Listening into Being: Community Organizing as Holistic Education

Laurita Ciceron; Elizabeth Rogers; Holly Roach

E-mail: ciceron.lau@gmail.com; elizabethcrogers33@gmail.com; roachh2@queens.edu

Received July 2025
Accepted for publication July 2025
Published May 2026

Abstract

Drawing on interviews with Charlotte-based organizers, this paper identifies key themes that define community organizing as a form of holistic education. These findings suggest that community education is not a supplement to social justice organizing, but its vital core—one that functions more like a living organism than a formal institution. By examining organizing as curriculum-in-motion, the Listening Project contributes to the fields of holistic education and community-based research. It calls educators and organizers alike to view learning as systemic, spiritual, and embodied—and to treat listening not as a research method alone, but as an ethical practice of transformation.

Keywords: *community organizing, social justice education, community-based participatory research, holistic learning, relational organizing, Charlotte, NC, emergent strategy, living systems, embodied knowledge, intergenerational learning, relational infrastructure, emotional and spiritual grounding*

In the summer of 2020, against the backdrop of a global pandemic and national uprisings for racial justice, a quiet question began to circulate among educators and organizers in Charlotte, North Carolina: What can we learn if we stop to listen? This question was not posed rhetorically or metaphorically. It emerged from a place of deep uncertainty and reckoning—a recognition that the systems meant to sustain life, justice, and learning were under profound strain. As schools shut their doors and protesters filled the streets, organizers and educators alike were asking not only what to do, but how to be. How to move, relate, and educate in a moment of rupture.

Out of this moment, the Listening Project was born. Designed as a community-based participatory research (CBPR) initiative, the project aimed to understand the landscape of community organizing in Charlotte by listening to those embedded within it. Through a series of unstructured narrative interviews, the project invited local organizers to reflect on their experiences: What brought them to this work? What sustained them? What did they learn along the way? The method was simple, yet radical in its refusal to extract. Listening was not only a data-gathering practice; it was a relational ethic and a pedagogical stance.

The impetus for this research was also practical. A social justice and community organizing (SJCO) certification program was being developed at Queens University of Charlotte, an institution with a complex racial history and a limited legacy of community engagement with Charlotte's communities of color. The project team understood that before they could design a relevant curriculum, they needed to build trust, and that trust would only emerge through genuine listening and mutual respect. The Listening Project was thus not a precursor to education, but a form of education itself.

This article argues that community organizing, particularly in the context of Charlotte, can be understood as a form of holistic education. Drawing from living systems theory and the work of thinkers like adrienne maree brown, James Grier Miller, and bell hooks, this research frames organizing as a dynamic, interdependent, and evolving system. It is not merely a collection of tactics or institutions, but an ecology of relationships, practices, and values. Just as living systems thrive through adaptation and mutual exchange, organizing communities learn, grow, and transform through shared knowledge, embodied experience, and relational care. We draw on critical place-based pedagogy, a holistic education framework that evolved out of the intersections of critical pedagogy and environmental justice pedagogy, expanding our understanding of how education impacts communities.

In the pages that follow, we outline the theoretical foundations of this perspective, describe the methodology used to conduct the Listening Project, and analyze the themes that emerged from the narratives of Charlotte-based organizers. We then reflect on the implications for educators, researchers, and organizers seeking to align their work with holistic and transformative practices. Ultimately, this article contends that community education is not peripheral to organizing—it is central, systemic, and alive.

The structure of this article intentionally weaves scholarly analysis with narrative reflection, reflecting the relational and embodied character of the organizing described. In alignment with CBPR and narrative ethics, we treat storytelling not as an illustrative anecdote but as a legitimate mode of knowledge production rooted in relational accountability.

Literature Review

This literature review situates the Listening Project at the intersection of three major bodies of work: holistic and community-based education, living systems theory, and storytelling as a participatory research methodology. These frameworks collectively inform a reimagining of community organizing as a living curriculum—one that emerges from relationships, adapts to context, and holds space for both learning and healing.

Holistic Education and Community-Based Learning

Holistic education emphasizes the integration of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of human development. Rooted in traditions advanced by scholars like Parker Palmer, bell hooks, and Paulo Freire, holistic education challenges mechanistic models of schooling in favor of approaches that treat learning as inherently relational and transformative. Freire's concept of dialogical education—the co-construction of knowledge between educators and learners—is particularly relevant. He writes that "education either

functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom" (Freire, 2000, p. 34). In this sense, organizing and education are inseparable: both are processes by which individuals awaken to their agency, co-create meaning, and build the capacity for collective transformation.

