EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF DRAMATIC ARTS ON UNDEREXAMINED
LITERACIES: EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN AN URBAN MIDDLE
SCHOOL

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

2020

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ABSTRACT

PORTIA MARIE YORK: Exploring the influence of dramatic arts on underexamined literacies: Experiences of Black girls in an urban middle school. (Under the direction of DR. CHANCE LEWIS)

This study examined the influence of drama participation on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of urban middle school Black girls. This interpretive case study used the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework with Black Feminist Thought epistemology to address the following research questions: What are the experiences of middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement? What role does the drama teacher play with urban middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address language, identity and social media engagement? Purposive criterion sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. Semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a writing prompt were conducted with five Black females; four participants were middle school students who attended Stonybrook School (pseudonym), and one participant was a Black female teacher who taught at the school. The findings of the study suggest that Black girls who participated in drama 1) Experienced enhanced foundational language, 2) Acquired a more positive racial and gender identities, and 3) Demonstrated effective management of social media engagement. Additional findings suggest that the Black female drama teacher plays a significant role with Black middle school girls as they successfully navigate academics, identity, and social media engagement through practicing drama activities, despite the race and gender challenges they face. The findings from this study help inform educational practices, policies, and research aimed at improving outcomes for Black girls in urban middle schools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee chair, Dr. Chance Lewis, for providing a constant source of fortitude and delivering stellar mentoring from the moment we started working together. I am thankful to have learned so much from you and had the opportunity to work with you! From receiving travel funding to attend conferences, becoming a teaching assistant for your class, acceptance into the Doctoral Fellows Program and becoming an intern for ICUE, each contributed to my scholarly development. You pushed me to levels that surprised me. I am eternally grateful for all that you have taught me about myself, the critical work needed in our communities (starting with the "Window" activity in your Critical Issues class), and the many opportunities that you have presented to me. Thank you for everything!

Sincere thanks are also due to the other members of my committee. Dr. Bettie Butler, thank you for helping me understand how to navigate the doctoral process from the very first class I was enrolled in with you. Your teaching helped create a roadmap for my journey. I will always remember the excitement I felt winning the grant for Curriculum Innovation in Alternative Education in your class. In addition, I learned a great deal from being a teaching assistant for your EDCI 8312 class. It enhanced my teaching expertise in higher education. Lastly, my favorite memories are the great readings from EDCI 8312. Thank you for expanding my knowledge base and expanding my personal library. Dr. Jae Hoon Lim, thank you for a style of teaching that helped me gain a thorough understanding of and love for qualitative research. It has undoubtedly contributed to my enjoyment of the data collection and analysis processes for my dissertation study. I strive to become an expert qualitative researcher. Next, I must thank

you, Dr. Elizabeth Murray, for embracing me and my research interests. You immediately engaged in long conversations with me and provided much expertise and awareness on all things theater. I needed that! Your positive affirmations also went a long way. I wholeheartedly appreciate the time, perceptiveness, and guidance that you all have dedicated throughout this process. Last, but certainly not least, I am thankful and very grateful for the discernment, expertise, and copyediting of Dr. Megan Rand. Thank you.

Finally, I must acknowledge Dr. Sonyia Richardson for her consistent and genuine support, knowledge, advisement, motivation, and true friendship as we journeyed together through this Ph.D. program. Thank you, my friend.

DEDICATION

To my family and friends who always believed in me and supported me throughout my journey: thank you! I especially want to thank my sister Monica, who was elated with my desire to begin and complete this journey, and provided me with dissertation books to guide me through this process. She also cheered me on through every milestone. I also want to thank all three of my parents, Dianne and Stan, and Bryant for their unconditional love and encouragement that helped lift my spirits during the tough times, and expressed excitement of my successes during this entire doctoral process. Mom gives me energy because she believes I am so smart and encourages me to be creatively curious. My dad ignites my drive with continual intellectual challenges and pushes me to think critically. I continue to thank my son Jordan for his belief in me, support of me, and for what I contribute to his development and to society. I'll always do the same for you honeybun. Also, I want to thank Reginald, my love, for his patience, affection, and encouragement as he created space for me to get to the end. Lastly, I dedicate this work to my beloved grandmother, Ruth, who left this earth shortly before my official acceptance into the program. I am still making you proud, Nana. I know that God is the source of my strength and faith, and makes all things possible. Each individual mentioned has helped me do what I love and be what I love. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

"*Let the beauty we love, be what we do*" - *Rumi*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AACPS ------ Anne Arundel County Public Schools

ADT ---------- Applied Drama and Theater

AEP ----------- Arts Education Partnership

BFT ---------- Black Feminist Thought

CLT ---------- Contextual Teaching and Learning

CRAE -------- Culturally Relevant Arts Education

FG ------------ Focus Group

MSA --------- Maryland State Assessment

NAEP ------- National Association of Educational Progress

SSI ---------- Semi-Structured Interview

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Black girls in urban middle schools may have a set of mannerisms, actions, and styles to express how they speak, what they write, what they post on social media, as well as how they express themselves through actions based on their culture, gender, and possibly their urban surroundings. These manifestations stem from the development and use of varied literacies and challenge us to see and explore literacy differently. In fact, scholars tell us that Black girls in urban middle schools face challenges with using language to construct meaning (Flood & Anders, 2005; Sealy-Ruiz, 2016), dealing with harmful social media activity (Martin et al., 2018) the cultural pressures of adolescence (Hough, 2019), and understanding how society embraces the intersectionality of their race and gender identities (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Additionally, Black females are often relegated to the margins, and most national statistics ignore Black girls' experiences, performances, and outcomes (Ricks, 2014). Unaligned with this data is the notion that females of color will comprise approximately 53% of the U.S. population by the year 2050 (Center for American Progress, 2013), so the idea of dismissing or leaving Black girls out of a national discourse on education and asking them to hide under other group identities (by gender and/or race) is educationally unsound and inequitable (Ricks, 2014). This data leaves us asking the question, where do Black girls fit within a society that has historically marginalized them based on their race and gender?

Previous data leads us to study certain literacies of Black girls differently. It leads us to examine influences on language, expression, and identity of middle school Black girls. Research has shown that integrating the arts has been associated with improved literacy skills (Bransford & Schwartz, 1999; Martins & Popkewitz, 2014). Arts in

education and arts integration are solution-focused concepts used to enhance Black girls'

multiple literacies in urban middle schools. The arts can open pathways toward

understanding the richness of people and cultures and foster a sense of being

("Symposium: Arts as Education, 1991"), yet scholars posit that they absence of the arts

can hinder achievement (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; Charland, 2011;

McDermott et al., 2017). However, research acknowledges the importance of advocacy

for literacy practices, specifically for Black girls, to make meaning of their identities

within schools (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016).

Society offers multiple literacies that people use to navigate the world. Ten

popular literacies that are consistently used in education include digital literacy, media

literacy, visual literacy, data literacy, game literacy, health & financial literacy civic &

ethical literacy, news literacy, coding & computational literacy, and foundational literacy

(Pietila, 2017). However, the basis for written and verbal expression is foundational

literacy that extends through the use of the other literacies. Given the basis of

foundational literacy, it is essential to discuss a core component: reading. For nearly a

decade, the reading scores of eighth grade students in the United States have been

stagnant or have dropped, particularly in large city urban school districts, which show

achievement scores below state and national averages (National Assessment of

Educational Progress, 2017). Additionally, 2015 Program for International Assessment

(PISA) data on reading outcomes showed the average scores of 15 year olds in the United

States well below the same age students in countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong,

Poland, Finland, and Canada (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). The data

also revealed that the state average achievement score for North Carolina is lower than

the U.S. average achievement score (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). Subsequently, in some states like North Carolina, the average reading scores of students in eighth grade public city schools in urban areas trend at less than proficient levels (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). When studying these scores more deeply, Black girls in eighth grade have significantly lower reading scores than White, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Island girls, as well as White and Asian boys, as presented from results analyzed from 2011 to 2017 (Nation's Report Card, n.d.). Furthermore, in 2013, Black girls were held back at a rate far higher than any other single group of girls, and more than twice the rate for girls overall (National Organization for Women, n.d.). Consequently, middle school Black girls' foundational literacy is lagging in comparison with their domestic and international peers. Unfortunately, there are new literacies that impact Black girls' lives when they go unnoticed and appear unimportant. Further research is needed on literary skills of Black teenaged girls. Sealy-Ruiz (2016) contends that Black girls draw on their critical literacies skills by reading, writing, and speaking about their individual and collective experiences. It is imperative that educators and researchers deeply examine the literacies development of Black girls.

The focus on underexamined literacies for the success of Black girls led to the purpose of this study. Students, educators, and parents, need to become more aware of the multiple literacies impacting the lives of middle school students, specifically Black girls. The word literacy has expanded beyond foundational literacy to encompass an ability to communicate effectively through various of mediums (Bales, 2019). In the 21st century, three popular literacies exist in the lives of many Black female students in the United States. Foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies are consistently present

and highly relevant in adolescent Black girls' lives and impact how they successfully navigate school and life.

Additionally, this dissertation research focuses on the importance of exploring drama as an art form in education related to drama's influence on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. One objective is to explore the emotional and motivational constructs that underlie adolescent girls' experiences, an aspect that has been given relatively little attention by researchers concerning underexamined literacies. This research has the potential to help adolescent Black girls in urban middle schools acquire skills and competencies through drama techniques and strategies by fully developing literacies needed for navigating into and through adulthood. This research also has the potential to encourage schools to adopt culturally relevant arts education, using drama as a conduit for enhanced curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy.

This qualitative study aimed to explore and investigate dramatic art strategies, activities, and techniques that influence traditionally underexamined literacies. The three literacies noted as being underexamined and studied for this project were foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. This study's participants were Black girls in an urban middle school that participated in drama classes and their drama teacher. The study intended to understand more about the experiences that the sample population of Black girls had by participating in drama classes and how that participation influenced their foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. These literacies are necessary and relevant for their navigation through life. The Culturally Relevant Arts Education (CRAE) framework through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) epistemology guided the study. It allowed for exploration of how Black girls expressed their language

(oral and written) in person and on social media, explicitly exploring their drama participation as a potential factor. This exploratory study utilized interviews, a writing prompt, and a focus group of Black middle school girls with their drama teacher. It is important to note that throughout this paper, the term Black when describing the study participants may also refer to African American and African.

The Presence of the Arts in Education

The presence of the arts in education embodies narratives about the hopes of the future and its promises of a more progressive and humane society (Martins & Popkewitz, 2014). Arts in education extend beyond the classroom to impact other aspects of life. In fact, in a public opinion poll, Americans believe the arts strengthens communities socially, educationally, and economically, where 64 percent of Americans approve arts funding by the National Endowment for the Arts, 60 percent of Americans approve arts funding by local government, 58 percent by state government, and 54 percent of Americans approve arts funding by federal government ("Americans Believe the Arts Strengthen Communities Socially, Educationally, Economically," n.d.). By moving the arts from the margins to the center of education, the arts can be perceived as a fundamental way of knowing. "The arts can be, for both students and teachers, forms of expression, communication, creativity, imagination, observation, perception, and thought" ("Symposium: Arts as Education," 1991, p. 25). The arts can also open pathways toward understanding the richness of people and cultures and foster a sense of being ("Symposium: Arts as Education, 1991"). Necessarily, the arts can lift up one or many voices, influencing educational settings to impact students' and teachers' academics and social engagement.

In educational settings, arts can be described in three broad categories: arts as education, arts experience, and arts integration (ArtsEdge, 2019). Arts as education gives meaning to learning how to do the art. "When students use the artistic processes of creating, performing, and responding, they draw from various kinds of knowledge and understanding about the arts to construct meaning" (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2016, p. 10). Arts as education can be justified as an alternative pedagogical technique to achieve better results in mathematics, reading, or science; hence the arts are used as disciplinary instruments to make the student more attentive, motivated, and even perform better on tests (Martins & Popkewitz, 2014). Arts experience in education gives meaning to students when they consume art provided by a field trip or guest artist (Jackson, 2010).

To understand students' art experiences in educational settings, researchers are likely to rely on the experiences of students as their abilities are developing, and less likely to depend solely on the experiences of adults (Jackson, 2010). Students have the opportunity to be open to an experience that may shift their thinking, outlook, language, or even aesthetics in their own artwork, whereas arts integration in education encourages students to engage in a creative process that connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). Additionally, arts integration often is defined as an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). The idea of integrating art disciplines into a general education subject area to enhance learning and gain knowledge has been of interest to many educators and educational reformers for some time (Moss et al., 2018). Essentially, students need to gain knowledge of aesthetics

and also be able to place the arts in broader contexts to fully appreciate their significance (Arts Education Assessment Framework, 2016). These contexts include personal perspectives and how the arts fit into society and the broader culture, yet also allow the arts to transform their own lives.

The arts in school settings can lead to multiple narratives pertaining to their place and purpose as the impact the lives of students. Additionally, engaging in the arts can be used for self-expression through visual and performing modalities. Consequently, the absence of arts in education can hinder students' academic achievement (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; Charland, 2011; McDermott et al., 2017), but also obstruct the more in depth and broader perspectives of students. In moving toward a policy for arts in education, the 2019 Arts Education Partnership (AEP) annual meeting employed an agenda that explored the latest research, innovative practices, and emerging policy approaches that highlight the arts in preparing all students for success in school, work, and life (AEP Annual Convening, 2019). Further research is needed to uncover what factors of the dramatic arts contribute to the varied literacies impacting Black girls in urban middle schools.

Drama and Theater as a Nuanced Field

The terms drama and theater are often used interchangeably in conversation. It is essential to compare and contrast the terms for a better understanding of this study. Consequently, Applied Drama, also known as Applied Theatre or Applied Drama and Theater (ADT), is an umbrella term for using drama practice in an educational context (O'Connor & O'Connor, 2009). It is often done in non-theatrical spaces, with participants who do not consider themselves to be artists and go beyond the traditional

and limiting scope of conventional Western theater forms (Neelands, 2016; O'Connor & O'Connor, 2009). Techniques such as role playing, improvisation, and other integrative methods are used in ADT, which are also used to help participants move forward in their discoveries extending beyond sole academics or professional art.

Practicing dramatic arts (drama) can be in the form of a play that can be performed for theatre, radio, or even television, and can also be known as a composition in verse or prose intended to portray life, a character, or to tell a story usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue. Drama, as in a play, is meant to be performed on a stage in front of an audience at the theater. Theater art is also in alignment with drama, and often the words are used interchangeably. Consequently, ADT, theater art, and drama have been a powerful medium of human expression and exploration for many years, offering a deeper understanding of entertainment and instruction. However, according to the seminal work of Wilhelm and Edmiston (1998), drama is not theater, drama is creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding together in imaginative contexts and situations; it is not about performance, but exploration.

Understanding drama is vital to appreciate the purpose of this study fully. Drama practices and activities in schools such as Forum Theater, Image Theater, Narration, Improvisation, Miming, Controlled Breathing, Fourth Wall, and Storytelling, among other techniques, may be used with Black girls for their development of foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. Furthermore, a need exists for curriculum of liberation to combat historical and current social conditions that negatively impact school-aged Black girls, such as harsh disciplinary practices, low academic expectations, and sexual

objectification (Nunn, 2018). Traditional curriculum may also craft the dominant narrative pertaining to the successes and failures of young Black girls, still calling for the need for liberation of curriculum. By utilizing a qualitative research approach, this study investigates the role drama may hold on influencing certain literacies of Black girls in an urban middle school as an effort to explore how drama practices may serve as liberation of curriculum with those literacies. For this dissertation's purpose, the word drama will be used to tell or express a story, usually involving conflicts and emotions through action and dialogue to examine the influence on literacy. However, it may encompass the actions and strategies of applied theater or ADT. Throughout this study, the word drama will encompass the practices of both applied theater, ADT, and drama techniques and strategies while investigating, collecting, analyzing, and reporting data.

Underexamined Literacies

Additional background information is needed about the literacies explored in this study. A growing body of research on Black girls' literacy practices suggests the need for more examination to advocate for literacy practices that afford opportunities for Black girls to make meaning of their identities within schools (Hobbs, 2017; Sutherland, 2005). When we interpret literacy, we traditionally lean toward reading and writing. However, for this study, a broader, more varied perspective on literacies will be investigated and delineated related to the descriptions of literacies in education today. Reading and writing are no longer considered the sole forms of literacy. The top 10 literacies in education are digital literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, data literacy, game literacy, health & financial literacy, civic & ethical literacy, news literacy, coding & computational literacy, and foundational literacy (Pietila, 2017). An additional literacy to be included in this

study is "Black Girls' Literacy." This refers to "specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create to affirm themselves, their world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood" (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Each of the literacies contributes to the development of Black girls. This study specifically focused on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies concerning if and how Black girls develop, employ, and perceive appropriate literacy skills by participation in dramatic art classes. As these literacies were explored in more detail, it was important to understand the meaning of experiences and behaviors extracted during the study. The three literacies studied are outlined as follows. Foundational literacy is the framework where other literacies can be strengthened. Foundational literacy is traditionally known as reading, writing, and meaning making that are skills gained in the early years and are used as building blocks upon which other skills can develop (Pietila, 2017). Digital literacy encompasses the literate use of devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops and being able to use these devices to achieve a variety of goals (Pietila, 2017). It is also a way of expressing knowledge using language, images, sound, and multimedia through digital platforms (Hobbs, 2017). The final literacy is Black Girls' literacy and is explained as an instructional practice that becomes a space for resistance and for Black girls' educational excellence that prepares them to be successful in life (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Each of the three literacies is further examined throughout the study.

The Foundation of Language

Students need to understand the importance of reading and writing to be motivated to excel in their own literacy development (Brown, 2014). Through active engagement in the reading and writing processes, children learn ways to use their

growing knowledge and skills fluidly and in combination with all domains of development in their lives (Brown, 2014). It is important to understand that reading and writing build upon a wide range of developing skills and is an ongoing process. Consequently, with foundational skills in place, students will develop and flourish in other areas impacted by their language development.

The Digital Era

Digital literacy is broad, and consequently, in this study, digital literacy will pertain specifically to social media platforms and usage. In our current technological society, middle school is around the period that students spend a considerable time on social media platforms. In fact, according to CommonSenseMedia (2018), 13 to 17 year old youth reported their heavy use of social media helped them feel more popular and confident, and less anxious and depressed. It should be noted that many middle schoolers indicate that Instagram, Snap Chat, and YouTube are their most used social media sites and that they do have concerns about social media activity due to inappropriate postings, getting hacked, getting their feelings hurt, lack of privacy, inappropriate pictures, bullying, negativity, and stalkers (Martin et al., 2018). It is worth pointing out that girls use social media more than boys, and the level of usage correlates with mental health (Common Sense Media, 2018). At age 15, 43% of girls were using social media at least an hour per day versus 31% of boys, and girls reported more social and emotional difficulties as they aged compared to boys (Common Sense Media, 2018). Consequently, Black girls contend with immersion on social media platforms, which creates social and emotional anxiety in their daily lives based on the types and meanings of social media posts. Lastly, according to Sealy-Ruiz (2016), it is vital to examine the usage and type of

social media engagement from middle school girls to understand the impact on their lives. This study will help examine the implications of social media usage on Black adolescent girls' education and personal development.

