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The Rose who Grew From Concrete: A Black Female  
Administrator's Perspective Of The Public School  
Experience for Black Girls who Attend a Predominantly  
White Middle School in Southeast Georgia

LaTashia S. Thomas

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THE ROSE WHO GREW FROM CONCRETE: A BLACK FEMALE ADMINISTRATOR'S  
PERSPECTIVE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL EXPERIENCE FOR BLACK GIRLS WHO  
ATTEND A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE MIDDLE SCHOOL IN SOUTHEAST GEORGIA

by

LATASHIA STROMAN THOMAS

(Under the Direction of Kymberly Harris)

ABSTRACT

This study explores the educational experiences of Black girls who attended a predominantly White school in Southeast Georgia from the perspective of a Black female administrator. Using Critical Race Theory (e.g. Bell, 1987, 1992, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Stovall, 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (e.g. Hill Collins, 2000; Henry, 1995; hooks, 1984/2000, 1994, 2002) as theoretical frameworks and memoir (Angelou, 1969/2009; Hurston, 1996) and fiction (Bell, 1992; Morrison, 1970/1993) as methodology, I explore ways in which Black girls are oppressed when they attend majority White public schools and may not necessarily receive the educational experiences that their parents intended for them to receive. I explore cultural characteristics that many Black girls share to portray what life is like outside of school, how Black girls are perceived by educators and the ways in which negative stereotypes and perceptions at school hinder Black girls' academic success.

Findings suggest that awareness and understanding of the role that White patriarchal standards play in the maintenance of the subordination of Black girls by way of public school policy is necessary to begin to dismantle the racist and oppressive nature of the U. S. public school system. Black girls and women have to be able to share their stories and experiences with

oppression by way of research and activism. In order to resist oppression in U. S. public schools and bring about systemic change, social justice educators will need to recruit fellow educators, pre-service educators, parents, students, and community partners to fund research and to take political action that demands policymakers to enact laws specifically geared toward eliminating those nuances in school policy that contribute to subordination of Black girls.

Six meanings emerged from this dissertation inquiry: (1) Writing my memoir has allowed me to critically look at my past and recognize that my experiences have affected many aspects of my life including my job as an educator. (2) CRT and BFT allows me to use my counter-story to challenge a dominant perspective held about schools. (3) Black Feminist Thought affirms that like other Black, women educators (collectively) I am in a dialectical relationship with oppression (the school district, my employer) and activism (being a curriculum theorist concerned with liberating Black girls from their oppressor (the public school system)(Hill Collins, 2000, p. 25). (4) BFT asserts that “all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely denigrates women of African descent” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 28). (5) BFT connects the public schooling of experiences Black girls with the larger issues of the criminalization of Black girls and the school to prison pipeline. (6) Like many others, I too, am guilty of perpetuating the marginalization of Black students before I gained an awareness of the oppressive nature of public school for Black girls.

INDEX WORDS: Suburban schools, Black girls, Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Thought, Counter-storytelling, Fiction, Inequitable education, Race, Gender, Class

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is a dedication to my mother, Hilda Claire Loadholt (September 25, 1959-September 7, 2018).

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### **My family**

I would like to thank my family and friends for all of their support and encouragement throughout this journey.

### **My work family**

Thank you to all my friends who have become more like family at both schools where I have had the pleasure of coming in contact with and learning from some amazing individuals.

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I would like to thank my students for reminding me daily why this work as an educator is one of the most important and most fulfilling careers one could ever choose.

### **My Dissertation Committee**

Dr. Kymberly Harris, Major Professor

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## PRELUDE

*Did you hear about the rose that grew  
from a crack in the concrete?  
Proving nature's law is wrong it  
learned to walk without having feet.  
Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,  
it learned to breathe fresh air.  
Long live the rose that grew from concrete  
when no one else ever cared.*

~Tupac Shakur

Like the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete, I believe that I too have proven “nature’s law” wrong by completing graduate school, becoming a leader in education, and pursuing a doctorate degree. As hooks (2009) explained, “in the world of my upbringing where class and race converged, there was only a limited range of possibilities for a black girl from a poor and working-class background” (p. 58). My dissertation is a memoir that explores my lived experiences inside and outside of the educational setting and how they have impacted my work as an educational leader. During my exploration, I sought to better understand how the personal experiences of educators determine the way they perceive their students and colleagues, how personal experiences guide how educators teach and lead, and the impact that race, class, and gender have on teaching, leading, and learning.

My study is situated among studies built on scholarship that draws upon Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. As a tool to expose and challenge institutional racism, Critical Race Theory draws upon the experiential knowledge shared by people of color to

illustrate as well as counter the effects of racism (McGhee & Stovall, 2015). Black Feminist Thought is a framework that challenges Black women to denounce negative images and stereotypes that have been assigned to them collectively by writing and telling their own stories (Alinia, 2015). As a Black woman, an educational leader, and a student of Curriculum Studies, I believe I have an obligation to share my story to expose, challenge, and counter racism within the public school system as well as to denounce negative images and stereotypes that society has assigned to Black girls and women.

With this study, I support the work of researchers concerned with improving the public school experience for Black girls by sharing institutional practices in the public school system in which I work. The sharing of race and gender-related issues that marginalize Black girls and women can be productive in initiating dialogue and actions among educators centered around ways to transform the curriculum in such a way that it benefits Black girls and women (Milner, 2010). With the information gathered from this exploration, these findings can be used to develop policies, practices, and strategies aimed at gradually transforming the public school curriculum by eradicating those school practices that keep Black girls and women on the margins of public schools and society. This research is a call to action encouraging further research, promoting awareness of, political action against, and educator, parent, and student activism aimed at eliminating forms of oppression embedded in the curriculum that negatively impact the schooling experiences of Black girls.

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE, AND REVIEW OF  
LITERATURE

In this chapter, I describe my research interest, the purpose of my research, key research issues, and the autobiographical roots of my inquiry. I present a brief historical overview of Critical Race Theory (CRT), one of the frameworks chosen for this study. I introduce the major tenets of CRT, and I discuss how it is used to analyze and combat racism in the educational settings and its relevance in this study. Next, I present an overview of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and the role that it plays in Black women creating positive images of themselves that are accessible to Black women of varying educational and financial backgrounds. One of the main assertions associated with BFT is that systemic change in the marginalized status of Black women will not take place if stories of resilience and resistance are only shared among academically and/or financially elite Black women. I then identify the questions guiding my research and give a brief overview of my methodology for this dissertation-fictionalized memoir, describe the significance of this study, and explain how this study will add to the body of scholarship in curriculum studies. Finally, I review the literature relevant to this study.

**Research Interest**

My first experience with autobiographical inquiry occurred in a foundational curriculum studies course, *The History of American Education*, the very first course that I took in the program. For the final assessment, I was tasked with writing my educational autobiography. The assignment was very emotional for me because for the first time I felt guilty for being afforded the opportunity to and for taking advantage of the opportunity to attend schools outside of my attendance zone. These schools allowed me access to educational opportunities and

experiences that kids who attended our neighborhood's schools did not have equal access to. The assignment lead me to realize how my experiences with schooling had shaped the kind of person and the kind of teacher I was. Events from my childhood that occurred both in and out of school resurfaced as I completed this assignment. I recalled moments in my life when I felt like an accomplished student. Conversely, painful memories of times when I felt like a kid with too many adult problems were dredged up while completing this task. Like most of us, my school years provide markers to the events in my childhood that were occurring simultaneously. At the end of this dissertation journey, I became more cognizant of how the events that were traumatic in my life did not define me in a way that has driven me to a life of self-pity and hopelessness. Rather, I have created a life for myself that has worth both because of and in spite of those more unhappy experiences. I realized that it was those experiences that led me to where I am: professionally, emotionally and spiritually.

As I took more classes, I received exposure to authors whose works are significant to curriculum studies. The teachings of critical theorists Paulo Freire (2003, 2005), Henry Giroux (1996), Joe Kincheloe (2008) and Peter McLaren and Joe Kincheloe (2007) send the message that schooling is oppressive in nature as the value of knowledge and who is entitled to receive the most valuable forms of knowledge is determined those who hold the dominant position of society. They further contend that citizens who are marginalized will only be emancipated if they recognize, resist, and work to remove the oppressive forces in educational systems. Critical theorists also argue that the oppressive nature of education serves the interest of White, heterosexual males who control the curriculum or what hooks (2000) refers to as imperialist, White supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. This privileged segment of society will employ whatever tactics necessary to maintain their dominance in education and society at large.



Critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell (1982, 1987), Kimberle Crenshaw (1995), Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001), and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995, 1999, 2009), contend that race is a permanent fixture in U.S. society that functions to maintain White power and privilege. After reading the works of these curriculum theorists, I began to question my role in maintaining the hegemony of the dominant class. I felt like I was staying in “my place”-in the submissive place that those who dominate U.S. society and U.S. public education wish for me to remain and that I was teaching a generation of students to do the same.

I was proud of the education that I received. During my 5th grade year, I was very boastful about being able to say that I was smart enough to be selected to attend magnet schools that only the brightest students in the county could attend and be placed in the highest achieving class whenever I attended schools that students in my neighborhood were zoned to attend. However, my coursework in the curriculum studies program has created in me an awareness of unequal educational practices that were in place during my K-12 education that are still active today in my role as a public school administrator. What I thought of as an emancipatory educational experience was, in fact, a tool in maintaining the status quo of White Anglo Saxon Protestant dominance.

Both magnet schools that I attended were predominantly Black. Both offered a specialized curriculum intended to attract students outside of the school’s attendance zone. At the elementary level, I attended the district’s international studies academy where we were introduced to various foreign languages and cultures. At the high school level, I attended the district’s medical magnet academy. Although both schools were predominantly Black, my classes were mostly White students. Approximately three-fourths of the students were White; I was always the minority. As I reflect on this from a CRT lens, it suggests that the school district

felt the White students were needed in order to improve the performance of these failing schools. Rather than exploring what resources were needed to improve the school for the students who already attended these schools, the district implemented a curriculum that attracted White families to these schools in hopes of improving academic performance.

As a child, I believed that I was a special student because I was selected to attend magnets schools. As a critical race scholar what I now see is interest convergence, my opportunity to attend the magnet program was made possible to meet the need of White parents thinking that sending their children to inner city schools was for the benefit of the school. I also recognize the notion of Whiteness as property. From a CRT standpoint, the school district's efforts to attract White students to these schools suggest that White students were the resources the school board and district administrators felt were needed in order to improve the quality of these schools. The issues surrounding the magnet school program in the Sea City School District mirrors those that Morris (2006) describe in his study of the St. Louis public school system,

...and the only way that some White parents would consider sending their children to the city schools was to make those schools "exceptional without question."

White students' presence in the city schools automatically ascribed a greater value to the St. Louis public school system (p. 146).

The conclusions are drawn from my coursework that I felt were relevant to my life as a student and a teacher are: (a) just because schools are integrated in theory does not mean that students and teachers are exempt from covert racist practices meant to maintain the dominant position of the White male in society; (b) U.S. public education does not attend to the unique needs of students of color; (c) voices of White women, men of color, and women of color will continue to be silenced if their research and scholarship requires validation from the White male

who controls academia and who may feel that his position of dominance may be in jeopardy due to works that critique and resist dominance; and (d) researchers can un-silence the voices of marginalized persons by sharing experiences that counter the stories of the dominant discourse on education and schooling in U.S. public schools.

Many school districts have programs and policies aimed at integrating schools or increasing diversity at schools that are racially heterogeneous. District lines may be drawn to include certain neighborhoods within a municipality to ensure that students who attend these schools come from racially and economically diverse backgrounds. While some school districts assign students to neighborhood schools that are located in close proximity to their homes. Districts that do the latter often save a designated number of seats for students who reside outside of the attendance zone. The parents of students who live outside these attendance zones often perceive schools within their own attendance zones as substandard and seek special placement in schools that they believe will give their children a better quality of education. Parents wishing to send their children to a school other than the school they are assigned to attend either request special permission from district level administrators or apply to attend through various school choice programs, many of which place students into a lottery system. The lottery system is used to select students to attend the desired schools because seating is limited and demand is usually high.

What many parents and much of the public fail to realize, however, is that special programs aimed at integration or creating diversity only changes the physical setting that selected students attend school. Neither the integration of schools nor the special placement of students can prevent the racial subordination of Black students subjected to public school policies and practices aimed at perpetuating their position of subordination. As Bell (1976)

purported, Black parents cannot assume that Black children will receive a better education at a predominantly White school because public school policy does not address the real “evil of pre-Brown public schools: the state-sponsored subordination of Blacks in every aspect of the educational process,” (in Nelson, 2017, p. 73).

Children of color have unique needs and U. S. public schools do not have the capacity to fulfill them. This can be partly blamed on the fact that most White teachers claim not to see color, which allows them to ignore their own White privilege as well as the need to culturally connect with their students (Markowitz & Puchner, 2014). The need for culturally competent educators who are honest about biases and who can recognize differences between stereotypes, perceptions, and valid behavioral issues that require intense intervention is a need that goes unmet in many U.S. public schools. Many educators claim not to recognize it, but they should educate themselves on verbal, non-verbal, conscious and subconscious mechanisms built into school policies and displayed through their own behavior can be detrimental to the psyche of Black and Brown children. When children feel undervalued and consistently receive the message that they are not good enough, their motivation to succeed academically is affected. This may also cause some children to act out and/or withdraw socially. Until these needs are addressed, the need for culturally competent educators who view Black children as academically capable beings with emotions and a desire to learn, public schools will continue to disproportionately punish Black children and prevent some of the brightest students from reaching their full academic potential.

The work of critical scholars is very necessary because without it, the voices of women and people of color will go unheard. Dominant discourses in education are aimed at protecting Whiteness, or more specifically White maleness, as evidenced in teacher preparation programs

and public school policy. It is the duty of educators who represent subordinate segments of society to include women, Black men, and Black women to conduct and share research that brings awareness to the practices that perpetuate White male dominance in education preparation and school policy. Critical scholars committed to deconstructing systems of oppression can do so by sharing their stories and the stories of their students and discouraging educators from accepting domination just for the sake of tradition.

Unless critical scholars take the lead in sharing the experiences of Black girls, they will remain silenced and the systems that oppress them will remain unchallenged and unchanged. Critical scholars must give voice to the voiceless by conducting research and sharing their findings with those stakeholders who hold the power to make change in a system that oppresses Black girls and women. It is not enough, however, to just share research findings. Critical scholars need to encourage marginalized populations to arm themselves with knowledge and political power to advocate for themselves. Until marginalized populations realize that they are being silenced, they will remain silent. It is the job of critical scholars to increase awareness of issues of domination and oppression for the purpose of working to dismantle the structures and ideologies that maintain White patriarchal domination of all other groups in society.

I believe my own lived experiences as a student, teacher, and administrator have impacted and continue to impact the work that I do with and for children. Therefore, I would like to explore those experiences in relation to my current educational practices to determine whether what I practice is beneficial to the students and teachers that I serve and to determine where I have opportunities to grow for my sake and for the sake of those whom I have been assigned to lead. According to Milner (2010), teachers and teacher educators must examine their own practices and beliefs because what they say and do in the classroom has the potential to

influence students and colleagues. Reflecting upon my life, I realized my experiences with schooling must be viewed through the context of the intersectionality of my race, my class, and my gender. I am not simply a black female teacher-leader; I am a composite of all of the events that encouraged me to seek this role, to believe that I could be influential in a leadership role, and to seek more education so that I could further my own education as well as be better at helping students and other teachers. I present a recapitulation, through memoir, of these schooling experiences focusing on events that are similar in nature to those events documented by girls and women with whom I share a similar background. Memoir as a form of autobiographical inquiry is the best methodology for my research given my personal experience with recognizing barriers to and negotiating academic success as a Black female student, teacher, and educational leader in a U.S. public school system. Autobiographical inquiry accepts my lived experiences as a valid source of knowledge. Many studies have implicated the need for teacher stories in the field of education to supplement theory (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990a & 1990b; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Henry, 1995; Muchmore, 2001; Sparkes, 1994). Autobiographical inquiry accepts elements of fiction, which allows me to tell my story honestly and seeks to protect the identities of persons who play roles in my story. So, I fictionalize information that can be used to identify individuals and particular settings in order to prevent recognition and detection. However, there are no fictionalized events. My stories, as well as the stories of my students to whom I relate, are true and factual as I remember and perceive them. Of the curriculum studies, dissertations that I have read (Anthony, 2011; Jefferson, 2006; Ledford, 2012; Mikell, 2011; Mitchell, 2009; Thomas, 2013; Ward, 2011; Wilkerson, 2008), those that used autobiography as methodology, were the most meaningful to me and were most practical for use in my role as an educational leader. These studies revealed a methodology that places my experiences at the center of the

research and explores how these experiences connect with my current role as an educational administrator. I chose memoir to create a portrait of the lives of Black girls educated in U.S. public schools from the perspective of a Black female to expose barriers that prevent them from achieving academic success. By exposing such obstacles to academic success as traumatic outside influences and negative perceptions and stereotypes, I hope to promote a call for educators to advocate for equity in education for Black girls. I also chose memoir as the methodology for its therapeutic benefits, to un-silence my voice as a Black female. It is well documented that Black women often find themselves uncomfortable with discussing or speaking up on issues of racism, sexism, and sexism in the workplace for fear of being labeled angry or militant (Davis & Gere, 2018; Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Rosette, Ponce de Leon, Koval, & Harrison, 2018). Memoir allows me to tell my truth about my experiences in educational practice on my own terms. Being able to speak freely about these experiences is liberating and releases the stress, the internal conflict, caused by remaining silent on the injustices that I have witnessed and/or experienced.

As teachers, many times our own practice stems not only from what we learned in our teacher preparation program but also from our own personal experiences as students. Our interactions with our own students, coworkers, parents and other stakeholders are often framed from how we ourselves experienced these interactions in our own schooling. As such, I know that what I say and do in school, in the community, and at home impacts students, teachers, and my own family members. Although it cannot be quantified, I believe my experiences as a student and educator affect those with whom I work, teach, and live. Therefore, it is important that I reflect on my beliefs and practices to determine what it is that I can do within my sphere of influence to eliminate educational practices that negatively impact the schooling experiences of

Black girls. When autobiographically reflecting, writing about my work experiences and the issues that Black girls in my school face, my emotions were triggered because many of these issues reminded me of some of my school experiences. I then thought about how easily these experiences paralleled the current research which identifies the rash of biases and discriminatory practices plaguing Black girls in public school. At that point, I knew that there was a need for me to share my story and to engage other educators in the movement to decimate systems in the public school curriculum that oppress Black girls. There are many situations that I would have handled differently in my work as an administrator had I recognized the presence of school practices that covertly contribute to the plight of Black girls in public schools. Now that I am armed with this knowledge, I use this dissertation to inform and encourage others to join social justice movements that resist and fight to eliminate educational practices that oppress Black girls who attend public schools. I show how educational policy and practices related to course placement, dress code enforcement, teacher expectations and perceptions, and disciplinary procedures are oppressive and marginalize Black girls. This dissertation provides concrete examples of how Black girls are marginalized in public schools by being given harsher disciplinary consequences than their White counterparts, by teachers limiting their access to advanced classes, and educators using their parents' limited knowledge of school law and policy to push their own agendas rooted in White patriarchal domination (hooks, 1994). This dissertation also offers recommendations to teachers, administrators, families, and community stakeholders actions they can take to confront and dismantle forms of oppression in schools that marginalize Black girls (i.e. share stories of oppression, conduct audits on course placement and disciplinary records, and take political action). I will advocate for students who may not have the skills and resources to advocate for themselves. My study explored my experiences as a



Black girl who attended public schools and my experiences working with Black girls during my public school career from the perspective of a Black female school administrator. Its purpose is to encourage formal educators – those employed by school systems as teachers, administrators, and other positions – as well as informal educators, including family members and community leaders to actively engage in making public education more equitable for Black girls.

My educational experiences prior to my doctoral work in curriculum studies led me to believe that all children have the ability to achieve academically if only they work hard and are nice and kind, that those students who failed consistently, mainly Black students and perhaps their parents were entirely to blame for their inherent failure. We were led to believe in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional) era, that we (meaning Black students and parents) could no longer use institutional racism as an excuse for our failures and educational shortcomings. After *Brown v. BOE*, school settings were now considered to be equal, opportunities for special programs and privileges were available to all regardless of race, and teachers were teaching all students fairly and equitably regardless of the color of their skin. There are a number of works that denounce the idea of meritocracy and explain that racial disparities in education and society are to be blamed for the vicious cycle of failure that we see in our nation's public schools that are attended by mostly minority and poor children (Fram, Miller-Cribbs, & Van Horn, 2007; Howard, 2013; Kozol, 1991, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pitre, 2014). I believed this myself as a young teacher; I blamed the victim for his or her failure because I believed that they were not trying hard enough. As a teacher, I judged my students without supplies, thinking that their parents had not prioritized their spending, and it was not until I reflected on my own school experiences that I remembered there

were times when my family did not have the funds to support special projects in my classes. Within my own implicit bias, I was able to rethink the programming that I had received in my upbringing; I was taught (and I believed) that Civil Rights legislation remedied racism in the school setting. I believed that there was equality of opportunity for the students I taught because the *de jure* segregation had been outlawed. This was not true then and it is not true now. Jonathan Kozol (2007) explains that racist beliefs that oppress students are very much alive within our schools. Kozol expounds one such belief, victim-blaming:

So long as myths and misconceptions about equal education remain unexamined in the schools that serve the poor, these kids are left to wrestle with the crippling belief that their repeated failings in comparison with affluent white children are entirely the result of an inherent defect in their character or cultural inheritance, a lack of will, a lack of basic drive and normal aspiration, or, as many have no choice but to believe, a deficit in their intelligence. (p. 164)

I have since learned throughout my matriculation in the curriculum studies program that racism, sexism, classism are some of the tools of oppression embedded in the curriculum used in U.S. public schools to maintain the power of White males. These modes of oppression are not easily recognized because they are often hidden in the curriculum that guides the norms, ways, and instruction that schools are required to carry out. As a result, my previous belief that school desegregation automatically equates to fair and equal schooling has been repudiated.

My interest in curriculum studies was further piqued when I was introduced to Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), bell hooks (1994/2000, 1994, 1996, 2002), Lisa Delpit (1995), Geneva Gay (1994), and Gail Thompson (2004), whose works all promote research, writing, and activism as tools for Black women to resist the negative portrayals of

Black women created and perpetuated by mainstream society. I did not realize at the time that these theorists were considered Black feminists; I just knew that their stories reminded me of events that occurred in my life and mirrored the stories of women with whom I had come in contact throughout my personal life and professional career.

