

**An Analysis of How K-12 Educational Experiences Affect
Black Women in Higher Education**



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ABSTRACT

The present thesis examines the K-12 educational experiences of Black undergraduate women to better inform education policy. Much of education literature on Black girls highlights disciplinary policies, disparate outcomes, or the influence of educators on their experience from researching Black girls. Yet, there is less of a focus on how Black women in higher education conceptualize their K-12 school experiences, which may offer further insight to practices that hinder or aid in positive school experiences for Black girls. Using semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method, this thesis explored the narratives of nine Black undergraduate women reflecting on their K-12 educational experience. Through an iterative inductive coding process, four themes emerged marking their common experiences: security in school environment, navigation of identity, structures of support, and quality of educator relationships & instruction. The findings highlight the permeation of antiblackness in educational environments, as well as how the women learn to navigate spaces and events as a result of their identity. The results also revealed how certain practices affirm Black girls and improve their educational landscape. I hope my findings contribute to comprehensive understandings of Black girls and transforms policy to create learning environments that are conducive to Black girl identities.

Keywords: Black women; Black girls; antiblackness; race and gender in education; K-12

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

My educational background as a Black girl in the U.S situates my schooling between two worlds: public education and private independent school. The experience from both worlds motivates my larger desire to study the educational outcomes and experiences of Black children. I come from a predominantly Black community where my school district ranks 23rd out of 25 districts in the State of Maryland. My parents, in search of a higher quality education, enrolled me in a program that served to dismantle barriers to entry by guiding Black and nonwhite students through the process of applying to and navigating life at private schools. Through this program we were extensively coached on how to act, what to wear, and what to say in preparation for the application process and eventual attendance at these schools. Once fully prepped, a series of visits and interviews at top Washington, DC, Maryland and Virginia (DMV) independent schools followed. At the time, I was unaware of the antiblack conditioning and principles of respectability that influenced my nature in these spaces and denied me the capacity to fully embrace my blackness.

Eventually I would attend one of the top 20 schools in the DMV area and commute over an hour away from my home for the entirety of high school. My school was a predominantly white college preparatory independent school that prided themselves on their commitment to social justice and progressive principles. I recall parting advice a mentor from the program gave me prior to my start, he said “never give them a reason to doubt your place there”. This was a coded message that called on me to suppress my blackness in a digestible manner to appease the white space I was preparing to enter. Coupling the grapple of leaving all my friends, my community, and everything I knew in pursuit of a better educational experience, with adjusting to a cultural

shift in pedagogy and environment was perplexing. I often questioned why my authentic self was never fully embraced or comfortable existing once I transitioned to the high school. While my high school broadened my perspective of what school could look and feel like through fundamentally progressive teaching, it also exposed me to the different ways antiblackness manifested in both worlds that I traversed throughout my schooling. In the public school environment, my body was heavily policed and I often felt targeted and held a fear of being targeted. Whereas being a Black girl at my independent school challenged my identity expression and tokenized me in a number of ways. Now, having more life experience, and knowledge from education classes at Brown, I can name and analyze my educational experience from both worlds and use that to inform the aim of this thesis.

While taking *History of School Discipline: School to Prison Pipeline* at Brown, my interest in the educational experiences of Black children began to focus heavily on the impact of school discipline. My final research paper focused on the disparities in school discipline of Black girls compared to white girls, and the invisibility of Black girls in discussions about the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) compared to Black boys. After writing my paper, I pondered on the various educational practices and disciplinary measures I encountered and avoided, and I pinpointed particular nuances that lead to differential treatment. For example, some dress codes do not consider how different bodies look in the same clothing which may lead to enforcers discriminating against Black girls for natural features typical to Black developing bodies. In reflecting on my disposition and awareness to the possibilities of punishment and discipline in school, I realized I often reduced myself to ensure I received positive recognition and feedback in both my private and public schools. And although schooling is about socialization, there are dominant conceptions of correct behavior that do not always consider how specific identities

may contend or be incapable of conforming to such notions which can lead to inadequate experiences. In school I went out of my way to be helpful to teachers, and I rarely pushed back on anything even when I felt I should have. Whereas I noticed some peers, Black girls specifically, that refused to police their tone and acquiesce to dominant forms of behavior, experienced antiblack practices from teachers in response to their natural disposition. While this is a specific example, it's important to note that this thesis understands student behavior and disposition exists on a spectrum, and not all responses to them are antiblack. With that being said, there are still many ways in which policies, responses, and the lack thereof towards students and their behavior have gone widely unrecognized for how their antiblackness affects students.

I. Research Questions

This thesis focuses on Black girl experiences with practices and discipline in educational spaces specifically in the United States; it explores how an understanding of their experiences can improve schooling for Black girls. I am particularly interested in how Black girls describe their experience in school and how the effects of their experiences manifest in their lives as college women. I seek to articulate those effects through an antiblackness lens and generate a discussion on measures that will counter them. With this in mind, this thesis will ask the following research questions:

- 1. How does K-12 educational experiences affect Black women in higher education?*
 - a. What types of experiences are common amongst Black girls and how do they contend with them in higher education?*
 - b. What measures work in opposition to address antiblack school practices and discipline towards Black girls?*

Research exploring race and gender in educational contexts has evidenced that Black girls receive inadequate support academically, socially, and psychologically in many schools

across the country.¹ Schools represent a critical site of development which contributes to lifelong trajectory, and Black girls are precariously situated with identities that push them to the margins in academic environments. One approach to understanding the implications of racial and gendered intersections in school experience is through an antiblack lens. Connie Wun recognizes that antiblack racism is an enduring practice that operates within US education, affecting policies, policy outcomes, and orchestrates the relationship between Black and non-Black people.² This thesis will utilize an anti-black lens to bolster analysis of experiences and offer insight into factors that inform certain experiences.

In recent years education policy focuses have attempted to bridge racial disparity gaps³, and existing work centering Black girls in education has focused on disproportionate rates in discipline and punishment. Yet, there is still a large gap in racial, cultural, and gendered awareness of how Black girls specifically navigate and achieve in school despite living with marginalized identities that may expose them to risk.

As stated, the extant research on Black girl school experiences is nascent. Education researchers are recognizing the ways Black girls are being harmed, pushed out, singled out, and discriminated against for subjective or minor offenses in school. A complex problem exist that involves a multitude of factors: teacher bias, misunderstanding Black girls, zero-tolerance policies, Black girl resistance to oppression, over-criminalization, representation, cultural ignorance, and more. Black girls navigate a unique position in American schooling by wielding their Black and girlhood identities along with facing further discrimination for their social class,

¹ Monique W Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

² Connie Wun, "Unaccounted Foundations: Black Girls, Anti-Black Racism, and Punishment in Schools," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (July 1, 2016): 737–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514560444>.

³ Rachel M. Perera, "Reforming School Discipline: What Works to Reduce Racial Inequalities?," accessed April 20, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/09/12/reforming-school-discipline-what-works-to-reduce-racial-inequalities/>.

ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, language diversity, and other social positionalities they hold. School environments exploit Black girl's vulnerability by disregarding the school's role in "reproducing, contributing to, and reinforcing currently existing racial and gender disparities in our nation."⁴ Venus E. Evans-Winters writes that education for Black girls serves as both a protective factor and a risk factor. The protective aspect represents conditions that improve their well-being and mitigate negative outcomes while the risk may cause negative life outcomes that threaten their health and well-being.⁵ In this thesis we will explore the different ways these factors impact the educational life of participants in the study.

Much work has been dedicated to combat discipline disparities for Black students overall and more recently Black girls. Given the continuing growth on this subject, I look to holistically expand the understanding of Black girl experiences to identify discursive ways Black girls are affected by schooling and how it shows up in their continual journey through higher education. Researchers have stated the lack of awareness on the challenges Black girls face perpetuates misconceptions about their ability, achievement, attitude, and overall existence.⁶ Identity formation and conception is important in dissecting nuance within Black girls' experience with education. Scholars note Black girls' experience with their identity is central to their construction of self, and an awareness of gendered and racial identities can impact the navigation of social and educational environments.⁷ To build upon existing work, this study draws on narrative accounts from Black undergraduate women, exploring how they describe and understand their

⁴ Ferlazzo and Evans-Winters, "Response: 'What Does It Mean to Be Young, Black, and Female in America?' (Opinion)."

⁵ Evans-Winters, "What Does It Mean to Be Young, Black?"

⁶ Dorinda J. Carter Andrews et al., "The Impossibility of Being 'Perfect and White': Black Girls' Racialized and Gendered Schooling Experiences," *American Educational Research Journal* 56, no. 6 (December 1, 2019): 2531–72, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219849392>.

⁷ Ashley N. Payne and Nicole M. West, "The (Re)Construction of Black Womanhood Among Black College Women at PWIs: A Hip Hop Feminism Model of Multiple Identities," *Journal of College Student Development* 63, no. 2 (2022): 168–84, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1353/csd.2022.0013>.

school experiences in racialized and gendered ways. The hope is to expand the conversation within communities of policy makers, stakeholders, educators, and advocates regarding efforts to create anti-racist school environments that consciously consider the effects of schooling on Black girls.

II. Description of Methods

To provide insight on the school experiences of Black girls', this study utilized qualitative research methods. The complex and vulnerable nature of conversations around race, gender, and school requires sensitivity and nuance for underlying messages when interpreting data, which called for a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 different Black undergraduate college women, reflecting on their school experience, each following the same semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B).

Directly hearing from Black women was a key component in answering the central questions of this thesis. The research population consisted of college women who identify as Black between the ages of 18-23 and have attended at least 2 years of K-12 schooling in the United States. Young Black women in college have most recently finished compulsory education and are in an ideal position to reflect on those experiences and speak to how they contest with their current positionality in higher educational spaces.

I ensured my sample included women who attended various colleges to reduce selection bias. To source participants, I utilized a flyer circulated on social media amongst my network, and the network of my peers to garner participants from different locations and schools. This presents both a shortcoming and a strength in my study. While participants were people who I had some form of a relationship with, and may present bias, they also felt very comfortable to

open up and honestly share their experiences. Data gathered from interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed through an iterative process using Nvivo20 software.

III. Thesis Contribution

When I initially decided to embark on this project, I knew I wanted to engage in work that would reflect my personal interest and background, but I was unsure of how to make that happen. Through speaking with Black women in my network, I engaged in a manner that would serve my community in an authentic way. I considered only interviewing Brown University students, but I wanted to amass a diverse array of experiences that may not be represented in the pool of students from Brown University. I also knew I wanted to make this project impactful beyond the scope of Brown University. With Black girls and women at the center of my research, I provided a platform for them to critically reflect, share their stories, and feel heard in a safe space with another Black women.

This research could improve the educational experiences for not only Black girls, but all students affected by discrimination and anti-black school practices. I hope to contribute to the literature in an impactful way that may help educators, policy makers, and Black women understand Black girls in a manner that influences transformative improvements to their educational journeys. Through speaking with these women, I identified new mechanisms for understanding Black girlhood and effective ways educators can navigate engaging with Black girls in educational spaces. Although participants may not benefit directly from the outcome of the thesis, they enjoyed reflecting and were pleased their stories and narratives were heard in research that may help future Black girls have better educational experiences.

IV. Chapter Overview

In the next, I conduct a historical overview of antiblackness and the iterations throughout education history by examining Black education in the US context beginning at slavery up to present day. In Chapter 3, I review the literature on Black girlhood studies, Black feminism, and Black girl education research to situate my work in the broader context of education research, specifically as it pertains to Black girls. In Chapter Four, I explain my research methods and present my findings through interview excerpt examples and explanations. Chapter Five goes on to analyze the responses through an antiblackness lens and situate them in conversation with the existing literature. To close, Chapter Six concludes and contextualizes my study, offering direction for further research and utilization of these findings.

CHAPTER 2: Historical Overview Of Antiracism

Contextualizing Antiracism and Black Education

I. Theorizing Antiracism

Antiracism as a social principle is the rendering of blackness and the Black subject as nonhuman. Historical conditions of slavery which positioned Black people outside of humanity and civil society are central to the foundations of antiracism theory. Michael Dumas summarizes scholars Frank Wilderson and Sadiya Hartman to interpret the connection between antiracism and slavery. He explains that while Black people are not currently enslaved, the very existence of Black people is visualized through slavery which is “how nonblack people – and particularly whites– assert their own right to freedom, and right to the consumption, destruction, and/or simple dismissal of the Black.”⁸ By scoping blackness in this way, we can understand how violence against the Black (Black people) becomes intrinsic ordinary occurrences. Put simply, the antiracism frame assumes that blackness is invariably perceived under the guise of slavery, thereby emboldening nonblack and Black people to issue comparable types of treatment Black people were subject to while enslaved. This continuity of the Black condition marked by slavery is embodied through current and historical US sociopolitical conditions such as Black codes, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, police brutality, and zero-tolerance policies. These institutional paradigms distinctly precipitate Black suffering and highlight how veiled shifts in the naming and output of antiracism do not surmount the immutable structural position of blackness as other than human, nonsubject, or nonhuman. Herein, I reject dominant regards to the emancipation of slavery as an ultimate marker of

⁸ Michael J. Dumas, “Against the Dark: Antiracism in Education Policy and Discourse,” *Theory Into Practice* 55, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 11–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2016.1116852>.

freedom and consider it merely a predecessor to the next volume of antiblack conditioning subjugating Black people.⁹ The transition from enslavement to ostensible freedom failed to define and substantiate Black people as human, evidenced by the nature of sociopolitical affairs which exacerbate conditions of slavery into the “afterlife of slavery”.

Sadiya Hartman introduces the concept of living in the afterlife of slavery which acknowledges the limits of emancipation for Black life. She explains,

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days... but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.¹⁰

The present day lived experiences of Black people rest on residual consequences of slavery. When state powers could no longer subjugate Black people through the institution of slavery, state strategies reconfigured to preserve the Black as a subordinate class, regardless of progressive expansions of rights and formal citizenship.¹¹ The racial calculus Hartman refers to in the quote above, socially positions the blackness in a deficit perspective and signals Black pain and suffering as inherent qualities of dehumanization. To be clear, I do not suggest that Black people are not sentient beings but simply resonate with the formulations of how blackness came to not be, in the US context. I conceptualize the non-human status outlined in antiblackness

⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth century America*. Oxford University Press. (1997).

¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother : A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

¹¹ João H. Costa Vargas, “Introduction:,” in *The Denial of Antiblackness*, Multiracial Redemption and Black Suffering (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 1–48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctv3zp0cg.4>; Hartman (1997).

theory, as a notion that bridges history with the present social condition of blackness, and in a literal way makes a statement about the treatment of Black people which are often seen as non-human. The main ideal conveyed through theorizing antiblackness is a reception of the impossibility of Black humanity. It's an acknowledgement that recognizes structural systems of dominance as inherently antiblack. The legacy of slavery has permanently made antiblackness an indestructible feature of American society and amplifies the violence of slavery within contemporary sanctions of "Black non/being as well as in [response to] Black modes of resistance."¹² Antiblackness is omnipresent in the sociopolitical schema of the US and establishes Black positionality which will help us underscore how Black girls are seen in the world and inside the educational landscape.

