll and Wynn determined only 91 of them “contained at least some form of research” (p. 20), and of those, 15 of them had scored a 10 on the researcher’s rubric, qualifying them as RAD research. Despite this relatively low percentage of RAD research overall, the findings did indicate a steady increase of RAD research in WCJ since 1985.

Babcock and Thonus (2012) examine another source of writing center scholarship: anthologies and edited volumes. Similar to the aforementioned studies of WCJ publications, Babock and Thonus also note that the essays and studies included in these books do not equate to research as defined by the components of RAD either – work that is “empirically definable” and leads to generalizable practices across various settings (p. 9). Babock and Thonus specifically examine three anthologies and 11 edited volumes of writing center scholarship, all of which they deem to be the basis of today’s theoretical framework for writing center practices. Based on their study, they find that the anthologies often include the same articles and lack empirical research, while the edited volumes demonstrate the nascency of the field in general; this allows for new publications to appeal to the founding authors of the field to garner legitimacy, as well as the potential for future scholarship to demonstrate greater variety as the field grows and expands. Babcock and Thonus argue that the lack of empirical research in writing center
scholarship is the result of the absence of a general desire to publish in the field, which they also connect to the fact that many writing center scholars are in fact writing center practitioners, and their practice in the field stalemates their ability to research the field itself.

**Writing Center Practice**

The practical work of writing centers has been situated using such theories as transfer theory (Devet, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Ervin; 2016; Hill, 2016) and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2013; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014; Nordlof, 2014; Tobin, 2010). Theory, of course, serves as a foundation for the work of writing centers, but as with any facet of education, it is important to consider the work of writing centers in practice. In reviewing the literature on writing center practices, I have included both practitioner-focused instructional guides as well as empirical studies as both types of literature help inform my own implementation of the writing center in my school.

When searching for prior studies and articles, I focused on using just the term “writing center” in my searches, and narrowed the publications included here based on how they informed my emerging understanding of writing centers, both in theory and in practice, as well as my new role as writing center director. I expanded my search beyond the last ten years to include publications from the last 25 years because doing so garnered more content that helped me comprehend the work I was attempting to take on. Also, although my context is a high school in a major city, I have opted to include studies focused on university-level writing centers given that the majority of literature is situated
in such contexts. As such, I had to remain mindful about transferring these skills, practices, and theories between such contexts. Ultimately, the literature included here, when brought together in conversation, helped to me shape my understanding of the work of writing centers and guided my planning of my school’s new writing center.

To begin considering the operation of writing centers, it is crucial to note that they are functionally interdisciplinary as they serve to help students with their writing in any number of courses (Block, 2016; Ervin, 2016; Jordan, 2006). As such, writing centers help tie together the work and missions of departments across the school or university, ultimately reflecting the institution’s vision and mission (Jordan, 2006; Simpson, 2002). In doing so, writing centers can serve as hubs of change to influence the schooling institution from within (Jordan, 2006). The truest of aims for writing centers need to focus on promoting student agency and self-efficacy in their writing while bolstering collaboration amongst all stakeholders (Blazer, 2015; Greer & Trofimoff, 2013; Jordan, 2006; Rafoth, Wells, & Fels, 2011).

**Tutor Training**

One important facet of writing center practice is tutor training, or tutor education. In addition to student-staffed writing centers, Kent (2006) identifies four additional types of writing centers: faculty-staffed writing centers, online writing labs (OWLs), university-affiliated writing centers, and community-based writing centers. While all writing centers require some form of staffing, the majority of the literature on tutor education examines full-time staff or student tutors at the university or college level. In Barnett’s (2006) writing centers, which existed in high schools, there was a fully
hierarchal structure in which writing center staff trained the high school teachers, who mentored the university tutors, who trained the high school students. These training sessions focused on questioning techniques, how to structure the full tutoring session, and various styles of tutoring. Another potential source for tutor education is visiting other schools’ writing centers, particularly high school tutors visiting college writing centers (Greer & Trofimoff, 2013). Professional readings and mock tutoring sessions are commonly used to educate tutors as well (Blazer, 2015; Driscoll, 2015; Greer & Trofimoff, 2013; Hill, 2016). However, aside from the mention of two specific articles by Greer and Trofimoff, many of the cited or found articles that could potentially serve as part of tutor education are clearly more geared toward professional academics, writing center directors, or college-level tutors, thereby leaving a gap in resources for high-school tutors.

Pushing beyond the basic how-to’s of tutoring techniques, Hill (2016) suggests that transfer theory supports the overarching work of writing centers and, as “key sites for the facilitation of transfer” (p. 78) at schools, directors need to be directly engaging tutors in learning about transfer theory. To do so requires professional reading and practice sessions. In her own study, Hill finds that after one hour of tutor education regarding transfer theory, tutors were supporting their tutees in transferring the knowledge considerably more, thereby demonstrating not just the effectiveness of tutor education on transfer theory, but arguably, on any number of theories and practices. When considering what to include in my own tutors’ training (and how to do so), considering such theories as this can be helpful as it supports not just the how of tutoring but also the why. I believe
including such ideas as transfer theory may be helpful in not only informing how the tutors engage with their peers who visit the writing center, but it may bolster their own engagement in the work as it helps to explain the importance of what they are doing.

Another area of tutor education for consideration is reflective writing, which many administrators and directors utilize, particularly in the form of blogging (Blazer, 2015). Hall (2011) expands on this concept, finding sheer reflective writing in itself too isolating and focused on the self to be effective if one writes with only themselves as the audience. Instead, Hall supports the use of a community-based blog for dialogic reflection. Dialogic reflection though shared blogging makes reflective writing more effective by allowing for staff to engage with one another in regards to their own practice as well as expert knowledge, which they can even question or dismiss in their dialogic exchange with one another. Thus, the “expertise is not possessed by individuals; rather, it is emergent within [the staff’s] transactions” (p. 103). This practice not only supports the learning and development of the individual tutors, but would also build and support a sense of community, which should be a key aspect in a culturally relevant space.

In addition to attending to the staff’s professional education regarding writing center theory and practice, Perry (2016) asserts that writing center directors must also be mindful of and support their tutor’s mental and emotional well-being, and in fact should be a priority. The act of tutoring a student’s writing can be taxing given interactions with upset and aggravated student clients, as well as occasionally taking on counseling responsibilities in unofficial capacities. To be responsive to the needs of tutors, writing center directors need to provide space and time after challenging sessions, flexible
schedules to swap appointments with fellow tutors, and even official counseling supports through the school.

Although limited in scope to one school site, my research may serve as one example of how tutor training in high schools can look. Different contexts and different models of writing centers will dictate different approaches to tutor training. However, this study will hopefully inform other potential first-year high school writing center directors in both what and how they choose to train their own tutors.

**Common Practices and Procedures**

Foremost, the work of writing centers is to promote writing as a process (Ashley & Shafer, 2005; Kent, 2006; Kolba & Crowell, 1996; Nicolini, 2006; Tobin, 2010). To do so effectively, writing centers must work to evade the common misconception that they serve to simply correct student papers. Instead, tutors guide their students to improve clarity of their ideas and arguments (Kolba & Crowell, 1996). Tutors can do so by considering the assignment as if they were the writer themself (Mulqueen, 2011); listening to the students’ concerns, and questions (Elchinoff & Kowalski, 2011); and having students’ read their papers aloud (Kent, 2006). Kolba and Crowell (1996) also suggest having tutors expand their work beyond the physical setting of the writing center by having them available to present, assist, and tutor in teachers’ classrooms as well.

Another specific technique tutors utilize in sessions with clients can be the *point-predict* technique (Block, 2016). In this technique, tutors play the role of the audience by reading aloud the student-generated text, pausing as they read to summarize what they are recognizing as main points before predicting what will come next. This specific process
intends to help student writers understand what is and is not being communicated in their writing versus what they intend to communicate. In doing so, students identify areas of improvement in their own writing, again underscoring the student agency supported in writing centers. As Block mentions, this is merely one tutoring technique that can be utilized in writing center work, and further research must continue to disrupt commonly accepted writing center practices to further our knowledge of and practice with various techniques to meet both the common and unique issues faced by our student clientele.

While the practices and procedures described here are specific to the work of tutors in the writing center, as a writing center director it is important that I am familiar with best practices to ensure that I am properly supporting the tutors in our school’s program. More specifically, as a new writing center director working to create this brand new resource in my school community, much of the work around these tutoring practices will likely be trial-and-error, and our writing center staff’s knowledge of and comfort with tutoring practices will continuously develop over the course of the study and certainly beyond. Therefore, in terms of writing center practice, this study offers my experience as a new writing center director seeking to best support my staff in their work, thereby providing insight beyond just what writing center practice can look like, but also how to implement such practices from the start of a new writing center program.

**Writing Center Outcomes**

Writing centers are supported by a body of research that demonstrate both in theory and in practice how such a resource helps boost student achievement academically as well as socially and emotionally. Because writing centers are largely present
throughout colleges and universities, high school writing centers have direct implications for students’ postsecondary success. The presence of writing centers in secondary schools provides high school students with a variety of postsecondary options such as help obtaining and refining college-level skills, making contact through direct college outreach, and even establishing potential jobs in college writing centers (Ashley & Shafer, 2006; Barnett, 2006; Littleton, 2006; Tobin, 2010; Turner, 2006). By providing this opportunity in high school, these students gain interpersonal skills, academic participation, and direct experience in a field that they can use to their advantage when pursuing higher education. Additionally, writing centers help improve students’ standardized test scores (Greer & Trofimoff, 2013), and more specifically, they help improve college access for traditionally underserved student populations (Ashley & Shafer, 2006).

In addition to these postsecondary connections, the mission and work of effective writing centers have strong impacts on a school’s culture regarding writing and its place across the curriculum. Foremost, writing centers help shift views of writing to be process-based (Ashley & Shafer, 2006; Kolba & Crowell, 1996; Nicolini, 2006; Tinker, 2006; Tobin, 2010; Turner, 2006), which ultimately disrupts the paradigm of writing instruction that focuses on final products and fixing conventional errors (Gardner & Ramsey, 2005). For students, this not only involves growing their writing practices, but also strengthening their habits of mind (Greer & Trofimoff, 2013), solving problems (Ashley & Shafer, 2006), and thinking critically (Nicolini, 2006). In addition to bolstering students writing skills, writing centers also enhance reading skills by engaging students in their reading
assignments necessary for assignments and allowing for collaborative discussions with peers and tutors about their understandings of their readings (Griswold, 2006; Wells, 2016).

Writing centers also impact school culture. For staff, the work of writing centers helps facilitate curricular reform regarding writing tasks (Ashley & Shaffer, 2006; Barnett, 2006; Jordan, 2006; Nicolini, 2006), which in turn drives further faculty development (Tobin, 2010). As a stabilizing force in the school community, writing centers have also demonstrated an ability to lower staff and student turnover (Barnett, 2006; Bell & Frost, 2012), particularly because writing centers support teachers’ instructional time when the consideration of writing conferences with students or grading multiple drafts of papers seems overwhelming and undoable (Turner, 2006).

The most effective centers, being process-based, support and grow students’ individual strengths and writing identities, both for attendees as well as the peer tutors (Ashely & Shafer, 2006; Turner, 2006). In developing their identities as writers, students also develop agency in what they write across throughout all of their classes (Tobin, 2010). This self-efficacy speaks to the academic socialization students encounter as part of engaging in work at writing centers (Archer, 2008). Lastly, because of the peer tutoring model utilized in a number of writing centers in both universities and high schools, students develop meaningful and positive relationships with their peers, some of which extend outside of the writing center into other afterschool activities and academic classes (Ashley & Shafer, 2006; Jordan, 2006; Turner, 2006).
Although this study examines just one high school’s new writing center in its infancy, the aim of this research is ultimately to inform how such practice can be done to best support student learning, in particular for students of color. Therefore, the aforementioned effects of writing centers on student learning and student experience are helpful in framing the task I have chosen to take on as a writing center director, and my study adds to such literature through the lens of an educator helping to lead this work rather than just the students who utilize the writing center.

**Writing Centers and Multiculturalism**

The importance of student cultures and identities as indicated through race, gender, class, language, and other social identities is increasingly pervasive throughout educational research, and the field of writing center studies is certainly no different. Given the interdisciplinary status and interpersonal nature of writing centers, even as situated in their unique and individualized contexts, multicultural and equity work are inherent in writing centers, their tutors, and their administration.

Since writing centers support students’ work across the disciplines, they can serve as key places in high schools and universities for both personal and institutional change to occur (Okawa et al., 2010). To begin this work, Okawa and colleagues assert that tutors’ training should include critical reflection. Through critical reflection, tutors explore their own identities as well as the power and privilege associated with language in our society, specifically in the realm of formal education. As a writing center director, Okawa supports critical reflection in her tutors by raising questions not just regarding writing and tutoring practices, but also of “learning theories, academic culture, social and
political issues, and events impacting education” (p. 44). This allows for culturally responsive practices in writing centers and tutoring sessions, as both the knowledges and experiences of tutor and student are valued and utilized. In doing so, students are granted agency and ownership over their writing processes and the texts they produce. This Freirean shift toward student empowerment seems a direct response to the common perception of writing centers as places to correct or fix student writing – a perception common among both teaching staff as well as students – that implicitly relies on the hegemonic value of standardized written English (Griffin & Glushko, 2016). The “translingual practices” bolstered by tutors’ critical reflection ultimately benefit students academically and professionally as they “develop the linguistic and rhetorical flexibility” required to successfully navigate and participate in today’s society, both in and out of school (Blazer, 2015, p. 169).

To do this work successfully harkens to the notion of teaching students who speak and write different Englishes to code switch, or worse yet, to fully eradicate these linguistic differences (Blazer, 2015). Doing so, Blazer argues, relies on the beliefs that linguistic diversity is different rather than normal; that academic, professional, and societal success necessitates one distinct form of English; and that students who maintain their linguistic diversities are somehow hindered, even lacking the ability to influence change. To avoid such pitfalls that could harm and even decimate students’ linguistic and cultural identities requires writing centers and their staffs to be culturally responsive, critically reflective, and ultimately, action oriented. To support this work, writing center directors must lead their staffs in this transformative work, which is a focus of this study.
Zimmerelli (2015) provides one case study of this transformative work through the work of a service-learning tutoring initiative. Through her case study of 30 college students who engaged in tutoring high school students of color in a writing center as part of a service-learning course, Zimmerelli proposes that such programs support the critical pedagogy necessary for transformative change in schools by: (a) shifting the sense of fear towards a sense of community; (b) supporting reciprocal and mutual learning between tutor and student; (c) engaging tutors in the civic learning necessary to address systemic issues of equity in race, class, gender, and language; and (d) enabling a transfer of learning for tutors to apply these learning to larger context beyond the writing center. Although these are meaningful findings, given that Zimmerelli’s participants were predominantly White and all the students with which these tutors worked were Black, I wonder how participating in such a tutoring program affects tutors of color or other marginalized identities when working with peers in a writing center environment. Given the dynamics of the student-tutor peer relationship, I believe it is important to note that each students’ racial identity, background, and experience, as well as their lived experiences through other key social identities, will most certainly impact the transfer of Zimmerelli’s findings to my own study.

These transformative practices in writing centers extend benefits to their students as well. In particular, by having a writing center as a resource in high school, traditionally underserved students experience greater college access due to an increase in willingness and capability for college-prep and college-level courses (Ashley & Shafer, 2005). While Ashley and Shafer note that high school writing centers staffed with current college
students allow high school students to work directly with college students and discuss higher education opportunities, high school students still grow their preparedness for college coursework when working with peers their own ages. This is due to the general emphasis of the writing process beyond grades and tests, as well as students being engaged with academic tasks through collaboration and discussion (Tinker, 2006; Tobin, 2010).

Though postsecondary success for all students is a worthy goal, Salem (2016) contends that writing centers do not serve all student populations equally, thereby maintaining the inequities in opportunities for college success. Salem builds her argument on the premise that we do not yet consider students who choose not to attend writing centers. Given that “the choice to use the writing center is raced, classed, gendered, and shaped by linguistic hierarchies” (p. 161), those who choose not to utilize writing centers are those who likely do not require the remedial supports too often associated with writing centers (Ashley & Shafer, 2005). Instead, students who attend the writing center for support, often by referral from their teachers and professors, are seeking and require help in first order issues of SWE grammar and conventions.

However, it may be unlikely for writing center tutors to truly impact students’ knowledge and mastery of SWE grammar and conventions; therefore, tutors and writing centers need to focus on other skills such as organization and clarity of argument, hoping to cover aspects of the first order skills in doing so (Archer, 2008; Mulqueen, 2011). Through this approach, however, “the very students who are most likely to visit the writing center are the ones who are least likely to be served by” these practices, as they
come with specific questions and concerns about these more traditionally academic elements in their writing, such as spelling and grammar (Salem, 2016, p. 164). In fact, Salem argues that the lack of focus on SWE grammar in writing centers speaks to the privilege of writing centers’ staffs and students who do not need to focus on these particular skills. Salem underscores this argument, as others do, as a matter of class, gender, racial, and linguistic inequity, believing that current writing center practices do not close these inequities, but rather reinforce them. This is something I must be aware of in this work as I work to open my school’s new writing center with and for students of color in an attempt to disrupt these inequities rather than simply highlight them.

Still, such a focus on SWE grammar and conventions as a means to assess student writing, while perhaps a focus of the teacher’s assigned task or a focus of the student’s concern, rests on Bartholomae’s concept of initiating students into the traditional academic discourse, which strips students of any personal identities not housed within that paradigm – or, at the very least, requires them to subjugate those identities beneath the hegemonic value sets. While concerns with SWE grammar and conventions will certainly drive some students to attend the writing center, either of their own accord or by referral, with the proper training and mindset, tutors can serve all students through the one-on-one interaction between tutor and student (Ashley & Shafer, 2006; Rafoth, Wells, & Fels, 2011; Turner, 2006).

Even in school settings where SWE prevails, writing centers can serve as hubs of change. To support this work, Grimm (2009) proposes a three-pronged framework for “consciously” working in writing centers to “alter assumptions about students, about
language, and about literacy learning … [that] signal awareness of twenty-first century linguistic and cultural realities” (p. 16). First, our students (as is our society) are not monolingual, nor should they be. Second, we must recognize that students must work within and between multiple contexts, discourses, representations, and languages to be truly literate. Third, students must be liberated from reproducing the hegemonic form of literacy to act as change agents themselves in shaping the future of reading, writing, speaking, and thinking.

