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The Silence Between the Lines Stories of Survival in Independent Schools

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Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of racialized educators within Canadian independent schools through a narrative inquiry framework. Drawing on interviews with three racialized faculty members, the study illuminates the often-silenced realities of assimilation, internalized colonization, and the absence of culturally sustaining pedagogies in independent educational spaces. Positioned within a three-dimensional narrative space, each participant's story is examined through a decolonial lens informed by Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). The findings reveal a troubling pattern of institutional omission, where racialized identities are rendered invisible in both curriculum and school culture. The study also offers reflexive insights from the researcher's own position as a racialized educator working within the same system. This work aims to disrupt dominant discourses of meritocracy and multiculturalism in independent schools, while calling for relational ethics and decolonial practices that can more authentically center equity in these privileged educational contexts.



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Introduction

There is a silence that lives between the lines of school policy, faculty meetings, and casual hallway conversations — a silence that speaks volumes for those of us whose bodies and stories remain unacknowledged in independent schooling spaces. This paper is about that silence. It is about what is omitted, unseen, and unspoken. But it is also about refusal and survival — about how racialized educators navigate, resist, and sometimes reimagine the very spaces that erase them.

Canadian independent schools have long been perceived as bastions of academic excellence and social capital. They are often associated with prestige, tradition, and high expectations. Yet behind their ivy-covered walls lie systems deeply embedded in colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and settler logics of discipline, merit, and control (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Bannerji, 2000). These institutions, built to serve elite and largely white populations, were never designed with equity in mind. Independent schools are sites where privileges are compounded, and social class is often reproduced. While many have moved toward more inclusive branding and DEI initiatives, the culture, curriculum, and leadership structures of these schools remain deeply entangled with whiteness and colonialism.

In these schools, multiculturalism often takes the form of symbolic recognition - a celebration of cultural food, festivals, or languages that leaves systemic inequities untouched (Thobani, 2007). Furthermore, Independent schools are not publicly funded and, as such, are not accountable to the public. These institutions can choose what to include or exclude in their curriculum, often centering Eurocentric or colonial values. The racialized educator in this context is not just an employee, but a living contradiction: valued as a marker of diversity, yet expected to assimilate into an environment that was not built with them in mind. Their presence is often simultaneously spotlighted and invisibilized, made hypervisible when needed, and ignored when convenient.

My interest in this work is both scholarly and personal. As a racialized educator with over thirteen years of experience in both public and independent school systems in Canada, I have often found myself caught in the space between gratitude and grief, grateful for opportunities to lead and teach in well-resourced schools, and grieving the ways in which those spaces demanded my assimilation, silenced my full self, and placed the burden of equity work on my shoulders alone. I write from within this paradox, not as a distant observer, but as someone whose story overlaps with those I have sought to listen to.

This study centers the lived experiences of three racialized educators in Canadian independent schools. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as both method and worldview, I explore how these educators navigate assimilation, erasure, and resistance. Their stories, told in conversation with theory, land, and self, offer insights not only into the institutional mechanics of marginalization, but into the pedagogies of survival that racialized educators enact daily. These are not just narratives of harm, but of agency and relational strength.

Drawing on Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) and decolonial theory (Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012), I ask: How do racialized educators experience their professional lives in independent educational spaces? What narratives emerge when we center their voices? And what does it mean to sustain culture in institutions still shaped by colonial norms?

This inquiry does not aim to generalize, but to illuminate. It speaks to what lingers in the margins of institutional mission statements and professional development agendas. It invites readers, particularly those in positions of power, to pause, to listen, and to reflect on the costs of silence.

Methodology

This research is guided by narrative inquiry, not simply as a methodology, but as a way of being in relation with participants and the knowledge they hold (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry rests on the belief that human experience is storied, we come to know ourselves, others, and the world through the narratives we live, tell, and re-tell. It is relational, iterative, and always situated within context. In independent schools, the dominant narrative is one firmly rooted in the colonial worldview. For this reason, narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited to research that seeks to understand how racialized educators navigate institutions steeped in colonial histories and whiteness as the norm.

As a methodology, narrative inquiry is deeply committed to relational ethics (Clandinin, Caine, & Lesard, 2018). I was attentive to the historical narratives that have been imposed on racialized peoples that have constrained the possibilities for them within education. Amplifying the narratives of racialized educators was not only an act of resistance, but it was also a step towards creating empowering conditions within the broader education system. Narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on ethical relationships and attentiveness to lived experience, served as a powerful methodological framework for this research.