Placed based critical pedagogy, an established intersection in holistic education helps us to understand the critical connections in the very real particularities and challenges of a place, in this case, Charlotte, North Carolina. Gruenewald (2008) expands on Freire's assertion that "acting on one's situationality makes one more human" asserting that decolonization and rehabilitation are necessary for rehumanizing populations healing from systemic disenfranchisement. "It is this spatial dimension of situationality, and its attention to social transformation that connects critical pedagogy with a pedagogy of place." (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 310) The main contribution of a critical pedagogy of place to educational research is how it challenges educational systems to expand their view and practices to include all the living systems and contexts of their own place and that of any community being studied. This challenge is of itself, an expansion of what Freire called conscientizacao, which has been defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 310) Freire also described this as "reading the world," (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 311) which is essentially allowing and including everything around us to inform our understanding of our lives contextualized by the systems we live in and around. We were inspired by this concept of "reading the world" and came to understand that listening—through interviews and community feedback sessions—would serve as the holistic backbone of our inquiry.

Parker Palmer (2021), a well-known holistic educator and author advocates for a view of education that is grounded in the body and an open heart that leads to experiential and relational awakenings. He advocates for the breaking down of traditional barriers to learning, such as the proverbial "ivory tower" of higher education. "Get your mind down from the top of the tower—get it down into the heart-place of the self, where it can do some good, grounded, relational work" (Palmer & Freimann, 2021). Often, well intentioned academics alienate the very communities they wish to study. Whereas, relational organizing is based in this practice of open hearted embodiment that builds relationships through attunement.

Author, hooks (1994) similarly contends that learning is a site of resistance, and that teaching is most powerful when it engages the whole self. In *Teaching to Transgress*, she describes education as the practice of freedom, advocating for learning spaces that are safe, loving, and justice-oriented. In community organizing spaces—especially those marked by histories of trauma and marginalization—this holistic orientation becomes not only pedagogically significant, but ethically imperative.

This framework aligns naturally with popular education traditions in Latin America and the Global South, where movements like the Zapatistas have long treated political education as a spiritual and communal process. In such spaces, learning does not occur in isolation; it is a living, breathing part of how communities sustain themselves through struggle and adaptation.

Living Systems Theory

To fully appreciate community organizing as a holistic educational system, we must move beyond individual experiences to consider the

structure and behavior of the system itself. Living systems theory, first articulated by James Grier Miller (1978), offers a lens for understanding how biological, social, and organizational systems function as open, self-organizing entities. Living systems exchange energy, matter, and information with their environment, and are sustained by the quality of relationships among their parts.

Author, adrienne maree brown (2017), building on Miller's ideas and drawing from biomimicry and complexity science, introduced a new generation of organizers to systems thinking through Emergent Strategy. She writes, "Each day should be lived on purpose… I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by how I am, as much as with the things I do" (brown, 2017, p. 58). Here, brown advocates for decentralized, adaptive movement-building rooted in mutual care and responsiveness. Her framing resonates with the ecological model of organizing observed in Charlotte—where change does not happen in predictable, top-down patterns, but emerges through relationships, intuition, and experimentation.

David Stroh (2015), in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, furthers this lens by articulating four key benefits of systems thinking in social movements: (1) uncovering how we may be complicit in the problems we seek to change; (2) fostering collaboration; (3) identifying high-leverage interventions; and (4) promoting continuous learning. Together, these frameworks illustrate how community organizing can be understood not merely as strategy, but as an ecosystem—a self-renewing web of people, practices, values, and feedback loops.

Living systems theory thus provides a way to see organizing communities as more than assemblages of campaigns or nonprofits. They are living entities with cycles of growth, rupture, repair, and regeneration—animated by the quality of the relationships within them.

Storytelling and Participatory Research

The Listening Project's methodology was grounded in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), a research approach that positions community members as co-researchers and emphasizes equity, reciprocity, and local relevance. CBPR challenges the extractive tendencies of traditional academic research by centering the lived experiences and priorities of those most affected (Minkler, 2005; Suarez-Balcazar, 2020). In Charlotte—where Black, Brown, immigrant, and low-income communities have long been overstudied and underserved—CBPR was not just a methodology; it was an ethical imperative.

During the project's design phase, we convened community feedback sessions to ask what people wanted to know and learn from Charlotte's organizing history. In one such session, Rev. Dr. Janet Garner-Mullins, who later became the project's community advisor, cautioned us, "Don't send someone who looks like Holly into the community and expect to get real stories."

We took this guidance seriously. With Rev. Dr. Garner-Mullins' support, we secured funding to hire a primary researcher from the community. We were fortunate to bring on Laurita Ciceron, who co-designed the study, built relationships with local organizers, conducted nearly all of the interviews, analyzed the data, and ensured findings were shared in step with the grassroots community at every stage.

