CONCRETE ROSES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE PARALLEL LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS AND WOMEN IN K-12 SCHOOLS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2021

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ABSTRACT

ALICIA W. DAVIS. Concrete roses: An exploration of the parallel lived experiences of Black girls and women in K-12 schools. (Under the direction of DR. BETTIE RAY BUTLER)

The schooling and leadership experiences of Black girls and women are overlooked as they are often intertwined with the experiences of Black males or White women. Historically, the academic, mentoring, leadership, and mental health needs of Black girls and women have been neglected and challenged in educational settings. The purpose of this three-article dissertation was to explore the racialized lived experiences of Black girls and women in K-12 schools from a student and Black school administrator perspective.

Using autoethnography, study one explored my experiences as a Black girl growing up in the South attending predominately White schools and my experiences as a Black female assistant principal in an urban middle school. I reflected upon my school age years, teaching tenure, and principalship to discover the parallels between being a Black female student and Black female administrator in K-12 schools. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) What unique challenges did I encounter as a Black girl attending school in the South?, and 2) How does my identity as a Black woman administrator impact how I navigated through White spaces as an assistant principal of an urban school?

Study two used a single case study research design to explore how an out-of-school suspension affected the academic self-concept of a Black girl who recently graduated from high school. Convenience sampling was used to select the participant. The primary research question guiding this study was: 1) How does a Black girl, who

recently graduated from high school, perceive her academic opportunities after encountering a suspension in school?

Study three used a multiple case study design to understand how the treatment of Black women administrators impacted their leadership abilities. Using purposeful convenience sampling, I explored how two Black women principals perceived their treatment by their staff and leaders and how these experiences affected their ability to lead. The research question guiding this study was: 1) How do two Black women principals navigate the gendered and raced work environment of their urban schools?

The findings from this dissertation indicate the following: a) Black girls and women encounter racism as students and administrators; b) Black girls and women lack mentorship and support at levels in education; c) A gifted Black girl viewed her academic outcomes negatively after experiencing out-of-school suspension; and d) Black women principals encounter gendered racism while serving as school leaders but remain committed to their leadership approach of providing inclusive environments for students.

The overall implications for this study suggest Black girls and women need collaborative spaces in schools that permit them to discuss their experiences without consequence from leaders and mentoring and mental health supports must be in place for Black women to grow professionally and Black girls to grow academically.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my chair and mentor Dr. Butler. I thank you for your guidance, protection, and words of wisdom. I could not have made it this far without you. I could not have asked for a better mentor. I would also like to thank my committee members: Dr. Jae Hoon Lim, Dr. Brittany Anderson, Dr. Jillian La Serna, and Dr. Tehia S. Glass. I am appreciative of your time and guidance during this process.

To my friends and family, thank you for keeping me accountable, your smiles, your phone calls, and your text messages. Your love reminded me why I need to finish this work and I am forever grateful.

DEDICATION

To my parents, Ricky and Myrtle, I cannot begin to express how much I love you! Thank you so much for your encouragement, laughter, smiles, and words of wisdom! This dissertation is dedicated to you! I love you so much!

To the love of my life, Avram, thank you for supporting me during this journey. Thank you for pushing me to finish this race and going through all the emotions (happiness, confusion, craziness, joy) with me along the way. This dissertation is dedicated to you. I love you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

Problem Statement 3

Purpose 4

Study Context 6

Theoretical Framework 7

Critical Race Theory 7

Critical Race Feminism in Education 8

Research Questions 10

Significance of Study 12

Limitations and Delimitations 12

Positionality Statement 13

Key Terms 14

References 17

CHAPTER 2: DON'T TOUCH MY SOUL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A BLACK WOMAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR 23

Literature Review 25

Perceptions of Black Women in Society 25

Perceptions of Black Girls in Schools 27

Perceptions of Black Women in School Leadership 29

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism 32

Data and Methods 33

Research Design 33

Data Collection 34

Data Analysis 35

Findings 36

You Shouldn’t Outperform White Students 36

Navigating White Spaces 40

Discussion 43

Bent But Not Broken 44

Mentorship as Survival 45

Implications 47

Conclusion 48

References 50

APPENDIX A: JOURNAL ENTRIES 60

CHAPTER 3: I USED TO KNOW HER: A CASE STUDY ON BLACK GIRLS, ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT, AND SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS 63

Literature Review 65

Black Girls and School Discipline 65

Black Girls and Academic Achievement 67

Gifted Black Girls 68

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism 69

Data and Methods 71

Research Design 71

Dawn 73

Data Collection 74

Data Analysis 74

Findings and Discussion 76

Hope for the Future 76

Lack of Motivation 78

Revival 81

Discussion and Implications 82

Conclusion 85

References 86

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 95

CHAPTER 4: CAGED BIRDS: A MULTICASE STUDY EXAMINING PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE EYES OF BLACK WOMEN PRINCIPALS 97

Literature Review 98

Women and Leadership in Education 98

Black Women Principals 100

Principal Self-Efficacy 102

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Feminism 103

Data and Methods 105

Research Design and Participants 105

Principal Brown 106

Principal Sierra 106

Shared Characteristics of Principal Brown and Principal Sierra 107

Data Collection 108

Data Analysis 108

Findings 109

Leadership as Intentional Ministry 110

Difficult Transitions 113

Leading with Love 118

Discussion and Implications 120

Conclusion 124

References 125

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL 131

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION 133

The Parallels Between Studies and Contributions 133

Implications and Future Research 137

Developing Critical Collaborative Spaces 137

Anti-Racism in Education 139

Integrating Mentoring Models and Mental Health Supports 140

Final Thoughts 140

References 142

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I am sick of you always defending Keisha. It's almost like she can do no wrong in your eyes even though she is always disrespectful to me. If you don't do something about her soon, then I will! (Ms. J)

During my second year as a middle school assistant principal, a frustrated teacher, Ms. J, a White[1], middle class beginning teacher, confronted me in the hallway during a class transition. Infuriated, she called me to her room to remove Keisha for talking while she was teaching. Keisha is an A/B honor roll student. She is also a 7th grade Black girl. When I did not oblige her request, she became noticeably upset. Filled with rage and anger, I told Ms. J we would discuss the incident during her planning period.

After the incident, I looked into Keisha's record more thoroughly. What I discovered was appalling. Keisha had received an office discipline referral nearly every two weeks from Ms. J for disrespect or disruption. Ms. J reported that Keisha often talked while teaching was taking place or rolled her eyes when addressed. In Ms. J's opinion, these behaviors were enough to warrant immediate removal from her classroom. I disagreed.

To gain additional context, I attempted to understand why Keisha was behaving this way. I learned that she was talking during Ms. J's lesson because she was attempting to explain the material to her classmates. When I shared this information with Ms. J, she concluded that I was defending Keisha because we are both Black females. While

[1] Racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized. Therefore, Black and White are used instead of black and white (colors), which are considered pejorative when used to refer to other human groups. Taken from the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001, p. 68)

abhorred by her response, I reflected on what Ms. J said and began to wonder how many more staff members thought this way.

Unfortunately, Keisha's experience as a Black female student and my experience as a Black female administrator are not unique. Similar to Keisha's experience with Ms. J, Black girls of all ages across the nation have and continue to be disproportionally targeted for office referrals by White teachers (Blake et al., 2011). In 2014, a 12-year old Black girl was suspended from school and faced criminal charges for writing "Hi" on a locker room wall (Stockman, 2014). In 2016, a nine-year-old Black girl was sent home for violating her school's dress code by wearing her hair in Afro puffs (Kim, 2016). In January 2019, four middle school Black girls in New York were strip-searched for drugs after teachers perceived them as being "hyper and giddy" in class (Gold, 2019). No drugs were found. In September 2019, a 6-year-old Black girl was arrested at school and taken to a juvenile center on a battery charge for reportedly throwing a tantrum (Krietz, 2019). These instances are among the increasing stories of Black girls being penalized, criminalized, and harmed for subjective infractions under exclusionary school discipline policies and practices.

Even my encounter with Ms. J is a common experience among Black women administrators and White teachers. According to Jean-Marie (2013), African American female principals generally receive a lack of support during their principalship from colleagues and staff. Reed (2012) and Witherspoon and Mitchell (2009) also suggested that Black women principals' authority is often disregarded and questioned. In Reed's (2012) qualitative study on the practices of three Black female principals, the lack of support and disregard of authority is attributed to the dismissive actions and disrespect

received from parents, colleagues, and superiors. Sexism and ageism were major contributing factors to Reed's participants feeling as though they were not being taken seriously. In Witherspoon and Mitchell's (2009) qualitative study on the intersectionality of leadership and spirituality of Black female principals, participants highlighted that they were met with tension, exclusion from decision making processes, and lack of support because their superiors "don't want Black women at the top" (p. 663). Participants in their study find support and strength through their spirituality rather than superiors.

The similarities found between Black women and Black girls' experiences in K-12 is undeniable. Given these parallel experiences, the aim of this study was to explore what it means to be Black and female in K-12 schools from both a student and administrative perspective. While much of the research has concentrated on the educational challenges of Black boys (i.e., overrepresentation in school suspensions) and men (i.e., lack of teacher recruitment) (Ferguson, 2001; Lopez, 2003), the plight of Black girls and women in education remains a topic of critical interest and concern.

Problem Statement

Black girls experience high rates of office referrals for subjective offenses such as defiance, aggression, dress code violations, and the use of profanity (Blake et al., 2011; Morris & Perry, 2017). These subjective offenses oppose traditional standards of White femininity and coincide with the stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexual, aggressive, and hostile (Morris, 2007; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). These stereotypes lead educators to believe Black girls need less protection, support, and nurturing in schools (Epstein et al., 2017). Black girls' actions of being loud and independent are seen as adult behaviors that threaten the order of the classroom (Epstein

et al., 2017; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2007). These perceived adult behaviors perpetuate the adultification of Black girls, which is defined as "a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children's behavior and verbalization" (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 4). Teachers' perceptions of Black girls exhibiting mature, stereotypical, adult-like behaviors cause them to be under constant scrutiny and surveillance in schools (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Epstein et al., 2017). The increased surveillance of Black girls and their behaviors may cause them to believe schools are toxic places where they cannot fully express themselves (Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

As Black girls become Black women, the belief that they are hypersexual and aggressive remains. Black women administrators reported that they are scrutinized for their appearance and behavior at higher rates than their colleagues (Reed, 2012). Viewed as promiscuous, even while dressed in professional business attire, Black women administrators must reflect on their fashion choices, hairstyles, and overall appearance to be respected and seen as authority figures within their schools (Reed, 2012). The increased policing of their attire and challenging of their authority within schools causes Black women administrators increased stress and burnout. As a result, they become doubtful, sometimes wondering if they are really making a difference in their schools. Working in this type of toxic environment, which some have suggested is strategically designed to tear them down, has led to the precipitous departure of Black women administrators from leadership in education (Farinde et al., 2016; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009).

Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the racialized experiences of being Black and a female in K-12 schools from the dual lenses of students and school administrators. Though there has been a burgeoning interest in the schooling experiences of Black girls in recent years, far less attention has been given to the leadership of Black women administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals). This study places a major focus on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) as it draws parallels between what it means to be a Black girl or woman grappling with gendered racism, microaggressions, and identity on a daily basis while reflecting on how these matters shape experiences in K-12 public schools. According to Gillborn (2005), schools and educational policy are built around centering Whiteness. Leonardo (2002) discussed Whiteness as a social construct that can be internalized by White people and people of color, designed to classify and divide the world according to race. Within education, Whiteness is normalized as White educators and educators of color who perpetuate Whiteness ideology uphold White supremacy through student tracking processes, school discipline, curriculum choices, funding bias, teacher/administrator beliefs, etc. (Gillborn, 2015; Matias et al., 2014; Matias & Mackey, 2016). As Black girls and women maneuver through K-12 White educational spaces, their intellectual abilities, identity, and health are challenged at every level. The title of this dissertation, *Concrete Roses*, was chosen because Black girls and women bloom and become beautiful sources of power, strength, and resiliency despite the gendered racism they experience daily in their school environments.

With regard to Black girls, I specifically examine how subjective disciplinary experiences can shape a gifted Black girl's academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is defined as "an individuals' knowledge and perceptions about themselves in academic

situations" (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 6). Using a single case study approach, I explore the story of one Black girl and how she perceived her academic capacity years after encountering a school suspension.

With regard to Black women administrators, I examine how gendered racism impact their ability to lead. Gendered racism is defined as the experience of both racism and sexism (Lewis et al., 2016). Using a multiple case study approach, I explore how the racist treatment of two Black women administrators influenced their perceptions about how well they lead their schools.

The ultimate goal of this study is to encourage White educators and others to critically reflect upon their interactions with Black girls and women in schools. I aim to bring awareness to the parallel traumatic encounters Black girls and women have and continue to face in education with the hope of not only decreasing, but also removing, barriers that have historically perpetuated their negative schooling experiences.

Study Context

The central location of this study takes place within the urban South. I define urban using Milner's (2012) typology. According to Milner (2012), urban education can be characterized as urban intensive, urban emergent, and urban characteristic. Urban intensive schools are located in large metropolitan areas. Due to the size of the cities, urban intensive schools may experience difficulty in providing necessary and sufficient educational resources to students simply due to the large number of students. Urban emergent schools are located in large cities that may experience a shortage of resources such as highly qualified teachers, student supplies, and curriculum development (Milner, 2012). Urban characteristic schools are located outside of large cities. They traditionally

see some of the same challenges present within urban emergent schools but with the addition of an increase in English language learners (Milner, 2012). The school settings for this study fall under both the category of urban emergent and urban characteristic.

Theoretical Framework

The experiences and voices of Black girls and women in politics, economics, and education have gone untold and were scantly documented for decades. Their identities and stories have been integrated into the mainstream narratives of White women and Black men to promote educational policies that will benefit the overall well-being and advancement of traditionally underrepresented groups. But their experiences are not the same. For this reason, I use Critical Race Feminism (CRF) to guide this study as it separates the experiences of Black girls and women from those of other marginalized groups.

CRF explores the intersectionality of being both Black and a woman (Crenshaw, 1995). I use CRF to specifically explore how race and gender are interconnected in the exclusionary discipline of Black girls and the discriminatory treatment of Black women administrators in schools. Before doing so, however, it is important to trace the origins of CRF to its parent theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Critical Race Theory

Developed by Derrick Bell (1989), Critical Race Theory (CRT) was formed as a response to the “slow pace of racial reform in the United States” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT provides a framework for examining how race and racism have been sustained and institutionalized. The five tenets outlining CRT are as follows (Bell, 1989; Delgado & Stefanic, 2001):

1. Racism as endemic: Racism is a permanent part of life.
2. Interest Convergence: White people advance the interests of people of color only when they advance and benefit White interests.
3. Social Construction of Race: Whiteness is a form of property interest.
4. Storytelling/Counter-storytelling: Values stories and counter-stories from people of color that challenge and question the majoritarian mindset.
5. Intersectionality: Explores the intersections of race, class, and gender.

In an attempt to use race as an analytic tool to understand the inequities present and increase racial reforms in schools, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied the CRT framework to education. To understand school inequities through a CRT lens, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1998) identified the following three propositions to guide their research:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. The society of the United States is based on property rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and consequently school) inequities.

While Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1998) do not explicitly connect CRT and discipline practices, they define how school inequities can be maintained through curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

Critical Race Feminism in Education

Borrowing from CRT, critical legal studies, and feminist jurisprudence, CRF frames the experiences of women of color separate from those of White women and men

of color (Wing, 1997). Wing (1997) explained how CRT has been strongly influenced by the experiences of men and CRF was designed to highlight the voices of women of color encountering affirmative action, discrimination, and other forms of oppression within the legal profession and academy. Positioned within Patricia Hill Collin's (2000) *Black Feminist Thought,* CRF has become increasingly popular in education and legal scholarship due to its exploration of the intersectionality of women of color through understanding their multiple identities and consciousness (Crenshaw, 1995; Wing, 1997). Similar to CRT, storytelling and counter-storytelling are essential in CRF to challenge the patriarchal and feminist systems that situate women of color's experiences within those of White women and men of color.

Critical race feminism in education disrupts the dominant discourses surrounding how Black girls and women should behave in school separate from their male and female counterparts. Understanding why Black girls conform or refuse to conform to White female norms provides an opportunity for Black girls to be seen and heard in multiple facets concerning their experiences with out-of-school suspension (OSS) and their academic futures. In addition, understanding how Black women administrators navigate racism on their track to becoming principals provides Black women an opportunity to narrate their stories as school leaders. Altogether, given the focus of critical race feminism, educators and policymakers are in a better position to understand and critically reflect on how Black girls make sense of being overly disciplined, controlled, and policed in schools (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Wun, 2016) and how Black women administrators internalize being controlled and policed as school leaders. These allowances permit the

art of storytelling and the use of different methods for Black girls and Black women to voice what it means to be Black and female in K-12 schools.

Research Questions

The purpose of this three-article dissertation was to explore how the exclusionary discipline practices of Black girls influenced their academic self-concept, in addition to how the discriminatory treatment of Black women administrators impacted their self-efficacy to lead. Autoethnography (Chapter 2) and case study methods (Chapters 3 and 4) were used to tell and examine the stories of Black girls and women in schools. Autoethnography allows for "rich and detailed data and interpretations" (Miller, 2008, p. 348) as researchers process and construct knowledge from their past and the current world around them (Hamdan, 2012). Case study research is used to demonstrate how one Black girl (Chapter 3) and two Black women administrators (Chapter 4) holistically and intrinsically made sense of their school environment and workplace climate (Merriam, 1998).