The study draws on the concept of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which attends to:

- Temporality (past, present, and future),
- Sociality (personal and social conditions), and
- Place (the specific physical and institutional contexts in which stories unfold) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In practice, this meant listening to stories not simply as data points, but as layered expressions of identity, survival, and resistance, shaped by history, community, and place. Each narrative was co-created between participant and researcher.

The stories shared by participants are situated within three different independent school contexts. While sharing many similarities, independent schools differ from public institutions in meaningful ways. Kane (1991) outlines six defining features that include: self-governance, self-support, self-defining curriculum, self-selected students and faculty, and small class sizes (Kane, 1991). These spaces often reproduce inequalities instead of challenging them. Within such spaces, racialized educators are vulnerable to epistemic violence, subtle forms of harm that are embedded in neoliberal discourses of individualism and meritocracy. Attending close to these institutional dynamics, this study uses narrative inquiry to explore how participants make meaning of their experiences and negotiate their identities within these elite educational environments.

Participants

Three racialized educators working in Canadian independent schools were invited to participate in the study. All identified as racialized and had multiple years of experience teaching or leading within independent schools. They came from diverse ethnocultural and religious backgrounds, and all spoke to the tensions of navigating whiteness, professionalism, and pedagogy in independent school contexts.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, informed by my insider knowledge of the independent school landscape. I approached individuals whose experiences I believed would offer rich insight into the research questions and who had expressed, either publicly or privately, a willingness to engage critically with issues of race, identity, and schooling.

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting 60–90 minutes each. Conversations were guided by open-ended prompts but were flexible enough to allow each participant to shape the flow and focus of their narrative.

Relational Ethics & Reflexivity

Narrative inquiry is fundamentally relational. As such, I approached this work with an ethic of respect, humility, and reciprocity (Clandinin, 2013; Smith, 2012). Throughout the process, I asked: *How can I be in relation with these stories in ways that do not reproduce the extractive logics of academic research?* This meant offering participants ongoing input into how their narratives were shared and interpreted, and acknowledging the co-constructed nature of the knowledge we produced together.

My own positionality is central to this inquiry. As a racialized educator who has worked in Canadian independent schools, and who has both benefited from and felt harmed by them, I am not a neutral observer. I carry my own stories of assimilation, silence, and resistance. Rather than bracket these experiences, I have made them visible where appropriate, recognizing that my voice is also shaped by the systems I am critiquing.

This insider-outsider tension became a generative force within the research. It allowed me to approach participants not with curiosity alone, but with resonance. I knew what they meant when they paused mid-sentence to weigh a word, when they shared coded moments of harm, when they described surviving professionalism as performance. These moments shaped not just what was said, but how I heard it.

Analysis & Representation

Rather than coding stories into themes, I engaged in a process of re-storying (Creswell, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), where I worked to preserve the wholeness and nuance of each participant's account. I looked for resonant threads across stories, not to collapse differences, but to identify shared contours of experience: assimilation, omission, trauma, resistance.

These threads are presented in the findings section not as categories, but as narrative moments: spaces where meaning coheres, where experience presses forward, where language meets feeling. Quotations were selected not just for content, but for emotional texture and relational power.

Throughout, I remained committed to the idea that narrative inquiry is not about extracting meaning from people's stories, but sitting beside them long enough to understand what the story is doing — in the world, in the body, in the institution.

Findings: Resonant Narrative Threads

The stories shared by Farah, Narin, and Sonny offer far more than personal testimony; they reveal how coloniality continues to structure independent schooling in Canada. Their narratives — grounded in lived contradiction, expose the dissonance between institutions that celebrate diversity in branding yet marginalize the very people who embody it. These educators are not outliers in their schools; they are embodied reminders of the colonial tensions at the heart of these institutions.

Assimilation and Internalized Colonization

*I wasn't one of them... f*** these brown people. (Sonny)*

Sonny's words, raw and unresolved, landed in the room with a weight that demanded more than analysis, they demanded witnessing. His disdain for brownness, spoken through clenched teeth and years of accumulated shame, was not unique to him. It echoed across the narratives of Narin and Farah, and resonated within my own bones. These stories reflected not just external racism, but something deeper, the internalization of colonial violence, the absorption of white superiority into the flesh and psyche.