II. Historical Progression of Antiblackness in Education

In situating antiblackness in education, we look to the origin of the Black struggle for educational opportunity as a continual confrontation against antiblack ideologies and representations, lack of resources, and violence towards Black bodies. The history of Black education is an antagonistic one, starting out with education positioned as unlawful and a perilous venture to pursue.

The regulation of enslaved Black people's literacy and education stemmed from attempts to sustain an invariant disjointed relationship between blackness and humanity. Southern whites viewed Black education as a threat and feared that literate slaves would obtain freedom. A valid fear, considering literate slaves would go on to forge documents to gain their freedom. The Slave

¹² Chezare A. Warren, Dorinda J. Carter Andrews, and Terry K. Flennaugh, "Connection, Antiblackness, and Positive Relationships That (Re)Humanize Black Boys' Experience of School," *Teachers College Record* 124, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 111–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221086115>; Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake : On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13-14, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822373452>.

Code of 1740, sanctioning writing and other forms of illegal learning marked the first emergence of antiliteracy laws in the US. A specific type of slave code that prohibited enslaved Black people from learning how to read or write in any form. Antiliteracy laws were structural impediments to Black education and deemed Black education universal criminal activity in the South, where majority of the Black population dwelled prior to the Civil War. Sentiments from these laws seeped into hegemonic ideology and attempted to strip Black people from educational opportunity, even as the American common school—dedicated to training responsible citizenry—developed after the Revolutionary War. As a result, dominant notions of who a citizen could be were purely aligned with whiteness. Furthermore, the same antiblack ideology that justified slavery, justified deducing Black Americans to the outskirts of American society, meaning structural Black exclusion from schools and citizenship.¹³ However, it is not to be assumed that Black schools did not exist prior to Emancipation. On a small-scale, schools for free Black people were created in a few northern and southern cities such as (Baltimore, Boston, and New York), but even in these geographic educational anomalies, the schools were heavily surveilled. Although not fully prohibited by law in the North, Black education was still suppressed. Jarvis Givens depicts northern whites' opposition to Black education as a fear that “schools might attract unwanted Black migrants, instigate black political activism... especially when Black Americans sought entrance to white schools.”¹⁴ The proscriptions against Black education, both laws and law-like social customs, did not completely hinder Black people from pursuing education through subversive means irrespective of the violent threats they were up against.¹⁵ A

¹³ Jarvis R. Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2021), 27, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674259102>.

¹⁴ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 11.

¹⁵ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 11.

Virginia act passed in 1831 demonstrates the gravity of constraint and violence they faced, the act proclaimed,

that all meetings of free negroes or mulattoes, at any schoolhouse, church, meeting-house or other place for teaching them reading or writing...shall be deemed...as unlawful assembly...at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes.¹⁶

The criminalization and punishment of Black movement and gatherings even for educational purposes is a historical phenomenon that continues to persist today in alternative measures.

Givens names and theorizes Black persistence for education as “fugitive pedagogy”, defined as “the metanarrative of Black educational history. It is a social and rhetorical frame by which we might interpret Black Americans’ pursuit to enact humanizing and affirming practices of teaching and learning.”¹⁷ The widespread narrative that Black people saw education as freedom is the foundation that fugitive pedagogy builds upon. One of the most notable versions of fugitive pedagogy is Fredrick Douglas’s acquisition of knowledge through clandestine means in spite of his master’s regulations. He developed tactical approaches to learning which included writing in the margins of his master’s books, trading food for lessons, disguising lessons from white kids as games, and watching and copying people’s writing amongst other covert endeavors. Additional efforts towards Black learning were noticed during the Civil War in contraband camps, where the Union seized property to provide education along with helpful resources for escaped or newly freed slaves.¹⁸

¹⁶ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 28.

¹⁷ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 11.

¹⁸ Mathew Brady, “Contraband Schools,” *Docs Teach*, n.d., <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/contraband-school>.

By the end of the Civil War, the government established an act that would considerably contribute to the growth of Black education. The act of 1865 established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, later known as the Freedmen's Bureau. A program of Reconstruction to assist approximately four million newly freed Black Americans in the South, commissioned by General Oliver O. Howard. During the tenure of the Freedman's Bureau, notable progress was made for Black educational life which was an extension of educational strides initiated by the formerly enslaved themselves.¹⁹

In W.E.B Du Bois' essay on the Freedmen's Bureau, he argues that the emergence of free schools for negroes, and the education of approximately 150,000 children were some of the greatest successes of the federal program.²⁰ There were also white advocates for Black institutions of higher learning such as General Howard who founded Howard University and Samuel Armstrong who founded the Hampton Institute—contributing to the insurgence of more Black colleges and universities, known today as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Notwithstanding the aforementioned achievements, Black education was still subject to violence, white opposition, and antiblack ideology. Black education and the lives of Black people existed in a precarious state. In the days of the Freedmen's Bureau and long after, sites for Black education like schools and churches were consistently burned or bombed. Teachers were subject to various forms of social and state violence, including evictions, social isolation, and mobbing.²¹ While expanding opportunity for Black education held its benefits, white educational leaders like Armstrong explicitly advocated for an education solely focused on

¹⁹ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 32.

²⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Freedmen's Bureau* (University of Virginia Library ; NetLibrary, 1996).

²¹ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 32.

industrial and agricultural learning.²² They sought for Black people to adopt white respectability standards and conform while intentionally instilling messages of Black inferiority.²³ After Reconstruction, the Supreme Court mandated legal segregation by race in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, applying to schooling in both northern and southern states. This decision developed a doctrine of “separate but equal” by race, but up till present day, schools and facilities for Black students never reached equality.

Infamous for his many contributions to Black educational life, Carter G. Woodson was aware of the antiblack operation within schooling and critical of the ideological orientation of Black educators specifically. He was concerned with Black teachers being taught “from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by negroes of enslaved minds...Negro teachers...served no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do.” Woodson acknowledged this problem with intentions of giving rise to a new kind of teacher that would confront “cultural politics of white supremacy throughout dominant schooling” and attempt to operate outside white authority.²⁴ Woodson’s teachings aided in the realization that dominant forms of academic curricula paid no heed to Black history or culture and became a medium for inserting colonial violence. Thus, Black educators were forced to enact defiant cryptic practices to humanize Black students and advocate for social action of future generations. Woodson argues that through erasure of Black history and culture, the American curriculum takes on a share of responsibility in wrongly inspiring white students by fabricating a narrative that only centered their homogenous identity as sole proprietors for all facets of societal

²² Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 33.

²³ Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, 1st Africa World Press ed., Miseducation of the Negro. (Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 1990).

²⁴ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 173-177.

advancement. Here in, blackness is violently diminished and subjugated, demotivating Black students while white students are encouraged by the achievements of their ancestors. White students were taught to value themselves and their race. This construction of schooling and the effects were not happenstance, but structurally manufactured by people in power who negated blackness. Taken all together, we see how antiblackness was constructed in education and enlivened physical and structural assaults on Black life. Woodson pointedly asserted that “there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom.” Through education, white students were instructed to disregard blackness and associate blackness with nothingness.²⁵

Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, schooling would legally be segregated until the *Brown v Board* Supreme Court decision in 1954 which made racial segregation in schools unconstitutional. Leading up to this point, an abiding feature of American culture was the condemnation of Black Americans. They posed a perpetual threat “to a world order where notions of humanity and civil society were structured on and by black death”.²⁶ Education was never simply education for the sake of mental elevation, but education and teaching for Black people demanded more in opposition of antiblack education. What did more entail? From emancipation to the late twentieth century, more entailed Black literary societies in the north; secret home gatherings to educate the uneducated; the foundation of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History(ASNLH), American Negro Academy(ANA), and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); Black teachers crafting a surreptitious persona to be palatable for the white gaze, covert organizing of Black professors and students at HBCUs, creation of Black Studies as a discipline, burying and mourning Black

²⁵ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 95.

²⁶ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 231.

victims of lynching and school bombings, and many more movements and implementations to enforce Black humanity and worthiness in education and the broader society.²⁷ In all their efforts to reach racial equality and thereby equal education, the aftermath from legally desegregating schools heightened the danger Black students and families faced in attempts to better their education. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally upended all forms of racial segregation, *de facto* segregation, racial segregation not imposed by law but happens “by fact”, persisted through racial integration efforts for various amounts of time.²⁸

At six years old Ruby Bridges was the first Black student to integrate William Frantz Public School in New Orleans. She is one of many notable examples of Black students attempting to enter white schools but confronted with institutional and social antiblack violence.²⁹ On her first day of school, she was escorted by US Marshals and encountered hostile retaliation protest from white community members and parents. She completed her first-grade year alone because all the white parents withdrew their children from her class. Her story is significant to the struggle for equal Black education and the Civil Rights Movement, but not unique. Both college level and school aged children experienced violent forms of backlash to integration well past the legal mandate for segregated schools. Opposition to integration was prevalent amongst legislatures, school systems, and white communities. To avoid integration, local and state governments found rebellious ways to refuse federal desegregation mandates. For instance, in 1959 the school system in Prince Edward County Virginia shut down for five years rather than allowing Black children to attend their schools. Tax dollars which were also paid by

²⁷ Givens, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, 235.

²⁸ Harmeet Kaur, “What Is Busing? | CNN Politics,” accessed January 1, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/29/politics/what-is-busing-explainer-trnd/index.html>.

²⁹ White Citizens Council et al., “Brown v. Board at Fifty: ‘with an Even Hand’ The Aftermath,” Library of Congress, November 13, 2004, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-aftermath.html>.

Black residents went towards supporting new private schools exclusively for white students. These exclusionary actions, along with the issue of residential segregation and busing, amplified the matter of funding and resources for improving conditions of poorer schools. Lots of money was spent on busing Black students to integrate rather than dispersing resources to refine schools in their communities.

In discussing busing, a clear distinction must be made about the misconceptions of the proponent and opponent attitudes towards the initiative. Firstly, white opposition, although masked as this, was not merely white parents wanting their children to attend neighborhood schools or not take buses, but a direct resistance to integration. Buses to transport children to school were used long before official busing legislation to rectify segregation, and white Americans desire for racial homogeneity did not prevail their reverence for neighborhood schools.³⁰ While Black opposition criticized the practice for disregarding Black schools and not investing in their improvement, the busing era represents the most successful vie for desegregation in the south. Busing mandates shifted the landscape of schooling as a last resort after desegregation mandates barely conducted any change. Ten years after 1964, only 2% of Black children attended schools with white children. Yet, the federal enforcement of busing mandates drastically engendered positive results, by 1972 nearly half of Black children were attending predominantly white schools.³¹ Schools saw a reduction in test score gaps—the narrowest it's ever been to date—and increased resources for low-income Black children, but by 1988 desegregation peaked because white opposition outweighed the support of integration. Busing was the driver of integration and would not have been as successful if residential

³⁰ Nikole Hannah-Jones, "It Was Never About Busing," *The New York Times*, July 12, 2019, sec. Sunday Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/12/opinion/sunday/it-was-never-about-busing.html>.

³¹ Hannah-Jones, "It Was Never About Busing."

segregation was not directly confronted, largely hindering the possibility of Black and white kids attending the same schools. There was heavy opposition from the south, but even more so from white northerners because busing was instantly and effectively desegregating schools. Eventually, northern desegregation would cease as court orders that enforced integration were struck down and white northerners realized moving to white towns would easily help avoid integration.

With all the transformative and relative success comes pitfalls as well, busing placed Black students in danger because the gravity of white opposition. In Boston, Black students bused to white schools were beaten, called racial slurs, pelted with rocks, and forced to confront riots against them joining white schools. No matter the various efforts towards attaining education for Black people, there were always violent structured barriers to overcome that were built on the pretense of Black students meaninglessness and unworthiness to the institutions and people in power. While Black students shouldn't have to leave their neighborhood to receive a quality education, it's undeniable that in the U.S, the whiter the school the more resources. The busing mandates were fully abandoned in the early 1990s, and resegregation surged in every region of the US soon after. Today, southern schools are the least intensely segregated of any other region in the US, attributing to the massive progress busing made for desegregation. Yet nationally, schools are more segregated than they were before the period of busing mandates.³²

Throughout the busing era and lasting into the early 21st century, schools experienced a proliferation of zero-tolerance policies which paralleled the launch of the war on drugs and crime during the time. Zero-tolerance policies were intended to target violent or criminal activity such

³² Will McGrew, "U.S. School Segregation in the 21st Century - Equitable Growth," accessed February 14, 2023, https://equitablegrowth.org/research-paper/u-s-school-segregation-in-the-21st-century/?longform=true#trends_in_school_segregation_since_brown_v._board_of_education.

as assault or weapon possession. However, as implementation of policies evolved, school officials began enforcing severe punishments and discipline for subjective behaviors or minor offenses without any regard for student circumstance. Through the disproportionality in discipline and noticeable outcomes of Black students, it was clear white elite class standards, infixed with antiblackness, corner stoned the basis for school discipline and surveillance of Black children in schools.³³ Punishments and implementations like long-term suspensions, expulsions, and increased security measures correlated with decreased learning outcomes and were not found to effectively prevent student misbehavior and instead negatively impacted Black student outcomes. These policies were harmful to the education and livelihoods of Black youth and disproportionately targeted them, resulting in lower academic achievement rates, increased school dropout rates, and lowered enrollment to higher education.³⁴ In “(Un)doing Hegemony in Education”, Elon Dancy writes about how securing the right to exist in a space such as schools, does not guarantee the right to equitable treatment. Dancy’s message is salient to education research as a whole and this thesis in particular in that Black people have the same right to education as anyone else, but due to the entrenched antiblackness within US society and systems, equitable treatment will never be a given. Thus, there must be a call to understand the affect this has on students, and a progression towards minimizing the disparate treatment that may negatively affect them.

The existence of zero-tolerance policies leads to the phenomenon of the school to prison pipeline (STPP) , a national trend linking students experiencing harsher disciplinary measures to

³³ T. Elon Dancy, “(Un)Doing Hegemony in Education: Disrupting School-to-Prison Pipelines for Black Males,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 47, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 476–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2014.959271>.