Chapter 2 is the first of the three articles included in this dissertation. It uses autoethnography to explore my own experiences as a Black girl growing up in the South attending predominately White schools, as well as my experiences as a Black woman administrator serving as an assistant principal in an urban characteristic middle school with a predominantly White teaching staff. Reflecting upon my K-12 school years, teaching tenure, assistant principalship, and lived experiences, I sought to understand the parallels between my being a Black girl and a Black woman administrator. The primary research questions guiding this study were: 1) What unique challenges did I encounter as a Black girl attending school in the South?, and 2) How does my identity as a Black

woman administrator impact how I navigated through White spaces as an assistant principal of an urban school?

Chapter 3 is the second study within this three-article dissertation. It uses a single case study to explore how exclusionary discipline affected the academic self-concept of one Black girl who recently graduated from high school. Using convenience sampling, I identified the participant for this study who then provided insight into her schooling experiences. She specifically recounted what led to her out-of-school suspension and how this disciplinary consequence impacted how she felt about herself academically. The primary research question guiding this analysis was: 1) How does a Black girl, who recently graduated from high school, perceive her academic opportunities after encountering a suspension in school?

Chapter 4, the final article in this three-article dissertation, employed a multiple case study to understand how the treatment of Black women administrators impacted their leadership abilities. Few studies have focused on how Black women principals navigate educational spaces that have historically served as sites of trauma and abuse for Blacks. Using convenience sampling, I explored how two Black women principals perceived their treatment by their staff and how these experiences affect their ability to lead. The research question guiding this study was: 1) How do two Black women principals navigate the gendered and raced work environment of their urban schools?

The studies within this dissertation intertwine to highlight the parallel lived experience of what it means to be Black and female in education from a student to school leader. The studies will discuss critical transitional years where Black girls learn how Whiteness works in educational settings and how Whiteness and racism is sustained in

schools, even when schools are led by Black women. Black girls and women experience racialized trauma at every stage of their educational journey. Their voices, through this study, will equip stakeholders on how to best meet their needs while dismantling racism in schools.

Significance of Study

Through this study, I hope to bring awareness to the trauma and racism Black girls and women encounter in K-12 schools. The microaggressions, gendered racism, and sexism Black girls and women face on a regular basis in schools have the potential to harm them mentally, physically, and emotionally as these occurrences can weather their bodies, minds, and spirit (Demby, 2018; Lewis et al., 2016). Experiencing schooling during a time of civil unrest and a global pandemic has only exacerbated the discriminatory treatment that Black women and girls encounter as evidenced through the stories of the study participants. Researchers, education leaders, and policymakers have the power to implement and sustain policies and programs that will empower, nurture, protect, and support Black girls and women. Policymakers, educators, and those alike should work to understand the importance of including the voices of Black women and girls in their decision making process, especially as it concerns education policies.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

It is important to note that within these collective studies, there are some limitations. Chapter 2 is a personal examination of what it means to be a Black girl and a Black woman administrator in K-12 schools. The experiences I encountered do not reflect those of all Black girls and women. Chapter 3 tells the story of a single participant experiencing suspension during high school. The results and implications are specific to

that student's experience and may not necessarily be applicable to other Black girls. The study could be extended in the future by including the voices of multiple Black girls at various school levels.

Lastly, Chapter 4 explores the experiences of two Black women principals. Both women currently serve as K-8 charter school principals and have previous experience serving as public school principals as well. While inclusion of their voices can enhance leadership studies, these recounts are not generalizable.

Concerning delimitations, the collective studies focus specifically on the experiences of Black women and girls impacted by the racism and sexism in K-12 schools. All other levels of schooling (i.e., early childhood and higher education) have been omitted from this dissertation. In addition, each study focused solely on the lived experiences of U.S.-born Black women and girls. This study also does not directly discuss trans girls and trans women in education. However, the lived experiences of trans women and Black women and girls born outside of the United States in education are topics of critical importance.

Positionality Statement

Protecting Black girls in schools is a topic close to my heart. As a young Black girl in school, I can recall the numerous times my teachers called me inappropriate names or treated me differently. Each time I was called out of my name by a teacher, I wanted to react in an aggressive manner, but I knew the consequences I would receive as well as the lack of consequences my teachers would receive. This caused me to become a passive participant in school and conform to White, middle-class norms of schooling in order to survive. This also led me to become a high school math teacher and an assistant principal

to protect Black girls in schools and support them as they strived to survive their K-12 years.

As a school administrator, I can recall telling Black girls to stop talking loudly, stop acting "hood" because they represent all Black girls when in certain teachers' classes, and to behave ladylike everywhere they go because people are watching. While these words may have been intended to support and provide code-switching skills to Black girls, these words may have broken their spirit and caused them to question their identity. Through this dissertation, I listened to the stories of Black girls and women while also reflecting upon my own experiences with the intent to share ways that White teachers and staff, respectively, can learn how to better support them. Last, I reflected upon my own experiences as a Black girl and Black woman administrator to understand how I came to be an advocate for Black women and girls in education.

Key Terms

Academic self-concept: individuals' knowledge and perceptions about themselves in academic situations (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003).

Adultification: a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children's behavior and verbalization (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 4).

African American/Black students: used interchangeably throughout the dissertation; students whose cultural and racial background identify with the continent of Africa or are of African descent (U. S. Department of Education, 2018).

Critical Race Feminism: a theoretical framework that explores the experiences of women of color separate from those of White women and men of color (Wing, 1997).

Critical Race Theory in Education: a theoretical framework that analyzes the existence of race and racism in institutions while calling for the elimination of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Exclusionary Discipline: discipline which removes a student from a learning environment for a specific amount of time (Children's Defense Fund, 1975).

Female: cisgender female whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

Gendered Racism: the experience of both racism and sexism (Lewis et al., 2016).

Microaggression: subtle and everyday slights and insults that can include insensitive comments based on an array of racial assumptions about criminality, intelligence, cultural values, and citizenship, as well as the minimization or denial of the racialized experiences of people of color (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 759).

OSS: instance in which a student is temporarily removed from school for at least a half day for disciplinary reasons to a home or behavior center (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Principal Self-Efficacy: a set of beliefs that enable a principal to enact policies and procedures that promote the effectiveness of a school (Versland & Erickson, 2017).

School Administrator: includes principals, assistant principals, and other staff involved in school administration (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Whiteness: a social construct, that can be internalized by White people and people of color, designed to classify and divide according to race (Leonardo, 2002).

Zero Tolerance Policies: state, district, and school-wide policies that enforce punitive and exclusionary discipline outcomes for students (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).

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CHAPTER 2: DON'T TOUCH MY SOUL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A BLACK WOMAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

I just don't understand why you always have to defend them. Just because you look like them doesn't mean their behavior is always right. (Mrs. M)

One of my staff members, a veteran teacher with 12 years of experience, who was visibly upset with how I handled a situation in her class involving a Black female student, said this to me during a staff meeting. These words murdered my spirit as my authority was questioned in front of my colleagues. Love (2016) defined spirit murdering as the "denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism" (p. 2). At that moment, I was denied protection, safety, and assurance as I was completely humiliated. A study conducted by Jean-Marie (2013) revealed that staff with Black women school administrators tend to view their administration as less intelligent and less capable of leading. I wondered if other teachers also felt that I was less capable of leading as this teacher went on her tirade. Feeling embarrassed and hurt, I constantly thought about how the staff perceived my leadership.

Unfortunately, spirit murdering was not a new feeling for me. Growing up in the South, I can recall being the only Black student in many of my classes from the fourth grade until my senior year in high school. In the fourth grade, Mrs. McNeil, one of three Black teachers I had during my entire K-12 schooling, noticed that I was gifted. She recommended that I be tested for placement in the gifted education program. While I was excited about being enrolled in gifted classes, the name calling, ignorance, sexism, and

racism shown towards me made me doubt my intelligence. Sixth and eleventh grade were particularly challenging years.

Black girls remain underrepresented and under-identified in gifted education (Ford, 2013) because their access is heavily dependent on teachers' perceptions (Bianco et al., 2011; Young et al., 2017). The intersectionality of gender and race further exacerbates Black girls' access to gifted education programs because teachers rely on stereotypical images of Black women in media to gauge student ability (McGee, 2013). Instead of recognizing the totality of my gifts and talents, teachers based my ability as a student on their bias towards Black women and the same can be said for Black girls in gifted education today. My experience as a Black girl in the South navigating through public school was what led me to become an educator, and later, a school administrator.

Schools serve as White spaces created to actively engage in the legitimation of White supremacy through Whiteness (Gillborn, 2005; Yoon, 2012). According to Leonardo (2002), Whiteness is an ideology designed to classify and divide people according to race. As a teacher, I was one of six Black teachers in my school and the only one in the math department. Each Black teacher in the school worked in a different department and were divided amongst two campuses, leaving little room for collaboration. Similarly, as an assistant principal, I was also the only Black administrator in the first school I served in. Being the only Black person in a department or in an authoritative role was daunting. I was acutely aware of the racism and microaggressions Black educators and administrators encountered on a daily basis in schools. Teachers' conversations regarding the humaneness of students and staff of color and if they were

worthy to receive certain privileges or benefits perpetuated the racial domination present in schools.

With these experiences in mind, this autoethnography allowed me to reflect on how being Black and a woman in K-12 schools shaped my identity. I aim to contribute to the discourse on Black girls and women research by discussing the potential parallel experiences of racism that Black girls and Black women school administrators endure. The use of autoethnography allowed me to explore how I was able to maneuver the intersecting complexities of race and gender as both a student and person in a position of authority. The experiences of assistant principals of color, specifically Black women, are often left out of scholarly literature. When discussed, Black women's experiences with school leadership are commonly grouped with the experiences of White women or Black men and ignore issues of racism and discrimination. To date, few studies, if any, have attempted to connect Black girls' journeys in K-12 public schools with that of Black women's experience as school leaders. In this sense, the present study breaks new ground.

To begin, this chapter provides an overview of the literature on perceptions of Black girls and women. Next, I introduce Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and show how this framework guided this study. Last, I utilize a constant comparative method to reflect on and critically analyze my experiences as both a student and administrator. The ultimate goal of this study is to raise awareness of what Black girls and Black women administrators encounter in schools with the hope of not only decreasing, but also remove barriers that have historically perpetuated their negative schooling experiences.

Literature Review

Perceptions of Black Women in Society

Throughout history, the experiences of Black women have been uniquely complicated. While enslaved, Black women were seen as “dominant, aggressive, sexually promiscuous, rebellious, rude, and loud” (Thomas et al., 2004, p. 428) as they endured heavy labor and were sexually victimized by their masters. These labels and characterizations led to societal images of Black women differing from those of White women (Ashley, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010; Thomas et al., 2004). White patriarchy deemed a woman to be someone of sexual purity, passive, domesticated, and faithful (Ashley, 2014). As Black women continued to be abused and brutalized physically and sexually, they were viewed as unfeminine, unacceptable, and unlovable (Ashely, 2014; Thomas et al., 2004). The discrimination and multiple forms of oppression Black women experienced due to racism and sexism are still prevalent today and the plight of living while Black and a woman often remains invisible (Ashley, 2014; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

The notion that Black women are invisible in society has been around for quite some time (Bell, 1992; hooks, 1981; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Research studies indicate that Black women had to choose between fighting and advocating for the rights of the African American community or women, but not both (Ashley, 2014; Bell, 1992; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Fighting for both was believed to hinder the progression of the African American community as Black women were seen as problematic if they also supported the women’s liberation movement (Bell, 1992; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Although Black women were more likely to be feminists and support gender equality, White women did not support or advocate for the rights of Black women (Gay & Tate,

1998). Consequently, the voices and experiences of Black women are rarely heard as they are structured within literature that captures the experiences of Black people or women as a whole (Bell, 1992; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Gay & Tate, 1998; Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Gay and Tate (1998) revealed in their study that Black women must often decide between their dual identities, which political and social causes they will support. This idea of Black women being “doubly bound” (Gay & Tate, 1998, p. 170) as their race and gender influence their political and social identities is a direct correlation with Patricia Hill Collins’s (2013) matrix of domination. The matrix of domination legitimizes Black female epistemology by placing Black women’s experiences at the center of analysis, separate from those of White men and women. The intersection of race, gender, and class as interlocking systems of oppression has deeply impacted Black women (Bell, 1992; Collins, 2013). Characteristics associated with Black women such as aggressive, controlling, and bitter are “reflective of survival skills developed by Black women in the face of social, economic, and political oppression” (Ashley, 2014, p. 28). While these survival skills can lead to social change, as seen through the work of Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, they can also lead to Black women longing for support in a society that is unwilling to accept them (Ashley, 2014; Bell, 1992).

Perceptions of Black Girls in Schools

Black women and girls’ educational achievements and accomplishments have increased dramatically over the years. Black women are obtaining college degrees at higher rates than their White and Hispanic female counterparts (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018) and Black girls are academically performing better than Black boys (DuMonthier

et al., 2017). Despite educational accomplishments and achievements, gifted Black girls and women continue to be silenced and marginalized in educational settings (Anderson, 2020; Ford, 2013; Lewis et al., 2016). Much of the current literature on gifted Black girls and women centers on their resilience in school environments where they are underrepresented in gifted programming or overlooked in school leadership positions (Anderson, 2020; Burton et al., 2020; Ford et. al, 2018; Evans-Winters, 2014). A contributing factor to the underrepresentation of Black girls in gifted programs and the silencing of Black girls in schools is adultification.

A study by Epstein et al. (2017) discussed how the adultification of Black girls influences teachers' perceptions. Adultification suggests that Black girls are in need of less protection and less nurturing. This idea is fueled by the false appearance and behavior of Black girls as older and less innocent. Adultification has been said to be the reason why Black girls are three times more likely to be suspended from school for disruptive behavior than White girls (Epstein et al., 2017). Thought to be "unruly, loud, and unmanageable" (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 24), teachers frequently give out office discipline referrals to Black girls. Because Black girls are seen as more adult-like than any of their same-gendered peers, the proportion of disciplinary consequences assigned far exceed their enrollment (Annamma et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017).

Black girls have experienced the highest growing suspension rates of all students within the last decade (Annamma et al., 2019; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Blake et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine if disciplinary infractions of Black female students were notably different from those of their White peers. Similar to Blake et al.'s (2015) study, Annamma et al.'s (2019) study found that Black girls receive out-of-school suspensions

for infractions that included disobedience/disruptive behavior, dress code violations, and inappropriate language/gestures. These collective findings concluded that Black girls who defy White middle-class norms of femininity and respectability encounter a greater risk of being suspended from school (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011; Blake et al., 2015). In comparison, Morris and Perry (2017) asserted that Black girls' behavior is seen as misbehavior more often than their White female counterparts. The consistent challenging of White, middle-class feminine norms in schools causes Black girls to be removed from schools at exceptionally high rates and for longer lengths of time, thus negatively affecting their academic outcomes and overall self-concept (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Greenwood et al., 2002).

Collins (2009) discussed how social reproduction theory enables schools to reproduce existing inequalities and not serve as institutions of equal opportunity. Institutions such as schools perpetuate the stereotype that feminine behavior equates with passivity and silence (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2007; Wun, 2016). Black girls who are seen as loud, controlling, and overtly sexual, as determined by their dress and attitude, defy the notion of femininity and educators "express more interest in promoting the social, rather than academic, skills of Black girls" (Morris, 2007, p. 493). In promoting the social skills of Black girls, school officials are compelled to discipline and remediate Black girls' behavior in an effort for these students to conform to White middle-class norms (Blake et al., 2011; Blake et al., 2015). The increase in literature pertaining to the disciplining and criminalization of Black girls in schools continues to expand and bring needed attention to the difficulties Black girls face in schools.

Perceptions of Black Women in School Leadership

Historically, stereotypical images of Black women have been crippling, demonizing, and dehumanizing (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). Images of the overtly sexual Jezebel, asexual Mammy, and loud and argumentative Sapphire have plagued Black women since slavery (Ashley, 2014; Townsend et al., 2010). Portrayals of these stereotypes in the media have influenced the way the dominant group (i.e., White Americans) interacts with Black women and girls (American Advertising Federation, 2016). These stereotypical, negative depictions of Black women help to explain their lack of accessibility to leadership roles in schools and school districts (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012; Tillman, 2004).

Educational leadership degrees are earned by women at a rate of 67 percent, while men continue to dominate higher level school roles such as superintendent (Orr et al., 2008; Reed, 2012). Women who are perceived to behave more like men are able to navigate principalship with more ease than those who are perceived as being nurturing and caring (Reed, 2012; Tillman 2004). Black women who enter into the principalship or assistant principalship are met with a plethora of challenges that hinder their ability to effectively serve their students and school communities. Similar to Black girls, Black female school administrators are seen in need of less support and mentoring because of their independent demeanors (Epstein et al., 2017; Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Black female school administrators who are not passive and silent in their leadership roles are perceived to uphold the stereotypical images of Black women being loud, demanding, and angry (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Lack of mentoring, absence of ongoing professional development, and increased scrutiny from parents, teachers, and colleagues create a hostile work environment which

lends itself to isolation. When isolated, their leadership potential remains underdeveloped and opportunities to advance in more senior positions are greatly limited (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012).