Rev. Dr. Garner-Mullins also offered a second crucial insight: "Don't expect something and

come with nothing." In response, we compensated each interview participant with a $50 Walmart gift card—not because Walmart aligned with our values, but because community members told us that was what they needed. This was one of many moments where we restructured our assumptions and allowed community voices to shape the research in meaningful ways.

Unstructured narrative interviews were central to this process. This approach—widely embraced in feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous research traditions—acknowledges that stories are a powerful form of data. Sandelowski (1991) argues that storytelling opens a unique window into lived experience, especially in the context of trauma, identity, and collective struggle. Corbin and Morse (2003) further emphasize that interviews on sensitive topics demand emotional attunement and reciprocal vulnerability, challenging the detached posture of conventional objectivity.

Beyond its methodological value, storytelling in this context was a political and relational act. As Christensen et al. (2018) assert in Activating the Heart, storytelling is not just a research tool—it is a strategy for building relationships, asserting cultural identity, and reclaiming knowledge sovereignty. In social justice organizing, storytelling resists erasure, nurtures resilience, and preserves community memory. Organizers in Charlotte described it as a healing practice—one that created space for grief, joy, clarity, and connection.

Paired with living systems theory, storytelling takes on another layer of meaning. It becomes the circulatory system of a living, learning organism—the organizing body. Stories help movements metabolize information, adapt to change, and continue evolving with purpose and coherence.

Methodology

This study employed a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methodology, emphasizing shared power, mutual respect, and the active involvement of community members throughout all phases of the research process. CBPR was chosen to align the research design with the relational, emergent, and justice-centered values embedded in Charlotte's organizing communities. The research focused on exploring how community organizers and social justice activists engage with and shape community education as a living system—adaptive, interconnected, and grounded in lived experience.

Research Design and Guiding Questions

The study sought to examine the educational dimensions of grassroots organizing in Charlotte through the lens of systems thinking, narrative inquiry, and participatory practice. It was guided by the following central questions:

- What knowledge regarding community organizing can be gained through the story-telling process?
- What narratives and lessons can be gained through interviews about community organizing in Charlotte?
- What have been the challenges, barriers, successes, best strategies and practices for social change and community organizing?

These questions reflect the project's aim to treat organizing not just as strategy or advocacy, but as a form of co-constructed, context-responsive education.

Participants and Data Collection

Fourteen community organizers based in Charlotte, NC participated in the study. These

individuals were selected based on their active involvement in social justice and community organizing efforts, with a clear educational component. Whether through leadership development, public education, mutual aid coordination, or policy advocacy, participants represented a range of organizing contexts, including racial justice, youth empowerment, housing rights, immigration advocacy, and faith-based initiatives.

Participants were recruited through relational networking and community connections. Initial outreach occurred through established organizing relationships held by the research team, as well as referrals from community advisor Rev. Dr. Janet Garner-Mullins. Snowball sampling was then used, with participants recommending additional organizers within their networks who met the study criteria. To be included in the study, participants were required to have a minimum of ten years of organizing experience within Charlotte, ensuring that interviews reflected sustained engagement and historical perspective within the local movement landscape. This criterion prioritized depth of experience over breadth of representation, aligning with the study's emphasis on intergenerational knowledge and long-term community impact.

The primary method of data collection was unstructured narrative interviews, which offered participants the agency to share their experiences at their own level of comfort. The conversational format of these interviews fostered openness and allowed the dialogue to unfold according to each organizer's own priorities, insights, and rhythms. While general prompts were shared in advance, participants were invited to direct the flow of conversation, centering agency and relational trust.

In addition to the interviews, data was also gathered through a brief online questionnaire distributed through grassroots networks, and through several focus groups that took place during the early design phase. These sessions helped refine the research questions and ensured that the interview protocol reflected community concerns and epistemologies.

All interviews were conducted virtually, recorded with consent, and professionally transcribed. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and request any redactions or clarifications to ensure accuracy and care in representation.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible qualitative approach that allows patterns and meanings to emerge from the data, while remaining grounded in participants' own language and conceptual frameworks. Analysis was guided by principles from living systems theory, which emphasize interconnectedness, relational feedback, and emergent behavior within complex social systems (Miller, 1978; Stroh, 2015).

Coding proceeded in multiple, collaborative phases consistent with CBPR principles. In Phase One, Laurita Ciceron and Holly Roach conducted an initial round of open, inductive coding to identify recurring concepts, patterns, and language grounded directly in participants' narratives. This stage prioritized in vivo coding—drawing themes from participants' own words rather than imposing predetermined categories.