³⁴ Emily Peterson, “Racial Inequality in Public School Discipline for Black Students in the United States,” Ballard Brief, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/racial-inequality-in-public-school-discipline-for-black-students-in-the-united-states>.

increased likelihood of contact with the juvenile and criminal justice system.³⁵ Through an acknowledgement of the STPP, more attention was brought to: disparities in school disciplinary policies, the presence of police officers in schools, and the harms of zero tolerance policies. Despite that, education research has advanced from using the school to prison pipeline narrative for its deficiency in holistically capturing the full culpability of harmful disciplinary policies. The narrative focused largely on how the STPP mainly impacted Black boys, and failed to consider the specific ways Black girls were affected. STPP framework also used race neutral language like students of color or urban youth which minimizes the unique experiences Black students have by conflating them with the experiences of non-black peers. The shortage of comprehensive analysis within the STPP framework in addressing disparities and impacts of school discipline detracts from the centrality of antiblackness to US society, institutions, policies, and practices.³⁶

In this section, we drew attention to the relationship between antiblackness and education through a historical overview of antiblack practices in education and how they can be understood as such. This does not cover all the instances of antiblackness within the educational sphere but provides a contextual understanding of its subsistence. With this in mind, we continue to the literature review to scope Black girls in the landscape of education.

³⁵ Dancy, “(Un)Doing Hegemony in Education: Disrupting School-to-Prison Pipelines for Black Males.”

³⁶ Connie Wun, “Schools As Sites of Antiblack Violence:,” in *Antiblackness*, ed. Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas (Duke University Press, 2021), 224–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1grbbwr.13>.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

Overview

Racial consciousness is continuously increasing in the United States climate, and over the past few decades issues regarding race within K-12 and postsecondary education discourse has garnered increasingly more attention. This focus has generated a vast body of scholarship devoted to understanding racial disparities in educational institutions, and the resulting negative outcomes affecting youth of color, but in particular Black boys. Some of these studies have applied critical race theory and other academic theories from the field of Black studies to analyze educational phenomenon and practices that have disproportionately impacted Black boys such as zero-tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, teacher bias, and the achievement gap. However, in recent years, education research has documented how the focus on Black boys has curtailed the exceptional ways educational experiences inflict harm and perpetuate violence against Black girls.³⁷ This awareness initiated formative studies on the unique positioning of Black girls in the educational landscape and utilizes antiblackness and Black feminist theories to frame how Black girls' intersecting identities mark them as structurally vulnerable. Black girl's structural vulnerability materializes through social, political, and economic forces that mutually place them at societal risk.

This chapter reviews literature on Black girlhood studies, Black feminist studies, and Black girl education research. The literature argues that antiblackness and the peculiarity of Black girlhood shape how school practices harm Black girls in violent ways. Drawing from Wun's study on Black girl's and school discipline, she argues that within an inherently antiblack

³⁷ Connie Wun, "Unaccounted Foundations: Black Girls, Anti-Black Racism, and Punishment in Schools," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (July 1, 2016): 737–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514560444>.

society, Black girls face constant punishment through state institutions. She contends their marginalization is often disregarded, subjecting them to various forms of violence.³⁸ Throughout this thesis, violence referenced against Black girls is not exclusive to physical forms, but understood as intersecting and layered forms of power that result in harm. In analyzing work from Sadiya Hartman, João Costa Vargas argues that Black women experience violence because of who they are structurally and defines violence as a state of terror that coexists with liberal laws, rights, and citizenship. Wun discusses how Black Feminists Scholars like Kimberlee Crenshaw link the centrality of violence on Black woman to the foundational base of the United States and its institutions. Scholars write that Black women are rarely seen as the subjects of violence but often characterized as the perpetrators of violence.³⁹ In this study, violence is defined as an intense and intentional force of power against a group, person, or other entity that is present through acts of omission or neglect, psychological harm, or deprivation. This violence The sanction of this violence and the forces that carry it out will be explored in the chapter.⁴⁰

Antiblackness in conjunction with Black girlhood illustrates the enduring existence of antiblack ideology in the US. The institution of education renders Black girls structurally vulnerable to harmful school practices without protection.⁴¹ This rooted context lays the foundation for my qualitative study of Black women in higher education reflecting on their educational experiences and shapes my argument. That is, as a result of the furtive nature of antiblackness in education, educational experiences inclusive of and beyond the bounds of discipline and punishment –including all forms of normative educational practices and policies–

³⁸ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations”.

³⁹ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations”.

⁴⁰ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations”.

⁴¹ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations”.

harmfully affect Black women's self-sense-making and critical consciousness as they continue navigating higher educational spaces.

Intersections of Gender in Understanding Antiblackness in Education

I. Deconstructing Dominant Narratives: Black Boys in Education Research

Education scholarship surrounding the relationship between Black boys and schooling has intrinsically created an association with prison, criminalization, and discipline. Statistics such as, Black boys having the highest suspension and dropout rates at the elementary and high school levels, do not paint the full picture of Black boys' frame in education, and without context contribute to a false narrative.⁴² Much work has been done to reveal the role that schools, policies, society, and other factors have on framing those associations in a manner that recognizes the root of problem is not Black boys themselves. Dancy notes that persistent social ills in the lives of young Black boys exposes them to harmful effects. In school environments, an absence of a critical understanding of how antiblackness works, can exacerbate the notion of Black boys as the problem. Especially when their response to an environment that reproduces the same racial and gender disparities seen throughout the nation is misunderstood and highly scrutinized. As previously discussed earlier in the chapter, antiblackness is an omnipresent force that directly affects the schooling experience of Black children.

Historically, Black children were units of enslaver's possessions and extensions of their mothers. They were exploited for abuse and labor, and Dancy relates this paradigm with

⁴² Dancy, "(Un)Doing Hegemony in Education: Disrupting School-to-Prison Pipelines for Black Males."

institutional surveillance, finding Black boys fully exploitable men in little bodies. After emancipation, antiblackness and white supremacy produced negative ideas of Black boys and men as a new way for society to understand a demographic that could no longer be legally controlled by another person.⁴³ Black children as a whole are susceptible to adultification⁴⁴, and most conceptions of Black boys stem from dominant conceptions of Black men within the US context.

Black boys are not afforded innocence and childlike status the way white boys are. Black boys are seen as young Black men in a society that views Black men as unteachable, troublemakers, menaces to society, and in an overall negative light with the exception of those who serve as a public benefit. When Black boys exhibit talent musically, athletically, or in any other entertainment sphere they are deemed conditionally acceptable to society. Educational settings mirror societal treatment of Black men, and often misconstrue and trouble Black boys with perceptions of Black men that assume mal-intent and carry negative connotations. Careless childlike behavior is interpreted as willful, destructive, or irrational when Black boys are involved because systems of oppression deny Black males the benefit of the doubt.

Black boys are also more likely to be labeled as mentally deficient or placed in special education classes which stems from further misunderstanding of Black boys, additionally setting those back who were not accurately evaluated to begin with. While Black boys may engage in behaviors that contribute to their underachievement, they are also funneled into limiting and marginal roles and more likely to be discouraged by adults who should instead distribute

⁴³ Dancy, “(Un)Doing Hegemony in Education: Disrupting School-to-Prison Pipelines for Black Males.”

⁴⁴ Adultification represents the interpretation of childhood transgressions as sinister, intentional, and fully conscious in the way one would classify adult actions and strips the perception of innocence typically extended to children.

supportive structures.⁴⁵ Education research has brought to light the antiblackness within practices and trends that lead to troubling Black boys and continues to build an understanding of how best to serve them in schools. Black girls are still a population of students that needs even further understanding and research. Next, we will explore the current literature surrounding Black girls and their realities in educational environments.

II. Introducing Black Girlhood Studies

Black girlhood studies (BGHS) is a methodology grounded in Black feminist praxis but goes further to uncover the lives of Black girls in places where many academic disciplines render their bodies nonexistent. BGHS is a safe haven for Black girl perspectives, sensibilities, and experiences.⁴⁶ It emphasizes giving Black girls agency to know themselves, share what they know, and empowers the creation of new knowledge about Black girls. Research within BGHS incorporates methods that focus on meaning making and negotiation between their imagined selves and constructed realities, and it positions Black girls as experts in this discipline. This section outlines how BGHS literature interrogates the political identity of Black girls, addresses societal (mis)representations, and offers generative frames for reimagining Black girlhood. This will be important for our later discussion and analyzation of findings from the research study.

Hegemonic society pins specific stereotypes and categorizations on Black girls, however BGHS challenges these to account for the variability and complexity of Black girlhood. Ruth Nicole Brown explores the binary of silence or sassy for Black girl branding and emphasizes that BGHS challenges these dominant categorizations and organizes a new frame that accounts for

⁴⁵ Dancy, “(Un)Doing Hegemony in Education: Disrupting School-to-Prison Pipelines for Black Males.”

⁴⁶ Amoni Thompson-Jones, “The Politics of Black Girlhood and a Ratchet Imagery” *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (Toronto ; Women’s Press, an imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019): 81-101.

differences and bolsters Black girls critical thought. Both brands share in common a misunderstood response when Black girls subscribe to them, and they encourage white supremacist and heteropatriarchy. On silence, she argues that some Black girls are taught to be unseen and silent whether self-imposed or enforced because when Black girls do speak, they aren't heard. Sassiness is notably displeasing to authority figures because it's a resistant trait that is stylistically bold, courageous in demeanor, and tonally expressive. It's used concurrently with negative monikers like ghetto or loud to describe Black girls.⁴⁷ This binary, sassy or silent, limits personhood and erases the range of different ways of being for Black girlhood. Overcoming these binding categories means curating a new frame of perceiving Black girls.

Black girls exist in a society that strips their agency, dehumanizes, hypersexualizes, masculinizes, oppresses, and adultifies their bodies. Adultification is a racial prejudice where Black youth are perceived by adults to be more mature, older, and less innocent than they actually are in comparison to their white peers. Therefore, Black girls are less likely to be considered victims which harmfully warrants punishment and violence. Living as a Black girl equates to forced contention with the politics of one's identity and stifling of their voice at a very young age. Yet, Black girls are depicted as deviant by society without interrogating why this notion is preserved. Their longing for freedom to embrace a girlhood that is unaligned with binary notions of white gender normativity produces acts of resistance to practices that enforce respectability and gender normativity. BGHS investigates how embracing authentic Black girlhood, interpreted as resistance to social constructs of femininity and appropriate comportment, results in social consequence.⁴⁸ It archives a wider repertoire of how Black girls

⁴⁷ Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Dissident Feminisms (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.5406/j.ctt3fh5xc>.

⁴⁸ Thompson-Jones, "The Politics of Black Girlhood".

are heard and seen with an aim to affirm them and acknowledge the dissension with their performance of self without antiblack prescription.

Ruth Nicole Brown tackles formulating a frame of organizing Black girlhood that critically engages with how Black girls are structured by governing institutions and larger sociopolitical systems. She institutes the ‘creative potential of Black girlhood’ as a “double referent for the articulation of Black girls’ expressiveness, style, and sound to mean movement that accounts for difference and also highlights what is possible when Black girlhood operates as an organizing construct, not as a static category of identity.”⁴⁹ Through the frame she calls for any engagement with Black girls to move beyond antagonistic conceptions such as sassy or silent and transition to emancipatory practices that inspire different movements and comprehensions of Black girls. She analyzes three logics under this framework—volume/oppression, swag/surveillance, and booty/capitalism— to clarify how restrictive categorizations don’t function in service to Black girls. Her utilization of music made by Black girls places sound at the axis of the frame and addresses how the creativity amongst Black girls informs BGHS.

The first logic, volume/oppression, touches on previously mentioned ideas about pronouncing Black girls as loud and further articulates how that pronouncement, when in a group setting as opposed to isolated, is predicated on a negative (de)valuation of unified Black girls and positively affirms Black girls alone. Policing volume can be viewed as a control mechanism that oppressively minimizes sound and breeds hostile environments where loudness is punishable. The second logic, swag/surveillance, describes the performance of confidence, style, and expressiveness through gender and race. Black girls recognize the everlasting surveillance on

⁴⁹ Brown, *Hear Our Truths*, 188.

them, and in resistance Black girl swag is implemented, placing the agency in their hands to decide when they want to remain unseen and hidden from view. The final logic, booty/capitalism, recognizes how popular culture sells Black girl bodies as the blueprint and the ideal body type, yet they reap none of the constructed benefits. Instead, through maneuvering space in a Black girl body, they receive inequitable and unfair treatment.

Brown resists framing Black girl identities on sameness, and declares they are armed with abilities to navigate societal contexts that impose binaries on them. Here, the value of Black girl expression is priceless and directly resists white supremacist and heteropatriarchal norms that seek to subjugate Black girls. BGHS in practice serves to uplift Black girl narratives and voices while creating an autonomous space for them to experience joy amid enduring harm experienced in schools and society.

III. Synthesizing Black Feminist Studies with Black Girlhood Studies

The core of this thesis requires us to listen and learn from the narratives of young Black women who are uniquely positioned in a period of transition from girlhood to adulthood. To balance these life stages and understand how the participants are oriented in this work, we will build a connective tissue for interpreting Black feminist scholarship with Black girlhood studies.

Black feminism is a radical practice that works to reveal oppression Black women face by evaluating how their gender and race influence economic, political, and societal issues. To focus on oppression and exploitation of Black women, Black feminism recognizes Black knowledge and experience as a legitimate measure of identifying oppressive structures. This practice is a form of resistance that incorporates multi-dimensional approaches to liberation. It has three grounding principles: Black women's experience of racism, sexism, classism, are

inseparable, their needs and perspective are distinctly different from Black men and white women, and there is no contradiction between the struggle against racism, sexism, and all other isms— they must be addressed simultaneously.⁵⁰ It's important to note that there are many visions within the umbrella of feminism, but Black feminism distinguishes itself from other feminist projects that do not articulate the indivisibility of race and gender.

While Black feminist scholarship has made innumerable strides for making visible the political identity of Black women, it's fallen short in terms of including Black girls in its scope in a non-homogenizing way. In discussion, Black girls are often looped in with discourse around adult Black women rather than observed as their own identity. While they face similar struggles, grouping them together runs the risks of perpetuating ageism and adultification on Black girls.⁵¹ BGHS calls for an expansive understanding of Black girls whereas Black feminism tends to over-essentialize their realities. Ashley Smith walks through the issue of utilizing tropes that are associated for adult Black women on Black girls. There are three traditional reductive stereotypes of Black woman: the Jezebel, the portrayal of Black woman as hypersexual; the Sapphire, the sassy, angry, and loud Black woman; and the Mammy, submissive maid who puts the needs of others before her own. But when applied to Black girls who also experience oversexualization and negative stereotypes because of their blackness, Black feminism overlooks and limits our understanding of how Black girlhood becomes characterized as deviant, aggressive, and sassy. Smith references the story of a 6 year old Black girl arrested for having a temper tantrum in school which is typically normal childlike behavior, but notes a particularity

⁵⁰ Max Peterson, "The Revolutionary Practice of Black Feminisms," March 4, 2019.