Using memoir as my methodology, my dissertation gives a fictionalized account of my personal experiences inside and outside of school as a student, teacher, and assistant principal and the experiences of my former students to illustrate how the curriculum of life has impacted my practice as an educator. I also exposed school policies and practices that are oppressive by telling the stories through the lens of a Black woman. I hope that my research, my memoir, can serve as a counter-story to stereotypical representations of the Black female present in print and visual media that portray Black girls and women in a negative light and deny credence to personal experiences as valid sources of knowledge (Hill Collins, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Through this study, I have illustrated the sociocultural conditions of receiving an education and being employed in a U.S. public school system from the perspective of a Black female by sharing my experiences as a student and an administrator as a call to educators and policy-makers to re-conceptualize the educational experiences of Black girls and women in U.S. public schools as a means of empowerment. An educator may not realize that she is perpetuating dominance and oppression of Black girls and women when she teaches her students and leads her faculty based on the same ideals that she had been taught from. However, once she becomes aware of “what is happening in schools around them, and to be daring enough to want to be equitable, safe, intellectually invigorating, and liberatory” (Owens, Edwards, & McArthur, 2018, p. 1-2). After intense self-reflection, I realize that my work as an educator is essential to

dismantling oppressive forces and creating empowering experiences for Black girls in public schools.

### **Purpose**

“Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work” (Freire, 2005, p. 130). The purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of the world of the Black female student from the perspective of a Black woman to illustrate the need for educators to develop practices that counter forms of oppression embedded in school policy that denigrate the public school experience for Black girls. The information gained from this study can be used to promote dialogue about and action to develop policies and practices to best meet the educational needs of Black girls. Although these strategies will not end oppression for Black girls overnight, the intent is to offer tools to resist oppression and negotiate the curriculum in ways that foster success for Black girls in spite of the curriculum’s oppressive nature.

The findings from this study will also be used to make meaning of how the lived experiences of one Black female educational leader impacted her leadership practices, identify what she recognizes as oppressive educational practices that marginalize Black girls, and to propose a curriculum that yields more positive schooling experiences for Black girls who attend predominantly White middle schools. I reflect upon the interactions that I have had with my family, teachers, colleagues, and my own students and critically examine them from a curriculum studies standpoint informed by CRT and BFT to make meaning of who I am and how my lived experiences affect the work I perform for my students, particularly Black girls. As a student and as an educator, when transferring from a predominantly Black school to a predominantly White one, I have had similar experiences as hooks (1994) describes:

that shift from the beloved, all-black school to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that strives to reinforce domination (p. 4).

In my current position as the assistant principal of a school with 95% white staff, most of whom are residents of an affluent area in the city, I often feel as if I do not belong and from my conversations with students and parents I believe that many of my students feel the same way. Also, like hooks (1994), I previously felt that education was emancipatory for all who would only take advantage of it in spite of my negative experiences as a student and as an educator. Now I have come to believe that public education oppresses Black girls and women but provides them with necessary skills when they can move past the forces that seek to hold them down. It is our responsibility to arm them with tools and resources to resist those forces that threaten to diminish the quality of their education. Many Black women have learned to negotiate academe for their benefit, but there are few studies that evaluate their experiences to improve upon the schooling experiences of future generations of Black girls. It is up to Black girls and women who have managed to prevail over an educational system designed to keep them in a position of subordination to share their experiences, mentor future generations, and recruit like-minded individuals and organizations including citizens not formally trained as educators to advocate for the elimination of practices that are detrimental for Black girls. The aim of this research is to do just that – share my experiences with the public school-based oppression of Black girls and women to create awareness and inspire readers to join in the fight to combat microaggressions in the form of school policies and practices that oppress Black girls who attend public schools.

This dissertation presents my memoir of identity development of a Black female educational leader while reflecting on how the adversity that plagued her girlhood in the form of racism, classism, and sexism influence professional decisions. Unlike traditional dissertation formats, this study does not pose research questions and seek to find answers to them. Rather, the intent of this study is to elicit conversations in the educational community that will encourage social justice action that promotes educational equity for Black girls who attend public schools. Fictional stories of girlhood and later adulthood along with the stories of Black female students that parallel those stories of the main character are presented from a Black female perspective. These stories have been collected around main themes that are occurring in current educational research that addresses the oppressive nature of public education for Black girls.

Freire (2005) writes, "...it is impossible to teach content without knowing how students think in the context of their daily lives, without knowing what they know independently of school" (p. 140). This study serves as an expansion of curriculum studies that recognizes, demonstrates, and investigates how curriculum is not only made up of classroom or schoolhouse experiences, but curriculum also includes life experiences outside of the confines of the school building. Curriculum studies purports that the school experiences of educators impact and guide our work just as much as theory and best practices that are taught in our educational preparation programs and professional development courses. By providing insight into the world of the Black female student and the Black female educator, this study serves as a work "to transform the curriculum so that it does not reflect biases or reinforce systems of domination" (hooks, 1994, p. 21). Rather, this study reflects the researcher's efforts to bring awareness to "the assault on Black girls in school" (Owens et al., 2018) and do something about it.

## Key Research Issues

### Colorblindness

Equality in education has become erroneously synonymous with “colorblindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Colorblind can be described as a seemingly disregard of race and ethnicity in order to subtly reinforce racists ideals by claiming that color or ethnic background is not a factor when forming perceptions or making decisions and determinations (Bonilla-Silva). Many educators are often heard saying, “I don’t see race; I see children.” This kind of attitude towards race gives the false sense that taking note of students’ race is harmful or bad in some way. Examples of colorblindness or color-blind racism include, but are not limited to white privilege, the perpetuation of racists stereotypes, and covert institutional/educational practices that reinforce racial privilege. “Colorblind” school practices and policies have had many adverse effects on Black girls (Bonilla-Silva). Rather than improving issues of race and racism, the “colorblind” approach to public school policy has, in fact, made it easier to dismiss, rationalize, or fail to recognize inequity in the treatment of Black girls as it relates to both academic and disciplinary policies and procedures (Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016).

Educators committed to social justice recognize that there are practices in place that put Black girls at a disadvantage and are willing to discuss how to make changes. This study supports research that suggests to educators and administrators that it is important to see color and recognize that society sees color in order to improve conditions for students of color. When educators are able to see color, they are in a better position to help students of color gain access to a curriculum that sets them up for success throughout their K-12 educational years and beyond. Educators are to be advised that ignoring color is the antithesis of social progress in the field of education but recognizing color – taking notice of and embracing racial differences – is

just the first step in creating a more equitable U.S. public education system for all students and future citizens.

### **Educational Experiences of Black Girls**

Casemore (2008) asserts that “learning must address the glaring inequities of a social system so that educational renewal can occur. The refusal to address the way racism structures the social field and our individual lives is the very antithesis of learning” (p. 29). Because they are both female and Black, the intersectionality of race and gender places Black girls in a position to be vulnerable to systemic biases (Harris, Hockaday, & McCall, 2017). Several studies document the disconnect between Black girls and their teachers when they attend schools that are staffed with mostly White teachers (Harris et al, 2017; Joseph et al, 2016; Kayama, Haight, Gibson, & Wilson, 2015; Slate, Gray, & Jones, 2016; Tonnesen, 2013, Wun, 2016). Cultural misunderstanding is one of the main reasons why Black girls are misconstrued by their teachers. This cultural conflict results in negative attitudes and perceptions of Black girls. Hegemonic negative stereotypes of Black girls adversely affect teaching and learning and therefore, their chances of academic success throughout K-12 years and beyond. Freire (2005) warns that progressive educators should not:

feel superior, in the public school system, to the learners from the slums to the lower-class children, to the children with no comforts, who do not eat well, who do not “dress nicely” who do not “speak correctly,” who speak with their own syntax, semantics, and accent (p. 128).

Although Freire is referring to middle-class teachers whose students are impoverished and live in the slums of Brazil, I would give the same warning to teachers of Black girls who attend our nation’s public schools.



## **The Curriculum of Life Outside of School**

As educators, we do not learn everything that we need to know about teaching from our colleges of education. We cannot simply forget who we are and the things that we have experienced upon entering the classroom, so it is not realistic to think that our students can forget their lives, their experiences, and what they have learned at home and in their communities upon entering the school building. I share the sentiments of Audrey P. Watkins (2004) from her study on the informal education that we receive at home. She writes, “home is where learning and preparation for life begins, but family life defies simplification” (p. 156). Because family dynamics are complex and what is taught at home varies from student to student educators cannot assume that every child is coming to school with learning as his or her main goal. Some children may be too preoccupied with their home lives to give their undivided attention to what we think is important to cover in school. Watkins continues, “learning from experience that occurs outside of school can prepare the individual to avoid or better negotiate future problems” (p. 156). Not all students learn how to associate or culturally and appropriately interact with people from multiple backgrounds or how to handle challenges to their academic success at home. When many Black girls enter predominantly White schools, they either avoid difficult situations and are silenced in the process or are unable to successfully negotiate through matters they believe to be unjust and end up getting penalized either academically or through the disciplinary process (Harris et al., 2017; Joseph et al. 2016; Kayama et al., 2015; Slate et al., 2016; Tonnesen, 2013, Wun, 2016).

### **Autobiographical Roots of Inquiry**

For the past six years, I have served as an assistant principal at a suburban middle school on the coast of Georgia. When I was appointed to this position, I was impressed by the testing

and discipline data, the positive vibrations emitted by teachers and students, and the overall atmosphere of the school. Like many parents and citizens, I believed that it was an honor and a privilege for students who did not live in this school's attendance zone to be able to attend by way of a lottery process. When I was a student who had been selected to go to the magnet school, I was proud to be recognized as being smart enough to attend a school that required students to have at least a B+ grade point average and excellent behavior. I thought I would be respected as a high achieving student scholar and acknowledged as being the smartest as my family had done. This was not the case; at the magnet school, I was just one of many high achieving students. Similarly, when I was an administrator, I expected teachers to welcome this group of high achieving students from other neighborhoods just as they would welcome students who resided in the school's designated attendance zone. Instead, what I encountered was very different from my experience as a student in a magnet school. As a child, while I was not acknowledged for being the best and brightest, nor afforded special opportunities based upon my abilities, for the most part, I felt like I was treated with the same as all students though I was not zoned for the school district.

My experience as an administrator, where diversity is attempted by lottery after qualifications that address good grades and good behavior, I soon learned that simply attending one of the District's three middle schools that is not on the state's failing school list does not guarantee that students outside of its attendance zone, the overwhelming majority of them being Black, would receive the same opportunities for a quality education as the White students who reside in the neighboring community. As I became more involved with class scheduling, the disciplinary process, and student admissions, I began to notice patterns of inequity based on students' races and their home addresses. For example, when teachers discovered that students

resided outside of the approved school zone those students were more likely to be targeted and reprimanded for such simple violations as untucked shirts or not walking on the right side of the hallway. Then, what should have been a simple redirection turned into a power struggle between a student and a teacher whose tone embarrassed the student in front of an audience of peers. Teachers gave these students frequent reminders of how lucky they are to be given the opportunity to attend this school since they were technically supposed to attend the schools assigned to their districts. From my observations, the number of calls that I received from parents, and the number of office referrals that I received from teachers, Black students were more likely than White students to be placed in lower-level classes, cited for dress code violations, and referred to the office for disciplinary action at the administrative level.

As a young, Black woman employed as an assistant principal in a predominantly White, suburban, affluent middle school, I have a deep concern with the way Black students are perceived, judged, and treated especially since, in my current school, the faculty is composed almost entirely of White teachers who reside in the same community where the school is located. In my experience, when White faculty teach in “good schools,” they tend to reside in the same community, but when White faculty teach in “Black schools” or “majority minority schools,” they tend to live outside of the community. I am not so much concerned with the lack of diversity in the faculty as I am with the lack of understanding about the cultural context of the students and what I perceived as a cultural disconnect between them and the growing African-American population of students whom they serve. Everything from hair colorings and colloquialisms were viewed as behavior issues and could be subjected to office referrals. The majority of these students are transported from the inner-city through one of the district’s school choice programs. Whenever a disciplinary referral was written on a student who did not live

within the designated school zone, many teachers would write “Administrative Placement” or “IB Student” on the top to indicate to me that we had the right to revoke their placement and make them return to their home school. As an administrator, I felt like teachers were cueing me to consider these students’ addresses and that they live in our school district when deciding on the disciplinary action that I should take.

Educators may be more likely to be empathetic rather than quick to assign negative stereotypes or automatically perceiving Black girls as “tough,” “angry,” “promiscuous,” or “having a bad attitude” if they are knowledgeable of common cultural practices and home-life issues that many share (Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula, 2016; French, 2013; George, 2015). When students are in less than ideal situations outside of school and have to also encounter teachers and administrators who they perceive lack knowledge, care, or concern for them and their situations, attempting to succeed academically is almost pointless (Clonan-Roy et al.; French; George). Certainly, this is not to say that all Black girls have bad home-life situations or prior schooling experiences. However, my aim is to encourage educators to be empathetic toward Black girls and common experiences that they share and bring to school with them before automatically assigning negative stereotypes.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theories that support this study are Critical Race Theory ([CRT]; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009), and Black Feminist Thought ([BFT]; Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). Both frameworks guide my autobiographical inquiry in order to explore and make meaning of my educational experiences and family life and their impact on my schooling and my teaching and leadership practices. I relied on these frameworks to critically explore how the social constructions of race, gender, and class influence how I interact with the students and colleagues who I teach and lead. I hope that my story paints a

picture of the shared experiences of Black girls who attend public schools and counters those stories of the dominant discourse about the education of Black girls. Those majoritarian stories serve the interests of those already in power as a means to preserve hegemony and are used as examples by White males to justify why he should remain in power in academia and in society at large. Telling a counter-story of the education of Black girls from the perspective of an educational leader who is a Black woman would support efforts to advocate for equal opportunities in education for Black girls and women.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Lynn and Dixson (2013) informs us that “critical race theory (CRT) engage[s] race as both the cause and the context for disparate and inequitable social and educational outcomes” (p. 1). Specific to teacher education, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define CRT as:

a framework that can be used to theorize and examine ways in which race and racism impact the structures, processes, and discourses within a teacher education context. This framework challenges dominant ideology, which supports deficit notions about students of color. Utilizing the experiences of students of color, a CRT in teacher education also examines that place where racism intersects with other forms of subordination such as sexism and classism. (p. 3)

CRT in education is an evolving methodological, conceptual, and theoretical construct that attempts to dismantle racism in education (Solorzano, 1998). Scholars recognize that race must be considered when attempting to create solutions to problems in education. CRT allows researchers to investigate how race plays a part in achievement and in what ways we can use these findings to benefit marginalized persons, Black girls, and women, for the purpose of this study. “CRT scholars believe that racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the

educational barriers for people of color, as well as explore how these barriers are resisted and overcome” (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 9).

CRT challenges the dominant discourses on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate students of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT aims: (a) to present storytelling and narratives as valid approaches through which to examine race and racism in the law and in society, (b) to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation while simultaneously recognizing that race is a social construct, and (c) “to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination” (Parker & Lynn, 2009, p. 9). Solorzano and Yosso explain that CRT in teacher education seeks to identify, analyze, and transform subtle and overt forms of racism in education in order to transform society. CRT is applicable to this study because its purpose is to uncover racism, sexism, and classism in public schools and to explore ways to resist those constructs in order to transform the U.S. public K-12 curriculum to make it empowering for Black girls and women.

One of the basic tenets of CRT is the normalcy and permanence of racism (Bell, 1992). If racism is believed to be a permanent aspect of our society, it is indeed prevalent in the educational system, the very system that seeks to prepare students to be citizens in the larger society. It is reasonable to assume that racist practices utilized in U.S. public education spillover to higher education and employment thereby making it virtually impossible for marginalized students to overcome their oppressed status. The same racist practices, when applied to higher education and employment, offer privilege to White students and workers while simultaneously oppressing Black students and workers. For example, colleges and employers may claim that they do not admit or hire based on race. That is to the benefit of White students and job seekers because they are less likely to be discriminated against due to their race or skin color, whereas,

the absence of affirmative action policies or other measures to increase diversity significantly and traditionally reduces the chances of Black students or job seekers being admitted or hired. Because this practice of new racism allows educators and employers to ignore the fact that the criteria by which prospects are judged are reflective of White norms and standards thereby automatically giving White male prospects at least some degree of an advantage over White women, Black men, and Black women. Therefore, the absence of affirmative action encourages the notion of colorblindness which indirectly reinforces White privilege and serves yet another roadblock for equitable educational experiences for Black girls and women. Similarly, when K-12 educational policy that prohibits the use of race as a criterion for selection for special programs decreases the chances of Black students attending the schools that are more than likely to rank as the best performing schools in the district as reported by state school report cards and other measures of success.

CRT challenges the notion of colorblindness, or race-neutral policies in education by shedding light on these policies that appear fair to all at first glance. CRT provides real-life examples of how such policies ultimately serve the purpose of power maintenance for White males. The five tenets of CRT as developed by Solorzano and Bernal (2001) are used to guide CRT research. The tenets of CRT include: (a) the centrality of race and racism, (b) challenging the dominant perspective, (c) commitment to social justice, (d) valuing experiential knowledge, and (e) being interdisciplinary. The tenets of CRT are important to this research. First of all, as I analyze my stories, CRT justifies my placing race and racism at the center of my study as I attempt to identify common threads. Secondly, this study challenges the White, male-dominated narrative on Black students which places them at a disadvantage by stereotyping their intellectual capacity as inferior and their behavior as deviant. It is important to this study for a framework,

such as CRT, to be utilized in order for my personal narrative of my experiences as Black student and educator to be accepted as a credible source of knowledge. CRT declares stories and personal narratives play critical roles when it comes to “exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate stereotypes” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). Finally, one of the goals of this study was to develop teaching practices that emancipate Black girls and women from educational practices and policies that reinforce their subordinate position in the rank of students who attend U.S. public schools.

Giving credence to experiential knowledge, “critical race theorists draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories..., and narratives” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Therefore, exploring my educational and personal experiences through the autobiographical fiction process places value on my experiential knowledge by adding to the body of literature that is concerned with transforming education so that Black girls and women receive an empowering education despite the inherent racism that plagues U.S. public schools (Taylor et al., 2009). Finally, my dissertation is interdisciplinary because it explores how dominant societal beliefs, teacher preparation, educational leadership, and politics are all interconnected in the mission to transform educational practices that marginalize and oppress Black girls and women.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Whereas critical race theory is concerned with the implications of race and racism prevalent in such institutions as the U.S. public school and judicial systems, Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 2000) is concerned with giving a voice to Black women because they have traditionally been silenced based on the intersectionality of their race and gender. BFT “is a theoretical approach that embraces the ideas of resistance, voice, and activism” (Bertrand



Jones, Wilder, & Osborne-Lumpkin, 2013, p. 330). BFT is concerned with giving credence and value to Black women's positions. BFT serves as a theoretical framework that accurately portrays the real life experiences of Black womanhood and places Black women at the focal point of analysis (Bertrand Jones et al.). In order to foster the empowerment of Black women, BFT brings awareness to the interconnectedness of "race, class, gender, and the self-production of Black women's knowledge" (Bertrand Jones et al., p. 330). BFT is a necessary theory for a study, such as this dissertation, that stories the personal informal and formal educational experiences of Black girls and women.

BFT recognizes African American Women as an oppressed group (Hill Collins, 2000). There are six distinguishing features that characterize BFT. They are: (a) "as a collectivity, U.S. Black women participate in a dialectical relationship linking African-American women's oppression and activism," (Hill Collins, p. 25); (b) asserts that "all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely denigrates women of African descent" (p. 28); (c) "concerns the connections between U.S. Black women's experience as a heterogenous collectivity and any other ensuing group knowledge or standpoint" (p. 33); (d) recognizes the importance of the "contributions of African-American women" both with and without formal education (p. 37); (e) requires that "Black feminist thought operate[s] effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic" (p. 42); and (f) encourages relationships or collaboration with other movements that are concerned with the "struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice" (p. 46). Therefore, BFT encourages women of color to advocate for all persons who are discriminated against on the basis of their race, gender, socio-economic status, physical or mental ability, or sexual orientation. Women from all walks of life must "aggressively push the theme of self-

definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment" (p. 40). When the forces that oppress Black women change, BFT must be armed with new ideas and tactics to resist those forces. In other words, "as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them" (p. 42).

Because African American women are both female and Black, they experience life differently from African American men and Caucasian women. BFT emphasizes that it is impossible to compare the oppressive experiences of African American women with either of the aforementioned segments of society, because African American women may not only face race discrimination but gender discrimination as well (Hill Collins, 2000). To further explain the double-discrimination that African American women face, Crenshaw (1989) offers:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race and on the basis of sex. And sometimes they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (p. 149)

Educators interested in improving the schooling experiences of Black girls must find ways to promote their agenda in a patriarchal society whose gatekeepers are not interested in promoting equity in public schools. CRT's concept of interest convergence asserts that any attempt to alleviate racism or achieve racial equality will not be taken seriously unless it converges with the needs of White people (Bell, 1980, Milner, 2008). Because equity in education threatens the maintenance of the power structure that places White males in the dominating position, equity in education does not serve the interest of White men. Hence, the

subtle racism, sexism, and classicism present in U.S. public schools are in place to perpetuate the hegemonic practices that keep White men in power as they oppress women and minorities. Black girls and women face some of the same challenges as anyone else-male or female, Black, White, or any other race as it relates to obtaining an empowering education. However, there are some additional challenges that are unique to black women. BFT offers a lens through which these unique challenges can be investigated as “diversity within commonality” (Norris, 2012, p. 452). BFT acknowledges the notion of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender as oppressive forces in society, and BFT is also instrumental in validating the historically marginalized voices of African American women. “Black feminism places the experiences and knowledge of Black women at the forefront and allows them to define their own realities” (Vickery, 2015, p. 165). Therefore, the use of BFT as a theoretical framework will assist me in defining my truth as created by my personal and educational experiences and how those experiences have influenced me as a student, teacher, and an educational leader. Using BFT to question how being Black and female has shaped my educational experiences as a student, teacher, and educational leader will aid in the exploration of my past for the purpose of developing ideas and creating empowering educational experiences for Black women and girls with whom I work and teach. BFT validates my lived experiences as a credible source of knowledge and recognizes my ability to use these everyday experiences to access more abstract knowledge claims (Hill Collins, 2000).

### **Questions Guiding My Research**

As a lower-level educational administrator who is Black and female, how can I bring awareness to and advocate for change in common educational policies and practices that marginalize Black girls? What practices can educators put in place to help Black girls overcome barriers within the public educational system that hinder their academic success? Those

questions that resonate with the most personal relevance are: (a) How can I use my lived experiences to bring awareness to the marginalization of Black girls who attend public schools and advise colleagues and future educators of the need to dismantle this system of oppression, (b) what practices can educators put in place to dismantle the oppressive nature of public schools for Black girls and promote more positive experiences for them, and (c) how have I evolved as an educator as a result of my experience as an assistant principal at a predominantly White suburban school?

### **Review of Literature**

In addition to the theoretical frameworks, CRT and BFT, there are six bodies of literature that are relevant to my inquiry: (a) the education of Blacks in the South, (b) intersectionality, (c) the educational experiences of Black girls, (d) stereotypical perceptions educators have of Black girls, (e) the educational experiences of Black girls in the South, and (f) the overrepresentation of Black girls in the public school discipline system. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to analyze the schooling and professional experiences of an educational leader in a White, suburban school from a Black Feminist Thought (BFT) standpoint.