In Phase Two, three trained community researchers (volunteer collaborators) reviewed transcripts and preliminary codes. These

community researchers were oriented to thematic analysis and guided in identifying major themes, extracting representative quotations, and noting patterns of convergence and divergence across interviews. Their involvement ensured that interpretive authority did not remain solely within academic leadership and that community members participated meaningfully in sense-making.

Thematic coding focused on identifying how organizers described the flows of learning, relationship-building, emotional and spiritual processes, adaptation, and systems change within their work. Particular attention was given to patterns of interdependence, knowledge exchange, and the role of failure, experimentation, and grief in shaping community education practices.

Rather than isolating variables, the analysis sought to understand organizing as a dynamic system of meaning-making and relational activity—one where education is always in motion, responsive to both internal dynamics and external pressures.

In Phase Three, the full research team reconvened to discuss emerging themes, interrogate discrepancies, and refine thematic clusters. Rather than pursuing statistical inter-rater reliability, the team engaged in reflexive dialogue to examine assumptions, clarify interpretations, and maintain distinction between participant voice and author analysis. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and return to the transcripts for contextual verification.

Throughout the analytic process, analytic memos, meeting notes, and version tracking were maintained to create a transparent audit trail of theme development. This collaborative, iterative approach emphasized relational rigor and epistemic accountability over detached objectivity, consistent with CBPR and narrative methodologies.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The research team occupies distinct yet interconnected relationships to the Charlotte community and to the institutional setting of Queens University of Charlotte. Laurita Ciceron, a Charlotte native and principal investigator, brought lived experience and longstanding community relationships to the project. Collectively, the three researchers bring more than a decade of community organizing experience in Charlotte, grounded in racial justice, social policy, and movement-based education.

Elizabeth Rogers and Holly Roach are affiliated with Queens University, where Holly co-founded and leads the Social Justice and Community Organizing (SJCO) Certification Program under which this project was developed. The Listening Project emerged within this institutional context, which carries both opportunity and historical tension, particularly given Charlotte's racialized landscape and Queens''limited prior engagement with grassroots organizing communities of color.

We recognize that race, institutional affiliation, organizing history, and academic authority shape access, trust, and interpretation. Throughout the research process, the team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue regarding power dynamics, insider–outsider positioning, and potential bias. Community advisors were consulted at key stages of the project's design and dissemination, and collaborative coding processes were used to decentralize interpretive authority. These practices were intended not to eliminate power differentials—an impossibility—but to make them

visible and accountable within the research process.

Findings

The Listening Project revealed that community organizing in Charlotte functions as a form of education that is dynamic, relational, and alive. Rather than formal instruction or isolated knowledge, organizers described a learning process embedded in daily life, historical memory, and collective struggle. Through thematic analysis, five central insights emerged that portray community education as a living system:

1. Embodied Knowledge
2. Intergenerational Learning
3. Relational Infrastructure
4. Adaptation and Emergence
5. Spiritual and Emotional Dimensions

Together, these themes illustrate a vision of community organizing as a process of continuous learning and transformation, rooted in lived experience.

1. Embodied Knowledge

Organizers consistently affirmed that their understanding of community issues comes not from theory or titles, but from lived experience. Embodied knowledge, gained through personal and collective struggle, was viewed as more authentic and actionable than detached analysis.

One organizer from Charlotte's historically Black Brooklyn neighborhood described herself as a "living experience" of urban renewal—not just someone who read about it. Her understanding was shaped by growing up in the neighborhood, witnessing its destruction, and inheriting a legacy of activism from her mother's emphasis on education and voting.

Another organizer, raised in the West Boulevard corridor, declared, "I got skin in the game, baby." Having spent over three decades in the same neighborhood and leading its community association for 20 years, her organizing was grounded in direct encounters with systemic neglect—particularly the absence of a grocery store. Her childhood in the village-like settings of Double Oaks and Roswell's Ferry instilled a deep value for collective care, inspiring her to recreate that sense of "village" through her childcare business.

A third participant, the U.S.-born son of Puerto Rican and Ecuadorian immigrants, recalled being treated as "an undocumented Mexican" in the U.S. South. The racism he and his father faced fueled his conviction that no policy change is adequate unless it centers people's real, lived experiences.

Participants emphasized that knowing through lived experience cannot be substituted with books, titles, or well-meaning policy. From a holistic education perspective, this foregrounds experiential knowledge as epistemologically central rather than supplementary to institutional expertise. As one organizer noted, too often, "people in power read reports but never talk to the people who actually live the problem." For many participants, community wisdom was described as deeper and more trustworthy than conventional expertise. We interpret this as a direct challenge to dominant hierarchies of knowledge production within formal institutions.