⁵¹ Ashley L. Smith, "Theorizing Black Girlhood" *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* (Toronto ; Women's Press, an imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019): 21-43.

amongst Black girls that warrants this type of response.⁵² This treatment is not only attributed to associations with tropes, but additionally “exacerbates the ways in which they maintain a non/child position in schools and society due to their blackness.”⁵³ Smith indicates that the tethering between Black girlhood and punitive dehumanizing actions is validated in ways that are inconceivable for white girls of the same age.⁵⁴ Therein lies the importance of employing both Black feminism and BGHS to provide an intersectional lens that helps uncover specific forms of Black girl antiblackness and ensure Black girls are viewed as children. Black feminism encourages the notion that Black girls are not entitled to their youthfulness or childlike innocence, and without BGHS we wouldn’t have the critical space needed to interrogate situations such as a six-year-old criminalized for a childlike tantrum.⁵⁵

Black feminism is the foundation that BGHS builds and expands on to allow for an exploratory path that helps decipher how Black girls, who will eventually progress to adulthood, navigate inevitable injustices and antiblackness from society. BGHS also opens the door for adult Black women to reclaim and reflect on their own journeys of Black girlhood in new ways that give their inner-child healing, agency, and creativity.⁵⁶ Identifying the breadth of subjection towards Black women and girls is a major component of these academic disciplines, but another essential piece is the culmination of a safe space that hands them the pen and demands for Black girl reimaging, redefining, healing, imagination, creation, and expression in ways that are

⁵² Smith, “Theorizing Black Girlhood”, 34.

⁵³ Smith, “Theorizing Black Girlhood”, 34.

⁵⁴ Smith, “Theorizing Black Girlhood”, 34.

⁵⁵ Smith, “Theorizing Black Girlhood”, 34-35.

⁵⁶ Smith, “Theorizing Black Girlhood”, 34-35.

affirming, resistant, and positive. With these frameworks, we will be able to examine how Black girlhood survives misunderstandings and structural impediments in the education realm.

IV. *Situating Black Girlhood in Education*

In growing research interrogating Black girls' educational experience, Black girls are highlighting how educators and schools harmfully impact their experiences. In Savannah Shangé's book, *Progressive Dystopia*, her ethnographic research explores how a school marginalizes its Black students while simultaneously pursuing strategies that uplift multiracialism. She delineates the experiences of non-Black students versus Black students and highlights the ways the school fails the Black students in a space predicated on antiblackness.⁵⁷

Here, I utilize her work as an exposition of Black girlhood to decipher how Black girls are perceived and perceive themselves, and to provide a frame around the antiblack treatment of Black girls in educational spaces. Shangé outlines her framework *Black girl ordinary* as "that which signifies on (but does not conform) normative notions of gender through a performative blackness shaped by hip-hop, social media, and conspicuous consumption: it is a mode of queer(ed) disidentification"⁵⁸ In this sense, ordinary is not interpreted as traditional but evokes a new meaning. It's a type of ordinary that's extraordinary to the dominant condition of blackness intersected with gender. An aphorism often preached within the Black community is that you have to work twice as hard to get half as much. However, *Black girl ordinary* works against this notion and recognizes that Black girls can be exceptional without being exceptional. Put another way, the hegemonic and often conforming ways Black girls are realized as potentially human and worthy of success is not a precept in this framework. Under *Black girl ordinary*, Black girls

⁵⁷ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602>.

⁵⁸ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602>.

can simply be— exist without conforming or overexerting. They can receive affirmation and praise for nonconformity and exceptionalism in an ordinary way. The framework also gives consciousness to forces that work against the possibility of living and succeeding in an ordinary way, namely “housing precarity, misogynoir, police terror, street violence, and the grinding disorientation of having-been-a-slave.”⁵⁹

Black girl ordinary is placed in direct opposition to *Black boy special*, an esteemed urgent endeavor that expresses deep concern for the fate of Black men.⁶⁰ Shangé locates this concern stems from the hyper incarceration of Black men. Through conducting a case study at a progressive social justice focused public school in San Francisco, she finds their approach to *Black boy special* advertently turns a blind eye to the antiblack perceptions and outcomes of Black girls at the school. Shangé describes the treatment of Black girls and their outcomes in this case as laissez-faire, indicating a blithe attitude that disregards the potential for intervention to remediate the nearly equal outcomes (number of graduates) of Black girls and Black boys at the school. Black girls are held to a higher standard, and Shangé poses the question “when ‘folks don’t know how to deal’ what do they do?”⁶¹ As a direct result of educators not knowing what to do with Black girls, Black girls are seldom offered support regardless of the need. Instead, they get disregarded, harmed, and pushed out without consideration or reparation for practices. To be Black and a girl or woman is to be misunderstood in a way that does not extend grace, sensitivity, or consideration for those forces working against living in the ordinary way.

⁵⁹ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602> 99.

⁶⁰ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602>.

⁶¹ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602> 102.

As stated above, Black girls are misunderstood and perceptions of femininity represent a significant factor as to why: black femininity remains undefined under the guise of the hegemonic portrayal of white femininity. Despite Black girls' history of ungendering, institutional powers place the onus on Black girls to reconcile with femininity that is opposed to Black being. Their natural Black refusal to Eurocentric femininity does not provide clearance for disciplinary action when Black girls are unable to conform.

Disobedience, through the lens of subjective educators, is coded language for the student's failure to conform to dominant gender stereotypes.⁶² Undeterred by the negative connotation placed on Black girls' femininity, a survey conducted by the National Women's Law Center found Black girls are more likely than any other racial groups to see themselves as leaders.⁶³ This illuminates the advantages of Black girlhood and the positive self-perceptions of Black girls despite negatively deemed qualities placed on them by society such as assertiveness, a quality often punishable in educational context. Black girls in particular receive scrutiny for their 'muchness'—unabashed expressions of their Black girlhood that proudly take up space. Literature on the study of Black girls in education finds that Black girls' assertion and tone of voice are depicted as "unladylike and deviant".⁶⁴ Black girls continue to be affected by the stigma of participating in exertions of identity that marginalize them. Their blackness and girlhood can no longer be observed through an exclusive view of femininity created by white hegemonic standards, and the societal condemnation of specific Black girl expressions of self is a form of antiblackness.

⁶² Hamida Hussein Hassan and Vernon Brooks Carter, "Black and White Female Disproportional Discipline K–12," *Education and Urban Society* 53, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 23–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124520915571>.

⁶³ Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, Kayla Patrick, and Neena Chaudhry, "Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls of Color" (National Women's Law Center, 2017).

⁶⁴ Savannah Shange, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602>.

Black girls have also historically been neglected in research surrounding education policy that contends with antiblackness experiences in school. Shangé conceptualizes carceral progressivism as the contradiction between social reform targeted at reducing the inequities in communities of color, and the perpetuation of antiblack racism in striving to combat the inequities.⁶⁵ In contemporary educational reform and social justice activism, the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) phenomenon is something policymakers, educators, and activists work hard to eliminate. The STPP worked as seminal framework to transform school policies and the practice of discipline in schools to reduce the disproportionate incarceration rate of marginalized youth and young adults. Yet, the notion of schools as the adversary to prisons presents a reductive dichotomy that reinforces antiblack racism when enforcing discipline and school practices. The STPP framework also offers another limitation in its focus on saving Black boys. Black girls do not fit the narrative of STPP en masse as Black boys do because of the variant ways Black girls behave at the nexus of blackness and girlhood. Black girls are often targeted for attitude or tone of voice, and STPP does not provide space for the different pathways Black girls and Black boys take to incarceration.

Adhere to the ways this chapter has exemplified how Black girls are disposable and considered an afterthought even in progressive attempts to address antiblackness in schools. For this reason, Black girls deserve extensive observation and research from a theoretical antiblackness lens on the ways school environments and their stakeholders interact with them and impose harm that reinforces Black girl suffering. Black girls' antiblack experiences in schools has gone unnamed and unaddressed in policymaking attempts to ameliorate adverse

⁶⁵ Savannah Shangé, *Progressive Dystopia* (Duke University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw602>.

school experiences and trajectories. While there is a substantial body of research on racial disparities and institutional policies on school discipline, this research opens the door to new understandings of Black girl experiences in education and how they affect their lives as women in higher education. The broader focus of gaining a holistic perception of experiences—inclusive to discipline and quotidian school operations effects on Black girls—lays the foundation for lucrative and effective education policy work to fully consider Black girls in their policymaking decisions. Through creating an understanding of how antiblackness exists in educational spaces for Black girls, we can utilize the framework in analyzing the narratives of Black girl experiences in school.

CHAPTER 4: Research Methods And Results

Methods

The research design in this study was a qualitative approach that utilized semi-structured interviewing as the primary method of data collection. The interviews offered key insight into the experiences Black girls have in education and how they carry over to inform their current college experience.

I. Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for the study participants needed to be between the ages of 18-23 and currently enrolled in college as undergraduate students. They needed to identify as Black woman and have attended at least 2 years of K-12 education in the US. School type was not a criteria factor, as long as they attended school in the states participants were eligible.

II. Recruitment

To locate study participants, I utilized my personal network and social media as primary sampling strategies. A flyer detailing the nature of the research and eligibility criteria was created and circulated throughout the network. I along with friends and family shared the flyer on our personal social media networks. A google calendar form was created for interview scheduling and interested students who met eligibility criteria were instructed via the flyer to reach out to me for more information or automatically follow the link to schedule an interview. Within the form, participants also had access to a document that outlined their agreement to participate in the study and their auto

III. Participants

The sample included nine Black women between the ages of 18-23 years with a median participant age of 20 years. The women were all enrolled in college at the time of interviewing,

seven attended predominantly white institutions, and two women attended HBCUs. At the time of data collection, two women were in their first year of undergrad, two were their third year of undergrad, four were in their fourth year of undergrad, and one was in their fifth year. Ethnically, five women identified as a first-generation Americans and four as African-Americans. Self-reported social class revealed that four women were from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and five were from middle-class backgrounds. The women were in a range education discipline including Public Health, Communications, and Criminal Studies. See table below for participant demographic breakdown.

IV. Procedures

Fifteen women scheduled interviews (six women canceled), and nine interviews were completed between December 2022 and February 2023. Each women had the option to choose their interview location, either in person or zoom. Five interviews were held over zoom, and four interviews were held in person at a quiet and safe location. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The women were informed interviews would be recorded, and only accessed by me, and they would remain anonymous for the study.

V. Interview Protocol

I collected the narrative data using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B). The protocol included a set list of questions as well as supplemental questions that could be asked based on the flow and direction of the conversation. Utilizing a semi-structured method allowed for reliable data collection, while also opening space for the women to steer the conversation and provide opportunity for new understandings with additional questions.

Each interview consisted of five sections. The first section he section served as a demographic introduction and introduction into their educational experience. The second section

focused on interpersonal relationships the women had in school. The third section touched on culture and community. The fourth section focused on school discipline culture. The last section focused the women's higher education experience. Participants responses included contextual insights about their upbringing and socialization influences from parents, school, peers, family, and media. Relevant interview questions included, "Did your identity as a Black girl influence how you navigated spaces at school?" and "How were you treated by teachers and peers at school?" Based on responses, I probed about in-depth experiences by asking questions like, "Did you feel affirmed? What made you feel affirmed?" Many women focused more heavily on high school experiences, however, both middle and elementary school experiences were also discussed by all women.

VI. Limitations

I recognize that my identity as a Black woman influences the outcome of the research and may increase bias. An additional limitation in this study is the population of interview participants. The target population excludes the experiences of Black women who did not attend college immediately after high school or at all. Additionally, working with Black women as opposed to Black girls presents a limitation that could possibly offer less applicability for K-12 education because education is always evolving. However, hearing from Black women is more conducive to this study because of their robust reflections about experiences which current K-12 students may not have been able to offer. Their narratives also offer insight into how K-12 experiences inform higher education experiences as a Black woman which is of interest to the study.

Only nine women were interviewed which decreases the external validity of the study. External validity represents the ability of findings in this study to be applicable to other

situations. To increase external validity, the sample includes women from diverse backgrounds and different schools.

VII. Coding Analysis Process

The recorded interviews and transcriptions were imported into NVivo 20, a qualitative data analysis software program. The utilization of this software enhanced my ability to code and analyze the data. NVivo contains features that help identify trends, patterns, and various themes within the data. Although the interviews were guided with specific questions around educational experience, I used an inductive coding method. This means all coding categorizations were derived from the data itself and not predetermined.

A three-step coding process was used to analyze interview data. In the first stage, every word of each transcript was coded into themes. The second stage consisted of identifying the most occurring codes, sorting and conceptualizing the data, and highlighting data that addressed the research questions. In the last stage, major concepts were decided by identifying links between categories so final themes could emerge.

Results

I. Analytical Themes

The research question and supplemental questions of the study are as follows: How does K-12 educational experiences impact Black girls? *What types of experiences are common amongst Black girls and how do they contend with them in higher education? What measures work in opposition to address antiblack school practices and discipline towards Black girls?* Data analysis of responses from all women in this study revealed four overarching themes—***security in school environment***, where women described challenges regarding physical, mental

and emotional safety along with affirmative approaches that provided security; *navigation of identity*, with an emphasis on identity formation and issues maneuvering school due to identity; *structures of support*, which detailed confronting mental health, accessibility to safe spaces and resources, and matters of visibility or invisibility; *quality of educator relationships and instruction*, which focused on the impact of representation, academic confidence, and formative or adverse relationships. Below, I use illustrative excerpts, to offer insight into the specific ways educational experiences manifest among Black girls. Though these themes help guide the understanding of the data, they are in no way rigid, and instead very fluid and overlapping with one another. To review the coding themes, sub-categories, and example excerpts, see Tables 2-5.

II. Security in School Environment

Table 2. Summary of security in school environment.