The unique set of challenges for Black women in attempting to obtain a principalship or assistant principalship is a direct result of racism, sexism, and ageism (Jean-Marie, 2013; Tillman, 2004). Black women school leaders are questioned or approached by their colleagues concerning their love lives, their outfit choices, hair and makeup choices, and overall appearance (Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Racism, sexism, and the glass ceiling that is indirectly put in place for Black women in school leadership leads to trauma (Ashley, 2014; Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012). The perception of Black female school leaders being unladylike, untrainable, and unacceptable can result in depression, anxiety, and other health-related issues appearing in Black women (Ashley, 2014). Navigating the micro-political world of school leadership can become a matter of life or death, joy or pain, for some Black women school leaders.

Existing literature continues to highlight the spirit murdering of Black girls and women in education. Yet, very few studies, if any, have analyzed the parallels between their experiences. This study seeks to close that gap by bringing awareness to the trauma Black girls and women administrators face in schools and describing how these experiences are noticeability similar. Using autoethnography, I analyzed how the racism and trauma I encountered as a Black female student led me to become an educator. I explored how the denial of inclusion and scarcity of protection I encountered as a student and assistant principal remained a constant element following me along my educational

path. Lastly, I discussed the implications of this mirroring effect for Black girls and women.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race feminism (CRF) originated from critical race theory, feminist legal theory, and critical legal theory (Carter, 2012). CRF was created to serve as a "theoretical framework that combats racial and gender oppression from multiple standpoints" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 19). Rooted in Patricia Hill Collins's (2013) *Black Feminist Thought*, this framework examines how the "complexities of intersecting systems of power complicated everything in their [Black girls and women] lives – from…jobs they could get, to the dreams they are allowed to dream" (Collins, 2015, p. 2350). CRF, through the epistemological lens of Black Feminist Thought, explores the intersectionality of race, gender, and class for women of color through understanding how their multiple identities and consciousness shape their experiences (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1990; Wing, 2003).

CRF is comprised of four major tenets that capture the distinctiveness of women of color (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). First, CRF illuminates the experiences and perspectives of women of color separate from those of White women and men of color (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Second, CRF addresses the numerous forms of oppression women of color encounter due to the intersectionality of gender, race, and class (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Third, CRF acknowledges the multiple political identities of women of color and that these identities and experiences do not necessarily follow those of men of color and White women (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003).

Lastly, CRF demands the expansion of practices and theories that analyze and tackle racial and gender oppression (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003).

Education scholars have increasingly engaged CRF for its counter-storytelling purposes (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Utilizing counter-storytelling, CRF challenges the patriarchal and Eurocentric feminist systems that situate the experiences of Black girls and women in education with those of their White female and/or male counterparts. Schools are often portrayed as safe places for students and staff, but in reality, schools are often the sources of Whiteness, trauma, discrimination, and dehumanization (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Love, 2016; Matias et al., 2014).

The use of CRF within this study serves as a lens to study, analyze, and critique my own experiences in education, beginning from my time as a student to my tenure as an administrator. This study is intended to distinguish my experiences from those of my White female and/or male peers. It also attempts to explore how the intersectionality of my identity as a Black girl in gifted education shaped my leadership as a Black woman assistant principal.

Data and Methods

Research Design

This qualitative study employed autoethnography as its research design. Autoethnography, as a method, calls for researchers to write and reflect on aspects of self, while connecting the autobiographical and personal self to the cultural (Adams et al., 2015; Coia & Taylor, 2005; Ellis, 2004). It is an approach to systematically analyze and explore the dynamic relationship between power and dominant expressions within a

researcher's lived experiences (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2003; Neumann, 1996). Autoethnography's ability to challenge White, male, middle-class dominance and perspective commonly found in research methods allowed me to become an active participant in my research (Ellis et al., 2011).

Utilizing autoethnography, I navigated what it means to be Black and a woman in K-12 education. I sought to understand how my experiences as a Black girl in gifted education are similar to the experiences I had as a Black woman assistant principal. Through a series of critical self-reflections, I narrate the intricacies of being both a student and administrator. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: What unique challenges did I encounter as a Black girl attending school in the South?

Research Question 2: How does my identity as a Black woman administrator impact how I navigated through White spaces as an assistant principal of an urban school?

Data Collection

Data collection took place twice a week over a period of six weeks. Every Monday and Friday morning before and after work, I participated in self-reflective journaling for one hour each. Reflective journals allow researchers to be transparent with their thoughts, feelings, and experiences during the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Also, utilizing self-reflective journaling enabled me, as the primary instrument of data collection and unit of analysis, to incorporate my experiences as an essential part of the research design (Ortlipp, 2008).

During the designated times for reflective journaling, I identified three major events that occurred while I was a Black girl in school. The three major events occurred in sixth and eleventh grade and served as the focus of my analysis. I also identified three major events that occurred while I served as an assistant principal at Small Town Middle School (pseudonym). STMS had a student population comprised of approximately 35 percent Black, 35 percent Latinx, and 30 percent White. I was the only Black school administrator and six percent of the staff were teachers of color. Less than ten percent of students of color participated in the gifted program and Black students accounted for 85 percent of the school's out-of-school suspensions. My journal entries focused on the following: 1) my schooling experiences with White teachers as a Black girl in gifted education, and 2) my professional experiences with White staff as a Black female administrator. My journal entries served as an exploration of my experiences of what it means to be Black and female in K-12 education.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis methods outlined by Chang (2016). Chang (2016) calls for researchers to look for recurring topics, identify exceptional occurrences, examine inclusion and omission from various situations, and connect the present to the past. Topics of competition with White classmates and peers, mental and emotional stress, and defending myself emerged repeatedly while analyzing the data. These topics were coded and sorted into groups to examine and explore the connection between my experiences as a student and assistant principal. The codes developed were student-teacher dynamics, administrator-teacher dynamics, defense/exclusion from the norm, and stress/breaking down. I triangulated my narratives and codes with previously

written journal entries, personal school records, and emails. The oldest journal entry dates back nearly 20 years, while the newest entry was recorded as recently as fall of the 2020 academic school year. Personal records consisted of old report cards, teacher notes, and yearbooks with messages from teachers. During times of tension with staff, I printed emails to save for my personal records. These emails were also used for triangulation within this study.

Findings

For the findings, I selected the following journal entries and email to critically reflect upon because of their significance. Each entry served as a turning point in my perception of teachers and the support they provided to their students and colleagues, particularly Black girls and women. The entries demonstrate my struggle for acceptance, respect, and nurturing while in K-12 schools. The codes designed during data analysis led to two themes: you shouldn't outperform White students and navigating White spaces. These themes drew parallels between the competition, challenges, and distress I encountered while in schools. The following journal entries (see Appendix A) created a holistic view of my experience navigating the K-12 educational world as a Black girl and Black woman.

You Shouldn't Outperform White Students

> November 16, 1999
>
> I can't believe Ms. Logan (pseudonym) embarrassed me in front of the entire class just because I did better on the test than anyone else. Did she really call me a nigger or am I making that up in my head? I know I am the only Black kid in the class, but I don't get it. The test was easy so what did she want me to do? Did she

> want me to fail? If I tell my parents, that will only make things worse because they will come to the school and Ms. Logan will keep embarrassing me in class. I don't even feel like going to school tomorrow. Maybe I can just play sick. This ain't right. Ms. Logan really hurt my feelings.

At the age of eleven, this single event stripped away my innocence and changed the way I viewed schooling and teachers. I was in the sixth grade and my teacher, Ms. Logan, called me a racial slur because I outperformed all of my White classmates on a math benchmark. Instead of celebrating my excellence and brilliance, she intentionally chose to degrade me in front of my White classmates. Prior to this event, I believed teachers were in schools to inspire, encourage, and teach students to reach their full potential. Due to the power teachers possessed, I was taught to always respect them. I did not know how to respond to or respect a teacher who did not see me. Ms. Logan repeatedly treated me as though I were invisible and a nuisance to teach. Reflecting on this journal entry led me to focus on the racism Black girls encounter in school.

The notion of invisibility is a form of gendered racism Black women and girls experience daily (Anderson, 2020; Collins, 2013; hooks, 1989; Lewis et al., 2016). Franklin (1999) defined invisibility as "an inner struggle with feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or recognized" (p. 761). As a gifted Black girl attending school in the South, my academic achievements were often ignored and I felt silenced and marginalized in the classroom. When I performed well on assessments, Ms. Logan would question my intelligence and assume I cheated. When I did not try on assessments and performed at a subpar level, she ignored me and did not inquire about why I did not perform as well. Initially I believed that becoming an overachiever would

gather respect for me amongst teachers, but I quickly learned that my intelligence could not override their racism.

February 23, 2005

> I cannot believe that during Black History Month, Mr. James (pseudonym) really thinks I am going to pick cotton as a way to show me what slaves went through. What is really good? He must have me all the way confused. And then to think he really called the assistant principal on me because I told him I ain't picking cotton. I know you supposed to respect teachers and all, but this dude took it too far. Not only was I going to debate him about it in class, but I'm goin' make sure that no one else Black in my class or in any of his other classes pick cotton. Like I can't believe dude really thought this was a good idea. I mean I know he don't talk to the Black students at all, but he ain't that stupid, I don't think. Like I am so heated right now. If I were a teacher or a principal, I would never ask students to do this or think it was a good idea. Yo, like who really thought it was a good idea for this dude to become a teacher?

My sixth grade experience taught me how to advocate for myself in White educational spaces. I no longer accepted the idea that all teachers had my best interest in mind and I made sure to communicate this to Mr. James during his eleventh grade Honors History course. Enraged, frustrated, and consumed with fire, I spent thirty minutes debating with Mr. James on why I refused to participate in his class activity and how he should have conducted research before introducing this lesson to any student, especially Black students. Appearing to become redder and more visibly upset with every word that came out of my mouth, Mr. James called the front office to have someone

remove me from class. Mr. James dismissed my feelings towards the activity and rarely engaged with me anymore after this event. Again, I became a nuisance and invisible to the teacher.

Hayes et al. (2016) linked Black girls' invisibility to the hidden curriculum and policies upheld in schools. Black girls who fail to meet the standards of passive White femininity in schools are met with heavy surveillance and criticism (Annamma et al., 2016; Haynes et al., 2016; Wun, 2016). The perception of Black girls resisting traditional schooling measures by being "loud" or "combative" is a gendered racial microaggression that poses academic barriers (Anderson, 2020; Lewis et al., 2016; Young et al., 2018). Teachers' low expectations, coupled with their microaggressions, result in fewer academic advancements for Black girls in education, particularly gifted education (Evans-Winters, 2014; Ford, 2013).

The internal battle with perfectionism, combined with external racist and stereotypical messages, creates hostile environments for gifted Black girls (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Ford, 2013; Lewis et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2011). The desire to feel worthy and accepted while being met with opposition and lack of support leads to gifted Black girls becoming resilient in an unjust environment (Evans-Winters, 2014). This resiliency and need to fight for liberation in schools can lead to high levels of stress (Evans-Winters, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017). During my eleventh grade year, there were periods of time I did not eat because I did not have an appetite due to the stress I encountered at school. I worked on assignments for four to five hours after school to ensure they were perfect. I did not want teachers, particularly Mr. James, arguing with me over subjective components of assignments. I fully understood I had to work twice as

hard to be considered equal to my White classmates. These stress levels and battle with perfectionism remained as I became a school administrator.

Navigating White Spaces

> Mrs. Davis,
>
> I did not like the way you handled the situation today with Tamika (pseudonym). She should not have returned to my class after I asked you to remove her. I know you want us to work on diversity and how we talk to students, but she will not get a pass because she is Black when she acts rude in my class. And you will not get a pass for being the diversity hire.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> B.T.

I received this email within the first month of my new position as an assistant principal. Mrs. B.T. was a veteran teacher who worked at Small Town Middle School (pseudonym, STMS) for over 20 years. She believed herself to be a staple in the school community and had a reputation for going against administration to create chaos. Upset that a young, Black woman was chosen as assistant principal over her preferred candidate, Mrs. B.T. found it necessary to create a hostile, racist environment for me and other Black faculty and students.

At STMS, students of color accounted for the majority of the student population yet, racism and White ideologies concerning schooling were present. Black students were perceived to be inferior to their White peers and Black girls, were labeled as “ghetto,” “combative,” and “loud.” As the only Black administrator, I was told upon my hiring that I was selected because the community could relate to me. I was informed that the

community consisted of primarily Black single mothers and church leaders the school desired as mentors. Assumptions were made about my identity and I told district and school leaders that I was not a mother. Later on, I realized I was hired to work with those whom the staff had stereotyped as the “difficult Black mamas” and “difficult Black students.”

Jean-Marie’s (2013) work on the lived experiences of Black female principals discussed the triple jeopardy of her participants dealing with sexism, racism, and ageism. In addition, they also experienced teachers, parents, and stakeholders questioning their leadership experience and labeling them as incapable of running a school. Similarly, Reed and Evans (2008) noted Black women school leaders experienced “complex and intersecting racialized and gendered role expectations above and beyond those expected of other administrators” (p. 488). As a new assistant principal, learning the details and nuances of what my role entailed while also desiring to bring about social justice in an unjust atmosphere became extremely stressful and difficult to manage. Choosing to engage in addressing the gendered racism I experienced and overall White supremacy present in the school, I was viewed as “hostile” and “angry” by some of the staff. They looked for me when they created uncomfortable situations for Black students and had to address these matters with parents, but did not seek my advice or knowledge outside of this arena.

Seeking support and mentorship during my tenure at STMS, I turned to my principal (a White woman) and Black women leaders in the district. Research studies indicate that Black women school administrators lack mentorship and support during their tenure as leaders and turn to each other for collective support (Burton et al., 2020;

Jean-Marie, 2013). My principal was empathetic and listened to my frustrations about disrespect and mistreatment from teachers towards myself and students, but lacked the ability to bring about sustainable change in the school regarding these concerns. Turning to my support group of Black women leaders for encouragement and inspiration, we found it necessary to capture our lived experiences leading schools on paper to share with the school superintendent. We sought safe spaces where we could lead without microaggressions, disrespect, and distrust. We did not make it to the superintendent. Three out of the five Black women administrators left due to stress, burnout, and seeking new opportunities outside of education. I was once again left in a state of stress where I needed to defend myself without support.

> March 31, 2017
>
> I am so tired and I feel like my body is breaking down on me. I try to get support but my principal doesn't know what to do to support me and Kia (pseudonym) and Faith (pseudonym) left me. Every time I find a Black AP (assistant principal) I can talk to they are just as stressed and over this as I am and leave. None of us feel supported by the district and I am tired of being people's scapegoat. Something has to give. My doctor has told me more than once that my job is killing me. I love the kids but I can't take this other mess much longer.

In January 2018, the Code Switch Podcast released an episode entitled *This Racism Is Killing Me Inside* (Demby, 2018). The episode passionately discussed the impact of microaggressions and racism in the workplace has on Black women's health. Within the interview, Arline Geronimus coined the term "weathering" to describe the erosion of the body due to stress. Burton et al. (2020) and Lewis et al. (2013) noted that

although some Black women learn to cope with microaggressions and diminishments of their abilities in order to survive, it is not met without a cost. “These women bore these costs in their personal lives, their physical and emotional health, and for some, their leadership positions” (Burton et al., 2020, p. 9).

Researchers have found the repercussions of stress and perceived racism on Black women to be tremendous. Black women suffer from higher rates of asthma, have higher infant mortality rates, experience higher rates of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension, and have higher levels of emotional distress than their White counterparts (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In addition, stress and perceived racism has contributed to mental health disorders among African American women (American Psychological Association, 2012; Mezuk et al., 2010). During my three years at STMS, I had a miscarriage, was hospitalized twice for various ailments related to stress, developed blood clots in my lungs, and I was told several times by medical professionals I needed to reconsider my career path. I became an educator because I did not want Black students, especially Black girls, to deal with the racism I experienced as a student. I now had to temporarily leave education because that same racism was killing me inside.

Discussion

This study looked to share the unique challenges I experienced as a Black girl and woman in K-12 schools and examined how my identity impacted my experience as an assistant principal. I also highlighted the tolls associated with surviving and thriving in K-12 schools as a Black girl and woman. Findings revealed that Black girls and women face numerous forms of oppression as a result of the trauma, discrimination, and dehumanization present in schools (Carter, 2012; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Love,

2016). Longing for support and mentorship in order to survive, Black women and girls learn to encourage and inspire one another in environments that do not seek to nurture them (Burton et al., 2020; Epstein et al, 2017; Jean-Marie, 2013).

Bent But Not Broken

My emotional rollercoaster of seeking acceptance, feeling isolated, and learning self-advocacy for survival led me to become an educator. I pleaded with teachers to see me as a gifted Black girl and accept my brilliance, yet they ignored my presence and discounted my abilities. As an administrator, my presence and abilities remained unseen and untapped as some teachers and parents disregarded and questioned my authority. I coped with gendered racism while navigating both spaces by affirming my identity.