2. Intergenerational Learning

Participants described learning in Charlotte's organizing ecosystem as a bidirectional flow: elders transmit historical memory, values, and strategy, while younger organizers contribute new tools, technologies, and political language. This exchange often occurred outside formal training spaces and was anchored in relationships—through conversation, proximity, and shared struggle.

Several participants named Charlotte civil rights leaders—including Kelly Alexander, Sr., Fred Alexander, Ella Scarborough, and Julius Chambers—as touchstones whose legacy continues to shape contemporary organizing. Others emphasized that studying local movement history—such as Swann v. Board of Education and resistance to urban renewal—helps newer activists locate their work within a longer arc of justice.

Mentorship emerged as one of the primary mechanisms through which this intergenerational learning travels. As one organizer shared, "It wasn't a workshop that taught me how to organize—it was sitting on the porch with elders who lived this work. They told stories that taught me how to move with love, how to listen, how to stay when it gets hard." Participants also voiced concern about generational disconnection and a perceived shift toward "position" over people—signaling that sustaining the movement requires intentional pathways for relationship-based learning across generations.

3. Relational Infrastructure

Organizers described trust and relationships as the true infrastructure of movement work in Charlotte. More than strategies or tools, it was strong relational networks, built slowly, maintained intentionally, that enabled lasting impact.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of building cross-racial, cross-class alliances with humility and mutual respect. One organizer referenced the African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That ethos of collective effort was seen as critical.

Trust, however, was fragile. Participants noted that divide-and-conquer tactics—from funders or politicians—often undermined unity by favoring certain individuals or groups to secure their silence. Others reflected on organizational competition, redundancy, and turf issues that fragmented otherwise aligned efforts.

Still, many called for a return to "village" thinking—where neighbors looked out for one another and understood community as shared responsibility. "People used to check on each other," one organizer said. "Now, too many folks are just plain old selfish. It's all 'I got mine'."

Participants identified what they described as an erosion of relational culture as a significant barrier to organizing. We interpret this as evidence that trust operates as core infrastructure within the organizing system; when it weakens, the stability of the whole is compromised. As one participant observed, "People complain but don't show up. But you gotta realize—you're that somebody. If you see a gap, maybe you're the one to fill it."

Rebuilding relational infrastructure, they stressed, means being present, consistent, and community-centered—not just showing up for "celebrity moments." From a living systems perspective, trust operates as a circulatory mechanism—carrying energy, knowledge, and capacity throughout the body of the movement.

4. Adaptation and Emergence

Organizing in Charlotte was described not as a linear process but as an emergent practice: responsive to changing conditions, shaped by reflection and experimentation, and sustained by persistence.

Participants repeatedly stressed that social justice is "a journey, not a sprint." Real change, they said, takes decades—and organizers must be willing to shift tactics as they go. One participant warned, "They'll try to kill your steam. If one door closes, find another way in. Speak without them."

The fight for a grocery store in the West Boulevard corridor was cited as a case in point. After decades of failed efforts, the community shifted strategies—gathering data through an urban farm, rejecting symbolic offers, and pursuing legislative earmarks. The result: land and funding secured after nearly 50 years of persistence.

Adaptation also meant founding new structures. In Charlotte, Action NC emerged from the ashes of ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), a national grassroots network that had once mobilized low-income communities across the U.S. through large-scale protest and advocacy. After ACORN's disbandment in 2010, former organizers in Charlotte intentionally charted a new course—one that prioritized sustained local leadership over rapid-response mobilization. Action NC committed to developing resident organizers and building community-led campaigns, shifting from a staff-driven model to one rooted in collective agency. This transformation reflected a deeper lesson: that organizing must be grounded in the long-term cultivation of community power, not just the spectacle of protest.

Organizers emphasized that effective leaders must be prepared to sacrifice, not just speak. "You can't just show up for the photo," one said. "You've got to roll up your sleeves—and maybe risk your life."

Despite disappointments, participants voiced a fierce hope in the movement's capacity to grow. Participants framed creativity, improvisation, and visioning a better world not as luxuries but as survival strategies. From a systems lens, these practices reflect adaptive capacity within a complex and evolving environment.

5. Spiritual and Emotional Dimensions

Finally, organizers spoke candidly about the spiritual and emotional roots of their work. Faith, trauma, burnout, compassion, and radical hope all emerged as integral—not peripheral—to community education and activism.

Several organizers invoked divine calling as central to their commitment. One organizer explained that when God places you in a role, "you don't have a choice." Others described themselves as "lighthouses," sent to bring clarity and comfort to their communities.

Many affirmed the historical role of the Black church as a hub for justice work—offering both spiritual fuel and practical support. Still, disappointment was also voiced. Some churches, they said, now remain silent out of fear of losing members or funding, participating only when it's convenient or politically safe.