Security in School Environment	
Sub-Theme	Excerpt
Unfair treatment (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances when the women recognized disparities in the enforcement of rules and differential treatment based on race, academic performance, physical presentation, or language/tone.	“I definitely noticed that sometimes certain people would get their phone taken all the time, while other people were blatantly on their phone while a teacher would walk by, and I’m like—how did you miss everyone’s phone except for mine...It definitely was like disproportionate amongst Black kids who would get [disciplined]...It turned into a new regrouping function.” (Tori, 4 th year)
Welcoming & affirming practices (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances when the women felt welcomed and affirmed by people and school practices.	“So, a lot of my schooling and elementary school was with Black teachers, which was very helpful in a way of just like representation. Having, your main teacher, that you come to every single day—to learn your main math and literature type of situation—look like you and talk to you, the way that your mom kind of does, in a similar dialect or vernacular is so welcoming and makes school exciting because you feel like you could still be yourself and cut up a little bit.” (Ellie, 4 th year)

A. Unfair Treatment (n=8, 88.9%)

The women in this study most attached security in their school environment to unfair treatment carried out through disparate enforcement of policies, practices, and discipline. Eight out of nine women in the study discussed how they experienced and witnessed differential treatment by race with confounding factors like academic performance, physical presentation, and language and tone, which was revealed by the way situations with were handled. Ellie, a 4th African American student, shared:

The adultification of Black boys and the hyper sexualization of Black girls is crazy. Because why the hell we couldn't wear leggings in middle school, I have no idea. It's like, as a person who's been thick since like fifth grade, I've had the same body type literally the entire time. So, it's like regardless of if I wear a dress, a skirt, pants, a burka, a hijab, like the ass is not going anywhere. It's always going to be there. It's going to stay. And the fact that you are making 11, 12, 13, 14-year old's cover their bottoms. Who's looking, like? And also, the fact that you want to police Black girls 10 times before you want to police white girls because they don't have the same body.

As Ellie reflected on her middle school experience with dress codes, she underscored the racial inequality and adultification that occurs in executing dress code policies on Black girls. For her, recounting on the experience called attention to the larger societal issue of hypersexualizing Black girls. Ellie also experienced racialized dress codes in high school, she said:

In high school, when you are banning durags and bonnets, who's that targeted to? And why is the bonnet or a durag bothering you? Maybe their hair is not done, and they think they are going to get bullied at school. Do we ever think about that? Especially when you get to the real world. And no one gives a fuck? That's why it's crazy, you can wear and do whatever you want to do in college. I think with the adultification of Black boys and hyper sexualization of Black girls, something needs to be said about it within our school systems.

Ellie's sentiment describes how a school policy was created specifically to target Black students. She made a point about the potential of bullying because of this policy, an oversight displaying their failure in considering the meaning behind it and how it could affect students, particularly Black ones. Other women under this sub-category perceived disparities in the way teachers interacted with them. Reign, a 1st year Malian American student, detailed her personal encounters, stating:

In academic spaces, sometimes I would get looks from white teachers, and then I would speak, and things would change. The idea that you perceived me one way and now things are different. And also, I noticed the difference between sometimes when I'm dressed in street fashion versus an outfit like now— kind of loose and flowery. They treated me unfairly but in the opposite direction because you know, the soft voice. They would like often take me as like, "she's so cute, so adorable" and often times it kind of feels like, you're like a pet for their entertainment when you're perceived that way.

Reign's experience highlights how projected perceptions of what blackness looks like can make girls feel dehumanized regardless of how they present. By stating they treated her unfairly in the opposite direction, she implied that Black girls are typically treated unfairly for presenting in a more contrasting way than how she does. Earlier in the interview she talked about the dynamics in the treatment of Black students in her school environment:

Teachers would group the Black students into good Black students and bad Black students, and often times some of the good Black students would be IB students. You would know just in the way that you were treated or talked to, that you were seen as different or profiled differently from other students. With other black girls, especially the ones who had hoops or hair slicked back in a bun and deeper voices, they would be the ones who security would be more aggressive towards, than to me. We definitely noticed we got profiled and put into boxes of like, "I'm going to treat this one nicely because this one is in the box of good not bad Black students."

The experience of targeted treatment was salient amongst women in the study. Although Reign garnered seemingly more positive attention based on the box she was placed in, the delineation negatively impacted her and exasperated her discomfort and unsafe feeling at the school. In a

different vein, Nicole, a 3rd year student, shared a more internal fear which brought her discomfort and insecurity in her educational space, she said:

I feel like I had to make an extra effort to make sure to not seem like I was a bad student, and I like I was always like a really quiet and respectful student, but I remember always having to consciously make sure that they kind of watched me be quiet and like respectful and stuff, because I was always scared of running the risk that they would think otherwise. I always had in the back of my head that people were going to assume certain things, and I'm going to get in trouble for things I didn't do.

Nicole did not want to become a target and felt she had to navigate the classroom cautiously and out of fear which resulted from the school environment that was created for her. Each of these narratives about the various types of treatment they received as Black girls, influenced the nature of physical, mental, and emotional security they had in school.

B. Welcoming & Affirming Practices (n=8, 88.9%)

Most of the women in the study discussed experiences where they felt affirmed and welcomed as a result of educators, school culture, and community. In this sub-category, eight out of nine of the women referenced representation or Black teachers as the source of their affirmative feelings. Sierra, a 5th-year Congolese American student, attended racially diverse public schools her entire life and speaking on her experience she said:

My schools are very diverse in color, so I never really had an issue of feeling like I was an outsider, I think. Being in such a like minority filled community in the sense... I feel like any differences I felt I had was outside of my skin color, like outside of my race, outside of my culture, outside of anything. So, I feel like anything that I was really dealing with was just outside of what I feel like the outside world would put on me. Yeah. With that, I mean, I think that played a role into me going to an HBCU.

Sierra's story demonstrates the power of diverse spaces in feeling welcomed and secure.

She mentioned the diverse school community as an influencer in her decision to attend an HBCU. Black girls in the study expressed feelings of empowerment and joy when they were

involved in instances or a community that uplifted and acknowledged their presence and identity. Other women in the study who attended predominantly white institutions or less diverse schools also expressed how they felt affirmed in alternative ways, Tori, a 4th year fourth year Liberian Haitian American student, said:

I think there was definitely times for both like playing sports and stuff like that, I definitely felt affirmed a lot of the time. Just because I played forever and like everyone in my grade knew like that was my sport, and I played like on the teams, like all the teams there. And I didn't really feel like I had to, do too much, or think too much about like race, or any other like prejudices or biases because my coach, she was not racist or prejudice in any way really. I think it was definitely more like in the academic setting.

Here Tori emphasizes how a space outside of an academic setting made her feel affirmed, overlapping with another sub-category, *accessibility to extra-curricular activities*, we explore later. She highlighted how because her coach treated everyone fairly and respectfully, she felt comfortable and did not have to worry about how her identity played a role in enjoying and being in that space.

Another source of affirmation for many women in the study was their experience with Black teachers. The women often expressed happy and enjoyable memories when recounting experiences with Black teachers they've had, Reign shared:

All the black woman teachers I had were very supportive and always very affectionate. I think it also came from a place of knowing that not all students would be able to have that at home because the area I lived in. They took the time to really care and support each other, and if they were ever harsh, it came from a place of tough love.

A key factor in Reign's story is the teacher's recognition of the community they were in, and the type of care that would best serve that community. Welcoming and affirmative school

environments helped the women enjoy and prosper in their academics as well, and having a Black teacher or even multiple was always a critical moment for the women.

III. *Navigation of Identity*

Table 3. Summary of navigation of identity.

Navigation of Identity	
Sub-Theme	Excerpt
Awareness of Black girlhood (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances that contributed to building awareness of Black girlhood identity.	“Right around the time that I entered a lot of white spaces, was the time that I started to have more awareness of my identity. When you kind of reach the age where you can actually distinguish that you're black, that's kind of when I entered more white spaces. I didn't really enjoy this space, I think I kind of felt like an other in those spaces, so I think that they kind of like made me want to like seek spaces where I felt validated.” (Nicole, 3 rd year)
Identity injury & growth (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances of growth and embracement of their identities as Black girls and women, sometimes after identity injury occurred.	“I think, over time I've learned that I am worthy of being in these spaces, and I'm worthy of being in any space that I'm in. Regardless of what that space looks like, regardless of what people say, regardless of who's in charge, I am worthy of being in every space that I am in.” (Kendra, 4 th year)
Performative presentation of self (n=6, 66.7%) Refers to instances where the women felt pressure to alter themselves to circumvent negative perceptions or interactions.	“In a PWI space, there's not many of us, and I think growing up, I always felt a little bit of pressure to act a certain way to like not give Black women a bad rep overall. But I think now I don't feel like the onus is on me to portray all Black women” (Tori, 4 th year)

a. Awareness of Black Girlhood (n=8, 88.9%)

The women in this study spoke frequently about their Black girlhood in conjunction with their education, and the ways in which the types of environments they were in played a role in shaping their identity. For Black girls in more white dominated spaces, the women noted how socialization can be difficult to maneuver. Tori attended the same predominantly white private school for the entirety of K-12, and when talking about friendship dynamics Tori stated:

I definitely think I started to notice, like the dynamic changing in high school. I mean, obviously being a Black girl at a private school is never an easy thing, especially [being] dark and thicker. Basically, none of the Black girls really got asked, and unless they were from like part of this one certain friend group, most of the boys in our year like, except for maybe the exception of like 3, actually like Black girls, or would even ask Black girls to stuff and like. There was a couple who would like get asked by default, just because, like they are friends in that friend group.

While social student interactions represent one of the more challenging aspects to dissect and contend with in school, there is a common experience of Black girls feeling less than and unworthy. Tori seemed to come to terms with how the social dynamics at the school were exercised, and she later shared that with more awareness she “started to own [her] blackness more”. Morgan, a 5th year African American student, who also attended a predominantly white private high school, talked about the social challenges of being a Black girl in that space, stating:

I didn't connect with like white people in my classes like at all...I think, fear and intimidation, like I just feel like I was already very intimidated by this space, and how like rich it was and how educated people like already were...I don't even remember like speaking in my classes too much...I was just really worried about like how they would perceive me, and quite frankly like it just never seemed like they ever looked at me as an option to like be friends with, you know, until I like kind of became like more confident in myself...It definitely was because I'm Black because I feel like the shy Black girls never really get recognized...which is unfair...It's always up to the Black person to seek out those relationships, and never the white person to really like, see us as like worthy of being friends with, and that, like that was pretty much the majority of my experience.

As Morgan detailed that she came to her school with an understanding that she was different from everyone else and a more discouraged mindset, this feeling became more inflamed by how she perceived others perceiving her. Her excerpt illustrated a common inherent discounting of self among Black girls, which largely stemmed again, from an environment that failed to affirm and empower diversity in students and bridge social gaps.

b. Identity Injury & Growth (n=8, 88.9%)

Every woman in the study expressed pivotal points in their schooling where they sustained growth in their conception of their blackness and girlhood, and some realized this only after recovery from identity injury. Identity injury constitutes the damaged feeling of pain or harm on one's identity. The moments in time where this happened for the women significantly varied as they all have unique circumstances and many factors influenced when new developments occurred. For instance, Reign recalled:

When I look back to the pictures of myself at that time...how could you be scared of me? I looked like any other average child at that time...you know like that type, "oh like I thought you might be intimidating or oh I heard you speak," because when they hear my voice, that's what makes them comfortable the fact that like, they hear a Black girl with a softer voice. "Oh, like that's what I needed to make me feel okay in the situation" feeling as if I needed to tame myself...Eighth grade, I started to say fuck it, I don't care...I'm going to say what I need to say and be who I need to be.

Prior to this excerpt, Reign referenced how she used to be overly nice to people so that she would be perceived a certain way. Often Black women in the study recalled how sometimes they stifled themselves to fit in and avoid negative perceptions out of fear of unwanted attention or repercussions that may come if they were unapologetically themselves. Reign's turning point happened in eighth grade and represents a form of resistance Black girls often must adopt in educational spaces for their own personal growth and security. Although existing as a Black girl is a vulnerable state of being, she no longer allowed that reality to control how she navigated spaces and began to relinquish the inclination to appease to the comfort of others or their perceptions.

Similarly, Angel, a first-year Nigerian American student, who attended religious private schools all her life, and a predominantly white catholic high school made realizations about her identity, but only after harmful experiences all through high school. She stated:

They revolved around suppressing certain aspects of my identity and suppressing aspects of individuality in general. I feel like I was more of a people pleaser at the beginning of high school, at the beginning of my PWI experience, as most Black girls tend to be because they want to fit in and acclimate to white society. But coming out and graduating as a senior, I feel like I had undergone a transformation that made me realize the importance of individuality. Like I came out more of an individual because I realized how much the institution worked to have me suppress my individuality, so I had to reckon with myself and understand the importance of my own identity traits, what made me as a Black girl, and what that looks like to me—not necessarily what they're telling me that looks like.

Angel went through a period of redefining who she was after countless encounters with antiblackness throughout high school that weighed heavily on her. She cites the institution as the culprit of identity injury, and throughout her interview mentions instances where instead of aiding in her recovery, the institution continued to double-down and inflict more pain. This is the type of harm Black girls are exposed to when schools are ill-equipped in cultivating culturally intuitive environments where Black girls can simply exist.

In other cases, some women felt insecure about belonging in academic spaces although their academic performance was not an issue. Nicole said:

I didn't even think like I'd be here like it wasn't even a thought...I think it took some time to actually feel like I can like be here kind of thing, but it happened eventually and I'm glad it did...I sort of worry for like kids and relatives in high school now...because... I had to look for those spaces and stuff like that...I don't think that like my classmates like acknowledged me as like high achieving student until like, I guess there was something to sort of..."got into [X college]"...I knew that at some point that because of the

impression people had of me, that I believed a certain thing about myself. And that that's funny, because I know, I said, imposter syndrome in here a while ago, but... it is not a real thing...it is really just the fact that like these institutions are not made for us. And I know like in college it looks different...but I think it's still there for sure in high school...because you're...still trying to find your way into these spaces...those challenges [are] there of like feeling like you fit into these spaces, and that's because you kind of don't... I feel like it shouldn't be like that. I always said...I wish there was like sort of like a guiding hand for a lot of people more because...it's kind of like discouraging to know that like people have impressions of themselves, and it's not because of themselves.

Nicole's excerpt underscores the effect the institutions and students within them had on her sense of self. Although the experience of knowing other people's impressions of her did not derail her ability to highly achieve, it took a lot of time for her to feel secure in her positionality and accomplishments at school, on account of those impressions. Nicole also made an acknowledgment that many other Black women in the study related to; the schools they attend were not made for them, and that makes it difficult for them to feel secure in their identity and existence in their education.

c. Performative Presentation of Self (n=6, 66.7%)

Several Black women in the study approached their education in a performative manner as a survival tactic and a means to circumvent stereotypes, discriminatory treatment, and social outcasting. Some Black girls in the study adopted their performance early in their educational lives, mainly those who attended schools with large white demographics. Tori noted:

I think in high school, too, like I definitely started to like own my blackness more because, like I definitely went through like the straightening hair phase, and, like you know certain brands that I had no business wearing...there is one girl that I was friends with... she was like very comfortable in repping her blackness, and like I definitely think I was taking a couple of like pages from her book, and just like not caring as much. And then I was like, okay? Well, I can't go to college with like fucking damaged hair...then I started like learning to do my hair and wearing it natural...being a little bit more

comfortable about it...not feeling like I had to code switch everywhere that I am or you know, not talk about certain things that like make me upset, or like calling people out and stuff.