This dissertation is an autobiographical inquiry into the development of my voice and self as a Black female educational leader. I story and re-story my lived experiences as well as explore writings of Black women that have influenced my identity as a student, a teacher, and an educational administrator. Reading the works of Black women has inspired me to use education as a means to overcome a life of poverty, sexual abuse, and family instability. I propose that educators of Black girls and women examine their own lived experiences to reflect on the impact those experiences have on how and what they practice in school settings, read works written by Black women about their childhood and educational experiences, and encourage their students to

read the works of Black women to find themselves, develop their voices, identify common themes, and to gain insight on how to create the places and spaces in which they desire to be in this world (Tremble, 2007). Further, I propose that Black girls and women should be given opportunities to write about themselves in the educational setting as a way to have their silenced voices heard.

In my dissertation, I explore stories written by Black women and look for themes that recur in the literature as well as my life stories. I was schooled in an educational system that placed little value on my experiences as a Black girl. It is through the stories of triumph and defeat over various obstacles that I found in autobiographical and fictional works written by Black women that I realized that I knew the experiences of the authors on a very personal level. They all reminded me of someone that I knew. It was me; I was the protagonist in these works.

From this study, I seek to gain an understanding of how my experiences as a Black female educated, teaching, and leading in a White, male dominated school system impact my development as an educational leader. With the knowledge gained, I hope to uncover, share and encourage others to implement curricular practices that empower Black girls and women to navigate through an educational system that retains them on the margins of society (hooks, 1984/2000).

### **The Education of Blacks in the South**

Desegregation of schools portrays the guise of equal educational opportunities for all students. However, the literature on the education of Blacks in the South paints a very different picture of the state of education for Black students in the South. Education is the source of knowledge, and the acquisition of knowledge begets power. In the White patriarchal South, the dominance of Black people by White males is maintained by the mis-education of Blacks.

Blacks are mis-educated by educational programming and a curriculum that is equal only in outward appearance. As Woodson (1910/2008) postulates:

This so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples...The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed. Negroes daily educated in the 57 tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of weak as divinely ordained...The Negro's mind has been brought under control of his oppressor... (p. 24)

The education of Blacks in the South is used as a control mechanism that affords Black people just enough knowledge to think that they are in control of their destiny. However, this educational control very cleverly maintains the status of White males as dominant, and Black people as oppressed.

The mis-education of Blacks is deeply seated in the roots of slavery. Teaching slaves to read and write was forbidden because slave owners were fearful that slaves would desire freedom and Whites would lose power and control if slaves became educated. "Most of the Southern states enacted legislation making it a crime to teach enslaved children to read or write" (Anderson, 1988, p. 2). During slavery, education was reserved for Whites as a privilege and control maintenance.

Abolitionists, many of whom were White males of the Quaker faith, felt that it was their mission to educate, and thereby, help liberate all of God's children. They became allies in the slave's quest to become educated. "A Quaker minister influenced by the philosophy of John

Locke began to preach that liberty is the right of all men and that slaves being the fellow-creatures of their masters had a natural right to be elevated” (Woodson, 2008, p. 42). Slaves began to understand the importance of education and its potential to improve their lives. Slaves recognized their owners’ objection to them being educated as a form of control and a way to keep them in bondage.

The 13th Constitutional Amendment of the United States Constitution eventually abolished slavery. While there was a general consensus that newly freed slaves needed to be educated, there were differing opinions on *how* they were to be educated. Scientific racism or the belief that Blacks are inferior to Whites influenced efforts to educate newly freed slaves, and Watkins (2001) explains:

Scientific racism was a fundamental precept in the architecture of Black education. It was felt that the naturally inferior Black must always occupy a socially subservient position. Industrial education, therefore, was right for the Blacks...After all, wasn’t it a step up from slavery? It could be marketed as democracy and a way to increase Black participation in the society and economic community. (p. 39-40)

Prominent figures who were key to the education of newly freed slaves included Hampton University’s Samuel Armstrong (Anderson, 1988). Armstrong “emphasized manual labor over academic preparation and deliberately sought to infuse African American schools with teachers who would teach this philosophy” (Walker & Archung, 2003, p. 24). Anderson gives a historical account of the Industrial Educational curriculum that northern philanthropists declared to be the best curriculum for Blacks, a curriculum that prepared Blacks for “manual labor and second-class citizenship” (Walker & Archung, p. 24) rather than technical and professional careers.

Today, nearly 70 years since the desegregation of U.S. public schools, the education of Blacks, especially in the South, is “embedded in a system of racial segregation designed to promote Whites into positions of leadership, land ownership, and economic control and to doom Blacks to subservience” (Walker & Archung, p. 25). The next section, intersectionality, will explain how the education of Blacks in the South is triply oppressive for Black girls and women who attend public schools in the South.

### **Intersectionality**

It is well-documented that Black girls and women face a unique set of challenges that are attributed to their multiple statuses of being Black and female. Due to the multidimensional roles that race, gender, and class play in the oppression and marginalization of Black girls and women, Black feminists stress the importance of taking an intersectional approach to analyze their lived experiences (Hill Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995). Hill Collins and Blige (2016) explain how intersectionality is used in educational research to analyze constructs that are used to oppress members of society:

Researchers in education tackle questions of how interactions between social inequalities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability shape educational experiences and outcomes of disenfranchised populations. The synergy linking scholarship and practice affects not just teacher training, curriculum design, and research of pedagogy for schools, but it also shapes the many sub-specialties within education scholarship. (p. 39)

Analysis of only a single construct, such as race or gender, does not accurately embody the experiences of Black girls and the multiple forms of oppression that marginalize, or subordinate, them (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1995).



## **Stereotypical Perceptions of Black Girls**

Black girls seldom see positive images of themselves represented in the public K-12 curriculum. They are left out of the literature and are forced to empathize with main characters who do not mirror them physically, socioeconomically, or otherwise. Greene (2016) explains how the lack of representation in the curriculum can cause a disconnect between Black girls and literature:

In the age of school mandates and school programs, school spaces often do not reflect the academic and socio-emotional needs of Black girls. School spaces often do not account for the multiple home and cultural experiences that shape who Black girls are and how they see the world. (p. 284)

It is a common perception among school officials that Black girls are not as serious as other students and describe their academic ability as average or slightly below average (Neal-Jackson, 2018; Nunn, 2018; Williams, 2018). It is also common for educators to predict the future success of Black girls as dismal or not as bright as their White counterparts even when they have demonstrated high achievement based on educators' perceptions of Black girls' interest in academics (Neal-Jackson; Nunn; Williams). In other words, teachers perceive Black girls as not being academically goal-oriented or interested in higher education even when they demonstrate the same levels of achievement or higher than White students. Another stereotypical perception of Black girls is that they are sexually more mature than White girls. Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, and Id-Deen (2019) indicated that "Black women and girls are portrayed as hypersexual or sexually deviant and are not afforded the care and consideration given to White women and girls," (p. 2533). Research is plentiful that reveals the tenacity of Black girls and women who achieve academic success in spite of discrimination, traumatic

experiences, and other forms of opposition (Evans-Winters, 2014; Spencer, 2014). However, these studies have unintentionally given the false perception that “resiliency is an innate trait available to all Black women, at all times” (Neal-Jackson, p. 509). Black girls are often lumped into one category by educators and perceived as loud, angry, hypersexual, uninterested in academics, and resilient to trauma. However, educators stand in need of cultural competence training that teaches us to become aware of our biases toward Black girls and to be culturally responsive (Gay, 1994, 2000) to their needs.

### **Educational Experiences of Black Girls**

If educators and policy-makers “acknowledge the unique ways that African American girls’ educational experiences are impacted by explicit and implicit bias and underlying racial and gender stereotypes” (George, 2015, p. 104), improvement to the quality of education for Black girls can occur. In order to work toward more positive experiences of and improve academic success for Black girls, educators must give explicit attention “to race and its role in educational equity and inequity” (Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016, p. 5).

Stereotypes commonly used to describe Black girls include “angry”, “aggressive,” or “promiscuous,” and have “contributed to this population being overlooked in the K-12 setting” (Harris et al., 2017, p. 1). Labels stereotypically used to describe Black girls have created negative perceptions of them and conditioned educators to be less sympathetic to Black girls’ academic and emotional needs (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Poole, 2019; Tonnesen, 2013).

Current research indicates that Black girls are underrepresented in advanced or college preparatory classes, and those who are given the opportunity to take these courses often fail to pass the accompanying tests required to receive college credit (Smith-Evans & George, 2014). Negative perceptions of Black girls and their attitudes contribute to their disproportionate rate of

disciplinary action. Even when Black girls are stereotyped in a positive light with such adjectives as “strong,” or “motivated,” they are adversely affected by educators’ perception of them being independent and not requiring attention, emotional, or academic support (Morris, 2007; Rollock, 2007). Because Black girls are often stereotyped as being promiscuous (Durham, 2015; French, 2013; White, 2018) they experience the dual effects of sexualization. Their statuses as the “victim” often come into question, and they are often penalized with disciplinary consequences such as suspension or expulsion for defending themselves (Tonnesen, 2013). When Black girls encounter one or more of these issues during their K-12 experience, they are less likely to graduate from high school prepared for college or a meaningful career (Morris; Rahimi & Liston, 2012; Wun, 2016).

According to the 2011 Civil Rights Data Collection Report (CRDC), approximately 5.2% of Black girls were identified as gifted and talented compared to 35% of White girls (CRDC, 2011). Many school officials attribute the underrepresentation of Black Girls in advanced math and science classes to their lack of interest, ability, and motivation rather than the lack of opportunity given to them to study and work in these areas (Neal-Jackson, 2018). This misconception by teachers that students are disinterested may lead to a lack of providing interesting and novel opportunities in math and science to help motivate students. Along with underrepresentation in the STEM fields, Black girls are underrepresented in gifted education in most school districts across the U.S. (Evans-Winters, 2014), making this a national inequity issue. The lack of opportunity to participate in challenging curricula hinders students from seeking a college preparatory pathway.

Although Allen (1990) is referring to Black female law students in her essay, *On Being a Role Model*, when she states, “they need teachers who will motivate them to do their best work,

listen to them with understanding, and validate their life experiences” this research seeks to understand how this belief can be applied to girls in the public K-12 setting as well (p. 82). Students need teachers to believe in them and their ability to succeed. Evans-Winters (2014) purports that “resilient Black girls can identify with at least one positive female in the school environment that encourages excellence” (p. 24). Evans-Winters also asserts that race has some impact on Black girls’ resilience, adults who are “culturally responsive and aware of their needs based on race and gender with attention to income/class” (p. 24) is what matters most. Educators need not be Black in order to help Black girls succeed, but they must be culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) to the unique needs of Black girls in U.S. public schools.

Upon entrance into U.S. public schools, Black girls are taught that they are subordinate to White males, White females, and Black males (Haynes et al., 2016). This study will focus on the public educational system in the South as it relates to the subordination of Black girls and women.

Greene’s (2016) findings suggest that Black girls continue to lag behind their White counterparts in the area of reading because they do not feel connected to the materials provided to them. Educators concerned with empowering Black girls and women should find ways to allow them to access reading materials that are culturally-rich and are reflective of the experiences of Black girls and women. As Greene’s study suggests, Black girls do not necessarily lack the capacity to learn to read fluently, rather they are disengaged in the learning process because they cannot relate to the materials. As educators, we know that all reading material is not going to be enjoyable. However, when students see reflections of themselves in books, reading becomes enjoyable and they are motivated to read more, thus increasing their reading skills (Ford, Walters, Byrd, & Harris, 2019). It is especially important for Black girls to

see positive images of themselves in books because Black girls rarely see themselves portrayed in books. Seeing themselves positively portrayed in books can also counter negative portrayals of Black girls and women shown in film and other media.

### **Educational Experiences of Black Girls in the South**

Though the autobiographies of Black women from the South who have influenced my research are not catalogued as curriculum studies texts, they can be situated within the curriculum of the South. As one organizing idea for political, autobiographical, racial, and gender issues in curriculum, Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) introduced the concept of place using studies of the American South to demonstrate its application (Pinar, 2004). My research was guided by noted Black female authors Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison. These authors write about their experiences growing up in the South and the influences race, gender and class have contributed to their familial and school knowledge. I could not help but reflect upon my own lived experiences as a Black girl raised and educated in the South as I read their works. I began to ponder what if any impact my familial and school knowledge has had and continues to have on my practices as an educational leader. Further, I wanted to explore ways of understanding, relative to my lived experiences, that may be beneficial to and for educators of Black girls and women, professors and leaders who are in authority over and who train educators, and of course to and for Black girls and women.

My research, my autobiographical inquiry, is situated in the South. I share my lived experiences as a student, teacher, and educational leader and reflect on the impact each of my selves has had on one another and my role as an assistant principal of a middle school located in the South. Through this exploration, I sought to understand how my lived experiences have shaped me as an educator, to give educators a glimpse into what the lives of some of the students

with whom they come in contact may look like, and to develop some ideas that we can implement for the purpose of improving the educational experiences of Black girls and women in order that the education they receive serves to free them of oppression and marginalization within the U.S. public K-12 system.

### **The Overrepresentation of Black Girls in the School Discipline System**

Black girls are disproportionately represented in the U. S. Public school discipline system (Wun, 2016). Much of the research on the impact that school discipline has on Black girls indicate that Black girls are more likely to be sent to the office, suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement than any other ethnic group of girls (Wun). Black girls are perceived by teachers and some of their peers as being aggressive (Putallaz et al., 2007) and more likely to be involved in physical altercations than White and Hispanic girls (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). However, research suggests that the disparities in the school discipline of Black girls are more likely due to teacher referral bias than actual occurrences of infractions exhibited by this group of students (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wun). Black girls are more likely to be referred to school administration, suspended, and expelled for such subjective behaviors as rude and disrespectful behavior, defiance, dress code violations, talking back, and having a poor attitude than their White counterparts (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Morris & Perry, 2017; Rahimi & Liston, 2012; Wun, 2016). Dvorak (2018) reported that “Black girls, especially curvier students, are disproportionately targeted” (para. 11).

Dvorak (2018) shares an account of racial bias in one school’s dress code as told by a school administrator:

Three girls, all good friends and all of different shapes, sizes, and colors, wore the same banned outfit to school one day to make their point. And sure enough, the curvier and dark-skinned girls were singled out for a violation; the thin, White girl was not.

The behaviors that Black girls are most punished for interestingly correlate to such common stereotypes associated with Black women as loud, angry, and hypersexual beings (Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016). The oppression of Black girls in public schools is clearly evident in their overrepresentation in the school discipline system as they “are haunted by the ever-present White supremacist and the misogynistic gaze of the administrators, teachers, and staff they encounter daily” (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 2539). Black girls are personified as women and not given the care that is afforded to White girls (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Morris, 2016). When White girls are non-conforming they are described as independent and assertive, but Black girls exhibiting the same behaviors are perceived as “disruptive, aggressive, and/or arrogant” (Carter Andrews et al., p. 2539). Murphy, Acosta, and Kennedy-Lewis (2013) eloquently sums up how school discipline practices oppress Black girls in public schools:

From being presumed guilty to being denied academic support, these girls of color experience school as a hostile environment in which they are dominated by discriminatory practices, teachers’ hegemonic judgments of their behaviors, and interpersonal conflicts with both educators and peers (p. 604).

### **Conclusion**

Although much research has been focused on the plight of Black boys and how U. S. schools serve as a school to prison pipeline (Nunn, 2018; Payne & Brown, 2017; Schiff, 2018; White, 2018) for them, researchers have recently begun to recognize that Black girls in U.S. schools are just as at risk as Black boys for dropping out of school and/or coming in contact with

the juvenile justice system as a result of disparities in the school discipline system (Nunn; White). Many of these disparities develop from educators' perceived notions of who Black girls are, how they behave, and what they are intellectually capable of. The review of literature on the experiences of Black girls in U.S. public schools suggests that more work is needed in understanding the schooling experiences of Black girls and developing a curriculum that helps them to overcome the oppressive nature of schooling that has been maintained by the hegemonic class of White males throughout the history of the US.



## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

I chose memoir to guide my inquiry because it allows me to share autobiographical data as I perceive it. This narrative inquiry focuses on my life as a student who attended a predominantly Black middle school and my career as an administrator of a predominantly White middle school in Southeast Georgia. To better understand and advocate for the improvement in the treatment of Black girls who attend predominantly White public schools, I draw upon my own personal experiences and interactions as a former student and educational administrator of a school district located in Southeast Georgia. Memoir allows me to share my lived experiences as I remember them without the need to validate concrete details. The fictionalization of characters and details of my life story was necessary to protect the identities of my family members, colleagues, students, and others with whom I share my experiences. Using Maya Angelou (1969), bell hooks (1996), Zora Neal Hurston (1937/2006), and Toni Morrison (1970/1993) as models, I merged memoir with fiction to explore the public schooling experiences of Black girls from the perspective of a Black female administrator leading a predominantly White school and a former magnet school student. There are many commonalities between the schooling experiences of Black girls and women from the past through the current. I used fiction as a tool to reveal sociopolitical issues such as unequal access to challenging courses and disparities in school discipline that are related to my personal experiences with oppression throughout my educational career as a student and throughout my tenure as an educator. Many of these experiences are taboo or may be uncomfortable for educators to talk about which is another reason that I fictionalized the experiences of my students and colleagues. The stories included in my memoir center around my perception of Black girls' public schooling experiences and how educators can eliminate barriers to their academic success. In order to fully understand the

significance of the memoir in curriculum studies research, we must first understand its autobiographical roots as well as the role of fiction and counter storytelling in the creation of memoir.

### **Autobiography**

For this inquiry, it was important for me to understand autobiography and its relevance to curriculum studies. Because my research did not include empirical data, I needed a method that would allow me to share and reflect upon my experiences without having to meet a standard of validity set by others. The loosely prescribed nature of autobiographical inquiry makes it an acceptable methodology in curriculum studies, an area of education that is particularly devoted to giving voice to persons who are typically absent from decision making (Wilkerson, 2007). I am absent from decision making within my school district, but sharing my story may contribute anecdotal data needed to prompt educators who have decision making authority to develop policies that specifically target and aim to eliminate disparities in honors and advanced course placement, dress code enforcement, and disciplinary procedures as they relate to Black girls. Sharing my story adds to the current research of other educators concerned with improving the K-12 experience for Black girls. Bringing this research to the attention of district administrators and the school board can be instrumental in revising policy and implementing changes in the curriculum that will break down current barriers that hinder academic achievement and thereby oppress Black girls.

Autobiography in Curriculum Studies is rooted in William Pinar's (1975) reflective analysis of his and his students' life histories. He coined this method of reflective analysis "currere." Though currere refers to narrative writing about educational experiences, it is important to note that these educational experiences may take place in school, but more often

take place outside of school (Strong-Wilson, 2015). This is of particular importance to this study because many of my stories take place outside of the classroom and because many of my student's stories require me to describe their home lives in order to understand my perceptions of their school experiences. In curriculum studies, autobiography is a method used by educators to link theory and practice and make meaning of their experiences. In this study, I make meaning of my experiences as a former student and as an educational leader in order to demonstrate the need for educational administrators to create more positive educational experiences for Black girls who attend predominantly White public schools.

Pinar (2004) purports that curriculum theory "is a form of autobiographical and theoretical truth-telling that articulates the educational experience of teachers and students as lived" (p. 25). From a curriculum studies standpoint, autobiography is a tool used to capture an educator's lived experiences and the impact that those experiences have on her educational practice. Unlike many other methods of educational research, autobiography does not provide measurable outcomes. Rather, autobiography provides us with data that we use to connect common themes associated with what it is about our lives, what we have seen, heard, and desired, that drives us to do what we do to, for, and with the persons that we teach, lead, and work with in the educational setting. The importance of autobiography to the development of teachers and students is recognized by many scholars. Educators critically analyzing the factors that influence their practices and critically examining each other's life stories may help to develop and implement educational practices that empower the populations that they serve.

Autobiography is neither a theory nor a principle, however, it allows the researcher to access memory and other valuable sources of data that are relevant to education, especially in the specialized area of curriculum studies (Graham, 1991). Autobiography, with regard to

Curriculum Studies is composed of an individual's lived educational experiences either as a student, a practitioner, or both. "The production of autobiography opens avenues for individuals to examine how the things their parents taught them, their formal education, cultural and life experiences all impact who they are, how they perceive, react to and interact with others" (Harris, 2005, p. 37). In other words, autobiography gives educational researchers a way in which to evaluate how one's lived experiences are reflected in, inform, and drive our practices as educators. This is important for educators who are concerned with promoting social justice in their everyday line of work because we need to be aware of any biases or preconceived stereotypes that we bring to the classroom with us that further oppress rather than support the academic excellence of Black girls, the population of students that were the focus of this study. It is only when we recognize how we contribute to the oppression of Black girls that we can work toward eliminating such forms of oppression in U.S. public schools.

"The autobiography is gaining acceptance in academia as a means to counter the hegemonic images of people of color, especially women" (Harris, 2005, p. 38). Such self-ethnographic writing as autobiography has been criticized as narcissistic and lacking scholarly value (Harris). However, in recent years, the autobiography has gained popularity in academia especially in the area of curriculum studies. The use of autobiography is becoming a more widely-used method of inquiry, and scholars are recognizing that autobiography is especially valuable in such areas as teacher education and preparation (Williams, 2018). So, as an educator who has experience as both a student and an educational administrator, my autobiographical narrative, my memoir can be used to help future teachers, current educators, and policymakers better understand the plight of Black girls who attend public schools in the US while countering the hegemonic image of the Black girl.

### **Autobiographies Written by Black Women**

According to hooks (2000), feminist scholars who are genuinely concerned with reaching the masses “ must either write in a more accessible manner or write in the manner of their choice and to see to it that the piece is made available to others using a style that can be easily understood” (p. 113). My autobiographical piece, my memoir, is written in a manner that is easily accessible and easily understood. The stories included in this research will be written in everyday language and do not require prior knowledge of any technical terminology or jargon specific to educators. To preserve the integrity of research, I will explain how each vignette is connected to theory. However, prior knowledge of theory is not needed to make meaning of the stories. hooks (2000) also asserts, “the value of a feminist work should not be determined by whether or not it conforms to academic standards”(p. 113). My research will not conform to traditional academic standards. For instance, data was not collected by observing or interviewing other participants. Examination and exploration of my own experiences will be the source of my data. Because I am the only human participant and all other participants will be fictionalized, my dissertation will neither require Institutional Review Board approval nor my employer’s permission to conduct research. Not being required to obtain my employer’s permission to conduct research was of grave importance to this study. I doubt if my employer would ever approve research that has the potential of exposing discriminatory practices used in one of the schools within its school district. The intent of this research is to seek justice for Black girls in the form of systemic change. However, those in positions to approve or deny requests for research may view this type of research as a risk management issue, deny my request, and further silence me and my perceptions as a Black female administrator.