Participants identified passion and compassion as essential traits for effective organizing. We interpret this emphasis as evidence that emotional literacy functions as pedagogical practice within holistic community education. One participant noted, "If you don't have love for the people, this

work will break you." That vulnerability, they said, also makes organizers more attuned to suffering—and more determined to address it.

Organizers acknowledged the weight of burnout and trauma, describing the emotional toll of constant resistance. Some called for "radical rest," not as retreat but as restoration. Others emphasized the need for healing spaces within movement work—not just for communities, but for organizers themselves.

Across narratives of grief and fatigue, one theme persisted: hope. From a holistic education framework, this hope signals not naïveté, but a regenerative orientation toward collective transformation. As one participant shared, "It's hard. But I have to believe people still care. I have to believe change is possible.

Limitations

This study is limited by its sample size (fourteen participants) and its geographic specificity to Charlotte, North Carolina. While the research prioritized depth and relational rigor over breadth, the findings may not be generalizable to other organizing contexts. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom due to pandemic conditions and to accommodate participant accessibility and comfort—particularly given that many participants were seniors. While virtual interviews may have shaped relational dynamics differently than in-person conversations, they also expanded access and reduced participation barriers.

Additionally, as a participatory project grounded in existing community networks, the study may overrepresent organizers already connected to particular relational circles. Future research could expand the sample size, include additional demographic representation, or replicate this study in other cities to further explore organizing as holistic education across diverse contexts.

Discussion

The Listening Project's findings affirm a powerful insight: community organizing is not only political strategy—it is a form of education, and one that functions as a living system. What organizers in Charlotte described—embodied knowledge, intergenerational learning, relational infrastructure, adaptation, and spiritual grounding—aligns closely with the tenets of holistic education, living systems theory, and transformative social change. These insights deepen the field's understanding of how learning happens in organizing communities and challenge dominant notions of where, how, and by whom education is created and shared. This section discusses the significance of these findings by connecting them to the scholarly literature and broader theoretical frameworks that guided the study.

Organizing as Holistic Education

Holistic education emphasizes the integration of cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of learning (Miller, 2000; hooks, 1994). It affirms that education is not simply about the transfer of content but is a process of personal and collective transformation. The participants in this study demonstrated that organizing involves exactly these processes. They learn through experience, trauma, care, and collaboration—often outside of formal institutions.

As hooks (1994) asserts, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the

academy" (p. 12). In Charlotte, organizers extend that vision beyond the classroom. Porches, protests, prayer circles, urban farms, and city council meetings all became learning spaces. Within these spaces, education was not passive reception but an active, embodied, and emotionally engaged process—what adrienne maree brown (2017) might describe as emergent pedagogy, rooted in care and complexity.

Moreover, the narratives highlighted that learning was not individualized or transactional. It was social, rooted in relationships and shared purpose. This aligns with Paulo Freire's (2000) notion of dialogical education: a co-created process in which learners and educators are mutually transformed. In Charlotte's organizing system, elders, youth, and peers were constantly learning from one another in a web of co-intentionality. This dialogic structure suggests that organizing is a site of public pedagogy—where people cultivate new capacities and consciousness in order to create justice-centered communities.

Community Education as a Living System

The Listening Project's theoretical lens—drawn from living systems theory—further clarifies the adaptive, non-linear, and relational nature of learning in organizing spaces. Living systems theory, originally proposed by James Grier Miller (1978), views systems as open, self-organizing entities that evolve through material and informational exchanges with their environments. In this study, community organizing in Charlotte was revealed as such a system: dynamic, feedback-driven, and emergent.

Participants described their movements not in fixed stages or programmatic plans, but in cycles of learning, rupture, reflection, and adaptation. Strategies changed in response to community needs, structural shifts, and failures. Organizing knowledge flowed not from a single authority but through a network of relationships and iterative experiments. As one organizer put it, "We try something, we listen, we adjust." This mirrors the feedback loops at the heart of living systems, where learning is not about efficiency but about evolving in context.

David Stroh (2015) argues that systems thinking helps us identify leverage points for sustainable change—not by fixing problems in isolation, but by shifting the relationships that sustain them. The Charlotte organizers' focus on relational infrastructure—trust, presence, accountability—illustrates this principle. Many framed these relationships not as soft or secondary, but as core infrastructure, capable of enabling or impeding movement-building. They saw breakdowns in trust and collaboration as signals of systemic imbalance, not simply interpersonal failure.

Importantly, the presence of spiritual and emotional narratives in the findings underscores another key aspect of systems thinking: the need for regenerative, not just resistive, strategies. Systems survive through cycles of rest and renewal. Several organizers called for "radical rest" and trauma-informed organizing, challenging the tendency of movements to replicate urgency and overwork. This echoes Resmaa Menakem's (2017) call for movements to address racialized trauma not only through policy but through somatic healing practices and nervous system literacy. Without such inner work, organizers warned, the outer work may collapse under its own weight.