My experiences in sixth and eleventh grade instilled a strong sense of cultural pride within me as I was determined to show my White teachers I was capable of succeeding academically. My perceived independence, as demonstrated through my academic performance, and outspokenness caused teachers to view me as an adult (Epstein et al., 2017). Although I did not face out-of-school suspension during my time as a student in K-12 schools, the perception that I did not deserve nurturing and the same treatment as my White peers lingered. My removal from the classroom in eleventh grade occurred because I was seen as a threat. My teachers' beliefs in Whiteness as a promotion of racial dominance (Leonardo, 2002) were displayed each time my actions and advocacy challenged their privilege. Their decisions to humiliate or dehumanize me in front of my peers caused me great pain, but also strengthened my identity as a Black girl.

Entering into a school as an assistant principal, I was secure in my identity as a Black woman seeking to implement social justice practices and policies in school. I

sought to provide mentorship to Black girls because I did not receive it as a student in K-12 schools. Through informal meetings in the hallways and lunchroom and more formal meetings through after school activities, I provided guidance to Black girls on their academics, life goals, familial relationships, etc. My mentoring and stance on school discipline practices and policies caught the attention of teachers. Understanding that Whiteness is maintained in education through school discipline and other factors (Lewis & Manno, 2011), my efforts to eliminate racist disciplining practices were met with defiance and disagreements. Teachers sought my advice when Black parents demanded to conference with them due to uncomfortable and hostile classroom environments, but disregarded my authority outside of these situations. I was met with disdain by teachers and accused of trying to save Black students, particularly Black girls.

The accusations of having a savior mentality led me to examine my practices and reflect on if they contributed to Whiteness in the school. As I deconstructed my beliefs and actions, my identity as a Black woman desiring to bring about change slowly started to bend, but not break. I reflected on my actions to provide freedom and justice to Black students daily and how these actions impacted them and the school environment. As a novice assistant principal with very little mentorship, the school environment became difficult to manage and my stress skyrocketed, causing me to question my purpose and identity.

Mentorship as Survival

I intentionally sought mentorship during my tenure as assistant principal at STMS because I was new to the profession. Discovering a support and/or motivational group is commonplace among Black women and girls in schools (Burton et al., 2020). Feeling that

I was called to be a school leader, I embraced the opportunity to bring about change and provide Black students with access to educational ventures they did not have access to (Burton et al., 2020). I sought to bring about the change in the form of mentorship and eliminating harmful discipline practices. In addition, while pushing for change and hope in schools, I realized that I would have to combat the racism that remained. White supremacist ideologies were present at STMS although the student population was made up of predominately students of color. Understanding the importance of mentorship, I sought the guidance of veteran principals to help me with my role as a novice assistant principal. I needed their support to survive in my role and in my school.

As a Black girl in school, I believed that having a mentor within the school building would have provided protection and strength in my efforts to do well academically and survive school. I looked for Black female teachers to serve as my mentor but few were hired within my district. During high school, I can only recall having two Black female teachers. One of the teachers resigned after her first year at the high school. Not wanting to repeat the past, I found mentorship and support amongst a small group of Black women leaders.

During our meetings, we found similarities in our experiences as Black female leaders. Through our discussions, we learned that we were experiencing racial battle fatigue. Williams (2004) defined racial battle fatigue as:

> A response to the distressing mental/emotional conditions that result from facing racism daily (e.g., racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, including contentious classrooms, and potential threats or dangers under tough to violent and even life-threatening conditions). (p. 180)

The daily stress of being seen as unworthy to lead was a common stance discussed at every meeting, yet we continued to inspire and encourage each other. We affirmed each other’s identity and provided strategies on how to combat the racial battle fatigue we encountered. During my third year as an assistant principal, our discussions led to us create an action plan on how to support our leadership needs. The mentoring/support group demanded the district to create safe spaces where we could lead without distrust, microaggressions, and the overarching structure of Whiteness. Before we were scheduled to meet with the superintendent at the end of the school year, three out of the five Black women administrators chose to protect their mental and physical health by leaving education. Due to the toxic school environment and racial battle fatigue, I followed suit and chose to protect my mental health, physical health, and overall happiness by resigning.

Implications

The findings from this study offer implications for supporting the needs of Black girls and women in K-12 schools. First, create spaces for Black girls and Black women to participate in conversations regarding their experiences. For me as a Black female student, these spaces would have allowed me the opportunity to safely discuss the racism I experienced from teachers. The discussions held in safe spaces would have empowered me to provide strategies to school and district leaders on how to bring about structural and sustainable policy changes that seek to support and nurture Black girls in schools. As a Black assistant principal, these spaces would have been sources of mentorship and support. Similar to my experience as a Black girl, as a Black assistant principal, these

spaces would have provided me with a seat at the table to implement actions to combat racism within schools.

The willingness of those of in positions of power to listen to, address, and provide sustainable solutions to the challenges I encountered as a Black student and assistant principal would have increased my faith in the schooling system and encouraged me to stay in education. Executing the same level of boldness used to dehumanize me in front of peers to openly reflect upon, deconstruct, and dismantle the racism present in schools would have caused other educators to see me as a person. Being seen as a person capable of learning and leading others would have increased my desire to sharpen my leadership skills and remain at the school. It is important for those who witness the racism Black girls and women encounter in schools to address it with their peers. “The burden of addressing gendered racism must shift from those who experience it to those who witness it and by their silence allow it to continue and negatively harm their colleagues” (Burton et al., 2020, p. 10).

In the future, this study could be expanded to explore the ways gendered racism affects physical, mental, and emotional health of Black girls who become school leaders. Applying a mixed methods design would incorporate the stories of the participants while also using quantitative tools to measure the ways gendered racism impacts their overall psychological well-being. Educators could use this data to foster healthy and safe learning environments for Black girls and women. In addition, the research can expand to include girls and women from other marginalized groups.

Conclusion

This purpose of this study was to explore how my experience as a gifted Black girl impacted my experience as a Black woman assistant principal. Using autoethnography, I reflected upon experiences as a Black female student in the South. I also analyzed how my identity as a Black female assistant principal impacted how I navigated through White spaces in an urban school. Findings revealed that racism and trauma were prevalent forces as I moved from student to assistant principal. My worth and humanity were debated at every stage, yet I remained hopeful in my desire to bring about racial justice in schools. I sought mentorship to survive the oppression I encountered, but ultimately left my school because the racism and stress became too much to bare. It is my hope that through this autoethnography, the parallel lived experiences of Black girls and women in schools becomes a widely researched topic. Future research will help to ensure that the needs of Black girls and women in K-12 schools never go unmet and support systems are put in place that promotes space for their souls to heal and bloom.

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APPENDIX A

Journal Entries

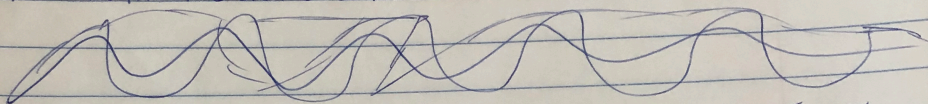
November 16, 1999

I cannot believe
Ms. [redacted] embarrassed me in
front of ~~the~~ entire class just because
I did better on the test than anyone else. Did
she really call me a nigger or am I making that
up in my head? I know i'am the only black kid
in the class, but I don't get. The test was easy so
what did she want me to do? Did she want me to fail?
If I tell my parents, that will only make things worse
because they will come to the school and Ms. [redacted] will
keep embarassing me in class. I don't feel like going
to school tomorrow. Maybe I can just play sick. This
aint right. Ms. [redacted] really hurt my feelings.

TODAY'S MOOD: KNUCK IF YOU BUCK

2/23/05

I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT DURING BLACK HISTORY MONTH, MR. [redacted] REALLY THINK I AM GOING TO PICK COTTON AS A WAY TO SHOW ME WHAT SLAVES WENT THROUGH. WHAT IS REALLY GOOD? HE MUST HAVE ME ALL THE WAY CONFUSED. AND THEN TO THINK HE REALLY CALLED THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL ON ME BECAUSE I TOLD HIM I AIN'T PICKING COTTON.



I KNOW YOU SUPPOSED TO RESPECT TEACHERS AND ALL, BUT THIS DUDE TOOK IT TOO FAR. NOT ONLY WAS I GOING TO DEBATE HIM ABOUT IT IN CLASS, BUT I'M GOIN MAKE SURE THAT NO ONE ELSE BLACK IN MY CLASS OR IN ANY OF HIS OTHER CLASSES PICK COTTON. LIKE I CAN'T BELIEVE DUDE REALLY THOUGHT THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA. I MEAN I KNOW HE DON'T TALK TO THE BLACK STUDENTS AT ALL, BUT HE AIN'T THAT STUPID, I DON'T THINK. LIKE I AM SO HEATED RIGHT NOW. IF I WERE A TEACHER OR PRINCIPAL, I WOULD NEVER ASK STUDENTS TO DO THIS OR THINK IT WAS A GOOD IDEA. YO, LIKE WHO REALLY THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA FOR THIS DUDE TO BECOME A TEACHER?

March 31, 2017

Today's Mood: Emotional Rollercoaster

I am so tired and I feel like my body is breaking down on me. I try to get support but my principal doesn't know what to do to support me and [redacted] and [redacted] left me. Every time I find a Black AP I can talk to they are just as stressed and over this as I am and leave. None of us feel supported by the district and I am tired of being people's scapegoat. Something has to give. My doctor has told me more than once that my job is killing me. I love the kids but I can't take this other mess much longer.

CHAPTER 3: I USED TO KNOW HER: A CASE STUDY ON BLACK GIRLS, ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT, AND SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

> *You know I could have been a pharmacist, counselor, or something right. That OSS thing really messed me up.* (Dawn)

It was not too long ago that Black girls were left out of school discipline research with the primary focus placed on Black boys (Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017). In recent years this has changed. There is now an increasing interest in Black girl research, particularly as it relates to their schooling experiences.

Some suggest that the lack of awareness of the challenges Black girls face in school only works to perpetuate adultification and policing of their Black bodies (Epstein et al., 2017). The presence of Whiteness, defined as a social construct designed to classify and divide according to race (Leonardo, 2002), in schools also work to perpetuate the adultification and policing of Black girls in schools. Teachers, regardless of race, can uphold White supremacist schools through their harmful beliefs and actions that maintain White dominance (Matias et al., 2014). Teachers' preconceived notions that Black girls are loud and less feminine influence how they interact with them (Morris, 2007). The stereotypical images of Black girls and women have historically influenced the ways teachers respond to them (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Morris, 2007). The stigma of aggressiveness, hostility, and hypersexuality influences how teachers see and interact with Black girls. Research suggests that they are viewed as needing less support and nurturing. It is this false assumption that has led to the increased use of exclusionary

discipline towards Black girls (Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2007; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015).

Black girls are nearly three times more likely than White girls to be suspended for instances of disobedience and disruptive behavior (Epstein et al., 2017). They are also more prone to miss instructional time and fall into a cycle of "academic failure, disengagement" because of their involuntary removal from the classroom (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). For this reason, Black girls tend to fall behind in their schoolwork and distance themselves socially.

In 2016, Amy, an 8-year old Black girl, was suspended from school for talking back to the teacher and constantly disrupting the learning environment. She was suspended from elementary school for three days and did not receive any assignments to work on while serving her suspension. Prior to entering the third grade, Amy was seen as a pleasant student who listened to the teacher and worked hard on all her assignments. She enjoyed coming to school and learning. After the suspension, she was mildly interested in school, did not put much effort into her schoolwork, and her grades began to slip. Amy is my younger cousin.

In 2019, a 6-year old Black girl was arrested on a battery charge and sent to a juvenile detention center for throwing a tantrum at school (Krietz, 2019). The 6-year old was tired from the previous night and when sent to the office, kicked an adult who tried to calm her down (Krietz, 2019). She was handcuffed and escorted to a nearby detention center for processing.

The lived experiences of Amy and this unnamed 6-year old Black girl are among the increasing stories of Black girls being penalized and criminalized under severely

punitive school discipline policies. Schools, originally designed as centers of learning, now serve as the first place Black girls are exposed to discrimination and prejudicial policies (Anyon et al., 2017; Watson, 2016). For many Black girls, schools serve as traumatic venues where they cannot express their authentic selves without fear of punishment (Andrews et al., 2019). Crenshaw et al. (2015) declared that, "research and policy frameworks must move beyond the notion that all of the youth of color who are in crisis are boys, and that the concerns of white girls are indistinguishable from those of girls of color" (p. 11).

The purpose of this single case study was to share the story of one Black girl whose self-concept and academic opportunities changed after receiving an out-of-school suspension (OSS). While literature on Black girls and school discipline has increased, a large portion of the existing research still relies heavily on quantitative data. More studies that give voice to Black girls' stories are needed. This chapter attempts to fill that gap.

To begin, this chapter provides an overview of the literature on Black girls, school discipline, and academic achievement. Next, I discuss Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and how this framework guides this study. Last, I use a data analysis process for critical feminist narrative inquiry to critically analyze the participant's OSS experience and perceived academic outcomes.

Literature Review

Black Girls and School Discipline

Research reveals that Black girls are overrepresented in school discipline data (Annamma et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Epstein et al., 2017). Racist depictions of Black women have created harmful experiences for Black girls and placed them at a

higher risk of exposure to zero tolerance discipline policies (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017). Black girls are seen as less feminine and less innocent than their same-gendered peers (Epstein et al., 2017). For this reason, Black girls are often targeted for disciplinary action for subjective reasons, such as defiance, talking back, disobedience, and dress code violations (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017). In the worst of cases, some have even been suspended for common everyday acts such as laughing, being “too” happy, talking, and sending text messages (Green et al., 2020).

Racial and gender stereotypes inform educators’ perceptions of Black girls, thereby reducing their potential for success and increasing their potential for school suspensions (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Teachers’ beliefs of the proper way to exercise femininity led to increased rates of school suspensions as Black girls are labeled as disruptive, unladylike, aggressive, or angry (Blake et al., 2015; Morris, 2007; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Black girls displaying signs of being aggressive or disruptive are often misread by educators (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Monroe, 2006). Black girls’ desire to speak up in class and exercise their independence is seen as a threat and so many remain silent for fear of being punished (Collins, 1996; Ford, 2013; Morris, 2007; Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

The increased suspension rates and criminalization of Black girls is one form of spirit murdering (Love, 2016; Hines & Wilmot, 2018). The pervasive racial humiliation Black girls encounter in classrooms causes them to doubt their intelligence, their happiness, and their very being. It also simultaneously destroys their Black spirit (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Hines & Wilmot, 2018).

Black Girls and Academic Achievement

Gender achievement gaps and outcomes have been topics explored by researchers for years. Girls traditionally perform exceptionally well in reading and writing in schools (Flore & Witcherts, 2015; Reardon et al., 2018; Stoet & Geary, 2015), but this is usually contingent upon their ability to conform to gender norms (Baker & Milligan, 2013). The perception of women as homemakers, passive, and fluent in languages contributes to girls as young as three, shaping their beliefs about their academic ability and performance (Flore & Witcherts, 2015; Reardon et al., 2018; Tomasetto et al., 2011). Girls often experience stereotype threat, the fear of confirming a particular stereotype that has been ascribed to one's larger group in areas such as math and science (Flore & Witcherts, 2014). Girls who succeed in math and science may feel as though they do not uphold the traditional gender norm of what it means to be feminine (Reardon et al., 2018).

Research on the academic achievement of Black girls differs from that of the studies previously listed. An abundance of scholarly literature exists on the achievement of Black students (Darensbourg & Blake, 2014; Gordon, 2016; Reardon, 2016). However, specific literature on the academic achievement of Black girls is difficult to locate (Young, 2019). Research on the academic performance of Black girls is presented through a between-group and within-group lens. When compared to Black boys, research shows Black girls outperform them in every academic area (Friend et al., 2011; Young, 2019). In comparison to their White female peers, research shows Black girls are underperforming in most academic areas (Robinson-Cimpian et al., 2014; Young, 2019).

The socialization of Black female achievement impacts academic outcomes for Black girls (Young, 2019). Traditionally, girls are taught to be less assertive in schools

and socialized to be seen, but not heard (Blake et al., 2015; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Young, 2019). Black girls are assertive learners in school and defy traditional notions of middle-class femininity (Evans-Winters, 2014; Ford, 2013). Black girls are socialized to be outspoken, independent, and strong-willed within their communities and this can lead to academic tensions in schools (Evans-Winters, 2014; Ford, 2013), the most common response to this being increased risk of suspension or expulsion. Over time, Black girls who are mocked for their independence and strength may develop a low academic self-concept (Evans et al., 2011). Few, if any, studies have linked academic self-concept with disciplinary experiences.

Gifted Black Girls

The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that the majority of Black girls graduate from high school and later attend colleges and universities. Black women attend college at higher rates than their Black male peers but yet are perceived as a threat or competition in their careers from those who have benefitted from privilege and gendered racism in education (Evans-Winters, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In spite of their challenges, Black women continue to persist and graduate from post-secondary education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Research advocates for the admittance of Black girls in gifted education programs due to the overall academic success of Black women and girls in education (Evans-Winters, 2016). This is an understated area in education research.

Historically, Black girls have been underrepresented and overlooked in gifted education programs (Ford et al., 2018). Ford (2013) reported Black students have always been underrepresented in gifted education programs by almost 50 percent. Educators

remain ill-informed on the experiences of gifted Black students, particularly Black girls, and how to support their needs (Evans-Winters, 2016). Gifted education literature on gender differences acknowledges the inconsistencies between vocational outcomes and achievements of gifted females and males, but omits the differences within gender groups such as gifted White females and gifted Black females (Ford et al, 2018). The prominent issues for Black girls in gifted education programs have not emerged in the field. Gifted education programs for Black girls are still ignored as sources of academic success and economic prosperity (Evans-Winters, 2016).

