

## ABSTRACT

JENKINS, DEMETRIUS D. A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Educational and Discipline Experiences of Black High School-Aged Girls and their Impact on Identity Development. (Under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Ayscue).

This study explores how Black high school-aged girls make meaning of how their experiences have shaped the development of their identities. Following a qualitative phenomenological design rooted in Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as the theoretical framework, this study centers the narratives of five Black girls who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban public school district. This study sought to understand how its participants internalized their experiences, particularly with school discipline procedures and practices, and how those experiences impacted their identity development.

The experiences of Black girls deserve their own considerations in discussions on equity and reform in schools. In response to that, this study answered two research questions:

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls contribute to the development of their identities?

The findings revealed four emergent themes: Surveillance of Black Girlhood, Respectability and Resistance, Connection and Community, and Self-Definition as Resistance. The study's participants reflected on their perceptions of moments that scrutinized their bodies, expressions, and behaviors. These moments pressured the participants to engage in self-preservation strategies where they chose to silence and shrink themselves in effort to protect their dignity in contexts that failed to see them fully.

The participants of this study described discipline to be deeply engrained into their schooling experience through misinterpretations and heightened scrutiny of their presence. They discussed being punished for actions that other subgroups could engage in without question. The findings support existing research that subject Black girls to unjust biases and surveillance.

The participants also shared narratives of safety and affirmation in their experiences. They discussed how positive relationships with trusted adults and like-minded peers served as critical sites for positive identity development. This study offers novel insight by identifying these connections as protective spaces for safety, affirmation, and resistance.

This study was guided by BFT as a theoretical framework that honors the voices of Black girls as valid knowledge in understanding their experiences and centers their agency in engaging in self-definition. Their reflections not only describe how they are perceived but elevate them as experts in choosing how they will resist and reclaim humanity in response to deficit-based perceptions.

This study recommends educators and policymakers to consider how the culture, policy, and practices shape how Black girls are seen and how they see themselves. Policy must explicitly address how the intersection of race and gender influences the disproportionate discipline of Black girls. School-based practices must also reflect prioritization of belonging, affirmation, and identity exploration of Black girls. This study also insists that Black girls' voices are valid; therefore, they should not be silenced but protected and celebrated.

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A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Educational and Discipline Experiences of Black High School-Aged Girls and their Impact on Identity Development

by  
Demetrius D. Jenkins

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

Raleigh, North Carolina  
2025

APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Jennifer Ayscue  
Committee Chair

---

Dr. Lisa Bass

---

Dr. Lance Fusarelli

---

Dr. Henry Johnson

## DEDICATION

For my nieces and my goddaughter who are bright lights in my life and reflections of all the Black girls who came before you, walk alongside with you now, and will follow in your footsteps. You are an embodiment that possibility is endless, and I can only hope this work affirms your brilliance and your power. Your voices will always matter. Your futures are without limits.

And for my late brother, your love and belief in me have reached farther than life itself. Well beyond the life we shared, you remind me to rise to my potential, to carry our dreams forward, and to never let what you saw in me go to waste. Your love, your pride, and your faith in me live on in every page of this work.

## BIOGRAPHY

Demetrius D. Jenkins is a native of Ahoskie, North Carolina. He earned his bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2013 as a first-generation bachelor's recipient and began his career serving and leading as an educator in rural, northeastern North Carolina. His early leadership work has strengthened his commitment to improving student outcomes and school communities.

In December 2018, Demetrius earned his Master of School Administration from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. He also participated in Project i4 at East Carolina University, further honing his instructional leadership lens.

Broadening his impact beyond the state of North Carolina, Demetrius served in Atlanta, Georgia where he deepened his knowledge and experience in school improvement. He later transitioned to the nation's capital, bringing his leadership lens and passion for creating better school experiences for all students.

Demetrius completed his Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at North Carolina State University as a first-generation doctoral degree recipient, continuing his mission to transform education through equity-driven leadership and a relentless focus on student success.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to my chair, Dr. Jennifer Ayscue, for your continuous feedback, advising, affirmations, and the way you stretched me to think deeper and aim higher. Together, we got this across the finish line.

To my committee, thank you for your knowledge, humor, and expertise throughout this program. You have made my time at NC State unforgettable and shaped my lens as a scholar and leader.

To the wonderful, Tuffy cohort, you inspired me from Day One. The way we held each other up through this journey is what I will remember most. I am honored to be connected to each and every one of you.

To my family and friends, your encouragement, laughter, and community reminded me that I was never alone through this process. You all motivated me more than you may know, and for that I am appreciative. You all served as sites to breathe, reset, and to revisit this work with new energy. I am grateful for every moment together that reminded me of the world beyond the dissertation.

To my brothers and my best friend, thank you for inspiring this work through the light and brilliance of my nieces and goddaughter.

To my big brother, your constant love and support has always made me lucky to be your baby brother. Our oldest brother, may he rest in peace, would be extremely proud of the ways you've shown up in his absence.

To my parents, thank you for planting in me, from a young age, the belief that I could do and be anything I set my mind to. When I thought I had nothing else to give, it was your desire to witness my completion that carried me forward.

To the bold Black girls who participated in this study, thank you for trusting me with your stories. Your honesty, vulnerability, and courage brought this work to life in ways that would not have been possible without your voices. I will always honor the truths you shared.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge God for keeping me steady when I did not know where else to turn. *“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint”* (Isaiah 40:31).

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Chapter Introduction

Black people in the United States have been disadvantaged since enslavement. Although the challenges of Blacks in the country may not look the same at first glance, the legacy of slavery continues to disadvantage Black people in the 21st century (Bertin et al., 2025). This history of the United States is imbued with the enforcement of policy that adversely impacts the trajectory of people who are both poor and Black (Okazaki, 2009; Reskin, 2012; Thompson & Neville, 1999; Willaims & Williams-Morris, 2000). Zero-tolerance policies were initially enacted to address the usage of drugs in communities (Advancement Project, 2010). Research shows that the enforcement of these local, state, and federal policies criminalized and targeted to deter social behaviors that were most associated with Black communities, such as crack cocaine usage, led to the disparate incarceration of Black people (Bell, 2015). Black people were unfairly prosecuted in comparison to their White counterparts as a result of the zero-tolerance approach to maintaining social order in the United States. Blacks were labeled as criminals, suffered unimaginable living conditions in jails, were unfairly tried and convicted, and were forced to experience a plethora of economic disadvantages for decades to follow. This legacy manifest itself in extreme disparities in discipline in the nation's public schools at the intersection of race and gender due to exclusionary, punitive school disciplinary practices (Blake et al., 2011).

As the legislators in the United States enforced a zero-tolerance approach to unfavorable behaviors that disenfranchised Black citizens and stripped them of their freedom and dignity, the country's schools utilized a similar approach to deter behaviors within school buildings (Gorman & Pauken, 2003). Following the aforementioned impact that this approach had on Black adults in the criminal justice system, zero tolerance discipline policies in schools also target students of

color in an unfair and inhumane manner (Findlay, 2008). These policies contribute to the racial discipline gap, criminalization of minors, and negative perceptions of law enforcement and schools for Black students (Morris, 2018).

Historically, as a result of the impact of racial oppression stemming from slavery, Black children have not been allowed to enjoy the same protections and experiences as White children in the United States (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ocen, 2015). For Black women and girls, femininity does not mean the same thing as it does for White women and girls (Fordham, 1993). Generally, to be feminine means to possess traits similar to sensitivity, warmth, emotion, and affection (Donovan, 2011). We live in a world where the standards for what it means to be a woman are situated on references of the White, middle-class norms (Collins, 2004). Since slavery, Black women were not allowed to subscribe to such norms as they were forced to work just as much and just as hard as their male counterparts (White, 1985). At the intersection of their race and gender, Black girls find themselves in a unique predicament that prohibits their access to social benefits and privileges afforded to males and White females (Crenshaw, 1989).

The purpose of this study is to examine how Black high school-aged girls perceive the impact of the intersection of their race and gender on their experiences in schools and the development of their identities. This topic was examined through a qualitative research design in which a phenomenological approach was applied to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of the study's participants.

### **Problem Statement**

Black girls and women occupy a unique space in our society. Being both Black and female, they have to live through inequitable implications that cannot be understood without considering the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). On one hand, in

comparison to Black males, Black girls and women are too feminine. On the other hand, in comparison to White women, they are not feminine enough. This leaves the Black girls and women in our society without a true group with which to identify, or to advocate for them. The challenge of being a Black girl or woman in public systems is their experience with intersectional invisibility due to the non-prototypical presence of their race or gender, resulting in them being easily overlooked in policy, research, and practice (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

As a result of the intersection between their race, gender, and class, Black female students in schools often find themselves having to battle stereotypes that label them as aggressive and argumentative. Therefore, they are commonly reprimanded for subjective disciplinary offenses such as disruption and defiance (Blake et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). Subjective disciplinary offenses are those that are based on the interpretation of behaviors by the adults in the school. This means that the implicit biases and perceptions of Black girls by the adults charged with the responsibility of creating safe spaces for them often cloud their judgment, resulting in disciplinary actions that exclude them from their regular educational setting. Morris and Perry (2017) found that Black girls were 3.26 times more likely to be disciplined compared to White students for minor offenses like disruptive behavior. In the same study, Morris and Perry (2017) also found that Black girls are not any more likely to be disciplined for more serious offenses, such as possessing drugs or alcohol.

Research also adds to the conversation regarding Black girls and their discipline experience in schools by confirming that the disproportionate discipline of Black girls is exacerbated due to colorism, essentially their skin complexion and Afrocentric features, and adultification (Blake et al., 2017; Hannon et al., 2013). Distinct from racism, which impacts all

members of a racial group, colorism directly disadvantages those with features out of alignment with Whiteness, such as darker skin, fuller lips, tightly coiled hair, and wider noses (Sissoko et al., 2023). Black women have reported that colorism has had its most significant impact on them during their adolescent years (Hall & Crutchfield, 2018).

Black girls with darker skin and exaggerated features fall victim to adultification. Due to adultification, these girls are treated as adults and therefore are disciplined more harshly, and even more when they are products of poor and diverse families, which contributes to differences in the expression of the intersectionality of their race, gender, and class (Blake et al., 2017).

The inevitable presence of implicit biases of people impacts how they perceive others and respond to situations subconsciously. It is human nature for everyone to carry biases implicitly towards groups of people that result in favorability that shapes outcomes for some and disadvantages for others. In schools, biases manifest themselves in the harsh perceptions of the presence and behavior of Black girls, resulting in unfair, exclusionary discipline (Epstein et al., 2017). Research indicates that Black girls have significantly different discipline experiences in schools than their White counterparts across the continuum of school discipline (Morris, 2018).

Table 1.1 displays the rate at which girls of color were administered exclusionary discipline actions in comparison to White girls, according to the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Initiative on Gender Justice and Opportunity and the RISE Research team at New York University's analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection 2017-2018. In this data analysis, Black girls were overrepresented in suspensions, arrests, expulsions, transfers to alternative school settings, referrals to law enforcement, and restraints.

**Table 1.1***Risk of Disciplinary Action Compared to White Girls.*

Disciplinary Action	Black Girls	Asian Girls	Hispanic Girls	Native American Girls
Suspension	4.19x	0.24x	1.31x	2.26x
Arrests	3.66x	0.31x	1.55x	3.02x
Expulsion	3.99x	0.18x	1.09x	1.77x
Transfer to Alternative Schools	5.34x	0.18x	1.19x	0.91x
Referrals to Law Enforcement	3.01x	0.37x	1.35x	2.69x
Restraints	2.17x	0.19x	0.48x	1.05x

*Note.* The data included in this table is from Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity and the RISE Research team at New York University's analysis of the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2017-2018 academic year.

The data emphasizes the clear disparities that exist regarding the discipline experience of Black students, specifically Black girls as discussed previously in this chapter. Disproportionate discipline of Black girls is attributed to behaviors that challenge what femininity looks, sounds, and feels like (Blake et al., 2011). When Black girls defy acceptable demonstrations of femininity, they are seen as loud or aggressive, leaving them to choose between being viewed as a lady or rejecting systems, such as education, that police how they should carry themselves (Morris, 2007).

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to understand how Black high school girls who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban public school district perceive how their intersecting racial and gender identities and school discipline practices impact the development of their identities. This research will give Black girls the opportunity to provide insight on how their intersectionality impacts how they view themselves and how they continue to show up in spaces that oppress them, including public schools. I acknowledge that Black girls are not a monolith, and it is not the intent to apply the lived experiences of this study's participants to all Black girls to implement best practices and policies for Black girls. Instead, the data and findings of this study can be used to understand how the systems that we enforce in our schools are perceived and internalized by the Black girls who we serve.

This study will answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls contribute to the development of their identities?

This study centers the voices of high school-aged Black girls in developing an understanding of how their discipline experiences impact the trajectory of their identity development as they matriculate through the public school system.

As leaders in the world of education, it is essential that we bring opportunities for all students to exercise their voice to make a lasting impact. In designing environments that are equitable for all students, we must place the lived experiences of Black girls at the center to emphasize that their population matters in our public education system. By understanding the

stories and perceptions of the Black girl participants who matriculated through the same middle school in regards to the aforementioned research questions, leaders could gain valuable insight into how they can influence the experiences and development of their current and future Black girls in their student body through the practices and procedures that govern their student experiences.

### **Study Significance**

All children should have the privilege to be socialized to the world and be prepared for productive lives as adults. Their lived experiences should be grounds for positive identity development as they matriculate through public systems. However, for Black girls, the adults that should protect their developmental process place them in the danger of adultification that adversely impacts their childhood experience (Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2018). Epstein and colleagues (2017) conducted a study that revealed that adults view Black girls as more adult and less innocent than their White counterparts as early as the age of five, continuing throughout their adolescence. The adultification and criminalization of Black girls is a problem in equity and policy that has adverse effects on the outcomes of the Black girls who experience the prejudices of adults.

This study is unique in the fact that it takes a step beyond merely highlighting the detrimental experiences that Black girls have in our schools and puts their voices at the center of the impact their experiences have on how they view themselves in high school. In this study, the participants are intentionally viewed as experts of their experiences. By focusing on the stories and experiences of the Black girl participants, this study can support the implementation of efforts to counter implicit biases and improve risk of Black girls in comparison to White girls. The findings of this study from the voices of Black girls themselves could be used in

transforming schools into equitable environments with positive cultures that positively impact outcomes for Black girls.

### **Definition of Terms**

Below are terms that are utilized throughout the following chapters.

1. **Adultification:** The perception that Black girls are more mature, less innocent than their White counterparts (Epstein et al., 2017). The application of adult norms to a child (Morris, 2018).
2. **Black:** A term used to describe individuals who identify themselves as being of African descent (Hunter & Robinson, 2016).
3. **Black feminist thought:** A framework for honoring how intersectionality shapes the injustices and inequalities that impact the experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000).
4. **Black girls:** For the purpose of this study, this term is used to describe Black school-aged individuals who were recognized as girls in school settings to restore their childhood in contrast to adultification imposed on them.
5. **Black women:** For the purpose of this study, this term is used to describe Black adult-aged individuals who were recognized as women.
6. **Colorism:** Prejudicial treatment of people of the same race based on their skin tone (Hannon et al., 2013).
7. **Criminalization:** The treatment of someone's legal behaviors as if they are in violation of the law (Morris, 2018).
8. **Exclusionary Discipline:** A disciplinary action taken that removes a student from their regular setting (Smizer, 2021).

9. Intersectionality: A framework for understanding the multiple marginalized identities that shape a person's experience with inequity, discrimination, and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).
10. School-to-prison pipeline: The impact of exclusionary discipline that contributes to a child's risk of interacting with the criminal justice system later in life (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).
11. Subjective disciplinary offenses: Behaviors in schools whose meaning is based on interpretation of adults, such as, disruption, defiance, and disrespect (Forsyth et al., 2015).

### **Organization of the Study**

This chapter lays the foundation for this study by acknowledging the idea that Black girls experience different outcomes in public systems due to centuries of biases, perceptions, and prejudices due to the intersection of their race and gender. Additionally, this chapter introduces the significance of centering the voices of Black girls who carry the burden of the biases, perceptions, and prejudices that impact their experiences during the critical phases of their identity development.