Harris (2005) argues in support of autobiographical writing by Black women and its importance in education, “there is a need for Black women to write their lives, as much for correcting of the history of their lives as for the personal benefits they gain from engaging in the process of developing autobiography” (p. 38). This research will add to the body of literature that rewrites the history of an African American woman and many women like me who were educated in public school systems that marginalize and oppress Black girls and women. My wishes were to reap personal therapeutic benefits as I wrote my dissertation to use as motivation to continue to advocate for improvement in the treatment of Black girls who attend public schools. I took note from Harris, who declares, “the autobiographical process permits the writer to think deeply about her life and to develop a positive identity. The creation of autobiography is, in these ways, a therapeutic process that is useful to all who write their lives” (p. 38). When educators write their lives, they can reflect on the things that people said or did to or for them that inspired them. Educators can also reflect on those persons or situations that negatively impacted them as students. This writing and reflecting allows educators to honestly analyze themselves as teachers and think about talents and ideas other than content expertise they can bring to the classroom to empower themselves and their students. Autobiographies written by Black women, especially in the field of education are needed to better understand their perspectives “as we work to empower student teachers as well as veteran educators and policy-makers] and advance the field by democratic and anti-racist actions” (Williams, 2018, p. 6). In the spirit of Black Feminism, I use my story and my experiences as “a way of knowing and learning” (Owens et al., 2018, p. 10). As I chronicled the experiences that I felt were relevant to this study, I realized that my study was not actually an autobiography. Rather, the research collected and shared throughout this study would be more suitably presented as a memoir.

Although it is important to understand the characteristics of autobiography and its importance in curriculum studies, the following section explains why memoir as the method of inquiry was more appropriate.

### **Fiction**

Fiction offers a means to examine and explore topics and situations in curriculum that are sensitive or very personal to researchers. “The use of fiction and dialogue allows the author to explore the tension that exists between essentializing and particularizing a character, phenomenon, or situation, while also imagining toward possibility—considering those things that can be done,” (Lukasik, 2010, p. 88). Fiction is used to illustrate how our personal experiences are interconnected to much larger societal issues. Leavy (2012) proclaims that fiction serves a crucial role in social justice research,

Fiction may be of particular interest to social researchers working from critical theoretical perspectives because this form is uniquely suited to build critical consciousness, disrupt stereotypes, cultivate empathetic understanding across differences, promote reflection through resonance, open up a multiplicity of meanings, and extend the reach of our scholarship. (p. 258)

Fiction allows researchers to expose and analyze hard truths about racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization without exposing the persons who have contributed to the oppression of others. Rather, fiction allows these issues and experiences to be examined through the lives of fictionalized characters. My research is fictional because the characters and stories are created by blending real life, personal experiences of mine not because the stories are made up for entertainment. “Nothing in it needs to be publicly verifiable, although much of it can be verified” (Morrison, 2008, p. 72). The same is true of my dissertation. Because memoir gives

me the authority to fictionalize my stories my data does not have to be validated. However, if one were to figure out the identities of the characters of my memoir, the events can be confirmed. Because many of the participants of this study, the characters of my stories, are still employed with and still attend schools in this Southeastern school district, their anonymity is of utmost importance.

### **Memoir**

Miller and Sockett (2000) explains that memoir is not an attempt to replicate one's entire life. Rather, memoir chronicles a period or certain times in one's life and the researcher's attempt to work through a particular problem or issue during those times. I expand this definition of memoir to include the researcher's attempt to work through problems or issues for others that are similar to those she had experienced at a certain time or point in her own life. Memoir "contains both retrospective and current musings on a theme or problem that runs through one's constructions and interpretations of particular life experiences" (Miller & Sockett, p. 254). Like autobiography, memoir "must recognize its own construction and cultural conditioning" (Miller, p. 254). I recognize that my memoir was not written as a traditional academic piece. My memoir has the ability to persuade other educators to re-evaluate school policies that they have accepted without question, based on tradition or majoritarian narratives, that are discriminatory and oppressive in order to create more positive educational experiences for Black girls who attend public schools. Taking a critical look at research that revealed commonalities in the schooling experiences that Black people and Black women have had has enlightened me to ways in which social justice proponents have worked to revolutionize the public school system to benefit Black girls.



As Connelly, He, and Phillion (2008) assert, “there is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves” (p. 498). Through my stories and the stories of my students, colleagues, and acquaintances, I show that the oppression of Black girls in the public education system is not just a personal issue, but one that plagues our nation. It is not enough, however, for the researcher to share her own stories. In addition, she must recognize and situate the power structures that guide the circumstances surrounding her stories and how the experiences described in her stories impact future aspects and decisions in her life.

### **Counter-Storytelling**

My memoir acts as a counter-story because, to date, very little research has been shared by Black women educators who are employed at a predominately White school that specifically shares her perspective on the schooling experiences of Black girls educated in such a setting. There are a growing number of studies that report findings on student and even parent perspectives of the treatment of Black girls in U.S. public schools (Bell, 2020; Leath, Mathews, Harrison, & Chavous, 2019; Tabron & Chambers, 2019). However, research that shares the experiences of Black women who have first-hand knowledge of the oppressive conditions that Black girls face in public schools is rare. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) “define the counter-story as a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society,” (p. 138). Counter-stories are necessary tools of resistance used to refute majoritarian stories, those stories fail to recognize the privilege of being White, male, middle or upper class, and heterosexual (Solorzano & Yosso). Majoritarian stories contain the element of White privilege and often go unquestioned because of the “natural” authority that is given to them by both Whites and Blacks. These stories “distort and silence the experiences of people of color” under the guise of being “neutral and objective” while implicitly reinforcing stereotypes

of marginalized persons of society (Solorzano & Yosso, p. 29). According to Love (2010), White privilege is disguised in majoritarian studies as something that is afforded to everyone including people of color using language and writing techniques that are widely recognized by Critical Race Theorists as

fostering invisibility, making assumptions of what is normative and universal, promoting the perspective that schools are neutral and apolitical, promoting the myth of meritocracy, endorsing the notion that there is equal educational opportunity for all, referencing dominants as ‘people’ while ‘othering’ subordinates” (p. 229).

Because these stories are left unchallenged, teachers, educational administrators, and future educators pursuing degrees in education of all races often believe and practice as if all students are afforded the same opportunities to receive a quality education.

Black inferiority, the myth of Blacks being inherently lazy and less intelligent than Whites, is a common theme in majoritarian stories. The effects of majoritarian stories that proclaim Black inferiority are manifold. These types of stories are internalized by both Black students and those who teach them. In turn, some Black students have low expectations of themselves when it comes to academic achievement as do their teachers, educational leaders, and in many cases their parents. Students who believe in this myth are often afraid or unmotivated to take on challenges, such as advanced or college preparatory coursework that promote advancement in education. Some will not even make an effort to complete basic academic courses due to the belief that Black people are not meant to be successful. Stories such as these also give Whites more reasons to believe in and justify their belief in being the superior, more intelligent race.

As a student, I, too, have experienced times when I believed that I was not a strong enough student to take certain courses especially in the areas of math and science. Even as a doctoral student I have had feelings of inadequacy. Although many Black women have completed the Curriculum Studies program, I began to think that they were exceptions to the rule, outliers, and who was I to think a Black woman could receive a doctorate degree from a nationally accredited and recognized research institution. This is probably as far from the truth as ever, but I began to think that the Black women who were successful at completing doctoral studies at traditional universities were single, did not have children to care for, did not have to work full-time, or had some other advantage that I did not have. Many times I thought about dropping out and enrolling in an online doctoral program because, as a Black woman, that was the only way for me to obtain a doctorate degree.

As an educational leader, I have seen students placed in lower level classes because teachers did not believe they could keep up with the demands of advanced classes. On several occasions, I have seen Black students with high test scores be placed in low level classes because based on the teachers' perceptions of their ability, motivation, and behavior. I have witnessed these same teachers advocate for behaviorally challenging White students and recommend that they are placed in advanced classes to motivate them and give them a challenge. Whereas Black students are denied the benefits of exposure to a challenging curriculum based on predicted behavior, White students are gifted these benefits with the expectation that exposure to a challenging curriculum will improve negative behavior that they have already displayed.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) describe the types of counter-stories or narratives, the personal story or narrative, other people's stories or narratives, and composite stories or narratives. Personal narratives are composed of an author's critical race analysis of her

experiences with racism and sexism within the context of a greater sociopolitical issue. Other people's narratives or stories analyze experiences with racism and sexism but are biographical in nature because they are not reflective of the author's personal experiences. Composite stories recount the "racialized, sexualized, and classed stories of people of color," using a variety of data sources (Solorzano & Yosso, p. 139). Composite stories may be both biographical and autobiographical because the author may use her experiences as well as the experiences of others to create stories that illustrate various forms of subordination while challenging majoritarian stories related to education. My memoir recounts my life as a Black female who attended predominantly Black schools and how my experiences have impacted my work as an educational leader in a predominantly White middle school. My memoir focuses on my perception of the treatment of Black girls at a predominantly White middle school located in the Southeast. My experiences working in a predominantly White middle school mirrors much of the research on the plight of Black girls who attend public schools in the U. S. My memoir adds voice, my Black, female voice to the research and serves to change the narrative on the treatment of Black girls in U.S. public schools from one of despair to a narrative that encourages advocacy and systematic change to improve the schooling experiences of Black girls. Because I narrate both my experiences and the experiences of my students, my memoir is a composite story that is both autobiographical and biographical in nature (Solorzano & Yosso).

### **Exemplary Works of Autobiography, Memoir, and Fiction**

Denise Baszile (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2015) frequently writes about her experiences as a Black woman who teaches about race as it relates to education to a population of mostly White students. In *Who Does She Think She Is* (2003), Baszile writes about the impact her culturally rich home life has on her as a professor, curriculum theorist, and activist. She states

that her passion for resisting racism is so deep, that there is no way it cannot be brought into the classroom with her. Teaching, Baszile contends, is an act of activism as well as an act of liberation. It is through teaching and constant reflection that she gains an understanding of self. I, too, believe that reflecting on my teaching style, what it is that I teach, and how I interact with students are a result of my experiences with my family and the events that have occurred in school. When I think about my work as a teacher and teacher leader, I can see where my experiences, my life lessons have influenced my actions and decisions. Drawing from key research issues surrounding the state of education for Black girls who attend public schools in the US – sexualization, low teacher expectations, harsher discipline, and being perceived as angry or having a bad attitude – this autobiography is a collection of my experiences as a student and my experiences in my role as an assistant principal. This autobiography chronicles instances of Black female marginalization that I have witnessed students experience in my role as an assistant principal and how those events were reminiscent of those that have occurred during my childhood as a public school student. My memoir serves as a testament that the marginalization of Black girls in public schools is a phenomenon that repeats itself throughout history. To this end, this research further calls for educators to develop and implement school policies and practices that liberate from rather than perpetuate the oppression of Black girls who attend public schools.

Baszile (2003) states that there are many challenges teaching about race relations to White students. She tells us about a time when she taught *Huckleberry Finn* to a group of mostly White, working class students in an 11th grade honors English class. Students were uncomfortable with the discussion of the word “nigger”; they even accused Baszile of being a racist. Reflecting on this experience, Baszile decided to think about what she could do to ease

tensions in her next position at a predominantly White college. Baszile's reflection on her past experiences and planning for her future position are examples of the first and second steps of the currere (Pinar, 1975) process, regression and progression. She recalled that there was an abundance of literature on multicultural teaching as it related to White teachers teaching students of color, but there were no references that she could refer to that dealt with Black teachers teaching White students during her years as a novice teacher. As a result, Baszile had to rely on trial, error, and reflection upon her own experiences to hone her craft as a Black woman teacher of students preparing to teach. I often deal with internal conflict in my role as an assistant principal at a majority White school. While I have never taught a population of majority White students, my role as assistant principal to a population of majority White teachers places me in the position to serve as the unofficial race relations coach tasked with schooling teachers, students, and even my principal how to build relationships with Black students and parents.

Baszile (2003) argues that her position as a professor at a predominantly White college is counter hegemonic in itself, and she would be doing a disservice to future educators and scores of children if she did not take advantage of her platform to do her part in the continuous struggle to resist racism and racist practices in education. I connect with Baszile in this regard as a Black woman leading a predominantly White middle school. This study serves as an act of resistance to racism in general and racists and oppressive practices that marginalize Black girls and women specifically by sharing my experiences with oppressive policies and practices marginalizing Black girls as a Black woman leading a predominantly White middle school. Like Baszile, I would be remiss not to utilize my platform to disseminate information that can aid in resisting racism and transforming racist practices in education.

Wilkerson's (2007) dissertation, *Black Feminist Autobiographical Inquiry into the Experiences of a Teen Mom*, utilized Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework and autobiographical inquiry as a methodology to illustrate resiliency in the wake of adversity. Wilkerson's dissertation highlights hardships that she encountered as a teenage mother and a drug addict later in her life. She credits the support of family, friends, teachers, college professors, and others in her life with helping her overcome many adversities and eventually choosing a career in teaching. This literature reminded me of the support that I received from teachers and coaches throughout my schooling. Although I have not experienced teen pregnancy or drug addiction, I can credit teachers and other educators with helping me to build resilience to hardships in my life.

Wilkerson's autobiography offers recommendations for teachers, social workers, and other professionals working with teenage mothers to best support them and encourage them to complete educational requirements needed to secure gainful employment. Helping teenage mothers complete educational and career goals and secure professional jobs will counter the stereotypical myth of the "welfare queen" (Wing, 1997). Wilkerson purports that setting teenage mothers up for success helps in the fight against the oppression of all women. As a middle school administrator, I have had one student become pregnant. Knowing Wilkerson's (2007) story at that time may have given my staff and me suggestions for offering her and her parents the support that she needed to overcome the challenges that come along with teenage motherhood.

Mitchell (2009) explored how her practice as a Black woman educator has been influenced by various circumstances in her life. She finds that her lived experiences were all and continue to be shaped by race, gender, culture, and place (p. 1). Mitchell shares narratives

from various time periods in her life fictionalizing characters, names of schools, and the names of the cities where she resided in order to protect people's identities and to mask identifying characteristics of schools. Her dissertation aided Mitchell in understanding her development of self and serves as an example for educators and other stakeholders to examine how their lived experiences impact their practices. This type of self-assessment is necessary for educators, professors who prepare educators for the teaching profession, and educational administrators because the experiences that teachers take into classrooms with them will reach hundreds of students who will take that knowledge into the world with them. That knowledge will either influence students to work to create a more peaceful world, one that moves in the direction of equality for all people or those students will intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate practices that oppress and marginalize Black girls and women depending on the messages they get from their teachers.

Mikell (2011) writes her autobiography utilizing a composite character and fictionalizing events in order to share stories of a Black girl growing up in the Deep South. Fiction is utilized to protect the identities of family, friends, students, and colleagues. Mikell developed the composite character (He, 2003) by blending the life of events of several characters in order to disguise the writer's personal involvement in situations that may have been traumatic or in some way controversial. A composite character assigns the experiences or data of several research participants to one or more fictionalized characters. This method protects the identities of participants but allows their data or stories to be shared. While the characters in the stories Mikell shared were reconstructed, the events actually took place in the life of the author or the lives of her family members, friends, colleagues, or students. These stories give readers access to the life of Black girls growing up during the same time period as the author. Using Mitchell



(2009) as a model, I fictionalize characters for the purpose of sharing my experiences as a middle school administrator without exposing the identities of those persons with whom I shared these experiences. This technique allowed me to share details of discriminatory acts committed against students without identifying the educators or students involved.

From her study, Mikell (2011) explains that she “learned a lot about myself” and hope[s] that this introspection and critical thought helps me to be a better well-rounded teacher/educator” (p. 286). Autobiography serves as an excellent tool for self-discovery that teachers can use to inform their practice and help them to recognize if the content they deliver, their views, and their interactions need to be altered in order to better serve their students. I, too, learned many things about myself that I share with others and will use in my activism for equity in education for Black girls.

Like Baszile (2003), Wilkerson (2007), Mitchell (2009), and Mikell (2011), my dissertation is situated among autobiographical inquiry written by Black female educators raised (except Baszile) and now teaching in the South. My autobiography also includes elements of fiction for the purpose of protecting the identities of family members, friends, students, and colleagues that are depicted in my stories. This autobiographical inquiry helped me to better understand my educator self, and to give educators insight into the roles they play in the lives of the children they teach. The information gained from this inquiry is an invitation to other educators to share ideas related to the development of strategies that empower Black girls in public schools and to continuously work to dismantle oppressive forces in the curriculum. Hopefully, we educators will all reflect on our lived experiences, our stories, and think about how those experiences impact our teaching practices and ultimately the students who we teach. From our findings, it is my hope that we will take a firm stand against and continuously work

toward transforming the curriculum utilized in public K-12 schools in the southern US to a curriculum that resists the oppression and marginalization of Black girls and women.

### **Composing My Memoir**

I used fiction to create a memoir of my personal experiences as a student and as a public middle school administrator. I shared my experiences to illustrate some of the experiences of Black girls in the South as they navigate between home and school life. Using Angelou (1969/2009), Hurston (2006), and Morrison (1970/1993) as models, I created a memoir that blends autobiographical inquiry and fiction to expose, examine, and create dialogue on how the state of public education for Black girls coupled with home life challenges affect their academic success. By sharing the stories of my childhood and select experiences I have encountered as assistant principal, I hope to illuminate some of the factors that educational leaders should consider in order to prepare Black girls for academic success during K-12 years and beyond.

I use a variety of data to compose a narrative that illuminates the plight of Black girls who attend public schools. Much of the data for this research was uncovered during the research process, especially the literature review as common themes related to problems Black girls who attend public schools surfaced. Counter-stories to my students' stories of marginalization were generated from my personal schooling experiences and my experiences as a middle school assistant principal. The stories re-collected and created are centered around composite characters that represent Black girls, Black women educational leaders, and the teachers who are key to the type of educational experiences they receive. By illustrating our shared experiences, struggles within our home lives and in public schools, this narrative gives readers a portrayal into the lives of Black girls and women in order to begin a dialogue about the hidden curriculum that oppresses Black girls in U.S. public schools. If the hidden curriculum that oppresses this

population is recognized, perhaps educators will work to peaceably remove some of the sources of oppression.

The counter-stories did not follow any chronological order. Rather, it will begin with my appointment as an assistant principal at The Cay, a middle school in a city that lies on the southern Georgia coast. I will not tell every story of my life, and of course, I do not know my students' entire life stories. Therefore, the stories shared will be those that center around the themes of low academic expectations held for Black girls or tracking, harsher discipline of Black girls than girls of other races, and the sexualization of Black girls. Stories from my childhood that relate to similar situations that I observed my students encountering and those whose exemplary works I reviewed will be told in flashback.

In order to protect the identities of family members, friends, teachers, administrators, students, and others who have helped shape my stories, I fictionalized some of my experiences as a Black girl raised in the South, as a teacher of Black students, and as a middle school assistant principal. I am still in contact with many of my childhood friends, and I actually supervise some of my former teachers. Some of the people who have contributed to my educational career are employed with the school district in supervisory positions. Fictionalizing persons, events, and in some cases time periods, for instance, the grade that I was in when an event took place, will protect my job and the identities of others with whom I have shared those experiences. It is important to note that fiction was not used to increase the sensational value of my autobiography; I do not want readers to think my stories are fictitious or "made up." I do, however, feel responsible for protecting the identities of those persons who are or were a part of shaping my story. As I read literature relative to this study, I recorded notes and reflected on events in my life that relate to my readings. I narrated my stories and discussed how my lived

experiences have impacted and continue to impact my life as a student, teacher, and school administrator. Finally, and most importantly, I use the information gained to develop strategies that I can implement through my position as a school leader to positively impact the educational experiences of Black girls and women. I suggest practices that educators can initiate so that Black girls' public school experiences are uplifting and empowering.

I selected memoir, a type of autobiography, as the method for this research because this inquiry was designed to share my experiences as a Black female administrator for the purpose of bringing awareness to the treatment of Black girls in a suburban, predominantly White public middle school. Further, this inquiry sought to encourage educators to create more positive educational experiences for Black girls. Finally, this inquiry gave me the opportunity to reflect on how I evolved as an administrator and to advise colleagues and future educational administrators of the need to eliminate practices that place Black girls at an academic disadvantage. Harris (2005) stresses the impact that the autobiographies of Black women can have in the hands of the right audience:

The importance of Black women writing autobiography, and of it being useful in multicultural venues, cannot be overemphasized. Black women are recognizing their responsibility for telling their stories so that others can gain firsthand, invaluable information about the individuals as well as the communities from which they come. (p. 50)

From these stories, others can find guidance, cautionary tales, or simply encouragement or motivation if and when they see themselves in similar positions of the authors.

Power is placed in the hands of Black women through the use of autobiography by allowing them to define themselves and to “share their own self-created identities with readers”

thereby bringing about social change (Harris, 2005, p. 38). Using autobiography as a form of curriculum inquiry requires the researcher to analyze her “educational experiences in and out of schools, always with the goal of contributing to the educational experiences of others” (Jefferson, 2006, p. 26). The aim of this study is to explore how my lived experiences as a student, teacher, and educational leader in a U.S. public school system in the South have and continue to develop my voice and guide my practices as a middle school assistant principal in the same school system. I take the same stance as Carter Andrews et al. (2019) to justify my lived experiences as a valid tool by which to analyze the data collected and findings presented in my memoir:

As Black women educators, researchers, and teacher educators, we have occupied and continue to occupy multiple roles within racialized and gendered educational spaces, just like Black girls in K–12 spaces. Our lived experiences are another analytical tool we use to understand Black girls’ experiences in school (p. 2537).

## CHAPTER 3

### MY MEMOIR: EARLY YEARS

This chapter begins with the vignette, “*Introducing LaTashia,*” the earliest childhood memory that I can recall. Technically, it is not my memory, but what I remember my family telling me about my infant and toddler years. The following vignettes chronicle my schooling experiences from daycare through graduate school. The chapter ends with “*Novice Teacher,*” which is about my frustration with my job as a social services case manager with the local housing authority and how I came to the decision to become a teacher. I then narrate my excitement with becoming an assistant principal.

#### **WHITE ROSE**

~Innocence, purity

#### **Please Allow Me to Introduce Myself**

My family tells me stories of being raised on the campus of Sea City State College. My mom’s twin sister and their brother cared for me throughout the school and workday because Granny Loady, with whom I lived when my dad was stationed in Killeen, TX, still worked as a teacher. My aunt and uncle would coordinate their schedule of classes so that someone was always available to watch me. We all went on campus in the mornings and they would pass me off to one another as they changed classes. My family tells me the reason that I am so smart is because I was always in an educational environment. Eventually, my aunt got married and dropped out of college. My uncle transferred to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia.

I went to daycare or preschool from Granny Loady’s house. I remember my Uncle Oliver, my mother’s oldest brother who was always in and out of jail, or my Aunt Genice, my mother’s baby sister taking me to and picking me up from Metropolitan Christian Academy (Metro Christian). I always loved to learn and the people at this church/school loved me. The

teachers at Metro Christian loved me because I was smart and now that I am older, I suspect they showed me favoritism because of my light skin. Upon dropping me off, one of my teachers informed my aunt that little girls would no longer be allowed to wear pants to school. My aunt thought this was ridiculous and she let my teacher and everyone who was in earshot of her verbal tongue lashing know it. She put a royal cussing on the sisters at my church school because they wanted to convince her that it was sinful for ladies and girls to wear pants. Needless to say, I never went back to Metro Christian Preschool again.