As in any current sect of education, issues of multiculturalism and equity are just as important in writing center practice and scholarship. As a new writing center in a school community serving predominantly students of color and multilingual students, these issues are prevalent and meaningful in my own work as I try to cultivate a culture in our writing center that honors our students, including our tutors, while ensuring they are growing their academic writing skills.

**Writing Center Directors**

Arguably, the lynchpin tying theory and practice together to drive the everyday workings of writing centers is their directors. As a nascent writing center director myself, understanding the history and the role of the position, as well as its problems, is an essential component to beginning this work for this study.

Although writing centers as we have come to think of them have been key supports for students in universities and colleges (and increasingly, in high schools) for the past 50 years as noted in the increasing focus on scholarship and professionalism of the area, Lerner (2010) traces the origins of writing centers—and their directors—back to
the universities’ answer to the swell of post-secondary students in the last part of the 19th century. College composition professors and high school English began using a laboratory approach to their instruction, relying on the writing process, which led to supervised writing instruction in “Writing Laboratories” emerging by the 1930’s and being widely accepted as a part of the university landscape by the 1950’s. This shift from laboratory methods being used in writing classrooms to separate, stand-alone writing clinics helped to shift the position of writing center directors. Although the writing center directors of the 1950’s oversaw the clinics, which were open to all students, many of them staffed the laboratories by themselves and received no support from their colleagues. Still, on a wider scope that included support from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the push to fully and concretely professionalize and institutionalize writing centers continued.

Interestingly, Lerner (2010) suggests that the gap between this emergence of the modern writing center model of the 1950’s and their rebirth in the 1970’s was due to the rise of two-year colleges intended to serve traditionally underserved student populations, as well as the “subsequent tightening of admission standards at most four-year institutions,” causing the writing skills of new students to be higher in general (Lerner, 2010, p. 9). Thus, the modern writing center as we consider it today, is historically linked to social justice and better serving underrepresented student populations, a priority of this current study.

One major gap in the literature regarding writing center directors is that the body of work almost entirely focuses on university- and college-level directors, leaving out a
whole segment of high school writing center directors, such as myself. While much of the work is the same or comparable, much of the literature highlights the effects of status and tenure on the position. For example, Geller and Denny (2013) find that writing center directors in universities end up happier if they have less status at their institution because they do not face the pressure to produce scholarship or publications in search of tenure. Other issues of concern for university-level writing center administration are the degrees they hold, the training they received (or did not receive) for the position, the resources allocated to their work, and the workload of directing the center and doing their own research – if, that is, they are even asked or required to complete research – which affects directors’ professional identity differently (Perdue & Driscoll, 2017). While these issues are limited to the working experiences of collegiate writing center directors, there are certain issues shared by the position regardless of their school context.

Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson (2016) divide the types of labor experienced by writing center directors into the disciplinary work of research and scholarship to build professional knowledge, the emotional work of interpersonal relationships with writing center staff and students, and the everyday work of running the center itself in a managerial fashion, including the important task of assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of their writing center (Lerner, 2000; Bell & Frost, 2012). While the disciplinary and everyday labors speak to directors’ feelings of being more akin to administrators than as teachers or writing specialists (Lerner, 2000), the emotional labor required of writing center directors – particularly new ones in the first year or two in the position – is especially wearing as it is time intensive, and directors do not typically
receive adequate training to cope with such tasks as needed, if at all (Jackson, McKinney, & Caswell, 2016).

Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson (2016) provide nine case studies to further explore the experiences of beginning directors with particular regard for their emotional labor. Of the nine case studies, only two work in secondary education like myself. Even then, one of the directors works at an international boarding school outside of the United States and the other works at an inner-city public charter high school through a volunteer program as non-teaching staff. Therefore, this study helps to address this gap in writing center research by examining how educators working in inner-city public schools with students of color tackle the work of opening and operating a new writing center. Regardless, these new writing center directors, together with the other directors at universities and colleges, reported feeling their biggest successes and challenges through their emotional labor despite the time and energy required of their disciplinary and everyday tasks. Regardless of academic standing within institutions, the amount of emotional labor required of writing center directors speaks to their important and encompassing positioning within the general school context.

Most importantly, Lerner (2000) contends that writing center directors ultimately determine how the work of the writing center plays out in actuality by establishing and maintaining the center’s workings and culture. For their work to be effective, Lerner suggests that the director know their theory in addition to their practice, and more importantly, maintain a larger institutional view. Miley (2017) agrees, suggesting directors and writing center researchers conduct institutional ethnographies that can serve
as a road map for their work within the institutional as a whole. Such an expanded view means that the work of the writing center is more likely to impact the work of others in the school, much in the same way that Miley finds that the writing center director’s discourse about their work impacts how their colleagues view the work of the writing center. Through this lens, it is easy to see that the scope of writing center directors is expansive and important, challenging and engaging, and certainly worthy of further study and research.

**The Study**

This study sought to understand the work required in beginning a writing center program with and for students of color in a traditional public high school. More specifically, I examined how I designed and implemented the new program in an effort to give students agency in their educational experience. In doing so, I aimed to address multiple areas of need in the current research on writing centers.

First, there is not yet the same amount of literature on high school writing centers as there is on university writing centers, largely due to the history of the topic and its beginnings being in higher education. Within that realm, there is an even larger gap concerning the work of the directors at high school writing centers, and more specifically new, first-time directors, which is potentially an obstacle in growing this needed practice in high schools further. Finally, there is a growing body of studies and articles on multiculturalism in writing centers. However, there is not yet research on a White writing center director’s work in initiating a high school writing center for students of color. Thus, my study addresses this gap in hopes that other educators in other high schools
serving students of color will consider taking up this work themselves as a means to address inequities in our educational system for these students.

**Theoretical Framework**

To analyze and understand this action research study, I drew from critical race theory (CRT) and imagination by bringing these two theories together into a framework I am calling *critical imagining*. I propose that imagination and aesthetics can best support the work of critical race theory by helping to imagine the *what-if’s* and the *could-be’s* inherent in the tenets of the latter in ways that can make them more accessible and actionable because they become more deeply felt.

In this section, I begin by describing critical imagining. Then, I outline critical race theory and provide an overview of imagination using the conceptions of various scholars and theorists, as both components work together in combination of this study’s overall framework. I conclude the section by summarizing how the two theories together help form critical imagining.

**Critical Imagining**

While fleeting mention of imagination arises in the writings of a few CRT scholars such as Bell (2016), and the notion of social change undergirds some thinking around imagination, particularly in the works of Mills (1959) and Greene (1995), by more explicitly bringing these two theories into conversation as critical imagining, I hope to better understand my work as a White male educator attempting to disrupt the racism threaded into our educational system through the work of a new high school writing center.
Critical imagining, in essence, helps conceptualize our work as educators in a way that considers both the problems and (potential) solutions – solutions that may very well include ideas that have not yet existed. First, critical imagining requires us to understand and to focus our work in schools around the problem of racism. Critical imagining calls on the tenets of CRT, outlined in the following section of this chapter, to help us acknowledge the history and the functionality of racism in our society at various levels, in different manners, and through different structures. Racism is pervasive in our current communities because of its historical roots, and to recognize the shortcomings and ills of our school system means an examination of the racism threaded throughout the system itself from its onset. Critical imagining centers race and the current inevitability of racism in the conversation to examine the root causes of problems inherent in education.

Second, critical imagining provides opportunity to consider ways in which we can begin to address racism in our school system and do better for our students. Though not necessarily concrete in action, through the concept of imagination, we begin to understand ways in which we begin to disrupt and eventually eradicate racism and other forms of oppression in our school communities. In all, imagination considers ways in which we consider otherwise, whether it be ways we create from images in our mind, ways we position ourselves at different intersections of personal experiences and public histories, or ways in which the arts help us understand ourselves and others in new ways – all of which are further explored in a later section of this chapter. Conceptually, imagination allows access and even permission to take up the work with which CRT charges us.
Critical imagining draws on both CRT and imagination as a means to examine research and practice as both problem and solution, which also makes it ripe for use in action research. Only by bringing this established theory and pre-existing concept together can we fully consider the complexity of the practical work that is at the heart of this study.

**Critical Race Theory**

Ladson-Billings (2016) traces the roots of critical race theory back to work in legal scholarship in the form of Critical Legal Studies (CLS). CLS itself is based on the concept of hegemony first explored in the work of Antonio Gramsci in the early 1970’s. Starting in the late 1970’s, CLS further developed from seminal works by the likes of Derrick Bell (1987) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), with the focus to uncover and examine the ways in which our country’s legal structures and practices both mirror and reinforce the class structure in our society throughout history.

These critical notions emerged in the realm of educational theory and research through the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Solórzano (1997) in response to educational issues such as “affirmative action, the re-segregation of most schools, and the growing racial achievement gap” of the 1980’s (Taylor, 2016, p. 7). In the educational field, CRT is used to help educators understand and challenge the various barriers faced by students of color in our educational system, giving a language to educators and researchers alike to challenge the hegemonic notions and structures that undergird our current school system. In doing so, critical race theorists ultimately seek to understand the history of oppression and subordination of people of color under white supremacy in
America to alter the power structures that have existed and currently exist between these structures and race (Ladson-Billings, 2016).

As a part of educational scholarship, it is important to note that not all work or publications related to matters of race is inherently connected to critical race theory (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2017). Instead, CRT embraces particular elements and perspectives that inform the ways in which its scholars approach their work around race and matters related to race. While lists and outlines of these tenets vary in length and specificity, drawing from Delgado, Matsuda, Lawrence, and Crenshaw (cited in Litowitz, 2016), Delgado (cited in Litowitz, 2016), Delgado Bernal (2002), and Delgado and Sefancic (cited in Ladson-Billings, 2013), this study recognizes seven common elements vital to CRT (see Figure 1).

Because of these elements, CRT “becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 17). Since this study highlights the work I aim to do by creating a new resource for students of color in the form of a writing center, CRT and its tenets are necessary in navigating such a task in a way that tackles traditionally oppressive structures in schools by giving both support and voice to these students in a way that will truly shift agency and power to them. However, CRT on its own does not fully apply to this study; by bringing it in concert with the concept of imagination, I am able to consider the current study in whole.
Imagination

The concept of imagination takes shape in various ways through the works of various scholars. Imagination pervaded much of John Dewey’s work, from his philosophical writings to his pedagogical musings (Chambliss, 1991). For Dewey,
imagination is essentially a form or a stage of epistemology, a way in which we construct our knowledge and understanding; it is a way in which we learn. Dewey recognizes two sides to imagining: the first being the image that is an idea or a thought born in our mind; the second being the action taken by the person to attempt to create that idea in a more concrete fashion. These two sides to imagining have a symbiotic relationship in that the initial image conceived by the individual informs the individual’s action, while ultimately the action taken by the individual transforms the image by bringing it into existence. Dewey (1991) believed that “all possibilities reach us through the imagination” because the imagery allows us to recognize what is missing and then act (p. 43).

Elsewhere, C. Wright Mills (1959) utilized the concept of imagination to inform his framework for the social sciences, which he termed the sociological imagination. According to Mills, the sociological imagination is a philosophical vantage point that, at its core, acknowledges and examines the intersectionality of our personal, private biographies and lived experiences, and the social, public histories and structures in which we exist. Mills argues that “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (p. 3), but that to do so requires one to utilize a variety of viewpoints. Mills also differentiates between the personal troubles faced by individuals and the broader issues at play in society and its structures. Yet, despite this distinction, he notes that personal troubles must be understood in terms of social issues if they are to be addressed and solved. Though perhaps farther from our traditional notion of imagination than is Dewey’s framing of the concept, in Mills’s sociological imagination, it is the work of the social scientist to push boundaries, think in
extremes, and try new combinations of ideas to learn, to understand, and to generate new knowledge.

Like Dewey and Mills before her, Maxine Greene focused much of her work around the idea and utility of imagination. Greene (1995) posits two types of imagination. The first, poetic imagination, allows us to actively engage with a work of art, thereby giving us new perspectives and “lead[ing] to a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary” (p. 4). The second, social imagination, allows us to “invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools” (p. 5). Greene’s understanding of imagination hinges on our ability to empathize, either with an artwork or with another person, and for that engagement with the arts to be truly transformative (Kohli, 2016; Miller, 2021). In doing so, we are able to envision differently, to make different connections. In the social imagination, these visions and connections transcend the individual experience to also consider the experiences of others, the histories, and the social structures, like Mills’s sociological imagination. And similar to Dewey’s understanding of imagination, in Greene’s work, imagination is a flashpoint of possibility, transformation, and change. As a vehicle for such transformation, Greene (2001) believes engaging with works of art releases the imagination and “evoke[s] an intimation of a better order of things … a consciousness of possibility” (p. 117). It is through these informed aesthetic experiences in which we “release ourselves into an art space, an alternative reality” (p. 39) that we are able to perceive our daily lived experiences in a new way, both for ourselves as well as others; and this imaginative awareness through which we pay closer attention to the world
around us not only awakens us to what is but also, to harken back to Dewey, what is not, thereby giving us the ability to enact.

Together, the works of Dewey, Mills, and Greene highlight three important components to the overall concept of imagination. First, imagination is about learning, knowing, and understanding. As explained by Dewey, the image and the action constitute a means for us to make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Chambliss, 1991). By imagining and doing, we learn. Second, imagination utilizes different, multiple viewpoints to do so. As seen in Mills’s work, imagining is about being able to place one’s self from different vantage points to consider multiple possibilities and potentials. In doing so, particularly by considering our localized experiences against more global ones, we better understand. Third, imagination is an action and is transformative by its very nature. For both Dewey and Greene, imagining itself is an act, but it also spurs us to do more in an attempt to make the imagined actualized. For Greene (1995) specifically, this action can be hugely transformative, either for an individual or, more importantly, for society.

In this study, I am actively working to positively impact the experiences of students of color at my school by setting up a new resource in the writing center that will hopefully not only strengthen their academic skills and writing capabilities, but also provide a source of socialization and support that grows our school’s culture. In doing so, of course, I am not only imagining in the way that Dewey connects an image to an action, but I am imagining differently for these students in the transformative way Greene views imagination. By also taking into consideration the many intersections of the personal
problems (both for myself and, more importantly, for my students) and the larger issues at play using Mills’s sociological imagination, I am able to fully comprehend how imagination at large is working in this study.

Conclusion

Critical imagining, as a framework, combines both critical race theory and imagination as a way to best understand the workings of our schools and education system way by both considering the problems and solutions of our work. As one component of critical imagining, critical race theory helps to frame the issues at hand by centering on race and racism to understand how historically and structurally our systems function to disadvantage particular student populations while also highlighting the needs of centering those students through their stories and experiences as valuable knowledge. As the other component of critical imagining, imagination encourages researchers and practitioners to consider ways to solve problems in our schools, likely in ways that have never yet been, but in ways that are much needed. By embracing such new visions, considering different experiences and vantage points, and better understanding our students and others, we can create new, meaningful structures perhaps never considered before that can truly disrupt the inequities critical race theory helps us to recognize.

Studying Applewood High School’s New Writing Center

As arts-based action research, this research project served as an examination of my work in undertaking the creation and facilitation of a new writing center as its director in its opening months. Given the specific context of the school, this inherently highlighted my positionality as a White male educator working with and supporting
students of color. While other theoretical frameworks such as whiteness could have helped focus this work provided these circumstances, I felt such lenses would have emphasized me too much in a personal light, thereby detracting from the important work I was attempting to do by supplying my students with this new resource. Instead, critical imagining allows me to examine the work within this study as both problem and solution – considering the racism experienced by students of color at Applewood (and at large) while also utilizing imagination to inspire ways to take action to make change.

Because critical imagining forges the tenets of CRT with the action of imagining, this framework was a valuable tool in helping to shape this particular study. Critical imagining informed my research questions by ensuring that I was considering both the work itself of starting the writing center at Applewood as well as its potential impact on students of color. Additionally, critical imagining allowed me to code and examine my generated data to explain to what extent my attempt to imagine otherwise for these students came to fruition in a truly transformative fashion. In the following chapter, I detail further these methods for this study.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Writing Centers

As action research, this study narrowed its focus on my work in my school’s new writing center. Through the work of this study, I designed and worked to fully implement as a new resource not previously offered at my school site.

Ultimately, whether at colleges and universities, or at high schools, writing centers serve as a vital resource for students to develop their interdisciplinary writing skills (Block, 2016; Ervin, 2016; Jordan, 2006), while also growing students’ voice and agency in their writing through strong collaborative techniques (Blazer, 2015; Greer & Trofimoff, 2013; Jordan, 2006; Rafoth, Wells, & Fels, 2011). Additionally, writing centers support school communities themselves by helping reflect the school’s mission and vision (Jordan, 2006; Simpson, 2002), even serving as ground for transformative work in the school’s curriculum and instruction (Jordan, 2006). Because of this transformative capability, there has been a recent call for writing centers and their scholarship to begin critical conversations regarding multiculturalism, race, and racism in these spaces (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). As such, writing centers are rich sites for both critical work and critical research, as well as being an important resource for students. With this in mind, this study sought to capture the crucial first 12 weeks of starting the new writing center at Applewood high school.
Context

Applewood High School is a neighborhood high school located on the north side of a large city in the American Midwest. At the time of this study, Applewood enrolled 1,365 students in grades 9-12, of which 70.7% of the students were Latinx, 12.5% were White, 10.2% were Black, 3.2% were Asian, and 3.4% identified by other racial demographics. Of the total student population, 72.8% of students were from low-income households, 16.9% were students with disabilities, and 9.2% were English learners.

Traditionally, Applewood’s students travel from across all neighborhoods of the city despite its status as a neighborhood high school meant to serve students from the local enrollment area – a highly affluent, predominantly White neighborhood of the city. Given a variety of metrics, the school was rated as being in good standing in the district overall, although the school’s rating had dropped one level two years prior to this study.

Academically, Applewood’s traditional college prep curriculum has been framed by STEM teaching and learning. Typically, as during the time of this study, students are offered courses at five academic levels, ranging from self-contained classes for diverse learners and mixed-level co-taught general education classes, to honors level courses and 16 AP level classes. The school also boasts a dual-credit program in partnership with a local community college through which students can earn college-level credit.