The review of the literature that will be discussed in Chapter 2 utilizes the study's purpose and the research questions to establish an understanding of the historical challenges that Black girls and women experience in our society and how they contribute to the experience that they have in public systems. Chapter 2 will establish the need for this study through synthesizing previously conducted studies on the experiences of Black girls in schools. In doing so, Chapter 2 will demonstrate that Black girls' experiences are best understood through centering their voices.

Chapter 3 will discuss the research design and procedures of this study. It will provide the rationale for conducting this qualitative study through a phenomenological approach to describe how the lived educational and discipline experiences of Black girls in schools impact who they see themselves to be in the spaces they occupy. This chapter also discusses how the study's participants were recruited and selected to participate. The third chapter of this study will outline the procedures for data collection, data analysis, and address considerations made to conduct an ethical study.

Chapter 4 will include a description of the findings of the study based on data collected from five Black high school-aged girls. As this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted, data were collected and coded for themes that emerged. The fourth chapter describes the lived and discipline experiences of the participants in relation to each research question.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings of this study based on the research questions. The findings will be compared with those of existing research. The fifth chapter also provides critical reflections of the theoretical framework that grounds this study. The chapter details implications for practice and policy, while making recommendations for future research.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the experience that Black girls have in the public systems in our society. This chapter further explored how factors outside of the control of Black girls negatively impact their overall experiences in schools (e.g., adultification, criminalization, etc.). This chapter also acknowledged the stark discrepancies between the discipline experience of Black girls in comparison to their White counterparts. This chapter discusses how this study is significant as it will center the voices of Black girls in understanding how their lived educational and discipline experiences have impacted their identity development.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature that is relevant to this investigation of the educational and school discipline experiences of Black girls and how they impact the development of their identities. Throughout this chapter, I will synthesize the literature relevant to the topic and discuss how each supports the need for this study. I will provide an understanding of the theoretical framework, Black Feminist Thought, which will be the lens through which this study is designed, how data will be collected, and how data will be analyzed to fulfill this study's purpose. This chapter will share a brief overview of the trajectory of Black people in establishing citizenship and accessing public education in this country. Then, I will illuminate the proliferation and impact of zero-tolerance policies on Black students and how they fuel the racial discipline gap and the school-to-prison pipeline. I, then, follow by exploring the shift to the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools in response to the disproportionate discipline experiences of Black children because of exclusionary discipline. This chapter also defines historically challenging, stereotypical images of Black women and how they impact the identity development and socialization of Black girls. Lastly, I found it critical to explore studies that center the voices of Black girls as experts of their unique experiences in schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To develop an understanding of the experiences of Black girls and their identity development in schools, I utilized Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as the theoretical framework. BFT honors how intersectionality, which is the interconnection of various systems of oppression (e.g., sex, gender, race, class, etc.), shapes the injustices and inequalities that impact the

experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000). McArthur and Lane (2019) call Black Feminist Thought the most comprehensive lens of experiences of Black girls in light of their intersecting identities. Collins (1990, 2000) further illuminates the unique experiences of Black women and girls through a both/and lens that acknowledges them as members of two marginalized communities being Black and female. The term intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1991) to define the multiple marginalized identities that impact individuals' experiences with inequity, discrimination, and oppression. For Black women, their identities were described as "double jeopardy" in 1969 by Frances Beal to describe their non-prototypical identities, emphasizing their distinct experiences in comparison to Black men and White women.

As a theoretical framework, BFT directly targets the power of Black women as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2000). BFT values the perspective of Black women while also empowering them to advocate for their needs. This study will give the participants the space to confront the oppression that they experience at the intersection of their race and gender. By examining the discipline experiences of Black girls through the BFT lens, they are granted the opportunity to tell their stories regarding how they experience the world through their perspective. The BFT approach also directly counters the historical, oppressive narrative that precedes Black girls in the spaces that they occupy (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). By placing BFT at the foundation of this study, Black girls had a space that has been constructed for them to safely offer insight into their experiences in the educational landscape.

There is an urgent need to apply this intersectional BFT lens to understanding the experiences of Black girls. The marginalization of Black girls due to their intersecting race and gender identities in the educational system puts Black girls at risk of inadequate access to high-quality education and experiences with discipline systems that result in their disproportionate

criminalization (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). BFT does not just encourage accounting for race and gender when considering the experiences of Black women and girls with multiple marginalized identities. For example, Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) found that when socioeconomic class is considered in addition to race and gender, the disadvantages that Black women and girls experience are exacerbated. Black women and girls of low socioeconomic status are most likely in economically disadvantaged communities that impact school budgets, lack high-quality teachers, and perpetuate culturally irrelevant curricula (Lane, 2017; McArthur & Lane, 2019).

The tenets of the framework that directly align with the focus of my dissertation are honoring intersecting identity markers of Black girls in regards to their race, gender, class, etc., centering the voices of Black girls as a marginalized group that have otherwise been disregarded in feminist and academic discourse, recognizing diversity within the experiences of Black girls, and advocating for equity and social justices of Black girls in schools. With these tenets at the foundation of my research, BFT honors the Black girl participants as the experts of their experiences and champions the knowledge that they have and gives them the space to analyze their experiences to construct meaning of how they have grown to see themselves in our schools and communities.

### **Historic Overview of Black Students and Public Education**

The history of the United States is imbued with racial oppression for people of color in schools. The country was founded on ideals of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Feagin, 2010). According to the Naturalization Act of 1790, to be considered an American citizen, one must have been defined as a "free White person," although limited to White men only, of good character (Zinn, 2010). Additionally, Black people were excluded from citizenship in terms of

voting rights, military eligibility, and civic duty to serve on a jury. These exclusionary practices and policies that define what it means to be American have long-standing impacts on the experiences of Black people in our country (Skiba et al., 2023).

In the 1954 United States Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the *Plessy* decision was overturned, and the court ruled that segregated school facilities are inherently unequal. The *Brown* decision brought forth a spirit of equality and hope for the public education system for all students, but researchers like Hanson (2005) argue that the potential of equality was never realized. Ultimately, desegregating the institution of public education did nothing to address the social, political, and economic disadvantages that Black people experienced that remained post-*Brown* (Triplett et al., 2014). The facilities that were used to educate Black students continued to be under-resourced (Ashford-Hanserd et al., 2020).

Despite the desegregation of schools in the United States decades ago, Black students continue to be subject to less favorable achievement outcomes as a result of less rigorous coursework, fewer resources, and ineffective teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2004; McCardle, 2020).

It is important to understand the legal trajectory that Black people, specifically Black girls for this study, have endured to justify their citizenship and right to a fair, free education in this country. It is fair to believe that remnants of these historical challenges still have an impact on the developmental trajectory of Black girls today.

### **Historical Representations of Black Women**

When discussing the experiences of Black girls and women, it is important to understand the challenges that continue to plague their identities starting from the legacy of colonial age stereotypes that precede their existence today. Since they entered the United States as slaves,

Black women have been subject to stereotypes that justify their mistreatment, punishment, and invisibility (White, 1985).

Colonizers fetishized the bodies of Black girls and women as objects that introduced the Jezebel figure, a hypersexual figure with an unquenchable, insatiable sexual appetite that cannot be trusted (Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Simms, 2001). This image of Black women arose from slavery where Black women were forced to display their bodies at auctions to be examined by slave owners (Jewell, 1993). These experiences of Black women resulted in the construction of this hypersexual figure that was casually exploited sexually by White men without punishment, sometimes resulting in pregnancy (Harris-Perry, 2011; Simms, 2001). Due to the promiscuity that surrounds the Jezebel figure, Black women were not seen as women that were deserving of the same protection as White women (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). hooks (1992) identified the Jezebel as the beginning of the use of the Black female body as a physical representation of sexual deviance.

Then, on the other hand, we have the Mammy figure. The obese, usually dark-skinned, maternal-like figure who is desexualized, opposite of the Jezebel. This figure portrays Black women as willing servants of their White owners and their families, usually at the neglect of their own (Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Although the Mammy served as a representation of Black women as nurturing, they were only nurturing to the families that owned them. The image of the Mammy is portrayed as someone who addresses negative criticism of the institution of slavery through justifying her role as a servant who is content in her servitude (Harris-Perry, 2011). Due to the hypersexualized image of the Jezebel, the Mammy was presented in stark contrast to justify her place in the White family's home in no threat to the marriage of her White male slave owner's and his wife (Morton, 1991).

Lastly, we have the construct of the Sapphire figure that paints Black women and girls as bitchy, bossy, rude, and stubborn, all attributes that directly challenge traditional, White femininity that is characterized as passive (Yarbrough & Bennett, 2000). The Sapphire figure is considered to be an emasculating threat to the patriarchy (Scott, 1977). The Sapphire's image is one that cannot be tamed and is always talking in an attempt to control men (Jordan-Zachery, 2009).

Although these stereotypes were introduced hundreds of years ago in the historic trajectory of the image of Black women and girls, today they still impact the self-definition of this population that leads to challenges in the formation of a positive identity for Black females (Collins, 2000).

### **Impact of Stereotypes on Black Girls in Schools**

As a result of the intersection between their race, gender, and class, Black females in schools often find themselves having to battle stereotypes that label them as aggressive and argumentative. Therefore, they are commonly reprimanded for subjective offenses such as profanity, disruption, and defiance (Blake et al., 2017). Blake et al. (2017) add to the literature by confirming that the disproportionate discipline of Black girls is amplified due to colorism and adultification, essentially their complexion and Afrocentric features (Hannon et al., 2013). Black girls with darker skin and exaggerated features fall victim to adultification. Due to adultification, these girls are treated as adults and, therefore, are disciplined more harshly, and even more when they are products of poor and diverse families, which will contribute to differences in the expression of the intersectionality of their race, gender, and class (Blake et al., 2017).

Epstein et al. (2017) published the report "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood" that highlighted the discipline experience of Black girls in schools in

comparison to their White counterparts. The study that was the basis of this report, published by Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, surveyed 325 adults to determine whether Black girls were perceived as more like adults than their White counterparts. The study found that adults perceive Black girls as needing less nurturing and protection than White girls in all age ranges between ages 0-19, most significantly in the age 5-9 and 10-14 age brackets. These results imply that in these critical age ranges of positive identity development, Black girls are held to more adult-like standards for behaviors that their White peers can receive grace and less culpability from.

Annamma et al. (2016) inquired about the mechanisms that place Black girls in the school-to-prison pipeline and whether those mechanisms were in alignment with controlling images of Black women in Denver Public Schools (DPS). This study revealed that Black girls in DPS were overrepresented in all subjective offenses that were largely dependent on the perceptions of adults, such as disobedience and defiance. Additionally, Black girls in DPS were less likely to be referred for objective offenses, such as possession of drugs and alcohol. This study also found alignment between the reasons Black girls were referred to the office and the controlling images of Black women. The behaviors that are perceived as disobedient and defiant are the results of stereotypes that label Black girls as aggressive, threatening, loud, and/or dangerous (Annamma et al., 2016; Blake et al., 2011; Morris, 2007). The study conducted by Annamma et al. (2016) shows that historically negative stereotypes of Black women adversely impact the inequitable adult perceptions of Black girls resulting in the criminalization of their behaviors that are not in alignment with traditional White femininity.

The inevitable presence of implicit biases in people impacts how they perceive others and respond to situations subconsciously. It is human nature for everyone to carry biases implicitly

towards groups of people that result in favorability that shapes outcomes for some and disadvantages for others (Staats et al., 2016). In schools, biases manifest themselves in the harsh perceptions of Black girls' presence and behavior, resulting in unfair, exclusionary discipline. Disproportionate discipline of Black girls is attributed to behaviors that challenge what femininity looks, sounds, and feels like (Blake et al., 2011). When Black girls defy acceptable demonstrations of femininity, they are seen as loud or aggressive, leaving them to choose between being viewed as a lady or rejecting systems, such as education, that police how they should carry themselves (Morris, 2007).

### **Identity Development and Socialization**

#### **Racial Identity**

Helms (1990) defines racial identity development as a sense of group identity based on one's perception that they have a racial connection to a racial group. Racial identity is critical in minority youth's development and is defined as their perceptions and investment in their racial group's norms (Sanchez et al., 2016). The development of one's racial identity as theorized by Cross (1991) highlights how Blacks progress through four stages that move individuals in the direction of acceptance of their Black identity and culture. The four stages of Cross's (1991) model are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization. In his revised 1991 model, Cross characterizes the pre-encounter stage as when individuals do not connect with their racial group and assimilate into the dominant White culture by internalizing their ideals. During the encounter stage, Black people experience events that drive their acceptance of the impact that race has on their experiences. In the immersion-emersion stage, Black people immerse themselves in Black culture while simultaneously challenging previously accepted ideals of dominant White culture. In the internalization stage of racial identity development,

Black people display a higher level of understanding of how racism and systems of oppression impact marginalized groups and demonstrate a level of resistance to White standards, norms, and beliefs. Under Cross's model, racial identity development is not a linear process, but instead it is applied throughout different stages of life as events are encountered that influence how race is internalized over time.

Racial identity has been conceptualized as a multidimensional and complex construct that is shaped by many factors that influence its development (Cross, 1971, 1991; Helms, 1990, 2007; Neville & Cross, 2017; Sellers et al., 1998). Most models propose that racial identity is developed through stages as described in Cross's (1971, 1991) theory. Building on earlier models of racial identity development, Sellers et al. (1998) introduced the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) which highlights two critical components – racial centrality and racial ideology. Racial centrality refers to the degree to which being Black is central to one's concept of self. Racial ideology refers to the beliefs one holds regarding how Black people should navigate a racially oppressive society.

As Black teenagers develop over time, they ask questions regarding who they are and how they should act in terms of their racial identities (Tatum, 1997). Mandara et al. (2009) conducted a study that found that racial identity of Black adolescents is connected to self-esteem and depression. Additionally, Mandara et al.'s (2009) study found that when Black adolescents develop prideful perceptions towards their racial identities, then their symptoms of low self-esteem and depression decrease. Booker (2004) found that when Black students do not feel a sense of belonging in their schools, their academic outcomes are adversely impacted. The findings of these studies are critical in understanding how oppression can impact the overall wellbeing and mental health of Black youth.

## **Intersecting Race and Gender Identity**

When considering the gender identity development of Black girls, we must honor their intersectionality to provide them with the recognition they deserve as an often overlooked population. The gendered experiences of Black girls are extremely different than their White counterparts. Research shows when studying the race or gender identities of Black girls and women in isolation, they are ignored and send a message that they are positioned at the lowest tier of the social hierarchy (hooks, 1981). Instead, Collins (2000), Crenshaw (1991), and hooks (1981) highlight that the unique experiences of Black girls and women stem from the intersection of their racial and gendered identities. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term “intersectionality” to symbolize the ways in which race and gender works together to shape the experiences of Black girls and women.

Gendered racial identity (GRI) captures the emotions, beliefs, and internalization that shape how one interprets their experiences at the intersection of their race and gender (Leath & Chavous, 2018; Thomas et al., 2011; Williams & Lewis, 2021). Jones and Day (2018) outlined four profiles of GRI that represented different levels of race and gender centrality: 1. intersectional engaged, 2. race progressive, 3. intersectional aware, and 4. gender expressive. The intersectional engaged profile reflects a keen recognition of both race and gender as central to identity. Racial identity is emphasized in shaping women perspectives in the race progressive profile. The intersectional aware profile acknowledges racial and gender identity in guiding responses but with less emphasis. The gender expressive profile places gender in the center of self-definition more than race. Together, these profiles illustrate how Black girls and women define their racial and gender identities differently and how they influence their perceptions and strategies for navigating social contexts. Williams and Lewis (2021) described GRI as a process

that includes the phases of hyperawareness, reflection, rejection, and navigation informed by the racial ideologies of assimilation, humanist, defiance, strength, pride, and empowerment.

Research that applies Cross's framework to the identity of Black women identifies that while race remains important, it is complemented by other critical social identities (Fhagen-Smith et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2007; Whittaker & Neville, 2010). While these studies focus primarily on Black women, the findings are relevant to the identity development of Black girls who also negotiate the salience of their race and gender in their contexts.