The Multidimensionality of Black Girls

Educators in schools across the nation should be concerned about the notion of Black girls feeling invisible, left feeling voiceless, or acting out of character through their language and actions. Few efforts have explicitly focused on African American girls, whose unique struggles are often conflated with the experiences of Black males or White female youth (Evans-Winters, 2011). It is crucial to examine this ongoing national problem concerning the traditionally underexamined literacies of Black girls and explore alternative methods and pedagogy to address academic and social issues. Scholars have called for the need to center Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility, mistreatment, and dehumanization of girls in schools, classrooms, public media, and research literature (Evans-Winters, 2005; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). To examine the need for creating literacy-learning spaces for Black girls, one must begin with a critical discussion about representation. School spaces should be transformative, and educators must be intentional and deliberate in teaching practices. Sealy-Ruiz (2016) posits that the use of the Black Girls' Literacies framework (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) approach in the classroom exemplifies how educators can make changes to enhance the literacies of Black girls. This framework allows Black girls to draw on their critical literacies skills by reading and writing about their individual and collective experiences of being a Black girl in today's context (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). The literature reviewed transverses multiple

literacies and includes a synthesis of research in reading, writing, language, and cultural studies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Although research states that Black girls in urban middle schools often combat challenges when it comes to literacies, such as embracing quality literacy instruction, development of literacies, and using language to construct and communicate meaning (Flood & Anders, 2005; Sealy-Ruiz, 2016), educators and researchers must look beyond the traditional sense of literacy to understand the ordeals that Black girls face when developing varied underexamined literacies. Black girls frequently face challenges in educational settings, dealing with potential invisibility in school, thus receiving inequitable education (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Additionally, middle schoolers report concerns about social media activity due to inappropriate harmful activities barraging them (Martin et al., 2018). Lastly, middle school girls come into a sense of suffering due to cultural pressures as they move into adolescence (Hough, 2019). In fact, a girl's self-confidence begins lagging in sixth grade, and a rise in anxiety and questioning her academic abilities and intelligence around seventh grade (Hough, 2019). The culmination of the literature in the field, including Black girls and middle school students, enhanced the researcher's interest in this study in exploring the intricacies of how Black girls navigate the three outlined literacies based on any influence from in school drama class participation. While evidence of the phenomenon of poor foundational literacy, as well as academic and oppressive challenges have been established in the literature, no such relationship has been investigated within the realm of drama as an art form influencing foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. The problem lies in the lack of drama based

curriculum and pedagogy that can connect with urban Black girls' learning styles and developing literacies, as well as how Black girls understand and embrace their identities and express their voices. Additionally, the lack of arts in education can hinder achievement (Chappelle & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; McDermott et al., 2017), not only in core academics, but also in varied literacies that affect confidence, expression, identity, and navigating other layers in the lives of Black female adolescents. Furthermore, the academic and social-emotional success and overall well-being of Black girls in school contexts cannot be achieved without their teachers and researchers who produce data to help inform educators and policymakers of their academic needs (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016).

Where do Black middle school girls fit within a society that has historically marginalized them based on race and gender? This is complicated by the minimal research available about Black females in the arts, education, and varying contexts. Most data and theories are framed from a White perspective. More research is needed on the influence that drama participation may have on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of Black girls in urban middle schools. In this investigation, the researcher explored the benefits of dramatic arts education to embrace the development of particular literacies for Black girls in an urban middle school. This approach may potentially lead to advocacy for Black middle school girls; in essence, this study explored what it means to be young, Black, and female in American urban public education.

Conceptual Framework

This next section begins by laying out the conceptual dimensions of the research. The Culturally Relevant Arts Education (CRAE) conceptual framework developed by Hanley (2013) guided this research study. In conjunction, the study is also guided by the

Black Feminist Thought epistemology (Hill Collins, 2014) as we explore the study

through such lens. To understand this framework and the lens to view the study, CRAE

and BFT are described individually and then together to show how Culturally Relevant

Arts Education (CRAE) is informed through the lens of Black Feminist Thought (BFT).

Culturally Relevant Arts Education

Hanley (2013) presented the framework as a model of Culturally Relevant Arts

Education (CRAE) based on intra and interconnections—of learning, creating,

disciplines, social power, controversies, theories, models, and experience. Hanley (2013)

explored and shared her personal connection to the conceptual framework in how she

expressed CRAE as a synthesis of her life as an artist, an educator, a researcher, an

activist, and an African American woman. The framework that embodies CRAE also

includes the importance of social justice as a means to recognize the roots of internalized

oppression. Social justice has a long history and been described as an "equitable

redistribution of resources" and as recognition of culture and identity for those who are

marginalized and subjugated in society (Avineri et al., 2019; Barry, 2005; Bell, 2007).

Consequently, Hanley (2013) explained social justice work as internal and external of

self and the world to make meaning of the world. This pedagogical model of CRAE is

useful to focus the arts on social justice and includes motivating artists and arts

participants through pedagogy that uses their cultural knowledge and experiences as an

asset that explores action and critical reflection about the arts, artists, the world, and art's

work in the world (Hanley, 2011). Hanley (2013) also contended that the foundation of

the model is imagination and creativity and expressed that "creativity is empowering; you

take risks, test the world, shape media and meaning, and thereby change the world" (p. 3).

The CRAE framework offers six pedagogical models as its tenets, three in the arts, and three in the non-arts (Hanley, 2013). The first three in the arts are 1) arts production, 2) arts integration, and 3) aesthetics. Arts production explains that artists or arts participants learn skills to express ideas and emotions through arts media. Secondly, arts integration involves the use of arts to teach and learn non-arts subjects. The last of the arts pedagogical models is aesthetics outlining the experiences and perspectives of the world of arts and artists. Comparatively, the three non-arts pedagogies are 1) multicultural education, 2) critical pedagogy, and 3) Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). Multicultural education must meet the needs of both race, and social group constructs to address modern society undergoing complex social, economic, and political transformations due to globalization (Sultanova, 2016). Secondly, Freire (1970) defines critical pedagogy to challenge cultural and structural power relations through an analysis of systems of power (such as practices within schools). It is a teaching approach inspired by critical theory, and it attempts to help students question and challenge the dominant narrative. Lastly, CTL is defined as a way to introduce content using a variety of active learning techniques designed to help students connect what they already know to what they are expected to learn, and to construct new knowledge from the analysis of this learning process (Bonnet et al., 2018; Hudson & Whisler, 2008). CRAE completely exemplifies the essence that aligns with the research conducted with Black girls and their drama teacher at an urban middle school concerning multicultural education, and

expression of ideas and emotions, while challenging forms of oppression through social justice using drama as an art form.

Demonstrations of Culturally Relevant Arts Education For Social Justice

There are numerous examples of how CRAE can be expressed and shared. Examples include counter storytelling, using a critical lens of the arts for young people to analyze inequities and develop strategies, drawing on action and reflection within the arts focused on liberation, using hip hop as critical pedagogy, and creating experiences of recognition and achievement for youth. According to Hanley (2013), the arts can be a model for engaging social change, uncovering secret stories, and creating empathy within schools and communities. Hanley (2011) contended that the arts could challenge invisibility and silencing by empowering Black youth to be creative and become critical change agents who challenge demeaning perceptions and practices. This framework is employed by the Black female middle school students in the study, telling their perspectives on navigating particular literacies while calling upon drama techniques and strategies learned and practiced.

Arts For Social Justice

Within the construct of CRAE, social justice art is explored, developed, and expressed to make changes in attitudes, behaviors, and systems within schools and communities. Defining social justice art begins with the artwork itself. The seminal work of Fraser (1997), defines social justice as a relationship between the redistribution of resources in response to socioeconomic injustice. Additionally, seminal scholars also posited that the most important characteristics of all art are its ability to communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences through imagery, audio, movement, metaphor, or other

forms of expression (Chalmers, 1996; Davis, 2005; Dewey, 1980). Activist art can also

be defined as social justice art and is often used to awaken awareness, mobilize people to

action, or inform people of specific social conditions (Hanley, 2013). However, within

the development and expression of CRAE, social justice art calls for evaluation of these

constructs. Consequently, it is difficult to determine how social justice is evaluated. The

CRAE framework views the evaluation process as systemic shifts, attitude changes, or on

a spectrum where social impact may fall anywhere from basic community building to

organized community change. The ultimate goal of CRAE is to promote empowerment

so that all individuals may assert their inherent creativity to create a world that shares,

recognizes, and includes their gifts (Hanley, 2013). In conjunction with CRAE, Black

Feminist Thought epistimology helped reveal the role of the drama teacher as a Black

female instructing mostly Black students in her classes at an urban middle school.

Black Feminist Thought

Without the voices of Black females, their lived experiences cannot be accurately

produced. Therefore, the omittance of Black women's' and girls' experiences further

demonstrates the silenced voices of Black females and the sovereignty of White women's

experiences (Collins, 1990). Black Feminist Thought (BFT) demonstrates Black

women's emerging power performing as agents of knowledge (Hill Collins, 2014). BFT

is an epistemology written by Patricia Collins that places Black women's knowledge at

the center of analysis (Collins, 2000). BFT speaks to the importance that knowledge

plays in empowering oppressed people (Hill Collins, 2014). Too often, oppressed

people's voices are only heard if their experiences are framed in the thoughts and

understandings of the mainstream culture (Collins, 2009). This study explored Black

female students' experiences and thoughts, who were taught by a Black female teacher, where their voices could be heard from a Black Feminist Thought lens, not the dominant narrative. One distinguishing feature of this epistemology is that new knowledge from the individual's consciousness and the social transformations from political and economic institutions are important for change (Hill Collins, 2014). Placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis offers fresh insight into worldviews.

There are two tenets or contributions of BFT that help further our understanding of the connections between knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (Hill Collins, 2014). First, BFT offers a shift in how we think about oppression by embracing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. Second, BFT is concerned with ways of addressing the truth. Beyond the tenets are three key themes: a) BFT is shaped by the experiences Black women have encountered in their lives, hence their personal stories; b) Black women's experiences are individually unique; however, some experiences connect them with other Black women; and c) Black women's experiences intersect through the diversity of their age, class, religion, sexual orientation, and other intersectional identities. The collective identity of Black women as articulated through BFT awakens their consciousness, which provides a new meaning to their own identity, revealing how they resisted the ways they have been oppressed. This epistemology offers underrepresented groups a way of contributing new knowledge about their own experiences and allowing for non-dominant groups to define their own reality.

In this dissertation study, the ideological perspectives are shared through the Black teacher and Black female students' voices. Their perspectives are sought out by the researcher to allow their voices to be heard. The epistemology embodies the reality

that Black women and girls embrace a mutual understanding of what it is like to be

oppressed, based on the multidimensionality of being Black and female; and their varied

lived experiences. BFT suggests that Black women's experiences are dissimilar to the

experiences of women of other ethnic backgrounds (Collins, 2000). In the context of this

study, BFT applies to Black middle school girls and their Black teacher who participate

in drama classes or instruct drama in an urban school setting. Since Black women's lives

have been told and shaped by so many external influences, BFT encourages Black

women to develop, redefine, and explain their own stories through the lens they identify

(Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Furthermore, BFT provides a platform for Black women's

voices to be amplified within academia, in social spaces through songs, and formal and

impromptu speeches that allow their thoughts to be articulated through their identified

struggles and challenges (Collins, 2000). BFT encompasses the thoughts of Black women

and girls who may have been oppressed.

In this study, the researcher explored the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of

Black girls and the role their teacher played in their drama class journey to investigate the

possible influence that participation in drama may have on how they express themselves

using language, movement, image, and engagement with social media. The researcher

interviewed selected Black female students and their Black teacher from the drama class

on strategies and techniques practiced by the Black girls, and explored if these

experiences are unique ways of developing certain literacies in spaces and manners that

may differ from those in the mainstream positions of power, or address how they respond

as Black girls in mainstream society. In this study, the drama teacher provided an outline

of her vision for how she teaches her class as a Black female who also teaches Black girls

who have hard life experiences. She provided strategies that she uses in her class to help her Black female students cope with identity, oppression, and other things that stress these young women. The researcher assessed if these approaches created a space in which student learning could be engaged through profoundly personal and cultural experiences that allow the students to realize their own literacies development.

Culturally Relevant Arts Education Aligned with Black Feminist Thought

CRAE is used as the foundation to ground this study, using BFT as a lens by which to understand the data because it emphasizes the knowledge and instruction through the arts and non-arts as a way to practice social justice beyond the dominant societal views. BFT specifically brings forth the insights of Black women and girls by actively acknowledging the oppression of Black females. The realities of the injustices faced by Black females are revealed only when their stories are told from their standpoint. Providing the platform for Black middle school girls and their Black teacher to speak their truth and their lived experiences from their position brings forth an awareness of a population of girls and women who are sometimes misunderstood, excluded, and may often feel voiceless or invisible, even in school.

The CRAE framework, as defined by Hanley (2013), contended that the foundation of the model is imagination and expresses that "creativity is empowering" (p. 3). Additionally, "Black Feminist Thought (BFT) demonstrates Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge" (Hill Collins, 2014, p. 553).

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Purpose of the Study

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This exploratory, qualitative study aimed to explore and investigate dramatic art strategies that potentially influenced the literacies of Black girls in an urban middle

school. The researcher sought to understand more about the experiences that the sample population of Black girls for the study had by participating in drama classes and analyzing how that participation may relate to their perceived literacies as well as their expression through advocacy and social justice through the arts. Using the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework through the lens of Black Feminist Thought epistemology to guide this study allowed for the exploration of Black girls expressing their voice through drama experiences. This examination entailed interviewing Black middle school girls and their teacher to hear the experiences through strategies practiced in drama classes that potentially influenced their digital, foundational, and Black Girls' literacies. The existing body of literature suggests that drama, as an art form, represents solid research for continued efforts of improving education and social justice for Black girls in urban middle schools.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it explored the influence of drama strategies and techniques on traditionally underexamined literacies, as defined in this study, of Black girls in an urban middle school. Many studies focus solely on examining foundational literacy connecting it to the achievement gap, the education debt, and national test scores in reading, investigating the disparities between the scores of urban students and non-urban students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017; Sandy & Duncan, 2010; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). However, this study extended foundational literacy as the developed written and spoken language as the base of other literacies. This study also explored digital and Black Girls' literacies as important for skill development. As an arts and urban education researcher, I sought to

understand strategies and techniques practiced in drama by Black middle school girls that explored social justice with art advocacy. The researcher also explored how the findings may fill the gap on the types of culturally relevant pedagogy, techniques, and strategies practiced in drama that ignite the self-concept of Black girls as a bridge toward their literacies development.

As a result of this research study, teachers may develop a better understanding of Black girls' culturally relevant academic needs in urban middle schools to facilitate the development of multiple traditionally underexamined literacies for these students, and consider implementation and practice of Black girl's literacy. Literature in the field, both seminal and contemporary, has not bridged these specific variables for research, yet provide great insight into elementary and high school students, non-urban students, theater outside of school, connection to other course curricula, specific to social activism. By understanding the prior literature and data, this study explored the culmination of Black girls, urban middle school students, arts education, dramatic arts classes, cultural empowerment, self-concept, and perceived development of underexamined literacies. This study is significant because the researcher plans to enhance and contribute to the current literature in the field from this study's results.

Scholars have stressed the need for Black girls' literacies to be centered in research, taking care to highlight the invisibility, mistreatment, and dehumanization of girls in schools, classrooms, public media, and research literature (Evans-Winters, 2005; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Additionally, the study results prove significant and alert educators to the need for new and revised culturally relevant teaching curriculum

inclusive of the arts, teacher training, and appropriate settings for Black female students in urban schools.

Research Questions

The first step in exploring this phenomenon was to understand more about the challenges and oppression that Black middle school girls face in school and how that impacts what they read and write, how they speak, how they express themselves with body language, and what they post on social media. After contemplating the literature in the field and using Culturally Relevant Arts Education (CRAE) conceptual framework (Hanley, 2013) in conjunction with Black Feminist Thought epistemology (Hill Collins, 2014) to guide the study, I created two research questions to explore the problem. This study examined the influence that drama has on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of middle school Black girls. The following research questions guide this study:

RQ1. What are the experiences of middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement?

RQ2. What role does the drama teacher play with urban middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address language, identity and social media engagement?

Context of the Study

The research study was conducted at a middle school in an urban intensive city. Stonybrook School (pseudonym name) is a KG – 12 public charter school in Charlotte, NC that delineates middle school as fifth through eighth grades. The selected school serves 1609 total students. There are approximately 608 students in its middle school (grades 5-8). However, there are approximately 303 students in grades 7 and 8. It is a

Title I school, with a diverse population of 1446 Black students, three White students, 147 Hispanic students, three Asian students, and nine students of two or more races. This population is aggregated as 821 female and 786 male students. The student-teacher ratio is 15 to 1. This school enrolls 79.4% of students qualified for the free and reduced lunch program. Additionally, the school touts 197 faculty and staff (full-time and permanent part-time), with more than 50% of that population African American. In fact, the director of the school is an African American female. Lastly, middle school encompasses 49 of the 197 faculty and staff.

This school is positioned in an urban community within a large city. It follows a mission that has three pillars to encourage the success of all of its students. They focus on academics, preparation for college, and life skills. The drama class enrolls 5th-8th grade girls and boys where more than 50% of those students are Black/African American and the rest are Hispanic. The drama teacher is also African American/Black.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are the factors and variables that have been intentionally left out of the study and are identified by the researcher to help delineate the boundaries of the study (Ellis & Levy, 2009). This study contained several delimitations. The sample population is narrowed by participant criteria. All study participants identified as Black females enrolled in Stonybrook School who participated in drama classes, and the teacher is included and identified as a Black female study participant. The participants were purposively selected based on race, gender, grade, and participation in the school's drama classes. The participants understood and agreed to their interest in sharing their narratives and perceptions of their own literacies based on their participation in drama classes. To

ensure the involvement of participants who fit the criteria outlined in this study, recruitment was limited to the specified students of Stonybrook School; thus, the participants do not reflect a national sample. The study is delimited by my examination of school-based drama and its influence on specified literacies of Black girls in a particular urban middle school. Finally, the study is delimited by the fact that only one out of more than 100 public middle schools in the selected county was used in this case study to collect data. However, not all middle schools in this county are urban intensive schools, offer dramatic arts courses, or have a significant population of Black female students.

Limitations are potential weaknesses with a study that have been identified by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although this study's limitations could have included methodological issues that may threaten the validity, reliability, credibility, or trustworthiness of the results, there were no limitations to the study in those areas. However, the small sample size of students may not be representative of the target population, which could be considered a limitation, although Creswell (2013) recommended no more than 4-5 participants in a case study design. Another limitation related to this study is the region of the country in which it was conducted. All participants live and attend an urban middle school in the southeastern United States. Additionally, the attitudes and opinions of the Black girls may be influenced heavily by the context in which they live and their experiences and knowledge of the oppressive histories of Black girls and women. Lastly, the exclusion of participants with visual arts or fiber arts interests and skill is a limitation. The inclusion of participants with visual arts or other art forms, such as fiber arts interests, may widen the study's scope and provide the researcher with more varied data concerning the connection

between school-based arts education, and literacies development of Black girls in urban middle schools.

Definition of Terms and Drama Strategies

The following terms and strategies help define each word. The drama strategies as explained by Drama Resource (Drama Resource, n.d.) and Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.) are just some of the strategies that may be used in drama instruction with students in schools. These are just some of the strategies that may be used for communication, expression and literacies development.

Arts Education: Refers to learning, instruction, and programming based upon the visual and tangible arts, including performing arts like dance, music, drama, and theater, as well as visual arts like drawing, painting, sculpture, and design works (USLegal, n.d.).

Arts Integration: An approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form where students engage in a creative process that connects an art form and another subject area to meet evolving objectives in both (ArtsEdge, 2019).

Black: Refers to African American, Black, African, African European

Black Girls' Literacies: Refers to "specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create in order to affirm themselves, their world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood" (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Data Literacy: Refers to using the right tools and training to make informed decisions in order for a student to take charge of his or her growth, or a teacher pinpointing specific skills his students need to enhance (Pietila, 2017).

Digital Literacy: Refers to the literate use of devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops that have permeated every corner of our lives from work to school to personal relationships, and part of a well-rounded education includes being able to use these devices to achieve a variety of goals (Pietila, 2017).

Foundational Literacy: Traditionally known as reading, writing, and meaning making skills that are gained in the early years and used as building blocks upon which other skills can develop (Pietila, 2017).

Forum Theater: A play or scene, usually indicating some kind of oppression, and is shown twice. During the replay, any member of the audience ("spect-actor") is allowed to shout "Stop!" step forward and take the place of one of the oppressed characters, showing how they could change the situation to enable a different outcome. Several alternatives may be explored by different spect-actors (Drama Resource, n.d.).