Tori discussed a culturally significant topic for Black girls, hair, and recognizes how inauthentic her presentation of self originally was. When she reflects on her phases, there's no slight towards the things she used to do, but more of an understanding that those habits were not a natural product of herself, but an influence by a larger force—school environment, social pressure, and antiblackness. Tori's connection with another Black girl helped her end an era of performance and step into a new light of comfortability in her blackness. The performance era was physically harmful to her hair, and a prevalent experience many Black girls contend with as they grow in their identity. Tori also mentioned code-switching as part of her performance, a term used to describe the act of subconsciously or unconsciously altering language and vernacular to fit the hegemonic standard. An earlier excerpt from Tori described how she felt pressure to not contribute to negative perceptions of Black women and code-switching represents a protective measure she utilized to avoid the outcome of that fear. Other Black women in the study took on additional measures as agents of performance. Angel shared:

When I first started school, I used to perm my hair in middle school up until like the beginning of sophomore year. The way I spoke, code switching a lot, making sure that I spoke in white vernacular...and even things like music...people would talk to me and be like “oh did you listen to this, but I didn't” and then I would go listen to it in my free time so I could really fit in. If it meant that I could go with them, than I would alter myself in that way so that I would be able to fit in...Being not just black at my PWI, but African, in terms of like when people mispronounce my name, I would allow them to Americanize it and westernize it and just say it however they wanted, even when I knew that's not how it was pronounced, I wouldn't correct people.

Angel's excerpt emits a deep desire to fit in when in fact, as expressed earlier, her individuality was compromised and threatened by the institution leaving her with a singular option was-fitting in. While the concept of fitting in is a typical school experience for any growing adolescent, there's a specific nuance to consider when Black girls discuss wanting to fit in. Often times Black girl identities are not given the space to exist, and they must divert to performativity to maintain even a concocted sense of self.

IV. *Structures of Support*

Table 4. Summary of structures of support.

Structures of Support	
Sub-Theme	Excerpt
Mental health & school resources (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances where women discussed mental health needs and concerns along with school resources.	“The school had a lot of resources for a number of different things. They prepared when it came to going to college because they had a college career center. It didn't feel as stressful for me because I had a lot of people that I could reach out to for a number of different things, and I didn't realize like how not stressful-like it was still stressful-but it wasn't as stressful as it could have been” (Kendra, 4 th year)
Black programming (n=8, 88.9%) Refers to instances when women discussed impact of Black centered school programs.	“I think that everyone deserves a Mr. Johnson, like a Black resource teacher who can teach you during lunch or teach you during a period that you're just not filling up to it to learn about something else. A Black resource teacher and teachers who aren't always going to go by the book. Teachers that are going to tell you the real history and not just what a textbook says.” (Ellie, 4 th year)
Parental involvement (n=7, 77.8%) Refers to instances when the women addressed ways their parent(s) showed up in their education.	“You had to decide if you wanted to engage in getting an academic education, or you wanted to play around and cut up... There are a lot of people around me who didn't have the same discipline or didn't take the time to do it. But again, I think it's also because of certain circumstances. Not everyone has the same type of support at home that I have, and I feel like that needs to be taken account for.” (Ellie, 4 th year)
Accessibility to extra-curricular activities (n=7, 77.8%)	“I honestly, I like school more for the extra curriculums because if I went home, I would just be by myself. I would be home by myself because my parents have

Refers to instances when the women had outlets outside of academics that improved their school experience.

work. So, I would rather make time at school, and then like, be here...I did everything I did I could do to not stay at home. I was in cross country, marching band, and I lead international night.” (Sierra, 5th year)

a. Mental Health & School Resources (n=8, 88.9%)

All women in the study discussed either needing or receiving support in the form of mental health or other school resources. In terms of mental health, many women expressed feelings of burnout and stress, but often did not have adequate support or did not feel comfortable reaching out to gain support. Primarily for the women who attended predominantly white institutions, the data displayed a correlating experience of trauma and lasting effects, which circulated into their college experience, from bearing the burden of implementing racially conscious programs, activities, or clubs for themselves and for the wider school community. The burden itself was the work outside of academics that the women were undertaking at the time to ameliorate the current state of the school environment and their relationship with it. Angel describes how the work in addition to the unfavorable school climate affected her, stating:

Tenth grade, I feel like I used to be a much more lighthearted, blissful, easy-going person...there was this one day around when we were planning that assembly for Black history month...I did not want to come to school anymore; and since I was a child, I never was the type to be like, “oh mom can I stay home”. But one time my mom was about to drop me off at the bus stop...I literally was tearing up, like I didn’t want to get on the bus because I was like, I can’t work in this type of environment. These people genuinely do not care. It doesn’t matter how you speak to them, what you’re saying...that was the first time I really encountered how much white people don’t care about Black identities, it was as if I stepped into the real world. I feel like a lot of hatred came into my heart for the white community and white institutions in general.

Angel’s school experience inflicted pain and left a persisting impression of how white people engage with Black people. Although this is her distinctive narrative, neglect of Black

girl identities and unaddressed harmful dynamics at play at a PWI, can have this trickled effect on Black girls. The joy she once had was stripped away because of a vast lapse of care and implementation of valuable resources that schools and educators are expected to deliver.

After reflecting on all the effort, she exerted to engender change even after graduating from her PWI high school and managing her college lifestyle, Morgan shared:

I realized, like this. It is not worth it. I think so many times. We sacrifice ourselves for the cause thinking that that'll get us somewhere. But it won't. What we really need to do is focus on ourselves as individuals and focus on our individual healing, because with all that I was experiencing, my burnout led to me developing a chronic illness...we need to like rethink as Black people. We think that the answer to everything is taking on more, more, being this, being that what about just being?

Rather than over-extending, Morgan started to place her health first and ensure at an individual level she can adequately function and maneuver through life. Morgan's perspective stems from an understanding of her trauma, and as a college student who worked through serious health concerns, she no longer allows herself to revert to that space of burnout. The posed question at the end of her excerpt is a difficult one for Black girls to contend with in K-12 education because 'just being' doesn't come without dissent. However, the aim is for Black girls to exist as themselves without the toll and fear due to their identity. The data shows Black girls are subjected to experiences in school that challenge their mental health and state of being, and sometimes in wanting to just be, they deem it imperative to do more under the guise of anticipated or further harm.

Outside of the PWI space, Black women overall in the study could have benefitted from high quality mental health resources. Shanice, who attended a predominantly Black Catholic school, described how her mental health impacted her comportment at school:

I was a good child until I wasn't. When my mental health went down the drain, I kind of went down the drain. This is when I was trying to leave my school because I was overwhelmed. So sometimes I wouldn't come in with my uniform, and I would get sent to a lot of in school suspensions and that happened often.

Shanice's defiance toward the dress code had a deeper meaning, yet discipline was the default course of action to address her situation. Shanice expressed being overwhelmed and battled mental health issues yet was never provided a resource to help her address her health concerns. She eventually transferred from the school to a public school because she was not capable of balancing her academics, athletics, mental health, and overwhelmed feelings. Typically, she was a productive and high performing student-athlete, but her mental health took over and affected her performance for the remainder of her schooling.

While some woman noted having no support mentally or discomfort with taking advantage of existing school services, some utilized alternative outlets of support within the school. Sierra described:

They did, but with high schools, it's like one of those things where it's tricky, because like, if you talk to [counselor] about something, although like it is a safe space, like I'm going to tell your parents in a sense so or not. Or not tell your parents, depending on how like serious it is, which I think never was really an issue for me, because I don't think it ever went to that point. But it was always in the back of my head like, no matter what this could be told to somebody. So, it never really felt like a safe space in a sense, but I've always had those teachers where they played that role instead of the actual counselor. So, I have gotten good advice from them. I can go in their room and cry if I needed to.

Sierra didn't view the mental health resource at her school as a viable source of support, and instead sought out teachers who stepped into a supportive figure role for her. She found a safe space that worked for her with multiple teachers, and as the next theme, *Quality of Educators*

and Instruction will show, healthy bonds with educators can be transformative to Black girl's experiences.

The college process is challenging to manage for many, and first-generation status may add additional layers of obstacles. While some women in the study had parents and adequate school resources that helped guide their college process, Tori shares how the absence of that experience along with insufficient school support went, stating:

He really pissed me off, and my mom really didn't like him because he was supposed to...come up with like a list of schools, or like, ask us what type of schools we want to go to, and what we were interested in studying, and then find some schools based off of that. And the only schools that I really applied to were schools that I had kind of done my own research on, but again, I'm first-gen, like neither of my parents went to college so it's not like they really know what to look for in a college that much...so his list was just a bunch of like crappy schools...but basically he was telling me every school I was applying to was a reach school, and he was just very unhelpful.

Tori described how her school insufficiently supported her as she was applying to schools, and noted that as a first-generation college student, her parents were not equipped to advise her on the process when the school support was inadequate. She later mentioned in the interview that she was not the only first-generation prospective college student in her class. Tori thought they all would have benefitted from a counselor that specialized or had an understanding on how to support first-generation college students.

b. Black Programming (n=8, 88.9%)

The most frequent structure of support for Black women in the study included participation in a program, club, or school activity with an affinity space specifically for Black students. The women expressed a deep value for the significance of these spaces in shaping their educational journeys. Tori shared:

Another club called [club name], which they made specifically for Black girls at [school]... It was definitely a nice space to have too, just because I often feel like being a Black girl at a PWI is very different than being a Black guy at a PWI, because a lot of times like they're still accepted to a certain degree. Or you know the white girls are all over them and what not, and but being a Black girl like you really sometimes are the outcast. and sometimes we only have each other. So, it was nice to, you know. Kind of create that connection with different girls from different years than that maybe I didn't get a chance to know as well.

Tori's excerpt highlighted the social dynamics at her school and how Black girls were situated, stating that as a Black girl "you really sometimes are the outcast". This acknowledgement of general feelings of being otherness linked which she links the club to a space e the

A few Black women used their agency to bring racially conscious awareness to their wider school community and had similar experiences with pushback and censoring from peers or school administration. Angel discussed her experience and feedback given after holding a Black history month assembly at her school, and said:

We really wanted to get into like how race, like the role that race plays in the United States, and of course we had to run the presentation by them, and as it was, it was censored...it was a big step for them, but it wasn't anything that crazy that we were saying in the grand scheme of things...one white girl came up to either dean of students or principal at the end of assembly and was like "I just don't like how you ask that question...my parents are divorced does that mean that I'm Black." They were like we can't ask questions like that anymore because that girl wasn't comfortable...like that was the point, you're supposed to lean in to discomfort. It's those kinds of things that will bring up conversation for her to further understand, like she was wrong for saying that but like administration being like we're not doing that anymore as opposed to sitting down and talking to her about why she was wrong for doing that was like a double edge sword.

Angel suggested that school administration provided more comfort and appeal to the white student about their discomfort around racially centered conversations, highlighting how whiteness is often validated over blackness. The girl's antiblack association stemmed from an

exercise during the assembly where questions were asked, and people walked forward when they fit the criteria. The question of, “do you live in a single-parent household” brought her discomfort after she made her own racially insensitive assumptions about the experiences of Black people. The lack of response in addressing the racial undertones of the girl’s comment contrasted with the immediate response to diminish Angel and other Black student’s advocacy for a more conscious and informed school environment. For other Black women, Black programming served as an additional academic and social space for learning about Black culture and history. Tori shared:

He taught us about like ancient Africa. He we return to learning about M. Hot and Matt, how Black people create a math...I can't remember what it was called, but basically, we had to learn a whole bunch of Black people, facts, and then competition. Something like a bowl or something. I can't remember what it was called. It's like that gave us the opportunity to sit and like, learn different information and facts about like our people. And even though that wasn't directly in the curriculum like you go to Mr. Johnson room anytime. Yeah, and he write you a note.

The program Tori was involved in brought an exposure to lessons on Black culture that she didn’t receive in the standard curriculum at her school. She mentioned the space also was a haven for Black students to feel safe with a Black educator who cared and supported them. In many cases, various Black programs at the women’s school became a vessel towards meaningful relationships with educators and peers. Nicole shared:

She was like the like the club sponsor for the [club] at my high school. And so...It's basically like a Black org, but for Black women. So, I was part of [the club], and so I guess we formed like a relationship there, and like, I think, through her there were like, I guess I like met other Black woman... and other Black women who I sort of like learned from and stuff. I know that there were like conferences every February that she would sort of like, take us to and things like that. And so that's like sort of like the only relationship impacting me outside of [academics]. I don’t think anything hit as close to home as this relationship. I guess it was a little frustrating sometimes...that was sort of the relationship for like all of the Black girls at school too, so I guess it was hard to sort of like take space because I know this is that space that everybody uses so it’s not like I

could even be like “oh what do you think about school and what I should do”...it wasn’t as convenient...but still pretty impactful.

While Nicole found both a safe space and developed a fruitful relationship with the club sponsor, who was also the assistant principal at the school, there was a threshold on how much she could nurture and lean on that relationship. The club also introduced her to other Black women in the school that she connected with; the space functioned in a vacuum amongst the rest of the school as a place for Black girls to be in communion. Nicole mentioned her relationship with the assistant principal as the most impactful out of all the relationships built with educators, and due to the dearth of spaces and opportunities for Black girls to feel connected to educators, she expressed feelings of frustration with her inability to have an unabridged relation with the club sponsor.

c. Parental Involvement (n=7, 77.8%)

Support through parental involvement varied in extent and looked different for all the women. For some, their parents took more of a backseat role, and they spearheaded the direction of their own education. Nicole expressed:

They were more so a support throughout my education...because I guess their transition to the States...and like just trying to figure out like assimilation and stuff like that. They never been like super involved in school, and I don't think it's like necessarily like by choice. I think it's just like how much they felt like they could kind of contribute. So, it was always kind of like, “oh, how is school going? How are your grades type of thing?” but as far as like decision making...I had to sort of be person to do that the most. I had some guidance from my sister and stuff as well, but I think like it’s kind of inevitable that like, I was like the person that kind of like molded my like educational experiences. I think like the first-gen aspect being there too. So, they were kind of like observing, I guess.

Nicole discussed how the role her parents played stemmed from a position of inexperience and less understanding about education in the US. The first-generation experience is a unique one and coupled with a Black girl identity, navigating school looks different. For Nicole, her parents had expectations for her, but she played a more independent and substantial role than other women in the study to ensure she obtained a successful education.

Only a few women had parents who played a more dominant role in their education. The support varied; some parents helped with academic work while others were very involved in the school community. Kendra, a fourth year African American student, shared:

She was always at my school. She was always participating in any event that they had. And she was like very like active in like the PTA, and that's because she had originally, my mom's a teacher, and I think by the time I got to the fourth grade is when she started teaching online instead of like regular school, and so she had a lot of free time. She was always at the schools. My dad, like never had time to go to the school, so he was like there, but he did more help with like the homework stuff, anything math related... Teachers that were in there like they just were not the best, I think that's why my mom was always at that school, because she was always like trying to talk to the principal about the teachers.