When we consider the racial and gendered experiences of Black girls in schools, research shows that they find it difficult to maintain positive relationships with their White peers (Schofield, 1981). In schools with predominantly White students, Black girls prefer to work with same-race peers in classrooms (Clark, 1989). In a 2017 study, Carter et al. report that friendships with other Black girls connected to an increased sense of belonging. Kelly (2020) highlights how Black high school-aged girls in a predominately White school maximized their friendships with other Black girls to challenge the oppression they face in their school. These studies suggest that Black girls benefit and seek relationships with each other to support each other in navigating through their predominantly White educational settings.

On the other end of the spectrum, predominantly Black educational spaces are reflected as spaces that are socially, culturally, and psychologically safe for Black children and youth (Berry, 2005; Brown, 2013). Morris (2016) counters that by arguing that Black girls are still most likely to have negative experiences because of adults that perceive them as argumentative because they are still more likely to have White female teachers despite being around same-race peers. Additionally, attending schools that are predominantly Black spaces does not offer Black girls protections from harmful prejudices, such as misogynoir and colorism (Bailey & Trudy,

2018; Hunter, 2016; Shange, 2019). Black girls also receive stereotypical messages regarding their attitude from their Black male peers in predominantly Black spaces (Brown, 2013). These studies make it clear that predominantly Black schools still perpetuate White standards of femininity that challenge healthy identity development of Black girls.

These dynamics are further shaped by the controlling images and stereotypes that precede Black girls and women (Ashley, 2014; Coleman et al., 2016; Knighton et al., 2022; Watson & Hunter, 2016). In schools, this can impact how adults perceive behavior, how peers engage with each other, and how Black girls navigate their interactions with discipline.

### **Socialization of Black Girls**

Children are subject to receiving messages regarding their multiple identities from caregivers that contribute to the values, behaviors, and beliefs that shape their identities. For Black children, these messages have the intent to instill pride, build historical context around their identities, and navigate through systems of oppression (Hughes et al., 2006, 2016; Neblett et al., 2009; Stevenson, 1995). School is supposed to be a place where students can acquire a level of self-awareness that leads to a clear understanding of their identity. But for Black girls who are invisible due to the intersection of their race and gender, it is instead a place of alienation and silence that impacts the development of their academic identities (Howard, 2003). In alignment with the BFT tenet of honoring the intersecting identities of Black girls, this study will focus on the oppression that Black girls experience as a result of the interlocking racial and gender-marginalized identities.

Historic, controlling images of the Black woman that label them as promiscuous and hypersexual on one end and nurturing and selfless on the other has been associated with low self-esteem and high levels of sexual deviancy (Thomas et al., 2004; Townsend et al., 2010). For

Black girls to develop a positive identity, they must be equipped with the coping mechanisms to navigate the realities of being Black and female (Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Lewis et al., 2013, Thomas & King, 2007). This could be particularly challenging for Black girls in a society that does not place high value and regard to either identity marker. The process of gendered racial socialization is critical in providing Black girls with mechanisms to cope with gendered racism and affirm positive beliefs of their identities (Leath et al., 2023). These mechanisms may include assertiveness, pride, spirituality, educational and career aspirations, and determination.

The caregivers of Black girls are charged with a critical role in protecting them through gendered racial-ethnic socialization, which is a form of socialization to support Black girls in coping with gendered racism that they may face in their identity development (Edmondson Bell & Nkomo, 1998). Edmonson Bell and Nkomo (1998), who called the gender racial-ethnic socialization of Black girls "armoring," studied the socialization of professional Black women and found that women who were raised in supportive, nurturing environments were taught that Black women are to be respectable and courageous. The lessons of respectability entail Eurocentric themes of femininity, such as concealing sexuality and being ladylike. The theme of courage included empowering Black girls to believe they can comfortably realize success in the White world. Women who were raised in families of struggle and survival received socializing messages to be strong and reliant on themselves. The findings of this aspect of socializing Black girls could take the form of helping raise younger siblings or striving to be able to sustain a certain lifestyle in the absence of support from males.

Leath et al. (2023) build on existing frameworks by describing strength as a form of gendered racial socialization that is modeled for Black girls by women in their family through direct conversation, witnessing responses to challenges, and observing perseverance. Though this

messaging can foster a sense of resilience in the Black girls that receive the messaging, it can also reinforce the concept that self-reliance and emotional suppression may compromise overall well-being (Abrams et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2016).

The socialization and identity literature strongly suggests that to garner a holistic understanding of the development of Black girls, their intersecting identities must be honored (Edmonson Bell & Nkomo, 1998; Rogers et al., 2021). When research focuses only on race or gender, we silence the unique experiences that Black girls have in society because of their non-prototypical identities. The socialization and identity literature acknowledges that the meaning that people make of their intersecting identities impacts the shaping of their identities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer, 2017; Spencer et al., 1997; Velez & Spencer, 2018). This study will honor that by utilizing the realities of Black girlhood from the source of Black girls as the experts to understand how their experiences in school inform the development of their identities.

### **Perspectives of Black Girls**

Collins (2000) considers Black girls and women as knowledgeable experts in their experiences at the intersection of their race and gender. There are a number of studies that are centered on the disproportionate discipline of Black girls and the negative outcomes that they experience (Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2017). In order to address the inequities that Black girls face, we have to share an understanding of their experiences from their unique perspectives.

In a 2012 phenomenological study, Koonce explored the experiences of Black girls who talked “with an attitude,” which she defines as a Black woman’s speech practice that either displays confidence or resistance. In this study, the Black girl participants revealed that they would verbally defend themselves in response to adults speaking to them in tones that were

perceived by them as disrespectful and not aligned with the expected behaviors of an adult in the moment. The Black girls also shared that their tone made them feel like they were reclaiming power in a hostile situation with an adult where they felt powerless.

When the voices of Black girls and women are not valued, we remove their ability to be heard as knowledgeable experts of their own unique perspectives and experiences (Dotson, 2011). Carter Andrews et al. (2019) developed a study that gave Black high school-aged girls the space to engage in critical conversations that unveiled how their interactions with adults and peers influence “how they view themselves, experience school, and understand their existence in society.” The findings of Carter Andrews et al.’s (2019) study show that Black high school-aged girls are keenly aware of the narratives that describe them in opposition to western notions of femininity. The Black girls in this study described how adults perceive them as disruptive beings through using words such as “loud” and “obnoxious.” The Black high school-aged girls that participated in this study also reported that the adults in their schools perceive Black girls as needing more discipline and control than their peers due to their perceived defiance. An additional theme that was reported in the Carter Andrews et al. (2019) study was the adultification of Black girls through double standards in regard to dress code. The participants of the study discussed their experiences with their dress being policed disproportionately more than their White or male counterparts.

Although the Black girl participants in this study are aware of the inequities that they face as Black and female in the school setting, they are equally aware that their advocacy will be received as them furthering the narrative that Black girls are angry and argumentative in public spaces (Bhabha et al., 1992; Crenshaw, 1989).

In their ethnographic study, Gibbs Grey and Harrison (2020) illuminate the experiences of four Black middle school-aged girls that have varied experiences with school discipline through reclaiming their humanity by centering their stories. The stories of the participants in the Gibbs Grey and Harrison (2020) study show how Black girls are dehumanized when they are on the quest for protection, healing, academic support, and belief in school settings. The narratives of each Black girl participant in this study highlights how they perceive that neither their physical or emotional safety was a priority to the school personnel who are charged with protecting them. The participants of the Gibbs Grey and Harrison (2020) study purport that Black girls are impacted by the personal attacks from adults in their school settings instead of feeling like school is a place where they receive feelings of empathy and compassion to support healthy identity development.

In a phenomenological study, Katz and Acquah (2024) explored how five Black adolescent girls made sense of their experiences in schools to have influenced how they describe their identity in relation to those experiences. The findings of this study show that while some school contexts provide space for exploration and growth for the participants, others marginalize and dehumanize Black adolescent girls (Katz & Acquah, 2024). The narratives of the participants of Katz and Acquah's (2024) study describes how Black girls constantly negotiate between fitting into White-dominated spaces and remaining true to themselves.

Using a youth participatory action research method, Harris (2022) focused on three Black teenaged girls who were all expelled from their high school in their freshman year after multiple suspensions. As co-researchers over a five-month period, these participants analyzed their experiences with school and their relationships with staff, peers, and family and how their experiences and relationships have informed their perceptions of identity. The outcome of this

project was clear: Black girls desire and deserve to be seen, heard, and understood past controlling images and harmful narratives of Black girlhood.

In her 2024 dissertation, Francois examined the lived experiences of 20 Black girls in schools with a focus on racial discrimination and the impact it has on their mental health. The findings of her study reveal that some Black girl experiences are influenced by inequities and biases that misinterpret their presence resulting in heightened surveillance and decreased sense of belonging. On the other hand, the participants in this study were able to identify relationships and spaces in their school contexts that affirm and support them. This identification of the dual realities Black girls face illuminates the need of fostering equitable spaces through mental health programs in schools to create a system to sustain an increased sense of belonging for this marginalized group of students.

Sainvil (2020) studied the relationship between the experiences 10 middle school-aged African American girls have with discipline in school and their academic identities. This study concluded that the experience of African American girls is shaped by staff with limited cultural knowledge and understanding resulting in the participants' perception of being disproportionately targeted for behaviors and constantly misinterpreted. Sainvil (2020) also discussed the impact that peer relationships have on the belonging of Black girls in schools.

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance policies in the United States were enacted in the 1980s in alignment with President Ronald Reagan's war on drugs (Advancement Project, 2010). Zero tolerance policies are founded on the belief that punishing crimes harshly will deter future, and in some cases more serious, offenses. By design, zero tolerance in law enforcement also uses strategies such as

mandatory minimum sanctions regardless of mitigating factors and increasing punishment after three convictions.

In the late 1980s, zero-tolerance policies began to be present in schools when states implemented mandated exclusionary discipline for behavior infractions. The implementation of zero tolerance policies was intended to make schools safer. Zero tolerance policies in schools are intended to deter misbehavior by imposing harsh punishments for even minor disruptions (Skiba, 2014). After the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was passed, exclusionary discipline practices were challenged when states receiving federal funding were required to mandate a year-long suspension for any student who possessed a firearm on campus (Atkinson, 2005; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). Zero tolerance policies gained more public interest due to school shootings, such as the infamous 1999 event at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado where two White male students executed a mass school shooting, killing 13 of their peers (Howell, 2009; Skiba, 2000; Welch & Payne, 2010). Although the media began to shed light on school shootings, Howell (2009) argues that no data supports that an increase in violence in schools was experienced. Kurtz (2002) highlighted a decrease in violent school deaths from 44 deaths in 1993 to 15 deaths in 2001 despite news stories documenting that violent school shootings increased from 200 shootings to over 450 shootings between the same years. Furthermore, violent events at school that perpetuated that schools were unsafe and resulted in the rise of zero-tolerance policies typically happened in suburban, middle-class communities; students of color in urban communities have been the most adversely impacted by the implementation of those policies (Triplett et al., 2014). Nonetheless, 94% of public schools in the country had enacted zero-tolerance policies for firearms by the end of the 1990s (Kaufman et al., 2000).

Although zero tolerance policies were originally intended to target objective criminal offenses to keep schools safe (e.g., possession of drugs and weapons), schools applied its ideals to more subjective offenses (e.g., defiance and disruption) that do not influence overall school safety (Bireda, 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba, 2010). The subjective application of zero tolerance ideals directly impacts the discipline experiences of Black students. Dunbar and Villarruel (2004) found that urban students of color have received expulsions disproportionately since the enactment of zero-tolerance policies in schools. In terms of the impact on the experience of Black girls specifically, zero tolerance policies resulted in Black girls being suspended at a rate six times the suspension rate of their White counterparts (Crenshaw et al., 2015). This is ironic since zero-tolerance policies were initiated to address violent behaviors perpetuated by White students (Council on School Health et al., 2013).

### **Racial Discipline Gap and School-to-Prison Pipeline**

For the sake of this study, the school-to-prison pipeline will refer to how exclusionary discipline in schools impacts the risk of a child having interactions with the criminal justice system in the future (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). When students are removed from their educational setting through exclusionary discipline, they lose instructional time, which impacts their grades, and results in decreased engagement (Gregory et al., 2010). Research also shows that there are adverse social implications for students who are suspended from school, such as difficulties in building and sustaining positive relationships with teachers and peers, battling labels as a behavior problem, and not feeling respected by adults in their school (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Dutil, 2020; Okonofua et al., 2016).

Public schools have a stark history of disproportionately administering exclusionary discipline practices to Black students. Since 1991, Black boys and girls have been subject to

higher rates of exclusionary discipline than any of their counterparts (Wallace et al., 2008). In 2011, the Children's Defense Fund reported that while Black boys and girls represented 17% of the children population between ages 10 and 17, they accounted for 58% of all children sent to adult prisons. Similar findings have been found in other studies that shed light on the increased likelihood of Black students being suspended in comparison to their White peers (Bal et al., 2019; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003).

For decades, Black males have received the focus of researchers who have been able to highlight their discipline experiences and their overrepresentation in the school-to-prison pipeline in comparison to other groups of children (Lewis et al., 2010; McCarthy & Hodge, 1987; McFadden et al., 1992; Shirley & Cornell, 2011; Welch & Payne, 2011). A few studies have found that Black boys experience the highest rates of exclusionary discipline as a resolution to discipline referrals (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Although Black boys are shown to be at risk of being disciplined disproportionately in schools, that does not mean they display negative behaviors in comparison to their counterparts. Nicholson-Crotty and colleagues (2009) report that the disproportionate discipline experience that Black youth have in schools is instead in part due to the negative perceptions of them by their teachers and administrators. Additionally, Moore and colleagues (2008) add that Black students are even impacted by the perceptions of their counselors, which further exacerbates their disproportionate presence in special education programs.

Black female scholars argue that the absence of focus on Black females further emphasizes the historical overlooking of the subgroup and their experiences in comparison to their counterparts who are male, White, or both (Blake et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). Although the literature is more limited in the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline for Black girls, the

targeted focus is beginning to receive more attention. Black girls have a unique discipline experience due to their intersecting identities. Scholars such as Monique Morris (2018) attribute the prevalence of literature on the school-to-prison pipeline and its focus on Black males to the mere fact that Black males hold a larger share of the prison population.

Like their male counterparts, Black girls are at higher risk of harsh school discipline, but Black girls are the only student group that is disproportionately represented across the entire continuum of school discipline, including in- and out-of-school suspensions, arrests, referrals to law enforcement, receive corporal punishment, and being restrained (Morris, 2018). Black girls are constantly expected to behave parallel to White femininity. When this expectation is not followed, Black girls are negatively labeled as defiant and rude (Annamma et al., 2016; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2018). Black girls are also harshly punished for subjective behaviors like dress code violations and talking back (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Morris, 2018).

In this study, participants will be asked to describe their observations and interactions with discipline in their public school career. Additionally, participants would be given the space to discuss how they process these observations and interactions to impact their identity development.

### **Restorative Justice Practices**

The criminalization of Black boys and girls in America's schools is a catalyst for their interactions with the criminal justice system (Advancement Project, 2010). Even considering the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline, the impact that schools have on the experience of Black girls has not been a primary focus for research as their male counterparts. In response to the adverse impact of zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices, schools have utilized restorative justice practices as a non-punitive alternative to disciplinary infractions

(Brown, 2017). The concept of restorative justice practices was initiated across the criminal justice system to center the victim in how offenders will be held accountable and repair the harm done in the committing of a crime (Zehr, 1990; Zehr, 2002). In school, restorative justice practices are intended to influence positive, safe school cultures and support positive student academic achievement outcomes (Vaandering, 2014). Schools that implement restorative justice practices utilize the concept as an intervention for building community and preventing disciplinary infractions while keeping students in school (Brown, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Ashley and Burke (2009) argue that restorative justice practices have three goals, (1) accountability, (2) community safety, and (3) competency development. Accountability encompasses providing opportunities for offenders to repair the harm caused. Community safety recognizes the importance of building relationships and giving the community space to play a role in maintaining the well-being of the members of the community. Lastly, competency development aims to develop the social skills of offenders while addressing the mitigating factors that contribute to infractions. Braithwaite (1989) presents restorative justice practices as a framework that prioritizes responsibility, accountability, nurturance, and restoration over punishment and blame.