Fourth Wall: An imaginary wall used in acting that keeps performers from recognizing or directly addressing their audience (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.).

Image Theater: Refers to participants rapidly sculpting their own or each other's bodies to express attitudes and emotions. These images are then placed together and brought to life. The method is often used to explore internal or external oppression and unconscious thoughts and feelings (Drama Resource, n.d.).

Improvisation: The act of creating together without pre-planning requiring two or more people and involves spontaneity, animation, and co-creation (Romanelli, Tishby, & Moran, 2017).

Media Literacy: Refers to the creation and consumption of media. Someone who is "media literate" can adapt to new communication formats, whether that is instant messaging, push notifications, wikis, online communities, blogs, or vlogs, and knows how to choose the most effective medium for communication in any given situation (Pietila, 2017).

Mime: To act a part with mimic gesture and action, usually without words (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.).

Narration: A technique used whereby one or more performers speak directly to the audience to tell a story, give information, or comment on the action of the scene or the motivations of characters (Drama Resource, n.d.).

News Literacy: Refers to learning the difference between fact and fiction through a critical lens, helping to learn not only how to find and read the news, but also how to think about it and evaluate it (Pietila, 2017).

Story Telling: A technique used rather than learning stories by rote study. Participants should identify key images and important moments and retell the story in their own words (Drama Resource, n.d.).

Theater: Theater, in dramatic arts, is referred to as an art concerned almost exclusively with live performances in which the action is precisely planned to create a coherent and significant sense of drama (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.). "Though the word theatre is derived from the Greek theaomai, 'to see,' the performance itself may appeal either to the ear or to the eye, as is suggested by the interchangeability of the terms spectator (which derives from words meaning "to view") and audience (which derives from words meaning "to hear")" (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d., para. 2).

Thought Tracking: A quick-fire strategy enabling participants to verbally express their understanding of characters and situations without the need for rehearsal (Drama Resource, n.d.).

Visual Literacy: Refers to the ability to comprehend and to create videos, photos, infographics, and other visuals that are essential for daily life and career success (Pietila, 2017).

Summary

This dissertation study explored the experiences and perceptions that Black girls in an urban middle school and their drama teacher have based upon their participation in drama classes, and any influence drama has on several underexamined literacies. Chapter 1 discussed the background of arts, highlighting drama as an inclusion of an art form in education, and explained the underexamined literacies studied as they relate to social justice of Black girls through a cultural lens. Additionally, the chapter introduced the Culturally Relevant Arts Education conceptual framework with the underpinning Black Feminist Thought epistemology used to guide the study. Chapter 1 closed with the significance, delimitation, and limitations of the study.

Organization of Dissertation Chapters

Chapter 1 outlined the problem of the lack of arts in education in the United States, the study of Black girl multidimensionality, and the explanation of traditionally underexamined literacies. It also addressed the barrage of digital era emotional issues on adolescents and Black girl's dominant narratives in America. Chapter 1 also created a platform for the need for arts education and instruction of drama as an alternative approach to explore the understanding of certain literacies and how they are perceived

and expended by Black girls. Lastly, Chapter 1 introduced the conceptual framework that guided the study. The remaining chapters of this dissertation define and outline the relevant components of the investigation.

Chapter 2 identifies the literature and research that establishes the foundation for this study. The literature defines and explores dramatic arts as arts in education as it trickles into other content areas. Chapter 2 sets the landscape of drama with foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies as well as their relationship with gender and race. The chapter explores literature about urban schools. After reviewing the literature, more research must be conducted to fully understand the role that drama in education may play in improving certain literacies as told through the voices of Black girls and their teacher in an urban middle school.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methods employed for this investigation. The research conducted was to understand a particular school-based occurrence. A single case study with multiple cases was the most appropriate research design for this study. For this case study, Black girls and their teacher from a drama class in an urban middle school served as individual (multiple) cases within the larger single case of all five participants for this design. The researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the Black girls and the drama teacher within their school setting. Lastly, the methodology also included a focus group conducted with the entire unit, where a short time for writing based on writing prompt was included.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study and includes analyses of the themes, sub-themes, and common ideas, which emerged from the interviews, focus group, and writing sample data. Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the findings, including

the implications of the findings, the study's limitations, recommendations for future

research, curriculum and instruction development, and policy implementation.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Before delving into the research methodology, a look at previous work in dramatic arts and literacies development with Black girls in urban middle schools is essential. This study was conducted to examine the development of literacies for Black girls who participated in school drama classes in an urban middle school in Charlotte, NC. This chapter provides an in-depth review of research and literature related to the variables of this study. The body of literature provides an explanation of arts education, drama as an art form, context of literacies of Black girls, and examination of urban schools. This literature review is divided into eight major sections. The first section covers relevant information related to arts in education. This section also highlights dramatic arts as a viable art form for literacies development and growth. The second section of the literature review addresses drama and its connection to three literacies: foundational, digital, and Black Girls'. This section pays particular attention to the development of these literacies in Black girls. It points out the challenges that Black girls face within the development of literacies and highlights studies that attempt to address these issues. Next, there is a section on the connection of drama and gender, including drama with Black girls. What follows is a chapter that explores drama and social justice. The following section of the literature review covers a section on drama in urban middle schools, while deep diving into the contexts of urban schools. The last section covers the perceptions and role the teacher played with setting the stage of practicing drama as an impactful art form that supports certain literacies of her Black female students. This chapter concludes with a summary of the existing literature on drama, literacies, and Black girls in an urban middle school.

The definition of literacy has changed in society and classrooms. Most of us have little understanding of new literacies that emerged over the past decade, particularly literacies used in education, and develop youth for navigating through society. This literature review pertains to drama and foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies, as well as drama, gender, and social justice, all in the context of urban middle schools.

Using the Arts in Education

Research outcomes related to this dissertation include a study conducted by Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2016) seeking a higher level of arts integration across the education curriculum. This entails curriculum development of teaching practices that were investigated through arts activities that would motivate educators to adopt "aesthetic teaching." Two different designs were tested. Each design posed a different educational role in arts activities. In the first design, the role of art is that of a teaching medium, while in the second design, the role is that of a teaching approach to the taught subject. The study followed the steps of a teaching design experiment. The data analysis was based on the teacher's reports, which were examined for indicators of aesthetic teaching. The findings of this study suggested a correlation between the educational role of the arts and the level of aesthetic orientation of educators in applying arts integration.

An additional study showed that arts integration and education had proven successful at a middle school in Maryland. Due to an arts integration program that was implemented for teacher professional development at Bates Middle School, a low performing school that had been targeted for restructuring by the state, there was an increase in sixth and seventh grade student achievement on the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) by 20% (Snyder et al., 2014). The program was called Transforming

Teaching through Arts Integration and was implemented for middle school reform in Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) (Snyder et al., 2014). This study proved the value of integrating arts with curriculum and the importance of arts integration within urban schools. This data from the Bates Middle School study sparked an interest in a positive outcome on how drama as an art form may enhance literacy.

A final study more specific to performing arts and urban students (Walton, 2015) examined the effects of performing arts participation on the academic achievement of African American male high school students studying how engagement in school-based performing arts influenced the academic identity development and school experiences of African American males who attended an arts themed urban high school. This research was important to my dissertation because it focused on urban students, performing arts, and the influence that the performing arts have on academics and identity. However, this study focused specifically on high school African American males that were enrolled in a performing arts school. Although this study has similarities to my dissertation research, the variables are different.

Arts integration also helps make literature more meaningful for students by allowing them to use their bodies to learn and express their learning (Lynch, 2007). When effective arts integration models are established, they can increase student participation in the arts, increase student achievement, and contribute to improved school climate (Fowler, 1996). In fact, research studies have shown that arts integration has proven to be successful in improving the academic achievement of middle school students in language arts (Walker et al., 2011). Consequently, there is ample research that point toward the influence of drama on the literacy achievement of urban students (Walker et al., 2011;

Wasserburg & Rottman, 2016; Young et al., 2016). These studies led to student growth

and development as many scholars believe that integrating the arts and inclusion of arts

education creates a path to many qualities that lead to enhanced academic achievement

and preparation for jobs and careers (Appel, 2006; Leicester & Taylor, 2010). As

researchers and educators seek to understand valid and conclusive arts education and arts

integrated teaching practices and their importance for students to perform at their highest

potential, it is beneficial for all educators to know "arts integration works because it uses

teaching practices that have been shown in brain-based research to improve

comprehension and long-term retention" (Nobori, 2012, para. 6). For most youth, the arts

provide a natural route for connecting with the curriculum in a meaningful way

(Crawford, 2004). Overall, these studies concluded that arts integration, even conducted

at a higher level, is effective for teaching and learning.

These peer-reviewed articles are informative in that they focus on drama,

language arts, and urban students, yet they present a gap in the literature with no

indicators of research specific to Black middle school girls. To date, few studies have

investigated the association of the direct relationship between drama and specific

literacies of Black girls in urban middle schools.

Drama and Literacies

Through further investigation of "literacy," Alberta Education defines literacy as

the ability, confidence, and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct, and

communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living (Alberta Education, n.d.). Society has

come to understand that language is explained as a socially and culturally constructed

system of communication (Alberta Education, n.d.). Further research studies included

examples of literacies as digital literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, data literacy, game literacy, health & financial literacy, civic & ethical literacy, news literacy, coding & computational literacy, and foundational literacy (Pietila, 2017). With the expansion of the definition and breadth of literacies, the researcher investigated the relationship between drama and a broader sense of literacies development. Numerous studies showed positive results of success for students when integrating the two areas. Several studies highlighted school drama classes involving the use of expression techniques within the regular curriculum. Drama provides students the opportunity to use various modalities to communicate, represent, and interpret their worlds (Schroeter & Wager, 2017). Consequently, in dramatic arts, many strategies are used for expression to convey messages and points. These studies have demonstrated positive correlations between school-based drama, reading, language development (Kardash & Wright, 1986; Peppler et al., 2014; Podlozny, 2000; Smilansky, 1968; Walker et al., 2011), and comprehension (McFadden et al., 2010; Rose et al., 2000).

Drama and Foundational Literacy

Multiple independent studies have been conducted that relate drama strategies and foundational literacy (also known as language arts, or language for this study). Additionally, the implementation of drama and language arts achievement has been studied in urban schools. Walker et al. (2011) presented a study examining the urban students' achievement based on whether the students were in the theater-integrated language arts classrooms or traditional classrooms. When achievement data meets drama and arts integration, the findings showed students passing language arts on state assessments for those students in the theater strategies program was higher than those in

the control group (56% compared to 47%). The article also presented data from the

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), finding that African American

students, Hispanic students, and those students on free and reduced lunch had lower

performance in writing and language arts than any other racial/ethnic and income groups

(Walker et al., 2011). However, the study provided strong evidence that the arts can to

contribute significantly to achievement in language arts for these students. The research

findings showed a strong association between arts-in-education practices and improved

academic success with language, especially for students from low-income families. The

findings underscore the importance of integrating the arts, particularly drama and theater

strategies, into students' learning processes. This article is beneficial in that it focuses

specifically on drama. Lynch (2007) showed that arts-based literacy instruction offered

students many opportunities to display their learning through methods that offer

alternatives to traditional rote instruction.

A research study highlighting a second grade class creating positive outcomes of

how schools today are supposed to be preparing students for a world that demands strong

literacy, effective communication, and creative problem solving, including utilizing arts

to enhance literacy skills, excluded data about the literacy development of Black girls,

(McFadden et al., 2010). The study stressed that visual and performing arts are a vital

part of a well-rounded educational program for all students. McFadden et al. (2010)

highlighted key points on how visual and performing arts can aid in student development,

including strong literacy. Peppler et al. (2014) concurred with the positive impact of arts

integration on student academic achievement in English language arts. Their study was a

longitudinal study of an intensive multi-art integration model implemented in public

elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. The findings consisted of significant gains in student proficiency on standardized tests of English Language Arts when compared to matched comparison school sites with standalone arts programming. Although the study produced effective outcomes, it lacked in exploring how the performing arts impacted digital or Black Girls' literacies. An additional study relating drama to literacy includes reading rate, comprehension, and fluency, showing all contributed to literacy where drama strategies like Rock and Read can actually help influence literacy (Young et al., 2016). Rock and Read is a fluency strategy similar to karaoke using reading and music that has been successful with younger students increasing their fluency and word emphasis, although not their reading rate (Young et al., 2016). However, researchers found that when Rock and Read was practiced consistently, it significantly increased important components of reading (Young et al., 2016). Consequently, Rock and Read is geared toward elementary school students and does not address the literacy needs of older students. McFadden et al. (2010) incorporated their study with not only drama and literacy but also on the use of theater arts to enhance literacy skills at the second-grade level. Although these studies stressed art's influence on the literacy of students, neither study focused specifically on the arts-literacy effect on middle school students, nor Black girls. Again, the research on the literacy development specific to traditionally underexamined literacies and Black girls in urban middle schools is absent.

Incorporating the visual and performing arts into middle school curriculum encourages balance, engagement, and strategy transfer to develop language use, language skills and increase reading comprehension (Chappell & Faltis, 2013; McDermott et al., 2017). In a study conducted with eighth grade students, three drama-based strategies were

used to promote literacy learning as they studied *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Chisholm et al., 2016). The findings of the study highlighted the success of students and their literacy. The study authors stated, "ELA teachers can borrow from and extend these arts-based strategies to help students engage more deeply in many types of challenging texts" (Chisholm et al., 2016, p. 39). Strategies learned in drama can link to components of foundational literacy with techniques such as 1) telling stories from different points of view, 2) reading stories, 3) thinking critically to prepare improvisation, and 4) written and oral communication for explanation or problem solving (Chisholm et al., 2016).

Drama and Digital Literacy

There is sparse literature informing education of any influence of drama on digital literacy, specifically social media engagement. Costello (2012) conducted a study watching students work together to create digital video movies, collecting data on the dramatization of vocabulary words, and mock newscasts. The students were instinctively gravitating to informal classroom drama without being required to do so for the assignment. The students chose not to study scripts to act out lines for characters but rather instinctually moved into improvisational drama to make digital video (Costello, 2012). Although this study presented information on the relationship between drama and a digital platform, it was not related to social media engagement. However, Ehiemua and Omoera (2015) presented an interesting study about social media engagement serving as acting or play activity. Ehiemua and Omoera (2015) contended that social media platforms had become facilitators of reality drama events in a telegraphic mode with users (or owners of accounts) and their listed contacts occasionally and conveniently engaging in a communicative play activity, which is recreational and entertaining and

which promotes social and human relationships. However, neither study directly addressed how participating in drama may influence what is written and posted on social media platforms and how that may impact Black adolescent girls. This dissertation study seeks to explore that context.

Drama and Black Girls' Literacy

Given the historical perspective of urban Black students, they are often overlooked for participation in educational opportunities that would enable them to attain similar academic success as their counterparts in other racial, gender, and ethnic groups (Walton, 2015). This dissertation research explores the potential influence that dramatic arts may have on the identity (including race and gender) of Black girls in an urban middle school. In conditions that have repeatedly told girls, indirectly or directly, that they are invisible or do not matter, it is important for them to develop survival, coping, and defensive skills, and one of the ways Black girls have learned to survive in school is by adopting a "race-less" persona, having the absence of behavioral and attitudinal characteristics related to a particular race (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). This teaches Black girls that in order to be successful, they cannot be who they are organically, thereby altering their identity.

Additionally, this investigation has implications on how drama may be used as a tool for improving Black Girls' literacy, and school and life outcomes as it pertains to their identity development. Scant literature is found on drama's influence on the identity of Black girls. One study focused on creating spaces for Black adolescent girls to write in collaborative groups where the writing was influenced by Black female writers that served as a roadmap for the girls to understand self-identity among dominant narratives

about Black girls (Muhammad, 2014). However, ample literature is available about

drama within other settings like elementary school and after school programs; it is not as

abundant, particularly with the inclusion of Black girls. Although an abundance of studies

is presented showing drama-based pedagogy concerning literacy, there is a gap in the

literature relating to the experience that Black girls have by participating in school-based

drama classes and their relationship to their foundational, digital, and Black Girls'

literacies. In fact, Carney et al. (2016) presented a case study on how drama-based

pedagogy was used in an elementary school setting serving an underserved population

where the students scored dramatically higher on standardized tests for language skills.

Although the study highlighted the connection between literacy and dramatic art, it is yet

another study focusing on elementary school students and not information on middle

school Black girls. The growing body of literature continues to show results of urban and

K-12 school studies detailing the relationship of drama and literacy, as Wasserberg and

Rottman (2016) examined African American and Latino students' perceptions of test-

centered curricular protocols in the urban high school context. This qualitative study with

the African American and Latino urban students examined testing on multiple core

subjects, including literacy. The study mentioned that standardized tests had become the

nation's method of determining if K-12 students are meeting academic expectations to

compete in the 21st century. The findings suggested that the test-centered curricular

protocols in place were not beneficial for the urban students but instead contributed to an

environment susceptible to stereotype threat effects and decreased self-efficacy. Based on

the researched literature, more studies are needed on the relationship between drama and

Black girls' literacies in urban middle schools.

Drama and Gender

Literature reveals studies that are inclusive of girls and drama with outcomes related to their experiences. One study conducted in New Zealand is a performing arts competition for New Zealand secondary schools called Stage Challenge (Trayes et al., 2012). This longitudinal study used observations, repeated questionnaires, informal conversations, and a graffiti board to follow the 5-month experience of a student-led girls' team aged 10 to 17 (Trayes, Harré, & Overall, 2012). Interestingly enough, this study focused on the quality of the girl's experiences and what contributed to and detracted from their desire to repeat them in the future. The study is essential to this dissertation because the sample population focused on adolescent girls who shared their life experiences as a result of the drama classes in which they participated.

Another study by Perry (2011) created a theatre project with youth that developed a transitional space of learning in which iteration in an urban section of a community is imagined and reconfigured. The study highlighted a scene of five young women who re-imagined the urban, feminine subject in relation to their own subjectivities (Perry, 2011). This study strongly focused on a plurality of processes and experimentation and creative strategies rather than focus on a single methodology (Perry, 2011). Consequently, this dissertation allows for understanding this plurality of processes and understanding of the Black girls participating in the drama class. Each student may express practices and techniques learned in drama that may influence varying literacies that help them navigate how they experience their lives.

Drama and Black Girls

Few studies have produced results of Black girls' literacies development or explored any influence of Black girls' dramatic arts participation to study the effect on their literacies. However, one study defined and developed summer writing collaboratives for Black adolescent girls reflective of Black women's writing groups (literary societies) of the early to late 19th century (Muhammad, 2014). The study focused on creating spaces for Black adolescent girls to "write it out!" One of the participants in the summer writing collaborative explained that writing in a space influenced by Black women writers of the past provided a roadmap for her to understand self-identity among dominant narratives that attempt to "write" Black girls' realities, and charged the Black girls to create similar pathways for Black girls in future generations (Muhammad, 2014). This study not only encouraged the self-identity of Black girls but also addressed the foundational and Black Girls' literacies of these young ladies. This literature is integral to the study as it emphasized Black girls strategically focusing on the foundations of language through writing, where writing and reading plays and scripts are a part of the process when participating in drama classes.

Nevertheless, there is a significant gap in the literature when addressing Black girls participating in drama that focuses on all three literacies. Studies have been conducted about Black girls addressing literacy through social activism, online schools, and out-of-school spaces (Greene, 2016; Greene et al., 2015; McArther, 2016), yet there is a gap in the literature of Black girls exploring participation in drama classes and investigating its influence on Black girls' language, writing, and actions. Topics related

to drama and literacy development of urban students are well researched, yet studies specifically about Black middle school girls and literacy are absent from the literature.