I don't remember any of my teacher's names. They were all called sister so and so. However, whenever I occasionally run into one of them at the grocery store or at the mall during the holiday season, they always greet me with a smile, by my name as if they were so happy to see me. We exchange hugs every time. I never let them know that I don't know their names. I would never want to hurt their feelings by letting them know that I don't remember their names because they have instilled such a positive image of education into my life.

After leaving Metro Christian Preschool, I enrolled in Crawford's Daycare, which was one block south and another block west of my house. I only remember walking to school with Uncle Oliver and cannot recall how I got to school when he was incarcerated. I was not as happy at Wright's childcare as I was at Metro Christian. It was not horrible, but the only real memory that I have of this school is getting in trouble for something I really did not do. I do not even remember what it was I was accused of doing. What I do remember is getting swatted on my bottom with some sort of plastic pipe for it. The sting of the plastic did not hurt nearly as bad as it did the false accusation and the teacher's disbelief of my innocence.

Occasionally there were holidays that my daycare would close for, but the public school system would remain open. I would go to work with Granny Loady on those days. Granny

Loady was a third grade teacher at Spaulding Elementary School. I learned later on that she would always get the most challenging students. On my days off or when I would feign a minor ache or illness, I looked forward to going to work with Granny Loady. I would blend in with her students and went unnoticed by everyone except her students and her teacher friends that Granny Loady associated with outside of school. I learned to read at an early age, so her students were impressed when she would let me read a passage during the reading lesson. Her students were always kind to me and treated me like the little sister of the class.

I recall grading papers for Granny Loady when I got older. Teacher's editions of textbooks, easy graders, and a gradebook always decorated our dining room table. Most of her friends were teachers too. Whenever we had company over, I would always overhear conversations about students, parents, principals, and general school talk good and bad.

Granny Loady also taught night school at Bethany Home for Boys. My mom would come over to my house with my sister to watch me while Granny Loady went to her night job. Sometimes, I would go to my parents' house until Granny Loady got off. In addition to teaching night school, Granny Loady also cleaned office buildings downtown. I didn't understand at the time, but now I realize that she worked so much to put my aunt and uncle through college. My mother's baby brother graduated from Morehouse College, and her baby sister graduated from Spelman College. I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher, but as I got older I realized that was not the most lucrative occupation. So, I ran far, far away from teaching as a career.

Being a Black female from a low-income, non-traditional family structure, I had all the classic characteristics of being at-risk for dropping out of school. However, I had a very strong family unit who was protective of me. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents along with aunts and uncles on both sides of my family cared for me while my parents were stationed in



Killeen. They all instilled in me the value of hard work and education, and they made it very clear that they had very high expectations of me. It is my belief that a strong family support system during my formative years influenced the resilience I needed to get through traumatic experiences later in my life.

### **The Early Years of Public School**

I started kindergarten at Rosetta Risley Elementary School. My parents were back in town at this point, so I do not know why it was Uncle Oliver who enrolled me in school. For the longest time, all correspondence from my schools was addressed to Uncle Oliver instead of my parents. Kindergarten and attending “big school” was such a time of excitement for me. I have fond memories of kindergarten, and I am still friends with many of my classmates.

My home life was generally good at this time as well. Uncle Oliver’s girlfriend turned wife, Linda, moved in with us, and a little while later, Little Oliver was born. Before the end of this year, tragedy would strike, however. Uncle Oliver lost his mind, robbed the neighborhood convenience store, and went to prison for more than a couple of months this time. He was sentenced to five years in prison. At this time, our household consisted of me, Granny Loady, Aunt Linda, and Little Oliver.

Ms. Wolf’s first grade class was life-changing. It is in Ms. Wolf’s class that I realized that there were kids who were actually smarter than me. We were separated into reading groups based on ability. I remember the titles of our readers being *Boats*, *Bears*, *Balloons*. At the young ages of 6 and 7 my classmates and I knew what it meant if you were reading from a particular book. That is my first experience with differentiation. It was in Ms. Wolf’s class that I failed my first test. I was devastated when my name was not called to the front of the class to receive a lollipop for not making a 100 on a spelling test. Actually, I had not failed the test, but I

did not make an “A.” In my mind, I just as well had failed. I went to my parents’ house that night, and I sobbed as if I had lost my best friend. My dad consoled me by taking me for a walk to the convenience store and buying me some candy. We talked about failure, about it not being the end of the world, and study habits. I knew my dad, but we really did not have a really close relationship at this time. As a matter of fact, I did not call him “daddy.” I referred to my father as “he” or “him” until I was about 8 or 9 years old. That walk to the store is one of the best memories I have of my father.

This was an important time in my life during which my attitude toward school was being formed. My parents were back in Georgia at this time, but I still had not moved in with them. I spent afternoons after school at my parents’ house doing homework as I waited for what seemed like forever before Granny Loady to pick me up after leaving her night job and prepare for the next school day. I continued to live with my non-traditional family, Granny Loady, although my parents’ home was available to me. I did not see anything wrong with my living arrangement then, and I did not see anything wrong with it as I reflected on it. I felt loved, I got help at home with my schoolwork, and I had my grandmother all to myself.

### **Child’s Play, I’m the Teacher**

My memories of Ms. Courts’ second grade class are few. What I remember from her class are timed multiplication tests and being jealous of the kids who had more than basic school supplies. I realized even then that she was the lead teacher in the class, and Ms. Minor was her aid. Though I am sure it was not intentional, their roles as lead teacher and “helper” were quite obvious. We, the students, did not respect Ms. Minor any less than Ms. Courts, but when I played “school” with my friends, I always knew that I did not want to be the “helper” or the teacher’s aide. I wanted to be in charge; I wanted to be the lead teacher. I wanted to be the one

teaching the class. As teachers, we must realize that we serve as role models whether we want to or not. Therefore, it is important to carry ourselves in a positive light. Ms. Courts and Ms. Minor were my first Black teachers in elementary school. It felt good to have teachers who looked like me, who looked like my grandmothers. Although I had not previously felt unsafe at school, I felt especially safe and secure in Ms. Courts' class. I felt like I was in class with my mom, grandmother, or aunt. Whipple (2018) described Black women educators' act of building relationships to motivate Black students as Black mothering. Some Black women teachers take on the role as surrogate mother to their students to foster a sense of belonging in the classroom family which in turn makes students comfortable taking academic risks. I definitely felt this in Ms. Courts' and Ms. Minor's class.

### **Miss Me with Math**

I believe it was in second grade that I became intimidated by math. I knew my multiplication tables, but I could never beat the clock and get the test completed before the two minutes ended. I remember how happy I was when I finally finished a timed-test and got them all right. It was a small victory, but I never recovered from my fear of math. Due to the widely believed stereotypes that boys perform better at math than girls and Black children in general being academically challenged, the intersections of race and gender marginalizes Black girls and can negatively affect their attitudes toward math instruction (Young, Young, & Capraro, 2017). Tichenor, Welsh, Corcoran, Piechura, and Heins (2016) contend that girls may develop negative attitudes about math as early as the second grade causing them to doubt themselves and believe gender-based stereotypes claiming that girls are not good at math. Given what the research tells us about the marginalization of Black as it relates to math instruction, my passing that timed test served as a form of resistance and helped build my confidence enough to perform at levels that

made teachers believe that I was qualified to take advanced math courses throughout my K-12 years.

### **Stay in Your Own Lane (School)**

Ms. Wright, my third grade teacher, was nice enough. We learned the basics-reading, writing, arithmetic. But what I remember most about this class is all of the White students being called on to answer questions, chosen to be line leader, and to run errands. It was in this class that I realized that all of the smart kids were placed in the same class. The third grade team at Rosetta Risley Elementary School was typically made up of an equal number of white and black students. It was quite noticeable that my class, Ms. Wright's class was the only third grade class at the school with more than one or two White students. Ms. Wright was one of the few White teachers at Rosetta Risley. Maybe she was given the highest students as consolation for her teaching in an urban school, maybe she was placed there intentionally to ensure that a White teacher would teach the White students who were bussed in from the more affluent neighborhoods in order to achieve racial balance within the school district, or maybe she was just there because she wanted to be.

Rosetta Risley only served grades K-3. After third grade, all students from my neighborhood were bussed to Isle of Joy Elementary School which was exclusively upper elementary: fourth and fifth grades. During the spring of our third grade year, the entire class went on a field trip to our soon to be new school on the Isle of Joy. We toured the school, talked to teachers and counselors, and waved at our friends from the neighborhood who were a grade or two ahead of us. We were so excited about going to a new school, meeting new teachers, and riding the bus to school. Then something quite confusing to a child happened. Before we got a chance to go to the new school at the Isle of Joy, the district school board redrew the district

lines, added fourth and fifth grades to Rosetta Risley and added Kindergarten through third grades to Isle of Joy. Gone were our dreams of attending a newer, cleaner school. Gone was our anticipation of riding a school bus to our new beautiful school and not having to walk in the heat or rain. We all remained at Rosetta Risley, and our friends from the neighborhood who spent fourth grade at Isle of Joy were sent back to Rosetta Risley. When the school district redrew the school zones, there was a very noticeable change in the demographics of our school. Our student population was now close to if not one hundred percent African American and the new school at Isle of Joy was almost entirely white. I was placed back in Ms. Wright's class for fourth grade, but there were no White kids in the class. The White students were now assigned to Isle of Joy Elementary School. I did not realize how drastically my life would change this year.

As early as third I was "tracked" into my future educational path. Although I am grateful to have been placed in the "smart class," my CRT lens leads me to believe that Ms. Wright's third-grade class was formed to serve the interests of my White classmates whose parents needed to feel that their children were set apart from the Black children in some way. I am not suggesting that parents White parents had a problem with their children going to school with Black kids. However, as the way White parents and White teachers saw it, they should be given some privilege and not be placed in class with too many Black kids. Certainly, it could just be a coincidence that the majority of White third grade students were advanced, but my perception from a critical lens tells me otherwise.

### **A Little Something Extra**

Granny Loady wanted the best for me. She signed me up for piano lessons. I took ballet and tap dance classes, and I also cheered for a little league football team. I was afforded opportunities that many kids from my neighborhood never even thought of. Of course, I did not

realize it then, but Granny Loady was attempting to expose me to the things that middle class families valued. We lived in a poor neighborhood in a very modest, three-bedroom, one bathroom house, but Granny Loady attempted to expose me to things that she was privy to through her professional relationships and her interactions with members of her Catholic church.

Granny Loady probably could not afford a piano. Besides, we did not have room for one in our small house, but she did buy me an electric keyboard so that I could practice between piano lessons. I played around with the keyboard, but I did not practice with fidelity. I did continue to take piano lessons for Granny, but I had no real desire to learn.

While I enjoyed taking ballet and tap classes, I knew that my family was not as well off as some of the other students. They lived in nice neighborhoods, went to nice schools, had pretty ballet bags, and their parents sat outside in nice cars waiting for them to get out of class. I did not have a fancy bag for my ballet clothes. I came to the studio already dressed because I did not want to carry my things in my book bag or a grocery sack. I really do not remember how I got to and from ballet class because Granny Loady mostly worked nights. I do remember a few occasions when my dad picked me up in his beat-up green Datsun long after all the other girls in my class were gone. I am sure Granny Loady intended to enhance my life somewhat with dance lessons, but that experience left me realizing that I was different from the other girls, I was poor. There was no fancy car sitting out front waiting for me to hop in as soon as class was over.

Of all my friends who lived in my neighborhood, I was the only one who took ballet and piano lessons. During that time, very few poor Black kids partook in such extracurricular activities. It was not uncommon to hear Black friends from school who lived in the same areas that White kids complain about having to do much homework after one lesson or another. I am

still grateful for Granny Loady exposing me to the arts which was not a typical occurrence for Black girls from my neighborhood.

### **Self-Image**

I also began to feel self-conscious about my body at this time. Nothing reveals the contours of your body better than a ballerina's leotard. I was developing breasts and my hips were getting wider before any of my peers. I felt so ashamed and embarrassed when older women would ask me if I was letting boys touch on my breasts as if that was the reason they were getting so big so fast at such a young age. As I reflect back on this, I realize it was my own family who sexualized my body. I know that no one meant any harm. Because of their belief that body maturation and development was onset by fondling, that was their way of checking with me to ensure that no one was sexually abusing me.

### **Parental Involvement**

A friend of Granny Loady's had three girls my age and they all cheered for a little league football team that practiced near our house. I enjoyed this sport. I met a lot of people, but what I hated about it was game night. It was fine to walk to the practice field every day after school. I couldn't wait for practice time every day because cheerleading was something that I was good at. I was loud, I kept a smile on my face, and my cartwheels and splits were perfect. My coaches loved me. No one in my family ever came to my games though. The coaches carpooled and gave us rides to the games that took place on various fields throughout the city, but most parents would meet their kids at the field. Parents would either be there cheering their kids on or at least show up before the end of games to take their children home. I had to ride home with my friends' parents or one of the coaches. I don't know what my parents were thinking. I guess they knew that the coaches would make sure that I got home. I am sure Granny Loady charged

my parents with transporting me to these various extracurricular activities since she was financing them.

My parents' lack of involvement has lasting effects on me as an adult. I always prepare for either my husband or myself to transport our kids to and from their extracurricular activities and sports events. I make great efforts to show up at least a quarter or two even if work keeps me from attending the entire event. I know what it feels like to be the kid whose parent never shows up; it is still painful to think of all the times I have lingered on a park or field hoping that someone would offer me a ride home from practice or a game.

### **BLACK ROSE**

~bereavement, loss, mortality

### **Granny's Gone**

My mother and father moved in with Granny Loady and me along with my sister and baby brother. I wasn't used to sharing my space or my grandma with anyone. It took quite some time to adjust to the rest of my family moving in with Granny Loady and me. Nevertheless, even though my whole family had moved in with me and my grandmother, I was going to have the opportunity to visit my relatives who lived in upstate New York over our Winter Break. I could not wait until Winter Break. Granny Loady and I rode a Greyhound bus for two, almost three days to from Savannah, Georgia to Syracuse, New York. I enjoyed the scenery as we rode for what seemed like forever, but as a child, I was perfectly content. Granny and I went to visit my Aunt Helen and her family who were stationed in Syracuse. This was the first time that I had ever seen snow; I got to spend time with my family who were close to me when I was very young. My Aunt Genice, who lived in Atlanta and had just graduated from Spelman, came up to spend the holidays and met the family in Syracuse. We celebrated Christmas and enjoyed each other's company for several days, perhaps a week.



We left Syracuse as planned although Granny was ill. This was the first time I had ever flown in an airplane. The next stop on our itinerary was Wilmington, Delaware to visit my Uncle Warren. Granny Loady was ill when she boarded the plane, but I was distracted by the excitement of flying for the first time. When we arrived in Wilmington, my Aunt Peaches and Uncle Warren were there to meet us. I believe my Aunt Helen alerted the crew when we boarded in Syracuse that my grandmother was ill. Granny was taken to the hospital directly from the plane and my Uncle Warren followed the ambulance there. My Aunt Peaches took me back to her townhome and I believed that since Granny was going to the hospital, she just needed some medicine and attending to and would be fine. I was enjoying all of the room in my uncle's four-story townhome. My aunt and uncle left me home alone; they had not planned to babysit me. They told me not to be alarmed when the housekeeper came over. This was so different from anything I had ever experienced in my own home life I was still in Wilmington when school started back. The whole time I was there, I kept expecting her to come home. Little did I know, Granny Loady would never join me at my Uncle Warren's house. She stayed in the hospital on life support. After more than a week, with my grandmother still in the hospital, I flew back home to Savannah on the plane by myself because school was back in session. Granny Loady would never come home. She died in the hospital in Wilmington, Delaware.

That year was pivotal for me in my ability to handle events that were painful for adults, much less a young child. There were too many life-changing events to occur that year for one 9-year-old girl to have. My parents moved in with my grandmother and I; my grandmother died less than a year later. My grandmother's death stressed me out so much that I lost my hair. On top of losing my hair, my face started breaking out in the biggest pimples imaginable. Bald edges and big pimples made me feel like the ugliest girl on the planet. So, now I felt lonely

without my pillar of support in my grandmother and felt horribly unattractive and repulsed by my own appearance.

As an educator, I am very familiar with how a traumatic event such as the death of a loved one can affect student performance. As I reflect on this period of my life, I realize that the close bond that I shared with my grandmother was the reason that my grief was so excessive. I mourned Granny Loady as if she were my mother instead of my grandmother. I was resilient enough to finish that school year with honors as always, however.

#### **4th Period**

As if my fourth grade year couldn't get any worse, I started my period during my fourth grade year at the tender age of 9. This event was more traumatic than it had to be. I remember sitting at my desk at the end of the day and my panties were feeling moist. We didn't have air in our classroom, so I thought maybe I was just sweating down there. As I got up for dismissal, someone yelled that I had something on the back of my pants. I contorted my body so I could get a look at the back of my pale yellow pants. There was a big red spot on the back of my pants. I knew what it was because we had the puberty lesson in health earlier that year. Luckily, I wore a sweater that day, so I wrapped it around my waste. No one had seen the spot on my backside except the people who were in class, so I wasn't so embarrassed – just a little. But the walk home from school that day is forever etched in my mind. Word had gotten around to all of the walkers that I had a sweater around my waist because my period had started and I bled through my pants. Out of nowhere, Albert, a fifth-grade boy, grabbed my sweater! Everyone walking home that day pointed at and teased me about my accident. That was my first encounter with hating myself for being female.

### **Innocence Lost**

I was molested by my older cousin the summer between my fourth and fifth grade years. I went to spend the last half of the summer with my favorite cousin in North Carolina. She was my favorite because we were closer in age, and she was just old enough to be cool and hip. I was often with her growing up because her grandmother and my grandmother were sisters. What I did not know when I came home with them was that she had to attend summer school in the morning and I would be staying home by myself until she got home at noon. I also did not know that her older brother would be there with me during the mornings until it was time for him to go to work. Even if I did know that her brother would be there, I still would not have imagined that he would abuse me. I was in the bathtub and he playfully threatened to come in and drown me. I laughed, “no” through the door because I did not think that he was serious. All of a sudden, I hear and see the door swing open. I was shocked. I closed the curtain and yelled at him to get out. I peeped my head around the curtain and saw that he was still in the bathroom and he was coming toward me. He reached in the tub, placed his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down in the water just enough to scare me. I yelled and screamed. He told me that he was just playing and instructed me to get out of the tub. I do not remember how we ended up in the bedroom, but I begged him to leave. He wouldn't. I told him I was only ten years old. He ignored me. Before I knew it, he placed his penis in my anus and penetrated me until he ejaculated all over my leg.

I remember thinking “what did I ever do to deserve this?” I thought God had abandoned me. This went on all summer long. He somehow made me believe that I wanted him as much as he wanted me by telling me that deep down I really wanted him to do the things that he did to me. He threatened to twist the story so that it appeared that I was the seducer and that I complied

with the abuse. He followed a pattern that is common to child sexual abusers. Child sexual abusers use their positions of power and threats of punishment to instill fear in their victims. Physical force is not usually used by child sex abusers who are acquainted with their victims. Rather, child sexual predators abuse their positions of authority to coerce their victims to comply with their demands (Perry-Burney, Thomas, & McDonald, 2014). Other tactics used to force child victims to comply with sex include perpetrators threatening to punish victims or (Perry-Burney et al.) report the victims' alleged deviant behavior to other adults in authority over the victims (Perry-Burney et al.). This continued for the duration of the summer, to where I just accepted it as part of this history. He didn't have to force me anymore; I just assumed the position at the first sight of him. He didn't even have to tell me what to do. I knew what was expected of me, and I complied. I am not alone in this history of abuse. The U.S. Department of Justice (2015) reports that African American girls are at dramatically higher risk for violent victimization than young women from other racial groups.

This summer stands out to me as one of the touchstones of my experiences as a child. The abuse at the hands of my cousin changed everything about how I felt about myself as a female and as someone who could stand up for herself. When I became a teacher and an administrator and encountered instances of students who had been abused, I understood how that could happen to a young girl without her being able to do anything about it. I understand the true vulnerability of that type of subjugation.

At this point in my life, I felt like there was no point in living. I had lost my grandmother, lost my hair, started my period, and gotten raped all in a matter of six months. I was highly depressed, as one would imagine. Although I had a very strong bond with my immediate and extended families, I did not feel comfortable telling anyone about my assault.

Not telling anyone weighed heavily on me, but I somehow felt like it was my fault. I remember wanting to die the summer before my 5th grade year, but I was afraid to harm myself, and most importantly I was scared of going to hell as I was taught would happen if you take your own life. I believe it was my faith in God, my strong family bonds, and my family's great expectations of me that kept me alive.

### **The Magnet Program**

Even after her death, Granny Loady continued to influence my education. Before she died, she submitted an application for me to attend one of the city's Magnet schools. Spaulding, the school at which Granny Loady taught before her retirement, had been reimagined as an International Studies Magnet School. My fifth grade year was the first time I had attended a school without the kids from my neighborhood. I loved the school, but it took so much for me to get there. I had to walk about three miles to school and back because I did not have a bus. I was petrified walking through such bad neighborhoods on my way to and from school. The winos and prostitutes on the corner never harmed me, but their yelling and fighting with each other scared me to death. There were also some busy roads that I was afraid to cross but managed to do so day after day. One day I noticed a girl walking around my neighborhood whom I had seen at school. I asked her where she lived and how she got to school. She informed me of her bus number and where it picked up her. I wrote a letter to my school's front office staff requesting a bus and had my mom sign it. There was actually a bus available to Magnet students who lived more than a mile and a half from the school. My parents were unaware that they could get a bus for me because they had never registered me for school, attended a PTA meeting, or gotten involved with my education in any way, shape or form. Without my grandmother to navigate the

intricacies of school out of district, I had to find my way on my own. My parents were unaware of how to “do school” and my peculiar situation was foreign to them.

I entered the International Studies Magnet Program at Spaulding Elementary School for my fifth grade year of school. This year was very difficult for me. I had not gotten over the death of my grandmother and I was attending a school without the children from my neighborhood, so this meant that I had to meet new friends. Although Spaulding Elementary was a Magnet school, it primarily served students who resided in the area surrounding the school. The surrounding area included three government funded housing projects.