Restorative justice practices in schools can support centering the experiences of Black girls and can support their overall wellbeing (González & Epstein, 2021). By honoring the community-building influence of restorative justice practices in schools that allow for community members to use their voice to dismantle dominant norms, Black girls benefit from being empowered to confront the racialized and gendered stereotypes that impact their experiences. Commonly, schools apply circles as the opportunity to give girls the relationship

oriented support they need to reflect, voice their opinions, accept accountability, and seek repairing of harm (Brown et al., 1999; González, 2012).

In a two-year study of a restorative justice practices program in an urban high school, Schumacher (2014) studied the implementation of talking circles, a symbolic indigenous tradition that promotes community through respect, safety, listening, and confidentiality, with an ethnically diverse group of African American, Polish American, and Arab American girls. This study found that the participants developed empathy for each other, increased self-efficacy, improved anger management, and refined their listening skills. The ethnically diverse participants felt the circles were a safe space and deepened their relationships with others.

In her 2019 dissertation, McPhail studied how Black girls perceived talking circles to shape their lives at an alternative middle school. In this study, boys were included in the talking circles and the Black girl participants all reported that their experiences would be improved if there were no boys allowed. Additionally, the participants in the study felt that not adhering to the basic practice to respect the speaker in circles to promote equity in voice directly impacted their perceptions of talking circles. In their experience, the participants voiced that their peers do not consistently honor the purpose of the circles by not showing respect and cooperating fully. Despite the challenges they acknowledged by sharing their perceptions, the participants in McPhail's (2019) study reported that their participation in talking circles has positively impacted their relationships with their peers and staff. Participants of the study directly reported that the talking circles promote trust with others, support their self-regulation, and teach empathy – findings that are consistent with the findings of Schumacher (2014).

To expand the findings of Schumacher's (2014) study, González and Epstein (2021) explored the connection of restorative justice practices in schools, protective health factors, and

overall student wellbeing. Schumacher (2014) argues that gender-responsive interventions have more impact on the health and wellbeing of girls, so this study focuses solely on the perceptions and experiences of Black and Latina girls. Through focus groups with the 60 middle and high school-aged participants, González and Epstein (2021) affirmed that restorative justice practices strengthened their relationships with their peers and adults. They perceive talking circles to be spaces that are nonjudgmental and support them developing a sense of belonging in their school communities. In congruence with the Schumacher (2014) and McPhail (2019) studies, the participants in González and Epstein's (2021) study report that their gender-based experience with restorative justice practices has given them strategies to self-regulate socially and emotionally. Additionally, it gave them a forum to acknowledge and confront the oppression at the intersection of their race and gender in ways that would make it less meaningful if boys were present.

Although it is just one way that restorative justice practices are implemented in a school setting, implementing talking circles as a strategy to develop a sense of belonging in their school contexts could support building community and centering their experiences with the racial and gendered oppression as Black girls. From the perspectives of the Black girls in the studies mentioned above, when implementing restorative justice practices, it is essential that all participants hold true to the protocols to ensure the space and intentionality is protected for maximum impact. Coker and González (2022) theorize that Black girls do not only benefit academically when school communities are healthy spaces, but they are also less vulnerable to criminalization throughout their development.

## Chapter Summary

This study focuses on the educational and discipline experiences of Black girls and the impact those experiences have on their identity development. Although studies mentioned in this review of the literature have not only mentioned the need for an intersectional lens when considering the unique experiences of Black girls, this study will inquire on how Black girls in an urban school district make meaning of how their experiences drive how they see themselves in the world. Black girls experience higher rates of suspension, arrests, corporal punishment, restraints, and referrals to law enforcement than girls of other racial groups. They find themselves searching for a sense of community within school settings to collectively challenge the systems of oppression at the intersection of their race and gender that makes schools a space that complicates their healthy identity development. It is essential that Black girls are centered and regarded as the experts of how their experiences lend to the ways they view themselves as they continue to matriculate through an educational system that is charged with preparing them to be contributing members of society. Through this centering of their experiences, I will inquire on how the educational and discipline experiences of high school-aged Black girls in urban high schools make sense of their identities.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This study aimed to describe the experiences of Black high school-aged girls and how they perceive that their experiences impact their identity development. The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How do the lived educational experiences of Black high school-aged girls in schools contribute to the development of their identities?
2. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive that their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?

This chapter will describe the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological study. I will provide the rationale behind this study's design. The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Through these data collection methods, the study participants were able to use their voices to illuminate perceptions of their unique experiences and the impact that these experiences had on their identity development.

### **Statement of Positionality**

This study was designed using qualitative methods; therefore, it was essential that I address my subjectivity and positionality within this research. In this section, I will discuss how my role as the researcher may have influenced the data collection and analysis processes.

I identify as a 33-year-old, Black male from a low-income family in rural, northeastern North Carolina. I was always successful in school but felt unseen for a variety of factors. While I relate to the research participants in the sense that I also identify as Black, I cannot assume that my experiences with discipline have been remotely close to those of this study's participants.

My academic prowess seemed innate throughout my K-12 experience. As I matriculated through adulthood, to where we are today, I ground my work in my connection to Black girls in various aspects of my life. Specifically, I am the proud uncle of three Black girls and the active godfather of one goddaughter. With all the love surrounding my role in their lives, I am open to providing a voice to all Black girls like them. I acknowledge how my gender expression differs from those who are the primary focus of my research – Black girls.

As I reflect over my career as an educator, I find that I have been able to build and maintain mentor relationships with many Black girls for whom I have been fortunate enough to serve as a teacher and an administrator. This comes from a commitment to being intentional regarding providing them with the space and support they need to feel seen, heard, and validated in my presence. The school communities that I have worked in have been very fortunate to be served by many programmatic efforts to support the development of males, while leaving me feeling like the girls under our care have been overlooked.

My priority as a researcher is to not generalize the experiences of all Black girls, but instead to use the voices of my study participants as a foundation for understanding how Black girls use their experiences to define who they are as an individual. I did not allow my gender expression to assume a superior status over my participants. I did not come to this study with any preconceived notions of what I may find through research. My study was guided by the participants and it will inform my practices within the education ecosystem.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a qualitative approach to investigate the aforementioned research questions using the Black Feminist Thought (BFT) framework. Qualitative research focuses on inquiring deep into the experiences of a small sample size (Bhattacharya, 2017). In qualitative

research, the researcher is instrumental in data collection and analysis. After data is collected from participants, the researcher makes meaning of the contributions of participants by way of identifying trends (Maxwell, 2005). According to Bhattacharya (2017), qualitative research is best fitting because qualitative researchers have the purpose of understanding participant experiences. Additionally, qualitative studies are well suited for research designed to interrogate with the assumption that the experiences of people are shaped by their multiple identity markers. For the sake of my study, I sought to understand the lived educational and discipline experiences of Black high school-aged girls and the impact of their experiences on their identity development at the intersection of their race and gender. Qualitative research is the process of understanding a problem with many layers among humans in society (Creswell, 2009). In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support qualitative research for studies that focus on understanding how participants interpret and make meaning of their experiences. Creswell (2009) also suggests that qualitative research focuses on the perspectives of participants in a natural setting to understand their experiences.

I conducted this qualitative study through a phenomenological lens. Phenomenological research aims to uncover the essence of a phenomenon by an in-depth inquiry into the experiences of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). For the sake of this study, the phenomenon that I studied is the experience that Black high school-aged girls have had throughout their schooling career. Structuring this study through phenomenology provided the participants the opportunity to deeply reflect on their experiences and the trajectory of their identity development (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kozleski, 2017).

Specifically, I utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach in this study due to its goal to focus on the description of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants

instead of my own interpretation as the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology is grounded in the concept of bracketing, which requires the researcher to set aside preconceived notions and experiences with the phenomenon being studied to see it as described by the participants. I engaged in bracketing by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis phases of my study.

Due to the nature of the experiences of Black girls, this study aimed to focus on their voices as a marginalized population invisible in research without the influence of my own assumptions and interpretations. Utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach helped me reach this aim by ensuring that the findings of this study directly reflect the experiences of the study's participants rather than my own. This complements the BFT framework, which honors the perspectives and narratives of the study's participants as valid sources of knowledge to understand their experiences with the phenomenon under study over narratives imposed onto them (Collins, 2000). This study was further guided by the six tenets of BFT by utilizing the lived experiences of the participants as a criterion of meaning, engaging dialogue as a method of assessing claims, handling the participants with an ethic of caring, maintaining reflexivity as means of personal accountability, acknowledging positionality as an agent of knowledge, and recognizing the complexity of truth. These principles in tandem informed data collection and analysis in ways that centered the voices of the participants.

### **Site Selection and Participants**

As of the 2022-2023 school year, the school district that this study took place in served over 50,000 students and consisted of more than 100 public schools across the district. The racial composition of the student population in this district consisted of 56% Black, 17% White, 22% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, and 3% Multi-racial. Of the student population, 15% were emergent

bilingual students, and 15% of the students received special education services. On the 2023 administration of the Panorama survey, district-wide, 56% of the students reported they feel loved at school, 66% of the students reported they feel challenged at school, and 82% of the students reported they feel prepared at school.

The participants in this study have all attended the same middle school in the school district. The middle school they have in common is one of over a dozen middle schools in the district and serves grades six through eight. As of 2021-2022, the racial composition of the student population at the middle school was 90% Black, 9% Hispanic/Latino, and 1% White. In terms of specialized programs, 7% of the students at this middle school were emergent bilingual learners and 14% were students who received special education services. In the 2023 administration of the Panorama survey, 77% of the students reported feeling challenged at school, 54% of the students reported feeling prepared at school, and 40% of the students reported feeling loved at school. In the same administration of the Panorama survey, 72% of the Black female students reported feeling challenged at school in comparison to the 80% of Black males and 85% of Hispanic females that participated in the survey. Additionally, 46% of Black females reported feeling prepared at the school site in comparison to 62% of Black males and 54% of Hispanic females. Lastly, 36% of Black girls reported feeling loved in the Spring 2023 administration of the Panorama survey, in comparison to 45% of Black males and 38% of Hispanic females. It is important to note that Panorama Education, the developers of the Panorama survey, does not report data on subgroups of students if there are too few members that completed the survey. Therefore, this site does not have specific data on the Hispanic male and White student subgroups.

Considering the data that was reported above, the site was ideal for this study because Black girls report less favorable feelings of being challenged, loved, and prepared in every category in comparison to their Hispanic female and Black male counterparts. With this distinction in mind, I hoped to learn about the conditions that contribute to these disparities. Additionally, I aimed to understand how Black girls perceive these conditions to impact their identity development.

Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest a sample size from three to ten participants for phenomenological research. The data collection concluded with five participants because no new themes emerged during analysis. This signaled that sufficient depth to explore the phenomenon had been achieved. I selected the five high school-aged Black girls to participate in this study using purposive sampling. The participants met the following criteria:

1. Identified as a Black girl.
2. Attended the same middle school as eighth graders during the 2022-2023 school year.
3. Were enrolled in a high school in the district at the time of data collection.
4. Had a range of behavior, academic, and social-emotional experiences.

Epstein et al. (2017) found that Black girls are perceived as less innocent and more adultlike than their White counterparts between the ages 5-14, overlapping with their middle school years. I chose to include participants who were in high school at the time of data collection because they are far enough removed from that critical age span while still being close enough to recall their experiences clearly. I wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to capture how those early experiences shaped the development of their identities.

To identify participants for this study, I first reached out to high school principals to explain the purpose of my research and to highlight the established criteria for participation. After initial contact, we identified an administrator to serve as the point of contact (POC) for participant recruitment. I met with the POCs to discuss potential participants who met all the criteria listed above. Each potential participant was provided with an overview of the study, participation obligations, and appropriate forms required to participate.

### **Instrumentation**

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group with the study's participants using the protocols in Appendices A and B respectively. Each data collection method was grounded in a researcher-designed protocol that was reviewed by a panel of experts to ensure the questions were aligned with the aforementioned research questions. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 connect the interview and focus group questions to the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

**Table 3.1**

*Alignment of Interview Questions to Theoretical Framework and Research Questions.*

Interview Question	Interview Question	Theoretical Framework/Research Question
1a.	Take a moment to briefly introduce yourself, sharing your name, age, the high school that you attend, and anything that you would like me to know about yourself.	Background information
1b.	How would you describe how you see yourself as a Black high school-aged girl?	Background information
2a.	How have both positive and challenging experiences with staff, peers, or policies in schools impacted your sense of self?	RQ #2

**Table 3.1** (continued).

2b.	Can you describe any unique challenges with being a Black high school-aged girl in school? And unique strengths?	RQ #2, BFT
3a.	Describe your experiences with school discipline in your school career.	RQ #1
3b.	How do you believe the school discipline practices you've encountered have influenced your sense of self or identity?	RQ #1, BFT
4a.	How do your relationships with peers influence the development of your identity?	RQ #2
4b.	Could you describe any instances where you felt a strong sense of belonging because of your identity as a Black girl? Any instances where you felt excluded?	RQ #2, BFT
5a.	Can you describe any instances where you experienced discrimination or prejudice because of your identity? How did you respond?	RQ #2, BFT
5b.	How have you learned to overcome such challenges?	RQ #2
6a.	What improvements or reforms do you think are needed to better support Black high school-aged girls in their identity development?	BFT
6b.	How do you envision your identity evolving in the future as you continue your education and life journey beyond high school?	BFT
7	Is there anything else that you believe is important for me to know that has contributed to your identity development as a Black high school-aged girl?	BFT

**Table 3.2**

*Alignment of Focus Group Questions to Theoretical Framework and Research Questions.*

Focus Group Question Number	Focus Group Question	Theoretical Framework/Research Question
1a.	Take a moment to introduce yourself, stating your name, age, and the high school you attend.	Background information
2a.	From your experience, how are Black girls treated by teachers, principals, and other adults in schools?	RQ #1, RQ #2, BFT
2b.	Since you entered high school, have you had to show up differently than you did in middle school? How so? Why not?	RQ #2, BFT
2c.	In your opinion, how are discipline practices different for Black high school-aged girls compared to other groups?	RQ #2, BFT
3a.	What have you learned about yourself since you have been promoted to high school?	BFT
3b.	What was it about your experiences since middle school that led to this discovery?	RQ #2
4a.	If you could change one aspect of school discipline practices, what would it be and why?	BFT
4b.	What improvements or reforms do you think are needed to better support Black high school-aged girls in their identity development?	BFT
5	Is there anything else that you believe is important for me to know that has contributed to your identity development as a Black high school-aged girl?	BFT

## **Interviews**

The data collection method of semi-structured interviews was the primary data source to address the research questions. This study sought to gain insight into the research questions from the perspectives of Black high school-aged girls through conducting semi-structured interviews.

Moustakas (1994) considers interviews to be the method of data collection that is typically used in a phenomenological inquiry. The interviews consisted of 13 open-ended questions. Dukes (1984) suggests phenomenological studies have between three and ten participants. I interviewed five participants in this study.

During the interviews, the study's participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as a Black girl in their school district and communities and how their experiences shaped their identity development. Through my development of the interview protocol, I aimed to gain a clear understanding of how these participants perceived their experiences had shaped how they view themselves in their identity development.

I acknowledge that the study participants were still relatively young in their developmental process and may have possessed various levels of self-awareness. Therefore, I utilized a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on the perceptions and experiences of the participants and their sense of self (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

## **Focus Group**

The secondary data collection in this study was a focus group. Focus groups are not usually implemented in phenomenological studies due to the methodological underpinning that focuses on the unique experiences of the participants. In this study, the focus group served as a complementary data collection method to the one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The focus

group allowed for the study's participants to collectively construct meaning through dialogue with those who had shared experiences.

Since the study participants had all attended the same middle school and attended different high schools in the city, I was curious to know how they were able to communicate how their shared experiences have influenced where they were in their identity development.