Storytelling as Method and Movement Practice

A distinctive contribution of the Listening Project was its use of narrative interviews and storytelling not only as a data collection tool but as a pedagogical and relational practice. Participants were invited to guide their interviews, center their own language, and decide how their stories would be shared. This approach aligned with Christensen et al.'s (2018) assertion that storytelling can "activate the heart," serving both as research and as relational repair.

Organizers' stories became vessels for transmitting cultural memory, collective grief, and tactical wisdom. These were not merely anecdotes; they were archives of struggle—holding patterns of resilience, lessons from failure, and glimpses of vision. In a context where communities are often pathologized or silenced, storytelling became an act of reclamation. It transformed participants from objects of inquiry into authors of insight, challenging extractive tendencies in academia and philanthropy alike.

Moreover, storytelling created space for contradictions and complexity—two qualities that organizing systems must navigate daily. Stories held grief and hope, anger and compassion, burnout and conviction. These dualities are not signs of disorder; they are signs of life in a system trying to evolve under pressure.

Mentorship as Storytelling in a Living System

The Listening Project suggests that mentorship functions as a key feedback loop in Charlotte's organizing ecosystem—one that stabilizes movement memory, transmits values, and regenerates leadership over time. While the findings section identifies intergenerational learning as a core theme, mentorship clarifies how that learning is sustained: through story-based relationship, not merely skill transfer.

This aligns with Christensen et al.'s (2018) argument that storytelling "activates the heart" by building relationships, transmitting community knowledge, and affirming identity. In Charlotte, mentorship operated as a narrative practice through which organizers made meaning of past campaigns, named collective wounds, and offered guidance for navigating conflict, burnout, and strategy. In living systems terms, these stories function like circulatory pathways—moving information and nourishment through the network so that wisdom remains available when conditions change.

Participants' concern about generational disconnect can be understood not simply as a cultural shift, but as an ecological vulnerability: when mentorship pathways weaken, movements risk losing continuity, repeating avoidable mistakes, and placing unsustainable demands on emerging leaders. The longing expressed for mentors who embody humility, grace, and presence reflects a need for what holistic education frames as learning grounded in the whole person—cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual (hooks, 1994; Miller, 2000). Mentorship becomes a site where political analysis and emotional regulation are taught together, often implicitly, through story and accompaniment.

For educators and institutions, this underscores that leadership development cannot be reduced to technical training or isolated workshops. If organizing is a living educational system, then mentorship is one of its primary methods of reproduction and renewal. Supporting intergenerational storytelling—through sustained relationship-building, protected time, and

trauma-informed practices—strengthens the system's capacity to adapt without abandoning its core values. In this sense, mentorship as storytelling is not an "extra" component of movement-building; it is part of the system's capacity to remember, to heal, and to evolve.

Implications for Educators, Organizers, and Institutions

The findings from this study invite educators, researchers, and organizers to take seriously the idea that community education is already happening—not as supplemental to organizing, but as central to it. Organizers are not only advocates or disruptors; they are teachers, learners, facilitators, and curriculum developers, working in the public square rather than the classroom.

For educators and institutions, this means rethinking the boundaries of where knowledge resides and who is qualified to teach it. Universities and funders seeking to support social justice work must move beyond content-driven, credential-focused models and toward relationship-driven, trust-centered collaborations. As one participant reflected, trust will not come from showing up with degrees or reports—it must be built through consistent presence, transparency, and humility.

For organizers, the findings suggest that naming the educational function of their work—and investing in the conditions that support sustainable learning—can be a form of power-building. Mentorship, storytelling, trauma-informed practice, and community-based research are not luxuries; they are essential capacities in living systems of change.

Lastly, for the field of holistic education, this study expands the terrain. It invites practitioners to look not only to schools or retreat centers but to neighborhoods, coalitions, and protest spaces as sites of learning and healing. These are places where people become more fully human through their participation in justice work—and where the future of education may already be unfolding.

Conclusion

The Listening Project affirms what many community organizers have long known: that organizing is not separate from education—it is education. More specifically, it is a form of holistic, relational, and embodied education that functions as a living system. Through the stories of Charlotte-based organizers, we see that learning happens not only in classrooms or workshops, but in the everyday work of building coalitions, holding grief, challenging power, and sustaining hope.