Black girls who are identified as gifted experience a myriad of challenges and successes while in school. Eager to rebel against systems that denied them access, gifted Black girls take on a mentality of resistance and liberation as they use their intellect and talents to work towards social change (Evans-Winters, 2014). As a result, gifted Black girls may feel the pressure to be perfect and always succeed academically (Anderson & Martin, 2018). However, pressure can lead to the fear of failure which may evolve into emotional distress (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Mayes & Hines, 2014). Few, if any, studies have linked academic self-concept with disciplinary experiences for gifted black girls. Thus, the purpose of this study was to show how they may be intertwined.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the prominence of race, class, and gender in the disciplining of Black girls, the social construction of Black female identity is needed to challenge and deconstruct societal norms and habits. As such, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) was used to understand how Black girls are disciplined and what this does to their academic self-concept.

CRF is an extension of critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought that highlights the voices and experiences of women of color separate from those of White women and men of color (Wing, 2003). Patricia Hill Collins's text, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), "suggested that the lived experiences of Black womanhood were essential to the creation of knowledge" (as cited in Carter, 2012, p. 7). Using Black Feminist Thought as an epistemological lens, this study sought to understand and explore the unique experiences of one Black girl using the method of storytelling and counter-storytelling to illustrate the ways patriarchal and White feminist systems have negatively impacted their schooling experiences.

CRF is comprised of four tenets that captures the essence of what it means to be a woman of color (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). First, CRF highlights how the experiences and perspectives of women of color are uniquely different from those of White women and men of color (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Second, CRF discusses the distinctive ways women of color experience oppression due to the intersectionality of gender, race, and class (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Third, CRF recognizes the numerous political identities of women of color and how these identities do not necessarily align with those of men of color and White women (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Lastly, CRF demands a growth in practices and theories that will call out racial and gender oppression (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003).

The use of CRF is particularly valuable to education when examining discipline and educational issues impacting Black girls. Black girls' nonconformity to White female

norms leads to harsher forms of discipline and more significant achievement gaps than their White counterparts (Crenshaw et al., 2015). CRF, as it is applied within this study, addresses how the disciplining of one Black girl altered how she saw herself academically. The following research question guided this study:

Research Question 1: How does a Black girl, who recently graduated from high school, perceive her academic opportunities after encountering a suspension in school?

Data and Methods

Research Design

Single case study was used as the research design for this study. Qualitative case studies provide in-depth descriptions of real-life events in a bounded system (case) (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2014). The use of a single case study allows the researcher to focus on an issue and select a case to describe the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This research design enables the study to focus on the connections between academic self-concept and school discipline for a Black high school graduate. Although the sample size is a single participant, the participant's experience with out-of-school suspension while labelled as gifted is a powerful phenomenon not often studied.

The participant selection criteria for this study included the following: Black, female, age 18 or older, recent high school graduate, and experienced OSS during high school tenure. The participant criterion was essential to the study as I sought to capture the voice and experience of a Black female. By the participant being a recent high school graduate, she was able to speak to how her suspension shaped her academic self-concept

as well as her academic opportunities post-suspension. In addition, it was critical to this study that the participant experienced OSS at some point while enrolled in high school. Students who experience exclusionary discipline outcomes in high school are more likely to be retained or drop out of school (Marchbanks et al., 2015). I sought to understand the potential effects of her suspension. Knowing whether the suspension impacted her post-school plans was of particular interest.

The participant for this study was selected using convenience sampling. Selecting Dawn (assigned pseudonym) to participate in this study was purposeful as well as convenient. Due to my prior relationship with Dawn and her family, when asked to participate in this study, the participant gave her immediate consent. I have known Dawn for seven years, as we are both members of the same church. Dawn and her family often discussed their frustrations with the school system with me because of my role as an educator after our church services. When Dawn received an OSS while in high school, she immediately came to me to discuss the situation and find solutions on how to best handle the suspension. She also inquired about how her suspension would impact her plans to attend college. From these conversations it was clear that Dawn would be an ideal participant for this study.

Dawn was invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews allowed for the flexibility to learn and respond to Dawn as she shared her story. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the participant. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded. An interview protocol (see Appendix B) was used and included the following categories: receiving out-of-school suspension, academic self-concept, and post-school outcomes.

Dawn

Dawn is a 21 year old Black female. I met Dawn when she was 16. When first meeting Dawn, she appears timid and shy, but her personality shines through once she trusts you. Her stylish glasses, gigantic smile, and big hoop earrings immediately draw people to her and leave them wanting to discover the key to her happiness.

Dawn's middle and high schools can be described as urban emergent (Milner, 2012). Dawn stated that middle school was very diverse as students from various cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status applied to enroll. Dawn recalled that students were encouraged to speak in their native languages throughout the school day and this provided a friendly and welcoming environment to learn in. According to Dawn, her high school was overcrowded, had a shortage of teachers as shown by the numbers of substitutes present daily, and lacked proper supplies and resources to educate. Although the student population and school leadership team were comprised of primarily Black students and staff, the IB classrooms she learned in were predominately White.

While in middle and high school, Dawn participated in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Throughout middle school and her first two years of high school, she was an A/B student. Her dreams of becoming a pharmacist seemed like they would soon become a reality as she excelled in science and writing. During her junior year, Dawn became seriously ill and missed a month of school. Although she stayed in constant communication with her teachers and counselor, she fell behind in her studies. When she returned to school and met with her counselors and teachers, Dawn believed they did not provide any plan or assistance in how she could receive resources for the assignments she missed as well as make them up. In addition, shortly after her return,

Dawn's younger sister got into a fight with another student at the school. Believing she needed to protect her younger sister, Dawn was implicated in the fight and was subsequently suspended. Her experiences before and following her suspension is the focus of this study.

Data Collection

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for protection and comfortability, the interview was conducted at our church where we could safely distance ourselves. Our Pastor graciously allowed us conduct the interview at the church as he knew this was a sacred space for us. I collected data during the interview process. Field notes were recorded in my journal to capture the body language and utterances of Dawn as well as the sequence of events that led to her suspension. In addition, the participant provided documentation of her office discipline referral for data collection purposes. Field notes were recorded in NVivo and reviewed during the coding process. The interview lasted approximately an hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Since the present study is rooted in CRF, I used Pitre et al.'s (2013) data analysis process for critical feminist narrative inquiry. Pitre et al.'s (2013) critical feminist narrative inquiry is used to "situate narrated individual experiences within research participants' personal history and relationship" (p. 120). Pitre et al.'s approach in data analysis calls for multiple readings of stories and data to clearly identity the multiple points of view associated with the participant's personal history and experiences while examining the social dynamics occurring. The transcript was read three times, as a form of member checking, to establish storylines, codes, and themes. During the first read, I

identified commonalities the participant discussed throughout her interviews. I gave particular attention towards her feelings about her suspension experience. During the second read, I established a chronological sequence of events that led to the participant's suspension from school (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). I also gave particular attention in the data analysis process to the developing tension between the participants and school officials. Lastly, during the third read, critical reflection occurred as I sought to collaborate with Dawn (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). She read through my notes to ensure that I captured her experience accordingly without imposing assumptions (Hickson, 2016; Pitre et al., 2013). While reading through my notes, she became overwhelmed with her story outlined on paper. A little more than halfway through the notes, Dawn decided to stop reading them to protect her mental health.

Following the sequence of reading, I created codes that captured the participant's stories, emotions, and overall experience with her suspension and future endeavors. Once the initial codes were developed, a peer reviewer read the transcript and created a set of codes aligned with the research question shared. The peer reviewer was my former colleague who also was a doctoral student. The peer reviewer and I compared our codes to ensure we did not impose particular meanings or assumptions on the participant's OSS experience.

The codes developed centered around Dawn's excitement for learning, the hope the IB program brought her, family dynamics, family background, discouragement, and estrangement. Next, Dawn reviewed the initial themes created. She agreed to participate in this process. Collaboration with Dawn was crucial as I wanted to ensure she had the opportunity to negotiate and renegotiate the stories and themes presented in the study

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). After placing the codes into categories, Dawn and I co-constructed the themes in this study to tell her story.

Findings

Giggling out of excitement to temporarily leave her house during the pandemic and nervousness to share her story, Dawn and I met in our church's parking lot for the interview. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we did not feel comfortable meeting in a public indoor space and we both agreed that our church was a safe and sacred space to conduct this interview. The interview lasted approximately an hour and Dawn, filled with uncertainty and joy, began to share moments of her K-12 journey that still impact her today. Throughout the data analysis process, three distinct themes were co-constructed with Dawn: hope for the future, lack of motivation, and revival.

Hope for the Future

Dawn has always had a strong sense of wanting to succeed in life and help others. She is the second to the youngest of nine girls in her family. Out of the nine daughters in the family, three have graduated high school (including Dawn), and one has graduated with a Bachelor's degree. Dawn's parents did not graduate from high school and she had a strong desire to make them proud, as well as her sisters, by graduating and going to college. Dawn realized in elementary school that she had to do something different to make her dreams come true.

In elementary school, Dawn performed well in her classes and made the A/B honor roll. When it was time to go to middle school, she told her mother that she did not want to go to her assigned school and she wanted to try something different. In fifth grade, the principal from a local IB middle school visited Dawn's class and did a

presentation on what it would be like to attend her school. Mesmerized with ideas of fun and engaging class projects, school field trips, and the opportunity to work with myriad diverse people, Dawn begged her mother to apply for the lottery at the school. Dawn was accepted into the IB school and was eager for the school year to begin. She recalled:

> In sixth grade, I was in the IB program. I liked it. It was dope. It was a lot of work and you had to write a five page summary about everything, but I felt like it was a purpose for it. I didn't want to be standard. I didn't want that for myself so I wanted to push myself in the program.

The transition to middle school can be a stressful time for students (Akos et al., 2015). A study by Coelho et al. (2017) reported that students experience decreased levels of academic and emotional self-concept during their transition to middle school, but Dawn overcame the struggles of navigating the transition. She continued to be on the A and A/B Honor Roll throughout her middle school tenure. She was thrilled about continuing the IB program in high school and graduating with an IB diploma at the end of her K-12 journey. Dawn noted:

> I was in the IB program from sixth grade to eleventh grade. I feel like that kind of molded me to, you know, work harder, you know, think more and do more work. I felt like I was a female Albert Einstein. I was the smartest girl in the world.

While in the high school IB program, Dawn continued to remain on the A and A/B honor roll through tenth grade. Intrinsic motivation remained a major contributing factor to Dawn's academic success from sixth to tenth grade as she had a strong desire to make her family proud. She stated:

> I mean, my academic goals was to, I really wanted to graduate with my IB diploma. For my career goals, I wanted to be a pharmacist or do study something with medicine. Um yeah, that's about it. That was the only thing I was thinking about in high school. Being under medicine and get my IB diploma.

Although Dawn continued to do well in high school, a shift in the atmosphere took place. Dawn had always been a shy, quiet student, but in high school this led to her becoming invisible in the classroom. She shared how teachers paid less attention to her academic and overall health needs and simply assigned classwork to fulfill the requirements of the program. The encouragement from teachers and staff she once received in elementary and middle school slipped away and she was left encouraging and motivating herself throughout her high school journey.

Lack of Motivation

Eleventh grade served as a crucial turning point in Dawn's academics and overall K-12 journey. A stint of sickness, coupled with a school fight, changed her academic trajectory and career goals after graduation. Prior to the eleventh grade, Dawn never received a suspension. According to Dawn, she was never a troublemaker. She valued family and took family loyalty seriously. This would prove to alter Dawn's future in devastating ways when she received disciplinary action for defending her sister on school property.

Dawn's younger sister and another female student had a verbal altercation one fall day at their high school. As a result of this interaction, Dawn's sister and the student planned to fight the next day at school. Dawn explained:

> My sister told me I had to go with her just in case the other girls tried to fight her. [My sister told me] We have to jump her, we have to fight her, and I'm not a fighter. I don't want to fight. I've never fought before. My sister told my mom and my other sisters and they were like, if the girl was four times bigger than her, why would you let her fight by herself? If you don't go fight with your sister, then that's not really your sister, because we would do that. So, I had no choice that was what my sisters were telling me. That's what my mom's telling me and I have to go back home to that.

The next day at school, Dawn stated word had spread that her sister and the other student were going to fight. As Dawn and her sister were walking to meet the other student, she described what happened:

> So, me and my sister were walking to class and there was a big, large crowd following us and we already knew what was about to go down. We were about to get suspended because we're causing too much attention. It was a large crowd and when we went to the classroom, it was so many people that there wasn't even a fight. Security was called. The BMTs were called and the principal was called. So, it was no fight but we got suspended for causing a riot.

Dawn and her sister were accused of "causing a riot" and received three days of out-of-school suspension. Dawn shared that during her out-of-school suspension she fell behind in her studies as her teachers did not provide work for her. Once she returned back to school, she mentioned how teachers nor counselors sat down with her to explain assignments, notes, and other forms of classwork she missed. The lack of support during

her transition back to school after the suspension resulted in a lack of motivation to want to do well in school. Dawn shared:

> I didn't like being out of school and missing a lot. I felt like I missed a whole school year worth of work because I like being in school and learning. So, I feel like I've missed out on a lot. I felt like, you know, I'm going to start slacking now because I don't this stuff. I don't really think they [teachers] cared. And they [teachers] looked like me. It blew my mind that they [teachers] looked like me but didn't wanna help.

In twelfth grade, Dawn's lack of motivation continued. Dawn's school had a strict attendance policy, especially for students in the IB program. Students were not permitted to miss more than ten days of school, unless it was for a medical purpose. During this time, Dawn was diagnosed with a life altering illness that caused severe pain to overtake her body. The pain would become so bad that Dawn would miss several days of school. Every school day she missed, Dawn provided an official doctor's note indicating her reason for being absent. Once Dawn was officially diagnosed with the illness, she provided the medical paperwork and pictures of her x-rays to the school counselors. Dawn and her mother pleaded for the school to forgive her absences because of the medical diagnosis, but the school refused their request. She recalled:

> After 11th grade, I started to get sick. I had doctors excuses and doctors notes that I couldn't be in school and I guess the counselors and the teachers didn't really look at that. They were just thinking, okay, she's not coming to school. She sick, well, she's missing too many days. I became disengaged in school because I was sick and no one would help.

Dawn told of how she did her best to complete her school work in a timely manner even when teachers did not make accommodations for her. The accumulation of school days missed and the out-of-school suspension on her school record haunted Dawn and she believed that a university would not accept her. Her family did not know how to support her in her academics because many of them never made it as far in school as she had. With glimpses of hope for the future, Dawn graduated from high school but her dreams of attending a university came to an abrupt halt.

Revival

A year of after graduating high school, Dawn enrolled at a community college. Her desire to become a pharmacist had faded and she now wanted to focus on earning a degree that would allow her to help people. After meeting with a counselor on campus, Dawn explained how she decided her new goal was to obtain a degree in counseling or psychology. Her focus was now on helping others make sense of their mental health as she sought help for this throughout her school journey. After completing her first year of community college, Dawn was unable to return. Her mother became sick and her sole priority and purpose was to be her mother's caregiver. Dawn recalled:

> I wanted to go to college. I wanted more for myself and I wanted to be able to provide, not only for me, but for my family. I had to pause school to help my mom who is disabled. I want to go back to school and I would love to go back to school. But as for right now, I am her caregiver and her nurse because she has no one else.

Without being enrolled in school, Dawn continued to pursue her academic and career goals in non-traditional ways. She found two mentors with counseling

backgrounds. These mentors introduced her to research and books about counseling and psychology. Once a month, Dawn meets with her mentors to discuss thoughts she has about the books and research she is reading. Although Dawn is not currently able to reenroll in college, she expressed that she is preparing for her major by staying abreast of the current research.

Throughout the interview, Dawn acknowledged how having a mentor throughout her K-12 journey may have drastically changed her academic and career outcomes. She stated:

> Because a lot of young Black girls like me go through a lot with their families and within their selves, you know, self-esteem issues. Some, a lot of them are suicidal. Some just have a lot of insecurities that they deal with. And no one knows about. So, all they have to rely on is school and their self and they don't have family like this. So, when we know people, mentors, that are in our corner that wants us to succeed, it pushes us to be better than what we are now. That's why we just need the encouragement and motivation. I would be in a different place if I just had encouragement and motivation from a mentor.

Discussion and Implications

Dawn's story is unique. Throughout middle school and part of high school, she believed she could achieve all of her dreams and her academic performance would provide access to any university or college she wanted to attend. Her high academic self-concept served as intrinsic motivation to remain on the honor roll and the thought of departing from her academic success never crossed her mind. After her suspension in eleventh grade, her interest in her academics declined and her hopes of attending college

diminished. She perceived her academic opportunities to be limited as a result of the suspension and how it would impact her school record.

Dawn was unable to regroup and push towards improving her grades after her suspension because she had a shortage of support around her. Her family encouraged the suspension and did not know how to advocate for her once she returned to school. Although the majority of students and staff at her high school were Black, Whiteness reigned supreme. As her absences accumulated due to suspension and sickness, Dawn's teachers and counselors were unwilling to help her catch up academically to her classmates. They refused to offer any resources or provide accommodations to make up work. Her label of giftedness, that she once celebrated, was tossed aside and she now became invisible.