The focus group asked the participants to (1) discuss their perceptions of how Black girls are treated in school, (2) consider the influence the intersectionality of their race and gender has on that treatment, (3) compare their perceptions of how they have to show up in their current education and community settings, and (4) discuss ways that schools can support Black girls in their identity development. Due to the nature of participant communication required in focus groups, I believed this data collection method would give the participants the opportunity to build on and compare their experiences. It was my belief that the focus group may have also generated a richer understanding of how the study's participants negotiated and affirmed their experiences in relation to others through collective insight and shared understanding. Although Black girls are not monolithic, I foresaw it to be empowering and inspiring to hear that they have peers who have had exposure to similar experiences across the district.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to collecting the data for this study through the data collection methods of interviews and a focus group, I received approval from North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to commence the data collection process. Additionally, I engaged in the school district's process of obtaining permission to conduct research with its students as participants.

Once all approvals were obtained, I contacted building level principals to communicate the purpose of my study and received permission to initiate contact with the students I was interested in as participants. I contacted the students by visiting their respective campuses to introduce them to my study and request their participation by providing informed consent forms for review by them and their parents. The consent captured through the informed consent form included each student agreeing to participate in an one-on-one interview and a focus group, if selected.

After consent was received by the participants and their parents, I scheduled a 90-minute interview block with each participant on their school campuses. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. I audio recorded and manually transcribed each interview within 24 hours of the interview. After all one-on-one interviews were conducted, I scheduled a 120-minute interview block for the focus group with the study's participants. The duration of the focus group was 96 minutes. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed within 72 hours. Throughout the data collection process, I captured my notes in my reflective journal to include all personal thoughts and observations that I was not able to capture through the audio recordings.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, which offered opportunities for me to observe the body language of the participants. This format was valuable in a post-pandemic world where reliance on virtual interactions has increased. Throughout the data collection process, participants' nonverbal communication provided important context to their narratives. While describing their experiences in comparison to other subgroups, their body language visibly tensed as if it were uncomfortable or uneasy to discuss. There were moments where participants cried or took extended pauses. In these moments, I was able to probe further by offering space

for the participants to define their silence by verbalizing what they were not yet sharing. These moments deepened the richness of the data in ways that may have been overlooked in a virtual space.

The focus group discussion was conducted in the face-to-face format on the campus of the middle school the participants attended. Three of the five participants were in attendance. The data collected from the focus group largely mirrored the one-on-one interviews, confirming the themes that emerged. While reinforcing the consistency of the findings across data sources, the limited attendance represented a considerable limitation.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process in a qualitative study is composed of three steps that includes memoing, classification, and description (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The memoing for this phenomenological study began with the process of bracketing, which removed my predispositions and judgements about the phenomenon, as suggested by Moustakas (1994). Throughout the bracketing process, I maintained a journal where I captured my thoughts, concerns, and experiences with the phenomenon that could impact how I internalized the data I received from the participants of the study. The next phase of the memoing process consisted of the immediate, verbatim transcription of each recorded semi-structured interview with the participants of the study (Saldaña, 2013).

The next phase of the data analysis process is to classify the data. In classifying the data in this study, I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts in alignment with Colaizzi's (1978) method of analyzing transcripts in phenomenological studies. I used the process of horizontalization as discussed in Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998) where data is organized into horizons, which are nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements. To engage in

horizontalization, I coded the data collected from this study using a combination of in vivo coding, value, and descriptive coding. In vivo coding was appropriate for this study because it was designed to honor and center the voices of the study's participants as discussed in Saldaña (2013). Saldaña (2013) cautions researchers to not overly depend on an in vivo coding approach as it may limit transcendence to more theoretical analysis. In addition to in vivo coding, I utilized values coding. Values coding is an affective coding method that reflects the values, attitudes, and beliefs of research participants (Saldaña, 2013). This was a relevant method to apply to this study due to its nature of exploring how the intersecting identities of Black high school-aged girls impact their experiences from their own perspectives and perceptions. Following Saladaña's (2013) coding protocols for qualitative research, I used descriptive coding to identify initial similarities that existed between each interview. After the initial round of coding, I clustered the codes into themes in a second round of coding that described the Black girl experience with discipline from their perspective in textural language.

The final phase of data analysis in a qualitative phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon in terms of what the participants experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon. This description of the phenomenon was derived from the themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process where I provided rich discussion centered on the experiences of the participants from their perspectives.

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Trustworthiness encompasses confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability of research data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest at least two of nine strategies are applied in qualitative research to establish validity.

Credibility is when the researcher presents the participant's views accurately (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As the researcher, I practiced bracketing to set aside any preconceived notions of the experiences of participants to allow myself to describe their experiences as they presented them to me through data collection and analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

I also maintained a reflexive journal prior to interviews and focus group discussions to capture any assumptions I may have brought to the research through my positionality as a former educator of the study's participants and other intersecting identities that I had that may overlap or contrast with those of the participants. Reflexive journaling is important in qualitative research because it allows researchers to acknowledge their positions as they interact with the participants and the data being collected (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Following each interview and focus group, I also utilized the journal to identify any connections to my perspectives that may have existed.

Additionally, I utilized member checking to enhance the credibility of this study and to confirm that I accurately captured what the participants shared through interviews and focus group discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Member checking is used by researchers to shift the validity to the participants as they confirm that the analysis of the data by the researcher is an accurate depiction of their personal accounts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checking to be the most impactful method of establishing research credibility. Due to the developmental stage of the study participants, instead of providing complete copies of the transcripts or written preliminary findings, I had a conversation with them following data analysis to discuss and confirm the accuracy of overarching themes that were identified through my analysis. These conversations occurred via Zoom or phone call, depending on the participant's preference. I provided each participant with descriptions of each theme in

accessible language. While no adjustments to the themes were warranted, I provided clarity about how my analysis connected to their experiences. Each participant agreed that each theme reflected their perspectives accurately.

Data triangulation enhances validity in research through identifying commonalities among different sources and methods (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The design of this study relied on multiple data collection methods, semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, to capture the experiences and voices of multiple sources, each of the study's participants.

The credibility of this study was also enhanced through providing the setting, participants, and themes of this study in rich detail (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) acknowledge that providing thick, rich descriptions allows findings of research to be applied to different settings. I used the data collected from the research participants to provide thick, rich descriptions of the experiences shared by the participants.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how Black high school-aged girls perceive their lived experiences have impacted their identity development. The participants of this study were second-year high school students who could possibly not have a firm sense of self-awareness in that phase of their identity development. Therefore, a limitation of this study is that the participants may have found it difficult to express how their experiences have influenced their development at a young age. I acknowledged that my identity as a Black male may have influenced the participants' connection to me as the researcher. I have had to employ policies that disciplined the study's participants. Therefore, the participants' experiences and perceptions of me may have served as a limitation as we discussed their interactions with discipline in schools.

With the small sample of participants, a delimitation is the inability to utilize the findings of this study to generalize about the experiences of all Black girls in schools.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 discussed the methodology that grounded this study. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of high school-aged Black girls in a public school system. In this study, I utilized the perceptions of the participants to discover how they make meaning of their unique experiences and how they perceive their experiences have impacted their identity development. The district and setting were described. This chapter included discussion of the interview and focus group protocols as sources for data collection. The analysis process of the data was also discussed in this chapter. Additionally, I discussed my positionality as the researcher in this study. I also offered the strategies I used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. Lastly, I acknowledged the limitations and delimitations of this study.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **Chapter Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how Black high school-aged girls who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban public school district perceive their lived experience to have impacted the development of their identities. I explored the perceptions of five Black high school-aged girls who were second-year students regarding the influences that school discipline practices, procedures, and lived experiences have had on the way they view themselves. This chapter presents a comprehensive set of findings based on the data collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview with three of the five participants of the study. Black Feminist Thought is the theoretical framework used as the foundation of this study. This chapter seeks to surface the essence of how participants experiences impacted the development of their identity.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, I will discuss the qualitative methods I used to conduct the study. I will describe the data collection and data analysis procedures that I used to obtain and analyze the data. Second, I will review the demographic information of the study's participants. This includes their selection criteria, such as their age, race, school district, and factors of behavioral and social-emotional experiences that made them ideal participants in the study. Third, I will discuss the overall themes that emerged in relation to the research questions. Together, these sections surface the essence of the phenomenon under study from the perspectives of Black girls.

### **Summary of Methods**

In this section, I provide a summary of the methods I used to conduct and analyze interviews and a focus group with the Black high school-aged girls who participated in this

study. I engaged in these methods to elicit rich descriptions capable of uncovering the essence of the experiences of the participants. The names of the study's participants are replaced by pseudonyms as a safeguard to their confidentiality. Rather than assigning pseudonyms, participants were invited to select the names they felt best represented them from a list that I provided. This process gave participants a voice in shaping how they were represented in the study. The use of pseudonyms supported me in reducing the possibility of identifying the student and the high school they attend. I utilized pseudonyms with the intent to create a forum where the participants were able to have in-depth discourse regarding their experiences while fulfilling the ethical safeguard discussed in Chapter 3. I purposely excluded any information that was obtained that could reveal the participant's true identity.

After I obtained district approval, assent and consent forms were obtained from five Black high school-aged girls and their parents/guardians granting me the permission to invite them to participate in the study. All in-person, semi-structured interviews were conducted separately utilizing the same interview protocol as the foundation of the conversation. After all one-on-one interviews were conducted, all participants were invited to participate in a focus group interview as a means to empower and inspire each other through sharing how their experiences have shaped the development of their identities. The audio element was recorded and manually transcribed within 24 hours following the semi-structured interviews and within 72 hours following the focus group. Reflective journaling took place during and immediately after each interview to fully understand the experiences of each of the participants. The data obtained through interviews and the focus group interview was analyzed through in vivo coding, values coding, and descriptive coding. Data analysis ultimately led to constructing the four themes that capture the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants.

## Participant Profiles

The five participants of this study were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria used to select participants included:

1. Identified as a Black girl,
2. Attended the same middle school as eighth grade students during the 2022-2023 school year,
3. Were enrolled in a high school in the district at the time of data collection, and
4. Had a range of behavior, academic, and social-emotional experiences.

This section will provide a short biography introducing the study's participants followed by a summary table.

### Participant Biographies

At the time of data collection, the five participants of this study were all second-year high school students classified as sophomores with an intended high school graduation in June 2027. They represented three different high schools in the urban, public school district selected for this study. For the purpose of this study, the five participants were assigned the following pseudonyms and are referred to as Sparkle, Majesty, Star, Queen, and Doll. Table 4.1 will summarize characteristics of the participants of this study.

#### *Sparkle*

Sparkle was the youngest out of the participants. At the age of 15 and one of six siblings, she enjoyed time drawing, painting, and writing. She was weighing career options that range from chef, to zoologist, to teacher. She identified as more mature than her peers which often led to her perceiving herself as too serious and reserved, which made her fear that she did not fit in or was too boring to be connected to her community. In addition to identifying her maturity as a

gap between her and other students throughout her schooling, Sparkle's alienation was deepened by her disconnect from social media trends, including viral dances and the introduction of new slang terms. She shared, "I feel like maybe I might be either boring or too mature to fit in that category." Instead of harboring feelings of bitterness, Sparkle embraced her social position through prioritizing her individuality, dignity, and composure. Although she did not have direct experiences with school discipline, her observations of how other Black girls were constantly under scrutiny directly affected how she showed up in educational spaces. Through her self-discipline, emotional regulation, and deep introspection, Sparkle embodied Black girlhood that directly countered dominant stereotypes of Black girls in urban schools.

### *Majesty*

Majesty was a self-possessed 16-year-old Black girl who described herself as someone who is driven towards a "successful, financially stable future." She distinguished herself from her peers because she observed them heading down the "wrong path" of alcoholism and teen pregnancy. Majesty had a personal mission to maintain a level of self-respect by staying on the "right path." Shaped by guidance from her brother, who she credited as a role model that modeled and supported her staying on track, she took pride in being different from her peers, even if it sometimes felt isolating. She was critical of how certain school policies were disproportionately applied to discipline Black girls. She specifically recalled how systemic biases and injustices had contributed to her disdain for school as an institution despite understanding she had to persevere to realize the future she envisioned for herself. Majesty's story was one that was a delicate balance of strength and discernment. She boldly refused to internalize unfair treatment and persistently defied low expectations or negative stereotypes projected onto her due to her identity. Majesty remained grounded in her vision for her future, even if moments of

conflict with policies diminished her sense of belonging. Majesty's experience with out-of-school suspension for fighting and classroom disruption served as critical moments that informed how her identity has been shaped as she navigated the disciplinary systems that she has witnessed.

### *Star*

Star was a 16-year-old second-year high school student who was soft-spoken but grounded. She presented as a respectful, reserved, and light spirited Black girl. She introduced herself as "a very goofy, respectful person that doesn't have a lot of friends." She found community in high school through her dance and cheer teams. Her self-image could be described as casual and self-disciplined that she maintained by avoiding unnecessary conflict as she balanced rigorous coursework. Her survival strategy was simple: "Stay out of the way. Mind my business." A defense mechanism that she adopted that represents her knowledge of how Black girls can be misinterpreted and stereotyped. Although Majesty may not have asserted her presence loudly, she was aware of her interpretations of how Black girlhood was defined around her. She leaned heavily on the support and love from her coaches and counselors, who created space for her to process her experiences and observations while providing her with an emotional safety net. Her narrative of Black girlhood deeply valued control, peace, and respect. With a single out-of-school suspension that disrupted her calm identity, Star was reminded how fragile perceptions can be influenced quickly in some environments. She was a reminder that volume does not always equate to strength; sometimes it can be defined through stillness and self-preservation.

### *Queen*

Queen, a 16-year-old Black girl, described herself stating, “I see myself as intelligent, always looking for new things to do, new opportunities, and I don’t let nothing hold me back.” This description was critical in understanding how she showed up in school as a confident Black girl. Queen’s lived experiences and observations also reflected an understanding on how Black girls were subjected to stereotypes regarding their tone. “Some girls do talk aggressive. That’s just how we talk. But I say, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover,’” she mentioned as she named how Black girl expression was often defined as an act of aggression and defiance. As a response and coping mechanism, she counteracted this by being intentional on when and how she spoke to maintain her integrity in an institution that struggled to fully understand her and other Black girls. Queen perceived her version of Black girlhood to be one that reflected the responsibility to extend care and grace to other Black girls around her who were challenged to overcome the obstacles that were in place in the constrained environments around them, such as school. Her advocacy for her peers highlighted her values of intentionality and solidarity. Queen’s experiences with out-of-school suspension for insubordination and disruptive behavior revealed her commitment to advocate for herself and others despite being perceived as defiant.

### ***Doll***

Described as a confident and expressive 16-year-old Black girl, Doll, the fifth participant in this study, took pride in standing up for what she believed in. Her self-image was rooted in self-advocacy, style, and open-mindedness. In relationships with her peers and adults, she valued open, effective communication. Doll boldly named that school discipline and policies systemically constrained Black girls like her, and promised to never avoid speaking up. In her reflections, she identified how expectations were applied to certain students differently depending on their reputation, identity, and adult perception. While rules were communicated to

everyone, their enforcement of rules were not consistent, stating first-year Black girls were “watched more than anybody.” She described how she noticed adult perceptions clearly distinguished who was granted leniency for similar behaviors. Doll’s contributions to this study were centered on justice, perception, and how her experiences shaped how she viewed schools impact the belonging of Black girls. Doll’s reflections over being suspended for fighting has impacted how she viewed justice and perception, supporting her mindset that Black girls are often penalized without considering context.

**Table 4.1**

*Summary of Participant Characteristics.*

	Grade	Race	Gender	Suspended Out of School	Suspendable Offense
Sparkle	10th	B	F	No	N/A
Majesty	10th	B	F	Yes	Fighting, Classroom Disruption
Star	10th	B	F	Yes	Fighting
Queen	10th	B	F	Yes	Insubordination, Classroom Disruption
Doll	10th	B	F	Yes	Fighting

### Findings

This section discusses the findings of this study that answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experiences with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls in schools contribute to the development of their identities?