Kendra's parents were active in different ways in her education, and she expressed throughout the interview different moments where her mom physically showed up to support her. There were times where she had issues with teacher instruction, and her mom helped as a reinforcement when her advocacy for herself was not enough. Everyone has different familial dynamics and levels of support depends on what those dynamics look like, but for those who do not have enough parental support when needed, schools should provide resources and accommodate students who may require additional support.

d. Accessibility to Extra-Curricular Activities (n=7, 77.8%)

A few Black women in the study cited extra-curricular activities as an enhancement to their school experience. In many ways, the activities helped cultivate relationships, build confidence and skill, and stimulate creative or athletic interests. Shanice shared:

This club called [club X] in middle school...a club where you could be really creative, and it included like STEM stuff and storytelling stuff, active stuff... you created your own clay and built stuff handmade, and a lot of arts and crafts. They had like competitions and stuff and those competitions were very diverse. They even like, if you won like move on to the next round...the next round is probably in like Paris, or something...like it was worldwide. So that was like, open for a lot of opportunity and just getting...a lot of mind stimulation stuff for a young kid. I also was a part of robotics in middle school...where you program and code...they also had competitions too...I ran track.

The clubs she was in were an exciting aspect of school for Shanice. They promoted her growth, expanded her interests, and she also mentioned developing a strong connection with a Black teacher from participating in the club. The teacher became a pivotal person in her life and was a huge influencer in Shanice's involvement with other school activities like math clubs and student government. Kendra also shared a positive experience with an extra-curricular activity that built a meaningful relationship, stating:

I was part of the [club X] ... which was a like a 3 year program that I had to do with on like business, business institutions, or whatever personal finance, economics... and she was one of my teachers, and she's also a Black woman...She pushed me the most, even when I she was like no, I couldn't do it. She like recommended me to like compete in competition for future businesses in America. and I made it all the way to Nationals, and she, like, was with me through every step of that process. She drove me to Nationals, and she stayed with me that whole week, and so I really appreciate it. And so ever since then, like we still text to this day, and she still keep up with me.

Kendra described how engaging in the club also molded a relationship she continues to maintain with a motivational teacher who pushed her to excel. The impact of extra-curricular activities for Black woman in the study were manifold and highlight how important having outlets outside of academic classes can be at all stages of education.

V. *Quality of Educators and Instruction*

Table 5. Summary of quality of teacher relationships and instruction.

Quality of Educator Relationships & Instruction	
Sub-theme	Excerpt
Adverse educators (n=9, 100%) Refers to instances where the women felt neglected, discriminated, or discouraged by teachers.	“Middle school, elementary school no feedback. I don’t remember being positively reinforced, it was just expected of me. Once I started consistently doing well in school, they didn’t really give me that attention, and I definitely noticed it subconsciously. A lot of the feedback I got would be constructive, about like improving my work which I feel like was very run of the mill.” (Morgan, 4 th year)
Formative educator relationships (n=9, 100%) Refers to instances when the women felt connected, mentored, and positively impacted by teachers in and outside the classroom.	“She believed in me before I believed in myself” (Angel, 1 st year)
Effective instruction & curriculum (n=7, 77.8%) Refers to instances when the women received or did not receive culturally rich and expansive materials in the curriculum as well as high caliber instruction.	“He was the first person to teach me about colonization in a non-sugar-coated way. He was like Christopher Columbus; we don’t rock with him. He was like, he was dirty. He came over here and wiped out all of the Native Americans. It was the first time I heard about colonization in an uncensored way, instead of the terms of ‘oh, well they hurt people’. No, he said they brought over chlamydia, they brought over like syphilis, they killed all these people. They were raping them. That was seventh grade, and I really started having a teacher that was like listen, the textbook doesn’t say this, but I’m going to tell you what should be in the textbook. (Ellie, 4 th year)

a. *Adverse Educators (n=9, 100%)*

All the women recounted having adverse experiences with educators that made them feel either neglected, discriminated, or discouraged. An average experience amongst some women in the study was feeling overlooked by their teachers. Shanice said:

My white teachers, not all of them, but like some of them just didn't... I feel like I just didn't stand out for them as I did like with, when I had a Black teacher. I was an exceptional student on paper, but I also like thrive to be an exceptional student outside of the work...that's why I bonded with most of my teachers... one of the white teachers I had...she just liked troubled student and I wasn't really a troubled student in her class, but she just gravitated more to troubled students, like the boys in the class versus the girls.

Shanice discussed that she was an exceptional student yet did not feel seen by some of her white teachers. She recognized that her teacher neglected to acknowledge students who may not need additional attention because of their behavior or academic performance, and instead put all her attention on to students who did. While Shanice still knew she was an exceptional student and had great experiences with other teachers that did reinforce her conception of her performance, other women did not and experienced very little feedback or positive reinforcement. Nicole stated:

I don't think I got a lot of feedback to be honest. I don't like, well, I mean not at all, but in a lot of ways, I don't think like I felt very acknowledged by a lot of my teachers. And I think that, like I don't think I mentioned that too when I said like... I never like realized that I like, I did well in school until, like a certain point. exactly, and I don't think that like teachers did that (tell her she was doing well) as well like.

Nicole shared the same feeling of not being acknowledged by teachers as Shanice did.

When teachers fail to provide reinforcement and feedback whether positive or constructive, Black girls such as Nicole may develop misconceptions about themselves. Nicole eventually

realized that she was excelling, but for Black girls who don't have those realizations or outlets of support the effect can be damaging.

Some women expressed that educators failed to address racial situations in a productive way that would have acknowledged the harm done and provided resources for growing and learning from the situation. They noticed that teachers or administration themselves would be racially insensitive and add more harm to the situation. Angel shared:

There was another time these two girls said n-word and they hate Black people, and I went to all girls catholic high school, in addressing that situation...“everybody makes mistakes we just need to approach them with forgiveness”, and I understand forgive them for their wrong but it's like forgiveness without education what is that, and they weren't trying to give them any resources to understand why they were wrong. It was asking the student body to move on from their mistakes, and victimizing them...they made it a worse climate racially for us because whenever we would discuss racial issues in the classroom, if someone cited that incident, they would be like “we can't talk about that because that makes them uncomfortable”... but is that not a clear cut situation...because they were victimizing the white students when in reality the Black students such as myself were the real victims it ended up hurting student

Similarly, to her previous experience with the Black history month assembly, the school victimized the white students who made antiblack remarks, when the real victims in the situation were the Black students. As Angel pointed out, forgiveness is important, but education is even more vital when these types of situations occur in school because it can improve racial consciousness in the school environment and demonstrate care and consideration for people hurt by the instance.

b. Formative Educator Relationships (n=9, 100%)

Through previous excerpts we have seen the power of meaningful educator relationships in the women's lives, and they can be especially potent for Black girls' who don't have many teachers outside of one or a few who show they care. Nicole shared:

I think the only teachers that I can like really think about that like impacted my like understanding of myself was like in my, during my junior year. She was a white woman, but...I think that there were a lot of things that we ended up like bonding over. I know, like midwifery was like one of the things...like after graduation, she had one of the libraries like drop off a book for me. And it was like about...history of like woman's medicine and stuff like that...That was one of the moments where I felt acknowledged by a teacher...and it's just because I brought up this interest once...and I don't think I ever had like an experience like that...I definitely think one of the best experiences I ever had, but outside of that there's not even anything I can come up with.

Here, Nicole recalled a relationship where a teacher bonded with her and validated her interest even further by taking an extra step to provide her with a resource about her interest. Teachers are not required to make special bonds with every single student, but when they do, they can be extremely impactful especially to Black girls in school environments that do not affirm their identities. Nicole felt acknowledged by her teacher, a feeling that did not come often in her educational experience because she rarely ever received feedback.

Many women associated their formative teacher experiences to a sense of being seen and affirmed in both their academic abilities and in a more humanizing manner. The women had relationships with all types of teacher or administrators, but many pointed out that teachers from diverse backgrounds often made them feel valued the most. Sierra stated:

Like there's some people where I know they're like, "oh, I can never go back," but like, I go back and like point out a handful of teachers. But I think that's partially too because like a lot of them, were like minorities so like I felt comfortable... like this teacher was looking to me like a person rather than like a student.

Sierra's excerpt explained that the teachers that made her feel most comfortable were the ones who looked at her like a person, and for the most part they were racially diverse. This was a commonplace in the women's narratives, Black and other racially diverse teachers typically showed more commitment to affirming them and creating environments where they could learn

and feel comfortable. Tori shared her connection she made with a teacher from elementary school that's always lasted with her, stating:

I think the first teacher that I think I really had like a deep connection with was my second-grade teacher, Miss Hart, Miss Susan Hart. I love her. She definitely had had high expectations for me, like she always was like you know. I'm watching you, or like, you know. You know you know you weren't supposed to be doing that, but I think she also, like definitely believed, and saw a lot of potential in me at a young age which I think was really important to know that, like you know, someone besides your parents like is confident that you're capable of.

Tori demonstrated how her teacher relayed expectations and expressed the potential she saw in her. At an early age Tori was embraced by an authority figure outside of her parents, and that became a transformational moment in her life. Teachers who instilled expectations and actively make students feel seen help create educational landscapes where Black girls feel embraced and more inclined to excel.

c. Effective Instruction & Curriculum (n=7, 77.8%)

The women's narratives on effective instruction and curriculum highlighted how teachers rarely made space for culturally important topics, but teachers that helped stimulate personal growth through their instruction and made classes interesting were most memorable and effective. Many women mentioned they did not see themselves or their cultures in their curriculum, and wished current events were discussed more. Tori stated:

I do wish that in some classes, especially like in high school, we talked more about current events, because I think like history is important, but I also think, understanding the world that we're about to be kind of thrown into in college and like into adult life is important as well and like what's going on in your own city.

Other women appreciated the specific ways the teachers taught and conveyed their lessons. Not every teacher has the ability to cultivate interest and motivate students, but Shanice shared an experience with a teacher that did:

Ms. Anderson had like a good relationship with a lot of students like. She one of them teachers, she just make the impact like every time we went to her class it wasn't like a class it was like we were going in there for a sermon. Also like she was just speaking life into us like her every word. She was an English teacher and she was Black. But the way she used her words and express herself and got it like engage in her plans. Her lessons were just different. It was never boring like I always look forward to go to her class. I always look forward to talk with her, go to her for it by his life. because she was also relatable, like she went to a private school. Like most students there, she grew up in the hood. She was just real relatable, but also passionate, and intellectual... She was just great and she made an impact on a lot of her students.

Shanice was always moved by Ms. Anderson and was positively influenced by her. In many ways, teachers who positively impact students continue to have an effect long after their time with them in the classroom. Ellie had an experience with a teacher whose advice she still follows today. After being on the verge of failing multiple classes due to some life circumstances, Ellie reached out to her teacher for help, she stated:

So, Miss Matthews, she gave me some of them best advice in my life that I ever received, which was basically like, don't you ever feel like you're in a black hole and you can't get out of it, like you can always get out of it. It's going to be very hard. It's never going to be easy; you can pick yourself back up. And that's honestly what I feel like has gotten me through college too...I think if I had never had that experience in high school. It would have broken me in college because I had a similar experience in college...Miss Matthews will always be someone in my life that really changed my perspective... she shared that story with me about how she failed and how she flunked. And ever since then I've known that... I can pick it up and get it together. So, I think Miss Matthews really changed me forever.

Ellie's story discussed how her teacher made an influence on her entire life by not only providing help in the moment, but offering life advice that's helped her navigate college and as she goes on with the rest of her life. Ellie was dealing with many obstacles during this time she received the

advice, and Ms. Matthews offered grace, which is something a lot of Black girls don't get from teachers.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to garner a holistic understanding of how K-12 education impacted Black women in higher education. To contribute to the creation of more anti-racist and affirming educational experiences for Black girls, the current study draws on antiblackness theory to provide a critical analysis of how Black undergraduate women experience K-12 education. Corresponding to prior research on Black college women, the study revealed that Black women are subject to race and gender based discriminatory treatment.⁶⁶ Misogynoir is a term that underscores how race and gender play a role in prejudice or discrimination faced by Black women and girls. Black women who had to negotiate varying degrees of misogynoir, experienced a form of antiblackness particular to their identity. Despite all the academic success these women achieved, the study finds that Black woman in higher education were confronted with violent antiblack encounters that portend mental damage and identity injury. These harms on the mental and physical worlds of Black women happen at different moments in their education and occur at a higher degree to Black women who were educated in predominantly white environments. As the harms occur at different moments, the women also heal in varying ways and times. For some Black women, the harms leave a scar that never heals while for others the scar heals but remains susceptible to future damage.

Although most Black women's narratives frequently described disparate treatment, they also had affirmative experiences that provided safety nets, reassurance, and support. These experiences indicated the potential of educational landscapes to be ubiquitous conducive spaces for Black girls if affirmative practices were to materialize extensively. However, for majority of

⁶⁶ Seanna Leath et al., "A Qualitative Study of Black College Women's Experiences of Misogynoir and Anti-Racism with High School Educators," *Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010029>.

these women, they existed as exceptions in their educational environments instead of the standard which follows the existing literature that recognizes Black girls as structurally vulnerable and in opposition to normality.⁶⁷ A pattern in the findings demonstrated practices inducing affirmative experiences for Black women were sporadic by nature of school climate for women who attended predominantly white schools. Meaning, as their identities harbored in an enduring state of vulnerability, they were challenged to seek out those spaces and experiences that would momentarily subsist their vulnerable states. Like harm, affirmative practices have abiding impact that the women found helpful in meaning making and navigating life in higher education.

I. Analyzing Harmful Experiences and The Presence of Antiblackness

Multiple women in the study expressed moments in their educational journey where they felt “othered” due to the treatment by educators, peers, and the school environment. This othering speaks to the prevalence of antiblackness within educational spaces and specifically the form it takes for Black girls, misogynoir. In the academic spaces, the othering they felt is the result of underlying attitudes and beliefs that recognizes blackness as something that operates outside of the standard conditions of human. One woman mentioned feeling like a pet, and under antiblackness theory we recognize how social institutions contribute to socially positioning Black girls in a dehumanizing way that does not receive their version of humanity. Their comportment is not factored because the perception of them as Black girls will always be fogged by oppressive structures that misunderstand them. Conforming to dominant ways of being does

⁶⁷ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations”.

not guarantee safety nor does it aid in Black girls identity mapping and affirmative conceptions of themselves.