This research positions community organizing as a curriculum-in-motion—adaptive, emotional, intergenerational, and rooted in lived experience. Organizers are not only strategists or advocates, but also educators, historians, mentors, and healers. They transmit knowledge through storytelling, practice, reflection, and presence. Their pedagogy is not abstract but embodied; not top-down but emergent; not standardized but grounded in context and care.

Viewing community education through the lens of living systems theory reveals that it cannot be fully understood through linear models or institutional metrics. Like all living systems, it thrives on feedback, interconnection, and the quality of its internal relationships. Organizing communities learn from failure, adjust their

approaches, and regenerate their vision in the face of challenge. They hold space for multiple forms of intelligence—cognitive, somatic, spiritual, and cultural.

This research also highlights the importance of storytelling and participatory inquiry as both method and movement practice. Storytelling activated learning, surfaced patterns, and made visible the emotional and spiritual work often overlooked in social change discourse. Listening itself became a pedagogical act—a way of building trust, sharing power, and honoring community wisdom.

For educators, scholars, and institutions committed to justice, this study offers a clear invitation: to listen more deeply to what is already alive in our communities. Rather than importing prepackaged solutions, we must begin by asking: What knowledge already exists here? What wisdom is already being practiced in silence? What healing is needed before learning can begin?

For organizers, this work affirms the value of slowing down, telling stories, and building systems that can support the inner and outer work of transformation. Education in this context is not merely about information—it is about relationships, readiness, and the capacity to imagine something new together.

As adrienne maree brown reminds us, movements must be built not just to resist, but to transform—to cultivate conditions in which people and ideas can flourish. The findings from the Listening Project suggest that organizing is most powerful when it is practiced as a form of relational learning—a way of becoming more human, together.

In the end, the message is simple but profound: the system is alive, and it is speaking. If we want to understand it, we must be willing to stop, to listen, and to learn from within.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following advisors and supporters of the Listening Project, without whom this community based research would not have been possible:

Rabbi Dr. Judith Schindler

The authors extend special thanks to Judith Schindler for her generous support of the Listening Project. Rabbi Schindler sponsored the IRB proposal and played a critical role in securing the funding that made this work possible, including support for the research team. Her leadership and commitment to community-based inquiry were instrumental to the success of this project

Rev. Vahisha Hasan
James Lee III
Rev. Dr. Janet Mullins Garner
All community feedback session attendees and interview participants

References

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Christensen, J., Cox, C., & Szabo-Jones, L. (Eds.). (2018). *Activating the heart: Storytelling, knowledge sharing, and relationship*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press. https://doi.org/10.51644/9781771122207

Corbin, J., & Morse, J. M. (2003). The unstructured interactive interview: Issues of reciprocity and risks when dealing with sensitive topics. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9*(3), 335–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403009003001

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; 30th anniversary ed.).

Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

Gruenewald, D. A. (2008). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Environmental Education Research, 14*(3), 308–324. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620802193572

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.

Miller, J. G. (1978). *Living systems*. McGraw-Hill.

Miller, R. (2000). *Caring for new life: Essays on holistic education*. Foundation for Educational Renewal.

Minkler, M. (2005). Community-based research partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Urban Health, 82*(2 Suppl 2), ii3–ii12. https://doi.org/10.1093/jurban/jti034

Palmer, P., & Freimann, A. (2021). In conversation with Parker Palmer: The "flow of gratitude": Conversations with a "non-violent spiritual warrior." *Holistic Education Review, 1*(1). https://her.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/her/article/view/1179

Sandelowski, M. (1991). Telling stories: Narrative approaches in qualitative research. *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 23*(3), 161–166. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1547-5069.1991.tb00662.x

Stroh, D. P. (2015). *Systems thinking for social change: A practical guide to solving complex problems, avoiding unintended consequences, and achieving lasting results*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Suarez-Balcazar, Y. (2020). Meaningful engagement in research: Community residents as co-creators of knowledge. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 65*(3–4), 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12414

Author Bios

Laurita Ciceron is a Charlotte native and social researcher whose work centers on social policy, community organizing, and intersectionality. She served as principal investigator for The Listening Project.

Elizabeth Rogers is a feminist scholar and experienced community organizer who approaches power-based violence advocacy through a trauma-informed, intersectional, and equity-centered lens focused on community empowerment and justice.

Holly Roach is a scholar-activist at Queens University of Charlotte and co-facilitator of the Social Justice and Community Organizing (SJCO) Certification Program. She served as co-designer and researcher for The Listening Project, which helped inform the program's development.

The Social Justice and Community Organizing (SJCO) Certification Program at Queens University of Charlotte is a community-engaged initiative that prepares participants for grassroots organizing through participatory, equity-centered learning grounded in local organizing practice. The Listening Project helped inform the program's development and alignment with Charlotte's organizing ecosystem. More information is available at sjcocharlotte.org.