As a school, the sole academic support for students was only offered to freshman students in the form of an afterschool tutoring program the year of this research. The program began four years prior by the school’s freshman on-track team in an effort to increase the number of 9th grade students considered to be on-track to graduate based on
the classes they pass and their GPAs. The freshman tutoring was offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school each week for one hour each day; it was staffed by teachers who volunteered for the task, though they received the instructional rate of pay for their time. Beyond this particular program, however, as a school community Applewood did not yet provide other academic supports accessible to all students.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to help examine the work it takes to create a new writing center program as a source of student agency and support for writing skills in a traditional high school setting with a prominent student population from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. Although students staffed the center as the tutors, I was the one charged by my administration with both designing and implementing the program as the director. Knowing that my positionality and lived experience is different than that of most Applewood students, this study was designed to examine this work through the lens of critical imagining, which borrows from both critical race theory (CRT) and imagination, to better understand how the work of a high school writing center could best serve its students. To do so, this study took the form of action research as a means to flexibly analyze the on-going work of opening the writing center in its first twelve weeks. Through this study, I aimed to provide insight into the process and journey of this work so that other high school teachers may feel encouraged to take on a similar role and task in their own high schools in an effort to best support all of our students, but especially our students of color.
Research Questions

To best address the purpose of this study, the research questions are as follows:

- How do I design and implement a new writing center that seeks to disrupt educational inequity and racism experienced by students of color?
- In what ways does my critical imagining shape the work of a new writing center in its first 12 weeks?

The following study was designed to explore these research questions through arts-based action research of Applewood High School’s new writing center. In this chapter, I begin by outlining the design of this research including its connections to qualitative research, arts-based research, and action research. I then include an overview of the study’s ethical considerations. I go on to describe the study’s data collection methods, including their alignment to this specific study and the validity. I include an explanation of data analysis and reporting techniques. The chapter concludes with the significance of the study, the timeline for the research process, the study’s limitations and delimitations, and the expected changes.

Procedures

The current study was designed as action research to meet the needs of the community and to specifically address the problem of supporting student writing at Applewood High School as these skills tend to be challenging for our students. In further designing the study, I drew upon arts-based research as a means of data collection that directly connects with the theoretical framework of critical imagining by using a creative
outlet to consider ways in which the work is and might be. In the following section, I outline in detail the research design and its different facets.

**Research Design**

This was an arts-based action research study. Because the study, in part, explored my experience of the phenomenon of starting and supervising a new writing center, it embodied elements of qualitative practitioner research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); however, because the study involved work done by myself, an insider in the context of the study, in an effort to improve the work of the school, the study was designed as action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Stringer, 2014). Since the data collection and analysis involved my own creation of visual art as a means to make sense of my experience and my work in the writing center, it was designed as arts-based action research (Leavy, 2018). To better capture the overall design of the study, I begin here with a brief overview of qualitative research, and then elaborate further on arts-based research and action research.

**Qualitative Research**

As a paradigm, the roots of qualitative research stretch back the beginning of the 20th century as part of sociology and anthropology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and has passed through a series of various eras in the past century to arrive at is current push for public recognition and value (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Qualitative research came into its own in the golden age thanks to the foundational works of Glaser and Strauss (1999) and Guba (1978), expanding the reach of this type of inquiry to other fields including education. Qualitative research utilizes nonnumerical data sources such as writing,
interviews, and images in ways that suggest new theories and understandings of topics and issues that are not commonly understood, most notably people’s lived experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In its broadest sense, this study was qualitative in nature because it used journals, images, and secondary documents for me to understand the design and implementation of a new writing center.

**Art-based**

As a methodology, arts-based research (ABR) is a relatively recent genre emerging and growing in the past three decades with increasing usage in social science fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. Across these disciplines and more, ABR is a way for researchers to engage with and create art forms as a way to make meaning, to gain knowledge, and to build theory (Leavy, 2018; Rolling, 2013). More broadly, Camargo-Camargo-Borges (2018) argues that ABR infuses imagination into research, thereby moving us forward and transforming our futures. Philosophically, the work of ABR appreciates the long history of art’s ability to communicate truth and knowledge, its role in acquiring such knowledge in one’s self and in others, its preverbal understandings, and its valuing of the multiplicity of the ways we know (Gerber et al., 2012). Rolling (2013) extends these characteristics to also include concepts regarding ABR’s recognition of constructivism, ambiguity, and induction to further make meaning. Because of these philosophical underpinnings, arts-based practices are rich methods for research because of their ability to: provide new, perhaps even elusive insights and learning; synthesize various forms and sources of knowledge; grow our empathic understandings; change our perceptions, beliefs, and actions; support
reflexivity; connect us with wider audiences; afford complex, multilayered sources of data; and promote social justice (Holm, Sahlström, & Zilliacus, 2018). The last attribute concerning social justice if of particular value to this study. Leavy (2015) builds on this idea to include the notion that ABR increases critical awareness by elucidating issues of power, generating supportive alliances between social groups, and challenging paradigms by exposing audiences to new concepts and experiences. Altogether, Barone and Eisner (2012) identify the primary purpose of ABR in education as improving both educational policy and teaching practice. This study incorporated arts-based methods for data collection because of this methodology’s connections to imagination, social justice, and professional development. Together, these particular aspects of ABR were significant to better understanding the work of designing a writing center to disrupt and improve the educational experience of historically marginalized student populations.

**Action Research**

Action research is a form of applied qualitative research as it seeks to improve practice by conducting inquiry for a non-traditional audience: educators and administrators who can apply the research to their own work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At its core, action research involves problem solving by practitioners and other stakeholders in their given contexts (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Pine, 2009; Stringer, 2014). The roots of action research are based in social justice, seeking to improve the social and emotional experiences of the participants. Thus, it is also grounded in an emancipatory interest in knowledge that serves as “the release of human potential and the investigation of ideology and power
within the organization and society” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 35), connecting to the works of theorists such as Paolo Freire. Such interest inherently underscores the premise of critical imagining, outlined in the previous chapter. As the theoretical framework for this study, critical imagining helps to cultivate curiosity and new ideas of educational experiences not yet had by students of color and other marginalized populations. In particular, the aim of this new writing center was to help give voice and agency to Applewood’s students; and as students of color, such work is inherently tied to and rooted in Freire’s vision and its informing of action research.

Although the history of action research can be traced back as far as Buckingham’s Research for Teachers in 1926, the groundwork for action research is more commonly attributed to Lewin, who began developing the field in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Lewin posited that by connecting research and theory, one would take action, specifically towards improving society (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Lewin also developed three phases of action research: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Through these three cycles, the action researcher seeks to unfreeze the status quo of the problematic situation in its context to then initiate change believed to potentially improve the situation; once improved, the researcher then re-stabilizes, or refreezes, the situation as to normalize the new, improved scenario. Over time, various iterations of these cycles have been developed to inform the work of action research (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Kemmis & McTaggert, 1999; Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). This study utilized Hingley’s model (see Figure 2) (as cited in Pine, 2009). This model demonstrates the recursive and on-going nature of action research as indicated by its cycles, but I also note that it takes into
consideration the aim of action research: to continuously improve the situation at hand. Because of these cycles, action research, unlike other paradigms, is also emergent in its nature as it requires the researcher to be responsive to the context as well as the results of the various decisions made throughout the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Pine (2009) highlights, however, these spaces of uncertainty and unknowingness are actually sites for learning.

**Figure 2**

*The Action Research Recursive Spiral (adapted from Hingley, 2008)*

While there are various types of action research, including participatory action research, collaborative action research, and appreciative inquiry, this study was critical action research (CAR). CAR stresses both “the political possibilities” and “the empowerment of those with the little power in their communities and society” (Johnson
& Christensen, 2014, p. 67). Although Johnson and Christensen connect CAR most closely with participatory action research in which the participants and stakeholders collaborate to conduct the study together, this study was designed as individual action research due to circumstances regarding the school district permitting the research to take place at Applewood, my own school site. As the researcher, I designed the research questions myself, and I conducted the inquiry myself; though the school’s writing center obviously involved others, in particular the students who served as the first cohort of tutors, the data collected was limited to my own journals and collages, as well as documentation, to allow this study to occur within the guidelines of the given school district. Despite this narrowed focus for the creation and implementation of the writing center, the work itself being done in the new program was intended to improve the social and emotional experiences of students of color, which was still captured in the data.

**Ethical Considerations**

In addition to ethical praxis, other ethical considerations had to be considered in this study as action research. In traditional participatory action research, special attention must be given to extending the common practice of informed consent of participants to transparently explaining to participants what is happening throughout the research process (Stringer, 2014). Although the data did not include participants other than myself, students and staff at Applewood were involved in the work of the writing center itself. Therefore, I had to be clear that I was conducting this action research involving my work at the writing center while also being clear that any of their involvement in the writing center did not directly impact data or be included as such, and that any indirect
involvement such as correspondence with me as the writing center director or utilizing the services of the writing center would be kept anonymous and confidential in the study.

Finally, there were also ethical considerations related to collaging as a means of data collection. Because collage makes use of other materials, including images and texts from others’ publications, one must consider art ownership (Scotti & Chilton, 2018). While it is common to provide the original artist with credit when using their work, this can be a challenge in collage since sometimes the original artist is unknown. However, by demonstrating there is no economic gain, images and materials used in collage are considered fair use. As a form of appropriation art, fair use includes artwork that is unique and singular. Lastly, because this was research being conducted for educational purposes, it also demonstrated ethical use of any others’ artworks and materials.

**Data Collection**

The following methods were used to collect multiple sets of data as a means to help make meaning of the complexity of this action research.

**Reflective Journals**

Research journals are a best practice, and they are especially important in action research. In addition to capturing the researcher’s thoughts and reactions throughout the research process, journals should serve to capture every decision the researcher makes, especially any ethical decisions (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This is particularly necessary in action research since the research process must be responsive to the situation, therefore it may shift and change from its initial design.
In addition to being a place to capture the researcher’s thoughts and feelings, journals can serve as a data source to capture the teacher’s thoughts and feelings as well. Pine (2009) argues that writing is a helpful data source because it is a natural source of reflection for “describing practice; for recording and examining beliefs, assumptions, questions, and challenges; and for expressing feelings and identifying problems” (p. 194). In doing so, the practice allows for the practitioner-research to inform and transform their practice throughout the action research study. For this practice to be effective, Pine suggests that journaling become a regular practice. At best, journaling would occur daily, though given the nature of teaching, this sort of regularity can be challenging; he suggests journaling at least three to four times each week.

In this study, I completed a daily practice-research journal to capture the ongoing work in the writing center and my role as the writing center director. Given the scope of the work in implementing a school-wide writing center, I felt it imperative to journal daily to capture the ongoing work, both during operational hours of the writing center as well as the days each week when the writing center was not open but work was being done in support of the new writing center. In doing so, I aimed to continuously reflect on the daily work supporting the writing center regardless of what was happening in the physical space or directly with tutors and students. Over the course of the 12 weeks for this study, I completed 49 journal entries, which ranged in length from two pages to a short paragraph depending on the happenings of each day. In total, the entries compose 38 total pages. The journals were collected in one Word document, which was password protected on my personal laptop to ensure the security of the data.
While Pine (2009) provides numerous suggestions for prompts and techniques to help guide the writing, in this study I used a set of prompts (see Figure 3). This set of prompts was developed during an initial pilot study during my coursework as part of the doctoral program. In the pilot study, I attempted to free write my journal entries, but I found that the data I was collecting was too scattered and not relevant enough for my study. Therefore, I generated these prompts based on my research questions to ensure my data aligned to my research questions. I also determined that my journal entries were most helpful when they were semi-structured; for each entry, I started by focusing on primarily addressing the first three prompts (in bold) and then responded to other prompts as necessary or as I wanted. For this study, I wrote daily at the end of the school day.

**Figure 3**

*Reflexive Journal Prompts*

- What issues of equity have come up in running the writing center? How have you responded to these issues? What was the outcome?
- How is the writing center supporting work around equity? Around problem solving and critical thinking? Around postsecondary readiness?
- How is the imagined version of the writing center being employed or not? What factors are impacting and/or changing this work?
  - How are the writing center staff and students using the writing center? How does this connect to the action plan you developed?
  - How will you change and adjust the center next semester? How will you change and adjust the writing center next school year?
  - What decisions have you had to make in this work as writing center director that have shifted your initial action plan? What decisions have you had to make in this research process that have shifted your research design?
  - What advice would you give someone considering starting a writing center at their school?
Collage

ABR utilizes a myriad of methods across the many different artistic mediums. For this particular study, I used collage as a specific form of visual art. In general, the visual arts support the understanding of more subtle and obscure qualities of experiences and situations, and provide opportunity for participants to demonstrate their self-perceptions, including who they imagine themselves to be (Holm, Sahlström, & Zilliacus, 2018). Because of its layered technique that aligns and juxtaposes various images and materials together on a new surface, collage specifically “allows or discovery of multiple realities and identities” and brings forth one’s beliefs and values (Scotti & Chilton, 2018, p. 359). Furthermore, collage enhances the understanding of relationships between objects, subjects, and ideas, and can facilitate both critique and transform cultural norms, stereotypes, and paradigms because the relationship between the various images and words provides novel meanings (Leavy, 2015). Through the framework of critical imagining, which seeks to help address and transform the experiences of students of color by imagining how things can be otherwise, collage is a valuable method through which I could explore the ongoing work of the new writing center.

To collect this data, I made a collage at the end of every cycle in the action research spiral, therefore totaling in four collages throughout the study. Collage relies specifically on previously produced images, but there are other related artforms such as métissage and bricolage that extend the use of materials and techniques beyond collage. I had ready use of printed materials from various magazines and newspapers at school and at home that I was able to use, but I also found use of other materials and techniques to
explore this art form and its possibilities based on the reflections, thoughts, and ideas I wished to communicate visually.

Scotti and Chilton (2018) suggest using prompts or themes to help elicit a participant’s reflexivity. To do this, I used the entries in my reflective journal from each cycle. At the end of each cycle, I read and coded each set of journals. Based on this, I would consider the emerging themes and concepts, which I would then sketch before starting to create the collages themselves. Each collage was made on a 11”x14” canvas, which was a consistent material and size provided by my colleague and critical friend.

Prior to data collection, I researched and practiced different collage techniques to address the potential challenge of demonstrating aestheticism, an important element of evaluation criteria in ABR (Scotti & Chilton, 2018), which is further addressed in the section on validity and trustworthiness. Each collage was completed at the end of a three-week cycle in the data collection. To complete each collage, I did preliminary open coding of the journal entries written during the same cycle. The themes gleaned from each set of journals informed the composition of each collage. I began each collage by sketching my ideas in a notebook. I then searched various magazines and books that were easily accessible at home and at school. In some instances, I had to find and purchase certain materials to match my ideas and intention. These materials included the mirrors in Collage 1, the string and buttons in Collage 3, and the fishbones in Collage 4 (see Figure 3). Other non-print materials were either found in my household or at school, or provided with other art materials from my critical friend. Such materials included: the dirt and matches in Collage 1; the white paint in Collages 2, 3, and 4; the tinfoil in Collage 3; and
the twine and post-it note in Collage 4. All collages were completed and stored in my apartment to ensure their security as a dataset.

**Figure 3**

*Collages*

![Collage 1](image1.png)  ![Collage 2](image2.png)

![Collage 3](image3.png)  ![Collage 4](image4.png)

*Note.* Larger images of the collages can be found in the Appendix.

**Document Analysis**

Official documents are a form of secondary data (Johnston & Christensen, 2014) and include a wide array of potential types of sources including reports, agendas, plans,
newsletters, records, manuals, and policies (Stringer, 2014). Documents are an effective data source because they are pre-existing, which decreases time and money spent in generating data (Kiecolt and Nathan, as cited in Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011). For documents to be useful in properly addressing the research purpose, researchers must carefully consider which documents they are including to ensure they are relevant to the study (Stringer, 2014). To do so, researchers need to verify the details of publication and the intended purpose of the original document (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Heeding the advice of Merriam and Tisdell, I remained open-minded as to which documents were most useful and relevant in this study. The pertinent documentation included a three-year action plan for the writing center, numerous written forms of communication to staff and students regarding the writing center including emails and flyers, and planning documents for tutors such as the writing center handbook and agendas for meetings.

Altogether, I utilized 35 different documents in this particular dataset. The documents included: two sets of visual presentation slides, the writing center tutor application, four posters displayed in the writing center, the tutor handbook, three agendas, a document of techniques for feedback during writing conferences, materials for a display in the hallway at school, the writing center’s section of the school website, a flyer, the course description for the proposed writing center class, 20 emails, the original action plan for the writing center, and the Google Form exit survey completed by students who visited the writing center. The action plan, tutor handbook, and two agendas
were pre-existing documents from work in and for the writing center prior to data collection but were included in the dataset for their relevancy to the work of the writing center upon its opening in the first 12 weeks. All names of staff and students on any documentations such the emails and exit survey were omitted during analysis given the focus of the action research and myself as the sole participant in the data collection. Since all documents were digital, they were accessed via my personal computer. All notes and coding were maintained in notebook at home to ensure the security of the dataset.

**Timeline**

The timeline of the study (see Table 2) took place over 12 weeks in the first semester of the 2019-2020 school year. The study commenced in tandem with the opening of the new writing center at Applewood High School in December to best capture the experience as it corresponds with the very start of the program. The timeline was designed based on Hingley’s model of the action research spiral to support the emergent and recursive nature of action research. Therefore, the research contained four cycles over the course of the study. Each cycle is outlined further in Table 2.

As action research, it is important to note that the action plan outlined in the current timeline was designed while keeping in mind that it must be responsive to the issues and needs of the work as the cycles progress. As such, the last cycle ended one week early due to school closures caused by COVID-19 in March 2020.