For women who attended predominantly white schools, they often had experiences where they felt neglected and unprotected. They did not have the freedom of maneuvering space in an unadulterated way under the guise of institutional surveillance. In BGHS, Nicole Brown discusses the everlasting surveillance Black girls are subject to and notes their agency in controlling their performance. A few of the women who navigated these spaces eventually assumed their agency by embracing their Black identities in resistance to the surveillance and white heteronormative conceptions of comportment placed on them. They attempted to exist in a Black girl ordinary way without conforming while up against misogynoir and disorienting expectations of who they had to be to receive acknowledgement. However, the prolonging experience of navigating space that bolstered their misconceptions about themselves and placed their identity up for question, created an unlearning process that persisted into their lives in higher education. While they worked to resist negative understandings of their identities rooted from their toxic environments, some experienced and contended with an alteration in their mental stability and capacity. As similar studies have found, daily events with teachers and peers influenced how Black women viewed themselves, their position in those spaces, and their future abilities.⁶⁸

In the classroom, women across all school types felt unseen by teachers and noted that often times they did not receive feedback. Some educators engaged in practices that attended mostly to students who engaged in behaviors and academic performances that they deemed

⁶⁸ Seanna Leath et al., “A Qualitative Study of Black College Women’s Experiences of Misogynoir and Anti-Racism with High School Educators,” *Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010029>.

deserved more of their attention. However, the absence of teacher feedback and attention contributes to the construction of false narratives about their abilities and potential. Black girls need reinforcement and generative observation from educators without discriminatory and neglectful assumptions.

Often Black women in white spaces felt pressure to prove themselves and fit in. Many women engaged in exceptionalism as to not be perceived through stereotypical means. For instance, Tori and Angel both mentioned how they often code switched and devoted a lot of energy to appeasing and conforming to white hegemonic forms of femininity and behavior. Yet, the nature of antiblackness in their environments place them in a peril state regardless of their misalignment with social norms.

At all types of schools they attended, in some capacity, Black women felt unsafe in their educational environments which stemmed from peers and educators cultivating an environment that invalidates their existence and intensifies their vulnerability. A few women recalled how Black boys were a source of that unsafe feeling and othering which underpins the divisiveness of antiblackness. Antiblack conditioning exist amongst Black people and when school environments that implement innately antiblack practices which target and dehumanize both Black boys and girls; they adopt those understandings and reproduce harmful instantiations of antiblackness onto each other. For example, Ellie mentioned how “black boys in middle school, did not make me feel safe. Not by any means” and referenced colorism and featurism to describe the type of treatment she received. Both colorism and featurism are forms of antiblackness that contribute to the structural vulnerability of Black girls as they proliferate in the larger school environment.

Other women marked educators as reinforcers of insecure and harmful conditions in school. Reign, who attended public and charter schools with racially diverse environments, said she never felt safe at any school she attended. Her experience with harassment from peers was never taken seriously or addressed in a manner that displayed a semblance of support or care. Shangé discusses how educators enact a heedless approach towards tending to Black girls. The argument of educators now knowing what to do when attending to Black girls rings true in this study. When speaking on educators lack of tendency to her sensitive experience with harassment, Reign stated, “in a lot of ways black girls are also failed even by other black people”. This type of experience where violent actions against the Black women goes unaddressed is a form of violence itself. Black girls are forced to remain in a continuum of precarity where safety and security are never guaranteed. They go unprotected and sensitivity to their unprotected status is rarely designated in school environments that are incapable of holding accountable practices, educators, and students who uphold the presence of antiblackness instead of counteracting it.

When conceptualizing these experiences Black women have shared, we must resist depreciating them to common happenings of any student who does not wield a Black girl identity. One could argue desire to fit in, feeling unacknowledged, or even targeted by teachers is a normal experience for any student. However, when there are structural implications that push the devaluation and minimization of an entire identity, there must be a critical analysis of occurrences that may appear to one as normal, but to Black girls as oppressive and harmful given their unique social positionality. The narratives of these women must be heard and understood with nuance because the furtive ways antiblackness is imbued within systems and institutions they navigate in their daily lives.

II. *Instituting Affirmative Practices & Care*

A common thread seen across all themes was the influence of representation and notably, how the variance in representation across study participants' experiences altered in substantial ways. Representation takes on many forms, and the women each had different magnitudes and types of representation throughout their K-12 experience. Some women went to schools with both a diverse multi-racial student body and staff and experiences with teachers seemed to be fruitful and substantially enhance their overall journey at the particular school. While other women who attended schools that were predominantly white, yet had a presence of Black teachers, encountered beneficial circumstances that ameliorated their experience. There were also women who did not have diverse representation amongst the student body or faculty and staff, and they linked the absence of that type of representation to damaging and unpleasant school experiences.

Evidenced in the results, formative relationships with teachers that took on mentoring roles and instilled affirmation in the Black women disrupted narratives and negative feelings about themselves that they developed in school outside of those relationships. Consistent with literature, Black teachers in particular take on a unique role in the educational landscape for Black women that make them feel seen and valued.⁶⁹ Black educators functioned as safe spaces for Black women, especially those in school climates that lacked racial diversity. They were often headed affinity spaces for Black women to feel affirmed. While this type of space is necessary in environments where the Black women were negotiating their identities against school climates that operated in opposition of them, the more imperative objective is establishing

⁶⁹ Seanna Leath et al., "A Qualitative Study of Black College Women's Experiences of Misogynoir and Anti-Racism with High School Educators," *Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010029>.

a new climate where their Black girlhoods could flourish and not stand in contention with school practices. The Black women also had numerous meaningful relationships with educators from all racial backgrounds. These supportive figures in their lives were meaningful for additional supportive structures in their educational journeys, they also provided a safe haven and demonstrated a refuse to be complicit in climates that were harmful to women in the study.

Given Black girls naturally exist in a vulnerable state, accessibility to support structures for their mental health and conversations to normalize seeking help is a necessary resource in schools. Most of the women in the study experienced mental health concerns and or battles with their identity at their schools and leaned on teachers educators to provide safe spaces and advice. However, the women who performed at high levels academically and ostensibly functioned well would have benefited from mental health resources to better themselves and unhealthy practices. Ensuring Black girls have proper access and adequate mental health support should be a priority.

Often Black women who attended PWI's devoted copious amounts of energy to engagements they hoped would shift their environments to be productive and welcoming sites for their identities. However, this led to burnout and enduring mental harm. The onus should not be on Black students to create educational environments that are safe, affirming, and combative towards antiblack conditions. To promote a school culture where Black woman do not feel inclined to question their identity, their belonging in space, and their academic performance, educators and schools must challenge themselves to evaluate their antiblack practices and distill the ways they are failing Black girls. The study notes Black girls feel most comfortable, affirmed, and impacted in educational spaces that comprise and recognize diversity and representation as a tool. In spaces that offer programming and activities that provide outlets for expression and cultivate interests. Schools where resources are accessible and have a standard of

quality that is inviting, and environments that are actively anti-racist and address racial issues with sensitivity and care for those harmed. Often schools mask their diversity efforts through performative measures and fail to incorporate meaningful change that is realized by Black women. To combat this, schools must utilize the growing body of literature around Black girls and women's educational experiences to understand how specific practices permit harm towards and methods they can implement to prevent it.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates the necessity in education research and policy to holistically understand Black girls' experiences in K-12 education and address the harmful practices that create educational climates exposing Black girls to misogynoir and antiblackness. Educators, peers, and school environments contribute to antiblack experiences that Black women face in schools. The findings of this study indicate that while Black women in higher education are able to continuously prosper academically and socially in their educational landscapes, K-12 experiences impacted their understanding of identity, mental health, and academic intelligence. The study also revealed that Black women who attended predominantly white schools experienced greater challenges navigating their identity in school and had a larger extent of encounters with antiblack practices. Black women encounter a number of challenges through navigating school, but find that affirmative measures disturb those challenges.

To combat antiblackness and affirm Black girls in educational endeavors, education praxis should do the following: evaluate and reconfigure practices to ensure they are not reinforcing antiblack conditions; nurture positive student-teacher relationships; provide structural support in the form of resources, activities, and safe spaces; encourage and implement diverse educator representation; and advocate for Black girls and acknowledge their unique identity with sensitivity and value. Black girls are problematized by educational environments and it's up to the stakeholders to confront norms and challenge practices that enable enduring harm and prevalence of antiblackness in the educational worlds of Black girls.

APPENDIX

A.

LOOKING FOR YOUNG BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN

A RETROSPECTIVE RESEARCH STUDY ON THE
EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS



BROWN

WHO AM I?

My name is Nailah Tukpah, and I am a senior undergraduate researcher and thesis writer at Brown University. I study Public Policy and have always had an interest in education policy and how it can serve as an effective tool to improve the institution of education for Black children.



WHAT AM I DOING?

This thesis explores the impact of antiblack practices on the lives of Black girls, both in school and beyond, with a focus on disciplinary policies. I am particularly interested in how Black girls experience school and how the effects of their experiences manifest in their lives after finishing education. It considers how Black girls encounter school discipline policies and discusses measures that serve to transform Black girls' experiences and counter anti-black conventions in school.

HOW YOU CAN HELP?

To gain insight on these experiences, I am looking to interview people who identify as **young Black women in college** (18-23) and engage in a reflective discussion about their educational experience. Please click the link, email, text, or call if interested in being interviewed.

INTERVIEW DETAILS

- ◆ Duration: Approximately 1-1.5h
- ◆ Location: In-person preferred, remote option available
- ◆ Timeline: December - February 2023

CALL OR EMAIL FOR MORE INFO



(301) 655 5967



nailah_tukpah@brown.edu

B.

(Semi-Structured) Interview Protocol:

Personnel Included in the Research

Nailah Tukpah, undergraduate student at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Project/Research Question(s)

1. How does K-12 educational experiences impact Black girls?
2. What types of experiences are common amongst Black girls and how do they contend with them in higher education?
3. What measures work in opposition to address antiblack school practices and discipline towards Black girls?

Introduction & Ethical Considerations

My name is Nailah Tukpah, and I am in my senior undergraduate researcher at Brown University. I study Public Policy, and have always had an interest in education policy and how it can serve as a tool to improve the institution of education for Black children. Throughout my progress to my degree I have focused on school discipline policy and its relationship to Black students. This project focuses on Black girl experiences with antiblack practices and discipline in educational spaces and how an understanding of experiences can improve schooling. To gain insight on these experiences, I will be interviewing young Black women in college and engaging in a practice of storytelling, remembering, and reflection. I seek to articulate the effects of existing school practices and disciplinary policies on Black girls and generate a discussion on measures that will counter them. My questions will primarily focus on reflections of one's educational journey and call upon both monumental and incidental moments in their educational life.

(**Ask if they have any questions about my project**)

Finally, remind them they will remain anonymous.

- Ask if they have a pseudonym they would like to use and if direct quotations can be used or not.

Interview Structure

Target respondents: College Undergraduate Black Girls

Duration: Approximately 1-1.5 hours

Format: Questions broken down into 5 sections

Questions written in red, optional probing questions based on direction of conversation

1. Introduction to Educational Experience
2. Interpersonal Relationships
3. Culture and Community
4. Discipline Within School Culture
5. Higher Educational Experience

Questions

Section 1: Introduction to Educational Experience

1. Introduce yourself and how you identify.
2. Where did you grow up? Describe the relationship you have with your community?
3. Where did you go to school and what types of schools were they? Describe the schools. (Size, private/public, demographics, infrastructure, school philosophy, city/suburbs, etc.)
 - a. If outside of one's community, why?
 - b. If they went to multiple types of schools describe differences and similarities.
4. What was your parent's involvement in your education? Why did they send you to the schools you attended?

Section 2: Interpersonal Relationships

1. Were there any teachers or school leaders you felt connected to? Tell a story about them.
2. Were there any teachers or school leaders you disliked or had tension with? Tell a story about them.
3. What was your relationship with other students? What kind of people did you hang out with?
4. Were there certain types of people you avoided associating with?
5. Were you ever associated or grouped based on the people you surrounded yourself with?
 - o Words that best describe relationships with educators over the years.
 - o How these relationships shaped their school experience?
 - o Elaborate on interactions you observed of other Black girls with educators.
 - o Compare current interactions with adults with those of earlier in schooling.
 - o How did your teachers describe you?

Section 3: Culture and Community

1. What was your relationship with the schools you attended?
 - a. Thinking about did they feel welcomed at school? Why or why not?
 - b. Did they feel safe at school? Why or why not?
 - c. Did they consider their school a community? What did they like or dislike about the school?
2. Did you see your own culture and community represented in your education and school atmosphere?
3. What words describe how you felt in school as a little Black girl?
4. Did your identity as a Black girl influence how you navigated spaces at school? If so, how?
5. How were you treated at school by teachers, peers, etc.?
 - a. Do you feel like you were always treated fairly? How would you change or what would you keep the same about policies at your schools? Were you ever treated unfairly?
6. Did you feel affirmed at school?
 - a. Were there any actions you took to create affirming spaces or seek affirming spaces?
7. Describe your college application process.
 - a. What support did you have or did not have? What support did you feel you needed?
8. Did you engage in activities or clubs at your school? Or specific social groups?
 - a. How significant were activities or clubs to you as a student?

Section 4: Discipline Within School Culture

1. Were you ever perceived as older than you actually were? If yes, how did that make you feel?
2. What did discipline look like at your school? Who was disciplined? What did you witness?
 - a. Follow up ask about their own discipline history.
 - b. Were there circumstances outside or inside of school that affected how you behaved in school?

- i. Thinking about where they the model student, were they talkative, were they ever separated from other students?
 - ii. What kinds of behavior did they exhibit and how was it perceived?
 - iii. Did they get positive feedback or negative, what was the feedback?
 - iv. How did this change or stay the same overtime?
 - v. Do you know of disciplinary instances that did not involve you?
- 3. Describe yourself as the student you were in adolescence.
 - a. What do you consider appropriate or good behavior in school? Why?
 - b. What do you consider inappropriate or bad behavior in school? Why?
 - c. What the school considered?
- 4. What motivates you to do well in school?
 - i. Thinking about where they always engaged in school, why or why not?
 - ii. Was it hard to be engaged, why?
- 5. What would you change or keep the same about the disciplinary policies and practices at your schools?

Section 5: Higher Educational Experience

- 1. How did your K-12 educational experience impact and inform your life as a student now?
- 2. Why did you choose the college or University you attend?
 - i. Thinking about what factored into their decision.
 - ii. What do you like about it?
 - iii. What don't you like?
 - iv. What's different about college vs your high school experiences?
- 3. Describe the type of student you are now.
 - a. Why do you have these habits and traits?
 - b. What similarities or differences do you see in yourself as a student from high school to now?
- 4. What types of activities or clubs do you engage with now?
 - a. Why? What are similarities and differences?

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