For Sonny, this internalized colonization manifested early. Raised in a predominantly white area of Alberta, he described a childhood filled with anxiety, confusion, and deep ambivalence toward his own culture. He distanced himself from Indian music, food, and community, and longed for what he perceived as a more "normal" life, a life marked by whiteness. He once said he wanted to write a book titled, *I Wish I Was White* — but to "cross out the white part." This was not a rejection of brownness, but a painful cry for the power associated with whiteness, a desire to be seen, valued, and safe.

Narin, too, remembered feeling ashamed of her parents, her mother's traditional clothing, and her father's accent. She reflected on moments where she had actively tried to hide them, to "become a settler" by performing the dominant culture. "I was complicit," she said, her voice steady but tinged with regret. "I tried to colonize my own parents." It wasn't until university, when she encountered racialized mentors who modeled what she called "balance", that she began to reclaim her cultural identity.

Farah's narrative was more subtle, but no less revealing. She spoke of feeling responsible for maintaining cultural rituals, learning her mother's recipes, participating in religious ceremonies, but also acknowledged a quiet shame when wearing cultural attire to work. She referred to her everyday clothing as "regular clothes," unconsciously centering whiteness as the norm.

In my own life, the desire to assimilate was insidious. As a young boy, I remember once trying to scrub the brown off my skin in the shower. I pursued white partners, anglicized my name, and prided myself on fitting in. I worked hard to be palatable, professional, and non-threatening in predominantly white institutions. It felt like survival, and perhaps, in many ways, it was. But it

came at a cost. Each act of self-erasure chipped away at something deeper. As Fanon wrote, “The colonized makes himself inferior. But the truth is, he is made inferior” (Fanon, 1967, p. 149).

These narratives exemplify what Thomas (2013) refers to as the proxy self, a survival mask worn by racialized people in hostile spaces. It is not merely a coping mechanism; it is a colonized performance scripted by settler expectations. In independent schooling spaces, where whiteness is synonymous with professionalism, these performances become compulsory. The result is what Du Bois called double consciousness, “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903, p. 5).

Assimilation, in these stories, is not a choice, it is a strategy for survival. But survival should not require the abandonment of self.

Narin recalled being excluded from conversations about race at her school, even when they directly involved the communities she represented. When Punjabi students were overheard using racialized language on the playground, the administration’s response was to ban Punjabi, stripping language from children in a move eerily reflective of colonial schooling. “They didn’t even ask me,” she said, “and I speak the language. I could have helped.” But her knowledge was not seen as valuable. Her voice, once again, was omitted.

This omission is more than an interpersonal slight; it is the structural violence of whiteness operating as a silent norm. Assimilation, in this context, is enforced through omission. As I reflect on these stories, I recognize my own complicity, the ways I once sought proximity to whiteness, how I internalized colonial values of meritocracy and competition. I chased validation in spaces that were never designed for me, and in doing so, I erased parts of myself I am only now beginning to recover.

The work of decolonization, for educators like us, begins not only in pedagogy or policy, but in reclaiming the parts of ourselves that colonialism taught us to disown. These stories are not just about assimilation; they are about what happens when the only way to belong is to disappear.

Omission as Erasure

They didn’t say I didn’t belong. But they never said I did either. (Farah)

In independent schooling spaces, exclusion often wears the mask of politeness. For the racialized educators in this study, harm was rarely loud or hostile. It arrived in silence, in the quiet absence of recognition, affirmation, and structural inclusion. This form of exclusion was not necessarily personal, but institutional: a pattern of being overlooked, omitted, or “included” only on the institution’s terms.

Narin recounted moments where her insights, grounded in lived experience and cultural fluency, were bypassed in curriculum planning, student discipline decisions, and conversations about race. When Punjabi students at her school were disciplined for using profanity in their home language, the administration responded by banning the language entirely, without consultation, conversation, or cultural context. Narin, the only Punjabi-speaking staff member, was not asked to participate in that decision. Her knowledge, while convenient during cultural events, was ignored when real power was at stake.

This reflects what Ahmed (2012) terms the non-performativity of diversity: when institutions use the language of inclusion but do not enact the structural change such inclusion

requires. Diversity becomes something that is performed in newsletters, mission statements, or special events, but avoided in everyday policy, staffing, and curriculum decisions.