**Alignment to the Study**

This study was intentionally designed in ways that supported its purpose. The study aimed to help examine the process and practices involved in beginning a high school
### Table 2

**Timeline for Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Practitioner</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Cycle 1 | Three weeks | To open the writing center for student and faculty use | - Communicate opening to teaching staff  
- Oversee general operations  
- Maintain records | - Open code journals  
- Track ethical decisions  
- Adjust action research plan as needed | - Create collage using open codes as prompt |
| Cycle 2 | Three weeks | To support tutors’ practice | - Oversee general operations  
- Maintain records  
- Facilitate writing center staff meeting | - Open code journals  
- Track ethical decisions  
- Adjust action research plan as needed | - Create collage using open codes as prompt |
| Cycle 3 | Three weeks | To promote the writing center for staff and students | - Oversee general operations  
- Maintain records | - Open code journals  
- Track ethical decisions  
- Adjust action research plan as needed | - Create collage using open codes as prompt |
| Cycle 4 | Two weeks | To develop a plan to increase student use of the writing center | - Oversee general operations  
- Maintain records  
- Facilitate writing center staff discussions | - Open code journals  
- Track ethical decisions  
- Adjust action research plan as needed | - Create collage using open codes as prompt |

*Note: Cycle 4 was shortened by one week due to school closings caused by COVID-19*
writing center in a school predominantly serving students of color. The study was designed as action research, which as a methodology supports such work by having the practitioner-researcher capture the ongoing work as it occurs to best understand the practice. This study expanded on this by including the arts-based method of collage. In doing so, the method not only aided in the complex, cyclical work of action research, but also connected to the study’s framework of critical imagining by creating a space for me to concretely and visually make use of my imagination while responding to and making sense of my ongoing work in the writing center in its opening months. Thus, this particular method aligned specifically to the second research question. Altogether, the methodology outlined in this chapter expressly supported my examination of the multiple roles taken as part of this study of my work in Applewood’s new writing center.

**Validity and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the validity of the study, various measures had to be met, particularly given the different aspects that inform the methodology. Foremost, the study was designed to triangulate the three data sources. In findings of the following chapter, I used rich, thick description as a means to help the audience share in my experience of the research process. Given the nature of the study, my data sources and my analysis also ensured that I could illuminate my bias through my different positionalities, as well as provided any discrepant information that countered the themes from the analytic coding (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Specific to the data generated through collaging, Leavy (2015) provides evaluative criteria to support validity. In terms of methodology in particular, the data
must demonstrate strength of form as indicated by the thoroughness of the artistic method and the coherence between the various elements of the project, including the final products. There is also need for transparency in the artist-researcher’s explanation of their process to demonstrate the connection between purpose and methods. In addition to these considerations, Leavy (2018) proposes that arts-based research can be evaluated on the contribution of the research, its ability to reach a wide audience, the response of the audience, the aestheticism of the produced artworks, the singular creativity of the artist-researcher, and the ethical considerations of the study. I most specifically aimed to meet this criteria of validity through my conversations with my critical friend, who, as an art teacher and equity-focused educator, provided insight into both the artistic validity of the collages themselves as well as their connections to the critical-focused work of the writing center.

Furthermore, as action research, there were other forms of validity that had to be considered. Upon analyzing data and reporting findings, I had to consider catalytic validity, consequential validity, outcome validity, and process validity (Pine, 2009). The study was measured for catalytic validity based upon its transformative nature and worked to promote change, particularly as a form of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Consequential validity demonstrated the farther-reaching implications of the research in terms of the “potential social consequences” to lead to more equitable decisions in the education process (Pine, 2009, p. 85). The study’s ability to show the actions taken to address the identified problem and the outcomes demonstrated validity in terms of the action research’s outcome validity. Finally, the study’s process validity
connected to the triangulation of data sources, the fit of research questions to methods, and the consistency of the findings as they related to the data, all of which demonstrated validity across the various components of this study.

**Critical Friend**

One particularly crucial support for validity in this study was the use of a critical friend. Herr and Anderson (2015) explain that a critical friend is a common form of validity in action research given how the practitioner-researcher is involved in the study through multiple roles. A critical friend serves as a resource for the researcher by helping the researcher to make meaning of the process, often pushing them to a different understanding by making their ideas more explicit. To do so, a critical friend can also be used by the researcher as a “vital sounding board” (p. 99) to help make sense of the action research process, which can be intense and long in nature. A critical friend is a vital component for validity in action research since it supports the important characteristic of collaboration (Lighthall, 2004; Baird, 2004) and provides the opportunity for critique from outside the emic perspective (Ham & Kane, 2004). In arts-based research, the role of a critical friend can be extended by sharing the generated artwork with them for insight and feedback, which is of particular use when the critical friend is an artist familiar with the used medium and method (Leavy, 2015).

Given this purpose and criteria for a critical friend, my critical friend for this study was a colleague at Applewood High School, Sally. At the time of this study, Sally had worked at Applewood for over 20 years as an art teacher, so she was very familiar with the school’s context and its history. She and I had collaborated on interdisciplinary
projects together, so I knew we had a strong collegial relationship that meant she would dedicate her time and energy to being my critical friend while allowing me to be open and vulnerable in sharing my research process with her. She had also served with me on the school’s equity team. Although she was at a different understanding of equity work in her classroom with her students, Sally had the language and concepts of such work that proved useful in this particular study. Lastly, as an art teacher, I valued her insights and feedback on my own artwork given her expertise in the field.

Data Analysis

This study utilized three data sources, each of which required its own form of analysis. First, to analyze the reflexive journals, I used open coding as this helped in identifying any segments of the entries that could potentially be relevant to the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process occurred throughout the research process as the emerging themes and trends were utilized in making collages as another source of data. However, once data collection was finished, the codes were then used to form categories in the form of analytical coding. Once the categories were established, I used them to better analyze the journals to address the purpose of the study and my research questions. The codes used for my journals included: messaging, agency, design and implementation, critical imagining, time and structure, and support.

Second, I analyzed the collages using discussions with my critical friend and thematic analysis (Holm, Sahlström, & Zilliacus, 2018). To begin, I discussed each collage with my critical friend to help arrive at a better understanding of emerging themes. I then proceeded with a thematic analysis using both the collages and my notes of
the discussion. Thematic analysis results in identifying themes in an artwork, which may either be literal or metaphorical. Because metaphorical themes may be challenging to understand on their own, they can be compared to the content of the reflexive journals to draw connections to the collages’ source material. Upon thematic analysis of all four collages, I arrived at themes of: whiteness, flexibility, time, empowerment, connections, community, power, strategy, and hope.

Finally, document analysis must begin with establishing the document’s authenticity, including the basis for its creation and its general history (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Such background is imperative in helping make sense of a document’s contents. In this particular study, I included each document based on its background and intention to ensure it supported the study’s research questions.

Furthermore, documents in this study were analyzed using content analysis. This particular process examines documents for its “meaning, symbolic qualities, and expressive contents” as well as the “communicative roles” they fulfill in their provided contexts (Krippendorff, 2013, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 179). For analysis, each document was analyzed separately for its content first. Then, upon a second round of analysis, the following themes emerged: student-centered, community, collaboration, assets, current structures, empowerment, and culture.

**Reporting Findings**

Findings from the study were reported in the final two chapters of this dissertation. I used rich, thick description in describing the data in support of validity to help the audience best understand how I experienced each data point shared.
Additionally, an image of each collage was included so that the audience could view the visual data for themselves. The findings were also presented as part of my final defense in front of my committee and other visitors. As action research, it is also valuable to share my findings with other practitioners. Because the study is most relevant to my specific school context at Applewood High School, after the defense I plan to share the findings with my administration in hopes of serving as an example of teacher-led work in initiating new programming and student supports at our specific school site. As other colleagues of mine at Applewood and other educators in other school communities decide to tackle work such as this, of course I am open to sharing my findings with them as well.

Conclusion

As this chapter draws to a close, I utilize this final section to explain the significance of this study within the wider body of literature and research regarding writing centers. Then, I explore both the limitations and delimitations of this study before stating the expected changes I anticipate given the nature of this action research.

Significance of the Study

While the body of literature on writing centers is expansive, a current gap exists in exploring the creation and implementation of a high school writing center as a resource for students, particularly students of color who may currently lack such academic support and opportunity for agency. Much of the literature regarding the work of writing center directors focuses on my colleagues in colleges and universities, and their varied experiences, practices, successes, and challenges in such contexts. However, as a potentially transformative resource for students of color, we must begin to address how to
start this work in high school. This study aimed to address this gap by presenting this action research to study this work of starting a high school writing center with and for students of color.

To do so in a meaningful way, the research was designed to help me consider the process and the practices of an emerging writing center and my role as the writing center director through the use of journaling, art-making, and documentation. This triangulation of data was designed so that I would be able to examine not only my practice as a critically-minded, White high school educator, but to hopefully capture ways in which this work could begin to address the inequities experienced across high schools by our students of color. The continuous cycles of reflexivity supported by the practitioner-researcher journals and collages effectively further supported this purpose. The document analysis added to this understanding by concretely viewing the work of the writing center outside of my own reflections and musings. By completing and sharing this action research, I hoped to provide just one example of how high school teachers can navigate the intimidating, challenging, and exciting work of developing a writing center for their school community.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study included its scope since it is singular in school site and the only participant in the study itself is me. Because this study was designed so that the work itself was highlighted, including my role as writing center director, it was inherently missing the important voices and perspectives of students and, of particular note given the study’s critical-based framework, students of color. While this limitation
worked against a fundamental tenet of CRT to feature their voices and counternarratives, it would not have been possible to conduct this study at my own school site with student participants due to school district regulations. Therefore, to ensure the study took place, it was important to yield to these restrictions.

Another limitation of this study was the specific context itself. Applewood High School was a distinct and unique high school environment based on its location, student population, and current practices. This specific context inevitably impacted the generalizability of the study to other contexts without some work on behalf of the audience. Therefore, the transferability of the study and its findings relies on the reader and their ability to make connections and adjustments as needed to fit their own roles and contexts.

A final limitation of this study was my positionality and my multiple roles in the research process. The research design, data analysis, and findings were all provided through my perspective as a White male educator with my particular history, both personal and professional, working in the context of Applewood. As such, this was a singular, individual perspective distinctive to this study, and certainly limited by my lived experiences as a White man in education.

Just as many of these elements of this study were limitations, so were they delimitations. Although the focus of the study on the work of the writing center and the specific context of the study limit the research in one way, they were purposely chosen to meet the purpose of the research. Because the study aimed to elucidate my work and experience in implementing this change in my school context, it was necessary for me to
design this research using arts-based action research and to acknowledge the unique context in which I work, which is a strength of action research (Loughran, 2004), as well as to name my dual role as the practitioner-researcher (Feldman, Paugh, & Mills, 2004; Baird, 2004). Another delimitation of this study was its timeline. This study was designed to occur over the course of the writing center’s first 12 weeks so that it faithfully captured my experience with the initial implementation of the program. While just a snapshot of the work at hand that came after the many hours spent pitching, planning, and preparing (as well as the multitude of tasks that surely will come after this study), this research was meant to serve as an example of how the work comes to fruition as the doors to the writing center open.

A final delimitation of the study was its use of arts-based methods as a means for data collection. My search of literature on writing centers yielded no results in which arts-based methods were utilized. The body of research regarding literature on writing centers, no matter its focus or lens, seems to primarily use more standard research methods. However, given that arts-based methods can help produce such an array of benefits as covered earlier, using these non-traditional methods was intentional here in making use of such advantages to best inform this particular study.

**Expected Changes**

As action research, it was important to name the expected changes from the research study since it is the purpose of such research to help initiate change. From this study, I initially hoped to see the full implementation of the writing center at Applewood High School in a sustained, successful way. To do so, I also expected to see flexibility
and responsiveness on my part to meet the needs of students as the work continues. As such, the three-year action plan served as a living document to both measure and support this key change, and it should continue to so. The most important and valuable expected change I hoped to see as a result of this study was establishing a positive, productive, and pluralistic space for students to grow their writing, their voices, and themselves in a welcoming and supportive environment.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The data collected in this study consisted of reflective journals, collages, and documents, as outlined in greater detail in the previous chapter. After analyzing each data component on its own, I triangulated the whole data set to support the validity of the data altogether. In the following chapter, I present and analyze the data in two sections, each corresponding to the study’s research questions:

- How do I design and implement a new writing center that seeks to disrupt educational inequity and racism experienced by students of color?
- In what ways does my critical imagining shape the work of a new writing center in its first 12 weeks?

I organized each of the two sections into three and two subsections, respectively, with each of these subsections covering specific findings that emerged from the data analysis. The focus of this chapter is to provide findings from the four cycles in this arts-based action research.

Designing and Implementing a High School Writing Center

This section responds to the first research question, which focuses on the practical work of starting the writing center at Applewood High School. Findings demonstrate three dominant areas of the work itself: (a) demonstrating flexibility, (b) centering students and community, and (c) focusing on messaging and advocacy.
Together, these three elements, detailed further in the following subsections, help to understand what goes into the more hands-on, practical work of designing and implementing a new high school writing center for and with students of color.

**Demonstrating Flexibility**

Over the first 12 weeks of opening the new writing center at Applewood High School, the reflective journals, collages, and documents demonstrated an ongoing yet evolving need to demonstrate flexibility. As the work of the writing center started, I immediately recognized the need to shift both the ideas and the work itself in response to a variety of elements at play in the context of the school. In analyzing the dataset over the course of the study’s four cycles, I came to understand the key role that flexibility played in the opening months of the new writing center, and how that flexibility changed even in that short time. Ultimately, I was able to further develop the coding for this section as my thinking and the work itself continued to shift and change over the course of the study, which helped to further break down the coding based on: (a) the need to adjust plans, (b) the emergent work of responding to the practical day-to-day work of the writing center, and (c) the consideration of how to navigate the larger systems and structures impacting the writing center.

**Adjusting Plans**

Within the first three-week cycle of the action research, I immediately noted in my reflective journals having “to make many decisions in this work … that have shifted away from my initial action plan, especially in regards to the timeline” (12/16/19) while also noting that “part of the biggest struggle this year has been consistency” (1/6/20) due
to the time constraints based on the original scope of the planned writing center program.

By the end of the first cycle in this action research, I had already come to recognize that no amount of planning I had done previously was going to play out as intended. While I had spent time prior to the study organizing the writing center for opening, including working with the tutors over the summer, the initial set of journals from the first three weeks of the writing center being open indicated an instant sense of needing to adjust plans in response to the realities of working in the writing center.

The role of flexibility in adjusting plans surfaced in the collage from the first cycle as well. In the first collage (see Appendix), I included a small image of a clock placed next to a comma. Based on my initial coding of the journals, I had recognized my need to be flexible with time. By placing the comma after the clock, I aimed to communicate the initial need to pause with each step of implementing the writing center since there were many delays; and even after opening, I had to demonstrate flexibility in time by diverting from my initial action plan. Unfortunately, I think this particular data point highlighted the ways in which the school system has been designed to intentionally slow progress for students of color. The ongoing adaptability demonstrated in this study on my part was oftentimes in response to the bureaucratic moves made necessary by the system in order to maintain itself. By constantly having to adjust plans according to the hierarchy of who to contact about which problem (i.e., maintaining the physical space of the writing center, creating a class in the schedule for future cohorts of tutors, and so on), I better understood the ways in which our communication trail works historically and contextually in ways that actually burden tasks we try to accomplish for our students.
My critical friend, Sally, picked up on this, and in our discussion she labeled the placement of the clock and comma as indicative of a “time crunch.” Sally also surfaced the division of the collage into thirds, noting she felt each area represented a basic element of the writing center (the tutors and students; the words and writing; and the grounding work of it opening), but that each element was still compartmentalized and not yet working in unison. This particular feedback helped me to better recognize an implicit meaning I embedded in the first collage unknowingly. Upon further reflection, I understood that my flexibility in the first cycle (at the end of which this collage was created) was in response to seeing the different components of designing and implementing a writing center but not yet being sure how they were meant to come together to work in unison and make the vision of the writing center a reality. As I continuously had to adjust the plans of the writing center in its opening weeks, I understood that the work of the writing center inherently entailed the need for flexibility.

Day-to-Day Work

With the work of the writing center progressing into the second cycle, the needed flexibility began to shift. As the writing center began to see more students visiting and working, the work required flexibility in much more practical ways in our day-to-day business. For instance, Amelia, a Latinx junior student who had been in my sophomore English class the previous year, came in to work on a practice college application essay at the behest of her mother. That particular day, I had two senior tutors, Freddie and Imogen, bot Latinx senior students, staffing the writing center, and I knew pairing Amelia with one of them would be beneficial since they had written their own college application
essays recently and could provide more insights into the process than the other junior tutors present. Of the two senior tutors, I initially wanted to pair Amelia with Imogen since she had naturally stepped into a supportive role with the other tutors during the summer training; additionally, Amelia and Imogen were both native Spanish speakers, and I believed that could be beneficial when crafting Amelia’s essay together. Freddie, to his benefit, had surfaced an initial hesitation in the same training session regarding writing conferences with other students because he worried he would be too straightforward and potentially hurtful when working with his peers. Being a former student of mine, I knew that Amelia likely needed a warmer, more caring experience in her writing conference. However, Imogen was already working with another student on a different paper for English class, so I introduced her to Freddie instead.

Despite any initial hesitation in that moment, the flexibility I used in pairing Amelia and Freddie was successful. I reflected in that day’s journal: “The result couldn’t have been any better … I saw him really listening to her, sharing some insights and resources online that I assume he had used himself when writing his own essays … And then they worked together a bit more” (1/22/20). Later on, Amelia began to regularly come to the writing center, sometimes even to just socialize with Freddie and the other tutors, demonstrating the ways in which a writing center can serve as a hub of socialization in addition to academic support.

As our work in the writing center progressed, the flexibility required to support the work was, in part, focused on the other daily procedures of the writing center: providing computers for students, welcoming visiting students and getting them to
complete the exit survey, and as seen here, organizing the writing conferences for walk-in appointments. In this way, the required flexibility in the practical, everyday work of the writing center seemed ever shifting and changing.

The documents from the opening 12 weeks of the writing center elucidated a different form of flexibility in the day-to-day work of a new writing center: room for flexibility with and from students, particularly the tutors. Although the writing center staff handbook was written prior to the study, it played an integral part during the first months of the writing center being open, particularly as a reference point for the tutors in supporting their work. In the handbook itself, I included a section for “Building Culture at the [Applewood] Writing Center.” However, I did not include any specific information, and instead included a note to the tutors that it was their role to “[establish] our culture as a group,” especially given their position as “the very first cohort of writing center tutors.” I then provided them the space and support to share their ideas for “things we do, the traditions we have, what’s important to us, and how we function.” While this section of the handbook ultimately remained untouched during the study (and afterward, due to the school closure), it demonstrated arguably the most important flexibility in the work of the writing center: the openness and willingness to be responsive to the ideas, energy, and insights of the students. In particular, with regards to something as important as the culture of the writing center, the flexibility to provide them the ability to voice their ideas about the space they are forging in their wider school community emerged as a key finding. This type of student-centered flexibility begins to uncover possibilities for the critical imagining of the writing center’s work to be expanded later.
The flexibility in student choice carried over in the addendum to the writing center staff handbook, which detailed the various feedback techniques for writing conferences. Within the techniques themselves, there was flexibility built in as tutors had to determine how to utilize each technique within each individual conference with a student. But, there was also an overarching call for their flexibility in determining which technique best matched the need of their peer and the goal of their writing conference.