While I was excited to attend a different school with what I and Granny Loady thought offered better opportunities than my neighborhood school, I was terrified. I heard before going to that school, that the students were rough around the edges and liked to fight. I always knew that my light skin and “white” speech worked against me among African American children, but at least the children in my neighborhood were used to it and had long stopped teasing me about it. That was not the case at Spaulding. I had to constantly prove to other African American children that I was just as “cool” as they were even though I “talked white.” At school, I began to use the same “ebonics” as the other African American children used just to fit in. I couldn’t change my skin color, but I could at least beg my parents for the coolest shoes or the latest fashions in clothes to further my belonging to the black club. Sometimes they obliged and sometimes they just told me that they were not spending “that kind of money” on a pair of shoes. Even as a child, I wondered how these children who didn’t have a house and a backyard had access to the fashions that my parents indicated that we either could not afford or were not going to buy because the price was ridiculous. From my perception, I now see that people who do not have many of the things that some consider necessities, for example, a house but spend money

on expensive things that many consider as frivolous may make such purchases to fulfill some kind of void. Parents may feel like they can never buy their children a nice home, but the least that they can do is buy their children a nice pair of shoes or a nice jacket. I now believe that I have no right to make judgments about people based on their possessions because I have no idea how they were able to obtain them or why having those possessions are important to them.

I described my experiences attending a magnet school outside of my designated school. This particular school was a predominantly Black elementary school with a specialized curriculum and geared towards attracting White families. As I reflect critically on the recruitment efforts of this program, CRT exposes the district's belief in Whiteness as property. It is my perception that the premise behind attracting White students to Spaulding elementary school was that the only way to improve the quality of the school was to enroll White students, particularly White students with a history of scoring high on standardized tests.

### **ORANGE ROSE**

~enthusiasm

My fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Felicia Redwine McCluskey noticed how bright of a student I was. One day, she pulled me to the side and told me in so many words to stop trying to be something that I was not. She told me how smart I was and how she had such high hopes for me. That was the first time in my life that a White person shared how much she noticed me and believed that I could be successful. I was honored, but as I reflect on that moment, I realize that my being a bright student was not validated in my young mind until a White person recognized my academic prowess. My family always bragged and boasted about how smart I was, but it didn't mean much until Mrs. McCluskey told me so. I felt that Mrs. McCluskey was more of an expert about what it meant to be bright than my family was, and also that my family had that bias

towards me since they did not come into contact with other bright children. Mrs. McCluskey had “street cred” when it came to knowing who was smart.

From then on, I tried to play both sides of the fence; I tried being a cool friend to my classmates and being a smart student to impress my teacher. It worked out for the most part until I ended up getting into a fight with the darkest-skinned girl in my class, maybe in the whole school. On the playground, she made the comment that “light-skinned people don’t wash.” She started a verbal argument with me and baited me into fighting her. Fortunately, since I had never been in trouble before, my mother was called in for a parent conference and I did not get suspended like I had seen happen to many other students. There was a very strict policy on fighting in school. Luckily my good girl behavior paid off in preventing a suspension. I suspect that my good grades, the fact that I was a magnet student whose standardized test scores were helpful in making the school look good, and probably Ms. McCluskey’s input influenced the principal’s decision not to suspend me. In my position as an assistant principal, I have had a principal who had instructed me to look at the totality of the incident and students’ discipline history to determine consequences that I assigned to students, and most recently I have had an administrator who instructed me to issue a standard consequence – 10 days suspension and a request for alternative school placement – for any student who fights. Administrators who operate like my most recent principal, from a zero-tolerance perspective, contribute greatly to the overrepresentation of Black girls in the school discipline and eventually the juvenile justice system. These students would be better served by restorative justice (Schiff, 2018), school discipline practices that focus on keeping students in school. Restorative justice refers to an approach to discipline that focuses on repairing the harm caused by individuals or the environment when students misbehave as an alternative to such punitive and exclusionary



consequences as suspension and expulsion (Weaver & Swank, 2020). As an administrator, I have to warn my students that our school policy is that both parties to a physical altercation will receive consequences regardless of who starts the fight. I often go back to my fight in elementary school and stand firm on the decision to fight Cynthia. If I backed down from her that day, she and possibly the other girls in my class would have continued to bully me. Cynthia and I became friends or at least tolerated each other, and other girls started inviting me to their homes. Though reluctant, my mother did allow me to stay overnight with friends (they were two cousins who lived in the same household and happened to also be placed in the same class) in my class who lived in “the projects.” That year I learned that although I was poor, there were a number of children who lived in worse conditions than me but seemed to be happy. Their apartment unit was very small and they did not have much grass to play in. My friends from class shared a room with two twin beds with their grandmother, two adult sisters shared a room, and two little boys shared a couch in the living room area. There were not many decorations present, no China cabinet, and the room that my friends shared with their grandmother did not have a dresser or anywhere to store clothes. From that overnight visit, I learned that people who just happen to live in public housing projects were very much just like my own tight-knit family. Children played outside but were made to come in at dark just as my parents made me do at home. My friends told me that we needed to be in the house by dusk because that is when the shooting began. I was instructed to “hit the floor” if I heard any arguing or tires screeching because it may be too late if I were to lie down on the floor after hearing gunshots. The instructions given to me were to prevent me from being hit by a stray bullet should a shootout occur. At the time, this seemed very exotic and exciting to me. And while nothing happened during my stay and my visit was relatively uneventful, I did learn that there is very little

difference between me and those who I see as living in abject poverty. And while I never visited my friends' home again, it was not due to any maltreatment or traumatic experience that I encountered there. It turns out that my visit to the projects with strangers was safer than my visit with my own extended family who lived on a military base. This family took great care that I was well-fed and had comfortable sleeping arrangements during my visit. I am grateful for the experience of visiting my friends who lived in the projects because it dispelled many stereotypes that I had of all people who lived in what I considered to be a less than sufficient housing situation.

### **Williams Middle School/Mrs. Schneider**

I did not apply to the magnet middle school, Herbert Middle School (pseudonym), because I had heard all of the horror stories about fights and gangs. As it turns out, the rumors were not actually rumors. Friends that I met in high school and colleagues who now teach there confirm that Herbert Middle gang activity was and still is present at school and throughout the surrounding community. Teachers and administrators often have to endure turf wars among students who reside in different projects. The school is often on lockdown due to violence in the surrounding neighborhood. Instead, I went to Williams Middle School (pseudonym). This is where I met Mrs. Schneider (pseudonym), my sixth grade homeroom teacher. Williams Middle School was demographically diverse. Students at Williams resided in the prestigious Greble Island and Isle of Joy areas of Sea City, the lower-middle class Buckingham community where many teachers and blue collar workers lived, the working class community where I lived, and students from Flowers Housing Projects (pseudonym) attended Williams Middle School as well.

I now know that teachers are often encouraged “not to smile before Christmas” as a way to get a handle on classroom management and illustrate how serious they are about being a

teacher. However, Mrs. Schneider seemed to take this “don’t smile” suggestion to heart; she was mean in a very snide way. Mrs. Schneider was a middle-aged White woman who I later learned lived on the Isle of Joy, an affluent community on the outskirts of Sea City whose residents’ income is reported to be well above the city’s median income. It was as if she resented teaching the poor, Black kids in her homeroom. There are a number of studies that suggest that teachers make assumptions about students as a racial or ethnic group and are often unaware or unconcerned with their bias (Agirdag, Van Houtee, & Van Avermaet, 2013; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). She rolled her eyes, gave exasperating breaths, and made gestures that made me feel like she was there teaching us only because she had to be. Her homeroom class consisted of students of various ability levels, races, and socioeconomic statuses. It was not until after homeroom that our classes separated into our homogenous academic classes. As it turned out, I was placed, as I had always been, in the highest achieving class on the sixth grade team. Mrs. Schneider taught language arts in this group and was much nicer to this class than to her homeroom. She did not make snide remarks in this class, and one could hear the smile in her voice as well as see the smile on her face as she addressed us, and she acted like she actually enjoyed being there. When I reflect back on my sixth grade year, I believe that Mrs. Schneider was much nicer to my academic class than she was with my homeroom class because it was predominantly White, all of the students were high achieving, and most of the students, except me, came from affluent families. Mrs. Schneider reminds me of the people bell hooks (2009) describes when she wrote of “... privileged-class white folks looked down on the poor white folks... projecting onto them many of the same negative stereotypes they used to define black people” (p. 54). This was evident in her attitude toward her homeroom students who included poor blacks and poor whites. This kind of teacher

thinking can have a detrimental effect on student achievement. Many studies have suggested that teachers' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs about the population of students they serve can be to students' benefit or detriment as the way students are treated is driven by these feelings, perceptions, and beliefs (e.g. Agirdag et al.; Rubie-Davies et al.; Van Maele & Van Houtte).

In order to give Black girls more positive public schooling experiences, educational administrators need to create non-threatening opportunities for teachers to become aware of their cultural biases and work to develop a school culture that is responsive to the needs of all students. Administrators can partner with local universities to have researchers who specialize in culturally responsive teachers to hold on-going professional development. Administrators can also encourage staff members and students to share their experiences with oppression to create staff awareness of the many ways Black girls are marginalized as a result of school policies and practices. Internal and independent audits on course placement and disciplinary data can be conducted to shed light on disparities. Administrators should also mentor teachers to become educational and community leaders in order to become empowered to dismantle forces of oppression in public schools.

### **Being Bullied**

While I felt like Mrs. Schneider bullied me during the school day, I had to also deal with a bully after school. Peaches beat me up almost daily and I never found out why. She would sometimes act like she was my friend so that I would lower my guard. She would then put on a show for all of the children in my neighborhood as she pummeled on my head or cheek with her fists. This went on for the first few months of school. Sometimes I would just stand there and let her hit me and at other times I would helplessly flail my arms attempting to block her blows or at least get a lick or two in. It was no use. She was older than me, bigger than me, and she

towered over me. I am not sure if I had conditioned myself to be a victim by this time or if I was simply intimidated by her size. If I wasn't hurt too badly after being hit, I would try to just walk away and shake off the pain especially when I was close to my house. When I did try to fight back it was because the pain was so unbearable and I hoped she would stop when she realized that I would try to defend myself. I also fought back when we were in areas of high traffic hoping that an adult passerby would see us and break up the fight. This did happen on occasion. Though I related this experience to both my parents, they did not contact the school administrators or her parents. They just advised me to fight back and she would eventually get tired of fighting me.

One day Peaches took things too far. She asked to see my ring. I obliged, took it off, and passed it to her. Once she took a closer look, I asked for it back. She told me that she was not giving my ring back to me. She proceeded to punch me in my jaw, my temple, and one more blow to the back of my head as I walked away in defeat, without my ring. Peaches did not go unpunished this time. My aunt made my mom go to the police station and report the assault and theft. We ended up going to juvenile court about this matter. Peaches was charged with assault and robbery. She was sent to the County Youth Detention Center for ten days. Because we were on Winter Break at the time of the trial, her ten days fell during the Christmas Holiday. She spent Christmas at YDC. Peaches never bothered me again. I do not know whatever became of her.

In my role as an assistant principal, I have very little tolerance for bullies. I believe it is my experience with Peaches that influences the consequences that I issue to bullies and the compassion that I feel for victims. Although I believe that Peaches should have been held responsible for her actions, from my Black female educator lens, I feel that incarceration was

extreme and unfair. I try to be very fair and objective when it comes to issuing consequences for disciplinary referrals, but I know that I have a bias when it comes to physical bullying and Peaches is the reason why. Teachers have their own experiences from which they draw specific strategies and interventions when working with children, and these experiences provide a context for what teachers believe is the best way to handle situations (Davis & Gere, 2018; Kahn, Jones, & Wieland, 2012). I feel that I am especially susceptible to addressing disciplinary issues around students because I was bullied as a child.

When I reflect on what transpired with Peaches, I realize that her spending 10 days, including Christmas, in juvenile incarceration must have had a profound effect on Peaches' life trajectory. I do not know if she was rehabilitated or not because neither I nor any of my friends ever saw her again. I surmise that 6th grade Winter Break was not Peaches' only contact with the justice system. I have committed however, to only refer students to my school's resource officer as a last resort. I do not want to be the cause of any child entering the juvenile justice system; I would rather not contribute to the growth of the school-to-prison pipeline if it is avoidable.

### **High School**

My parents were not as involved in my high school education as many of my friends' parents were. There was a stark contrast between Granny Loady's involvement in my early childhood education and my parents' involvement in my middle and high school education. It is not necessarily that they did not think education was important, they just seemed to believe that all schools were the same. They did not have any point of reference to determine the differences in academics between attending the neighborhood school or the medical magnet school across town that might assist me in my goal to become a doctor. As long as I went to school they were

satisfied. Even as a young person, I knew that I wanted to be exposed to a curriculum that was designed to give students a foundation in medical career preparation. Therefore, I completed the application for the medical magnet program at Oceanside High School myself. I believe that rather than admit that she did not understand the differences between what was offered at one high school over the other, my mother just signed the papers. At the time, I was already setting my own goals and planning my own future with little input from my parents.

Oceanside High School was on the west side of town; I lived on the east side. Unlike the White students from suburban neighborhoods who attended Oceanside via the medical magnet program, I wasn't assigned to a yellow bus at a street corner near my house. Rather, I was given bus passes for the city bus, and I had to learn to navigate the local transit system. This meant that I had to catch a bus on a busy city street, where traffic was heavy, crime was high, and either the drug dealers were trying to push their products on young victims or entice them into sexual relationships by flashing their money, along with the drug addicts who were panhandling to support their habits. On one occasion, as I walked home from the local bus stop, a man in a beat-up car asked me if I wanted a ride. I turned my head toward the car to politely decline and saw that the driver was stroking his penis as he asked me this. Scared to death, I immediately looked straight ahead walking as fast as I could trying not to appear afraid and praying that he would just go away. Luckily, for me he did keep driving. In the first breath, I thanked God that the pervert kept going rather than trying to kidnap me, and in the next I questioned why things like this always happened to me. I felt like this could have been prevented if I were provided with school bus transportation with a bus stop strategically placed in my neighborhood or near my home rather than a local bus stop located at a busy intersection. I felt like my school district thought it was more important to protect the safety of the White kids in the magnet program who

qualified for bus transportation than to protect me because they were provided with safe, secure school bus transportation and I was issued bus passes to catch the city transit. I see this now as a startling example of Black girls' perceived resilience by educators (Nunn, 2016). Because I was a Black girl who had made it this far, I appeared to be able to take care of myself. It appears to me now that those in charge of my transportation assignment believed that a Black girl like me was tough enough to travel from one side of town to the other with the use of public transportation thus a school bus wasn't needed. I do not see any reason for the school transportation department or administration to use transportation to prevent me from attending my predominantly Black high school.

### **Sleepless School Nights**

It was hard getting up for school every morning, but somehow I managed to do it. Every night of the week including school nights, my mother hosted "card parties." Four or five of my mother's friends would come over every evening and play *Tonk*, a fast-paced card game. Game nights always started out nice and friendly, but things started getting heated when one person won too many hands, if cheating was suspected, if someone had too many alcoholic drinks, or any other issue that might arise with illegal gambling. Our house was small; it was less than one thousand square feet, and the walls were so thin I could hear the cards shuffle. It was especially hard to sleep when someone would slam a hand of cards down on the table from excitement or from anger. There were also times that the arguing became so loud and angry that I actually feared for my life and the lives of my parents, my siblings, and whomever happened to be visiting our house on those nights. These parties lasted well past midnight and sometimes just before my alarm clock went off. However, I managed to get up and go to school every morning



and pretend like everything was fine, often on very limited sleep. Oceanside High is where I went to be safe and normal and just like everyone else.

My homelife was such that statistically I should have been an academic failure. I credit the work ethic that my family instilled in me along with my drive to improve my life situation with fueling me with the resilience I needed to maintain good grades and stay out of trouble. Though my living environment at this time was not ideal, I was not physically safe, not being abused, and my parents still held very high expectations of me.

### **A Counselor Who Cared**

To this day, I do not know how Mr. Hall, my high school counselor, got in touch with my Uncle William. Mr. Hall was concerned that it was a quarter of the way through my senior year and I had not applied for college yet. I knew I wanted to go to college, but I figured I would just show up at my local college and attend classes. Mr. Hall called my Uncle William to express his concern with me not applying for college and scholarships. Uncle William, in turn, gave me a tongue lashing that made me feel as small as an ant. Needless to say, I applied to several colleges. The application fees were waived – Mr. Hall worked his magic and some were waived by Educational Talent Search, a federal program aimed at increasing college admissions for first generation college students. I received acceptance letters from the University of Georgia, Spelman College, Xavier University, Shaw University, South Carolina State University, and several more. Ultimately, I decided to stay closer to home and attended Seaboro Southern University (pseudonym).

I am forever grateful for the push that I received from Mr. Hall and my Uncle William. I did not go off to an Ivy League University or a prestigious college but knowing that there were

people who believed and cared enough about me to even suggest I try to instill in me the will to do my best to become a college graduate.

### **Undergraduate Experience**

I had been accepted to a number of colleges throughout the Southeast. In the end, however, I chose to attend a university only 45 minutes away from my hometown. I chose to attend Seaboro Southern University because it was close enough to home that I could work on the weekends. Part-time employment should not have been a factor when graduating from high school, but I knew there was no one that I could call on if I needed financial assistance. I was paralyzed by fear of the unknown, and what I did know was that I had a job with a company that valued me enough to put me on the schedule whenever I wanted or needed to work.

What I remember most about my undergraduate years is working all the time. I had a work-study job in the library and I worked weekends back home. I missed out on so much during what should have been the best years of my life. When my friends would go on trips together during the summer or spring break, I would stay behind so that I could go home and work. I was able to have my job transferred, which was great when school was in session, but I would have to stay behind to work holidays rather than go home like everyone else. I remember being so scared of walking home at one o'clock in the morning after closing the grocery store. Again, this would have been acceptable and safer if school were in session, but during breaks, the city, especially near campus, was a ghost town. Not only did I not have a ride because all of my friends were on break, but I had to walk home at dawn by myself because there were no students strolling home from a late night study session at the 24 hour library or otherwise taking advantage of no curfews and freedom from their parents.

I did not take classes the summer before my junior year. Rather, I went home to work because I was beyond disgusted with not having reliable transportation. I worked three jobs that summer – at a sugar refinery in the packing house, as a bank teller, and as a grocery store cashier. I worked so hard that summer because I was determined to buy a new car. At that time, I didn't realize in addition to money, I needed to have good credit. My parents were not in a financial position to co-sign for me, so I decided that I was just going to sit out of school for a semester to make the extra money that I needed to put down on a car due to my limited credit history and no cosigner. That plan quickly changed when I was assigned to stack 10-pound bags of sugar onto pallets in a hot warehouse for 8 hours per day. It was my job at the sugar refinery and not wanting to drop out of college like my mother that motivated me to go back to the Seaboro Southern and complete my degree requirements. No matter how tough school was, it was not as bad as the mundane task of throwing bags of sugar on a pallet all day for \$8.00 an hour. This experience gave me an indication of what the rest of my life would be like if I did not finish school.

### **Welcome to the Real World**

I graduated with a B average with a degree in sociology. I did not know what my next move in life was because I had not secured a job before graduating. I applied for jobs in Sea City, Central City, and Sherma – all places where I either had family or friends with whom I could live until getting on my feet. I did not want to come back home to Sea City, but I considered myself lucky to be called for an interview at the local housing authority just two months after graduating. In my position as a caseworker, I worked with women and children who resided in public housing projects and low-income housing throughout the city. The major focus of my job was to assist families with developing and completing self-improvement plans as

was required for them to secure housing in a mixed-income housing community that was being built. I had some success getting the women, all of whom were Black, to complete short-term certification programs such as to become certified nurse's assistants and hospital transporters. I even managed to convince one of my clients to leave the housing projects and purchase her own home. I was happy to get a paycheck every two weeks, and I enjoyed my position that was similar to a life coach, but something was missing.

To fill a void, and because I knew that I needed more than a bachelor's degree if I were to ever make more than the \$26,000 annual salary that I earned at the Sea City Housing Authority, I applied and was admitted to the Master of Public Administration Program at Sea City State University. Sea City State University is an HBCU-historically black college or university. My experience there was much different than my undergraduate experience at Seaboro Southern University. Here, all the students looked like me, and most of the teachers did, too. It was here that I realized although I would not become the medical doctor that I thought I would become as a child, I could become a "doctor." Back then, I only wanted what I thought was the esteemed title of "doctor" to make my parents and grandparents proud, and I thought the title would help me earn respect as a professional. Now, I crave the doctorate degree much more than the title because I have invested so much money and time not to complete the requirements here at the end of the program. I want to show my children that I am not a quitter although it has taken me quite some time to complete my goal of becoming a "doctor."

My professors in this program served as more than teachers; they were my role models, my "educated Black person idols." I wanted to be just like them. Although Dr. Jackson (pseudonym) always joked about himself being a "poor-fessor," I still wanted that esteemed title. Students referred to Dr. Cross (pseudonym) as "Dr. Dr. " because she possessed two PhD's. Dr.

Henderson (pseudonym) was so down-to-earth. I couldn't believe that someone who held the title of "doctor" would invite students to her home for dinner or ask for assistance babysitting her grandkids when they visited for the summer. I wanted to be just like my professors, not because they did anything special in class, but because they were Black people who were smart enough to be called "doctor." Because I encountered professors that looked like me, who were not African as they were at Seaboro Southern University, I had the audacity to think, to believe that I could be called "doctor," too. I have come to terms with the fact that simply earning a would not help me earn professional respect, but it is still important for me to complete this goal. Crumb, Haskins, Dean & Harris' (2019) study on the persistence of working-class African-American women doctoral students who attend PWI's (Predominantly White Institutions) found that Black women pursuing doctorate degrees rely heavily on familial support for motivation to endure the challenges that come with doctoral studies, and that their families have high expectations of them. Although my mother has passed since I have started this doctoral journey, I still believe that I can make her and the rest of my family proud by becoming a "doctor." At this point in my life, the title is not just for me; it is for my entire support system.

After living with my paternal grandparents for a year, I had saved up enough money to purchase my own home, but it would not be my own home for long. I closed on my house in May, but I did not move into it until August after I had gotten married. My husband-to-be moved in shortly after I closed on the house, but I did not want to defy my grandparents and "shack up" with a man before I was married to him. I knew my grandparents' feelings about people living together without the benefit of marriage and it weighed very heavily on me to not disappoint them in this one regard. My husband and I were in the MPA program together. We took all the same classes, so we studied and wrote our papers together. The only time we spent

apart was when we went to our day jobs. My husband and I were honored to be recognized as the first married couple to graduate from the MPA program in its history of existence at Sea City State University.

### **Time for a Change**

Soon after graduating from Sea City State University, I was stymied in my job with the housing authority and I did not see any chance for growth there. My job entailed assisting families who lived in subsidized housing with finding employment, enrolling in GED classes, admission to trade or technical school-basically with helping families to improve their economic conditions. I was tasked with working myself out of a job. Unfortunately, however, the majority of the families with whom I worked seemed complacent with their conditions or afraid to lose their safety nets. So, with the exception of a few families, many of my clients did little to further their education or improve their job outlook. Not being able to provide a strong enough rationale for people to seek out available opportunities that were right there for the asking served as a great source of frustration for me. I got tired of finding and initiating contacts for jobs and education to my clients, only to have them go unused. It seemed like I was only being used as a safety net when the lights were being turned off. I decided that it was time for a career change.