For Farah, omission showed up in curriculum and school culture. Religious holidays went unacknowledged. Her cultural background was never referenced in course content or staff discussions. While she was never overtly excluded, she described a “hollow space” around her presence, one where belonging was conditional and always tentative. Her experience is consistent with what Spivak (1988) describes as epistemic violence: the silencing or erasure of subaltern knowledge systems within dominant institutional discourse.

These forms of erasure are not accidents. As Bannerji (2000) argues, Canadian multiculturalism often functions as a technology of containment. By celebrating visible markers of cultural difference : food, fashion, flags, institutions can appear inclusive while leaving deeper structures of racial hierarchy untouched. In independent schools, this often plays out as a willingness to acknowledge difference in symbolic ways (e.g., a “Multicultural Day”) while keeping the curriculum, leadership, and power structures firmly rooted in whiteness.

Tarc (2011) reminds us that curriculum is not neutral — it is “a psychosocial representation of human life” that shapes identity, value, and legitimacy. When whiteness is centered in curriculum and institutional values, it communicates to racialized educators and students that they are peripheral to the school’s core mission. The result is what Kumashiro (2000) calls “partial education” , a system in which only some identities, voices, and histories are validated as worthy of knowledge.

For Sonny, the omissions were personal and professional. He described being invited to participate in DEI events, but never to lead them. His stories were solicited as evidence of inclusion, but when he raised concerns about microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) or lack of representation in leadership, he was met with defensiveness. Over time, he began to censor himself , not out of fear, but out of exhaustion. The cost of being the “representative voice” for his community was too high.

Patel (2021) notes that in elite institutions, diversity is often curated in ways that are aesthetic, not epistemic. That is, racialized bodies are included in the room, but their knowledge is not centered. These dynamics create a double-bind for racialized educators: they are both hyper-visible (as symbols) and invisible (as thinkers and leaders). When difference is only welcomed on the institution’s terms, real transformation becomes impossible.

The educators in this study were not calling for celebration; they were calling for recognition and redistribution. They wanted their insights, their identities, and their pedagogies to be engaged not as decoration, but as essential to the life of the school. Their stories expose how omission can be a more insidious form of exclusion, one that does not provoke outrage, but wears people down over time.

Omission is a kind of institutional forgetting. It allows whiteness to remain unmarked and unquestioned, while placing the burden of inclusion on those already marginalized. It teaches racialized educators to translate themselves, to perform neutrality, and to lower their expectations for what belonging can mean.

But as these narratives show, silence is not the absence of violence, it is one of its most enduring forms.

Discrimination as Trauma. Discrimination in elite schools does not always scream. More often, it whispers, coded in professional norms, buried in backhanded compliments, softened by smiles. For the racialized educators in this study, the harm they experienced was cumulative, relational, and deeply embodied. It was not the result of single egregious moments, but of persistent and patterned indignities: being interrupted in meetings, overlooked for leadership, asked to explain one's culture but never consulted on pedagogy. Over time, these encounters took a toll not just on morale, but on the body.

Sonny recalled being asked, after a heated staff conversation about equity, whether he could “help tone things down for the group.” He had not raised his voice. He had simply asked a difficult question. “I realized in that moment,” he said, “that I wasn’t allowed to be fully here.” For him, the message was clear: belonging required emotional labor, restraint, and an endless willingness to be palatable.

This emotional demand aligns with what Sue et al. (2007) identify as racial microaggressions, brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile or derogatory racial slights. While each instance may seem minor in isolation, their cumulative impact can be devastating. These microaggressions are often denied or dismissed by perpetrators, which further compounds the harm for recipients, who are left questioning their own perceptions and responses.

Farah described being praised by a parent as “so articulate,” followed by, “you’re not what I expected.” It was meant as a compliment. But embedded within it was the assumption of deficiency, that someone who looked like her should not be eloquent, composed, or intellectually commanding. She smiled through the exchange, but inside, she felt small. The moment stayed with her not because it was loud, but because it was familiar.

Huber and Solorzano (2015) argue that microaggressions are not just momentary irritations, but “manifestations of structural racism” that reflect and reproduce unequal power relations (p. 300). Within elite schools, where whiteness is normative and racialized staff are few, these aggressions carry the weight of institutional validation. They shape how racialized educators are perceived, how their contributions are valued, and how safe they feel in their roles.