Drama and Social Justice

In his seminal work, Boal (1985) described the theater as a weapon for liberation and change. Initially, Boal argued that theater is political and oppressive, which is where he formed a new concept on theater toward liberation and change, *Theater of the Oppressed*. In contrast, Gallagher (2007) used critical ethnography, feminist, and poststructuralist approaches to produce research on the theater's role in urban education. Yet, their contexts are linked to social justice to challenge unjust practices and devise collective strategies for change. The philosophical concepts of both Boal (1985) and Gallagher (2007) lay a foundation for exploring drama and its alignment with expression, identity, confidence, and advocacy or social justice (Freebody & Finneran, 2016) in the realm of Black girls as this study is guided by CRAE (Hanley, 2013), which encompasses social justice through art. The concept of social justice through the arts, in this case, dramatic arts, also creates space for teachers to offer discussion and their own perceptions about curriculum, pedagogy, and reality of Black middle school girls navigating education and life.

Drama and Urban Middle Schools

Middle schools nationally attempt to provide curriculum that will best serve their students' academic and social-emotional growth. Urban middle schools are not different yet face different social challenges when serving their population of students. A separate study on theater arts and middle school student literacy achievement examined the relationship between the arts and academic achievement when the arts are integrated into

language arts, as well as math and science courses (Inoa et al., 2014). The study

employed a multi-stage cluster randomized design in which the effects of infusing

process drama into traditional language arts curriculum was investigated. The study

sample consisted of sixth and seventh grade students enrolled in a high poverty urban

school district. The findings showed that the students in the arts-integrated classrooms

tended to outperform the students who were not in both math and language arts. The

research article aligned closely with this dissertation study, except it was not specific to

Black girls. The Tubman Theater Project, a project developed for Black youth to examine

racism and expressed internalized oppression, is a model and example of CRAE (Hanley,

2011, 2013). This specific project focused on drama that was culturally relevant to

American youth (Banks, 2007; Gay, 2010; Taylor et al., 2009). This aligns with the

dissertation study when exploring the influence that drama may have on race and identity.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding drama and middle school Black girls.

The literature presented a relationship with drama and middle school students but did not

reveal that relationship, including the variables of Black girls and literacy.

Urban Schools

Urban schools are often coded for schools in city neighborhoods that exist in

popular media where poor and ethnic-racial minorities reside (Urbanski & Eidman-

Aadahl, 2016). The term often conjures images of unkempt, dilapidated buildings where

students sit in rows of desks sometimes ignoring the teachers and displaying disruptive

classroom behaviors. When the term *urban students* is used, the visual is often of students

with hard-faced glares wearing clothing that emphasizes the need for attention (Urbanski

& Eidman-Aadahl, 2016). These types of imposed visuals of urban students lead us to

believe that students in low-income, culturally diverse urban schools are academically

underachieving and may be the least likely but most in need to experience feedback about

their strengths and potential competence for academic development (Jackson et al., 2011;

Urbanski & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016). Studies on urban schools nationally, on the state

level, and locally produce common themes of low performance, yet additional literature

reveals that alternate practices involving the arts may improve students and school

achievement. Studies should be geared toward the crux of academics that present

challenges within urban schools. Urban schools and urban students are often viewed

based on the challenges they face and not for what they accomplish in spite of these

challenges (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014, 2019). When exploring urban

school settings for scholarly study, it is important to note the social, economic, and

identity differences than those of predominantly White, high socioeconomic status

schools.

Urban Schools Nationally

Studies have been conducted on public schools across the nation, with results

highlighting graduation rates and academic scores. National graduation rates from 2010-

2017 showed an increase in overall students graduating from high school. From 2010-

2017, the national graduation rate percentages respectively were: 79%, 80%, 81%, 82%,

83%, 84% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). However, the national

graduation rates for Black students during that same time frame are considerably lower at

rates of 67%, 69%, 71%, 73%, 75%, and 76% (National Center for Educational Statistics,

2018). Chappell and Cahnmann-Taylor (2013) presented an article that is beneficial for

this study because it recalled the No Child Left Behind Act and how that put a spotlight

on failing schools in urban areas as the measurement that entailed high-stakes standardized tests that disproportionately affected students from minoritized communities. The article was a review of literature advocating for arts in education and multicultural-multilingual learning for all. The review examined the literature on arts education with minoritized youth within landscapes of structural inequality, scientific rationalization, and a resurgence of the rationalization of non-White communities and curricula in schools. This article is important to this dissertation study because it critically examined the need for arts education for the marginalized population.

The nation's big-city school districts educate about one-third of its students of color, one-third of all poor students, a far higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014, 2019). One research study highlighted positive results for urban schools districts, by explaining that despite the challenges faced by many urban schools, graduation rates for students in a system like Albuquerque Public Schools rose to 73.3 percent in 2013, a 16 percent increase from 2008, with other big-city school districts also showing a rise in graduation rates, including Denver, Minneapolis, Providence, Rhode Island, Boston, and Saint Paul, Minnesota (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014). In fact, several urban middle schools have made it to the 50 Best Middle Schools in the United States list including urban schools in Jackson, Mississippi, Dallas, St. Louis, Miami-Dade County, New York City, Charleston, South Carolina, Honolulu, and Clark County in Las Vegas (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014). Although Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, which qualifies as an urban district, was not listed, the system continues its efforts toward quality education and reform for its urban students.

Urban Schools in North Carolina

Schools in North Carolina have been trending upward over the past four years with increasing graduation rates and school letter grades. In 2014, the four-year graduation rate increased in certain cities in North Carolina, reaching a new high of 88.5 percent with the Class of 2014 in North Carolina's Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, exceeding the 2014 state average of 83.8 percent (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014). From 2010-2015, public schools in North Carolina increased graduation rates of 78%, 80%, 82.5%, 83.9%, and 85.6% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). The most recent data shows the North Carolina public school graduation rate for 2016-17 at 87% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Subsequently, low income students in North Carolina, where most of these students are enrolled in urban schools, had significantly lower graduation rates than the state and national percentages as presented from 2010-2015 respectively: 71%, 75%, 76.1%, 78%, and 79.6% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Although North Carolina has made some strides with improvements in graduation rates of students within the state, school rates and scores continue to correlate with the poverty levels of schools, significantly affecting urban schools across the state (Hinchcliffe, 2017). Continued efforts from politicians, school boards, and administrators are needed to focus on the inequities of low-income and Black students in public schools across the state.

Urban Schools in Charlotte

Urban schools in Charlotte have made some strides over the years, yet still fall behind with student academic performance. As the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System continues to strive for better performance, how can educators who work in urban

schools in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School (CMS) system understand how the intersectionality of race, identity, privilege, and ability actually shape the opportunities for their students? One opportunity presented to CMS was when the Wells Fargo Foundation donated $150,000 toward a public-private partnership for twenty-nine CMS urban school principals to participate in Harvard University's Urban Educators Seminar in July 2019 (Helms, 2019). The schools participating in the project have some of the district's highest poverty levels and lowest test scores, as is often the case across the nation (Helms, 2019). These types of seminars may be helpful to CMS urban educators if innovative concepts are introduced that can be funded and realistically implemented over a period of time. Arts education and arts-integration programs are ideal for consideration in urban schools, and further research is needed, particularly with drama and the literacies of Black girls.

Teacher Roles and Perceptions

One of the challenges in urban education is the need for teachers to develop a cultural and contextual understanding of students in their classrooms while maintaining an emphasis on the heterogeneous academic needs of students in urban settings (White et al., 2017). The additional challenges are when gender is factored. Although there is scant research on drama teachers' role and perceptions of Black girls relating to their participation in drama and its influence on their language, identity, and social media engagement, there is a great need for this research.

Gallagher (2016) conducted a study in the Toronto District School Board, one of the largest and most culturally diverse and urban school systems, that aimed to engage young people in activities and experiences that invite them to contemplate the diverse

world in which they live and learn, to examine and question perspectives, and to consider issues of power and exclusion through drama participation. In essence, this study embraced the concept of identity. Focusing on elementary and secondary level teachers, the study discussed how drama teachers situate their classrooms as a safe environment for developing important life skills within their students (Gallagher, 2016). Several of the teachers interviewed expressed their perceptions about drama participation, drama curriculum, and its effects on students. Although much of the data drew positive conclusions, there were some adverse results. Some examples were the absence of student's voices within the drama curriculum and drama's claims of creating empathic and better citizens. Although this study focused on teacher's perceptions about drama participation and curriculum, it did not explore a segment of Black middle school girls in that context.

An additional study explored teacher perceptions as they addressed the distinct challenges that impact the experiences of Black girls as they continue to develop their identity. Although Black boys remain at the center of research efforts and initiatives to improve their education and lives, Black girls continue to be invisible or feel like teachers and administrators treat them unfairly based on the color of their skin (Watson, 2016). Consequently, in general, teachers who teach in urban schools must have a skillset to work with these students, even if they are not drama teachers. They must understand and have a commitment to equity, access, and understand the environment where the student is being raised (White et al., 2017).

Teachers' roles and perceptions of drama influencing literacies and language are important while reviewing literature for this dissertation study. Ample data appears

absent from the literature when seeking information on the perceptions of urban teachers related to the influence that drama has on literacy and language. The only study found that most closely relates to the context of this dissertation was Marco (2015), as it explored how a teacher explained drama used in the classroom to get students involved with literature by creating skits or act out scenes. It helped foster learning and understanding concepts, and in many cases learning to resolve conflicts (Marco, 2015). It was explained to be freeing, fun, and helped find meaning using the author's language or the student's own language and dialect. The results of this study revealed that drama participation produced students who wrote better, supported thinking more clearly, and allowed students to be more active in the learning process (Marco, 2015)

Each article that was reviewed in this section revealed teachers' perceptions of some impact of drama with language and identity, even though it was not specific to Black middle school girls. No articles were found on teachers' perceptions of drama on the social media engagement of Black middle school girls or students in general, nor on any role that the drama teacher would play in creating spaces to navigate social media engagement. This research study seeks to explore that context.

To provide context to this chapter, it explores literature on drama as an art form used with certain literacies, urban middle schools, Black girls, and CRAE through the lens of BFT. Given the pedagogical model of CRAE as useful to focus the arts on social justice and includes using the cultural knowledge and experiences of motivating artists and arts participants through pedagogy (Hanley, 2011), it allows for exploration of how students express their language, explicitly exploring their drama participation as an influential factor. The literature highlights multiple studies using performance arts to

understand its impact on academics and identity of students in elementary and high schools. However, Black girls in urban middle schools face unique challenges when navigating academics, race and gender identifiers, and social media engagement. CRAE is used as the foundation to ground this study, using BFT as a lens by which to understand the data because it emphasizes the knowledge and instruction through the arts and non-arts as a way to practice social justice beyond the dominant societal views.

Summary

In summarizing the body of literature, it is clear that there is a considerable gap in the literature when addressing Black girls' participation in school-based drama to enhance their literacies development. Namely, the concept of literacies has been stunted to reflect standard reading and writing solely. Studies have been conducted about Black girls addressing literacy through social activism, online schools, out-of-school spaces (Greene, 2016; Greene et al., 2015; McArther, 2016), and topics related to drama and literacy development of urban students, yet studies about Black middle school girls and traditionally underexamined literacies are absent from the literature**.** Most of the research is conducted on elementary or high school students, males, Black males, non-Black students, non-urban students, or outside of academic settings. The literature indicated that drama, as an art form, positively influenced the language development of Black girls. Educators and educational reformers have been researching and studying integrating art disciplines into a general education subject area to enhance learning for students (Moss et al., 2018). Consequently, the absence of arts integration can hinder the academic success of students (Chappell & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; Charland, 2011), as well as social and emotional development used to navigate beyond academics.

Studies have been conducted defining and outlining the importance of the language development of urban students through alternative methods, such as media literacy (Morrell, 2002), and techniques used toward urban literacy development, such as Image Theater (Drama Resource, n.d.; Marranca & Boal, 1980). Innovative critical techniques and methods used with urban students when studying how to enhance their literacies have proven successful. Additionally, the existing body of research suggests a positive relationship between classroom drama activities and other course curricula pertaining to high poverty urban school districts (Walker et al., 2011; Wasserburg & Rottman, 2016). Although the studies presented many benefits to the students, numerous limitations were also presented in the findings, noting barriers from school policies as well as the demographics and participation of some students (Inoa et al., 2014). Previous research has established a relationship with drama and middle school students but did not reveal that relationship included the variables of Black girls and other various literacies. Research findings indicated that the connections between conventional literacy and the creative visual and performing arts could complement students' learning and development (McDermott et al., 2017). However, the research did not reveal an extension of the literacies and how they influenced the experiences of Black girls beyond academic achievement. It is not evident within the literature that drama impacted the literacies of Black middle school girls in urban schools.

This dissertation explored how the extension of this drama research with underexamined literacies influenced the language that Black girls use in speaking, writing, social media engagement, and self-advocacy. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth description of the research methodology that was used to conduct this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter reviewed literature about drama as an art form being used as a tool to assist Black girls in developing their own narratives toward expression through language, engagement in digital literacy, and the multidimensionality of being Black and female. Discrimination and oppression often reveal themselves as dominant forces invading the lives of Black females, where Black girls often are challenged with how to combat these forces or navigate acts of social justice. However, research indicates that drama used for movement and expression is an art form that could be the conduit for strengthening traditionally underexamined literacies (digital, foundational, and Black Girls' literacies) as they pertain to how Black adolescent girls navigate the world (Costello, 2012; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Rottman, 2016; Walker et al., 2011; Wasserburg, & Young et al., 2016).

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology that explores how Black middle school girls and their teacher embody drama techniques and strategies used as the girls navigate specific literacies. The purpose of the study and the research questions are reintroduced as well as the research design that includes a description of the data collection and analysis processes. This chapter shares the data collection setting, a description of the sample population, and a step-by-step process on how the data was analyzed. Finally, the chapter closes with ethical considerations and a summary of the methodology.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to explore and investigate experiences of Black girls in an urban middle school who participated in drama classes and how drama may influence the underexamined literacies (foundational, digital, and

Black Girls' literacies). It is important to study if the Black girls' participation in drama classes helped the girls develop personal narratives through language, expression, voice, and image that helped navigate deeper issues of challenging discrimination and oppression. The research questions that guide the study were:

RQ1. What are the experiences of middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement?

RQ2. What role does the drama teacher play with urban middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address language, identity and social media engagement?

Research Design

Research for this study was conducted using a qualitative case study design. Case study is used to develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as an illustration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2014). Creswell (2013) contended that case study research is an approach where the investigator explores a real-life bounded system or multiple systems defined as the case/s. This approach involves detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., interviews, audiovisual material, documents, reports, focus groups, etc.). Case study has a long history in anthropology and sociology, as defined by Hamel et al. (1993), lending to an appropriate research design for cultural studies. Constructing a case study protocol is important for the validity of the study. The qualitative case study protocol for this dissertation following Ponelis's steps (2015) entailed: 1) Deciding the unit of analysis; 2) Selecting the cases; 3) Deciding the number of cases; 4) Determining the data collection techniques and procedures; 5) Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; and

6) Writing a report. Case study research begins with identifying a specific case that may be defined as an individual, a small group, a relationship, a project, or even a decision process (Yin, 2014). This research design was chosen for the sake of looking at subunits that were situated within a larger case to analyze data within the subunits separately (within case analysis), between the different subunits (between case analysis), or across all of the subunits (cross-case analysis) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). I chose case study to explore the whole case consisting of multiple cases, which included the drama teacher and four Black girls in the drama class. This case was bounded in that the participants under study were four Black middle school girls enrolled in the drama class, as well as their teacher, at a particular school (Stonybrook School). Case study methodology can be particularistic and descriptive as it focuses on a particular group, illustrates the complexity of the situation, and can explain the reasons behind a problem or question (Harreveld et al., 2016; Merriam, 2002). The data collected allowed the researcher to interpret and theorize about the phenomenon under investigation. The goal was for this particular study to be informed by participant interviews, a focus group, a short writing prompt, and the existing literature in the field. The researcher took on the role of non-participant/observer as participant. In essence, as the researcher, I did not participate in any class instruction or writing samples, yet I interviewed the sample population and observed how they responded and their interaction with classmates while they participated in the focus group. The study sample size of five participants was chosen to provide ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases, and conduct cross-case theme analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design allowed for individual case descriptions and themes within the case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as well as the

emergence of different perspectives within the case. This description of a case study fits best with the research questions in this study and the researcher's desire to uncover what transpired with the exploration of traditionally underexamined literacies of middle school Black girls who participated in a drama class.

Site of Research

After researching middle schools in Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Gaston, and Union counties of North Carolina that met the criteria of offering drama courses and having an ample population of Black girls who participated in the classes, a suitable school was selected. I initially emailed the superintendent of Stonybrook School to introduce my study and myself, and I was also personally introduced to her by my mentor at an awards reception. At her request, I prepared a short proposal about the study, and after further discussion, she agreed to allow me to conduct my study at her school. The school selected for the study is a K-12 charter school located in Mecklenburg County that serves 1607 students, where 1446 are Black, 147 are Hispanic, two are White, three are Asian, and nine are of two or more races. The total population includes 786 males and 821 females. The middle school incorporates $5^{th} - 8^{th}$ grades.

Participant Sample

The desired sample size for the population under study was five participants. The study focused on collecting data from four Black girls in middle school who participated in the drama classes. The drama teacher was also included in the sample population. Once the study was allowed, we selected a time frame to get teacher consent, parental consent, and student assent. I was then able to speak to the Black girls in the drama class, and I explained the study to them so that they could determine their interest in

participating in the study. The principal also connected me with the director of professional development and the school's drama teacher for coordination purposes. The participants were selected for the study because their participation was central to addressing the research questions that guided this study. This study involved voluntary participation, and the participants were informed many times that they had the right to cease involvement in this study at any time. Once I received responses from the Black girls and teacher interested in participating in the study, I worked with the drama teacher to schedule the best times for me to collect data.

The final sample population for this study employed a total of four (7th and 8th grade) Black girls and the drama teacher selected as multiple cases within the larger case study. The study represented an exploratory, qualitative, educational case study in the interpretivist paradigm that allowed for the exploration and understanding of the experiences of Black girls in an urban middle school who participated in the drama classes. Purposive criterion sampling was used for this study. It is the process of selecting a sample that is believed to be representative of a given population and is effective because it relies on clearly defined criteria to identify appropriate participants for a study (Ames et al., 2019; Gay et al., 2012). The concept of purposive sampling entails the researcher selecting individuals and sites for the study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the study's central phenomenon (Ames et al., 2019; Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2010). The purposive sampling criteria used for this study included:

1) Be enrolled in Stonybrook School's drama class

2) Identify as a Black, African American, or African female

3) Be enrolled in the 7th or 8th grades (middle adolescence)

4) Be employed as the drama teacher for the middle school drama classes at

 Stonybrook School (adults only)

  Once a group of interested students with consent and assent was identified that

met the criteria, I worked with the teacher to purposively select four students that would

feel comfortable answering questions, sharing information, and have participated in

drama classes long enough to have learned strategies and techniques that the teacher has

instructed. Creswell (2013) recommended no more than 4 -5 participants in a qualitative

case study research design to get depth and breadth of the situation for each individual. I

chose to include four students and one teacher in the data collection process for this study

collect sufficient in-depth information from each case. Table 1 outlines the demographics

of the study participants.

Table 1

Demographics

Demographics	
Gender	
Female	5
Race	
Black	1
African American	1
African European	1
African/African American	2
Grade	
7th	1
8th	3
Role	
Student	4
Teacher	1

Research Procedure

  For this study, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the

University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the principal at Stonybrook School. I

received approval from the school principal to conduct my research at Stonybrook School

on December 16, 2019, and received final approval from UNCC- IRB on January 6,

2020. After meeting with the drama teacher to discuss the study and address any specific

questions or concerns, we set dates in January and February 2020 to begin the data

collection process. The first step was to receive approval from the teacher to participate

in the study. Secondly, I emailed a detailed parent consent letter and a student assent

letter to the drama teacher to disseminate to the girl's parents/guardians and to the girls

themselves. The letters outlined the researcher's role as a doctoral candidate from the

Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North

Carolina at Charlotte inviting a sampling of 7th and 8th grade Black girls to participate in

the research study entitled, *Exploring the Influence of Dramatic Arts on Underexamined*

Literacies: Experiences of Black Girls in an Urban Middle School. The letter explained

the expectations of the participants and that their participation was completely voluntary.