This type and level of flexibility was vital for a writing center like Applewood’s in aiming to disrupt the inequitable structures in our school system because, like the space in the handbook for the tutors to help outline and craft the culture of the space, the flexibility in techniques for writing conferences allowed the students space to explore their own decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking. Despite efforts in recent years, much of the curriculum and instruction at Applewood was still structured similar to the banking method described by Paulo Freire. In the two years prior to the study, Applewood pursued a school-wide professional development from an outside provider geared at increasing students’ reading and critical thinking through metacognitive practices. However, after its initial year, the training went unsupported and began falling to the wayside, with many staff returning to more traditional teaching models. The beginning writing conferences at the new writing center specifically sought to address this as they worked to bolster student agency in their writing and in finding support. With a student population of predominantly students of color, this is one specific way in which Applewood’s new writing center had started to chip away at the bigger
structures in our school system working against our students and their education, thereby
supporting student learning in line with the liberating education imagined by Freire.

**Systems and Structures**

Starting in the second cycle, but increasingly over the course of the last two
cycles, the flexibility needed in the work of the writing center continued focus more and
more on bigger systems and structures beyond the writing center itself. In particular, as I
worked to expand the program to include a class during the day for the following school
year, I began to have to be resourceful in working within the confines of our school’s
systems and structures.

Initially, I found myself considering how to be flexible in the recruitment process
of new tutors. In my journal from February 14th, 2020, I considered the best ways in
which to recruit new tutors, particularly students of color who would be representative of
our overall student population, I also found myself considering the ways in which a
traditional application system potentially supports white supremacist culture despite
aiming to establish engagement and commitment from the potential tutors. I reflected on
“still struggling to find a balance between something more formal, polished, and
professional, and something that is more informal, laidback, and personal” (2/14/20). In
an attempt to be flexible, the application process included a written portion in the form of
a short Google Form as well as in-person conversations with the applicants and the
teachers they submitted as recommendations. In particular, I reflected on speaking with
my colleagues about the applicants, noting how “I ended up just chatting with them about
the student applicants over lunch” (2/13/20). The more informal discussions with other
teachers about these future tutors was not how I intended the process initially, nor was it how I had checked recommendations the previous school year. Again, the school’s structure of who communicates with who regarding handling issues, as well as navigating the way our school programs were specific systems my work with the writing center directly butted up against. But this type of flexibility, paired with similar informal discussions with the applicants themselves, was an attempt to reimagine the ways in which students and the school community at large interacts and navigates more traditional structures such as applying to an activity like this. When combined with the other forms of flexibility previously described, the work of the writing center was able to continue to carve out the new space and resource for students.

The final collage from the fourth cycle (see Appendix) also illuminated this type of flexibility used in the opening months of a new high school writing center. In particular, the collage was divided into two sections, and the division was created using a firm, strong line of rough twine. However, along the twine, at the top and bottom of the barrier, I placed a collection of small, fragile fish bones. By the final cycle of the study, I understood my flexibility in the work of the writing center requiring a balance of, as Sally framed it, “strong … but [also] delicate.” This balance in flexibility matched the shift in flexibility previously noted in the journals regarding a wider view of the work at hand in regards to systems and structures. Although critical imagining requires new ideas and, ultimately, a full revision of current systems and structures as an antidote to the inherent racism in our schools, to enact that vision was a far more delicate process. To fulfill the imagined vision of the writing center, given the existing structures and relationships
involved, required more finesse to make sure the work at hand was successful and meaningful. Thus, it required flexibility not just in the daily and ongoing work of the writing center, but also with consideration for the larger systems and structures in which the new writing center operated.

**Centering Students and Community**

In designing and implementing the new writing center at Applewood High School, the dataset highlighted work done around how to center students and underscored the importance of community.

**The Skin They Are In**

Even upon the first journal entry reflecting on the work, I found myself considering specific groups of students by their race and ethnicity, home language, and special education status. Most importantly, I began wondering “how they will experience the writing center” (12/16/19) based on these important identities. Being so early in the process – even before a real student set foot into the writing center – I tried holding space for Applewood’s students in the new writing center; more specifically, I found myself wanting to name the groups of students the writing center specifically was meant to support. While this alone does not constitute anti-racist work in and of itself, it does initiate the critical imagining vital to the writing center’s burgeoning work. The experience of students of color and other historically marginalized students was centered in the work of Applewood’s writing center by imagining how they would be in the space, what they would gain from the space, and how that would shape the space to be.
This work carried over to my portion of the presentation created for the Applewood staff. In each department’s meeting, the tutors covered the basic ins-and-outs of what the writing center was and how it would operate, and I covered the mission of the program. I included our student body demographics with the intention of reminding our staff of the student population we serve. For years, our administration has embedded these details into our professional learning, especially to help name and drive conversations around how our students experience discipline at Applewood, the disparity between Black and White students in advanced courses, as well as the disproportionate failure rates for our students of color. By including this information as part of the initial communication about Applewood’s new writing center, I wanted to convey that the writing center was created with our student body in mind, and that the writing center program was designed to provide supports for our students who have been historically marginalized. I aimed to demonstrate that the writing center hoped to contribute to our school’s overall work focused on equity. While the mere inclusion of our student demographics did not constitute anti-racist work, nor did it even begin to truly capture the complex and meaningful people our students are and their myriad identities, it did at least begin to ground the work of the writing center in recognizing our students as whole, complex individuals. In this way, the conversations could continue about how our students experienced school and the ways in which we could specifically work to try and disrupt the inequality and oppression inherent in our schools and education system.

Although I initially hesitated including the information in the presentation given by me and the tutors, I ultimately decided to since “it demonstrate[d] we [were] thinking
about our student population in specific, because they [would] have specific needs with
their writing based on who they are” (12/19/19). I also noted this focus on students in the
collage from the first cycle of data collection. One of the three sections of the collage was
composed of various body parts in many different skin tones, particularly those of Black
and Brown people. When creating this portion of the collage, the intention was to
explicitly call attention to the distinct diversity of Applewood’s student population while
specifically highlighting students of color as a focus in the work of the new writing
center, both as tutors and as visiting students.

In discussing the piece with my critical friend, she raised the question: Are we
seeing them in just skin tones? Later in my journaling, as I reflected on my attempt to
select the next cohort of tutors for the following school year, I did question the potential
of tokenizing as a result of trying to have the writing center staff represent the school’s
student body (2/14/20). In particular, I had to note that in the initial cohort of tutors in
this inaugural opening of the writing center, there were no Black tutors; no Black student
had applied or expressed interest in taking part in the writing center in this first year.
Given the focus of the study and trying to create a space and resource to specifically
support Applewood’s students of color, this was a shortcoming at the opening of the new
writing center, and I hoped to rectify in future cohorts to ensure that the tutors truly
reflected all of Applewood’s student body.

However, in connecting this journal entry back to my discussion of the first
collage with my colleague, we recognized the composition of the different skin tones
really elucidated the concept of community and how various types of people help
compose the broader group of people involved in the efforts of the writing center, therefore attempting to see the parts of the sum while also striving for the overall big picture of the community as a whole.

**Student Voice and Agency**

The centering of students in the writing center and in our work in the writing center also highlighted the pivotal role of student voice, and how providing an avenue for students to be heard aimed to provide them with agency. Early in the reflective journals, I found that I “remind[ed] myself of the fundamental importance of letting this work be for and by the students themselves as a way to empower them in their writing and in the work of the program itself” (1/16/20). But as the work of the writing center progressed, I more explicitly made calls for “students need[ing] to feel heard, take [the] lead, and celebrate themselves and their work” (2/3/20) for “student voice to lead the way” in making sure the writing center would serve as “a hub of student leadership, student interaction and socialization, and student joy and celebration” (2/10/20). I also recognized how, especially since the writing center was in its opening weeks and months, “there [was] so much potential to have student shape it. And, if they [did, there would be] a definite entry point for all types of students to have their voices heard” (2/14/20).

In the second collage, the concept of student voice and agency appeared as a black hand stirring a cup of coffee with a pencil. This particular image was placed directly in the center of the chess board, a symbol for the power structures and systems at play in schools, thereby physically centering students, their work, and their voice in the visual. In discussing this element of the collage with my critical friend, she called
attention to the connection between the pencil as an instrument for student voice and sharing ideas, and how it was being used in this case to stir the coffee – a beverage associated with energy and waking up. In this way, this element of the second collage implicitly messaged how the design and implementation of the writing center, in its centering of students, aimed to empower students, providing both energy and a call to action.

The explicit work of the writing center, as seen in the documentation of the feedback techniques taught to and utilized by the tutors, also centered students and their voice. Each of the 10 techniques hinged on “what the writer intends,” which was named explicitly in some techniques like “Read Aloud” in which the written work would be read aloud during the conference, while it appeared more implicitly in other techniques such as “Cut It Out” in which the tutor and the student physically cut up a printout of the writing, cut it into separate sentences or sections, and physically manipulate and reorganize the writing to make the writer’s message clearer. By grounding each feedback technique for writing conferences in the goal of clearly communicating the student author’s intended ideas, the design and implementation of the writing center centered students in a very practical way.

Through such work, the writing center seems to have started addressing the current curriculums at Applewood in which students, especially our students of color, may be underrepresented or even silenced. There had been ongoing work for years to diversify both the curriculum and instruction at Applewood. For example, in the English department, there had been an initiative to incorporate texts by more authors of color
across the curriculum in our classes. However, we had also been beholden to ensuring the
texts we used met a certain threshold in reading levels despite demonstrating texts by
authors of color traditionally scored lower in such quantitative text analyses due to the
structures of traditional grammar for Standardized Written English. Though modest in
this study, the work of the writing center had started to create a space in which there was
power in language and experience beyond that grounded in whiteness, especially by
trying to provide students with the agency to determine what they are saying in their
writing and how. For Applewood’s students of color whose home languages do not
adhere to or align with Standardized Written English, this was important work to start in
the new writing center.

The Role of Community

Most importantly, in the vein of centering students, the focus on and role of
community also surfaced. In addition to demonstrating collaboration, in the second
collage, the dialogue bubble around the table indicated community – a communal setting
in which Applewood students could come together to connect with one another. The
concept of connection as a driver in community was even clearer in the collage from the
third cycle of the action research. From a reflective center made of tinfoil, indicative of
the writing center’s role in reflecting the student population, seven strings of neon green
string stretched out to various points in the collage. Specifically, one string connected to
the door knob of a door slightly open, as if to demonstrate that it was ultimately the
connection between students and the sense of community that would open the door –
either as a means to get students in the door of the writing center and access the resource,
or as the crux of driving the work of the writing center forward, opening the door of opportunity for the writing center to be a fixture in the wider school community.

While these ideas were intentional in the creation of the collage, through my discussion with my critical friend, she drew attention to how the strings of community did not cross into the bottom section of the collage – the writing of a book slightly obscured by a thin layer of white paint. Because of this, I recognized how this cutoff could indicate how the sense of community may, in fact, be the true core of the writing center work as an anti-racist structure at Applewood. In other words, the true design and implementation of the new writing center began to highlight the crucial role community can play in the start of disrupting structural inequities in our school. Historically at Applewood, our classes and school-wide schedule have not yet allowed for the type of community building inherent in the beginning work of the new writing center. Other after school activities through which students connect with one another have typically focused on pure social or athletic activities, and the academically-grounded activities have fallen on staff to plan and facilitate. The creation of the writing center as a student-centered and student-led academic space helps to address and start to disrupt the previous system by handing over the space for students to both connect with and support one another with their learning.

The thread of community as a way to center students continued through the documents of the Applewood writing center. In the staff handbook for the writing center tutors, a section in the first part indicated etiquette asking them both to offer and to ask for help as needed, indicating a symbiotic relationship of care and support in the
community. Additionally, the protocol for appointment protocols outlined in detail in a later part of the handbook began with time to build rapport. This portion of the writing appointment was described in detail and explained as an important opportunity to “[make] a connection with your student … [and] to establish that relationship” while “remember[ing] that you are their peer and not a teacher.” In doing so, the protocol for every writing conference highlighted the need for personal connection and therefore supported the concept of community.

Elsewhere in the documentation of the writing center, the importance of community was demonstrated in the both the core values of the writing center, where it was explicitly listed, as well as the agendas for the writing center staff meetings. Each of the three scheduled meetings for the tutors began with either “teambuilding” or a “family check-in,” which again provided a space for establishing community at the very beginning of a time in which students come together. The work of the writing center to establish and nurture a full sense of community, especially between the tutors, demonstrated an emerging level of cultural responsiveness for these students of color. And in doing so, the writing center also began to emerge as a space unlike the individualistic structure typical through much of Applewood, and thus started to disrupt this pervasive sense if individualism throughout the school.

This drive to make the writing center a space for community for students was further demonstrated in an email exchange with an administrator. I had an email exchange with the assistant principal in charge of facilities in regards to the accessibility of the space that housed the writing center. An offshoot of the school library intended to
be accessed by its own door was also accessible through the simple moving of a room divider placed between the writing center and one side of the library. After encountering a few instances of the writing center’s space being accessed by other students and visitors outside of our hours of operation, I contacted this administrator to solve the issue. While I reflected on the issue in one way in my journals by expressing concern for maintaining a warm, welcoming, and clean environment for our students, which could be difficult in some schools in large cities given available spacing, in my direct communication with the assistant principal, I framed the issue around ensuring it was a “space [meant] to be communal,” but to do so required a respect for the space and its maintenance. By outlining the emerging issue in this way, as opposed to simply calling attention to the physical upkeep of the space as an issue in terms of having to clean the space or a misuse of the space, the value of community was underscored as an important element in making the writing center a valuable resource for Applewood students.

Lastly, the reflective journals elucidated how community as a way to center students informed the work involved in designing and implementing a new high school writing student with and for students of color. On one level, there was the smaller community of tutors who staffed the writing center. Toward the end of the second cycle of data collection, I noted “a bit more community building between” themselves and with me, particularly the one group consisting of the more naturally social tutors (2/4/20). In particular, this group of tutors built community through a sense of humor and the ability to tell jokes with one another (especially by making me the butt of jokes, which was perfectly fine and taken in good humor), as well as their ability to connect across grade
levels. The juniors, who were nearing their SATs, were asking questions of their colleagues about the college application process, scholarships, and other steps in preparing for postsecondary life. By the fourth cycle of data collection, however, I recognized that the division of tutors between the two days after school was a blockade in further developing their connections with one another, and I aimed to find ways to ensure the entire group of tutors would have time together to strengthen that community (3/4/20).

The community of tutors also presented itself in each of the collages through the inclusion of groups of seven items in each image, symbolic of their cohort. In the first collage, the cohort of tutors appeared as a row of unlit matches near the bottom right corner, seemingly growing from the dirt along the bottom. In the second collage, they appeared as the seven red squares across the chess board. In the penultimate collage, the tutors showed up as seven buttons just outside the opening of the door – unsure if they were entering the door themselves, or perhaps on their way out into the wider area of the full image. And in the final collage, the tutors took form in the seven cutout circles in the righthand portion of the image, through which we would see the yellowed pages of *A Raisin in the Sun* upside down. By threading the specific cohort of tutors throughout each of the four collages, the importance of their community emerged more strongly in the dataset.

In terms of the writing center as a full program, the role of community was strongest when considering the intended design of the writing center. In the reflective journals, I explicitly stated: “I want the writing center to be a hub of communication and
community for the school community” (2/13/20), and later described the space needing to be “a living, breathing community of learners and people coming together to craft their ideas and their words” (2/28/20). While this was the aim of the space, given the restraints of time and scheduling, the implementation fell short. I worked with both our schools’ counselors and STEM coordinator to arrange two separate opportunities to get students into the writing center during lunch periods, for a scholarship program and a summer programming opportunity, respectively. But, because these sessions occurred during the day, none of the writing center tutors were available to attend and support the underclassmen with their writing for these applications. While my colleagues understood this and were happy just to have a designated space to provide students to work on these tasks (and I was happy to get students in the door in the hopes that they would seek out the writing center after school in the future), seeing the underclassmen sitting in near silence just typing away at their computer screens, many with headphones buried deep in their ears, I recognized the missing element of community: “[they were] missing out on that peer-to-peer interactions with the tutors … missing that component today was almost tangible to me” (2/28/20).

Although I intended the writing center to be a place of community for Applewood, and I had seen some of that community come to life with the tutors themselves, ultimately the intended community fell short in the opening weeks of starting the program due to the logistical and programmatic constraints.
Focusing on Advocacy and Messaging

As the director of Applewood’s new writing center, my role predominantly required me to advocate for students behind the scenes and to lead the communication and messaging of the writing center.

Working Behind the Scenes

Within the first six weeks of the writing center opening, I began to recognize how “my work with the writing center [focused] on ‘behind-the-scenes’ [work]” (1/2/20). While this type of work often happened outside of our hours of operation either during the school day itself or even during in-service days for professional learning, as more students began utilizing the space while we open, I understood how my direct interactions with visiting students was limited to greeting them, connecting them with a tutor as needed, and encouraging them to complete the exit survey before they left (1/14/20, 1/17/20, 1/21/20, and 2/11/20). This step back in my presence of the actual work and operations of the writing center was crucial in how it was designed and implemented in a way to support student leadership and learning.

To take on this role specifically also requires self-reflection, which was best demonstrated by the use of pieces of mirror across the first collage. In particular, it was telling that this reflection was most prominent at the onset of the study, demonstrating a beginning awareness of my more limited role in the actual workings of the writing center work itself. By de-centering myself in the writing center, especially as a White male educator, the work of the tutors and the students in that space was further highlighted as the core focus of the program.
Through a lens of race for this study, my work behind the scenes and my attempt to decenter myself as the leader of the ongoing writing center work as a White male educator was in direct recognition of the leadership structure at Applewood. Applewood has four administrators who lead the school: the principal, a White male educator like myself, and three female assistant principals. Two of the assistant principals are White, and the third is Arab. As such, our school community is predominantly lead by White educators despite our student population being only 12.5%. In a small way, my ongoing attempt to work behind the scenes and have the tutors, as students of color, be recognized as the true leaders of the writing center and its work. In doing so, the writing center’s opening work began to upend the traditional ways in which power is viewed at Applewood and who was seen in leadership roles, particularly placing students of color in those positions to be viewed as such by the wider school community.