For Narin, the trauma of exclusion was most acute in staff meetings, where conversations about student behavior or curriculum never acknowledged racial bias. When she tried to raise concerns, she was told she was “reading too much into it.” After a while, she stopped speaking. “It felt like death by a thousand paper cuts,” she said. “And the worst part is, you start thinking maybe it’s you.”

This experience speaks directly to what Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011) define as racial battle fatigue, the psychological, physiological, and emotional toll experienced by racialized peoples as they navigate chronic racial stressors in predominantly white environments. Symptoms include exhaustion, hypervigilance, anxiety, and a deep sense of isolation. For educators in elite institutions, where public performance is central to professional identity and institutional branding, this fatigue often goes unacknowledged, leading to burnout or quiet withdrawal.

What makes this trauma particularly insidious is that it is often misrecognized as sensitivity, personal insecurity, or a lack of resilience. But as Lorde (1984) reminds us, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112). When racialized educators are

expected to manage both the weight of their own marginalization and the fragility of their colleagues, the institution has failed to be a space of ethical relation.

Sonny, once an outspoken advocate for equity, described becoming more quiet over time. “You learn to pick your battles,” he said. “Not because you don’t care, but because you have to survive.” This strategy of self-preservation, of holding back to hold on, is a recurring theme across stories. But it is not passive. It is what Tuck and Yang (2014) call refusal: the decision not to expend energy where it will be co-opted, ignored, or weaponized.

Despite these harms, the participants also spoke of small, deliberate acts of resistance: creating space in their classrooms for counter-narratives, mentoring racialized students, challenging biased assumptions in subtle ways. These actions may not have changed institutional policy, but they were acts of reclamation, affirmations of presence in places that often demanded invisibility.

Discrimination in elite schooling is rarely overt. It is often polite, professionally coded, and structurally embedded. But its impact is real. It leaves racialized educators doubting themselves, minimizing their pain, and shrinking their presence. It leaves institutions looking inclusive, while quietly reproducing the same hierarchies they claim to dismantle.

Discussion

The narratives of Sonny, Narin, and Farah offer more than isolated personal testimony. They expose the patterned logics through which independent schools maintain whiteness as the norm and marginalize racialized presence. These educators’ experiences are not aberrations — they are institutional outcomes of spaces built on colonial foundations and neoliberal values. Their stories reveal the emotional labor of existing within systems that both erase and celebrate them, often in the same breath.

The pressure to assimilate described by participants aligns with what Fanon (1967) identified as the desire of the colonized to adopt the norms of the colonizer in pursuit of legitimacy and safety. In schools where leadership, curriculum, and community expectations reflect settler values, racialized educators often must choose between visibility and belonging. Their decisions to modify tone, suppress language, or conceal culture are not betrayals — they are strategic acts of survival.

Farah’s hesitance to bring her full self into school spaces, and Sonny’s eventual withdrawal from leadership roles, are not evidence of disengagement but of what Smith et al. (2011) call racial battle fatigue, the cumulative emotional, physiological, and spiritual toll of navigating white-dominant environments. These educators are not fragile; they are overextended. They are navigating hostile norms that reward neutrality over authenticity and performance over truth.

Meanwhile, institutional omission, in curriculum, policy, and leadership, reflects what Ahmed (2012) terms non-performative diversity, where the language of equity circulates without structural change. Narin’s exclusion from language policy decisions, despite her fluency and experience, exemplifies this dynamic. Her knowledge was welcomed in multicultural programming, but not in governance. As Spivak (1988) would argue, her voice was allowed to speak only when it did not challenge the center, a form of epistemic violence that silences through selective recognition.

One critical issue warranting further attention is the underrepresentation of racialized educators in leadership positions within educational institutions. Despite their valuable insights and experiences, racialized educators are often neither placed in nor encouraged to pursue leadership roles. This exclusion not only perpetuates their invisibility but also limits their ability to influence structural changes in curriculum development, policy-making, and school culture. Without diverse leadership, schools risk maintaining inequitable systems that fail to fully integrate the perspectives and contributions of racialized educators, thereby hindering meaningful progress toward equity and inclusion.

These conditions underscore a deeper pedagogical gap: the absence of frameworks that actively sustain racialized identities and knowledge systems. This is where Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) becomes not just relevant, but necessary.