The drama teacher and I agreed upon a return date of the letters. Once consent and assent

letters were received, I was allowed to meet with the 7th and 8th grade girls enrolled in the

drama class (in the presence of the teacher) to explain the study in more detail and answer

any questions or concerns. I reiterated that four girls were purposively selected with the

teacher's assistance and knowledge and that each selected participant had the authority to

end their participation in the study at any time.

        The researcher interviewed the selected sample and they also participated in a

focus group that included a short free writing sample. The interviews were audio

recorded for accuracy of the conversation and the information was used to complete this

dissertation. It may also be used to publish the study results in a journal as a contribution of research and literature to the field of urban and arts education. A meeting was held with the drama teacher in order for me to build rapport, but also to understand the approach, content, curriculum, pedagogy, and intent of the class in order to understand the drama teacher's vision for her students. As a researcher, I wanted to gain more understanding from the teacher of specific activities, techniques, settings within the drama classes, expectations, and philosophy on culturally relevant teaching and multicultural education, as well as her belief, perceptions, and the role she plays with drama's influence on the literacies of Black girls.

Methods

Data Collection

The dissertation proposal was successfully defended on September 17, 2019. I started collecting the data in January 2020. The interviews provided data on the participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences, which were crucial for this study. Anonymity was assured for each girl, with data reported under pseudonym names and participant numbers. Using the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework helped to frame interview questions that explicitly addressed how involvement in the drama classes influences the underexamined literacies of Black girls and explored the relationship between drama and those specific literacies based on their emotions, beliefs, and experiences. The consent and assent forms were kept separately in my home office in a locked box away from the data collected. The consent forms were the only things with participants' names. No personal identifiers beyond what was needed for the study (age, grade, gender, and race) were used. I transcribed the audio recordings and removed any

identifying information in the transcription process. The data was shared with the dissertation committee after it was analyzed and presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation. The data collection in case study research is "typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as interviews, documents, and audio materials," according to Creswell (2005, p. 75). As such, the following information outlines the types of data that were collected during this study.

Semi-Structure Interviews

Participant interviews were central to this study. One instrument for this study was semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which enabled planned focused conversation in order for the researcher to find out detailed and more in depth information than casual conversation. Additionally, semi-structured interviews (SSI) were able to provide data on the participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences, which was crucial for this study. The SSI was designed to ascertain subjective responses from selected participants regarding a particular situation they have experienced using a detailed interview guide (Creswell, 2013; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). For this dissertation study interviews were semi-structured to allow new ideas to present themselves within the dialogue. First, the drama teacher was interviewed using an interview protocol (see Appendix A for teacher interview protocol), which allowed the researcher to have a discussion about the framework of the drama curriculum, learn expectations from the teacher, and explore the discussion from the lens of Black Feminist Thought epistemology. Secondly, using the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework helped to enable the researcher to frame interview questions in a manner that explicitly addressed how involvement in the drama classes may influence the underexamined literacies of Black middle school girls, and

explores the relationship between drama and those specific literacies based on their emotions, beliefs, and experiences. A group of four selected Black girls in the drama class were interviewed using open-ended, semi-structured interview questions during the study (see Appendix B for student interview protocol). The interviews were conducted in-person during the school day and audio recorded to transcribe the data for analysis purposes. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to code for themes.

Although conducting semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended responses and two-way communication to result in the qualitative data having the ability to compare previous and future data, which are significant benefits of this method, there were some disadvantages. It was time consuming and finding enough of the suitable participant population to draw conclusions and make comparisons was challenging.

Focus Group

A focus group (FG) interview as a data collection method not only relies on question and answer format of interviews but also relies on the interaction within the group and is led by a moderator (Creswell, 2013). Using a focus group as a qualitative research strategy would be appropriate when the researcher is interested in how individuals form a perspective of a problem (Bostan, 2015), and add meaning and understanding to existing knowledge. Through the FG technique, I collected data and identified the experiences of the Black girls and the drama teacher, as well as their way of thinking and way of expressing.

Focus groups can be used when making a case for data triangulation as a means for demonstrating validity, often used in conjunction with other qualitative methods like

in-depth interviews (Nel et al., 2015; Wilson, 1997). There are three types of questions used in FGs: probing, follow-up, and exit questions. It is important to realize that there are some limitations to FGs. First, since FG data is qualitative, it cannot necessarily be generalizable to the population because qualitative data is often context specific. A moderator who becomes biased could cause another limitation. For this research study, a focus group was formed after each participant had been previously interviewed. The focus group included the four Black girls and the drama teacher. The group was guided with a couple of focus group questions (see Appendix C) to engage in discussion as the researcher audio recorded the conversation. The session lasted for 45 minutes and included two components: a writing prompt and focus group interview questions. Although some researchers recommend a minimum of three to four focus group meetings for simple research topics (Burrows & Kendall, 1997; Nel et al., 2015) for a duration of one to two hours, this might differ when the group consists of younger participants such as school children (Gibson, 2012; Heary & Hennessy, 2002) because children tend to have shorter attention spans and will begin to lose focus and interest in the topic quicker than adults. Additionally, each time focus groups are scheduled for students during the school day, the more time they are missing from classes.

Both SSI and FG require the interviewer to use specific techniques for a quality process. Using the modified in-depth narrative interviewing technique allowed the researcher to keep the participants centered and focused on the subject and to use concrete examples of experiences. Additionally, the interviewer was able to probe for additional details. Lastly, the researcher had to be an active listener in the process. Active

listening in qualitative research involves listening beyond the usual sense of hearing. It requires that the researcher use all of the senses including intuition.

Writing Prompt

Within the focus group, each participant was asked to engage in a fun activity of answering a timed three-minute writing prompt related to what they learned in drama classes and how they may react to negative messages on social media (see Appendix D). The teacher answered a separate writing prompt asking her to share how she would react as a drama teacher when dealing with an issue of a Black female student from her class who felt disrespected or oppressed by a situation that happened to the student inside or outside of school (see Appendix D). The students and the teacher were given three minutes to answer the writing prompts on the paper provided to them by the researcher.

The data collected from the focus group and writing samples were analyzed along with the data from the semi-structured interviews. This data examined the experiences of each participant exposing how they utilized specific strategies and techniques in drama class that addressed various aspects of foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. The teacher's personal interview highlighted her perceptions and the role that she plays as a Black female teacher who teaches drama strategies to Black adolescent girls as they navigate foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies.

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Data Analysis

</div>

Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns within the dataset. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smedley & Coulson, 2017). While thematic analysis is flexible, this flexibility can lead to

inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes derived from the research

data (Glesne, 2016; Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, thematic analysis provides a

highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing a

rich and detailed data. For this study, simultaneous data collection and analysis of the

drama teacher and Black girls' perceptions and experiences were used to allow the

researcher to shape the study as it proceeded (Glesne, 2016). Organizing data as it was

collected and organizing it into emerging concepts or themes achieved concurrent data

collection and analysis. The interviews were recorded and uploaded into Temi software

for transcription. NVivo was used to devise themes and codes to conduct a thematic

analysis. The researcher used Culturally Relevant Arts Education through the lens of

Black Feminist Thought as a framework to develop the analysis of the data. Through this

framework, the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts for emerging themes from a

position that placed drama as a culturally relevant art form with the Black girls'

perceptions of their foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies as the focus of the

analysis. Through interview and discussion with the teacher, the researcher used Black

Feminist Thought epistemology to understand the instructional practices and meaning

that drama may have on Black female students through her lens. There are six steps of the

thematic analysis process: 1) Familiarize myself with the data; 2) Generate initial codes;

3) Search for themes, 4) Review the themes; 5) Define and name the themes; and 6)

Produce a report.

Coding

The study concentrated on analyzing the collected data from a select group of four

Black girls and one Black drama teacher at Stonybrook School in Charlotte, NC. For

effective data analysis, two cycles of data coding methods were employed. The first cycle

of coding included three coding methods to capture the phenomenon of my data fully.

The first cycle of coding began with the Initial Coding method, which allowed for a first

review of the transcribed data. This method is truly open-ended yet has multiple steps for

processing data. The first step in Initial Coding is to break down the data into discrete

parts, then carefully examine the parts, and lastly, compare the parts for similarities and

differences (Saldana, 2016). Initial Coding aims to remain open to all possible directions

suggested by the researcher's interpretation of the data. The second coding method used

in the first cycle of coding was In Vivo coding which draws from the participant's own

language and is an effective method for the researcher to attune to the participant's

perspectives and actions through studying interview transcripts. In Vivo coding has been

labeled "literal coding," "verbatim coding," and "inductive coding" (Saldana, 2016).

Descriptive coding was the third method used during the first cycle of coding. This

method was explicitly used for the writing prompt artifacts that were obtained during the

focus group. Descriptive coding is a method that assigns basic labels to data to provide an

inventory of their topics (Saldana, 2016).

The second cycle coding method used was pattern coding. "Pattern codes are

exploratory, or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or

explanation" (Saldana, 2016, p. 236). Essentially, it is a way of grouping first cycle

summaries into smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts. This technique

allowed me to review the data again to group like concepts. One of the most critical

outcomes of qualitative data analysis is interpreting how the individual components of the

study weave together. Saldana (2016) posited, "codeweaving is the actual integration of

key code words and phrases into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together"
(Saldana, 2016, p. 276). This is the process that I undertook to reach relevant themes by
sorting data into themes that were relevant to the research focus (Glesne, 2016). Coding
enables the researcher to attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment
represents (Charmaz, 2006; Elliot, 2017). According to Saldana (2016), "theme" can be
defined as an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about
and/or what it means. Patterns and themes were reviewed and refined using an iterative
process to compare and contrast the perceptions and experiences of the Black middle
school girls in drama classes as they relate to their perceptions of their literacies. The
study focused on the experiences that the participating Black girls expressed in drama
class and considered if those drama experiences transfer to this dissertation's defined
literacies. The study also explored the concept of drama classes providing advocacy for
social justice for Black girls by inserting the CRAE framework.

Research Validity

Validity is the degree to which qualitative data accurately gauges what the
researcher is trying to assess (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gay et al., 2012). Yin (2011)
stated that the key quality control part of research is the validity of a study and its
findings. A valid study is one that has adequately collected and interpreted its data so that
the conclusions represent the real world. Researchers can take specific steps to establish
the validity or trustworthiness of their research. Creswell (2013) outlined specific
verification procedures that can enhance the credibility of qualitative research such as
persistent observation, triangulation, peer review, prolonged engagement, clarification of
researcher bias, member checking, reflexivity, and rich, thick descriptions. This study

used at least three of the verification procedures outlined. To establish validity, data triangulation was used to establish validity, which involved using different sources of information to increase the credibility of the study and strengthen the validity by analyzing the topic from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2016). In this study, the multiple sources of data used for consistency within the data are semi-structured interviews and a focus group that included short writing samples from the participants. The participants were interviewed and observed in a focus group to establish the consistency of the primary source of data used to conduct this study.

Reflexivity is a second method that was employed to strengthen the validity of this study. Conducting a credible qualitative study requires the researcher to intentionally reveal underlying assumptions or biases that may influence data collection and analysis (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016; Gay et al., 2012). In qualitative studies, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, it is difficult for the researcher to extract personally held ideas, beliefs, and assumptions. Reflexivity practices are necessary to help minimize bias by developing an awareness of how the research will be conducted, how the researcher will relate to the participants, and how the researcher reports the results (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016; Charmaz, 2006). I engaged in reflexivity practices which enabled me to maintain awareness of how my personal ideas and beliefs may have influenced how questions are asked and interpreted, and how I interacted with the participants. As a researcher, I used journaling strategies to ask myself reflexive questions (Glesne, 2016), which helped develop a consistent pattern of awareness of potential subjectivity and bias.

Rich, thick description is the final strategy used to enhance the validity of this study. Rich, thick description refers to the task of providing a detailed description and interpretation of observed behavior within a particular social context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell, 2013). The following facets characterize the method: description observed social actions, assign intentionality to these actions, captures the thoughts and feelings of participants, describe the relationships between participants, and encourage thick and meaningful interpretation of the data (Harreveld et al., 2016; Merriam, 2002). Detailed transcriptions of interviews were used to showcase the diverse perspectives of individual participants, with the goal to enable the researcher to create a detailed description of the context of each participant's experiences.

Subjectivity Statement

In qualitative studies, researchers need to be aware of their own biases and have a clear understanding of how their background and experiences may influence data collection and analysis (Glesne, 2016). My main reason for choosing this topic is personal interest. My decision to conduct a study examining drama and literacies of Black girls was influenced by my position as a Black female artist and educator interested in the visual and performing arts. As a Black female artist and educator, I have observed persistent race and gender-based disparities in academic achievement, self-concept, and identity of Black girls. I have also experienced oppression in and outside of academic settings during my middle school years and beyond. As an adult, I have led girls' groups and taught fiber art lessons where the majority of the youth were Black girls challenged by all forms of literacies development, social justice issues, and perceptions and beliefs about themselves that may hinder their growth as Black females. These sessions were

mainly utilized as ammunition to combat identity crises, racism, lack of confidence, and challenge oppression through art activism and social justice advocacy. Through the lessons and conversation with the girls that I led, I realized that Black girls received and expressed content and information more openly when art forms were utilized for instruction. They were able to embrace challenging topics by inserting art, expressing feelings, and eventually ending with an aesthetic product that spoke to their emotions or expressed their experiences through art. Additionally, due to negative stigmas that have become attached to urban Black girls, teachers, administrators, and their peer groups often treat Black girls differently than their White counterparts. Exploring experiences that link art to other subjects can help overcome negative experiences, narratives, and outcomes for Black girls. Culturally Relevant Arts Education can provide a counter narrative for these situations.

Many urban schools do not offer drama as an elective for their students, or Black girls may not choose to participate in the drama elective classes due to embarrassment, non-interest, or stigma. In referring to the stigma, Black girls may already assume that society thinks they are over-exaggerated or filled with "drama" in their lives. They may choose to stay away from that art discipline because of that stereotype. As an artist and lover and patron of the theater, I have become increasingly curious about the connections between arts education, arts integration, academic achievement, and social justice. Research indicates that performing arts participation may positively influence cognitive development, academic achievement, and school outcomes; however, CRAE moves beyond those basics and suggests that arts education influences social justice advocacy and allows students to challenge dominant narratives. I firmly believe that the arts can

positively impact academic performance, academic self-concept, confidence in cultural identity, and positive school experiences for all students, particularly Black females.

My bias is rooted in a place of personal experience as a child. I grew up during a time in a part of Boston that was still very racist. During my middle school years, I lived in a section of town that was mostly African American with very few Black and brown people from other countries. There were a handful of White Americans who lived in this middle to lower economic community. However, the local public middle school was over a bridge that seemed as though it divided Black and White people with varying economic statuses of lower to middle-upper class. Several African American kids, including myself, had to cross that bridge and walk to the designated public middle school. For the most part, I felt I had a "normal" life with regular friends, family, racial slurs, occasional racial fights, and constant feelings of being on guard physically, intellectually, and socially. In middle school, most of my friends were also African American because more than half of the school population was just that. The mostly White neighborhood residents near the school did not appreciate "their" school becoming infiltrated with Black students. However, this middle school was classified as an urban school and pulled from many neighboring residential communities. As I reflect on my past schooling experiences, I remember having less than one handful of favorite or memorable teachers in middle school. Mrs. Doe, the art teacher, was my favorite at that time. Sadly, in this urban school with more than half the population of Black students, it had less than a handful of Black teachers. In dealing with racial slurs, being called the "N" word regularly, getting into physical altercations, losing my self-esteem, and having a low academic self-concept affected my grades, how I presented or expressed myself as a Black girl, and the way I

perceived myself academically in relation to my peers. Middle school became the time where I recognized my differences from the dominant culture, and it forced me to choose how I should proceed forward in life in order to survive academically, culturally, socially, and emotionally. I had to learn to navigate "White" spaces and maintain my Black female identity. Essentially, I had to learn to live biculturally.

As I grew into adulthood and became more professional with my artwork, I not only create work to display art in exhibits or sell, but I create fiber art that deals with race, education, identity, or social justice issues. I also carve out time to work with students creating art. I have had opportunities to work with Black girls on identity art. The discussions around student participant crochet groups were more specific to identity, physical features, self-expression, confidence, language, style, and other things about being a Black girl living in an urban society. Although my art medium and expertise is fiber art, I have a love for drama and acting. It allows for self-expression without judgment. The techniques can carry over into many facets of one's life, like reading, writing, verbal communication, mannerism, self-expression, and other life developments. As an adult, I attend many plays and performance art events to study actors and performers, especially those of color. I like to know their "stories" as I research their journeys. I also sat on the board of directors of a youth organization, The Possibility Project, that empowers teenagers to create safe, peaceful, and productive lives in response to racial division and violence destroying youth. The teenagers create, write, and perform vignettes that allow them to express their personal dealings of oppression. Being a part of this organization for three years helped me reflect on my own childhood and think about types of change that can be made, how arts can be in education, and how

drama can influence literacies so that more Black girls do not experience discrimination or oppression from the dominant culture. My personal experiences and these attitudes and beliefs may add bias to my study, but my awareness of these potential biases will hopefully enable me to contain my subjectivity during data collection and analysis.

Researcher's Role

My background as an artist and educator has spawned my interest in this study and is an integral part of the methodology. Although I am a visual fiber artist, I have a strong interest in theater and dramatic arts, particularly with the connection they have with culture, social justice, and literacies development of Black girls. As a researcher, I chose to take an overt, non-participant observer role in this case study. This choice was made in order to be able to fully observe the students and teacher within the unit of analysis without having to be undercover and without having to participate in the activities. This role would allow me to be immersed and critical in data collection. I am interested in discovering the perspectives and experiences that take place when Black girls participate in drama classes; therefore, a non-participant observer role seemed like the most logical choice. I am not an actor and do not have a background in the field, so I do not expect much bias toward the research findings.

The data was collected at Stonybrook School over the course of approximately one month focusing on one drama teacher and four Black female students who participated in the drama classes in grades seven and eight. I interviewed the sample of Black girls and received valuable information. I also interviewed the drama teacher who shared her critical lens of teaching drama techniques to these young ladies. Close attention was paid to the process of reflection during this study to make sure I focused on

my participants' experiences and perceptions rather than my desire for the success of the potential of drama's influence on the literacies of Black girls. I also absorbed and processed the information that I collected after interviewing the teacher to better understand the developed framework within the class structure. I made sure to bracket my own experiences in reflective memos during both the transcription and data analysis stages of this study. Bracketing is a method used to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions and judgment that may taint the research process (Anneli et al., 2015; McNarry et al., 2019; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

The research provided valuable information from the responses of middle school Black girls' experiences participating in drama classes and the influence their participation has on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. There were no foreseeable risks involved by participating in this study. Though likely infrequent or rare, there was a chance that embarrassment or emotional distress might occur depending on the content of the prompts and how interview questions were presented. To mitigate these possible risks, I reiterated to each participant that they do not have to answer any question that they did not want and that they may pull out of the study at any time. Additionally, the students did not miss any core instructional time as a result of the study. Interviews were conducted during the lunch breaks or specials time. The teacher was interviewed during her planning period via Google Hangout. Each approved participant was repeatedly informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I asked each participant before beginning the interview if they had questions regarding their consent. I ensured that participants understood each section of the assent and consent forms prior to

conducting the interview.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative research approach. An interpretive case study method with multiple cases was used to examine the influence of drama on the three traditionally underexamined literacies of 7th and 8th grade Black girls in an urban middle school based upon their beliefs, experiences, and perceptions. The drama teacher was also a participant in this study. Data was collected from interviews and a focus group meeting that include a short free write sample. A total of four 7th and 8th grade Black girls from an urban middle school and their drama teacher was the sample population. Rich and thick descriptions of research participants' responses from personal interviews and the focus group helped develop themes during the coding process. The goal was to establish validity through triangulation, reflexivity, and the utilization of thick, rich descriptions. After analyzing the data, connected the experiences of Black girls in an urban middle school who participated in drama classes to the influence that drama as a culturally relevant pedagogy has on the literacies of those students. The results are presented in the next chapter as a discussion of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis and included exemplary quotations from the participants.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

"I feel like as a Black girl in middle school; I'm set to like be a certain way. And that way is to talk loud and just be obnoxious and be whatever society puts us, Black girls, in like a stereotype. And so I feel like drama class has made me feel like I can be so much more than what life stereotypes, um, Black girls because we can be so much more in that we can express our feelings and we can be more than just us, basically being more than what life thinks that we are." – Nasa Jupiter

Chapter 4 analyzes the results of interviews, focus group discussions, and the writing samples undertaken during the study. This chapter explored how the practice of drama may influence three underexamined literacies (foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies) for Black girls. The study was specifically designed to capture the experiences of Black middle school female students who were enrolled in drama classes at an urban middle school. It intended to produce the narratives that explored the influence of drama on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies based on the experiences that they shared, and the role that their drama teacher played. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study. Data from this study attempted to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement?