**Role of Advocacy**

With my role in Applewood’s writing center being focused on work behind the scenes and during non-operational hours, my role as advocate for the space and the students became primary. A general sense of this advocacy emerged most clearly in multiple collages. In the collage from the second cycle, a cutout of an ancient soldier wielding a shield in front and a sword overhead was placed at the bottom of the checkerboard facing a dark tower illuminated with a full moon in the back. Together, these two images placed next to each other connotated a sense of fighting something immense and something powerful – as my critical friend commented in our discussion of the piece, systemic racism. She also pointed out how the background of the entire piece,
on which the checkboard lays titled and askew, was quite literally whitewashed, as if to show the prominence of whiteness and white supremacy as the backdrop to the work of the writing center and to academia in general.

The theme of whiteness carried over in both the third and fourth collages where, respectively, a thin layer of the same white paint obscured the writing at the bottom of the third collage as if to demonstrate the struggle against whiteness to center students’ writing and their voice in their writing, and a thick bold outline of the white paint etched out the pattern between the different patches of the hopeful blue sky. In this fourth and final collage, however, the shift from wide swatches of whiteness to more finite outlines, admittedly still present, seemed to suggest a shift toward the utility of a White educator’s work to help piece together a vision for something different, something “revolutionary,” as depicted in the centering of the word in the visionary portion of that collage. With representation of myself gone in the final two collages, unlike the mirrors in the first collage and the warrior in the second collage, my more theoretical role as a behind-the-scenes advocate became much more evident as the data progressed over the course of the study.

Earlier in the study, I surfaced hesitancy around “ruffling more feathers than necessary,” deciding instead to defer to administrators, engineers, and staff, being “more keenly aware of how politics work in a school seeing” and noting needing allies in the work for the writing center to be successful” (1/2/20). In particular, I reflected about being “a bit worried about some of the messaging around the writing center and its connection to equity” (1/9/20) given the pushback such ideas and concepts had received
from sections of the staff in previous interactions and discussions. I asked myself, “With [its] critical race roots, what’s the best way to message that [focus of the work]? Is it a ‘hide-the-veggies’ sort of deal where those beliefs and values and workings are hidden into the work so that it just happens? Or, does it need to be more explicit and educative on the surface?” (1/27/20).

Weeks into the study, as explored in a previous section, the hindrance of the systems and structures at Applewood became increasingly apparent. However, toward the end of the study and this data collection, my mindset regarding my role as advocate began to shift, particularly in regards to how the writing center could in fact be a core site of anti-racist work at Applewood. I started to recognize how “if I went full tilt against the system in some way to really radicalize the program, it would garner more interest,” but still wondered: “how do I do that?” (3/2/20). In regards to critical race theory, I found myself leaning into ways to eliminate all forms of oppression – or, at least, starting to really grapple with such work. As a White male educator, my role as advocate was especially important as I started to conceive ways in which I could use my privilege to begin disrupting the racist structures and systems at Applewood and beyond.

Although this shift in my role and my work as writing center director did not take place over the course of this study in the opening months of the program, this notable change in how I approach my place in the design and implementation of the writing center did surface in the final cycle of data collection, which will undoubtedly inform my work in the program going forward, as explored in the implications outlined in the following chapter.
Role of Messaging

My role as advocate, in more concrete terms of the design and implementation of the writing center, took the form of shaping and focusing the messaging of the writing center, particularly in the form of our writing center’s mission, vision, beliefs, values, and core practices (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

*Applewood Writing Center’s Mission, Vision, Beliefs, Values, and Core Practices*

In this documentation itself, the focus on students and providing them support and a channel for agency was apparent all five components, but it was especially clear in the
repetition of the concept of collaboration in the mission, beliefs, values, and core practices, as well as by centering students in the mission and vision, and explicitly stating the value of writing to liberate in the vision and beliefs. With these key concepts highlighted across this documentation in multiple places and in multiple ways, my use of these documents to drive the messaging of the writing center became paramount in my role as the director.

In specific, the aforementioned documents found their way into multiple facets and places of the writing center work. First, the documents composed the entire first section of the tutors’ handbook, and our opening session as noted in the agenda of our first staff meeting had students directly working with and responding to this portion of the handbook by coming up with concrete examples of various components, and then sharing and discussing their ideas. This documentation also found its way, in part through the mission statement and beliefs, on our writing center’s portion of Applewood’s website. As I put the webpage together, I journaled about how “I needed to consider what information is important for visitors to know … I included a small blurb on what a writing center is and does. I also included our mission and core beliefs” (1/3/20).

Second, these documents helped from portions of the application and interviews for the next cohort of tutors (1/13/20). Questions such as “What is your greatest strength as a student?” helped to illuminate some of these founding documents including those framed around asset-based thinking. This proved an attempt to try to make sure our writing center’s message, etched out in these five components, continued to inform the
work of the program and the tutors who would carry the work forward in the coming year.

Lastly, I had our school librarian print posters of these documents, which I proceeded to frame and post near the door of the writing center on top of a row of built-in bookshelves. In my reflective journals, I reasoned “that visibly posting these items for all in the space to see and refer to is a huge step in making it known how the space is supposed to work, why it’s there, and how to function in it” (2/7/20). However, I also recognized the need for these to be “living, breathing documents” (2/7/20), especially since I had to create them by myself the summer prior to meeting with the tutors. I did so because I knew what a critical role they would play in the work of the writing center, so I wanted to be sure they existed and were something the staff and students could refer to from the beginning. But, I also recognized the future need to involve the writing center’s tutors in perhaps revising and reshaping this documentation once the role and the need of our writing center at Applewood was more tangible through their own experiences in the setting. In particular, their input into the writing center’s core documents must reflect their own values and beliefs, and as students of color, their lived experiences and knowledge. In this way, the message of the writing center in this study fell short of the intended goals to begin disrupting current systems and structures; but, it also provides a particular pathway to continue doing so in the future as students of color further take on leadership roles and shape the messaging of the working of the writing center.

Ultimately, the messaging of the writing center – to myself as director, to the tutors, as well as to the wider school community – was central to the work I did as the
director in the beginning months of designing and implementing the writing center. Still, as the work continued over those 12 weeks, I surfaced how my advocacy work in this role needed to be expanded and clearer.

**Utilizing Critical Imagining in a High School Writing Center**

This section responds to the second research question, which focuses on the role of critical imagining on the practical work of Applewood’s new writing center. As a hybrid framework created for this study, it is important for the data to be viewed in light of the framework’s impact on the action research. Critical imagining combines Critical Race Theory (CRT) with the concept of imagination as a way to understand and examine the everyday work happening in schools and to consider the impact on students of color by pushing that work beyond the here-and-now to consider the ways in which the future work can be truly transformative for these students and their educational experiences – ways in which have not yet existed and imagine otherwise outside the current systems and structures that pervade our schools. By bringing the tenets of CRT such as the understanding that racism is endemic and structural, and intersects with other forms of oppression into conversation with imagination as the concept of a powerful way in which we learn by making the everyday less familiar and creating new visions of what can be in our society, critical imagining frames this study in both a practical and idealistic way, converging the two in an effort to affect change for the students at Applewood High School.
As this section illustrates, the data demonstrated that critical imagining, when applied to the implementation of the writing center in its first 12 weeks, helped me to view students as leaders of the work as well as to focus on balancing strategy and hope.

**Viewing Students as Leaders**

Through my use of critical imagining, I came to recognize the importance of student leadership in the writing center program. This understanding was a crucial component of how I conceptualized the work of the writing center through my critical imagining because it helped to not only understand how the tutors shaped the work of the writing center, but it also helped me to recognize and uplift their leadership while also looking ahead to what that leadership could grow into in the future.

**Shaping the Work of the Writing Center**

Through critical imagining, the primary vision of the nascent writing center reframed students, particularly the tutors, as leaders of the work and agents of change in the school community at large. As reflected in a journal entry from the second cycle, the position of students as leaders was especially important and possible given the newness of the writing center program, thereby giving them the room and the ability to truly shape the work (2/14/20). With this positionality in mind, the critical imagining of students taking the lead in the work dominated the landscapes of all four collages.

The first cohort of tutors included seven students. The cohort included five Latinx students (three females and five males), one male Arab student, and one White female student. Three of the students were current 12th grade students, while the other four were current 11th grade students. In addition to English, Spanish and Arabic were both spoken
by some of the tutors. Also, one of the female Latinx students was also in the special education program. Given the writing center was an after school program open two days per week, the tutors opted into the role after being recommended by either myself (as their previous English teacher) or by the STEM coordinator based on her relationship with them through a STEM after school initiative.

In the first collage, I included seven matches to represent the cohort of seven tutors working to opening Applewood’s writing center at the time of the study. In discussing this choice of material with my critical friend, I resolved that the matches also indicated their ability to start the work as matches do fire, thus serving as the leaders of the work themselves. In the second collage, the seven tutors appeared as seven distinct red squares on the otherwise typical black and white checkboard. By visualizing the tutors in this way, the red squares did not merely represent how the tutors themselves stand out in the work, but how functionally they were intended to lead the work in disrupting the systems and structures represented by the rest of the typical board.

By the following collage, the cohort of student tutors appeared as seven buttons near the opening of the door represent. Similar to the matches, the choice in material here helped highlight the role of these particular students as leaders in the critical imagining of the writing center: as buttons, they worked to hold the work together as leaders in the writing center and the overall school community. Finally, in the last collage from the fourth cycle, the cohort of tutors from the opening of the writing center showed up as seven cutouts in the half representing the ongoing vision of the work. As such, the cutouts served as windows into what is possible; but also, backed in the collage with
pages from *A Raisin in the Sun*, they provided a view into the writing, the agency, and ultimately, the possible change because of the new writing center moving forward.

In each instance of the collages from the dataset, the intended leadership of students became a focus of each image demonstrating the way in which the critical imaging of this work reframed who truly drove this work and made it impactful.

*Highlighting Student Leadership and Recognizing Their Work*

Elsewhere, the critical imagining of how to work to make sure students lead the work in disrupting the historically oppressive systems and structures at Applewood surfaced in both my reflective journals and the documents of the writing center. Primarily, the data showed a distinct effort to center the students as the leaders of the work, particularly when communicating with others in the school community.

Across multiple documents, the student leadership present in the work of the writing center was highlighted by including the cohort of tutors. The tutors’ names, self-written introductions, preferred disciplines, and photos were included on the writing center’s page of Applewood’s website, in a slide for the presentation to Applewood’s staff, a handout for students created by one of the tutors, as well as a large portion of the information board for the writing center in the hallway. When helping create the presentation for Applewood’s staff, I reflected in my journal how “includ[ing] the tutors … [was] important [so] that our community [saw] the students who [were] taking the lead with this work (and that they [got] the recognition they deserve[d])” (1/3/20). Here, the critical imagining that grounds the work in Applewood’s new writing center began to become slightly more concrete in the way it reframed the tutors as leaders in the school.
Applewood included other programs that involve student leadership such as a Black student union, a genders and sexualities alliance, and a mentoring program for freshman. Yet, the students who participated in leading this work were never specifically named or mentioned in front of the wider Applewood school community. For work in our school to be truly transformative required student agency and leadership in making those changes. Though a small gesture, the critical imagining of how the program should be started to take form a bit by highlighting the specific students tackling this important work.

Even within the opening 12 weeks of the program, the critical imagining of students as leaders began to surface in concrete, visible ways in the actual work. Early on, tutors stepped up to do the work around creating promotional materials for the school community, including the presentation for Applewood’s staff (1/8/20). As the writing center started to grow and students began to attend and make use of the space, the tutors took the initiative with the bulk of the work. I noted in my journals how, aside from greeting students and connecting them with tutors as needed, the actual work of the writing center “was entirely student focused and student run” and hoped “that the students (both as students and as tutors) continue[d] to take charge in this experience” (1/14/20), noting that the “tutors [were] carrying that load of the work” when the writing center was operating (1/21/20).

Toward the end of the study, as attendance and usage of the writing center dropped off, I engaged the tutors in problem solving, allowing them to voice what they noticed and experienced, and more importantly, in creating solutions (3/3/20). I helped students navigate a fishbone diagram in which together they identified key issues at the
writing center, brainstormed potential causes to these issues, and eventually considered potential ways in which, as a cohort, they could work to address these problems before each of them identified a specific task they wanted to be in charge of moving forward. In doing so, the driving vision of the students leading the work continued to progress in concrete ways, especially in providing an arena for them to shape the work of the writing center going forward, which notably lacked more toward the opening of the writing center at the start of the study.

**The Future for Student Leadership in the Writing Center**

The critical imagining shaping the work of the Applewood writing center also surfaced in documents intended to help move the work forward beyond the scope of the study. As I worked to form an official class during the school day as a way to carve out sacred time and space for the work of the writing center to happen, I first had to revise the course description. A pre-existing course for writing center tutors in the district focused on providing the students with a chance to improve their own writing as well as their instructional skills. However, in rewriting the course description for Applewood, I included a focus on participating students to “gain important leadership, communication, and critical thinking skills.” Based on both the work of the current cohort of student tutors and the critical imagining of the work in the writing center to support students leading change in our school community, this change in the course description served as a small step in helping make the vision a reality.

This emphasis and focus on student leadership further translated to the materials for tutor recruitment such as the slides for a presentation to potential future tutors and the
application itself. In the presentation, students were told they would “[be] the start of something cool and important” by “grow[ing] your leadership and interpersonal skills.” These same ideas transferred to the actual application, where at the beginning in the directions, students were told tutors demonstrate an “eager[ness] to learn and to lead.” As it did in the initial framing of the work of the Applewood writing center, my critical imagining continued to help me reframe students as leaders in this work at our school. And, in fact, the notion took further hold as it took shape in such documents that helped inform the ongoing work of the Applewood writing center moving forward.

Balancing Strategy and Hope

In the work of opening a new high school writing center through the use of critical imagining, the work illuminated an ongoing balance between strategizing and hoping to drive the work forward. Through the duality of these two concepts, critical imagining appeared to begin to take foot.

The Practical Work of Strategy

The strategizing portion of critical imagining surfaced in the practical work of the writing center. Nearing the end of the first cycle of data collection, I began to encounter issues around the physical space of the writing center, namely that it was easily accessible by various students and staff when closed, which jeopardized the care and maintenance of the space. In my journals, I connected this issue to ensuring students felt valued by being provided the nicest space possible, and reflected “need[ing] to figure out other ways to make it a sacred space for our students without ruffling more feathers than necessary … [and resorting to] backchanneling a lot of the work that needs to happen to
hopefully find a happy in-between” (1/2/20). This type of backchanneling led to direct communication with the school’s engineer regarding changing the lock and providing keys to only staff who used the space for programming, essentially circumventing further communication with an administrator who seemed to misunderstand the issue after a series of emails. In this instance, I had to strategize and navigate pre-existing working relationships and systems in the school to ensure the work of the writing center continued in a positive way to grow the program.

This type of strategizing continued into the second and third cycles of data collection as I worked to develop a class for the writing center the following year to provide more time and space for the work to grow. However, in the early stages of the work, I hit numerous dead ends as I tried to work directly with administration and our school’s counseling department, who most directly dealt with students when programming, and I reflected how I wasn’t getting many answers or support in moving the work forward (2/24/20). Through intentional strategizing, I determined the need to move the application process forward myself with how I saw fit as a means to make sure the work happened. Without fully knowing what to do, I decided to provide an online application to current sophomores and juniors throughout the school, leading to one-on-one conversations for students interested in the program, and then ultimately providing a list of students to administration and counselors once the cohort was selected. (This final step, though planned, never happened due to the premature closing of the school due to the pandemic in March 2020). Regardless, by taking this work on without complete answers from my colleagues or administration, I strategically moved forward in the work
of the writing center using my best judgment to help progress the work of the program, which likely would not have taken place without such use of strategy and initiative.

While these two instances demonstrated the strategizing of critical imagining in practice at the writing center, an overarching strategy of how to frame and communicate the work of Applewood’s first writing center evolved over the first 12 weeks of the program. By the start of the second cycle in data collection, I surfaced “a nagging fear is that if I push too hard or in the wrong way, I could potentially turn [the administration and the staff] off to the project” and how the writing center could suffer without their support (1/23/20). Still, I recognized the “politics at play. But … [still] see the bureaucracy and red tape at play – and to the detriment of our students.” My main concern in working with the staff was how to effectively communicate the undergirding ideas of critical race theory that inevitably helped shape the writing center’s mission and vision, and would ultimately inform our practices. I best reflected on the issue in a journal from the second cycle, writing:

What’s the best way to message [this part of the work]? Is it a “hide-the-veggies” sort of deal where those beliefs and values and workings are hidden into the work so that it just happens? Or, does it need to be more explicit and educative on the surface? And, if it is the latter, how do I do that successfully? In the end, it’s probably not an either/or but rather a both/and. The work needs to be inherently happening in all we do in the writing center so that it’s just the way of life in our four walls. But I also need to be ready and willing to spell it out when I need to. (1/27/20)
Although this strategic work never came to fruition in actual practice like work in protecting the physical space of the writing center or furthering the work of a future class did, the consideration of this strategy evolved over the study. By the start of the last cycle, I began to raise the idea of going “full tilt against the system” as a potential way to “garner more interest” (3/2/20).

Though this idea only surfaced toward the end of the study in an explicit way via the reflective journals, looking back at the collage from the second cycle this concept initially surfaced a bit earlier. In this collage, the primary design was a checkboard constructed of predominately black images for some squares and the mostly white pages of *A Raisin in the Sun* for most of the other squares. The checkerboard as the dominant landscape in the image conjured ideas of systems and structures given both the rigidity of the board itself as well as the rules of the game. As my critical friend raised in discussion, the game itself is one of power, strategy, and manipulation. By the second cycle of data collection, I began to understand how the systems and structures inherent in Applewood (and education at large) such as tracking in programming, providing student supports outside of class, and the centering of whiteness in curriculum and instruction necessitated strategy to grow the work of the new writing center – though exactly how to do so, when, and how others contributed to those calculations remained foggy. Still, this type of strategizing, as part of critical imagining, only composed half of the framework’s impact on the nascent writing center; the new program also required much hope in its beginning and ongoing work.
The Counterbalance of Hope

Closely tied to the messaging of the writing center as described in a previous section, especially the writing center’s mission and vision statement, the critical imagining of this work surfaced a counterbalance to strategy in the form of hope in what could be in the program. Beyond the work at hand on a daily basis, my reflective journals illuminated over all four cycles the true vision of the writing center’s work. In some instances, this hope was demonstrated in ways that expressed wanting students to “feel successful, proud, and empowered in this work” (12/18/19) and wanting them “to walk away feeling accomplished and cared about” (2/28/20). With student agency in focus for a long-term goal with the ongoing work in the writing center, the true hope that surfaced in the journal was the transformative impact the program could have in disrupting the inequitable systems at play in schools and in education.