I was unsure of what I wanted to do, but I had heard of a pathway to teaching that seemed like a better career choice than what I was doing. I resigned from my job at the housing authority to seek other employment opportunities because I saw teaching as an intervention that might occur before people became victims to the system that had retained a whole generation to a dead end place in government supported housing. I enrolled in an alternative teacher preparation program that I thought promised to place me in a teaching position upon completion of the first semester.

### **So You Think You Want to Teach**

My journey to becoming an educator came to pass out of my frustration with social services. Strangely enough, I came to view education as nothing more than the same social services industry that I had come from, only one overloaded with the trappings of federal monies, politics, and public relations. I fell deeper into the very industry that I tried to run away from, and yet I fell in love with the field of education in spite of its challenges.

I heard an advertisement on the radio for Georgia Teacher Academy for Preparation and Pedagogy (GaTapp), a program geared toward preparing and hiring college graduates with backgrounds other than education to become teachers. The requirements were minimal: candidates for the program must have had a bachelor's degree and a passing Praxis score. As an incentive, candidates who accepted positions at high needs schools were given a forgivable loan that was cleared after three years of teaching in one of these schools. Courses in education were provided by the local university, and practicum opportunities were coordinated with the local school district.

I began my teaching career at MLK Middle School (pseudonym), an urban, Title I school with a high poverty rate, high teacher turnover, failing test scores, and low parental involvement. I taught at MLK for 9 years as an eighth grade language arts teacher. As a classroom teacher, I felt that I excelled at teaching and was often recognized by my peers as a model to follow. I believe I was highly regarded by my peers because I was a good teacher and a good coach. By this time I had already begun my doctoral studies and as part of my program, I earned the Tier I certification that upgraded my certificate and provided me the opportunity to go into administration. I was grateful for the experiences that I encountered and the relationships that I

had with many students, teachers, parents, and leaders at MLK Middle, but I was also in need of change. I applied for an assistant principal position within my district.

### **INTERLUDE**

*Proving nature's law is wrong it  
learned to walk without having feet.*

*~Tupac Shakur, 1999*

The stories shared in the previous were true stories detailing my childhood experiences. From the stories, readers can see that I am a Black female from a low-income family background. The dynamics of my family changed throughout my childhood from being born in Texas with both my parents to being sent to Sea City to be raised by my grandparents, back with my parents, then with my newly divorced mom, and finally with my paternal grandparents with whom I loved until I graduated from high school. My childhood experiences mirrored those experiences detailed in my literature review, including my experiences, teachers' expectations, and sexual abuse. In the following chapter, I tell the stories of my students to show commonalities in our struggles (Hill Collins, 2000).

Though I tell the stories as truthfully and factually as I remember them, it should be noted that limitations of reporting from memory include selective memory, remembering events as if they happened at one time, but actually occurred at another time, and that my perceptions may and probably will be different from someone else's memory of events that occurred.



## CHAPTER 4

## MY MEMOIR CONTINUED

**Learning While Black and Female at a Predominantly White Middle School****Stories of Black Girls Who Attended a Public Middle School in Southeast Georgia**

In *Belonging: The Culture of Place*, bell hooks (2009) writes, "... that healing can come from understanding the past and connecting it to the present" (p. 17). One purpose for writing my memoir was to seek healing from understanding my past so that I could use those experiences now and in the future to inspire and make life a little easier for Black girls and women, many of whom will navigate the public education and the university systems as I have and continue to do as both a student and an educational leader. What I have learned from completing this memoir is that many of the hardships that I faced as a student have prepared me to respond to my students' needs with empathy. This inquiry is not an autobiography, so I do not recount every life memory that I have. Rather, the stories that comprise my memoir are all related to oppressive schooling experiences of Black girls at a predominantly White middle school in Southeast Georgia. In this chapter, I explore my experiences as a middle school assistant principal as well as flashback to related events of my childhood and public school experiences in order to gain an understanding of how race, class, and gender as a student shape my identity and impact my practices as an educational leader. I recount how my excitement with becoming an assistant principal is quickly diminished by my having to revisit the same issues of race, class, and gender oppression that I lived through as a public school student as it relates to the students and teacher that I lead. I present stories that typify experiences of Black girls who attend predominantly White schools from the perspective of a Black female administrator. This chapter features real life tales of the issues highlighted in the literature review with respect to the

schooling experiences of Black girls. The portraiture in the following stories depict educators' inability to deal with Black girls who are victims of child sex abuse, stereotyping Black girls as incapable of understanding and performing advanced coursework, and role in the overrepresentation of Black girls in the school discipline system.

### **Welcome to the Cay**

I clearly remember getting a phone call from the Executive Director of Student Affairs notifying me of the offer for the position of assistant principal. I was vacationing in the Blue Ridge Mountains and was lucky to have cellular service. Dr. Garza told me that I needed to be present for the Board of Education Meeting to accept the position, so I had to cut my vacation short. I was not about to miss out on the opportunity to become an assistant principal.

It was at the BOE meeting that I was first introduced to the principal of the Cay, Mrs. Curtis. Mrs. Curtis lived in the area surrounding the Cay. She is friends with many of her students' parents, attends church with them, and had served as principal of many of their siblings. On the other hand, I lived in the community where I taught and was accustomed to a certain demographic of students and colleagues for that matter. I could not imagine why in the world I would be assigned to a school that was the polar opposite of the school from which I taught.

### **Operating in a Strange Land**

Leading a school is challenging enough for educators when we are familiar with the territory, the population of students we serve, and the staff whom we lead. However, being the new Black person who was second in command at the Cay, a majority White middle school where the teachers have known each other, the students, and their students' families for generations pose a unique set of challenges for me. Racism, classism, and sexism are taboo

subjects in the public educational setting, but ignoring the fact that those issues exist oppresses students especially those who are Black, poor, and female. As a Black, female educational leader, it is impossible for me to ignore issues of racism, classism, and sexism even when others tried to brush them off. When these issues arise, and they do almost daily, I am faced with internal conflict as I try to handle them in the most politically correct manner that I know without appearing to be militant.

I admit that I thought working at the Cay would be fairly easy compared to working at my former school because I felt like I was escaping some of the ills that students in the urban school setting faced (e.g., frequent discipline issues, lack of parental involvement, low test scores, dysfunctional home lives) and other issues that made the job of educating our children more difficult because their basic needs often went lacking. I soon learned, however, that the covert bias and inequity that the small population of Black students faced at the Cay was more difficult to cope with than addressing the issues that were more likely to occur in the urban school setting. At least issues of poverty, lack of resources, and lack of parental involvement were recognized, validated as occurring and to some extent being addressed. In the suburban school in which I was employed, Black students were expected to ignore what is perceived to others as minor injustices and just be happy for the privilege to attend the Cay. For example, Black girls were expected to conform to the policy that prohibited them from wearing scarves on their heads, but White girls were allowed to fold the same type (shape, design, and print) of scarves and wear them as headbands. The attitude that many teachers at the Cay have expressed is “if you’re not happy here, if you don’t like the way we do things here, you can always go back to your home school,” as this phrase is verbalized by teachers as well as the principal in response to a number of student and parent complaints and concerns. As assistant principal, I am charged

with the task of supporting the teachers and the culture of the school. However, I struggled internally because the staff's attitude toward students who were there on special placement and the school's culture was contrary to my belief that all children deserve to be taught and taught well.

### **Me, a Role Model?**

I was on my way to the hospital gift shop on the way to visit my mother. A lady stopped me and stated that my face looked familiar, but she could not place where she had known me. I told her that I was the assistant principal at the Cay and asked if she has a student who went there. She replied, "Yes, my baby, Miracle, is a 6th grade student there. She went on to explain to me that the first time she made contact with me was when she decided that the Cay was the right middle school for her daughter. She was proud and felt comfortable with her child attending a school with a Black woman principal. I have accepted the fact that many people refer to me as the principal although I am the assistant. She said that she felt that I had a very humble spirit. I told her that I was flattered and it meant so much that she trusted me to educate her daughter. She further explained that she explained to Miracle, "Now see, that is someone I would like to be your role model." This is one moment that affirmed my belief that Black girls and their parents trust and believe that a Black female educational leader relates to their unique issues and will work to help them overcome some of the barriers that oppress them in the educational setting. Just as I have been inspired by Black teachers and administrators, I know that the kind of experiences I give them in the educational setting will impact how they view and negotiate their worlds.

### **Theorizing Me, a Role Model?**

There is much scholarship that demonstrates that people of color who hold leadership positions can influence or even create policy outcomes beneficial to the groups they represent (Zajicek, Hunt, Miller, & Kerr, 2020). From a BFT standpoint, I can view and use my position as assistant principal to serve as a positive model for Black girls influencing them to resist negative stereotypes portrayed in film and media by my actions and interactions with them. From both CRT and BFT standpoints I can use my platform as a leader to question and inform my colleagues and parents of school practices and cultural norms that are unjust and oppressive in order to work toward implement policy, practices, and norms that are more culturally appropriate and empowering for Black girls (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017).

### **Keya's Story**

Keya was a smart girl, but she was always in trouble. She was defiant and had a “bad attitude.” She often received office referrals for “rude and disrespectful behavior,” and “failure to comply with directions.” Occasionally, she would get a referral for making threats to teachers or other adults. These “threats” were never verbal; they were always “visual.” Incident descriptions on her referrals would read “she looked at me with a mean glare” or “her body language was threatening.” Teachers and administrators never asked either Keya or her mother if there were any issues at home that might be impacting her behavior at school. Her teachers stated that they could not figure out how to connect with Keya; they could not find any classroom management strategy to modify Keya's behavior so that she would engage in and display more appropriate classroom behavior.

Keya did not return to school for 7th grade. The school social worker informed us that Keya had become pregnant. She was placed in the district's Hospital Homebound Program that

is usually reserved for students with chronic or terminal illnesses that prevent them from attending school. We found out later that Keya was being raped repeatedly by her brother-in-law. No one at the school realized she was residing with her older sister and brother-in-law. We just assumed that Keya lived with her mother and had no other information to make us think otherwise. When speaking with Keya's mother, she expressed to me that she was against abortion and would not allow Keya to terminate her pregnancy.

### **Theorizing Keya's Story**

Research confirms that traumatic experiences such as rape and hostile home environments make children more susceptible to physical and mental health issues as well as negative educational and life outcomes (Jenkins, Wang, & Turner, 2014; Parks, Wallace, Emdin, & Levy, 2016). Often these traumatic experiences go unnoticed in schools because educators are not trained to or are too busy to recognize the signs of childhood trauma (Jenkins et al.; Parks et al.). Victims of childhood trauma often exhibit behaviors such as running away, aggressiveness, truancy, and other disruptive behaviors. These behaviors are described by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network as coping strategies victims believe will prevent them from experiencing further harm (YWCA, 2017). Behaviors that victims perceive as methods of survival are criminalized by schools and they are punished accordingly. Victims of traumatic childhood experiences become victims all over again when they are placed in school discipline and juvenile justice systems. According to the YWCA's Briefing Paper on Girls of Color and Trauma:

This criminalization is the driving force behind the overrepresentation of girls of color in the school discipline and juvenile justice systems. The underlying gendered bias is

exacerbated for girls of color, who also experience biases related to racial stereotypes and cultural norms about appropriate feminine behaviors. (p. 1)

### **My Connection to Keya**

Like Keya, I had been sexually abused by a family member. I was fortunate enough not to get pregnant, but the emotional scars stay just under the surface. Because I am a victim of child sexual abuse, I was able to empathize with Keya's hardship. I understand now why she was angry at school and seemed to crave attention by acting out around her teachers. I, too, was angry. While I acted out at home, Keya acted out at school. I remember feeling like some adult should have been smart enough to figure out what was wrong with me without me having to verbalize that I had been molested on a nightly basis. School was a much needed distraction for me; working hard and studying helped keep my mind off of the fact that I had been abused for an entire summer. This was not the case for Keya. Along with the sexual abuse, she was further victimized by being removed from school and placed in a setting that does not have academic supports that she needed. Her pregnancy precipitated her removal from school and although school officials offered her an option for distance learning, she was alienated from other students and the curriculum because my colleagues disguised the hospital homebound option as a benefit for Keya. I perceived Keya's hospital homebound assignment as a measure put in place to protect innocence, or Whiteness, of the school by keeping the pregnant Black girl away from other students. Research substantiates that victims of traumatic events such as sexual abuse often struggle in school academically and behaviorally resulting in high rates of suspension, expulsion, and dropout. The lack of educational attainment further places girls at a higher risk for other negative outcomes to include early childbearing, poverty, unemployment as well (YWCA, 2017). If educators are trained to recognize signs of trauma and their own biases

toward Black girls, strides can be made in breaking down barriers to success for Black girls who attend public schools.

### **Brandy's Story**

“Let’s just place her in the honors 8th grade math class. I’m just not certain of her work ethic or motivation,” Ms. Hopkins suggested as she read the data forwarding cards during the 7th grade course placement meeting. “But she has benchmark scores higher than some of the students we already have placed in the 9th grade algebra class. How can you make assumptions about her work ethic or motivation if you have never taught her?” Ms. Brown questioned. Ms. Hopkins tried to explain that it is ok if 8th grade students do not take 9th grade math because they will be better prepared and have a more solid foundation for high school math if they are given a review of the 8th grade concepts that they accelerated through in the 7th/8th grade compacted math class. “Well, if that is the case, why are you placing students who have lower scores than Brandy in the 9th grade class? It seems that those students would benefit more from another year of 8th grade math than a student who has consistently exceeded expectations on both math and reading benchmark assessments,” Ms. Brown retorted.

This debate went on for a few minutes with tempers noticeably flaring. Other considerations came up with the placement of Brandy into the 9th grade math class including the fact that the class size must remain under 25 in order for the school to receive gifted funding as well as the fact that she would be the only Black girl in the class. None of that mattered to Ms. Brown, who was more concerned that a Black girl was being denied access to a math course from which she had the potential to receive high school credit in favor of a “more suitable” candidate. Ms. Hopkins eventually conceded and agreed to place Brandy in the 9th grade math



class, but we can certainly assume that she would have been denied that opportunity had she not had anyone to advocate for her in her and her parents' absence.

### **Theorizing Brandy's Story**

Black girls are often underrepresented in gifted and advanced classes because referrals to such programs are dependent upon teacher recommendations. White Black girls being at the intersections of race, gender, class, and ability, teachers' intentional and unintentional biases, which are influenced by stereotypes and their perceptions of Black girls, determine the trajectories of Black girls' academic futures (Evans-Winters, 2014). If it were not for Ms. Brown advocating on Brandy's behalf, she would not have received a recommendation to take high school courses. Although Brandy scored as high as or higher than other students in her peer group, teacher perception of her motivation was cited for her not originally being placed in the high school courses. Francis (2012) found that "black female students are perceived as less attentive and more disruptive of their white, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts" (p. 312) and that "perceptions of attentiveness are significantly related to the probability that a teacher recommends a student for honors courses" (p. 312). Limited access to a challenging or college preparatory curriculum starts as early as middle school. Girls, and to a greater extent, Black girls fall victim to this barrier more so than any other group of students. From BFT and CRT standpoints, Brandi's story exposes how Ms. Brown challenged the other teachers' objectivity as an attempt to exert their power to reserve the advanced courses as a privilege for White students and how the intersections of Brandi's race and class almost prevented her placement in the advanced courses. The teacher who attempted to place Brandi in the regular classes had access to her test scores but cited her unfamiliarity with Brandi's work ethic as the reason for her recommendation. Since Brandi's test scores were at or above the levels of White students who

were placed in the advanced courses, assumptions regarding her work ethic must have been informed by the recommending teacher's perception of Brandy as a Black girl.

### **My Connection to Brandy**

I am reminded of Ms. McCluskey, my 5th grade teacher who was impressed by my willingness to participate in class, to answer and ask questions, to volunteer to do classroom chores, assist other students, and to run errands, when I reflect on Brandy's story. Ms. McCluskey noticed my disappointment when I received less than 100% on assignments. She also noticed the change in my behavior on the playground or in the cafeteria and realized that I was trying hard to gain acceptance from the Black kids. When around the Black kids my vernacular changed to include more "ain'ts" and "honey childs", sometimes we sang and taught each other the latest dances on the playground and my body language included neck rolls, finger pointing and snapping, hands on my hips – things all perceived as characteristic to Black girls and women. Unlike the White teachers with whom the decision to place Brandy in advanced classes laid, Ms. McCluskey was impressed with me academically. However, she also told me in so many words that being "too Black" or acting stereotypically "Black" would hinder my academic success.

### **Another Connection to Brandy**

Just as Mr. Hall encouraged me to apply to more than one college, Ms. Brown advocated for Brandy to be enrolled in high school courses. Many educators believe that Black girls are not capable or are not serious about academics (Nunn, 2018). Because these educators prematurely predict Black girls' academic and career paths as dismal, they do not see the need to advocate for Black girls to be placed in courses that put them on the path for college preparation (Nunn, 2018). One of the most significant forms of oppression that Black girls face in U.S. public

schools is not being afforded the same opportunities for challenging coursework that is afforded to White boys and White girls respectively (Andre-Bechely, 2005; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). One such example at the Cay is the placement of students. Students at the Cay are placed based on test scores and teacher recommendations. Unless Magnet students, students who are administratively placed or students who live out of district and have extremely high test scores, are placed in the lowest performing or special education inclusion classes. They are not given the same challenging courses or opportunities to learn with gifted students that students who reside in the school's surrounding area are. Magnet and administratively placed students are overwhelming Black students whose parents sought a means to escape their failing neighborhood, or zoned schools (Andre-Bechely; Rhodes & Warkentien). Even when Black students and White students have similar test scores, White students are more likely than Black students to be placed in the higher classes by teacher recommendation. In predominantly White schools, the most rigorous courses are reserved for White students, and very few Black students are able to gain access to these courses that ultimately prepare students for college admission (Chapman, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2008).

### **Kerri's Story**

Kerri, a 7th grade student, was being bullied by her classmate Taliyah since their 6th grade year. Things came to a head one afternoon at lunch when Kerri got frustrated and decided to stop the teasing and taunting once and for all. Right before lunch, Taliyah had been calling Kerri names and picking at her for her dark skin and hair extensions. With hurt and anger built up inside of her, Kerri walked up to Taliyah, yanked Taliyah from her seat by her ponytail, threw her down to the ground, and punched her in her face repeatedly.

After an investigation to include obtaining statements from the aggressor, the victim, classmates, and teachers, it was determined that Taliyah was in fact bullying Kerri by taunting her and calling her names – many of them racially charged. I issued out-of-school suspension to Kerri for 10 days for the physical assault and 5 days of in-school suspension for the verbal assault. In my professional opinion, I thought I was being fair to all parties. My principal, Mary Alice Maloney, however, disagreed. She was horrified by what she had seen on video of the cafeteria fight between Kerri and Taliyah. From my view, it was not that bad. At least no blood had been drawn.

Mary Alice demanded that I complete an expulsion packet requesting that Kerri be sent to the alternative school. I was upset to my core because I felt that Kerri would be placed at a horrible risk for her safety and her future academics at the district's alternative school. Not only was it filled with students who had committed much worse offenses – many of them were felons involved with the juvenile justice system, but the academic program at the alternative school is the worst in the district. Kerri would not receive gifted services there and rigor would have been much less than challenging for her. She would not have the opportunity to take a foreign language as she was at the Cay, nor would she be on track to take any of the other courses offered at the Cay taken for high school credit.

Mary Alice and I viewed this situation from two very different perspectives. Being a White woman, she was not aware of how deep the emotional scars name-calling or taunting that references hair texture or style and skin run to a Black female. The emotional pain that Taliyah inflicted upon Kerri was just as bad as the physical pain Kerri inflicted upon Taliyah. Taliyah may not have known this either because she is a mixed-race female with light skin and straight

hair. Zora Neale Hurston (1937/2006) in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, illustrates colorism (Wilder & Cain, 2011) in the Black community:

But Mrs. Turner's shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes... to her way of thinking, all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked the fields. (p. 140)

Wilder and Cain (2011) define colorism as an "intra-racial system of inequality based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features that bestows privilege and value on physical attributes that are closer to White" (p. 578). Perhaps I should have directed Mary Alice to this passage or one similar to it to give her an understanding of the hurt that Kerri felt.

Of course, I complied with my supervisor's request to complete an expulsion packet on Kerri. In the end, however, the hearing officer ruled that expulsion was not justified as Kerri had already served 10 days of out of school suspension as well as 5 additional days at Habersham Middle School, one of the district's failing schools that is located in the center of four of the city's housing projects. Kerri was sent to Habersham Middle School because of a delay in her hearing, which was supposed to take place within 10 days of the incident.

I surmise that the hearing officer, Ms. Louper, a Black woman and retired administrator, shared the same perspective that I had on the impetus and the severity of the fight. Like me, she has probably seen worse fights than the one between Kerri and Taliyah, and I am certain that she has dealt with issues of colorism.

### **Theorizing Kerri's Story**

CRT exposed race as a critical component as it relates to student discipline. It is well-documented that principals are key players in the disparities in school discipline since principals are in charge of assigning disciplinary consequences. Black girls are punished more often and are given harsher consequences than girls of any other ethnic group in U.S. public schools. BFT exposed preconceived notions that leaders have about Black girls' attitudes, affinity to violence, and resilience to trauma as highly influential in principals' decision making process when issuing consequences to Black girls. In Kerri's story, the principal attempted to expel Kerri for her very first offense since she had entered school 8 years prior, a fight provoked by another student that lasted less than one minute. Kerri's entire academic and life trajectory would have been negatively impacted if it were not for the hearing officer's rejection of the principal's request to have Kerri expelled from school and placed at the district's alternative school. This story illustrates why BFT and CRT scholars suggest that social justice advocates seek leadership positions that empower them to overturn policies and practices that oppress people (CRT), especially girls and women (BFT) of color.

### **My Connection to Kerri**

In my role as an assistant principal, I have very little tolerance for bullies. I believe it is my experience with Peaches, my 6th grade bully, that influences the consequences that I issue to bullies and the compassion that I feel for the victims. I try to be very fair and objective when it comes to issuing consequences for disciplinary referrals, but I know that I have a bias when it comes to physical bullying and my experience with being a victim of bullying is the reason why (Davis & Gere, 2018; Kahn et al., 2012).

### **Porsche's Story**

Ms. Schneider called me to her classroom because she was having trouble with a student. When I arrived, I found Porsche to be the student with whom she was having trouble. Porsche is a 6-foot tall Black girl with a dark complexion and a deep voice. Ms. Schneider stated that Porsche refused to complete an assignment and was being generally disrespectful. Ms. Schneider stood halfway in and halfway out of the door as she told me about how rude and disrespectful Porsche was. Then, she yelled for Porsche to come out into the hall. Rather than moving out of the way, I witnessed Ms. Schneider move her body slightly to the side that Porsche tried to pass through, then yelled at me, "Did you see that? She hit me!"