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) was the theoretical framework that grounded the exploration of the lived experiences and unique perspectives of the study's participants by centering them as the experts of their experiences and acknowledging how intersectionality shapes their perspectives. I gained a clear insight into how Black high school-aged girls perceived how their experiences impacted the development of their identities. The alignment of the questions within the semi-structured interview and focus group interview protocols to each research question are outlined in Tables 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

The findings of this study were organized into themes that emerged from the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Through sharing the experiences and elevating the voices of the study's participants, the body of knowledge surrounding the impact school discipline and the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls have on the development of their identities has been expanded. The emergent themes have been aligned to each research question to organize the insights gathered from the perspectives of the study's participants. Across themes, what emerges is the essence of how surveillance, respectability, connection, and self-definition shape identity.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question in this study was intended to examine how the discipline practices and procedures the study participants have witnessed or experienced have impacted how they as Black girls understand themselves in their school contexts. The intended outcome of

this question was twofold: 1. to capture the outcomes of disciplinary actions applied to Black girl behavior explicitly, and 2. to identify whether and how Black girls are systemically socialized and surveilled. By applying Black Feminist Thought, this study places the experiences of the participants as valid knowledge around how school discipline practices and procedures inform how they see and protect themselves. The two emergent themes aligned to this research question are 1. Surveillance of Black Girlhood in Schools and 2. Respectability and Resistance.

### *Surveillance of Black Girlhood*

The constant surveillance the participants experience as Black girls in school had a profound impact on how the participants in this study developed their identities and their place in their school communities. This theme emerged from the participants' descriptions of how they perceived school discipline procedures and practices regulated their bodies and behaviors through inescapable monitoring due to their racialized, gendered identity. From the account of the Black girls in this study, they did not see school as a place where they could dress, speak, or exist freely. The essence of surveillance here is the felt experience of being persistently read, regulated, and pre-judged.

Across all interviews with the study participants, they communicated that Black girls were constantly under evaluation for simply being in spaces, whether they misbehaved or not. Therefore, they had to be hyperaware of their movements and expressions to avoid instances where they were misjudged or unfairly punished. The consistent surveillance of their Black girlhood informed their sense of belonging in their school communities through their daily experiences.

The experience of these Black girls is a representation that Black girls perceive that even when Black girls engage in behaviors that mirror students from other subgroups of their peers,

the systems in place lead the adults to perceive their behaviors as more severe. Doll recounted an instance and shared, “A boy had hit me, and I had hit him back...and we was both in trouble for that, but they was trying to make it seem like I did the most.” For Doll, moments such as this underscored how the actions of Black girls were left to the perception of others instead of the facts of the matter. In a similar situation, Queen recounted an incident that she observed that defined the imbalanced responsibility that Black girls had to handle situations. Queen explained,

It was these two boys, you know, these two boys, they sit at the table with these two girls and they always picking with this girl and take her pencils, her paper, they mess her hair, they do a lot. But soon as she get back up and to defend herself, it's always, “You just like playing with boys.” And they make me feel a certain way, like, you see them do all this to them and as soon as she get up to defend herself. It is “Oh she just like to play with boys.”

These incidents revealed a pattern that the participants perceived Black girls were held more accountable than their peers, no matter the context. Among the experiences of the participants of this study, Black girls often anticipated how others would perceive their actions preemptively.

Star’s experience as a Black girl in school affirmed this restricting concept of preemptive caution. When asked to describe how her identity has been shaped by school discipline practices, she shared, “Some times when you laugh too loud or want to ask questions, adults act like you are being loud or trying to start drama,” even when the intent is not to cause a disruption but to instead have fun or gain clarity around certain topics. Her experiences were representative of how outward expression of Black girls were received as threats or harmful, no matter the context.

These encounters communicated more than expectations for behavior, they conveyed that the participants' presence in schools were valued less than their peers. The essence of these experiences is in how constant surveillance impacted their sense of worth, labeling them as disruptive before they were recognized as capable members of the student body.

The theme of surveillance of Black girlhood goes beyond behavioral infractions to include control over their bodies as well. All participants of this study mentioned the dress code and how it maintained its presence in discussions about the Black girl experience in schools.

Majesty strongly critiqued her experience regarding how the dress code policy was applied to leggings, particularly when worn by Black girls. She asserted,

It was mainly towards Black girls like if a White or Hispanic girl wore them I would never see or, any other Black girl, would never see them say anything to them, but they would say it to the Black girls. So I didn't like that.

She furthered her critique by discussing the academic consequences wearing a piece of clothing has by describing that continuous infractions would result in an honor code violation, despite her interpretation of the honor code to outline actions taken in the event of academic dishonesty. She struggled to understand the intent behind interpreting noncompliance to dress code policies to criminalize Black girls and their bodies. Doll shared a similar sentiment when she reflected on what would happen if she were to wear a crop top to school as she had witnessed girls from other racial groups wear. Although hyperbolic, she believed that "the whole school would shut down for three weeks," highlighting a similar pattern that Majesty revealed. The participants were frustrated by the scrutiny that Black girls' bodies are placed under in schools resulting in identifying them as distracting. From their perspectives, the participants link the

ways school policies surveil and weaponize cultural expressions of Black girlhood to their deliberate choices about how they navigate school daily.

Even Sparkle, the only participant who had never been suspended out of school, stated that “...you have to limit what you wear because the Black girls here are more developed than other girls...” when asked to describe any unique challenges that Black girls had in school. Sparkle later added,

...you have to limit yourself, the way you talk because it can be considered to other people as just being ghetto. Even if you aren't ghetto, it's just stereotypically claimed that “Oh she's loud, she's Black, she's ghetto.” I feel like that's just stereotypical and is judgmental towards us.

Through her lens, her version of Black girlhood preceded her before she opened her mouth. These prejudices put her in a position where she always had to balance the risks of being misinterpreted and wanting to express herself freely as a Black high school-aged girl.

Doll revealed how the silence of Black girls can also be misinterpreted. When discussing her past experiences in school, she recalled “I used to be quiet but people be thinking they can play with you when you don't say anything.” This recollection highlighted how being reserved invited a distinct kind of mistreatment. Black girls who were too loud were received as aggressive, while Black girls who were too quiet were received as weak. This tension on both ends of the spectrum left Black girls struggling to exist without performing a balancing act around when, how, and if she should speak.

According to the Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) framework, the controlling images of Black girlhood imposed on the study's participants are tools of regulation. The experiences they described reveal the ways that adults in schools interpret their behaviors,

bodies, and intentions, often prejudicially. The level of surveillance discussed here was rooted in school communities having power over who belongs. In response, these Black girls enacted strategies to curtail being misperceived. The accounts of the participants display how they fostered agency in how they would navigate a space that placed them under constant scrutiny.

### ***Respectability and Resistance***

The theme of “respectability and resistance” emerged from the study’s participants’ perceptions on how the expression of Black girls are often misinterpreted. They defined a clear deficit between how they see themselves and how they are seen by staff. The participants acknowledged that their desire to be seen, heard, and validated often was not aligned with what respectability looks like. Respectability prohibits their ability to advocate, give context, or express themselves freely. The essence of this is a tension between imposed respectability and their active resistance as strategies to self-preserve and self-protect their dignity in an environment that misinterprets their tone as defiance and aggression.

The question that lies at the foundation of this tension is, who gets to define what respectability looks like for Black girls in school? From the perspectives of the participants in this study, this definition is not derived from their own values and standards; but instead, it was defined from expectations imposed on them and measured by their compliance.

Queen introduced a concept of being seen through a gendered, racialized lens of disruption when she discussed,

Some teachers got this idea that the neighborhood, where they come from, where they got their addresses – so she must be crazy. I feel like some teachers really have that mindset. Or what middle school she went to, you know, you don’t know how many times people judge me because I went to [redacted].

In Queen's perspective, how a Black girl behaved in the moment is not the only thing that resulted in being disciplined in school. Sometimes it had something to do with her origin, reputation, and bias.

Queen further explains that "people already have their mind made up the kind of person you are before they even give you a chance to show them." Through this perspective, she supports the idea that Black girls are not given the opportunity to be individuals. Instead, their beings were predetermined based on their origins and image. These preconceived notions shaped how the participants approached navigating through their school communities.

Star strategized to overcome by "minding her business and staying out of the way." In an effort to survive, not avoid, Star separated from visibility and discord to protect herself from a system that is designed to penalize Black girls from stepping outside of the boundaries of respectability. Just like the other participants who modified their voices, adjusted their personas, and balanced when to lower their tones to circumvent mistreatment and misinterpretation solely based on the intersection of their race, gender, and class. Star's strategy to quietly distance herself from challenging labels served as an example of how Black girls implicitly resist. Her conscious disengagement from the system served as an act of self-care; having less to do with compliance and more to do with being calculated in how she was perceived and matriculated through the institution.

Sparkle shared how she intentionally rejected dominant perceptions of Black girlhood with similar calculation. With clarity and conviction, she affirmed, "I am not loud. I am not ghetto" as she discusses how Black girls are normally assumed to be. She states, "people think that because you are a Black girl and quiet around them that you have an attitude...that is not always the case. I just do not talk a lot." Though she was quiet in nature, her message was loud

and clear; she does not allow her narrative to be told through stereotypes that precede her and her Black girl peers.

On the other hand, Majesty's resistance was more explicit. As earlier stated, she describes herself as someone who boldly refuses to conform to the detrimental actions of her peers, specifically alcohol and sex. For Majesty, her form of resistance meant that she surrounds herself with people and conditions that will support her in exceeding the limits of the expectations that are placed before her. She boldly claims, "I don't want to be seen like that. I want to be somebody that is successful and makes it out." Her metrics of success fuels her definition of respectability, which is rooted in financial stability, high educational attainment, and a degree of self-respect.

Doll demonstrated a form of resistance that was rooted in self-advocacy. She detailed an incident where a teacher yelled at her when she attempted to assist another student with some classwork. When Doll attempted to explain that their discussion was on topic and productive, the teacher said, "It doesn't matter what you have to say; I am going to always have something to say back." In an effort to not further engage in confrontation with the teacher, Doll elected to walk out of class to solicit the support of a dean and to create space between her and the adult. She later explained, "Although I did not want to go back to her class, I knew that it would only hurt me." Doll's actions illustrated a layered form of resistance that rejected imposed definitions of respectability and reclaimed her agency of how to return with purpose. Her choices to disengage while still prioritizing her education unveiled how Black girls challenge systems that misinterpret their intent.

Collectively, the accounts of the study's participants revealed that the resistance of Black girls can either be quiet, bold, or anywhere between. Some may shrink and maneuver under the

radar, while others defy vocally. No matter the mode, all participants negotiated the benefits and risks of aligning their actions with how they wanted to be perceived in their school contexts.

Their resistance strategies were equal parts survival, protection, and care.

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) describes the resistance these Black girls demonstrated as political acts. The participants made decisions to speak up, remain silent, withdraw, or redirect intentionally to assert their identity and navigate their school communities where their voices were silenced or misinterpreted. In a method true to themselves, each of the study participants refused to be defined in a manner that was not shaped by their own narratives. Through this self-definition, they challenged ideas of respectability that required Black girls to be compliant, silent, and restrained.

For the study's participants, efforts to balance how they were perceived by adults were not only about compliance, but about preserving a sense of worth in spaces that often devalue their voices. The essence of this theme is rooted in the negotiation between respectability and the participants' acts to assert their value through resistance.

### ***Summary of Themes for Research Question 1***

The themes of surveillance of Black girlhood and respectability and resistance convey the essence of how school discipline procedures and practices shape the identity development of Black high school-aged girls. The participants in this study discussed how they adapted and navigated the structures in ways to protect and preserve their dignity. Through these themes, there was clarity gained regarding how Black girls respond to the consistent monitoring of their behaviors, bodies, and voices to navigate their existence in schools. Consistent with Collins' Black Feminist Thought (2000), participants in this study identified how the intersection of their race, age, gender, and class has impacted the systemic monitoring and adult perception impacts

how they demonstrate their Black girlhood. Their voices served as valuable knowledge to understand their perspectives regarding how Black girls internalize their experiences in matriculating through schools that are ineffective in affirming their existence.

### **Research Question 2**

This research question aimed to gain an understanding of how the lived experiences of Black girls inform how they come to understand themselves. The intent of this question was to analyze the essence of how Black girls make meaning of their general lived experiences in schools. It gave the participants a forum to explore how their daily interactions in schools shaped their self-perception. Collins (2000) argues that Black girls develop knowledge through their lived experience and define themselves as a survival strategy and political resistance. Through the lens of Black Feminist Thought the voices of the participants of this study are valid sources of insight into how their identity has been shaped under the conditions set in their schools. Their stories illuminated the emotional and social labor required of them to survive school cultures that did not affirm their worth. The two themes that emerged in response to the second research question are 1. Connection and Community and 2. Self-Definition as Resistance. In harmony, these themes reveal how Black girls define themselves in efforts to protect themselves in their school contexts.

#### ***Connection and Community***

Despite being influenced by surveillance and respectability politics of discipline practices and procedures, the participants revealed moments where connection and community made them feel safe socio-emotionally. This theme communicates how these Black high school-aged girls built relationships that positively impacted their daily experiences. Teammates, coaches, classmates, and counselors had a critical impact on the participants' management of the pressures

of their environments. These relationships were the cornerstone of experiences that aided these Black high school-aged girls in building supportive ecosystems that made school tolerable. The essence of this is that connection serves as both protection and a space for meaning-making.

Star discussed the role that the coach of her dance and cheer teams played in her feeling a positive sense of belonging in those spaces. Even though she introduced herself as a reserved girl, she acknowledged the influence her coaches have on her navigating the environment. She says,

I talk to my coaches about, like, negative stuff going on in school. Like the drama or whatever...and she helps me, like, stay focused, and understand that I'm, like, where other people want to be.

Her experience illustrated how the relationships with her coaches offered her practical and emotional guidance on how to navigate negative interactions with her peers. The roles of these adults gave Star space to open up without fear of being misjudged or misread, a stark difference from her general survival strategy of staying out of the way. Sparkle echoes a similar reflection when she shared, "I have about three adults in my school that I feel I can go to about anything." Through these relationships, Star and Sparkle were able to maximize connections with adults who acknowledged and recognized them far beyond behavioral expectations and created spaces where they were protected against harm of institutions that did not affirm their presence.

Queen shared an opposite but profound account of how interactions with peers can establish a sense of community to impact the development of identity in Black girls in schools. She recounted receiving a call during the summer informing her that she had been accepted into her college-level coursework for the upcoming school year that some of her peers overheard.

Despite not knowing these other high school-aged girls personally, she remembers how happy for her that they were to overhear the conversation.

I was shocked...I was just stuck. Then all these girls came around me, jumping up and down. Then I started jumping up and down. It was just a good moment...I cried and they were all like, "No, don't cry." Now we are all like the best of friends at school.

She describes that moment where joy brought her closer to other Black girls and shaped her social experience in school. Then, she recounted how she mended a relationship with a Black girl who previously made negative remarks about her when she asked Queen for advice on how she maintained focus and distanced herself from drama. Queen delivered knowledge that she encouraged this girl to surround herself with others who will lift her up and encourage her to make positive changes. Queen has since tutored her peer and supported her in improving her academic performance. Through these actions Queen embodied the sense of community that she had once benefited from as she paid it forward and supported someone else. Her account serves as a representation of how peer relationships can serve as sites of identity development.

Majesty, who had concerns for her attendance history in high school, furthers the concept of the power of peer relationships when she shared,

It be girls that I didn't even talk to at first. Now, they be the ones that check on me when I miss school to make sure I know what I missed and offering to help me out with my work.

Her account highlights how instances of mutual support among Black high school-aged girls served as a counterspace for identity development, enabling them to collaboratively navigate struggle and see each other fully in spaces that deem them invisible.

Doll discusses how the community she has established to remain connected to her school environment has grounded her through shared identity, creativity, and culture. She describes how her school's dance team served as a space where authenticity was celebrated and welcomed by her teammates. When asked to describe the conditions that made her feel a sense of belonging amongst the members of the team, she responded,

Everybody on the team are them. Like...it's not a room full of people trying to portray a certain image. Everybody is themselves. Everybody knows they can be themselves. There is no pressure to be someone you are not. It is truly an awesome place to be in.

This account portrays how Doll defines authenticity as a condition for true connection and community. She acknowledges how her dance team is a forum for her to be herself without anticipating misjudgment. Through sharing her experiences, Doll makes it clear that she internalized belonging through shared interests, sincerity, and genuine expression.