At Applewood specifically, our school community seems beholden to a daily structure through which students remain dependent learners on the adults in the building. Oftentimes, especially with higher level courses such as our Advanced Placement or Dual Credit courses, any additional supports outside of class rely on the teacher’s willingness and ability to stay after school or come in on the weekend. Additionally, such supports are also inaccessible to students who have home and family commitments outside of school such as caring for younger siblings or working a job, which many times are students of color. While this first iteration of the writing center did not address this aspect, there is future potential for the resource to expand and be available during the school day to do so. As Applewood works to increase the number of students of color
taking higher level courses, this lack of built-in daily supports will continue to impact our students of color disproportionately, potentially affecting their overall success in accessing such coursework.

By the beginning of the third cycle of data collection, as I continued to butt up against more and more bureaucratic barriers to progressing in the work of the writing center such as navigating the hierarchy of who to contact for which issue, accessing the budget to help support the initiative, and following district-level steps to advance the writing center beyond a small after-school program, I reflected on the current state of starting the writing center and the hope for its future:

It would be so easy to try and make this program into something that looked good, something we could point to as a school and say, “Yeah, we have a writing center, and it’s a great resource!” (But then, in reality, it’s just another cog in the machine of what we do on a daily basis in the school.) No, it needs to be a hub of student leadership, student interaction and socialization, and student joy and celebration.

(2/10/20)

Grounded in reality, I was surfacing a very real threat of how others may view the writing center at Applewood as just another program the school can say it offered students without sharing the hope and vision of our specific writing center as “such a potential hub of change schoolwide” (3/9/20). Through my critical imagining, I was able to cling to the hope of the project to be:

something more groundbreaking – a true avenue to do some social justice work in this school community that lifts up students of color and their voices, fully
supports them in doing that, and opens doors for their futures that more traditional routes of writing centers and education in general tend to do. (3/2/20)

This hope that continuously undergirded the opening of the writing center also surfaced in the creative work of the collages. Along the bottom of the first collage, a row of dirt collected from the school’s grounds anchors the visual. The dirt served symbolically as the start of the writing center and the driving hope for it to be the start of something much bigger that could grow and evolve even further.

Hope carried over into the second collage in the form of an eye in the upper left hand corner beneath a cutout of the question: “What do the instructions say?” I chose this eye specifically, being that of James Baldwin, because of his moving work and words to lift up counternarratives of himself and others as Black individuals, a crucial element of critical race theory as threaded into critical imagining. Placed here, the eye and this question appeared to serve as the starting point to the rest of the narrative played out through the other visuals placed on the board, including next to it a water can wetting a flower and the phrase: “Crazy idea.” This component of the second collage also resonated with the hope inherent in this work and in critical imagining, specifically harkening to the component of imagination required to think beyond the typical and without constraints, to envision something that isn’t yet (and perhaps never has been), but needs to be.

Lastly, the hope that sprung from of the critical imagining in this study was also seen in the final collage from the last cycle of data collection. One entire half of the collage was dedicated to the ongoing visionary work of the writing center, composed of with a background of blue sky that, as my critical friend noted, hinted at positivity and
optimism. In the bottom right hand corner (really, the top left and the true top when this half is viewed turned upside down from its typical placement – also indicative of the hope in upending the oppressive systems in education) was the word “tomorrow,” noting the forever-ongoing work toward the true vision of the writing center program at Applewood. And, now at the bottom of this half when viewed upside down, rested mountains, a direct connection back to the row of dirt from the first collage. The dirt from the beginning by the end was mountains.

In the end, the critical imagining that framed this particular study ultimately resulted in trying to balance strategy and hope in the actual work of opening a new high school writing center with and for students of color. By utilizing both sides of this equation, the work itself was simultaneously practical and idealistic, which drew from one specific tenet of critical race theory that feeds into the critical imagining. When used to frame and guide work in schools such as this, critical imagining may help to both navigate the systems and structures inherent in our schools (really with the goal to subvert them) while always focusing on the belief that there can and will be a difference for our traditionally marginalized students.

Conclusion

In all, the data analysis showed both the practical and theoretical work done in the opening months of Applewood High School’s new writing center. When considered against the first research question, the data demonstrated that the hands-on work of designing and implementing the writing center requires flexibility, a focus on students and community, and my own attention as the director on messaging and advocacy. In
terms of the role of critical imagining as the study’s theoretical framework and how it informed the work of the writing center, the data showed that critical imagining necessitated viewing and supporting students as leaders in the work, as well as consideration of how to balance strategy and hope to drive the work forward. In the following chapter, I expand on the data analysis provided here to describe the outcomes and findings of this arts-based action research, to further discuss their implications, and to make suggestions for future research regarding high school writing centers.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Back to the Writing Center

Over the summer, after spending many months out of the building due to COVID-19 and the school closures, I was able to go back to Applewood High School and spend some time writing the curriculum for next year’s new course for writing center instructors. It had been nearly 16 months since I had to close and lock the door on the writing center, wrapping the initial 12-week opening that this study helped to capture. Given the challenge of time experienced at the initial writing center, I advocated to expand the program to include a class period during the day for which the tutors would receive an elective credit. More importantly, the class would provide the much needed time to better support the tutors and build community, while also giving Applewood’s students more opportunity to utilize our writing center when it is available both during the day and after school. It is a small step in continuing to grow the writing center, but I believe it holds a lot of promise.

I decided to spend my time working on the curriculum in the writing center itself, now a quiet shell of a room in a school building that has been widely vacant for the better part of a year and a half. Sitting there in the tepid summer warmth, I began recalling some of the moments, faint with time but still there: the tutors timidly practicing their first writing conferences with one another that summer after sharing lunch as though
breaking bread with new friends; walking into the writing center the day of its first opening to find small red pots of white flowers placed lovingly in the center of each table as a surprise well-wishing on the grand opening from a close friend and colleague; managing the slight chaos of the day near the end of the first semester when a couple dozen students flooded the space seeking a refuge in which they could work on their final papers, taking up all the seats and a few even comfortably sprawled out on the floor along the shelves, their books and notes scattered around them and the hum of chatter drowning out the background music; and locking up the door one last time before the school closure that spring, unsure exactly how long the writing center would sit hollow and silent.

Sitting there now on that summer day, a little less silent thanks to the air conditioner in the window and not quite hollow with me and the memories taking up a mere corner by the sunlit window, I realized how vibrant of a space it had started to become (something lost on me at the time amidst days when no students came through the door and ongoing stressful email exchanges with administrators – distractions from the progress actually being made). But more importantly, I began to recognize how vibrant of a space it would be in the future. I grew full of hope, of excitement, and of joy yet again.

In this final chapter, I begin by summarizing the findings of the data analysis and sharing the outcomes of the action research of starting the writing center. I then discuss my takeaways from the study and the work itself, framing this study in the larger context
of writing centers and schools. I conclude with suggestions for future research of high school writing centers and a call to action for educators of students of color.

**Summary of Findings**

First, in regard to the practical work of opening the writing center, the findings of this study demonstrated the work required flexibility, responsiveness, and creative problem solving to navigate the existing structures and systems at the school site. In particular, these skills were most necessary for securing enough time and space for the writing center program, as well as helping to establish culture and community with the tutors. The work also necessitated the centering of students, especially as a way to begin disrupting current systems and structures such as the daily schedule in which students are highly tracked into certain levels of class and provided no school-wide supports during the school day. By authentically making Applewood’s students the focus of the work in the opening weeks, especially with regard to fostering collaboration and community, the design and implementation of the writing center honed in on providing agency to the students to begin subverting these typical power structures in education through which they must rely on the adults in the building for support. Through a program like Applewood’s first writing center, students begin to gain agency over their own learning together. Beyond the academic support, the writing center can also begin to provide space and time for students to connect with one another. And hopefully in doing so, students can start to emerge as leaders of their school, enacting more agency over their learning than in the current structure of the school.
Lastly, for my specific role as the writing center director and given my positionality as a White male educator, the practical work to open the new writing center required me to put my time and energy into making the messaging around and about our writing center clear and strong, and to work most of the time behind the scenes advocating for the tutors, the students, and the writing center program. As action research framed with critical imagining, I had to consider how I showed up in the work, especially with the aim to start a space to center and support Applewood’s students of color. Through the study, I learned how to better communicate the goals of the writing center program to the wider school community, including to Applewood’s predominantly White staff. More importantly, in these opening 12 weeks of Applewood’s writing center, I started to understand the importance of utilizing my own privilege as a White male educator to make way for such work. Anecdotally, I have come to notice that I am taken more seriously and listened to more by leadership than my female colleagues and colleagues of color. As such, it is important to name that, through this study and this work, I have better explored and I better understand how to take an advocacy stance to work toward advancing our school community for the betterment of our traditionally marginalized students. I feel I am more confident in ways to translate my critical imagining into action.

With attention to the role of critical imagining in the early work of Applewood’s first writing center, the data underscored the need of seeing and supporting student leadership in driving the work forward, in addition to striking a balance between strategy and hope in tackling such work. First, critical imagining took form in this study through
the way students were viewed and given space in the writing center program. In particular, the seven writing center tutors (5 Latinx students, 1 Arab student, and 1 White student) were valued as genuine leaders in the work, thereby working to upend the more traditional top-down power structures at play in schools with teachers and staff typically leading programs. Second, for my specific work as the writing center director, I found that critical imagining helped me to tackle the work by finding balance between strategizing how the practical work could advance and be achieved closest to the writing center’s mission and vision, and hoping that the overall vision for the writing center would in fact come to be.

In all, the findings of the study illuminated some key factors in the work of a new high school writing center done with and for students of color, both in the practical everyday work completed to get the program up and running, as well as in the theoretical work of critical imagining and its impact on the new writing center program.

**Outcomes**

As this study was designed as action research, it is necessary to outline specific outcomes of the four cycles completed as part of this research. On the most basic level, the aim of this study was to create a new writing center at Applewood High School, which predominantly serves students of color in a major Midwestern city. Given the student population, the goal in establishing a new writing center program was to produce a space that would ultimately provide students agency, thereby hoping to interrupt the inequitable systems typical in school communities and education today. In particular, such a program can aim to disrupt programmatic and curricular norms that often
disadvantage students of color, including tracking, the centering of whiteness in content and instruction, and making additional supports inaccessible during the school day. At Applewood specifically, our writing center targeted the accessibility of supports, but moving forward there are opportunities for the program to also help address concerns regarding the school’s tracking system as well as what the curriculums cover and how.

In one aspect, the study was able to achieve the opening of the writing center. After a three-month delay due to still preparing the physical space, trying to train and support the tutors who were unable to attend the summer training, and promoting the program, Applewood High School now had a writing center as part of its school community. Although this was an obvious goal of the work, it turned out to not be a simple or straightforward task. Though the study was cut short by one week due to the school closure caused by the pandemic in spring 2020, and the writing center did not operate during the following school year due to the majority of the year taking place remotely, the writing center program re-opened in the current school year, operating both during the school day for one period as well as after school three days per week.

Over the course of this study, within its first 12 weeks, Applewood High School’s writing center had 56 students\(^1\) visit and use its space and resources during its operational hours after school. In addition, two separate visiting groups of students were brought in by other faculty during lunch periods. Though the attendance of the writing center

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\(^1\) Unfortunately, the document used to capture student visitors to the writing center did not ask for their demographics. Therefore, it is unclear in terms of race, ethnicity, home language, or special education status who these 56 students were or how they would identify themselves. While such information would have been helpful to see if the space was being utilized primarily by those it was most intended for, given the scope of this particular study and its inability to include student participants, such information was intentionally not gathered. This would be a potential area for future research.
diminished in the fourth cycle of the study in particular, the program established itself as a resource for students at Applewood in ways that have (and will continue to) grow and expand in the future.

As for the use of critical imagining, there was a noted change in my own mindset and viewpoint of the work across the 12-week study. Early into the first cycle of the action research, I demonstrated hesitation around driving equity-focused work in the school community by way of the writing center program, as noted in both the reflective journal entries as well as the first collage. I was notably concerned about possibly upsetting some colleagues and administration, and potentially losing support for the writing center itself. Our school had been engaged in conversations around race and racism in our school for years prior to the opening of the writing center, and through some of those meetings and conversations colleagues had surfaced their disease with the concepts and with the work. At the onset of opening the writing center, I was not yet confident in navigating race-based conversations with colleagues whose support for and promotion of the writing center we needed to get the program off the ground.

Similarly, I recognized my administrators as gatekeepers to so much: securing the space for the writing center, allotting budget towards new furniture and materials, and eventually expanding the program beyond its initial after-school status. As such, I was worried early in the study about overstepping any boundaries, asking for too much, or seeming to seek any special treatment of any kind. Without their support, the writing center could lose access to so many resources or, worse yet, be shut down completely. In
the early weeks of the study and the opening of the writing center, I felt a need to the line with the school leadership in particular.

However, as the study continued and the work for the writing center progressed, my critical imagining helped me to embrace the true vision of the writing center more and more, which in turn helped me to stand more firm in the work of the writing center to work towards creating that vision to begin interrupting inequities faced by our students; this, too, was shown in the reflective journals, particularly in the third and fourth cycles, as well as the final collage. Specifically at Applewood, our students face inequity through our programming structure and the lack of academic support systems available to the wider student body. Through its five tiers of classes, Applewood has set up a tracking system in which our students must participate. In specific regards to the higher level coursework of Advanced Placement or Dual Credit classes, our students tend to either lack the academic confidence to try the classes, or they tend to feel overwhelmed and overly stressed when they do take the class. Teachers of these courses must offer any additional support such as office hours on their own time, which not all teachers can or choose to do. With these two structures working in this way together, students are simultaneously left to fend for themselves and also somehow beholden to what the adults do (or don’t do). Given that Applewood’s student population is almost 85% students of color, the programming structure is a primary example of the type of inequity the writing center has begun to address in a very modest way. Through the writing center, students have begun to connect with each other and support one another academically, thereby starting to chip away at Applewood’s typical schedule and structure. In doing so, students
are beginning to gain more agency and all students across all grade levels and classes now have a specific resource to use for support with their writing.

Overall, my commitment to working in my school community as a White male educator to dismantle white supremacy and systems of oppression grew and was emboldened by my experience in helping open the writing center for and with our students of color.

**Discussion**

At the onset of this study, I understood and framed the problem as the ways in which students, particularly students of color, struggle with their writing skills. With the pivotal role writing plays in college, career, and community, I designed this action research to help plan and implement a writing center at Applewood High School that would aim to support students develop their identities and skills as writers, while simultaneously trying to create a stronger sense of community and collaboration amongst Applewood’s students. The long-term goal of the study being to have an established school-wide academic support for our students that would serve them in growing this crucial skill; the short-term goal being, as stated, simply getting Applewood’s new writing center up and running with and for our students of color.

Through this study and navigating the first 12 weeks of opening a new high school writing center however, I have been able to now reframe my own understanding of the issues faced by my students and my school community as manifesting directly from larger systemic issues of racism and other forms of oppression. In doing so, I have also begun to reconsider exactly how to critically imagine the work of Applewood’s
writing center moving forward to more intentionally address these much larger, much more pressing problems.

Latta (2019) revisits Stephen North’s seminal work “Idea of a Writing Center” through the lens of deficit thinking in a way that reshapes the foundational writing center document in a critical way. Latta argues that, for the work of a writing center to be racially and institutionally transformative, we must acknowledge and ultimately abandon North’s formative notion that the work of writing centers aims to help improve writers rather than their writing. This initial framing of the work of writing centers inherently situates the writer as faulty and failing in some way, which for writers and students of color carries further connotations.

To change this, Latta posits that writing centers must move away from our inherent conception of writers struggling and being flawed in some way, and instead trend towards an understanding and utilization of writers’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992, as cited in Latta, 2019) and also, I would add, their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). In doing so, we can begin to alter our work in writing centers in an important way that no longer positions writers, and particularly writers of color, as needing to fix themselves.

Instead, by embracing, championing, and even utilizing the strengths, perspectives, and gifts of our writers in meaningful ways, writing centers can begin to shift the dominant academic paradigm in our schools and in education at large that for too long has dictated what is considered knowledge and skill, and by whom. And in this way, as seen in this study’s findings, we can continue to center students and our school communities. Furthermore, with the increasing debates regarding critical race theory and
curriculums across the United States recently that aim to thwart the progress we have been fighting for in our schools, there is potential for writing centers to emerge as sites of the educational justice we are fighting to deliver for our students of color and to serve our school communities as beacons of how this work might be done.

Through much of the literature explored in chapter two (and utilized to design and implement Applewood’s writing center), we see the work of writing centers and their tutors as focusing on individual students. In this way, Latta’s argument continues this conversation of both our practice and theory along the same lines. Grimm (2011) goes further to help us reimagine our work in writing centers to be anti-racist: we must shift our focus away from the individual student writers and towards the structures and systems at play. Grimm postulates that “our focus on the individual student hinders our ability to address racism that operates structurally” (p. 79). So while the day-to-day operations of a writing center in which tutors are conferencing with and supporting students directly can and should recenter the talent, skills, and knowledge our writers of color naturally bring to the table, doing so on its own falls short of the truly transformative work that anti-racist writing centers like Applewood’s aims to do, and the meaningful anti-racist leadership of which all writing centers are capable as hubs of change in our schools (Jordan, 2006). To do this successfully, writing center practitioners must continue to focus on the advocacy for and messaging of their programs to drive the work forward.