CSP, as developed by Paris and Alim (2017), challenges educators and institutions to affirm, extend, and be accountable to the cultural practices of historically marginalized communities. It reframes student culture not as a barrier to overcome, but as a foundation upon which to build. Its principles, honoring intergenerational knowledge, practicing relational pedagogy, and confronting internalized oppression, stand in sharp contrast to the containment strategies of multiculturalism (Bannerji, 2000).

In independent schooling spaces, however, CSP can be flattened into performance. Cultural practices may be celebrated in designated weeks, but rarely inform the structure or governance of the institution. As Patel (2021) warns, justice work detached from decolonial critique risks being absorbed into the very logics it seeks to disrupt. A sustaining pedagogy that is not also structurally disruptive is, ultimately, cosmetic.

A truly liberatory CSP would require a reorientation of values, a decentering of whiteness, a redistribution of curricular authority, and an expansion of who gets to define knowledge. It would involve inviting families, students, and racialized staff into meaningful co-creation of schooling practices. This is not about inclusion as an invitation. It is about ownership, co-creation, and shared authorship.

San Pedro (2017) reminds us of the need for dialogic spaces - spaces where multiple truths can coexist without needing to be resolved or softened. These are spaces of wakefulness, where truth is honored even when uncomfortable. For educators like Sonny, Narin, and Farah, such spaces are not aspirational - they are necessary. Without them, schooling becomes another site of harm.

CSP, then, is not simply a teaching strategy. It is an ethical stance rooted in relationship and refusal. It refuses the separation of pedagogy from the lives of learners and educators. It insists that culture is not decorative, but political. It demands that schools do more than make space — they must yield space.

The educators in this study model this ethic in practice. In their mentoring, their curricular choices, and their quiet resistance, they sustain more than culture, they sustain possibility.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings of this study call attention to the absence of culturally sustaining pedagogical practices in independent schools across Canada, spaces that continue to be shaped by colonial values, whiteness as norm, and logics of exclusion. This research affirms that assimilation,

omission, and racial trauma are not exceptional in these institutions, but structural features of how they operate.

Through their narratives, participants illuminated how the absence of culturally sustaining pedagogy not only marginalized their voices but also hindered their ability to enact transformative educational practice. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is not merely about inclusion, it is about reorientation. It asks schools to center dynamic communities, foster intergenerational knowledge sharing, build reciprocal relationships with land and people, and offer opportunities to contend with internalized oppression.

In institutions where dominant narratives remain unquestioned, where holidays are acknowledged but not accommodated, and where racialized teachers are expected to represent but not lead, the work of cultural sustainability is both urgent and fragile. Still, the participants in this study embodied refusal, refusing erasure, refusing silence, and insisting on the right to teach and lead from a place of wholeness.

The implications of this study are both practical and philosophical. Meaningful decolonial transformation must begin with a pause — a slowing down of institutional inertia, a willingness to listen, and a commitment to discomfort. As Patel (2021) reminds us, “the most explicit decolonial move we can make is to sit still long enough to see clearly what we need to reach beyond” (p. 88). This stillness is not passive; it is a radical act of reorientation.

For independent schools, this pause might mean putting a moratorium on performative equity work, the kind that relies on progressive language while leaving power untouched. It may mean reexamining relationships to land, authority, and merit. It may mean unlearning whiteness as the standard for professionalism. It certainly means centering the stories and leadership of those most often asked to serve without being seen.

For educators, especially racialized ones, this study affirms the need for collective care. The burden of transformation cannot rest on isolated shoulders. It must be relational, resourced, and sustained by institutional commitment. As one participant said, “I can’t keep doing this alone.” This is not a failure of individual resilience; it is an indictment of institutional design.

This inquiry also positions narrative, and more importantly, relational narrative inquiry, as a methodology of resistance. By creating space for stories to live in their complexity, this work resists the urge to flatten, essentialize, or manage racialized experience. It honors what Smith (2012) calls the ethical imperative to “tell the story well, and get the story right.” In doing so, it makes visible what often goes unspoken in dominant educational discourse: that racialized educators are surviving systems not built for them, and doing so with vision, care, and clarity.

It is in these spaces, the in-between, the nearly said, the stories whispered under breath, that survival takes root. These are the places where transformation begins, not with policy or branding, but with the courage to listen. If independent schooling is to become something more liberatory, it must begin here: in the spaces where racialized educators have already been leading, dreaming, and telling truths, between the lines, in spite of them, and sometimes against them.

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