RQ2. What role does the drama teachers play with middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address language, identity, and social media engagement?

Themes were formed based on the data collected from interviews and a focus group during the study. Four middle school Black girls and their Black drama teacher participated in individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group that included a writing sample from prompts. Analysis of the interviews, focus group, and writing samples revealed 94 codes grouped and reduced to determine two categories, six emergent themes, ten subthemes, and three common ideas presented in this chapter.

Chapter 1 addressed the problem that Black girls in urban middle schools have where they often combat challenges in educational settings regarding literacies and are often left voiceless and feeling invisible (Flood & Anders, 2005; Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). They understand how society views them yet may not intuitively embody the skills and advocacy to deal with the challenges that they face. The problem stems from the larger picture of the lack of specific curriculum and pedagogy that connects urban Black girls' learning styles with certain literacies, as well as how Black girls understand and embrace their identities and express their voices. Additionally, Chapter 1 outlined deficits in varied underexamined literacies that affect language, confidence, expression, identity and navigating other layers in the lives of Black female adolescents. Finally, Chapter 1 outlined the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework including Black Feminist Thought epistemology. The CRAE framework with BFT epistemology allows for exploration of how Black girls express their language (oral and written), in person and on social media, explicitly exploring their drama participation as an influential factor. BFT also encapsulates the thoughts and vision of the Black female teacher that understands and supports Black female adolescent students who live in urban settings. Chapter 2 delved into the literature on arts education related to drama as an art form, and

foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. This review of the literature was conducted to establish a solid foundation for addressing the research questions. Chapter 3 provided the methodology that was constructed to examine the research questions that guided this study.

Lastly, chapter 4 describes the findings of this study. The five case study participants are introduced early in this chapter. The study involved four Black female middle school students enrolled in drama class at their middle school and one Black female drama teacher. They all brought their unique perspectives about drama and shared the experiences in their lives where drama strategies were employed and influential.

Later in this chapter, I identify and discuss major themes that emerged from the findings as answers to the research questions. Using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set which helps to investigate how other members respond to the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smedley & Coulson, 2017), I discovered it provides a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies, providing rich and detailed data (Smedley & Coulson, 2017). Concurrent data collection and analysis were achieved and organized into emerging concepts or themes, which delineated the shared experiences of participants. I was able to formulate themes, which signified common experiences among participants.

Culturally Relevant Arts Education through the lens of Black Feminist Thought was used as a framework to develop the analysis of the data. Using the six steps in the thematic analysis process to familiarize myself with the transcribed data, a coding technique was employed to identify themes or concepts found within the data. The

process involved sorting data into themes relevant to the research focus (Glesne, 2016).

Coding enables the researcher to attach labels to segments of data that depict what each

segment represents as a fundamental aspect of the analytical process and the ways in

which researchers break down their data to make something new (Charmaz, 2006; Elliot,

2017). While using Temi software to transcribe the data, and NVivo software to analyze,

interpret and code text, the data was then reviewed for content and independently open-

coded for subthemes related to the benefits and challenges based on the experiences of

Black middle school girls' participation in drama classes, as well as how the teacher's

role played a part in these developing literacies for the middle school Black girls. Themes

were reviewed and refined using an iterative process to compare and contrast the scenario

based on the role that the drama teacher played and experiences of the urban middle

school Black girls in drama classes as presented in this study.

Participant Descriptive Data

After coding ample amounts of transcribed data, I began to analyze the data. It is

important for data to be descriptive in qualitative studies. Descriptive data must be used

to highlight the similarities or differences among the participants (Yin, 2011). The

evidence presented in this section sought to allow a deeper understanding of the

participant's experiences in the sample population. This section was organized around the

thoughts and experiences of each participant separately and within a unit. The purpose

was to give the reader and researcher a more precise view of the circumstances

surrounding the Black middle school girls and their drama teacher. While the

summarizations were on significant themes and ideas, the individual responses presented

a more vivid description of the experiences of the participants. Table 2 provides a brief

introduction and description of each participant. Additionally, detailed descriptions of the

participants provide essential information for understanding the background in which the

narratives of their experiences can be situated.

Table 2

Individual Participant Descriptions

Pseudo	Grade	Gender	Race	Social Media	Time	Years in Drama	Favorite Strategy	Other Info
Maria	Teacher	Female	African American	N/A	N/A	3 Yrs	N/A	Educator- 12 years
Nasa Jupiter	7th Grade	Female	Black	TikTok & IG	½ Hr	6 Yrs	Improv	Mother is an actor
Bobo	8th Grade	Female	Black	TikTok & IG	3 Hrs	2 Yrs	Shakespeare into raps	Liberian
Alice	8th Grade	Girl	African American	IG	4 Hrs	3 Yrs	Improv	Speaks out for justice
Noemi	8th Grade	Female	African European	TikTok, IG, Twitter, Snapchat	4 Hrs	1 Yr	Going into character	African and trying to under-stand her identity in America

Participants

As outlined in Table 2, the following is a description of each participant in the

study. Participant grade, gender, race, length of time participating in drama classes,

favorite drama practices, social media usage, and some outside of school experiences

were revealed to provide a richer picture when reading the full data. All participants'

names were changed to protect anonymity.

Participant T1

Maria Gomez is a self-identified African American female drama teacher. She has

worked in education for twelve years. She makes the distinction that the class is "drama"

and not "theater" class. She expresses this in a way that lends to how designs her

classrroom space and lessons to allow for individual unique expression revealing gender

and culture identities, as well as learning strategies and techniques through reading,

watching, and interpreting plays. The teacher makes a distinction between drama used for

personal, cultural strategies for expression and interpretation versus theater as the actual

production and performance of a play. She came to Stonybrook School three years ago

and accepted the position as a drama teacher even though that had not been her

background before coming to the school. After the first year, the administration thought

that she was doing a great job and continued to develop her in that role. Ms. Gomez's

vision and goals for her students are for them to have an appreciation for the arts,

particularly drama. Ms. Gomez stated, "I want them to be exposed to things like audience

etiquette so that when they grow up, they know how to behave." She also said, "I want

them to feel comfortable within themselves, enough to express themselves in whatever

way they see fit." She plans to continue working at the school for a while so that she can

expand her curriculum in drama to meet her student's needs. Ms. Gomez explained the

class demographics, stating:

> I have both male and female students. Um, the majority of my students are, either
>
> African American or they are also Latina and Latino. And I have Asian children
>
> in my classes as well. I would say there are definitely more females than males in
>
> my classes. The students are assigned classes. The way it works is that they are

assigned a special for each marking period and then that way you're able to kind of gauge what they like the most.

Although Ms. Gomez prides herself on being a fair, sensitive, and understanding teacher toward all students, she admitted that she enjoys working with the Black female students in drama class, particularly to guide them through challenges.

> I have overheard, um, Black girls just talking about you know, like, well, I'm just having a bad hair day or whatever and they feel bad. It's real. We all have felt awful. I don't know if that directly correlated to my class, but I know how it is to be a Black girl. I know that having your hair done and especially in middle school is like really important. You know, we all have bad days and you know, like I try to just be positive.

Additionally, she continues to build her repertoire of culturally relevant pedagogy for her drama classes by connecting with other drama teachers to share and gather ideas through online teacher sites. Maria Gomez believes that her students' participation in drama class will help them achieve her vision for them. Outside of school, Ms. Gomez has a nonprofit business that she runs where she supports urban children with engaging in the performance arts through exposure and arts participation.

Participant S1

Nasa Jupiter was the only 7th grade student in the sample population, and she self identifies as a Black female. She has been in drama classes and some drama clubs inside and outside of school since she was in 1st grade. Nasa Jupiter's mother is a local actor that has engaged Nasa Jupiter in drama settings since she was a very small child. Her mother believed that participating in drama classes would help Nasa Jupiter emerge from her

shyness. Nasa Jupiter enjoys participating in the drama class as it helps her deal with

challenging times, discrimination as a Black middle school girl, and becoming more

confident and less shy. She shared her experience as a student in the drama class, stating:

> In this school usually we learn about improv and we also learn about, um, what to
>
> do when in plays, what not to do in plays. Um, like kind of like how to feel and
>
> stuff. It's also a good experience to like get to know other students and how like
>
> drama affects them because I feel like drama affects, lots of people in many
>
> different ways.

Nasa Jupiter's favorite drama strategy is improvisation and during the study she shared

experiences where she was able to use strategies that she has learned in drama class to

navigate challenges, thus enhancing her skills.

Participant S2

Bobo is in the 8th grade, and she self identifies as Black and female. However,

Bobo is Liberian and shares that her culture does not allow for females to express

themselves. She has been taught to hold her feelings in and not express emotions or

personal thoughts. She believes that participating in the drama class at school has allowed

her to express herself in ways that her culture does not permit. She has been participating

in drama classes since sixth grade for the two years that she has been enrolled at

Stonybrook School. Her participation in drama has helped deal with challenges in school

and on social media, as well as socially navigate the nuances of her culture. Bobo shared,

> We do drama activities. We act, we do Shakespeare and a lot of other stuff. We
>
> play, sometimes we do, like we get in groups and we do scenarios and scenes

where we act in different situations. And yeah, we play a lot of games for acting.

It's pretty fun, you know, getting to act with people that relate to you and like

know what you like. Y'all both can understand each other and work with each

other.

Moreover, Bobo's favorite drama activity is turning Shakespeare plays into rap songs.

She found that activity to be very fun but also learned a great deal about Shakespeare.

This process has ignited her interest in Shakespeare plays that she never knew existed.

Participant S3

Alice is an 8th grade student at Stonybrook School, and self identifies as an

African American girl. She has been participating in drama classes for the three years that

she has been enrolled at the school. Alice was somewhat quiet and did not talk a lot

during the interview but answered the questions that the interviewer asked. Alice shared

that she enjoys being in the drama class and gets a lot out of it.

Alice shared,

We learn about different, like types of acting, and then we do games of

demonstrating it. Like, we have two people or three people go outside the

room and then, um, the people in the class, uh, they all know this one topic,

and then when we come back in, they have to say, they have to like give

hints of the topic. We also do other things like she [Ms. Gomez] puts on a

video of a play and you had to write about our feelings or what we think

the play was about.

Alice also enjoys reading Shakespeare's plays in drama class and using improvisation.

They are her favorite activities and practices that she uses from drama class. She believes

the strategies helped her with her language arts class lessons and being a more confident Black female. However, although Alice may be shy at times, she speaks up for social justice issues.

Participant S4

Noemi initially identified herself as African European. She is African and has been in America for a little while. She is trying to understand the term African American and sometimes refers to herself that way. She eventually identified herself as African American. She is in the 8th grade and identified as a female. She has been a student of the school for a little over a year and has been participating in drama class that entire time. Noemi enjoys drama class and says that is where she met her closest friend, who happens to be Hispanic. Noemi noted that although her friend is Hispanic and she is African, they have become close friends because they have a lot in common. Noemi shared what she has done in drama class, stating:

> It's really easy. All you just have to do is like get to know people. And,
> when you're performing it's just like bring out how you feel outside, like
> not just faking the tears you have to like feel it to bring it out to project it
> for people. Drama class is actually great cause that's where I met one of
> my closest friends and we had something in common and we had like a
> space to just do what we liked together and make it fun.

Noemi admitted that her favorite drama strategy is going into character. She believes that strategy helps her deal with challenging situations that she faces in her life.

Each student participant was central to the study because they met the purposive sampling criteria required for the study by being: 1) enrolled in Stonybrook School's

drama class, 2) identifying as a Black, African American, or African female, and 3)

enrolled in the 7th or 8th grades. The adult participant in the sample population was

selected because she met the purposive sampling criteria by identifying as a Black or

African American female and being employed as the drama teacher for the middle school

drama classes at Stonybrook Middle School.

The data used for this study consisted of transcribed individual and focus group

interviews that were analyzed and coded to determine emergent themes. The anecdotal

data collected during interviews provided rich and thick descriptions, which served as the

primary sources from which themes emerged. To be considered a theme, at least two of

the four student participants, or the teacher and at least one student participant, had to

share that common experience. The responses to the research questions were used to

arrange categories and themes during the data collection process. The research questions

were designed to highlight the experiences of middle school Black girls in a drama class

at an urban school, as well as the role of the drama teacher as she created a unique

situation for those middle school Black girls. The qualitative analysis, as described in the

Methodology chapter, elicited six themes and ten subthemes, which fell under the two

categories of Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls, and Drama Influences.

The primary themes under the category Factors in Education for Urban Middle School

Girls were: (1) Experiencing Racism, and (2) Exploring Underexamined Literacies. The

themes categorized under Drama Influences were: (3) Literacies Development through

Drama Participation, (4) Cultural Relevance, (5) Race and Gender Identity, and (6)

Drama Practices and Activities. Lastly, three common ideas that emerged from the focus

group were: (1) Shaping the Future of Drama as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, (2) Black

Girl Confidence, and (3) Foundational Literacy.

The primary goal of this study was to examine the experiences of Black urban

middle school girls to determine any influence of drama on foundational, digital, or Black

Girls' literacies. During interviews, participants were given the opportunity to discuss

and describe their experiences related to their responses to certain scenarios and if they

used specific drama techniques within their responses.

Classroom Environment

In order to set the stage, it is important to understand how the drama teacher

creates a classroom space that is inviting to all students' cultures and backgrounds. She

wants her students to be comfortable freely expressing themselves in that space in order

to secure self confidence and esteem. She teaches strategies that her students are able to

practice that extend beyond classroom instruction; helping students navigate through

some challenging life experiences. Many of the strategies help Black girls with what and

how they speak in person and what they post on social media. The strategies also

encourage and build self confidence that allows Black girls to express themselves through

their personal narratives. In the classroom space, she teaches drama strategies like, Take a

Walk in Someone Else's Shoes, Improvisation, breathing techniques, and Shakespeare

Raps as tools to help her students gain skills that assist how they navigate through life.

The Black female drama teacher especially connects with the Black female middle school

students in her class as she understands what it is like to be a Black girl, and perceives

that they sometimes come from hard backgrounds and feel misunderstood. The Black

female students are able to share personal experiences, learn drama strategies, and have safe discussions in the confines of the drama class.

Student Experiences

In response to research question 1: what are the experiences, in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement of Black girls in an urban middle school who participate in drama classes, the findings reveal that multiple themes arose from the experiences of these Black girls. The findings from the analyzed data reveal influences that drama has on certain literacies of Black girls in an urban middle school as told through their personal experiences. Themes and common ideas emerged through interviews, a focus group and writing samples.

Common Idea 2: Black Girl Confidence

During the focus group, two of the girls made strong comments about Black girls being confident. They spoke confidently and shared their thoughts on the topic as the conversation was allowed to flow without interruption. Although two girls led the conversation on that topic, all of the girls nodded in agreement as a unified group. The gist of the conversation around that topic focused on how Black females cannot allow society to force societal requirements on them, and that Black females are strong, powerful and confident and do not need to succumb to imposed expectations. Bobo shared these sentiments in the group discussion:

> If we need to meet society requirements to identify what it is to be a true girl or Black girl and on top of that, we've got prove to them that you're wrong, we can do this, we can do that. We're not this, we're not that. We are stronger than

they know.

Noemi shared that she likes to post positive images of Black females on social media to show the strength of African American females. The entire group was nodding and agreeing during this portion of the conversation, signifying that they also agreed with these sentiments. This common idea connects with subtheme 5 and with research question one as it demonstrates the Black girls can gain and sustain the confidence that has been influenced by drama instruction and practice.

The themes Experiencing Racism and Exploring Underexamined Literacies emerged as factors in education for urban middle school girls during this study. These are aspects related to situations that urban middle school girls endured in school, in personal lives outside of school, and on social media, where they also found that the use of drama practices helped them to overcome some negative challenges. Through the experiences that were shared by the Black girls the findings indicate that they experienced racism.

Theme 1: Experiencing Racism

Racism refers to a hierarchy of superiority/inferiority along the line of the human (Grosfoguel, 2016). This hierarchy can be constructed and marked in diverse ways. Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) posited that Black girls have learned to survive in a racist society, even while in school, by adopting a race-less persona. This teaches Black girls that in order to be successful, they cannot be who they are organically which alters their identity, or they have to ignore negative responses against their humanity of being Black and often a Black female. Data analysis from the interviews demonstrated that some participants experienced racism or discrimination inside and outside of school. Thus, the participants explored how participation in drama classes helped them to deal

with their emotions and reactions to these challenges. Three student participants shared

some of these experiences of racism or discrimination. Bobo highlighted a situation at a

rest area while her family was traveling by car to Virginia for a family wedding. She and

her brother were waiting for their mother outside of the restroom door when an adult

White male walked by them and called them the N word. Bobo shared:

> This one man, he came, and he looked at my brother and me said the N-word to
>
> us, and I was like, wow. It was like a year ago and I was like, wow, people still
>
> act like this, you know, I was like, you know what, I'm not gonna let it affect me.
>
> I'm gonna keep on going. Won't ruin my day. I will breathe.

Bobo has learned breathing techniques in drama class assist her in not allowing outside

negativity to influence how she reacts to it. She did not allow the negative racist

comments that were spewed at her and her brother to cause her to become angry and

respond with negative words or actions. The racial slur also did not cause Bobo to break

down in tears or slump into depression because she practiced her breathing activity and

refused to let it ruin her day.

Nasa Jupiter, who also plays soccer after school, experienced degrading remarks

while on the soccer field by a White male student on the other team. Nasa Jupiter shared,

> People on the other team decided that it would be okay to call me the "B" word.
>
> And I felt like really down, and I felt like I kind of just like felt bad that he would
>
> call me that. And he called me the "N" word because of my skin color. So that
>
> really made me feel, yeah. So it made you feel a certain kind of way.

In that moment, Nasa Jupiter felt hurt and down because someone would use negative

slurs against her race and gender, but she did not retaliate with her own negative words or

actions. However, Nasa Jupiter shared that improvisation helps her adjust in different situations, even when she is dealing with discrimination. She believed that learning how to promptly deal with whatever is thrown at her by managing her behaviors and comments are some of the things that she has learned in drama class with improv.

The last participant, Noemi, experienced discrimination on a different level. She was shocked that a student who had the same skin color as her would discriminate against her because of where she was from. Noemi shared, "This guy, he thinks I'm like African cause like I'm from Africa and so he just says, go back to your country, you ugliest bitch. I just have to ignore it and keep going." Noemi was completely hurt by his comment and was shocked that someone who looked like her with the same skin color, even though they were not born in the same country, would say those hurtful words to her. Noemi has learned through drama that she can go into character sometimes to deal with the negativity of other people. Instead of instantly becoming hurt and defensive to the foul words that Noemi's peer said to her, she chose to go into character, outside of herself and feelings, to have conversations beyond the negative comments in order to move beyond the instance. These Black girls have learned to combat racism, discrimination, and misogyny as they strengthen their identity as Black females.