To do such work with students and writers, however, requires writing centers to move beyond just our theory to also reconsider some of our most foundational practices.
This is particularly of importance as an action research study. Perhaps the most impactful, intentional move we can make as writing center practitioners is to ground our work in decentering whiteness. Geller, Condon, and Carroll (2011) outline how such work hinges on a consistent, deep “examination of our own racial construction, as well as the way we construct others” (p. 104). While they offer ideas of how to do such work using shame and palinodes (retractions of previous statements and beliefs), such work may not be appropriate or beneficial for tutors of color given their lived experiences in schools. Still, their conception of how the decentering of whiteness requires all writing center staff to practice vulnerability and recognize our work as interdependent on another is key.

To do so with a more diverse staff of writing center tutors, Greenfield and Rowan (2011) offer another way to aid in the decentering of whiteness: make antiracism a clearer and more unambiguous part of the work for the tutors. Essentially, they argue to build antiracism and the decentering of whiteness into tutor training in an explicit manner. Both Greenfield and Rowan sketch such work in their specific contexts using different texts to launch discussions with their writing center staffs as part of their learning. Through such readings, discussions, and learning experiences, we can provide our tutors with opportunities and support to better understand themselves and the writers with which they’ll work; and if done with an intentional decentering of whiteness, our writing centers and our tutors will put into practice the transformative actions we hope to see in our sites, our schools, and our system. In this way, such work both helps frame students as leaders in the work while helping directors to continue to balance the strategic daily work of
overseeing the writing center while simultaneously hoping for the transformative chance for which we work.

Reflecting further on this particular study, I realize that the design and implementation of Applewood’s first writing center, though critically imagined in many ways, was not yet fully addressing the systemic issues at play for our specific school community or at large in the educational system. Although the findings indicate that the new writing center at Applewood began to center and bolster student leadership and experience in our work, the writing center needs to further our transformative work for our students of color by more intentionally and more thoughtfully shifting the ways in which we view our students and writers, and their lived experiences as invaluable sources of knowledge and skills, as well as the ways in which we base our tutor training and work with writers in decentering whiteness and antiracism. To do so effectively and meaningfully, my work must elaborate on the findings outlined in chapter four to address the larger issues at hand impacting our writers and students. If our writing center at Applewood is truly meant to disrupt the oppressive systems experienced by our student writers in our community, we must begin to discuss and address more than just our writers’ words on the page. Our writing center – as with all writing centers – has the potential to serve as a starting point in changing our school by leading the way in such work.

Moving forward, Applewood’s writing center can continue to address certain harmful structures and systems in our school community such as the centering of whiteness in the curriculum and the lack of supports to help all students access more
rigorous coursework and engage in deeper learning. Although the start of the writing center did not get to this point, the current iteration of the writing center is starting to engage the tutors in conversations about race, the power of language, and the whiteness inherent in Standardized Written English (SWE). The writing center should continue doing so to further give students agency with their languages; but also, the writing center can help push the staff’s thinking about their curriculums and the ways in which their current texts, materials, instruction, and assessment centers whiteness. More importantly, through those conversations, the writing center will be able to support teachers in shifting their mindsets and revising their practices to be more responsive and representative of Applewood’s student population, especially in their writing.

Similarly, the writing center at Applewood can continue to serve as a resource for students across all grade levels and in all classes to connect with each other and support one another. For too long, academic supports for Applewood students have other been for specific grade levels such as 9th grade tutoring, or has relied on the generosity of teachers able to give their time and energy after school to host office hours or additional study sessions. In doing so, a significant portion of the student population have been left on their own to navigate their tasks and assignments. The writing center aims to disrupt this current structure by providing a space and time for students to collaborate and connect. By serving the entire student population, the writing center is able to provide support to all students, with the hope that in doing so students will gain a better sense of themselves as writers and grow their writing skills, growing their academic confidence in the process as well. Ultimately, there is much work to do for Applewood to continue working
towards providing the education our students of color are owed; the writing center has much potential to not just contribute to such work, but to lead the school community in addressing these issues and needs.

**Future Research**

As discussed in the second chapter, there is a notable hole in the research of writing centers regarding programs in high schools, particularly in school communities that are predominantly students of color. While this arts-based action research aimed to begin addressing this gap in the research, ultimately many more future studies are needed to better understand this work and to grow this practice in other high schools.

Based on this study, I would first recommend future studies to take place over a more extended time period. My research was specifically designed to examine the first 12 weeks of Applewood’s new writing center as a means to capture a unique time period in the program that would never be duplicated or available to me again. However, the four short, three-week cycles of this study were a limitation that could be addressed in future studies that examine the work of high school writing centers serving students of color over the course of a full academic year, or even longer. In doing so, such studies could better understand the ongoing work of writing center programs in such contexts that this study was not able to do, and potentially aid other teachers in tackling such work in their own schools for their students.

Perhaps most importantly, I suggest that future studies of high school writing centers serving similar student populations include the tutors and the students as participants in the research. Given the parameters of this particular study as a dissertation,
as well as the limitations of data collection set by the district in which Applewood exists, including students in this research was not possible. However, especially given the framework of critical imagining or any other framework undergirded in critical theory, the inclusion of voices of color should be paramount as a key tenant to such theories. Additionally, by including the tutors and students in such research could shift the design of the study toward participatory research. Participatory research as a method would pair nicely with critical frameworks such as this study’s critical imagining given the methodology aims to have “the community and the researcher together produce critical knowledge aimed at social transformation” (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Such design would highlight the voices of students’ of color while also having them directly take part in the work of a writing center even more so, thereby working towards the transformative change needed in our schools. As such, this is arguably the most important route for future research in this area given the direct participation of the students in not just the work of the writing center, but in the critical work of the research as well.

Finally, I would recommend future research considering more explicit use of antiracism in the daily workings of a high school writing center servicing students of color. In the case of this study, such work was more implicit in the opening months of our writing center by design. However, as explored in “Beyond the ‘Week Twelve Approach’: Toward a Critical Pedagogy for Antiracist Tutor Education,” Greenfield and Rowan (2011) elucidate various ways in which they have made antiracism a more explicit part of their respective writing centers’ work. Specifically, they have worked to very clearly center antiracism as a foundational part of the training they provide their
tutors in their own writing centers, including specific readings and discussions of texts related to antiracism and its relation to their work in their writing centers. However, these scholars’ school sites, like much of the research on writing centers, are colleges and universities. Therefore, there is opportunity in future research to continue such work in high school contexts to continue shifting the paradigms inherent in the workings of writing centers across various contexts.

Conclusion

The bell rang, and I greeted my nine writing center tutors at the door. It was only week two of the school year, back in person finally after so many months of logging on to classes online. They had spent the two previous class periods reading and annotating two fairly heavy articles from academics – one outlining the ways in which schools were failing students in preparing them for college through underdeveloped writing skills, and the other a direct response to the first. Written in Black English by a Black academic, the second article not only tackled the original author’s argument, deconstructing the White academic’s reasoning piece by piece, but doing so in his own language.

I waited with baited breath and sweaty palms to see what my own students thought.

This year’s writing center tutors are nine female-identified students, seven of which are students of color. I had initially hesitated to assign the two readings, worried about how the two texts might land on them without some sort of guidance first, but also hesitating to inform their opinions or reactions before they had the chance to do so themselves.
In the Applewood writing center, we gathered in a circle around a few small tables, distancing because of COVID-19 guidelines. Although I had my own thoughts and questions I wanted to ask, I deferred to the group instead: What did everyone think?

Surprisingly, the tutors wanted to first discuss the article arguing in favor of traditional grammar instruction (and, from my viewpoint, the dominant discourse). For a while, in popcorn fashion back-and-forth across the circle, the girls seemed to vibe with the author’s stance, advocating for the ways in which “correct” grammar garners certain power and entry to gatekept positions. They seemed to agree with the argument.

And then, one tutor shifted the conversation by asking about the other article.

What did you all think of the other piece? The first response came from one of the Black tutors, saying how she had never read anything like it, noting the vocabulary and grammar but not even being able to identify exactly the way in which it was written. From there, the other tutors began to open the conversation to the counter-argument: What does it matter if the writing doesn’t look like it “should” if the ideas are there? If the argument is sound? And together, they began to dissect the ways in which the power of language are rooted in concepts of power (though they didn’t explicitly name “whiteness,” they began to dance around the subject as best they knew how at the time). Although their initial discussion of the White academic’s work initially sided with his insistence that they and other writers needed to conform to the traditionalist linguistic constructs to be successful and taken seriously in school, as they untangled the Black academic’s counterargument they seemed to begin to recognize the very power they had in their own identities and experiences, and their own languages.
I initially took charge of designing and implementing my school’s first-ever writing center because I believed our students deserve the support and resources to be successful, and I knew that writing is a skill with which they tend to struggle but is still massively important as they move on in their lives for college, career, and community. Through this work, I came to understand that the real importance of the writing center’s work did not just rest on the importance of writing as we tend to think of it. Writing has the capacity to be emancipatory and liberating by giving voice to those historically silenced, giving them the pages to share their stories, their experiences, and their understandings of themselves and the world. Writing provides the space and platform for them to be heard, to be understood, to be powerful.

Writing centers have the ability to house this crucial work, not just as spaces dedicated to the craft of writing, but because they are collaborative and community-centered by nature, thereby giving students the space needed to come together for support, for collaboration, and for celebration. For me, it was crucial to take up this work through this study, and it is now more important than ever to push the work forward as our students of color come up in this place and time when their existences and their contributions must be shared and honored in ways that transform our school communities. As a White male educator, such work took the form of a writing center because of the needs of my community and our students, and because I believe in the transformative energy in writing centers and how they can drive such changes for the rest of the school community. While Applewood’s writing center has started this work in our school, through this study I have learned we have much work to do, and how to better
tackle the mighty task at hand. As I did at the start of this journey, I continue to critically imagine new and inventive ways in which the writing center can bolster and amplify my students’ voices, creativity, and brilliance.

But, this does not mean other educators must go on and create writing centers for their own schools (though I hope they do). Instead, I urge others to tap into the critical imagining needed to create transformative spaces in their school communities like Applewood’s new writing center – spaces that their students can call their own, spaces in which students can come together in community and drive change themselves, spaces that do not yet exist and may have never existed before. Let us imagine otherwise in ways that will make our school communities and our education system what our students deserve.
EPILOGUE

I have spent the entirety of my teaching career in schools serving predominantly students of color, and when I think back to my early days in the classroom I realize how far I have come in my own understanding of what such work actually means. In my first few years, I fell prey to notions of how standardized testing, canned curriculums, and highly-structured instructional methods would help our students of color finally succeed in ways White students historically have. We would finally be able to close the ever elusive “achievement gap,” and finally all would be right in the world.

Of course, that is not how any of this works.

In the past few years – and especially through the work involved for this study and opening Applewood’s writing center – my understanding of the work we do as educators for students of color has evolved and grown. The work required of us in our schools and classrooms is about providing our students of color with genuine channels to establish, promote, and grow their own agency while standing alongside of them to name and ultimately deconstruct the systems designed to hold them back. We must work with and for our students of color.

But, as a White educator, how do I do this?

Speaking with a mentor recently about the work of the writing center and this study, she asked me how I reconciled the sensed tension of navigating such work and the critical imagining given my positionality as a White male educator. After a brief pause, I
realized: I haven’t, and I don’t think I can fully. At least, not yet. Perhaps never.

For this study, I intentionally constructed and used the framework of critical imagining in my best attempt to understand how such work with and for students of color may be accomplished (or, more realistically, at least started), especially given my own positionality. I also specifically avoided using the lens of Whiteness to view this work because in the end I wanted it to be about the work itself, and not about my experience or myself in the process. But inevitably, as with any research and particularly action research, I play a critical role in the work; and my experience is worth further exploration.

For me, perhaps the biggest takeaway from this study personally and professionally has been the burgeoning recognition of the gravity of my voice and my opinion in my school community. As I surfaced early in the study, my natural inclination had been to avoid conflict with others, to not ruffle any feathers, in fear of how that could impact support for the writing center. This evasion of difficult conversations was backed with the comfort that comes from my positionality as a White male educator (see Figure But as my understanding of the work necessary to truly disrupt inequity evolved, I knew that confrontation had to be a part of the work. In particular, it was important as a White educator to name oppressive systems and structures at play, and to actively work towards dismantling them in the true spirit of co-conspiratorship with our students and families of color.

In the opening 12 weeks of Applewood’s writing center, I know I fell short of such work. Invoking the work of Mills (1959) specifically as part of my critical
imagining, I further wonder about the intersection between my own personal lived experience in this study and the public context of my school community and our students, and how this component of my critical imagining helps me consider my experience in the work of this action research.

**Figure 6**

*Collage for Epilogue*

First, from one vantage point of this intersection, I become aware of the likely interest convergence in such work. In essence, the concept of interest convergence recognizes that “the interests of Blacks in gaining racial equality have been accommodated only when they have converged with the interests of powerful Whites”
Bell (2004) further builds the concept to note that when a policy that authentically supports racial equality begins to threaten the social standing of the dominant White class, that policy will be altered and/or eliminated. This occurred when President Johnson amended his executive order regarding racial discrimination in 1967 to extend to the inclusion of discrimination based on sex. In doing so, the policy no longer benefited the Black community as it also then benefited White women, and by extension, the entire White population (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Interest convergence could play a role in my own involvement with the new writing center program given my positionality as a White male educator. For example, because of the timing, I was able to focus my dissertation for the completion of my doctorate on the work of the writing center, and in that way I gained my terminate degree through the work of the writing center and benefited from the program personally and professionally. However, being aware of this, I am committed to working to de-center myself in the work of the writing center in order to focus on, highlight, and support the work of the students themselves and ensure that they are the beneficiaries of the writing center and its work. Though this surfaced a bit in this study’s findings, I know that this work must be continuous and ongoing.

Interest convergence may also surface due to the context of the school community, given its predominantly White administration and teaching staff, as well as its location in a predominantly White, affluent neighborhood. Given this, I can anticipate the potential pushback from members of the Applewood school community as the writing center program grows and continues to work to disrupt oppressive systems and structures.
in the school. In the opening 12 weeks, such active resistance was not seen or felt directly. If anything, I perceived slight passive resistance through the leadership’s inability to better communicate or organize around programming – both examples of how existing structures and their functions worked to impede potential progress for our students of color. Being more passive in nature over the course of this study, such resistance seemed manageable through my budding use of critical imagining, specifically through the balance of strategy and hope. But should the resistance become more active and tangible due to the inherent interest convergence, I will need to lean into the role of advocacy that this study and the opening of the writing center has helped to spur in me as a White male educator.

Second, taking a different viewpoint of the intersection, I consider again the difference between individual students and broader issues at hand. As Mill suggests, in imagining we must differentiate between individual struggles and larger societal issues, and also recognize how our personal troubles are framed by the bigger issues at play. For the tutors and the students at Applewood’s writing center, such a perspective connects with Grimm’s (2011) notion broached in the discussion that anti-racist work in writing centers is best suited to examine the bigger systems and structures at work in their school contexts and in education at large rather than writing centers’ typical workings to target writers’ individual needs one conference at a time. By shifting in this way, we can view our work from a different standpoint, thus bolstering our critical imagining to see such work through.
For me, this ongoing work of trying to place myself in different viewpoints is crucial, not only through Mills’ sociological imagination but also through the strong thread of empathy weaved throughout Greene’s conception of imagination. As a White male educator in particular, I must stay devoted to this level of critical imagining as I support the ongoing work of Applewood’s writing center because I believe this to be the best way for me to connect with and to work for our students of color, by continuously seeking to understand their experiences in our school community. In doing so, I can continue to seek out new viewpoints and intersections to help shape my work in the writing center.

As for my navigation of this work with my positionality, I believe this study has helped me surface the duality of the work in both creating space for the voices and the leadership of students of color, while somehow simultaneously leveraging my privilege to help forge such spaces. I think the tension sensed by my mentor in this work is just that: How do I determine when and how to use my own voice and energy in the work of the writing center as opposed to lifting, highlighting, and centering the voices and the work of our students of color? While I think this study has helped me to arrive at such a question, I do not believe I know yet a starting point to figure out such a delicate balance. But, this ongoing work motivates me to keep pursuing this line of inquiry.

In the end, the work of designing and implementing Applewood’s first writing center has galvanized me as an educator in ways I could not have anticipated. What began as an exercise in attempting to begin disrupting systemic oppression through an academic support for students of color evolved into much more. Through this work, I find
I am much more inclined to solve problems creatively by seeking out answers that have not yet been explored or even considered – to try and push boundaries beyond what simply is, and instead towards what could be. I also find I am much more eager to understand how I can advocate and find ways to utilize my social privilege for the benefit of my students of color and our school community. Although I am still at a starting point in such work, the opening of the writing center helped to surface this as a crucial part of this ongoing work both in and out of the writing center itself. Most importantly, I find I am much more able to consider who my students are and what they need. Of course, this is something I have strived to do for the past twelve years, and it is something that will be continuous and ongoing. But, because of the work entailed in the design and implementation of Applewood’s writing center, and the use of my critical imagining, I feel a bit better equipped to connect with and empathize with them. And most critically, I feel better able to step back and view the broader systems and structures dictating how our students experience school every day. And in doing so, I feel more committed than ever to the work required to improving our schools and communities for our students through the creation of new, imaginative spaces.
APPENDIX A

COLLAGES
Collage from Cycle 2
Collage from Cycle 3
Collage from Cycle 4
Collage for Epilogue
REFERENCE LIST


Mackiewicz, J., & Thompson, I. (2014). Instruction, cognitive scaffolding, and motivational scaffolding in writing center tutoring. Composition Studies, 42(1) 54-78.


VITA

Sheldon C. Krieger is the son of John and Debra Krieger. He was born in Denver, Colorado on May 27, 1988. He currently resides in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago.

Sheldon graduated from the public school district of Jefferson Country in Colorado in 2006. He graduated from New York University in 2010 with a Bachelor of Science in English Education. In 2014, Sheldon earned a Master of Arts degree in Teaching of English from Teachers College, Columbia University. In 2015, he earned a Master of Science degree in School Leadership from University of Pennsylvania, and also received his Type 75 School Administrative Certificate from the Illinois State Board of Education the same year.

Sheldon has taught high school English for the past 12 years. After completing his student teaching in New York Public Schools, he began his teaching career in the School District of Philadelphia in 2010. In 2013, Sheldon moved to Chicago, where he continued teaching first in a contract high school before joining Chicago Public Schools in 2015, where he has been teaching since. He currently teaches English at Lake View High School in Chicago, where he also serves as Writing Center Director and the head of the school’s international travel program.
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