Her love for education and desire to pursue college returned after graduation. While not currently enrolled in college, she has actively sought and found mentors that will guide her through this next phase of life. Her meetings with her mentors have motivated her to enroll in college in the future and pursue a degree in counseling.

The findings from this study are not generalizable due to the sample size, but present crucial implications for practice. Dawn mentioned that the obstacles she faced while in school may have been avoided if a school official took the time to develop an authentic mentoring relationship with her. Brinkman et al. (2018) suggested that positive mentoring relationships produces "a greater focus on building empathy, trust, and attention to children's needs and experiences" (p. 206). Mentoring Black girls in schools provides nurture, care, and accountability to both the student and mentor (Case, 1997). Black girls need to be involved in the creation of mentoring programs that benefit them.

In addition, the voices need to be considered in vetting processes for serving as mentors. The creation of mentoring programs and the vetting process should be collaborative and include the voices of Black girls, Black parents, teachers, schools counselors, and school administrators. The vetting process will rule out potential mentors who have biases towards Black girls that may cause them additional harm. Intentional positive mentoring programs for Black girls can be beneficial for their mental health as well as their academic outcomes (Brinkman et al., 2018; Case, 1997; Blumer & Werner-Wilson, 2010).

The lack of guidance from teachers and school counselors greatly impacted Dawn while in high school. With no one to turn to for help during and after her suspension, she was isolated while trying to make up the work she missed. Direction and advocacy from a school counselor or other educators may have altered her academic and career trajectory while in high school. Implementing collaborative practices with educators and Black girls has the potential to tackle any barriers, such as academics, that may hinder their learning (Hines et al., 2020). Amatea and West-Olantunji (2007) proposed school educators create a school environment that is family-centric. They suggested school administrators, counselors, and teachers work alongside parents to address the academic needs of students during extended school hours. Extended school hours provide students with a more inclusive, safe space to work collaboratively with adults.

While this is a single case study, future research can be expanded to include the lived experiences of more gifted Black girls who have experienced out-of-school suspension and other exclusionary school discipline consequences. This unique intersection allows for much exploration as some may assume gifted Black girls do not

experience out-of-school suspension and other exclusionary consequences. Exploring the mental health of these participants and the various forms of support they received while in school is critical to understanding how schools can uplift and not oppress Black girls during their K-12 journey.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to share the story of one Black girl whose academic self-concept and academic opportunities were greatly impacted after receiving out-of-school suspension. Using a qualitative single case study research design, data was analyzed to explore how Dawn, a recent high school graduate and gifted Black girl, perceived her academic opportunities after experiencing a three day out-of-school suspension. The findings revealed that a once highly motivated and academically successful student suffered greatly after her suspension. Dawn's academic self-concept decreased and desire to enroll in college was vastly reduced. She was met with hardship as she did not receive support, resources, or guidance upon her return to school causing her to fall behind and her grades to drop. Although not currently enrolled in college, Dawn is looking to pursue a degree in counseling in the future. Implications from this study suggest that mentoring and collaboration with families and students can positively impact the academic outcomes of Black girls in schools.

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APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Building Rapport

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

2. What made school interesting for you?

3. Describe your academic performance while in high school?

4. Can you tell me about a time you felt very successful in school?

Academic Self-Concept

5. How did you see yourself as a high school student?

6. What classes did you excel in during high school?

7. Why do you believe you did well in these classes?

8. How did teachers see you in high school?

9. Did teachers' perceptions of you impact how you saw yourself as a student? If so, how?

10. What academic or career goals did you set for yourself as a high school student?

Receiving OSS

11. Describe the time when you received an out-of-school suspension (OSS). Explain.

12. How did you feel during the time?

13. How did your teachers react to you receiving OSS? Explain.

14. Tell me about the kinds of behavior that you would expect to see from students who receive OSS.

15. Do you believe you exhibited those behaviors?

16. How did your parents/guardians react to you receiving OSS?

17. How did you feel about their reaction?

18. Who supported you during your suspension?

19. Did teachers provide work for you while your served OSS? Explain.

20. Did you feel successful in completing your assignments? Explain.

21. How did you feel about returning to school after receiving OSS?

22. Can you describe your experience on your first day back at school?

23. In what ways did the suspension affect your school work once you returned to school?

24. How did you view yourself after the suspension?

25. How did you view yourself academically after the suspension?

26. Do you believe that receiving OSS impacted your academic and career goals you had previously set? Explain.

Conclusion

27. What did you learn from your experience?

28. Do you believe your OSS experience impacted how you saw or currently see yourself academically?

29. What advice would you give to Black girls who experience OSS?

30. What advice would you give to Black girls concerning their academics in high school?

31. What advice would you give to teachers on how to treat Black girls when they return back to school from a suspension?

32. What are you currently doing as your career choice?

33. Is there anything else you would like to share?

CHAPTER 4: CAGED BIRDS: A MULTICASE STUDY EXAMINING PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES THROUGH THE EYES OF BLACK WOMEN PRINCIPALS

I would rather lose my job standing up for what's right than keep it knowing I sat there while something wrong was going on.

(Principal Brown)

Principal Brown expressed this sentiment in July 2021 as she reflected on the safety of her students, staff, and herself during the pandemic. COVID-19 had significantly impacted her life as well as the lives of her students, teachers, and staff. She was limited in the resources she could provide due to the mandates of the company for which she worked. Principal Brown is in her 17th year of being a principal and her first year as a principal of a charter school. Although she was well respected in the district she previously worked in, her knowledge and ability to lead was stifled in her new work environment.

Historically, Black principals have been placed in predominately Black schools with taxing environments (Jean-Marie, 2013; McCray et al., 2007; Peters, 2011; Reed, 2012). These taxing environments are a result of Whiteness at work (Yoon, 2012). Leonardo (2002) defined Whiteness as a social construct that can be internalized by White people and people of color, designed to classify and divide according to race. In schools, Whiteness appears through funding inequities, the overrepresentation of Black students in discipline data, and teacher beliefs and perceptions of their students (Lewis & Manno, 2011). Black female principals working in these environments are often not

viewed as serious leaders and their authority within schools is often challenged (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). The persistent questioning of their authority from staff and leaders can cause some Black female principals to overcompensate in their actions to gain respect and use more of an authoritarian approach in establishing leadership (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012). In turn, these perceived actions reinforce a stereotype that working for Black women principals can be difficult (Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). The constant need to reflect on how the intersection of gender and race influences their leadership practices can cause Black women to question how they lead.

This chapter uses a multiple case study approach to examine the leadership experiences of two Black women administrators. Both women currently serve as K-8 charter school principals and have previous experience serving as public school principals as well. This study provides a review of the literature on women, leadership, and self-efficacy. Next, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) is introduced to explain how this framework guided the present study. The study concludes with implications on how to support and mentor Black women administrators.

Literature Review

Women and Leadership in Education

Teaching is widely perceived as a female profession (Apple, 1985). During the nineteenth century, as men began to leave teaching to pursue jobs in business and industry, well educated women were recruited into the teaching force as cheap labor (Grumet, 1988; Loder & Spillane, 2005). Viewed as natural nurturers and caretakers of children, women who entered the teaching profession were praised for cultivating the

minds of young students (Weiler, 1989; Weiner & Burton, 2016). They experienced long tenures as teachers and found it difficult to transition to leadership roles. Research has found that women during the 19th century did not feel comfortable leaving the classroom to become managers of schools because they did not feel supported and were often denied these positions (Adams & Hambright, 2004; Loder & Spillane, 2005).

As female teachers continued to seek educational leadership positions, their praise as effective teachers was diminished. They were met with opposition as educational leadership roles required leaders to be assertive and forceful, and these actions are traditionally associated with men (Adams & Hambright, 2004). Women who pursued leadership roles experienced conflict in the role as their gender and identity were constantly challenged (Reed, 2012; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Taking charge as a female principal led to isolation from their colleagues and a perception that they were no longer caring but seeking validation through power (Jean-Marie, 2013).

Research on K-12 educational leadership reveals that women made up 54 percent of principals in the United States in 2015 - 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Women report being in a double bind during their principalship as their ability to break or embrace traditional gender stereotypes heavily influences their perceived leadership capabilities (Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Weiner & Burton, 2016). Women who do not uphold the stereotype of leaders being dominant and aggressive suffer greatly in their level of mentoring and their access to professional networks (Banks, 1995; Weiner & Burton, 2016). Female principals who are able to control their emotions and act more like men are perceived as effective leaders and receive more opportunities for growth than their female counterparts (Reed, 2012; Smith et al., 2016).

Due to the lack of growth opportunities, as well as the need to achieve a work/family balance, women tend to have shorter overall principalship tenures (Eckman, 2004; Weiner & Burton, 2016).

Black Women Principals

Black women principals face racial and gender oppression in their profession (hooks, 1981; Horsford & Tillman, 2012). Research on educational leadership remains focused on the lived experiences of White men and women but does little to address the unique history and experiences of Black women in education (Lomotey, 2019; Tillman, 2004). Black educational leadership centers around the historical ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Walker, 2013). *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and schools must begin to integrate (Van, 2004). Tillman's (2004) research on the impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education's* ruling on Black school leaders provides a critical analysis on school leadership pre and post *Brown*. Tillman's (2004) historical perspective study aimed to highlight the work and importance of Black educators, the academic success of Black students, and how the *Brown* decision impacted the Black community. Pre-*Brown vs. Board of Education*, African American principals were leaders in their communities and worked tirelessly to establish and build schools for Black children (Tillman, 2004). Black women served as teachers and principals and were responsible for "introducing new teaching methods and curricula, organizing in-service teacher training workshops, and serving as assistants to county superintendents of schools" (Tillman, 2004, p. 108). Black women principals fought tirelessly for excellence in Black education and would defy their White supervisors if it meant their students would gain access to opportunities and

resources to improve their learning (Tillman, 2004). Those who defied their supervisors were subjected to gender discrimination and faced opposition in their leadership roles (Tillman, 2004).

Post-*Brown vs. Board of Education*, Black principals who were well respected leaders in their communities were demoted or fired (Tillman, 2004). This decision resulted in the closing of Black schools and the replacement of Black principals with White principals (Etheridge, 1979; Tillman, 2004). Black principals who remained employed by local school districts were given jobs such as secretary and not able to uphold the structure of Black schools they once created (Tillman, 2004). This time was especially difficult for Black female principals as they faced an ever growing sexist and racist environment (Tillman, 2004). Black women continued to be outnumbered by White men and women and Black men in principalships and this still holds true today (Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Tillman, 2004).

To compound matters, Black women who obtain principalships in their late twenties or early thirties face age discrimination (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012). Their authority is often questioned or disregarded amongst superiors, colleagues, and staff (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012; Tillman, 2004). Findings from Reed's (2012) qualitative study on three Black women principals revealed that Black women are not taken seriously in comparison to their male counterparts and are disrespected by parents and community leaders because they are perceived as not being able to manage the instructional and operational aspects of a school. In spite of the ageism, racism, and sexism Black female principals encounter, they continue to persevere in their profession.

Although women accounted for 54 percent of all principals in the United States, Black women only accounted for seven percent of the total number of principals during 2015 – 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Black women state spirituality and mission work as the most prevalent reasons in becoming principals (Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Believing they are called to provide distinct opportunities, resources, and success for Black children (Kelley, 2012; Williams, 2013), Black women principals center their leadership around community, spirituality, and family (Lomotey, 2019; Shujaa & Shujaa, 2015; Spicer, 2004; Tillman, 2004). Support, often provided by their spiritual faith, is one way that Black women remain confident and motivated to lead their schools (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012). For Black women leading in White institutionalized racist systems, "spirituality fosters a sense of optimism and offers the promise of survival" (Lomotey, 2019, p. 339). Research concerning leadership styles found that people of color and women believe their leadership abilities are greatly "influenced by their leadership self-efficacy, whereas white men were not as strongly influenced" (Reed, 2012, p. 41).

Principal Self-Efficacy

A principal's beliefs that allow them to enable policies and procedures which promote the effectiveness of a school is called principal self-efficacy (Versland & Erickson, 2017). Principal self-efficacy is important when examining leadership styles and performance because a leader's beliefs drive a school academic performance, staff's work engagement, and overall job satisfaction (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). A principal with high self-efficacy is able to motivate their staff and collectively work to improve the culture, decision making processes, and community outreach efforts of a school (Federici

& Skaalvik, 2012; Versland & Erickson, 2017). Goddard et al.'s (2015) quantitative study focused on the instruction leadership of principals to improve teacher instruction. According to Goddard et al. (2015), principals with high self-efficacy can cultivate various opportunities for teacher collaboration that enhance the instructional practices throughout the school building. These opportunities are strongly aligned to the principal's belief that they are the instructional leader and produced positive results for student academic outcomes (Goddard et al, 2015; Versland & Erickson, 2017).

In comparison, principals who are struggling with self-efficacy report burnout and not being satisfied with their job (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). Burnout is often a result of being overly stressed and emotionally exhausted (Maslach et al., 2001) and can lead to principals leaving the profession (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). The leadership style of a principal experiencing low self-efficacy may reflect the desire to improve instructional strategies, teacher collaboration, and student achievement but there is an internal conflict because the principal is overwhelmed (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). This can, in turn, negatively impact the improvement process of the school.

There is a growing body of literature on the experiences of Black female principals (Burton et al., 2020; Jean-Marie, 2013; Lomotey, 2019; Reed, 2012; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). Yet, much of the current research on Black female principals does not examine how the racism they experience guides their leadership and how this impacts how they navigate through an institution that has historically oppressed them. This study hopes to fill this gap.

Theoretical Framework

hooks (1981) once said, “No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have Black women” (p. 20). This powerful statement still holds truth today as the experiences of Black women principals continue to be embedded in those of Black men and White women. To capture the intersection of race and gender in the essence of what it means to be a Black female principal, this study used critical race feminism (CRF) as understood through the epistemological lens of Black feminist thought (BFT). Using BFT, the unique experiences of Black women are told through the method of storytelling to highlight the ways patriarchal and White feminist systems have oppressed and challenged Black women administrators (Collins, 2000).

Developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), BFT looks at the world through an Afrocentric perspective. BFT acknowledges that Black women use dialogue to link their oppression and activism (Collins, 2000; Lomotey, 2019). Next, BFT incorporates accountability in addressing the microaggressions and racism Black women face daily (Collins, 2000). Lastly, BFT addresses the need for Black women to nurture and care which is prevalent in the education field (Collins, 2000). Similar to BFT, CRF also addresses the unique experiences of women of color, with particular attention given to Black women.

CRF is a branch of critical race theory (CRT) that brings attention to the experiences of women of color separate from those of White men and women, and men of color (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Recognizing the peculiar ways women of color experience oppression due to the intersectionality of race and gender, CRF demands institutional systems to call out and address gender and racial oppression (Carter, 2012; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2003). Next, CRF acknowledges

the political identities of women of color are separate and not aligned with those of White men and women and men of color (Carter, 2012; Wing, 2003). This is especially important as the political ideas and identities of White men have driven the educational field for years and Black women who defy these ideas are met with great opposition (Tillman, 2004).

The use of CRF through the lens of BFT is essential to understanding the self-efficacy of Black women administrators. This framework helps to illustrate how Black women's nonconformity to traditional patriarchal standards impact their leadership beliefs. The use of CRF within this study illuminates the challenges and triumphs Black women encounter daily. The following research question guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do two Black women principals navigate the gendered and raced work environment of their urban schools?

Data and Methods

Research Design and Participants

This study followed a qualitative methodology and used a multiple case study research design. Creswell and Poth (2017) defined multiple case study as the ability for a researcher to purposefully select several cases to highlight one issue. The use of more than one case illustrating an issue enhances the generalizability or external validity of the findings (Merriam, 1998). For this research, multiple case study was selected to analyze the leadership experiences of two Black women principals. Purposeful convenience sampling was used to select the participants. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), purposeful convenience sampling creates detailed and rich information that highlight the purpose of the study.

Principal Sierra (pseudonym) and Principal Brown (pseudonym) were invited and agreed to participate in this study as I had personal connections with both principals. I worked previously with Principal Sierra as her assistant principal and collaborated with Principal Brown on school projects. Both participants selected their pseudonyms as they stated they felt these names suited them.

Principal Sierra

Principal Sierra is a veteran educator with 25 years of experience preparing to start her eighth school year as a principal. Principal Sierra taught for 10 years and served as an assistant principal for seven years. She attributes her leadership efforts and relationship-building with kids to her being a parent. She stated that she is able to view situations from the parent perspective because of her role as mother. Principal Sierra works for the same charter school company as Principal Brown. During her time with the charter school company, she has served as principals in two different schools.

Principal Brown

Principal Brown is a veteran educator with 17 years of experience preparing to start her sixth year as a principal. She taught for six years in affluent and urban schools and worked at the central office level supervising principals. Outside of teaching and supervising principals, she has also served as a school grant director. Principal Brown is a wife and mother who attributes adult interaction as the reason she still serves as a principal. Principal Brown's leadership track is unique as she never served as an assistant principal prior to her principalship but as a co-principal in a previous school. She served as a principal at two separate schools before becoming a charter school principal. Prior to

her role as principal for her current charter school company, she served on the state leadership team of the charter school company and supervised principals.