Across the accounts of the study's participants, it became clear that community for these Black girls were not created by happenstance; instead, they had to actively seek and cultivate relationships themselves. Whether through staff members who provided nonjudgemental spaces, peers who celebrated successes and offered levels of support, or extracurricular organizations that valued authenticity, each of these Black girls contributed to the formation of enabling conditions that allowed them to grow and thrive. Their stories uncovered how being seen, heard, and validated was critical to their identity development.

The moments of community building described by the study participants are understood to be an act of survival rooted in Black Feminist Thought as the framework of this study (Collins, 2000). In an effort to make sense of the school environments that sometimes failed to affirm their existence, these Black girls had to actively create spaces where they felt a strong

sense of belonging. Who they decided to establish relationships with was their way of reclaiming a sense of Black girlhood. These relationships were rooted in honoring their presence and shaping their self-identity.

### ***Self-Definition as Resistance***

The theme of self-definition as resistance describes how the participants in this study intentionally defied misinterpretations of Black girlhood by developing a sense of who they were despite limitations imposed on them. They formed a sense of identity that protected their futures, worth, and values. Self-definition in alignment to Black Feminist Thought emerges as a form of political resistance for Black girls as they navigate rejecting narratives that confine them into challenging images of what it means to be a Black girl in their contexts (Collins, 2000). The essence of this theme is the deliberate development of identity as a counternarrative to controlling images.

Sparkle directly discussed how she intentionally distances herself from common images of the Black girl as ghetto. The way she speaks, how she carries herself, and how she sees herself all worked in unison to protect how she navigated the world around her. She continuously referenced herself as “more mature” than her peers, a difference she willingly accepted as a part of her identity that she protects daily through her restraint and introspection. She later added,

I think some girls act a certain kind of way because they think that is how Black girls are supposed to act. But, I always knew I wasn't like that. I focus on not being that kind of girl though. That is not how I want to be seen.

Sparkle's story highlights how she defines her version of Black girlhood by deliberately resisting expectations of how Black girls are supposed to act in spaces.

Majesty's resistance was quiet yet firm as she refused to be diverted off the path that she had pre-defined for herself. She purposefully separated herself from her peers as she mentioned, ...girls my age, they are boy crazy, into drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancy, things like that. I don't see none of that for myself and I don't want to go down that path...middle school was where I was actually seeing myself and feeling myself go down the wrong path. And then, my brother, you know, talked to me or straightened me up and he was like, "you don't want that for you and now I changed."

The resistance she describes here was purpose-driven. She was not interested in seeking approval from others; instead, she was defining a vision for herself that reflected her ambition and desire for stability in her future.

Majesty continued to assert the vision she has authored for herself that is grounded in upward mobility and a refusal to accept harmful narratives that limit Black girls. She shared, "I'm just trying to graduate, go to college, and create a stable future for myself."

Star recalls the first instance where she was suspended for getting in a fight in middle school. She expressed frustration with ending her no suspension streak because of how she perceived it to negatively impact the image of her that she spent her life protecting. Star said

...it was all unnecessary...I don't say nothing to nobody. I mind my business and don't let people get under my skin...this was the first time I got to that point...I know I don't want to be seen as a fighter... I don't like how after a fight everybody just talks about it.

This critical experience in her school career disrupted her streak of being in control of her self-image. She had to make a decision to set clear boundaries around how she allowed people to disrupt her peace and gain control of her composure after this incident.

Star continued her reflection over this incident by sharing, “I always tried to carry myself different like to not get involved in drama and stuff. So when that went down, I felt like I let myself down more than anything.” Her emotional analysis highlights her awareness of how her long-standing efforts to maintain a positive image could be overshadowed by a single instance of conflict in some environments.

In a similar fashion, Doll recounted the way she altered her presence to avoid provoking conflict or being misread. She shared,

I can't feel comfortable with saying certain things to certain people because I'm not scared of how they may react but I don't got time for how they may react to what I have to say... Everywhere I go, I look down... 'cause I don't have time for altercations.

Through these words, she illustrated a resistance that used silence and disengagement as a means for protection. Doll engaged in a form of self-definition that prioritized how she invisibly moves through spaces to avoid harm.

These pivotal experiences where this study's participants were resisting conflicting images of the Black girl in schools were not a representation of defiance, but instead they represented their efforts to shape an image of themselves that directly defined their self-worth. Though each participant's resistance was unique in its own right, they all shared the concept that their identity was intentionally and purposefully developed in conflict with how they perceived their school cultures to define the identities of Black girls.

Collins (2000) asserts through the lens of Black Feminist Thought that self-definition serves as a critical counternarrative to controlling images of Black girls. The participants of this study engaged in this level of resistance to reclaim agency in how they are perceived. Their self-

definition was an act of individual empowerment and a political resistance of the gendered racial stereotypes imposed on them in the institutional contexts that constrain them.

### ***Summary of Themes for Research Question 2***

The themes of connection and community and self-definition as resistance represent the essence of how Black high school-aged girls perceive their lived experiences to impact the development of their identities. The participants of this study described how the community they fostered for themselves provided them the opportunity to experience affirmation and to feel validated in their school communities. The connections they developed with coaches and peers were critical in guiding them in reflecting on who they were and how they wanted to be received as Black girls. In tandem, the participants purposefully defined their self-image through intentionally separating themselves from dominant stereotypes and chose images that were aligned with values instilled in them, whether self-inflicted or influenced by family and lived experiences. These themes support that identity development of Black girls in schools is an ongoing process that is proactive in nature and shaped through community and resistance.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings and essence of how Black high school-aged girls understand how their experiences with school discipline practices, procedures, and lived experiences have impacted the development of their identities. Through semi-structured interviews and a focus group, the perspectives of five participants in their second year of high school who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban school district served as valid sources of expertise and knowledge of the Black girl experience. Black Feminist Thought illuminated how the participants navigated the surveillance of Black girlhood and respectability politics while, in spite of, intentionally constructing and protecting their self-

image. This chapter summarized how data was collected and analyzed to identify themes that emerged in alignment to the research questions. The findings of this study present rich, detailed insight into how Black girls develop their identity throughout their journeys in schools. In the next chapter, the implications for practice, policy, and future research will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This qualitative study was designed to understand how Black high school-aged girls perceive the development of their identities to have been influenced by their lived experiences. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4, implications for practice and policy, and recommendations for future research. First, I will provide a summary of the key findings presented in Chapter 4, organized by research question. Then, I will offer a discussion of those findings, followed by a reflection on Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as the theoretical framework that guided this study. I will also explore the study's limitations and implications for policy and practice. Finally, I will conclude with recommendations for future research and a closing summary of this study.

Although this study was designed around a single urban school district, the essence of this problem extends well beyond this context. Black girls and women around the world grapple with systems that surveil, silence, and misinterpret them. The experiences of the participants of this study are just a part of a larger struggle worth recognition. In this chapter, I interpret the findings to articulate the essence of how the participants experienced school discipline and identity development and what that essence implies for policy, practice, and future research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black high school-aged girls who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban public school district perceived the influence of their experiences with school discipline and intersecting identities on the development of their identities. This study centered the voices of the Black girl participants to explore how their experiences informed how they see themselves in contexts that marginalize

their identities. Through the lens of the BFT (Collins, 2000) as the guiding framework, this study elevated the unique perspectives of the study participants to contribute to the discussion on how to better serve this population of students. This study sought to uncover the essence of the participants made meaning of their experiences.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study sought to gain insight into the impact that the experiences of Black high school-aged girls had on their identity development. This study utilized the voices of the study's participants to uncover that the identity development of the study's participants was an ongoing, active process as they navigated systems that narrowly characterized them and their identities. I analyzed the themes that emerged from participant responses during the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion.

#### **Research Question 1**

First, this study explored the question: How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experiences with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities? This research question gathered insight from the participants regarding how the discipline practices and procedures they witnessed or experienced have impacted how they see themselves in school. The essence of the accounts of the participants is a negotiation between regulation and self-understanding. The themes that were uncovered after an analysis of the narratives disclosed by the Black high school-aged girls that participated in the study were 1. Surveillance of Black Girlhood and 2. Respectability and Resistance.

The first theme illuminated how the participants felt their behaviors, bodies, and intentions were constantly under scrutiny and often prejudged. The experiences raised by the participants detailed how adults in schools maintained power over who belonged in their school

communities through orchestrating a level of surveillance that narrowly depicted how they perceived Black girlhood should be represented. To challenge the consistent monitoring of their presence, the participants employed strategies to maintain a sense of dignity and avoid consequences. The essence here is the sense of being constantly misinterpreted and scrutinized.

The second theme surfaced how the participants resisted system-imposed definitions of appropriate expression of Black girls through performing balancing acts to navigate how they see themselves and how they are seen by staff in their schools. Through the reflections of the study's participants, it is understood that they believe presenting themselves as more mature, calm, and compliant would prevent them from the harm of the preconceived notions that misinterpret their expression. They actively resist perpetuating controlling images of the Black girl in schools that label them as defiant, ghetto, and loud by carefully managing when to silence themselves, when to speak up, and when to withdraw from conflict as means of self-preservation. The participants of this study heavily valued being defined in a way that was in direct alignment with their own concepts of their individual identities. The essence of this theme is the tension between respectability and resistance as strategy for self-preservation and protection.

### **Research Question 2**

Second, this study explored the question: How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls contribute to the development of their identities? This research question unpacked how Black high school-aged girls leveraged their lived experiences to contribute to the development of their identities. The essence here is how connection and self-definition become sites of meaning making and identity development for the participants. The themes that emerged in response to this inquiry were 1. Connection and Community and 2. Self-Definition as Resistance.

The first theme revealed how the participants fostered and cultivated relationships with others to establish feelings of safety. The experiences shared by the participants illustrated how they countered isolation in a broader sense through engaging in moments where their presence was honored through their connections with others. The essence of this is that through these connections Black girls could experience authenticity, support, and care that provided a forum for the development of their identities.

The second theme covered how the study's participants actively constructed their identity in contrast to the controlling images imposed on them. Their individual narratives challenged those harmful images by prioritizing setting boundaries, focusing on the future, maintaining control of their actions, and protecting their peace. The way the participants defined themselves highlights their unique resistance to accept being reduced to stereotypical perceptions of the Black girl. The essence of self-definition is deliberate development of identity as a counternarrative to controlling images.

### **Discussion of the Study Findings**

This study examined the school discipline and lived experiences of five Black high school-aged girls to understand how they impacted their identity development. The qualitative, phenomenological research design rooted in BFT surfaced how their identities were shaped through their experiences. The discussion in this section synthesizes how the findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on this topic. Together, these findings distill the essence of how Black girls navigate, interpret, and redefine narratives imposed onto them.

**Research Question 1: How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?**

The findings of this study confirmed existing literature that discusses that school discipline practices are not only modes of behavior regulation but also serve as sites of identity development for Black girls (Blake et al., 2011; Wun, 2016). The stories of the study's participants described how using their voices to seek clarity and self-advocate was often interpreted as a tool for defiance instead of communication. In addition, the study participants shared how adults perceived them as more aggressive and disruptive than they intended to be received. This directly supports the findings of Epstein et al. (2017) which covers the bias that Black girls are subjected to in schools that results in more harsh interpretations of behavior.

The findings aligned to this research question also supported existing research that found that Black girls are overrepresented for subjective discipline infractions, such as disruption and dress code (Annamma, 2016; Blake et al., 2017). This reinforces the idea that Black girl behaviors are viewed through a deficit lens. This study's participants discussed the negative perceptions that accompany them speaking up that results in them choosing silence in order to avoid being labeled and punished.

The findings of this study also supported that Black girls are preceded by oppressive narratives that shape how they are viewed by adults in schools (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). This was evident in a participant's account that she perceived that she has been judged based on the neighborhood she hails from before getting the opportunity to develop an image for herself. Lane (2017) and McArthur and Lane (2019) covered the likelihood that a school perpetuates culturally irrelevant curricula is increased for students of low socioeconomic status. This reinforced a perpetual cycle where the reputation of a community is utilized to justify the disciplinary surveillance of the Black girls.

To extend existing research, this study offered detailed insight into how the participants internalized their interactions with constant surveillance over time. Much of the existing literature on school discipline covers the adverse impacts of exclusionary practices, such as, missed instructional time, disengagement from school, and increased chances of dropping out (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2011). Although these effects maintain relevance in the discussion, they do not shed light on the internal consequences Black girls experience as they navigate the disciplinary system. The participants in this study revealed they have to constantly negotiate with themselves how they will balance being perceived as disrespectful while staying true to their desire to express themselves freely. This finding captured the essence of how discipline practices and procedures shape how Black girls deliberately choose to show up in their school communities. This internal negotiation reflects the concept of stereotype threat, where the awareness of harmful stereotypes creates pressure that influences how people govern themselves (Steele, 2010). For the participants of this study, the efforts to avoid being seen as loud or ghetto influenced their self-expression because of the risk of confirming others' biases and expectations.

The internal negotiation that takes place aligns with the idea that individuals navigate being marginalized in oppressive systems by suppressing their identity as a method to survive (Bhabha et al., 1992; Crenshaw, 1989). The participants in this study demonstrated a level of awareness of controlling images of Black girls that precede them. They also described how they actively resisted dominant stereotypes to maintain respectability in their educational contexts.

This study also contributes to the literature by discussing the informal experience with school discipline through consistent surveillance and heightened scrutiny, not just suspensions. In alignment with Ferguson's (2020) concept of school's "hidden curriculum" that outlined how

schools implicitly enforced messages of power and compliance through their discipline of Black boys, this study highlights how Black girls are shaped by a similar curriculum grounded in the policing of their tones and misinterpretations of respectability. This affirms that Ferguson's "hidden curriculum" is racialized and gendered that silenced and controlled Black girls in order to be accepted.

Although one may expect predominantly Black educational spaces to be socially, culturally, and psychologically safe for Black children (Berry, 2005; Brown, 2013), this study supports Morris' (2016) counterargument that claimed that Black girls are still more likely to have adverse experiences due to negative adult perceptions. This study's participants, despite attending predominantly Black schools, described being subjected to heightened scrutiny, inequitable disciplinary action, and silencing. This is related to the argument that Black educational spaces do not inherently offer Black girls protection from harmful prejudices and power dynamics (Bailey & Trudy, 2010; Hunter, 2016; Shange, 2019).

This study also extended existing research by shedding light on how Black girls experience discipline through the internal decisions they make to balance avoiding surveillance, maintaining authenticity, and protecting themselves from misinterpretations. The participants of the study displayed a sense of awareness of the systemic criminalization of their self-expression. They also knew that asserting their voices was risky in perpetuating images of Black girls as angry (Bhabha et al., 1992; Crenshaw, 1989).

**Research Question 2: How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls contribute to the development of their identities?**

The findings of this study revealed that the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls were most beneficial when the participants were able to define themselves in ways that

were in tandem with their values, driven by their futures, and reflected the relationships that affirmed their identities. The participants perceived their identities were shaped by a process that acknowledged how they were seen by others and defined by the choices they made in response to assert how they saw themselves. This aligns with the literature that places meaning-making as a critical component of identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Spencer, 1997, 2017; Velez & Spencer, 2018). The participants of this study made sense of their racialized and gendered experiences by actively filtering messages from others that misrepresented them by using those to craft their own version of their identities. This adds a novel contribution to the literature by highlighting how the participants maintained agency through everyday decisions they made to address misinterpretations of their presence. The essence here is how participants filter external messaging to create an image of themselves that they can live with.

The importance of connection and community emerged from the findings as a source of strength and protection against deficit-based perceptions. The participants shared that relationships with peers, coaches, and teammates supported their sense of belonging. These relationships served as safe spaces where the participants were not subject to labeling or judgement. This echoes the existing research that argues that a gendered approach to implementing restorative justice practices supports the well-being of girls by providing them with spaces to process oppression at the intersection of their identities (González & Epstein, 2021; Schumacher, 2014). This study builds on these findings by displaying how the connections described by the study's participants extend past restorative justice structures and serve as spaces where they felt seen, heard, validated, and protected.