Ms. Schneider attempted to file charges on Porsche on the grounds of battery. The school's resource officer was charged with the task of investigating the battery claim. Video footage was reviewed and the school resources officer interviewed me, Mrs. Schneider, Porsche, and other students that were present. The officer determined that there was not enough evidence to move forward with the case. A conference was held in which Mrs. Schneider, school administrator, Porsche's mother, Porsche, and the school resource officer were all present. The decision was made to remove Porsche from Mrs. Schneider's class for the remainder of the school year. Mrs. Schneider and Porsche were both advised to avoid contact with each other.

### **Theorizing Porsche's Story**

Being suspended or expelled from school can have dire effects on students' lives including a higher propensity for them to fail academically, drop out of school, come into contact with the juvenile justice system, and become teenage parents (Parks et al., 2016). This is especially true for Black girls who are overly represented in and receive the harshest consequences from the juvenile justice system. Porsche was fortunate enough to have me

present to witness what transpired between she and Mrs. Schneider; otherwise, she could have very been expelled or perhaps arrested in response to Mrs. Schneider's claim that Porsche hit her. Contact was made as a result of Mrs. Schneider calling Porsche out to the hall, then slightly moving her body in the doorway. We will never know whether Mrs. Schneider's move was an intentional act meant to bait Porsche into hitting her or if it were an involuntary move that Porsche miscalculated as she abruptly stormed into the hallway following a heated verbal altercation with Mrs. Schneider. What we do know is that BFT affirms that Black girls are burdened with stereotypes of being loud, disrespectful, and aggressive. So, had I not been there to witness the occurrence, the White administrator would have more likely than not yielded to her perception of Porsche as a Black girl and sided with Mrs. Schneider. Racially-biased perceptions coupled with zero-tolerance policies could have place Porsche in the school-to-prison pipeline, a term used to describe the role school-based arrests contribute to students' increasing contact with the juvenile justice system (Payne & Brown, 2017).

### **My Connection to Porsche**

My connection to Porsche was very significant because I had actually experienced what it was like to have Mrs. Schneider as a teacher. As it turns out, Mrs. Schneider, my former 6th grade teacher, was now employed at the Cay. I have tried to repress my memories of the way Mrs. Schneider treated me in middle school to be as objective as possible when I have had to handle any of her discipline issues in order to objectively assess each case. I found it most difficult, however, to separate my personal experience with Mrs. Schneider from my professional judgment. This situation put me in a precarious professional position as I have specific assumptions about Mrs. Schneider based upon her treatment of me as a young Black girl.



### **Jasmine's Story**

Jasmine is a student with a disability. Her exceptionality is emotional behavior disorder. Her behavior is characterized as being defiant at times. She has not displayed any act of physical violence, but she will refuse to carry out the directives of adults when she is having an “episode.” She has threatened physical violence when other students make fun of her weight or academic ability, but she has never carried any out. While most adults got frustrated when Jasmine refused to comply with directives, I understood why she felt like she was exempt from the rules. I believe in her mind, she thought that she was just as much of an adult as the teachers were. Mary Alice, the new principal, knew that Jasmine was protected by IDEA and could only be suspended for a maximum of ten days during the school year. So, she concocted a plan to coerce Jasmine's mother into relinquishing Special Education services. Mary Alice bragged about convincing Jasmine's mother, who was not very sophisticated on school law, that Jasmine was making choice behaviors and that she did not need the protection of special education services. Jasmine's mother agreed to terminate special education services, agreeing with Mary Alice that “Jasmine just thinks she is grown.” I wondered what else was Jasmine to think when she had so many adult roles and responsibilities. As soon as Jasmine's mother signed the form to discontinue Special Education services, Jasmine was expelled for chronic disruptive behavior and sent to finish the school year at the district's alternative school.

### **Theorizing Jasmine's Story**

Jasmine's story illustrates the challenges of experiencing the intersections of race, gender, disability, and class. It is not uncommon for students receiving special education services for emotional and behavioral needs to be suspended although many antecedents to undesired behavior are directly influenced by those needs (Haight et al., 2016). Although special

education regulations prohibit the suspension of students who receive special education services, many administrators, including Jasmine's principal, find ways to exclude students from school. Poverty is also a risk factor for suspension (Haight et al., 2016). Milan and Wortel's (2015) study on the effects that family obligations have on girls from low income families found that the intersectionality of gender, race, and income makes it more likely for girls who come from similar backgrounds as the participants of their study (Black or immigrant girls whose household SES is described as low income) to have multiple responsibilities to include part-time jobs to help support the family, caring for younger siblings, and taking care of household chores. These obligations make girls more prone to becoming overwhelmed with other life events and negatively affect their mental health (Milan & Wortel). BFT and CRT expose several social constructs that intersect and contribute to her marginalization. Jasmine's participation in the special education program was intended to afford her accommodations specific to her emotional and behavioral needs and to protect her from excessive suspensions related to her needs. CRT's tenet of interest convergence is used to theorize that Jasmine's principal convinced Jasmine's mother that Jasmine was making "choice" behaviors unrelated to her disability, and she Jasmine's mother to sign her out of the special education program. It was in the White principal's interest to remove Jasmine from the special education program so that she would not have a limit on the number of days that she could suspend Jasmine. Not long after Jasmine's mother signed the waiver of special education services, Jasmine was expelled from school for the remainder of the school year. Jasmine's story also illustrates why BFT calls for researchers and the academically elite to join forces with women of all socioeconomic statuses and educational backgrounds. Jasmine's principal was able to use Jasmine's mom's ignorance of educational policy to aid in Jasmine's oppression.

## **My Connection to Jasmine**

Like Jasmine, I was a caregiver to my younger siblings. Unlike Jasmine, my duties as the adult in charge did not start until the weekends. My parents divorced during my 10th grade year. My three siblings, mother, and I remained in our family home; my father moved out. My mother worked during the week and got home shortly after my siblings and I arrived from school. The weekends were my mother's times for herself. She would leave with a friend of hers and would leave my siblings and me home alone the entire weekend with me being the one in charge. As a 15-16 year old, I enjoyed the freedom to do whatever I wanted to do, but after a short time I grew tired of babysitting. I was also afraid of being home overnight with no adult present. This arrangement went on for about a year before I realized this was no way for a child to live. Eventually, I ran away because I did not feel that it was fair for me to "raise" someone else's kids just so she could party on the weekends. I would not have had a problem with this arrangement if my mother were going to work or school, but she just left us home alone to spend time with someone she did not want to interact with us. I did not run far; I moved in with my paternal grandparents. Sadly, this did not encourage my mother to change her habit of leaving her children home alone on the weekends. The role of weekend caregiver was passed on to my younger sister. Unfortunately, my sister did not adjust too well with her dual roles as an adult at home and child at school. She acted out in school and always got in trouble with teachers and authority figures. My sister was the authority figure at home at least some time. So, I believe that my sister felt that she was as much of an adult as school personnel and they did not have the right to tell her what to do. Eventually, my sister dropped out of her junior year of high school. Fortunately, she did obtain her GED shortly afterward. My response to being given adult responsibilities was to run away from them. My sister chose to stay. I believe, as I believe was

the case with Jasmine, that her role as an adult at home conflicted with her role as a child at school. As a result, they both rejected school authority and were indirectly penalized for circumstances of their lives that were beyond their control. Educator competence on how family obligations impact low-income, minority girls (Milan & Wortel, 2015) may have been beneficial to both my sister and Jasmine.

### **Conclusion**

To some, it might appear that Black girls who attend predominantly White schools have the same rights and privileges as White students. However, consistent with what current research suggests, The Cay, like many other predominantly White schools, maintain White privilege and dominance through adopting a curriculum that is void of diverse content, does not teach students to critically examine power structures, employ discipline practices that adversely affect Black students, and track students into courses that almost always precludes their migration into college preparatory courses (Chapman, 2013). The curriculum offered to Black girls who attend The Cay, a predominantly White school in Southeast Georgia, is used to “further marginalization and maintenance of the status quo, rather than a tool of empowerment and social change” (Chapman, p. 616).

In this chapter, I explored how my own schooling experiences significantly influenced my role as an assistant principal. The narratives of my public school experiences as a former student and as an assistant principal were compared and contrasted to illustrate how it is almost impossible to completely separate who you are as a result of your experiences from who you are professionally. From this inquiry, I sought to understand the influence that my lived experiences have on my will to succeed, my desire to uplift the students I serve, and my practices as an educational leader.

*Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams,*

*it learned to breathe fresh air.*

*Long live the rose that grew from concrete*

*when no one else ever cared.*

*^Tupac Shakur, 1999*

## CHAPTER 5

### REFLECTIONS OF INQUIRY

In this final chapter, I make meaning of my lived experiences as a Black, female student turned educational leader. I illustrate how I, a rose, proved nature's law wrong and grew from concrete. I establish how my life as a student, as a teacher, and as an assistant principal of a South Georgia school district through autobiographical inquiry connects to curriculum, autobiography, race, class, and gender. Fictionalized memoir is the methodology that I employ to recapitulate events during my life as a student, my life as a teacher, and my life as an assistant principal. I convey how the intersectionality of race, gender, and SES affected my experiences during each of these phases of life. I detail how my experiences have molded me into the type of student I was in public school and now in graduate school, the type of leader I am, and the leader I am still learning to become. The process of writing this memoir has reaffirmed what I thought to be true—that race, class, and gender have a significant impact on one's determination to succeed, but it also made me realize that race, class, and gender also impact my work as an assistant principal.

This dissertation explores the cultural disconnect between Black girls and White teachers and how this disconnect perpetuates the oppression of Black girls in U.S. public schools from a Black female perspective. The goal of this study is to encourage educators of all races to acknowledge oppressive forces present in public schools such as unequal access to rigorous coursework and harsher disciplinary consequences than girls of other races and work to eliminate them in order to help Black girls reach optimal levels of academic success. Purposeful and intentional strategies and interventions that support the success of Black girls must be created and embedded in the curriculum if we are to achieve systemic change. Such strategies and interventions are discussed in further detail later in this chapter. I used autobiographical inquiry

as a means of reflection, analysis, and interpretation of my experiences as an assistant principal working in the same school district from which I graduated. I utilized fictionalized memoir and counter-storytelling as a methodology to blend in research that reveals commonalities in the forms of oppression encountered by Black girls who attend U.S. public schools. The use of fiction throughout my memoir helps to hide the identities of the students and teachers whose stories and experiences I share. The oppression of Black girls in U.S. public schools is a taboo topic that many pretend does not exist. Fiction eliminates the possibility of my students and colleagues being associated with such a topic as oppression in U.S. public schools. The use of fiction lessens the risk of the researcher being labeled a radical.

I chose to focus on Black girls for my study because I am a Black woman who has attended schools within the school district that I now work for as an assistant principal. In my work, I have witnessed and been involved in many situations similar to those I experienced firsthand as a student. I want to work to eliminate such barriers as no access to rigorous coursework and harsh disciplinary practices that disenfranchise Black girls and serve as sources of oppression within U.S. public schools. Black girls must overcome these barriers if they are ever going to decrease the achievement gap that exists between them and girls of other races, but they cannot do it alone. Educators must recognize these barriers, work to eliminate them and teach Black girls how to overcome them.

It was not until I entered the doctoral program and began to reflect on my life that I realized that my painful childhood experiences affected my goals as an adult in such a significant way. What I experienced as a child and as a student served as a catalyst for me to excel academically for the acceptance of the adults that I respected and admired. hooks (2009) writes, “my hurt was rooted in trauma experienced in the dysfunctional family” (p. 59). In all of the

turmoil that my family has endured, the one thing that I could do to make things better is to make the Honor Roll or some other academic achievement. I could give my family bragging rights amongst their friends for being so smart. I may not have had the clothes and shoes that my friends had, but I was smarter than them all. Whereas I wanted my family to have the financial resources of my friends, they wanted my intelligence. To this day, I am still working to please my family. One part of me wants to complete the doctoral program for myself, but a big part of my desire to earn a doctorate is because I feel like I owe it to my family.

Six meanings emerged from my dissertation inquiry: (a) Writing my memoir has allowed me to critically look at my past and recognize that my experiences have affected many aspects of my life including my job as an educator; (b) CRT and BFT allows me to use my counter-story to challenge a dominant perspective held about schools; (c) Black Feminist Thought affirms that like other Black, women educators (collectively), I am in a dialectical relationship with oppression (the school district, my employer) and activism (being a curriculum theorist concerned with liberating Black girls from their oppressor (the public school system)(Hill Collins, 2000, p. 25); (d) BFT asserts that “all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely denigrates women of African descent” (Hill Collins, p. 28); (e) BFT connects the public schooling of experiences Black girls with the larger issues of the criminalization of Black girls and the school to prison pipeline; (f) Like many others, I too, am guilty of perpetuating the marginalization of Black students before I gained an awareness of the oppressive nature of public school for Black girls.

Writing my memoir has allowed me to critically look at my past and recognize that my experiences have affected many aspects of my life including my job as an educator (Meaning 1). This is evidenced in the stories of my childhood as well as the stories I tell of my students. Now



that I have this awareness, it is my duty to use it to make sure that my experiences do not get in the way with the success of my colleagues or the students whom I serve. bell hooks (1996) explains that writing her autobiography, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996) “enabled me to look at my past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way” (p. 432). I concur with hooks as writing my memoir evoked feelings ranging from joy and pride to sorrow, rage, and helplessness. Keya’s story of being raped by her brother in law and getting pregnant made me sad for her, but angry at myself for not trying harder to figure out why she was so angry. Writing her story made me reflect on how I let my position as assistant principal perpetuate her oppression by failing to look past her misbehavior to explore if she had a greater need.

CRT and BFT allows me to use my counter-story to challenge a dominant perspective held about schools (Meaning 2). The stories of my students challenge the belief that sending Black students to high performing, predominantly White schools ensures that they will benefit from a better quality of education than they would receive from schools to which they are assigned based on their residence. Brandy’s story demonstrates that Black girls are not automatically given access to courses that prepare them for college and advanced careers. CRT’s acknowledgement of White privilege can be used to explain that the recommending math teacher intended to reserve her seat in the advanced course to someone more deserving than a Black girl. This White teacher did not evaluate Brandy’s work ethic based on personal observation or interaction. Rather, Brandy was evaluated on what this teacher thought she knew about Black girls, the stereotype that Black girls lack motivation to excel academically.

Black Feminist Thought affirms that like other Black, women educators (collectively) I am in a dialectical relationship with oppression (the school district, my employer) and activism

(being a curriculum theorist concerned with liberating Black girls from their oppressor (the public school system)(Hill Collins, 2000, p. 25) (Meaning 3). My disagreement with Mary Alice's request to expel Kerri and anger upon finding out that Mary Alice coerced Jasmine's mother to waive her right to receive special education services illustrate my dialectical relationship oppression and activism. I was in a position of having to accept my superior marginalize these Black girls for the sake of maintaining an amicable work environment and keeping my job. I was not able to help Jasmine, but I was able to advise Kerri's mother to seek counsel to represent her at Kerri's expulsion hearing.

I explored the similarities between my experiences as a student and the experiences of my students decades later. BFT asserts that "all African American women face similar challenges that result from living in a society that historically and routinely denigrates women of African descent" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 28)(Meaning 4). Through my connections with my students' stories, I demonstrated similarities between their challenges and the challenges that I experienced as a Black girl. Keya and I shared the challenge of finding resilience following sexual assault. Brandy and I both encountered Black teachers who advocated for our academic futures. Kerri and I both shared experiences with being bullied. Porsche and I shared the experience of being harassed by a teacher. In fact, we were harassed by the same teacher, Mrs. Schneider, who was ironically my middle school teacher as well. Finally, Jasmine and I shared the experience of having to care for younger siblings while our mothers were away for extended periods of time. My memoir is situated with teacher stories that give voice to the marginalized as an act of resistance.

BFT connects the public schooling of experiences Black girls with the larger issues of the criminalization of Black girls and the school to prison pipeline (Meaning 5). Jasmine's story

illustrating the intersections of gender, race, discipline, and poverty as well Kerri's and Porsche's stories of educators' perceptions of Black girls a violent demonstrate why Black girls are overrepresented in the school to prison pipeline. Mary Alice carried out her White supremacist, capitalist patriarchal (hooks, 1994) agenda by coercing Jasmine's mother to relinquish Jasmine's right to receive special education services which also eliminated Jasmine's protection from receiving excessive suspension. Mary Alice, then expelled Jasmine for the remainder of the school year. Fortunately, I was able to use my position to inform Kerri's mother of her right to a disciplinary hearing for a ruling on Mary Alice's request to expel Kerri. I was also able to serve as a witness for Porsche when Mrs. Schneider falsely accused Porsche of hitting Mrs. Schneider. From Mary Alice's desire to rid the school of Black girls through expulsion, I can only imagine that Porsche would have been on her way to either the district's alternative school or the county's juvenile facility.

Like many others, I too, am guilty of perpetuating the marginalization of Black students before I gained an awareness of the oppressive nature of public school for Black girls (Meaning 6). Before entering the Curriculum Studies Program, I believed in and was unwittingly a part of what Kozol (2007) calls the "The Hortatory Lie," or the notion that the academic success or failure of our nation's most marginalized students:

is a matter wholly of their own self-will, their own determination, their own perseverance, and that the external world-the governor, the school board, the determination of white society to keep them at a distance where they can't contaminate the education of the middle class-has no role in preventing them from learning. (p. 160)

As evidenced in *The Cay*, I was excited about the opportunity to leave the high poverty, predominantly Black school where I was employed for a school that boasted high test scores and low poverty. I blamed my former students and parents for the students' academic shortcomings measuring them by White supremacist, capitalist patriarchal (hooks, 1994) that they had not been prepared to navigate. I now see that it is my mission as an educational leader with a social justice activist to help this marginalized population of students and parents to resist the oppressive public educational system that intends to keep them in a position of subordination.

### **Implications**

The implementation of policies and strategies that are culturally relevant, trauma induced care, social emotional learning, and resilience training are necessary to dismantle the oppressive nature of public schooling for Black girls. Black girls are motivated to excel academically when the curriculum is relevant to them. Students become more engaged in academics when they see representations of themselves in the learning content. Freire (2005) explains,

only as learners recognize themselves democratically and see that their right to say 'I be' is respected will they become able to learn the dominant grammatical reasons why they should say 'I am' (p. 89).

Cultural norms and dress code policies are oppressive forces in public schools that have an indirect relationship on the harsher discipline and higher rates of suspensions that Black girls are susceptible to. Owens et al. (2018) argue, "students of color are expected to present themselves in ways that signify Whiteness, and not their own culture and values" (p. 4).

- First and foremost, educators must acknowledge the current research that addresses the harsh reality of the schooling experiences of Black girls in U.S. public schools with regard to their lack of representation in gifted and advanced

courses, disparities in discipline, and the generally negative perceptions that teachers have of Black girls.

- Secondly, more attention needs to be given to the care of Black girls who have had traumatic life experiences in and outside of the school setting. Teachers and other educators need to be trained to recognize the signs of childhood trauma and have resources in place to help Black girls build resilience to such obstacles. Many Black girls are doubly victimized by traumatic experiences and school disciplinary consequences for such coping mechanisms they adopt as misbehaving or failing in school.
- Review and consider revising zero tolerance policies that overwhelmingly affect Black girls.
- Implement restorative discipline that focuses on keeping Black girls in school as an alternative to suspension and expulsion.
- Take a culturally responsive approach to school discipline.

### **Recommendations**

- Require an introductory curriculum studies course in pre-service teacher education programs.
- Enact laws/policies that protect teachers who promote social justice.
- Educators who consider themselves activists for social justice educate peers, superiors, parents, students, and politicians on the research related to the use of public schooling for the maintenance of hegemony.
- Educators with a social justice agenda need to position themselves to apply for positions in educational administration in order to implement change.

- Social justice activists need to encourage parents and other stakeholders to use political action to bargain with board members to hire personnel, especially administrators, who are engaged in community and social justice activism.
- Social activists may solicit businesses and seek grants to fund mentorship programs for Black girls.

## POSTLUDE

### **What I Have Learned from My Story and My Students**

As an educator, I have learned that many of the girls with whom I have come in contact either as a classroom teacher or as an administrator, have had the same experiences that I have had as a student. Reflecting on my experiences often had me asking myself “what was it that I needed to get me through this particular situation when I was in this child’s position?” The first thing that I came up with each time was that I had to believe that there was some way to overcome whatever hardship I faced at the time. Secondly, I needed a trustworthy adult who believed in me. I needed an adult who would believe me, believe in me, and who was willing to be my voice. For me, that adult was often a teacher or some other adult advocate who was not a member of my family. My experiences as a student were not identical to my students’ experiences because I mainly attended schools where I was a part of the majority and for the most part had teachers who believed in me. However, my students were in the minority at their public middle school and encountered teachers who knowingly or unknowingly prescribed society’s stereotypes of them and treated them accordingly. I could no longer stand by, watch, and accept the treatment of Black girls whom I encountered in my role as an educational administrator to continue to be oppressed. So, I chose to tell my story, to share my memoir to educators to encourage them to find the courage to stop ignoring what is right in our faces and do

something to create more positive experiences for Black girls who attend public schools in the South.

### **My Evolution as an Assistant Principal**

As hooks (2009) asserts, “many people in our nation, especially white people, believe that racism has ended. Consequently, when black people attempt to give voice to the pain of racist victimization we are likely to be accused of playing the ‘race’ card” (p. 71). In Educational Leadership, internal conflict often arises when discussing with colleagues issues that revolve around the educational resources that are provided to schools in certain neighborhoods, disparities in the discipline of students, the quality of and the support of teachers, and a number of other factors that plague schools with high minority populations. From my perception as an administrator, we all see that most of the schools in our district are segregated by race and class, but we are afraid to talk about it for fear of being accused of playing the “race” card. From this study, I found that in my position of assistant principal at a predominantly White school, I struggled with my desire to advocate for social justice and not jeopardize my chances of career advancement (Baszile, 2006) if colleagues perceived me as being too “pro-Black.” We see that the brightest African American students are being bussed to “specialty” or “magnet” programs that attract high performing students and parents to schools outside of their neighborhoods. As an educational leader, I see that students who attend schools outside their zoned neighborhood schools through special programs do not necessarily get the full benefit of attending a school on special placement as do the students who are zoned to attend the specialty school based on their addresses. For example, students who attended my school on special placement were often scheduled into the lowest performing classes. It was not until a teacher recognized these students’ performance as advanced compared to others’ performance in the class that these

students gained access to more challenging classes. In some instances, students have complained to their parents that the work in these classes was too easy. Parents would then request a class change through the principal who made the final decision on placement. Therefore, I contend that parents who send their children to schools they perceive as “better” than their zoned schools should meet with school representatives to ensure that their children are correctly placed and appropriately challenged.

In order to combat racism in the public education system, it is imperative that educational leaders relinquish their fears of being accused of playing the race card. hooks (2009) offers this resolution:

What has become clear is that education for critical consciousness coupled with anti-racist activism that works to change all our thinking so that we construct identity and community on the basis of openness, shared struggle, and inclusive working together offers us the continued possibility of eradicating racism (p. 182).

Educational leaders who are committed and brave enough to engage in honest dialogue about race and racism in public schools are needed to develop effective strategies to truly increase achievement of Black girls.



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