Shared Characteristics of Principal Brown and Principal Sierra

Principal Brown and Principal Sierra currently serve as principals of two separate K-8 charter schools with a predominately Black student population. Prior to their charter school appointments, they served as principals in separate schools in a neighboring school district. The charter school company (CSC) Principal Brown and Principal Sierra work for is a for-profit company that has been in business since the 1990s. The company has over 80 schools in six states. Each state the CSC is located in has a director that oversees the operations of all the schools in their respective state. Each state director, since the start of the CSC, has been a White male. Looking to diversify the school leadership teams in the Southeast, the CSC was interested in what Principal Sierra and Principal Brown could bring to their team and hired them.

Proud graduates of historically black colleges/universities (HBCUs), Principal Sierra and Principal Brown stated that these institutions shaped them into the leaders they are now and are champions for Black representation in all levels of education. In the beginning of their careers as school administrators, both women worked at various affluent elementary schools with a majority White student population before moving to urban emergent schools. Urban emergent schools are often located in large cities and may experience hardships in gaining resources such as highly qualified teachers (Milner, 2012). Principal Brown and Principal Sierra have known each other for years because they have worked in the same district or company but they have not worked together in the same schools.

Data Collection

The original intention was to conduct the interviews in person and observe their leadership at their schools, but the rise of COVID-19 stopped those plans. The charter school company prohibited visitors from entering the schools of Principal Brown and Principal Sierra as a precaution to not expose staff to the virus. As a result, participants were individually invited to participate in a semi-structured virtual interview due to COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews were crucial to this study as the flexibility in questioning the participants allowed me to create a safe space where each participant could openly and honestly talk about her experiences and feelings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants were interviewed separately and each interview lasted approximately one hour. An interview protocol (see Appendix C) was used and included the following categories: building rapport, leadership style and principal self-efficacy, and barriers/obstacles to the principalship. Principal Brown and Principal Sierra participated in the interview using Zoom. The audio was recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, I noted their dispositions and key words or phrases used. After analyzing and coding the data, a second informal interview occurred with Principal Sierra to provide additional context around her leadership style and principal self-efficacy.

Data Analysis

Pitre et al.'s (2013) critical feminist narrative inquiry was used to analyze the data within this study. According to Pitre et al. (2013), critical feminist narrative inquiry analyzes the main objective or *the what* of the stories told by participants to understand the circumstances that shaped their experiences. This process illustrates "the role of forces and conditions enabling and constraining storytellers' identity, agency, voice, and

reflexivity as knowledgeable agents" (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 120). Critical feminist narrative inquiry calls for multiple readings of the participants' stories to discover the various points of view connected to their personal history and experiences while examining the social dynamics that occurred. Individual transcripts were read three times, twice by me and once by the participants, as a form of member checking to develop codes, accounts of experiences, and themes.

During the first read, I compared leadership experiences of the participants in public and charter schools. During the second read, I identified accounts of gendered racism and microaggressions the participants experienced and how this impacted them. During the third read, I collaborated with Principal Brown and Principal Sierra individually. Separately, each participant read through their transcript and my notes to ensure I captured their stories without imposing assumptions (Hickson, 2016; Pitre et al., 2013). Next, codes were created that captured each participant's leadership style, interactions with staff and students, and interactions with their superiors. Codes were then placed into categories that called attention to their experiences with gendered racism in their school environments.

Findings

Laughter, huge smiles, and lots of sighs filled each interview as I met with Principal Brown and Principal Sierra. Due to ending their school years and preparing for summer school, each interview had to be rescheduled to accommodate their lives. As a result of the ongoing global pandemic, I had not seen Principal Brown and Principal Sierra in over ten months. Once we were able to meet, the sense of familiarity and trust was present in each interview as the women let their guards down to discuss their school

year and leadership journey. Throughout their interviews, Principal Sierra and Principal Brown repeatedly talked about leadership as their calling or ministry and how they love being principals. They discussed the obstacles they faced as Black women leaders. Some of these obstacles made them consider leaving the profession but they remain as principals because they love what they do. As a result of their interviews and the collaboration that took place with Principal Brown and Principal Sierra during data analysis, three themes emerged: leadership as intentional ministry, difficult transitions, and leading with love.

Leadership as Intentional Ministry

Principal Sierra is a veteran educator with 25 years of experience preparing to start her eighth school year as a principal. Principal Brown is also a veteran educator with 17 years of experience preparing to start her sixth year as a principal. Similar to previous studies on the correlation between the Black principals and spirituality (Lomotey, 2019; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009), Principal Brown and Principal Sierra discussed how God orchestrated their paths to serve as principals. They perceived educational leadership as a ministry for them. When asked what led her to pursue her current role as a principal, Principal Sierra stated:

> Well, umm, I guess it's all happened the way God has planned it to happen is the best way to sum it up. I think I've always been a lifelong educator. I always felt like education was my passion and this is what I was born to do. Umm, I wanted to go to college to pursue a teaching career. My mother [sigh] discouraged me and told me that I would not be able to take care of myself. [My mother said] I would be poor forever [laughs], um, and could not take care of a family and she wanted

> me to go into business. So, I did start my freshman year of college as a business major, and it was an epic fail. I was very, very unhappy. Um, my sophomore year I changed over into the education department without telling my mother, um, and then I, once I got my grades going home for Christmas, I told her [mother], um, because I was on the Dean's list and I just did well and exceeded and excelled, um, ever since then.

Principal Brown stated her role as principal and her leadership style serve as a ministry for her to positively impact the lives of her students. She explained:

> If nothing else, being a principal is a ministry for me. The leadership style that I have, which is not conventional, I know it's not what other people do. They don't lead with love. They don't say, "Hey, we're not going to do what they said to do. Instead, we're going to do what we know is right by kids."

Seeking to do right by kids and viewing their principalship as callings has led Principal Brown and Principal Sierra to work in a variety of schools. Although Principal Sierra and Principal Brown have not worked together at the same schools, the schools they have worked in have similar characteristics. Both women began their principalships in affluent, predominately White schools. Placed at a school to provide representation and solace to Black parents and students, Principal Sierra was told during her principalship that her role was to defuse Black parents. She stated:

> I was in one school that was affluent and I was placed there because they didn't have representation. So anytime an African American parent complained, they would call me and bring into their meeting. I would have to show up at the meeting to defuse the parent or solve issues that parents that looked like me had. I

realized my race played a key and not only my race, but being female also plays a key because a lot of times we're often looked at as emotional and I could help others manage those emotions.

Principal Brown recalled her time in an affluent, White district and stated:

> So [sighs], I wanted to ensure that I had an experience everywhere so that I didn't just know one type because you only know what you know. So, if you only worked in urban schools, you only know what that looks like but not the other side. So, yeah, I left one school district and went to another that had a vast difference. I went from a school that was probably 99% free or reduced lunch to a school that was maybe one or two. I went from a school where all of my kids were Black and Hispanic to a school where there were only 10 Black students in the entire school of about 700 students. So, I simply wanted to see what was like. I wanted to understand the challenges and everything that came along with it.

Discerning their talents are better utilized in a different environment, Principal Sierra and Principal Brown transitioned from working at affluent schools to urban schools. Describing urban schools as their niche, Principal Brown and Principal Sierra spoke with enthusiasm and passion during their discussion about urban schools and representation. Principal Brown stated:

> Girl, I made it my promise to go back to those schools where the children looked like myself and my cousins and my husband and everyone else to ensure that children were able to be children. Often what happens in high poverty and high need or underperforming areas is sometimes kids come with those other things and they're not allowed to be children right. They come with adult issues and I

> was going to make it my goal to ensure that the children that were at my school were able to truly be children.

Principal Sierra discussed that her talents were best served in schools where students looked like her. With a joy radiating through her smile, Principal Sierra stated:

> My talent in a school of that look like me is best served there. Um, I've been very selective in the schools I've applied to. I wanted to make sure that I am an advocate and a voice for kids who sometimes are overlooked, sometimes underappreciated. Sometimes they don't get, um, the "atta boys" or the pat on the back that they deserve.

During their tenure as principals, Principal Brown and Principal Sierra have continued to seek principalships and educational leadership positions that permitted them access to positively impact the lives of Black students. When their leadership opportunities became stifled in their districts due to superintendent turnover, increasingly confusing policies, and life changes, both women sought positions outside of the traditional school model.

Difficult Transitions

Seeking freedom, flexibility, and the chance to create and build a school of their own, Principal Brown and Principal Sierra were introduced to a charter school company (CSC) through different sources. The CSC promised principal candidates that if they were selected, they would be provided with endless opportunities to operate and manage their own school under CSC guidelines. During her interview, Principal Sierra was promised the freedom and flexibility to create the school of her dreams, if offered the

position, and this piqued her interest. Principal Sierra joined the company in 2019. She stated:

> I got the opportunity to open my own school and who would pass that opportunity up? It's an opportunity of a lifetime. I knew it wouldn't happen in the district because it wouldn't, but this was a time for me to brand a school. I can hire who I want and just put my own stamp on it and make it my own.

After serving as a principal for seven years in the neighboring school district, Principal Sierra believed this was her time to bring about real change with her role. She wanted her school to be magical. The charter school she opened is located in a rural area with ninety percent of the students identifying as White. Principal Sierra believed every student deserved to see a teacher who looked like them and she intentionally hired a diverse group of teachers. The inaugural school year of Principal Sierra's school was held at a local church due to the CSC being unable to purchase land to build the school on. In spite of having school in a church, Principal Sierra made sure her students and staff knew they were special and loved. She explained:

> So, my school that I opened, they [CSC leadership team] still refer to it as Disneyland. They say it's just a magical place. It was intentionally built that way because I think learning for kids should be that way. I think you [students] should have a quality teacher that cares about you [students] just like they care about their own kid. I think you [students] should have a teacher that communicates well, a teacher that is flexible and fun. A teacher that knows what she or he is doing and I intentionally hired people who could do those things. Um, and so for

> us at that school, that’s what happened. We put our heads together and everything was a team effort. It was what I’ve always envisioned school to be as a leader.

The board of education for Principal Sierra’s magical school sought to purchase land so the school could move out of the church. With the support of the community, the board believed they would be able to secure land. During a meeting with board of education, a member on CSC’s leadership team was asked to give a message to Principal Sierra. Principal Sierra noted:

> We were in the process of approving land at my first school and one of the bosses came down from Florida. He’s a Caucasian male. He was supposed to deliver a message to me but he didn’t. When he met me, he said, “Oh, somebody else will tell you.” He didn’t even want to talk to me. So that was offensive. So, what I took away from that immediately is that he didn’t want to deal with this little Brown girl. And that’s not the first time that had happened working for this company.

Principal Sierra never received the message from her leadership team. Shortly after this moment, she learned the board was not able to secure land to begin building a permanent home. After four months of leading her magical school, she was asked to transition to a different charter school with the company in her region. Principal Sierra stated:

> [Sighs heavily] So, I was told, this is Disneyland. Now you need to move to this other school and make it Disneyland because it’s not. I never got any details about what “not” meant.

Later on, she discovered what "not" meant for the CSC. Similar to her time as an assistant principal, Principal Sierra was asked to become the principal of the new school to defuse Black parents, put policies and procedures in place that benefitted the CSC, and create a magical atmosphere everyone in which would want to partake. The transition proved to be difficult in the beginning. Now under the leadership of a White female principal, Principal Sierra's former school was able to secure land shortly after her departure. She quickly realized the "freedom and flexibility" promised during her interview was fabrication and the CSC leadership team was not fond of Black women operating their schools.

Principal Brown also came to discover the CSC was not fond of Black women operating their schools. Principal Brown did not join the CSC initially as a principal. Due to her background in overseeing twelve schools in the neighboring school district, in 2019, Principal Brown was asked join the state team of the CSC to oversee schools and principals in her region. After two months as a member of the state team, she was asked to become principal of a school in her region where the principal had resigned. Like Principal Sierra, Principal Brown discovered she was asked to become principal to defuse Black parents and put policies and procedures in place that benefitted the CSC.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Principal Brown had to quickly make adjustments to online learning for her students while the staff were required to report to the school building per the CSC guidelines. During a visit from the CSC state team to check in on the staff during the pandemic, a conflict arose where Principal Brown had to address a staff member and a member of the state team. Principal Brown recalled:

> We focused on making sure the processes and procedures were in place for the prior school year with our kids, you know. Do we know what to do? Do we know and the kids know Zoom codes? Do we have all of this set up? The very first day of virtual school, teachers were in our building. Kids were not and the state team came to support, which I welcomed. One of my current staff members and one of the state team members were overheard talking trash because we had not organized some unnecessary, irrelevant spaces in the building.

Not afraid to hold uncomfortable conversations with staff, Principal Brown addressed her staff member and the state team member.

> I told my staff member bluntly that their actions were disrespectful and underhanded. You don't do that. And then I told the state team member that at our school, cause it's not my school it is our school, we're respectful of each other. We don't talk about each behind our backs. So being disrespectful and messy is not tolerated here.

The state team was not pleased with how Principal Brown handled the situation but she stood firm on her words and actions.

Both women worked to ensure they were not perceived as the stereotypical angry Black woman but as passionate educators advocating for their students and staff. Working for a company that disregards their authority and intellect because they are Black women led to a feeling of isolation and lack of motivation to remain with the company for Principal Sierra and Principal Brown. Relying on each other and another Black female principal in CSC, Principal Sierra shared that she created an informal

support group. The support group provided ways for them to lead with love in a racist organization that does not love them.

Leading with Love

The relationship Principal Sierra and Principal Brown developed while working for CSC is one of respect and love. During times where they were isolated and not receiving the same treatment and support as their White colleagues, they became dependent on each other for support. Even with the emotional and professional support they provided each other, a sense of isolation remained for Principal Brown. When asked about her support system during times of isolation, Principal Brown stated:

> Unfortunately, with the company I'm with now, I go inside the school, I close the door, and I do what's necessary. I do know that the other principals often feel some of the exact same things that I'm feeling as a Black woman. I think it is just always being the only person in the room who pushes the agenda of "do you know that's slightly racist?" How do you respectfully check board members so that they aren't as disrespectful as a state team member because they will all try you.

Principal Sierra stated the importance of having a positive support group when working in a toxic environment. She stressed:

> I have to surround myself with people I can trust. Trust is very important in this role. It's very lonely. People say that all the time. It is a very lonely journey but if you surround yourself with people you trust, they will always be your eyes and ears on the ground and give you the heads up.

Their experiences with isolation within in the CSC did not change their views on their principal self-efficacy. Committed to leading with love and doing what they believe is best for staff and students, particularly Black students, Principal Brown and Principal Sierra did not allow the actions and beliefs of their leaders deter them. Principal Sierra stated:

> I do believe in the self-fulfilling prophecy. I do believe in affirming others because I want them to do their best. They represent me and I tell them that all the time. I do not worry so much about having friends long as I'm doing right by kids. For that reason, I want to make sure that I'm true to myself. I want to always make sure I'm open and honest and approachable making sure that the things, my vision, my value, my goals for kids are right because I need them to be successful. They're the future and I convey that in my actions and beliefs every day.

Principal Brown with passion and conviction stated:

> Please do not try to duplicate what I'm doing because I don't know what I'm doing. All I'm doing is what I feel like is right in my heart. I want to be known as someone who leads with love more than anything. I want my staff and students to be treated with respect at all times and I will do everything to make sure that happens. Just like every little whose name is Laquisha. Don't answer to Lakeesha because that's not your name. Tell them your name, no matter how many syllables and letters is in it because that's who you are.

When met with obstacles concerning the day-to-day operation of their schools, Principal Brown and Principal Sierra stand firm on their beliefs and policies in place to protect students and enhance their academics. They advocated to receive the resources

needed to provide their staff and other teachers within the company culturally relevant classroom management and cultural sensitivity professional development. In addition, they have advocated for the development of curriculum review teams to ensure all students are represented. Unfortunately, the professional development and curriculum review team formation has been placed on hold due to COVID-19.

Discussion and Implications

Each interview served as a reminder of why Black women support each other as school leaders and the need for district leaders to support Black women. The desire to protect Black women principals and Black students oozed through the conversations with Principal Brown and Principal Sierra. In this study, the principals identified multiple barriers to their roles as principals in urban schools. Perceived as a tool to lessen complaints from Black parents, Principal Sierra experienced racism in the early stages of her school leadership tenure. Not wanting to be viewed as the clean-up woman, both Principal Sierra and Principal Brown found their talents were best utilized at urban schools. The racism did not end once they became principals of urban schools.

While serving as principals of urban schools in a neighboring school district, the power and authority both women had was questioned by board members and district leaders. With each superintendent change, the tools, academic programs, and resources Principal Sierra and Principal Brown implemented at their schools were challenged. Finding a lack of support in the traditional school district, Principal Sierra hoped to find refuge in a charter school company. The CSC promised Principal Sierra complete autonomy in how she operated her school but overturned their promise within four months. Principal Sierra encountered microaggressions as CSC leaders refused to

communicate with her and make the necessary accommodations to secure land for her school.

Recruited by the CSC to serve as the poster child of diversity on their state leadership team, Principal Brown was promptly removed from the leadership team and placed as principal in a struggling school. She never returned to her role on the leadership and remained a principal. This would not have occurred in a traditional public school setting. In a traditional public school setting, district leaders would immediately seek a candidate to fill the principalship in order for the leadership team member to return to their formal role. Faced with skepticism, doubt, and racism from her staff and the CSC, Principal Brown feverishly advocated for resources for students while experiencing challenges of her own. In spite of the test and trials thrown at Principal Sierra and Principal Brown, they remained positive and authentic leaders in their gendered and raced work environments.