This study's findings also support Ashley and Burke's (2009) identification of community safety as a goal of their restorative justice framework. Community safety for the

participants of this study meant that they were connected to peers who understood them and adults who poured into them with care. This interpretation expands Ashley and Burke's (2009) framing by interpreting safety as a space that affirmed identity and promotes well-being. These spaces capture the essence of a sense of belonging as recognition and safety.

Through BFT, Collins (2000) identified self-definition as an act of reclaiming one's identity in response to controlling images and expectations. The participants of this study discussed ways they intentionally resisted harmful narratives imposed on them. Their decisions to self-define functioned as both a political act and strategies for identity development.

Crenshaw et al. (2015) discussed how teen pregnancy results in Black girls feeling disconnected from their school communities. This is supported by one participant's reflection on her commitment to avoiding pregnancy because of how she associated it with the loss of momentum towards a stable, successful future. Her self-definition showed how identity is not only impacted by what she experiences but also by what she chose to avoid. This introduced a novel contribution by highlighting avoidance as an intentional act of self-definition.

Cross's (1991) racial identity development theory helped understand the choices the participants made in context. As people move through the immersion-emersion and internalization phases, they begin to cultivate a sense of pride and resist dominant beliefs. The participants in this study discussed resisting beliefs that labeled them as dramatic and disruptive by creating identities around restraint and composure. This finding bridged the gap between racial identity theory and understandings of self-definition as resistance.

### **Reflections on Theoretical Framework**

BFT is the theoretical framework that was utilized to ground this inquiry into the impact the experiences Black high school-aged girls had on their identity development. This section will

describe how this theoretical framework was productive in designing this study and analyzing its findings. In this study, BFT was the guiding framework through which I studied the experiences of the study's participants to understand how they have impacted the development of their identities. BFT offers the most comprehensive lens for understanding the realities of Black girls that honors how their intersecting identities impacts their experiences with oppression, inequity, and discrimination (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; McArthur & Lane, 2019). I chose BFT as the theoretical framework, because as a Black male school leader, it was necessary to design this study in a manner that honored the voices and experiences of the participants as valid sources of knowledge. BFT not only provided a lens to understand the stories of the participants but also the essence of how they came to know and define themselves.

Using BFT was critical in developing the research questions, designing the study's instrumentation, and analyzing the participant narratives. Both of the study's research questions were written to capture how the participants internalized and perceived how systemic misinterpretations of Black girlhood and control over their expression has shaped their identities. The interview and focus group protocols reflected the tenets of the theoretical framework by centering the participants' voices in reflecting on how they see themselves. BFT also provided a lens for me to understand the emergent themes: Surveillance of Black Girlhood, Respectability and Resistance, Connection and Community, and Self-Definition as Resistance. BFT's emphasis on agency, meaning-making, and resistance led to an analysis that highlighted the intentional strategies to self-preserve and self-define that Black girls use to survive institutional contexts that fail to see them fully. BFT, as the theoretical framework for this study, held up well throughout this research. The participants in this study discussed experiencing consequences for seeking clarity and self-advocating. These moments are the result of controlling images that define Black

girls as loud and ghetto; as critiqued by BFT. The theoretical framework also helped reveal how the participants resisted perpetuating deficit-based prejudices through establishing communities preserving their dignity. The acts of resistance the participants engaged in reflect BFT's concepts of the power of collective solidarity and self-definition as a political act. BFT aligned with the phenomenological lens in which this study was designed by centering the essence of lived experience as a criterion of meaning.

While BFT fulfilled its purpose as an appropriate framework for this study, there were areas where its application was not fully equipped to consider generational, developmental, and institutional nuances that influence the experiences of Black girls as they navigate school-based power dynamics. The framework also does not consider the impact that geographical location and cultural contexts play a role in the experiences of Black girls in schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study focused on the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls and how they perceive those experiences have impacted their identity development. Despite actions taken to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of this study, it is essential to note that the study was not without limitations. There were some critical limitations that presented some constraints of this study before and during implementation. Through acknowledging the limitations of this study, I was able to make notable recommendations for future research that are discussed later in this chapter. The limitations listed below should be considered as the findings of this study are reviewed:

1. The study originally intended to include participants who had extensive experiences with school discipline. However, due to suspensions and ongoing attendance challenges, it was difficult to secure consent and collect data from participants who met this criterion.

Therefore, it was necessary for me to consider allowing Black girls who expressed interest in participating in the study the opportunity to raise their unique perspectives. These interested parties who were granted permission to participate provided unique observational accounts, despite limited, direct experiences with discipline.

2. The decision to include a focus group discussion in phenomenological research was initially intended to develop an opportunity for the study's participants to feel empowered through being in a setting where the collective voices of Black high school-aged girls were centered as valid knowledge to understand their experiences, as outlined in the theoretical framework that guided this study (Collins, 2000). Unfortunately, conflicts with extracurricular activities, modified school schedules, commutes to a neutral location, and overall attendance issues inhibited participation of all participants and limited the richness of data able to be extracted from the discussion.
3. Through my statement of positionality, as mentioned in Chapter 3 of this study, it is worth noting that while my racial identity as Black may have created conditions for rapport with the participants, the intersection of my gender and role, as a male school leader, may have impacted the breadth and depth of their responses. To address this threat to the trustworthiness and bias of this study, I engaged in bracketing my assumptions and experiences during data collection and analysis phases of this research.

### **Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice**

#### **Implications for Policy**

This study had findings that offer implications for implementing policy at the school, district, and state levels. This section will initiate a call for policy development that promotes equity, student voice, and cultural responsiveness. Policies addressing the essence of the

participants' experiences must confront how subjectivity, surveillance, and silencing of Black girls is sustained in schools.

The findings of this study reveal policy implications regarding the perceptions Black girls have on how they are seen, treated and supported in school. The experiences the participants recounted shed light on the patterns of constant scrutiny, misinterpretation, and suppression that are imposed on them through discipline policies; specifically, their descriptions of subjective interpretations of their voices, bodies, and expressions as ghetto, disrespectful, or disruptive. In these instances where infractions are rooted in vague, subjective interpretations of Black girlhood, efforts must enable progress towards explicit action that addresses systems that result in these biased perceptions. The participants described examples of being punished for seeking clarification and advocating for themselves by using their voice. These examples highlight how subjective discipline policy interprets the voice of Black girls in ways that challenge their visibility and agency in their institutional contexts.

While school-level disciplinary policy is expected to follow progressive disciplinary guidance set forth by the district that prohibits exclusion as a sanction for subjective behaviors, remnants of punitive mindsets continue to exist in regard to how adults react and respond to the presence of the participants of this study. To place value in the voice of Black girls, a culturally responsive policy that centers the dignity and empathy for students to include behavior evaluation rubrics, inclusion of student voice in conflict resolution, and ongoing professional development for educators must supplement the work that the district has laid the foundation for. I also call for state policy to require educators to engage in professional development that trains them to understand how intersectional identities and their own implicit biases impact the experience of Black girls to obtain and maintain certification.

The participants also reflected on how dress code policies were inconsistently and unfairly applied across their experiences. They noted that girls of other races and boys were able to escape being targeted by policing their dress. It was one participant's experience where dress that was deemed inappropriate was handled as a direct reflection of her academic integrity. District and state-level dress code policies must include inclusive language that enables equitable application. In tandem, dress code enforcement must transparently track which groups of students are most impacted so that review teams can address the root cause of inequitable application and enact policy that inherently dispose of racialized and gendered double standards.

State and federal policy must require all schools to disaggregate culture, climate, and discipline data honoring the intersection of race and gender. Through this level of data analysis, the inequitable policies that render Black girls invisible in broader equity discussions could compel schools to name Black girls as their own subgroup, thus making room for intentional goal setting and monitoring around their overall well-being.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study call out the need for critical shifts in everyday best practices. Black girls in the study highlight how their daily interactions with adults showed up in how they navigated through their institutional contexts. Practice that honors the essences of these experiences prioritizes inquiry, listening, and dignity over control.

The participants of this study shared that clarity seeking or providing justification was sometimes received as defiance and talking back. It was instances as this that highlight how Black girls are not always disciplined for behavioral infractions, but for defying norms of compliance. This outlines a need for discipline practices at the school level that do not punish student expression punitively. Instead, it is critical for school-based staff and leaders to adopt an

approach that is centered on inquiry over assumption when addressing concerns over the expression of Black girls. There is a difference that distinguishes aggression from advocacy, and educators who work with student groups that are systemically marginalized need to be able to identify the contrast. While it may be a simple, yet powerful, practice, this begins with intentional listening. School-based staff should be equipped to relinquish authority and control in instances where student expression challenges power.

In addition, participants also described how they avoided tension with peers due to misinterpretation of their expression. In some environments, simply making eye contact with another person could be perceived as disrespect or opposition. Schools must strategically transform their school culture to include embedding restorative practices in their routines and normalizing healthy, positive curiosity and disagreement within their student bodies. With this in mind, schools will not only impact student-adult relationships, but student-student interactions as well.

The Black girls in this study shared experiences rooted in community and connection through their relationships with peers, teammates, and coaches. These relationships offered the participants safety from misinterpretations and prejudices that imposed harmful narratives about their identities. School-based staff and leaders must recognize the essential need for affinity spaces to promote the identity development, safety, and engagement of Black girls. The enabling conditions require strategic master scheduling, staffing considerations, and connecting with external partners that will support the formation and sustainability of these groups over time. The outcome of designing opportunities to develop such spaces could be a cultural shift that enables Black girls to experience a strong sense of belonging that affirms their identity. At the school and district levels, budgets should allocate funding for social-emotional learning grounded in

building community through culturally responsive resources and professional learning for advisors and mentors.

Lastly, educators at all levels must engage in reflective professional learning centered on Black feminist philosophy. The participants of this study deeply detailed how they constantly resist the controlling images of Black girls that precede them in any space in order to maintain a level of dignity and to protect themselves in harmful contexts. Shifts towards explicitly naming how power dynamics are perpetuated in schools and classrooms can actively disrupt the preservation of racialized gender expectations of Black girls in practice.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To better understand how the experiences of Black girls impact the development of their identities, I make the following recommendations to build on the limitations of the study. Future research should continue to pursue the essence of Black girls' experiences across additional settings, intersecting identities, and developmental stages.

Due to the phenomenological design of this study, the sample size was relatively small. Future research should expand the context of the Black girls under study to highlight the diversity of their lived experiences. This study focused on five Black high school-aged girls who attended the same Title I middle school in an urban school district while acknowledging that the experiences of Black girls are not monolithic. I encourage future researchers to design similar studies that study participants across geographic settings, school types, and social identities. Through the proposed expansion, insight can be obtained into how intersectionality impacts the experiences and identity development across a range of educational landscapes.

This study was originally intended to include participants with extensive experience with school discipline. However, the final group of participants included those who only had

observational experiences. Future researchers may find it helpful to the literature to consider sampling strategies that will illuminate the experiences of participants with more disciplinary exposure to enable comparison of the lived experiences of Black girls across different subgroups within the shared phenomenon.

Researchers should consider more accessible focus group structures when studying high school-aged participants. In this study, participants experienced many logistical challenges that prohibited all from participating in the focus group as intended. Future researchers may deem it beneficial to leverage virtual options and district-wide academic calendars to identify ideal windows and opportunities for participation. Additionally, future research should include multiple modes of expression, i.e., journaling, photos, and drawing, as entry points for meaning-making of their experiences to enrich the data able to be extracted across all instrumentation.

Future researchers must also continue to engage in intentional reflexivity when studying populations to which they do not belong. As a Black male school leader, I am keenly aware of how my positionality as the researcher could influence participants. It is critical in minimizing bias and maintaining trustworthiness in the research design that reflexivity protocols are ingrained in the research methodology.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study explored how Black high school-aged girls make meaning of how their experiences have shaped the development of their identities. Following a qualitative phenomenological design rooted in BFT as the theoretical framework, this study centered the narratives of five Black girls who previously attended the same Title I middle school in an urban public school district. This study sought to understand how its participants internalized their

experiences, particularly with school discipline procedures and practices, and how those experiences impacted their identity development.

The experiences of Black girls deserve their own considerations in discussions on equity and reform in schools. In response to that, this study answered two research questions:

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived experiences of Black high school-aged girls contribute to the development of their identities?

The findings revealed four emergent themes: Surveillance of Black Girlhood, Respectability and Resistance, Connection and Community, and Self-Definition as Resistance. The study's participants reflected on their perceptions of moments that scrutinized their bodies, expressions, and behaviors. These moments pressured the participants to engage in self-preservation strategies where they chose to silence and shrink themselves in effort to protect their dignity in contexts that failed to see them fully.

The participants of this study described discipline to be deeply engrained into their schooling experience through misinterpretations and heightened scrutiny of their presence. They discussed being punished for actions that other subgroups could engage in without question. The findings support existing research that subject Black girls to unjust biases and surveillance.

The participants also shared narratives of safety and affirmation in their experiences. They discussed how positive relationships with trusted adults and like-minded peers served as critical sites for positive identity development. This study offers novel insight by identifying these connections as protective spaces for safety, affirmation, and resistance.

This study was guided by BFT as a theoretical framework that honors the voices of Black girls as valid knowledge in understanding their experiences and centers their agency in engaging in self-definition. Their reflections not only describe how they are perceived but elevate them as experts in choosing how they will resist and reclaim humanity in response to deficit-based perceptions.

This study recommends educators and policymakers to consider how the culture, policy, and practices shape how Black girls are seen and how they see themselves. Policy must explicitly address how the intersection of race and gender influences the disproportionate discipline of Black girls. School-based practices must also reflect prioritization of belonging, affirmation, and identity exploration of Black girls. This study also insists that Black girls' voices are valid; therefore, they should not be silenced but protected and celebrated.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### Research Questions

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived educational experiences of Black high school-aged girls in schools contribute to the development of their identities?

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Background Information
  - a. Take a moment to briefly introduce yourself, sharing your name, age, the high school that you attend, and anything that you would like me to know about yourself?
  - b. How would you describe how you see yourself as a Black high school-aged girl?
2. Lived Educational Experiences
  - a. How have, both positive and challenging, experiences with staff, peers, or policies in schools impacted your sense of self?
  - b. Can you describe any unique challenges and strengths with being a Black high school-aged girl in school?
3. Experiences with Discipline
  - a. Describe your experiences with school discipline in your school career.
  - b. How do you believe the school discipline practices you've encountered have influenced your sense of self or identity?
4. Relationships with Peers
  - a. How do your relationships with peers influence the development of your identity?
  - b. Could you describe any instances where you felt a strong sense of belonging or excluded because of your identity as a Black girl?
5. Challenges Due to Identity
  - a. Can you describe any instances where you experienced discrimination or prejudice because of your identity? How did you respond?
  - b. How have you learned to overcome such challenges?
6. Future Identity Development
  - a. What improvements or reforms do you think are needed to better support Black high school-aged girls in their identity development?
  - b. How do you envision your identity evolving in the future as you continue your education and life journey beyond high school?
7. Closing Thoughts
  - a. Is there anything else that you believe is important for me to know that has contributed to your identity development as a Black high school-aged girl?

## Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

### Research Questions

1. How do Black high school-aged girls perceive their experience with school discipline practices and procedures impact the development of their identities?
2. How do the lived educational experiences of Black high school-aged girls in schools contribute to the development of their identities?

### Focus Group Questions

1. Introduction
  - a. Take a moment to introduce yourself, stating your name, age, and the high school you attend.
2. Experiences as a Black Girl
  - a. From your experience, how are Black girls treated by teachers, principals, and other adults in schools?
  - b. Since you entered high school, have you had to show up differently than you did in middle school? How so? Why not?
  - c. In your opinion, how are discipline practices different for Black high school-aged girls compared to other groups?
3. Development Since Middle School
  - a. What have you learned about yourself since you have been promoted to high school?
  - b. What was it about your experiences since middle school that led to this discovery?
4. Reforms to Support Black Girl Development
  - a. If you could change one aspect of school discipline practices, what would it be and why?
  - b. What improvements or reforms do you think are needed to better support Black high school-aged girls in their identity development?
5. Closing Thoughts
  - a. Is there anything else that you believe is important for me to know that has contributed to your identity development as a Black high school-aged girl?