Each of the three participants experienced racism or discrimination inside and outside of school. They used breathing techniques, improv, or going into character that they learned in drama class to help combat those challenges, validating that practicing drama strategies has influenced words, actions, attitudes, and behaviors of Black middle school girls. These actions warrant the connection to Black Girls' literacy and how teenage Black girls navigate in society with language and expression. They have formed

a sense of confidence in being Black coupled with employing techniques that they learned in drama class, to deal with racial challenges. The student participants embodied Black Girls' literacy as an instructional practice that became a space for resistance and for the educational excellence of Black girls that prepares them to be successful in life (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). This theme and the experiences shared by the Black girls helps answer research question number one by revealing the influence that drama has on the students' identity as Black girls and how they were able to combat the challenges they faced in the experiences that they shared.

Theme 5: Race and Gender Identity

As we continue the narrative on where Black girls fit within a society that has historically marginalized them based on race and gender, we know that Black females are often relegated to the margins, and most national statistics ignore the experiences, performances, and outcomes of Black girls (Ricks, 2014). However, the data in this study indicated that four student participants shared experiences about the influence that participating in drama has on their confidence, expression, and advocacy skills as Black females. After sharing negative race and gender experiences, including racial slurs and feelings of misogyny, several student participants shared that they use drama activities that they have learned to express themselves in person and on social media platforms, as well as build their confidence and advocate for themselves and other Black girls. Bobo shared,

> We should be boosting each other up in our economy and helping each other rise
> up because we are at a point where White people are against stuff and us; we like
> trying to stick together, help each other, and we should keep on doing that

instead of bringing each other down in this economy.

She is able to speak up for what is right, particularly concerning justice for Black girls. She has taken a stance on helping people who look like her instead of contributing to the racial and misogynistic hurt instilled upon certain people. Participating in drama class has helped her identify incidents that are right and wrong and feel empowered to speak out to support others in need attributing to the underpinnings of the CRAE framework. This theme can draw on critical literacies skills by encouraging Black girls to read and write about their experiences of being a Black girl in today's context (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016) by connecting to drama's influence on Black Girls' literacy. These Black girls build confidence and explore expression through drama participation.

Confidence and Expression. Confidence is needed to inspire trust and communicate effectively, yet self-doubt and nerves can undermine one's ability to act decisively (Confidence, 2019). Knowing that a girl's self-confidence begins lagging in sixth grade, and a rise in anxiety and questioning her academic abilities and intelligence around seventh grade (Hough, 2019), the data revealed important information. During this study, it became apparent that the student participants were able to push past insecurities through the practice of drama activities and strategies. Confidence was a theme that emerged throughout the data. Confidence directly impacted their levels of engagement and success with foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. The student participants felt comfortable sharing the transitions of their confidence levels. Three student participants communicated that practicing drama strategies helped them feel confident and control negative behaviors. Alice expressed how drama helped build her confidence as a Black female by merely having to embrace her fears and a hard

situation like speaking in front of a large crowd. Other participants expressed how practicing drama strategies have influenced their confidence:

> My mom said that when I was little I was like very shy. And that's why she started signing me up for drama, at a very young age. So over the years she said that she has seen me go through lots of stuff as a more confident, Black female. (Nasa Jupiter)

> I am sometimes still shy, but like I can even share that sometimes I feel a little bit more confident now. (Noemi)

Those student participants shared examples of how practicing drama has helped them gain more confidence. This theme answers the first research question as each student shared experiences that pronounce the influence that drama has on identity and on Black Girls' literacy.

Two student participants have shared how practicing drama has influenced how they can express themselves. Bobo has learned to express herself despite her Liberian cultural norms. Bobo said,

> Well, drama has definitely impacted my life because I'm Liberian, so like I'm African. I came from a culture where you really can't express yourself like that. As a Black girl, I like drama. It just motivates me. Like I could do anything. I can express myself the way I want to show me. Represent myself the way I want to respect myself. Respect others.

Another student, Nasa Jupiter, shared that drama helped her express her feelings more positively when dealing with people who are negative toward her. She shared a

time when the students participated in an activity in class where other students had to negatively rate the performance of their peers. Nasa Jupiter shared,

> On purpose, she [the teacher] got like negative people to rate us. And she tried to like see how I would respond, and she showed us that if you let these people affect you and how you feel, then you're being as negative as they are. And so that basically taught us like not to stoop down to people's level and to express positive actions and to believe in ourselves.

These students were able to learn to express themselves with mindfulness by learning techniques in drama class. This theme also helps answer the first research question as each student shared experiences that articulated the influence that drama has on expression as a Black female urban middle school student, thus connecting each of their experiences to the influence that drama has on Black Girls' literacy.

Theme 2: Exploring Under Examined Literacies

Reading and writing are no longer considered the sole forms of literacy. Ten literacies that are used in education include: digital literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, data literacy, game literacy, health & financial literacy, civic & ethical literacy, news literacy, coding & computational literacy, and foundational literacy (Pietila, 2017). The three underexamined literacies explored in this study are foundational, digital, and Black girl's literacies. This manifestation stems from the development and use of varied literacies and challenges us to see and explore literacy differently. Some participants related to the underexamined literacies and expressed how each of those literacies impacts their daily lives in ways that affect what and how much they read, how they speak, and what and how much they write and post on social media.

They also discovered that practicing drama not only supported foundational literacy but also how they expressed themselves as Black girls. Bobo shared, "I learned how to control my temper, learned how to control myself, like, do my breathing technique and all that other stuff to be more confident." Bobo learned the breathing technique in drama class and recognized that it helps her contain her anger but allows her to calmly express how she wants to be seen as a Black female.

Common Idea 3: Drama Influence on Foundational Literacy

When the group was asked if there was anything else that they would like to say about the influence that practicing drama may have on how they speak, what they say, what they post on social media, or how they navigate being a Black female, three of student participants indicated that participating in drama class influenced their foundational literacy. They clearly shared that their vocabulary expanded, they were able to use more words and speak in public, as well as increase their book reading list. In addition, they were exposed to more plays by reading them in class and then having detailed discussions. They agreed that this unlocked their interest in reading even more. Common idea number three supports subthemes 3a, 3b, and 3c, and is connected to foundational literacy and helps answer research question number one through the expansion of vocabulary, enhanced public speaking, more avid reading, and better writing of the student participants. These drama influences on foundational literacy are explored more deeply.

Drama Influences

Four themes emerged from the data highlighting the influence that practicing drama has on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. The themes were:

Literacies Development through Drama Participation and that had four subthemes; Cultural Relevance produced one subtheme; Racial and Gender Identity produced two subthemes; and lastly, Drama Practices and Activities revealed three subthemes.

Pietila (2017) explained foundational literacy as reading, writing, and meaning making skills gained in the early years used as building blocks upon which other skills can develop. All participants addressed the influence that practicing drama had on developing their reading, writing, speaking, and advocacy for Black girls and Black people in general, even on social media platforms. The next three (3a, 3b, 3c, 3d) subthemes answer the first research question when addressing the influence that drama has on foundational and digital literacies.

Subtheme 3a: Reading. Based on reading outcomes data from 2015 PISA, the 2015 NCES average achievement scores in reading, and the 2017 NAEP average reading scores of students in eighth grade public city schools in urban areas, Black girls in eighth grade have significantly lower reading scores than White, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Island girls, as well as White and Asian boys. The data indicates that three out of four student participants support that their drama instruction has influenced their reading.

One student participant, Nasa Jupiter, said that practicing drama strategies has not affected her reading that much but it does some. The data showed that several student participants believed that drama influences their reading. Two of the four participants love reading Shakespeare in their drama classes and believe that it enhanced their vocabulary and made reading even more intriguing. The three participants shared:

> We learn about Shakespeare, and then I might look up an account about poetry or
> Shakespeare and then sooner or later I'll keep seeing Shakespeare and poetry over

and over on my timeline. I might post online a Shakespeare quote that I learned.

(Alice)

We have to like read it and re-write it and it helps you remember what you are

going to say cause you already wrote it down multiple times. (Noemi)

I love Shakespeare. So basically, we're reading *Romeo and Juliet* and a lot of

Shakespeare. So I'll be able to understand the work more. Read more

Shakespeare!" (Bobo)

The results from this study support that drama influences the reading of middle school

Black girls. Not only have the students embraced favorite activities and strategies that

they have learned in drama classes, but they have figured out when and how to ignite

those strategies to enhance what and how much they read, as well as develop a more

substantial interest in wanting to read more.

Subtheme 3b: Writing. When students actively engage in the reading and

writing processes, they learn ways to use their growing knowledge and skills fluidly, and

in combination with all domains of development in their lives (Brown, 2014).

Additionally, the Black Girls' Literacies framework allowed Black girls to draw on their

critical literacies skills by reading and writing about their individual and collective

experiences of being a Black girl in today's context (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). The data revealed

two (50%) student participants expressed their reasoning for how drama influences what

they write. They learned how to express themselves better through writing in drama class.

Alice exclaimed, "We watch plays on video and then write out our feelings." She

explained that she could more easily express her thoughts and feelings as a Black female

based on participating in that particular activity in drama class.

Nasa Jupiter shared, "With my writing, um, it's [drama] helped me a lot." Nasa Jupiter clarified that she had been in drama classes since she was a young child and believed that her writing is pretty decent due to these circumstances, however, she mentioned a friend who did not start participating in drama until middle school and how practicing drama strategies helped her friend become more creative in her writing. Additionally, Bobo shared that studying Shakespeare has helped with her writing and enhances her vocabulary. She stated, "Um, it like enhances my vocabulary. Some words that I can say some people wouldn't really understand cause they weren't like in drama and stuff." Bobo recognized that her vocabulary is expanding through her participation in drama classes.

Subtheme 3c: Speaking. This study extends foundational literacy as the developed written and spoken language that is the base of other literacies. Black girls are often stereotyped as not effective speakers or lack the confidence or vocabulary to speak well. The data showed that two student participants believed that participating in drama influences their speaking. Alice posited, "it helped me be more confident and express things more clearly." Additionally, Nasa Jupiter gave more details on how it helped her emerge from shyness. Nasa Jupiter shared,

> I kind of went through like a phase of where I was very shy and timid and I
> wouldn't really speak that much because I always thought, well what I say would
> be wrong or something. So when I started doing drama class, I've been able to
> speak out more and speak up. So it's helped me with my speaking a lot.

The student participants recognized that drama influenced not being too shy to

speak and actually speaking up.

    Subthene 3d: Advocacy on Social Media. Common Sense Media (2018) reported that 13 to 17 year old youth report their heavy use on social media during those ages and that girls use it more than boys. It should be noted that many middle schoolers indicated that they do have concerns about social media activity due to inappropriate postings, getting hacked, getting their feelings hurt, lack of privacy, inappropriate pictures, bullying, negativity, and stalkers (Martin et al., 2018). When coupling these stats with the additional challenges that Black girls face with racism and feeling voiceless, the data revealed something interesting and promising for Black girls to gain advocacy skills in support of social justice for themselves and others while using social media. The data indicated that the participants thought more deeply about social media as one digital literacy outlet. All student participants shared that they spend considerable time (30 minutes-4 hours) on social media per day. Although they may spend ample time on social media, they each try to refrain from participating in negative, harmful, and inappropriate activity online. Although each student participant shared that they have experienced negative moments on social media, they all shared that they consciously work at not acting out of character after reading hurtful posts on social media. They attributed the management of their actions to strategies that they have learned in drama class.

    Four student participants shared that they spend approximately 30 minutes-4 hours on social media per day. The data showed that all student participants feel comfortable in those social media spaces to advocate for themselves and others as Black middle school girls. They use combinations of Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter as their

preferred social media platforms. Additionally, they have learned to manage their

responses and behaviors on social media, but do not feel bullied or intimidated to engage

in responses posted on social media. The student participants shared:

> If I'm responding to a post, I say my opinion or if I think they're wrong or right,
>
> or I might share facts about the topic. (Alice)

> I can encourage somebody, motivate somebody to do good cause you don't know
>
> the situation they're going through. So like you could make somebody's day by
>
> like just commenting on like simple and nice stuff that can inspire them. It's a lot
>
> of things going on right now by being Black and stuff. So you just have to keep
>
> your head up, keep on going, stay positive, don't look at the negative things.
>
> (Bobo)

> One of the main things is that I shouldn't let what people say or what people do
>
> affect how I feel because at the end of the day it's my life, and they're probably
>
> just jealous of me, so I shouldn't really respond to posts. (Nasa Jupiter)

> Before I post off, I'm like, would this impact you in a good way, or would it affect
>
> you in a bad way? So that's why I barely post stuff. Take a walk in someone else's
>
> shoes. (Noemi)

The students were mindful of their actions in person and online. They also were

keenly aware of how their voice and actions could support, stand up for, and advocate for

others and displayed the confidence in scenarios that happened while they engaged in

social media. Although digital literacy encompasses the literate use of devices to achieve

a variety of goals (Pietila, 2017), it is also a way of expressing knowledge using

language, images, sound, and multimedia through digital platforms (Hobbs, 2017). Each

of the students has acquired enhanced reading, writing, speaking, and confidence through

the instruction they receive in the drama class in order to advocate for themselves using

digital literacy while engaging on social media.

As the girls shared their experiences and were asked how they navigate

challenges, they were also asked what their favorite and most effective drama strategies

were.

Subtheme 6a: Favorite. The data analyzed for the first subtheme revealed that all

four student participants had favorite drama practices or activities that they learned in the

class that they felt positively influenced foundational, digital and Black Girls' literacies,

and other areas of their lives. Nasa Jupiter, Alice, Noemi, and Bobo shared:

It was a breathing exercise, and basically you count, you breathe in and breathe

out five times and then you try to think about your history and where you've come

from and basically that helped you calm down so that you can approach the

situation or you can think about what happened. (Nasa Jupiter)

I like improv. (Alice)

We got to like read it [scripts] and to project or voice like we were the characters,

which was like really fun getting to walk in someone else's shoes and like feel like

how they feel. (Noemi)

Shakespeare definitely, um, I like the wilding out activity. I really loved that one.

That one was fun. We learn how to put Shakespeare into like raps and stuff.

(Bobo)

Although they have all found enjoyment practicing some techniques and strategies in and outside of the drama class, the Black female students also learned strategies that effectively strengthened their skills to combat challenges effectively.

Subtheme 6b: Most Effective. Although each student participant had favorite drama practices and activities that they learned in class, the data indicated some drama practices and activities to be more effective than what they chose as their favorite. Drama Resources (n.d.) outlined several strategies that were implemented in the class with the study participants, like *Thought Tracking, Storytelling, and Improvisation.* The Black girls shared their own experiences where those strategies were effectively used to combat challenges. The data revealed three student participants spoke of drama practices and activities that were effective when dealing with regular challenges in the lives of Black urban middle school girls:

We do practices and stuff. Like we learned how to not take offense to it and stuff and the breathing strategy. Drama will help with learning improvisation because not everything in your life will be planned. (Bobo)

Drama for speaking out in public and you can use everything that you learned in it when you have to write speeches and present it in front of people. (Alice)

Drama helped me understand another person's story. Take a walk in someone

else's shoes. (Noemi)

Each of the drama practices offered was effectual in the girls' personal and

educational lives. They shared many experiences, some frustrations and some

accomplishments. However, it is important to understand the significance of the role that

the drama teacher plays in supporting these Black middle school girls.

Teacher's Role and Evaluations

In response to research question 2: what is the role does the drama teacher play

with urban middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address

language, identity and social media engagement, the findings from the analyzed data

reveal the significance of the role that the drama teacher plays in creating a safe and

inviting space for students from all racial, cultural and gender identities. The data also

outlines that teacher's perceptions of her Black female students and the culturally

relevant curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy that she employs to enhance certain

literacies and the lives of her Black female students. Themes and common ideas emerged

through interviews, a focus group and writing samples.

Common Idea 1: Shaping the Future of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ms. Gomez clearly expressed her passion for working in an urban school with the

given population of students. She always remains fair and professional when speaking

about her lessons and delivery to all of her students, not solely her Black female students.

However, through this process, she learned perspectives from her students that she had

not known, like the drama strategies that they loved, what worked for them when

advocating for themselves and others, as well as how they became better at public

speaking. She believed this knowledge would help shape her future drama classes. Ms. Gomez was very impressed with her Black female students and how they could articulate their experiences during the study. Listening to them confirmed that she was on the right track with teaching and supporting them:

> It was fun just to learn the perspectives of my students, and I feel like it's helpful for shaping the future of like my classes and stuff. Just like figuring out and listening to them about what's important to them and then trying to incorporate that in my class.

> Additionally, Noemi expressed that she really enjoys participating in drama classes and hopes that she will be able to learn new and more strategies that help her as a Black girl. " I think the stuff that she teaches will help me express myself better with my friends and when I have to speak in public."

This common idea supports subthemes 4a and 6c, as well as connects to research question two and how Ms. Gomez perceives her Black female students. She enjoys listening to them through their development as drama students to continue to shape the curriculum to be culturally relevant, taking into consideration the female lens.

Theme 4: Cultural Relevance

It is challenging for teachers in urban education to develop a cultural and contextual understanding of students in their classrooms while maintaining an emphasis on the heterogeneous academic needs of students in urban settings (White et al., 2017). The Culturally Relevant Arts Education (CRAE) framework (Hanley, 2013) with Black Feminist Thought (BFT) epistemology (Hill Collins, 2014) guided the study and allowed for exploration of how Black girls expressed their oral and written language, in person

and on social media. This theme emerged as the data revealed the passion, pedagogy, and

vision of the drama teacher for her Black female students who participated in her drama

classes. Maria Gomez, the drama teacher, embraces all students' cultural knowledge and

experiences as an opportunity to explore actions and critical reflection about the arts and

education while using drama as an art form. Maria Gomez continues to share her passion

for accepting her students' cultures and ignites that fire in her students through the arts.

She stated,

> You should be able to be yourself before you can transform into another
>
> character. I think that their participation, um, just sorta helps them be able to be
>
> comfortable in their own skin. So I try to highlight something that may be seen as
>
> a negative into a positive and I feel like it helps with their self-esteem and feel
>
> comfortable with themselves.
>
> Um bringing awareness to different situations is a way that drama teachers could
>
> incorporate it [culturally relevant art education]. And we could do that through
>
> simple discussions, um, analyzing different plays that sort of touch on social
>
> justice issues. Um, that's sort of what I do and I'm definitely a firm believer that
>
> we need to bring those things to light. And I believe that theater is sort of a way to
>
> incorporate those sorts of things.

Ms. Gomez believes that the practice of drama allows students to explore their race and

culture in the comfort of her classroom without judgment. A good example is Bobo who

is African and believed that participating in drama class allows her to express herself in

ways that her culture does not allow. Through drama class, Bobo was able to appreciate

the discipline and beauty of her culture yet have opportunities in Ms. Gomez's drama class for her voice to be heard.

Teachers must recognize and have a commitment to equity, access, and understand the environment where the student is being raised (White et al., 2017). In answering research question number two, as a Black female, Ms. Gomez appreciates the unique backgrounds of her Black girl students and perceives them to be proud of their culture, and thus believes drama instruction influences on how they express their cultural selves. She also shares her vision and teaching as she embraces culturally relevant pedagogy in her lesson.

Subtheme 4a: Teacher Pedagogy and Vision. There are three non-arts pedagogies under the CRAE framework: multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). Multicultural education must meet the needs of both race and social group constructs (Sultanova, 2016), where critical pedagogy, as defined by Freire (1970), aims to challenge cultural and structural power relations. Through an analysis of systems of power, CTL is a way to introduce content using a variety of active learning techniques designed to help students connect what they already know to what they are expected to learn, and to construct new knowledge from the analysis of this learning process (Bonnet et al., 2018; Hudson & Whisler, 2008). The data indicated that the CRAE framework laid the foundation for what was already happening within the instruction of Ms. Gomez's drama class. Her students not only do a lot of writing and reading in her class to enhance foundational literacy, but her vision is for her students to embrace drama strategies, activities, and practices so that they feel comfortable in being themselves and embrace their culture. For her Black female

students, this reading, writing, and expression allowed them to explore Black Girls'

literacy. Ms. Gomez stated, "I try to foster a positive relationship with all of my students

so that they are comfortable with being able to be themselves and how to be in the

world." Ms. Gomez exclaimed,

> I want for children just to have an appreciation for the arts, particularly drama. I
>
> want them to be exposed to things like audience etiquette, so that when they grow
>
> up, they know how to behave.