The experiences of Principal Sierra and Principal Brown are parallel to studies on the experiences of Black female principals. Principal Sierra and Principal Brown found moral support in each other and their faith as they coped with the barriers they encountered (Lomotey, 2019; Shujaa & Shujaa, 2015). The moral support provided to each promoted a sense of optimism and hope that the racism and sexism faced would pass after a period of time. Faith and the belief that education is mission work kept the women motivated to lead their schools. Faith provided them with high principal self-efficacy as they believed were leading their students and staff into success with their policies and procedures. Faith, spirituality, and mission work were themes in previous studies by Jean-Marie (2013), Lomotey (2019), and Tillman (2004).

Next, in their daily efforts to meet the needs of students, Principal Sierra's and Principal Brown's ability to lead was met with uncertainty by their superiors and staff. Parallel to the work of Jean-Marie (2013), Reed (2012), and Witherspoon and Mitchell (2009), these Black women principals were not taken seriously and were disrespected by leaders because they were perceived as not being able to manage the instructional and operational aspects of their schools. The uncertainty and disrespect did not impact their ability to lead as they remained true to their identity and enacted policies they believed were best for students. However, the disrespect from the CSC state leadership team did impact Principal Brown's decision to remain with the company. The CSC challenged her principal self-efficacy as they repeatedly found minuscule points to discredit her leadership. Principal Brown is still with the CSC but is open to other educational opportunities. In addition, Principal Brown is learning to set boundaries with her CSC leaders to protect her mental and emotional health. Principal Sierra's self-efficacy was slightly affirmed as she was asked to create another magical school. While this may appear as an honor of distinction, it can also be construed as Whiteness at work as her former school was able to obtain land once was she asked to leave as principal. Her ability to create a school referred to as "Disneyland" benefitted the CSC but her race denied her the ability to continue to lead the school.

This study reveals the harsh nature of leading schools while being a Black woman. Principal Sierra and Principal Brown experienced marginalization in their school environments, districts, and charter school companies but remained committed to lead their schools with love and authenticity. This study has implications for practice. One is to create professional development programs that address gendered racism and cultural

sensitivity in educational leadership. These programs should discuss the trauma and harm directly and indirectly imposed on women leaders of color. Outside researchers would conduct an analysis on the state of gendered racism within the organization and work collaboratively with leaders to provide the appropriate resources and training. Monthly meetings would be held as a form of accountability to actively address if the trainings are helping to decrease the number of incidents related to gendered racism and adjust accordingly. The ultimate goal would be to provide actions to shift the institution to becoming anti-racist and anti-sexist.

Next, formal and informal spaces must be created for Black women to reflect on their experiences as school leaders and simply be. These spaces can lead to Black women creating policies that will improve their experiences as well as those of Black teachers and Black girls. Black women can invite educational leaders to these spaces to learn how to advocate for Black women and serve as an ally while disrupting White privilege and supremacy present in school and school districts. Lastly, Black women need access to mental health supports and counseling while serving as school leaders. Microaggressions, lack of growth and opportunity, and gendered racism can heavily impact the physical and mental health of Black female principals. In order to inspire Black women to become principals, their overall well-being must be protected.

Future research for this study can be expanded to include the leadership experiences of Black women principals serving in multiple sectors: private schools, public schools, charter schools, independent schools, etc. Each school sector has specific beliefs, hierarchies, and missions that drive their schools. Examining the leadership experiences of Black women at each sector would provide a more in-depth analysis of

what Black women principals go through. In addition, future research can include the leadership experiences of Black women principals who identify as LGBQTIA+. The voices and experiences of LGBQTIA+ Black women principals are needed in educational research to best learn how to support and grow Black women leaders holistically.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership experiences of two Black women principals through their eyes. Using a multiple case study approach and semi-formal interviews, the experiences of Principal Brown and Principal Sierra were examined to discover how they navigated the gendered and raced work environment of their urban schools. Findings revealed the paralleled and varied barriers Principal Brown and Principal Sierra experienced during their principalships. Both principals were perceived as tools to pacify Black parents. Principal Brown's principal self-efficacy was challenged as the charter school company's leadership team heavily critiqued her actions and openly discussed them with her staff. In spite of this, Principal Brown stayed true to her leadership style and implemented policies she believed best served her student. Principal Sierra's leadership style and principal self-efficacy were partially affirmed because she was believed to have magical leadership capabilities that enhanced the appearance of credibility of the charter school company. Implications from this study suggest creating professional development programs to address gendered racism and cultural sensitivity in educational leadership. Next, the creation of formal and informal spaces for Black women to collaborate and reflect on policies are needed in school districts. Lastly, Black women principals need mental health supports to work through the microaggressions and racism they experience daily.

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APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Building Rapport

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Why did you become an educator?
3. What sectors of the education field have you served in?
4. How many years did you teach before becoming an assistant principal?
5. How many years were you an assistant principal before becoming principal?

Leadership Style and Principal Self-Efficacy

6. Tell me the story of your journey to become a principal.
7. What qualities and skills do you possess that help you to achieve in your role as a principal?
8. How would you describe your leadership style?
9. What factors influenced your leadership style (culture, past experiences, family, community, etc.)?
10. How do you view yourself as a Black woman? In what ways do these views influence your leadership?
11. How do you believe others view you and your leadership style as a Black woman?

Barriers/Obstacles to the Principalship

12. What barriers have you encountered as a Black female principal? How did these barriers impact your leadership?
13. Describe a specific encounter that challenged your role as a principal and how you reacted.
14. How did you learn to overcome these barriers?
15. How would you describe your principal self-efficacy?

16. Do you believe the obstacles you have experienced as a Black female principal influenced your principal self-efficacy? If so, how?

17. Are there any other incidents that you feel may have influenced or hindered your leadership style and principal self-efficacy?

Conclusion

18. What advice would you give to Black women looking to become principals and school leaders?

19. What advice would you give to district leaders and policymakers on how to support Black women principals?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share?

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This three-article dissertation was designed to explore the parallel lived experiences of gendered racism Black girls and women encounter in K-12 schools. Using qualitative data, the lived experiences of a Black girl turned into an assistant principal (AP), a Black, female recent high school graduate, and two Black women principals were examined to understand how Black girls and women navigate through White educational spaces. The research aimed to bring attention to the barriers that historically perpetuated the negative schooling experiences of Black girls and women creating a mirroring effect.

The findings from this dissertation indicated that: a) Black girls and women encounter racism as students and administrators (Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4); b) Black girls and women lack mentorship and support at all levels in education (Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4); c) A gifted Black girl who experienced an out-of-school suspension viewed her academic opportunities negatively afterwards (Chapter 3); and d) Black women principals encounter gendered racism while serving as leaders yet remained committed to their leadership approach of providing inclusive environments for students.

This conclusion provides an overview of the parallels between each study and their contributions to research. Next implications and future research are discussed. Lastly, I provide my final thoughts on the parallel lived experiences of Black girls and women as well as the dissertation process.

The Parallels Between Studies and Contributions

In an effort to demonstrate how the experiences of Black girls and Black women in K-12 schools mirror each other, each study explored unique, though interrelated

research questions. The research questions and the corresponding study findings for each study are presented below:

Study One

Research Question 1: *What unique challenges did I encounter as a Black girl attending school in the South?* Findings revealed that I encountered multiple forms of oppression and trauma from teachers in school as I was perceived as a threat to my White peers because of my intellect. As a result, I became invisible in classrooms and lacked proper mentoring and support.

Research Question 2: *How does my identity as a Black woman administrator impact how I navigated through White spaces as an assistant principal of an urban school?* I became an administrator because I was called to do the work. In my position, teachers doubted my leadership abilities and my principal was unsure on how to support me. I faced gendered racism but still sought and provided opportunities and access to educational ventures for Black students. The stress associated with the daily microaggressions and combative ways of teachers negatively impacted my health, forcing me to set boundaries for my mental, physical, and emotional health by resigning.

Study Two

Research Question 1: *How does a Black girl, who recently graduated from high school, perceive her academic opportunities after encountering a suspension in school?* As an IB student, Dawn was determined to graduate and attend a university, but her plans were derailed due to a suspension and absences. A lack of mentoring, guidance, and support with an insurmountable amount of

invisibility led Dawn to pause on her efforts to attend a university because she perceived her academic opportunities to be non-existent. Positive mentorship would have altered her academic trajectory and provided a path for her to receive a Bachelor's degree.

Study Three

Research Question 1: *How do two Black women school principals navigate the gendered and raced work environment of their urban schools?* Believing their career as principals are God-ordained, Principal Sierra and Principal Brown were challenged in their authority and management skills by their staff, leaders, and board of education members. Lacking support and space to contribute to the decision making processes pertaining to their charter schools, both principals remained authentic in their leadership approach to create environments that were conducive to learning for students of color, particularly Black students. The gendered racism Principal Brown encountered negatively impacted her principal self-efficacy and she contemplated leaving her school.

As a collection, these studies show the disregard, neglect, and invisibility of the needs of Black women and girls in K-12 schools. Each study offered a unique perspective of the challenges and perseverance concerning the experiences of Black girls and women. In Study One and Two, sixth and eleventh grade were pivotal turning points. Embraced with joy, hope, anger, disappointment, and advocacy, in sixth grade I was perceived as an adult while Dawn's brilliance had its first opportunity to shine. Adultification made me question my existence in a school environment sworn to protect me and Dawn slowly began to slip into the background of her classroom. As Black girls, identified as gifted,

our excellence was not celebrated but rather questioned as teachers, administrators, and counselors were unsure of how to engage and teach us. Eleventh grade brought about radical change as I discovered my voice in advocating for my rights and Dawn lost her voice over a suspension. Eleventh grade reinforced my desire to become an educator and changed Dawn's path in pursuing higher education. Although Dawn and I experienced joyous and tumultuous trials during these times, we continued to strive for our dreams because we both believed we were called to help others and accomplish great things.

The notion of accepting one's calling to help others continued with narrations of the lived experiences of Principal Sierra, Principal Brown, and me in Studies One and Three. Principal Sierra, Principal Brown, and I saw an opportunity to bring about change and a positive learning experience for Black students but were met with opposition and defiance from staff and leaders. The emotional tax of leading a school without the support from those assigned to help school leaders proved to be too much for me but Principal Brown and Principal Sierra continued to advocate for their students. The informal support group I was a member of dissolved because three out of the five Black women leaders chose to protect their peace and set boundaries by resigning. I believed I had no one to support me and help me grow professionally and was out of options. With my health declining as a result of racial battle fatigue, I decided to protect my peace and set boundaries by resigning. Although Principal Brown considered leaving her school and is still actively searching, she is learning how to set boundaries with the CSC leaders while protecting her mental and emotional health and remains a principal with CSC. Their beliefs on leading with love and care are essential in the Black community as Black parents look for principals and teachers who will be a village for their children (Tillman,

2004). Principal Sierra and Principal Brown learned to build informal professional learning and mentoring networks in order to survive in their settings and hold each other accountable. Without these informal networks, they may have sought careers outside of education to escape their oppressive environments.

All three studies are interconnected as they display the struggles, trials, triumphs, and joy that Black girls and women experience at all levels in K-12 education. A major finding revealed that all participants lacked mentorship during their K-12 journeys. Dawn, Principal Sierra, Principal Brown, and myself were all excited about the opportunities we believed education would bring us. We saw education as a venue to bring about change in our lives as well as the lives of others. Our joy and excitement went on an emotional rollercoaster as we experienced the highs and lows of how schools work. Dawn, Principal Sierra, Principal Brown, and myself were not immune to the racism that existed in our educational environments. As a collective unit, we did not receive mentoring. Each individual became responsible for their own educational growth as K-12 schools did not seeks to support us. The neglect and disregard for Principal Brown's and Principal Sierra's leadership growth caused them to carry each other's educational burdens. As a result of the lack of mentorship in high school, Dawn searched for mentors to guide her through the college process after graduation.

As a Black woman in education, I understand the importance of care and positive support needed for Black women. Four months after interviewing the participants, I remain in contact with Dawn, Principal Sierra, and Principal Brown. Through our conversations, Principal Sierra, Principal Brown, and I continue to encourage each other and create ways to assist and support other Black women in school leadership. My

conversations with Dawn are full of life, joy, and hope as we discuss her future and the amazing things she will accomplish. In return, Dawn encourages me to continue to talk to Black girls in school and mentor them. Dawn reminds me of the importance of representation and caring for our village.

Implications and Future Research

The findings from this dissertation have several important implications for research on the experiences of Black girls and women in K-12 schools.

Developing Critical Collaborative Spaces

Critical collaborative spaces (CCS) for Black women and girls to feel protected and valued must be created in schools. Through this research, I define critical collaborative spaces as environments were Black girls and women can discuss their experiences in schools or leadership without repercussions. CCS for Black girls would allow them the opportunity to find community in the daily obstacles and struggles they encounter. CCS would also allow them to produce strategies and action plans for teachers, administrators, and other educational leaders on how to support Black girls academically, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Educational leaders and stakeholders should not invade these spaces unless invited and once invited, they must attentively listen to the strategies presented and actively respond. In addition, CCS would allow for Black girls to develop criteria for mentorship and clearly state their expectations and outcomes for a mentoring program.

For Black female school administrators, CCS would provide them the ability to discuss their experiences without supervision by their leaders. In these spaces, Black women would determine what supports they need to effectively lead their schools.

Similarly to CCS for Black girls, superintendents and additional stakeholders should not invade these spaces unless invited and once invited, they must attentively listen to the strategies presented and actively respond. Black female school administrators would decide what active decision making looks like for them in their districts and petition to be a part of every decision-making process. Black women school administrators desiring to participate in these spaces should not be met with intimidation, harassment, discrimination, or racism as they work to make school environments affirmative for them as well as their staff and students.

Anti-Racism in Education

All educational programs must be taught through an anti-racist lens. It is not the sole responsibility of Black girls or women to educate teachers and leaders on their historical background or why they deserve to be treated with respect in educational environments. In their reflective research, Matias and Mackey (2016) discussed how their education diversity course implemented strategies to understand the Whiteness ideology immersed in pre-service teachers. During Matias and Mackey's course, teacher candidates read books by authors of colors that elicited emotions such as anger, defense, guilt, and pain. Matias and Mackey found it critical for teacher candidates to engage with their emotions and "own the emotional burden of race, class, gender, and homophobia" (p. 37). Using a variety of texts (Facebook, Jing, commercials, social media, etc.), field trips, and session reflections, and activities teacher candidates reflected on the construction of race and the deconstruction of Whiteness within them. Matias and Mackey stated teachers need to be emotionally prepared to take on the task of anti-racism and racial justice in schools.

Similar pedagogies can be applied to educational leadership programs to deconstruct Whiteness ideologies present within school administration. Educational leadership programs and candidates must conduct a deep dive into their district and school policies regarding school discipline, student entrance into gifted programs, testing and curriculum choices. Candidates must examine if the policies in place are harmful and exclusionary to specific groups of students and what can be done to eradicate these policies. Candidates must understand the curriculum and testing implemented at their schools and analyze the purpose behind them. They must ask does the purpose serve to classify and divide students based on race, socioeconomic status, and proximity to Whiteness.

Integrating Mentoring Models and Mental Health Supports

Mental health supports and mentoring must be put in place for Black girls and Black women in K-12 schools. Daily microaggressions, confrontations, and acts of racism can become too much for Black girls and Black female leaders to handle. Psychologists, therapists, and other mental health counselors should be available at every school for Black girls and Black women. If and when the school environment becomes too much to bear, the mental health experts should have the ability to grant, at minimum, alternative instructional aid and/or paid leave for Black girls and women respectively to focus on their overall health. In order for Black girls to be successful and Black women to be effective leaders, their overall mental health must be prioritized, protected, and cared for at all times.

Final Thoughts

This study has been immensely personal to me because I have ties with each of the participants. The fight and dedication within Principal Brown and Principal Sierra to advocate for their students in spite of the challenges they faced as leaders encourages me to re-enter the world of K-12 education. Dawn's tenacity to pursue a degree in counseling motivated me to complete this dissertation. Principal Brown, Principal Sierra, Dawn, and my ability to persevere in education through racism, microaggressions, and trauma is a testament to our faith and spirituality. However, we still live in a society and participate in educational institutions that do not see us as human.

Black girls and women are special but we are not superhuman. We deserve the same level of mentorship, attention to our professional growth, and nurturing as our White counterparts. The constant pressure to conform or adapt to a school environment that does not care for our physical, emotional, or mental health is daunting and discouraging. The perception that Black women principals are useful in pacifying disgruntled parents of color and Black girls who experience out-of-school suspension are not worthy of guidance served as reminders that our presence, abilities, and intelligence may always be seen as inferior.

Future research on the parallel lived experiences of Black girls and women in K-12 schools could include Black female superintendents. With the inclusion of Black female superintendents, the research could explore the ways gendered racism affects the physical and mental health of Black women. Quantitative measurement tools can be used to measure how gendered racism and microaggressions impact leadership self-efficacy and academic outcomes for Black girls and women. Previous studies have discussed the

resiliency of Black women and girls in education, but it would be interesting to explore the effects of resiliency and perseverance on their physical and mental health.

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