Additionally, Ms. Gomez realized that the drama instruction that she teaches in

class actually taps into the underexamined literacies and transforms into life skills for her

Black female students. Ms. Gomez shared, "I didn't realize that um, the stuff that I was

really doing actually was so reality based. Um, I mean the stuff I'm teaching in class,

I didn't necessarily like think of it as a life skill of theirs." We know that one of the

challenges in urban education is the need for teachers to develop a cultural and contextual

understanding of students in their classrooms while maintaining an emphasis on the

heterogeneous academic needs of students in urban settings (White et al., 2017). Ms.

Gomez prides herself on her sensitivity toward the culture of her students. Through a

more in depth analysis of the data, drama influences were revealed that enhance Black

middle school female students' reading, writing, speaking, and advocacy on social media

platforms. It was evident that she wants all students, but in particular, her Black girl

students, to have space to openly express their cultures while also embracing the cultures

of others. Interestingly, Noemi enjoys embracing culture through fun activities. She

shared,

> We had to do, um, a show for Black history for Michael Jackson, so we had to

> like dance like he used to and use your body to show what is going on and
>
> express culture. You didn't have to like really talk.

Ms. Gomez also shared her approach to teaching urban middle school students, as she believes that working with this population requires more understanding:

> I love the fact that I allow my students to be anything that they want to be. Sometimes a lot of my students, they come from a very hard background and a hard home life, and so for my students to just be able to, you know, become a doctor, become a lawyer or become a cowboy, or whatever they want to be. I think it really helps them, and that's something that I enjoy. I enjoy watching my students transform into characters in different roles.

Subtheme 4a helps answer research question two as Ms. Gomez shared her perceptions on what she has learned about her students and how she is able to extend her vision for her Black female students. Ms. Gomez also works at encouraging her Black female students to freely express themselves as she believes its important self identity development.

Subtheme 5b: Expression. Drama is used for expression and to convey messages and points; in essence, drama is used in alignment to explore expression, identity, and confidence (Boal, 1985; Gallagher, 2007). Data showed that the expression subtheme revealed three of four student participants, and the teacher believed drama influences students with how to show expression. Ms. Gomez believes that students should have an outlet for self-expression. Consequently, she has set up a private digital platform where the students can go online and have a space to express themselves through words where others have limited access to judge them. Ms. Gomez said, "I want

them to feel comfortable within themselves, enough to express themselves in whatever way they see fit."

Theme 6: Drama Practices and Activities

Drama is creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding together, in imaginative contexts and situations; it is not about performance, but exploration (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998). Drama Practices and Activities was an emergent theme from the coded data. Within that theme emerged three subthemes: Favorite, Most Effective, and Curriculum Development. The participants shared the practices that they have learned in drama classes that influenced how they manage different aspects of their academic and personal lives. The data from the teacher gave insight into curriculum and pedagogy that helps with students' development and use of foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. Foundational literacy is the basis for written and verbal expression that extends through the use of the other literacies. Additionally, Black Girls' literacy refers to specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create to affirm the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). The experiences shared by student participants in subthemes 6a and 6b connect to foundational and Black Girls' literacies.

Subtheme 6c: Curriculum & Pedagogical Development. Although Ms. Gomez may not fully understand the connection between drama and foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies, she is delivers a form of *critical* pedagogy that aims to challenge cultural and structural power relations through an analysis of systems of power (Freire, 1970). Discussions revealed that Maria Gomez always taught in a school that with a

diverse culture, and she is receptive to different backgrounds. With this experience and

sensitivity as a Black female teacher, Ms. Gomez creates lessons in drama class to teach

her student population with cultural relevance from a critical lens. Her school

environment allows her to develop further curriculum that would be more useful and

beneficial for Black middle school girls in an urban middle school. Ms. Gomez shared,

> I think just add more, maybe plays and discussions about the things that they go
>
> through. I think that that would be really helpful for the day to day stuff that they
>
> go through as just Black children. I am extremely sensitive, and I tried to
>
> incorporate sort of an appreciation for different cultures. We've done like a
>
> poetry slam, um, and we're doing, actually a Black history thing where the
>
> students will research a person and then try to dress up as them.

Additionally, Alice shared an experience of how she felt about the drama instruction that

she receives in class. She said,

> Something might have to do with drama or speaking out in public and you can use
>
> everything that you learned in it [class] and put it to use. Like if you win an award
>
> for doing good in school, you now have to write speeches and present it in front
>
> of people.

Alice embraces what she learns in the drama class to utilize in several aspects of her life

while Ms. Gomez enjoys being present and an advocate for cultural acceptance as a

Black female for her students. She recognizes differences and the life challenges that her

students bring to the classroom. She knows when to dig more critically with lessons and

when to allow for practice and appreciation of drama strategies and activities. As

Gallagher (2016) outlined, drama teachers learn to situate their classrooms as a safe

environment to develop essential life skills within their students. Subtheme 6c helps

answer research question number two as Ms. Gomez expressed what she perceives about

the influence that drama instruction has on foundational, digital, and Black Girls'

literacies of her Black female students. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the themes and

subthemes that emerged with exemplary quotes.

Table 3

Results of Data Analysis: Themes, Subthemes, and Exemplary Quotes. Themes 1-2:
Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls

Theme	Subtheme	Exemplary Quote
1. Experiencing Discrimination & Racism		"This one man, he came, and he looked at me and my brother and said the N-word to us and I was like, wow, it was like a year ago, and I was like, wow. People still act like this, you know, I was like, you know what, I'm not gonna let it affect me. I'm gonna keep on going. Won't ruin My day." (Bobo)
2. Exploring Under Examined Literacies		"I didn't realize that um, the stuff that I was really doing actually it was, so reality based. Um, I mean the stuff I'm teaching in class, I didn't necessarily like think of it as a life skill of theirs" (Maria Gomez)

Table 4

Results of Data Analysis: Themes, Subthemes, and Exemplary Quotes. Themes 3-6:
Drama Influences

Theme	Subtheme	Exemplary Quote
3. Literacies Development		
	3a. Reading through Drama	"We learn about Shakespeare, and then I might look up an account about poetry or Shakespeare and then sooner, or later I'll keep reading Shakespeare and poetry over and over my timeline" (Alice)
	3b. Writing through Drama	"Drama for speaking out in public, and you can use everything that you learned in it when you have to write speeches and present it in front of people." (Alice)

"We watch plays on video and then write out our feelings." (Alice)

	3c. Speaking through Drama	"Some people can't, don't speak well in front of people and drama can help with speaking like public speaking and kind of getting over that fear and nervousness as well" (Alice)
		Now very confident in myself and what I say because, um, I know so I kind of went through like a phase of where I was very shy and timid, and I wouldn't really speak that much because I always thought, well what I say would be wrong or something. So when I started doing drama class, I've been able to speak out more and speak up. (Nasa Jupiter)
	3d. Advocacy on Social Media	Before I post off, I'm like, if I was this person, would this impact you in a good way, or would it affect you in a bad way. Take a walk in someone else's shoes" (Noemi)
		"We should be boosting each other up in our economy and helping each other rise up because we are at a point where White people are against us and stuff; we like trying to stick together, help each other and we should keep on doing that instead of bringing each other down in this economy." (Bobo)
4. Cultural Relevance		
	4a. Teacher Pedagogy & Vision	"I'm extremely sensitive to different backgrounds. I am extremely sensitive, and I try to incorporate sort of an appreciation for different cultures" (Maria)
5. Race and Gender Identity		
	5a. Confidence	"I would post it with a quote and then post some pictures of um, successful African American female like Michelle Obama and stuff like that to show that female African Americans are strong, powerful, and it doesn't matter about your color or race. What matters is what's inside. You should never judge a book by its cover" (Bobo)
		"I feel like as a Black girl in middle school, mm I'm set to like be a certain way. And that way is to talk loud and just be obnoxious and be whatever society puts us Black girls in like a stereotype. And so I feel like drama

		class has made me feel like I can be so much more than what life stereotypes, um, Black girls because we can be so much more in that we can express our feelings and we can be more than just us, basically being more than what life thinks that we are." (Nasa Jupiter)
	5b. Expression	"As a Black girl, I've taken to like drama. It just motivates me. Like I could do anything. I can express myself the way I want to show me. Represent myself the way I want to respect myself" (Bobo)
6. Drama Practices and Strategies		
	6a. Favorite Practices	"It was a breathing exercise, and basically you count, you breathe in and breathe out five times, and then you try to think about your history and where you've came from and basically that helped you calm down so that you can approach the situation or you can think about what happened.' (Nasa Jupiter)
	6b. Most Effective Practices & Activities	"We do practices and stuff. Like we learned how to not take offense to it and stuff through the breathing strategy." (Bobo)
	6c. Curriculum Development	I never thought of it like they could use improv to solve their problems in their everyday life" (Maria)
		"I think just add more, maybe plays and discussions about the things that they go through. I think that that would be really helpful for the day to day stuff that they go through as just black children." (Maria)

Focus Group Common Ideas

A focus group was utilized to see how the students and their teacher would form a

perspective of a problem (Bostan, 2015), and add meaning and understanding to existing

knowledge. The data analysis of the focus group interview revealed three common ideas.

For this study, a common idea is defined as an agreement by other participants of a group

in response to an individuals feelings, thoughts, beliefs, or ideas. This differs from

emergent themes that are developed by way of experiences expressed through individual

personal interviews that are not clouded by the judgment of others. All five study

participants shared insight through the focus group. The prevailing ideas that were

commonly shared were: 1) Shaping the Future of Drama as Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy, 2) Black Girl Confidence, and 3) Drama Influence on Foundational Literacy.

Table 5 shows the results of the analyzed data from the focus group interview and

includes exemplary quotes listed in each section. Table 5 produces the results of the

analyzed data garnered during the focus group.

Table 5

Results of Data Analysis: Focus Group Common Ideas Based on Drama Participation

Common Ideas	Summary	Exemplary Quote
1. Shaping the Future of Drama as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	The data indicated that Ms. Gomez shows her passion for working with urban students and actively seeks ways to teach her student population.	"It was fun just to learn the perspectives of my students, and I feel like it's helpful for shaping the future of my classes." (Maria Gomez) "Figuring out and listening to them about what's important to them and then trying to incorporate that in my class." (Maria Gomez) "Just looking at my curriculum and then looking, listening to the girls as they've been doing this study, it just kinda makes me feel like I'm on the right track. Um, for just kind of preparing them for just real-life situations." (Maria Gomez) " I think the stuff that she teaches will help me express myself better with my friends and when I have to speak in public." (Noemi)
2. Black Girl Confidence	As the student participants shared during the focus group, two student participants made significant comments about Black girls' confidence, yet all of the girls nodded in agreement with their fellow peers.	"If we need to meet society requirements to identify what it is to be a true girl or Black girl and on top of that, we've got prove to them that you're wrong, we can do this, we can do that. We're not this, we're not that. We are stronger than they know" (Bobo) "I post some pictures of um, successful

			African American females like Michelle Obama and stuff like that to show that female African Americans are strong, powerful, and it doesn't matter about your color or race. What matters is what's inside. You should never judge a book by its cover." (Noemi)
3. Drama Influence on Foundational Literacy	The data indicated that three student participants shared the influence that drama has on foundational literacy.		"It helps expand our vocabulary as some people feel like drama doesn't help. (Bobo)

"It can help with speaking, like public speaking and kind of getting over that fear and nervousness as well." (Alice)

"When you get to like different stories of books, you read it and like helps with your reading and how you say stuff, pronouncing words, and it helps. It helps in your ELA, which makes me guess your is English is better." (Noemi) |

The results of the writing samples revealed all positive actions. Each participant had the option to answer the writing prompt on paper through the form of expression that they choose. One participant (Noemi) chose a short poem, and others responded with a written answer or drawing to the writing prompt.

Table 6

Results of Data Analysis: Personal Ideas from Writing Samples related to a negative social media post about Black Girls

"Brown skin, black skin, don't care, because you should never judge a book by its cover" (Noemi)	"What I would do is try to block out that negativity by either listening to music or posting something positive." (Nasa Jupiter)	"Read a play with the class and have group discussions about the play vs. what students have experienced in reality." (Maria Gomez)	"Stand up, showing them that the post is wrong and that we don't need to meet the society requirement on what it means to be a girl, a Black girl and top off that to show that a post doesn't identify us." (Bobo)	"I would probably post good things about African American people to go against the post and comment on how the post sounds, which is dumb." (Alice)

Each participant believed that drama strategies influence foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies at varying levels. They each had poignant stories to tell that aligned with how drama practices and strategies influenced their education and social and emotional lives, specific to social media in this case. These writing samples support themes and subthemes throughout this study. They also support research question one.

Summary

This study explored the influence of dramatic arts on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of teenaged Black girls in an urban middle school. The data were analyzed and categorized into six themes, ten subthemes, and three common ideas, which corresponded with the research questions that guided this study. The six themes were: 1) Experiencing Racism; 2) Exploring Underexamined Literacies; 3) Literacies Development through Drama Participation; 4) Cultural Relevance; 5) Race and Gender Identity; and 6) Drama Practices and Activities. The ten subthemes were: Teacher Pedagogy & Vision, Confidence, Expression, Reading, Writing, Speaking, Advocacy on Social Media, Favorite, Most Effective, and Curriculum Development. Lastly, the three common ideas that emerged from the focus group were: 1) Shaping the Future of Drama as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy; 2) Black Girl Confidence; and 3) Foundational Literacy.

Five participants shared their thoughts and experiences in this realm. The data illustrated that four Black middle school girls who participated in drama classes witnessed that drama influences their foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies by using drama practices and activities. Finally, the Black female teacher shared her perceptions and the role she played as the teacher of middle school Black girls who

participated in drama classes as they addressed language, identity, and social media

engagement. To be considered a theme or subtheme, at least two of the four student

participants, or the teacher and at least one student participant, had to share that common

experience, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Results of Data Analysis: Number of study participants sharing common experiences by theme and subtheme
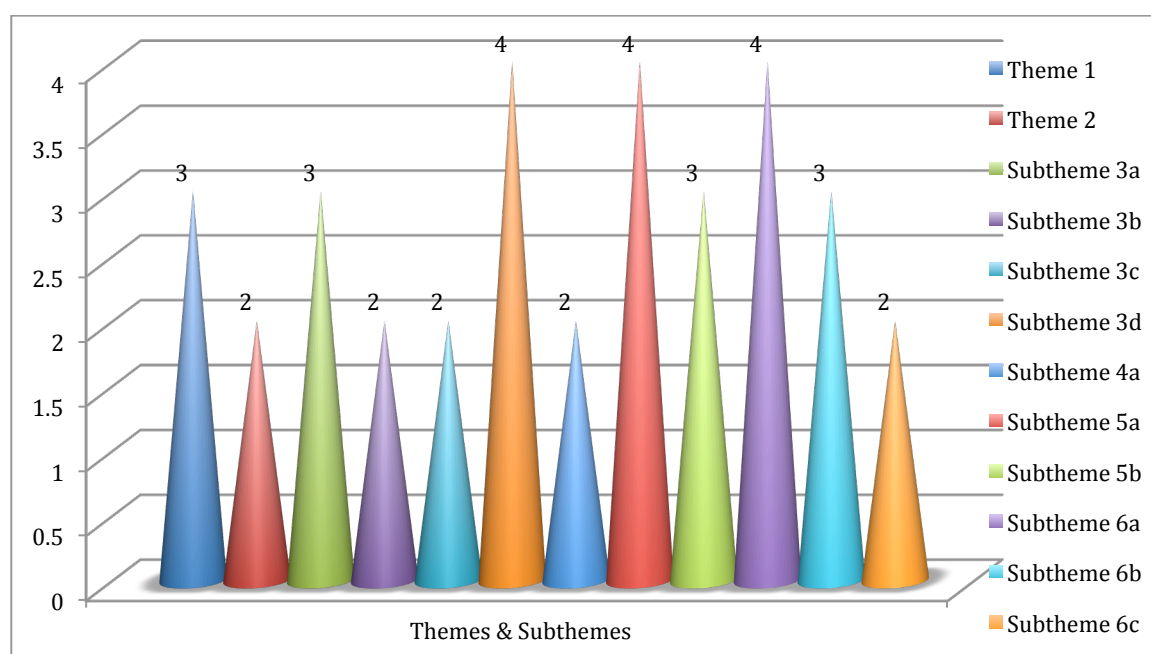

Note. Themes and subthemes are listed showing two or more study participants who have

shared the common experience in order to be considered an emergent theme or subtheme.

The data analysis answers both research questions by sharing the varied

experiences that Black middle girls have through their participation in drama classes in

relation to language, identity, and social media engagement. Additionally, the data also

revealed the drama teacher's perceptions of these middle school Black girls as she

aligned her vision and goals through curriculum and pedagogy. The next chapter includes

a discussion of themes, examines the implications of the findings, and provides

recommendations for curriculum development, greater policy implementation, and future research that may impact the lives of middle school Black girls.
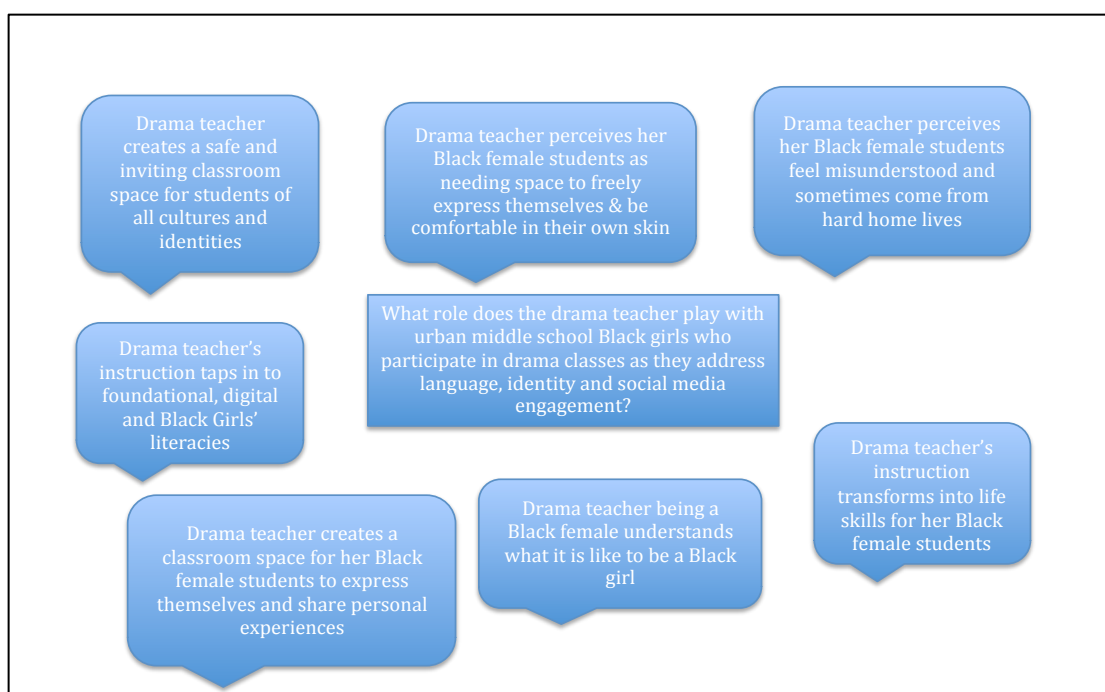
Figure 2

Results of Data Analysis for Research Question 1
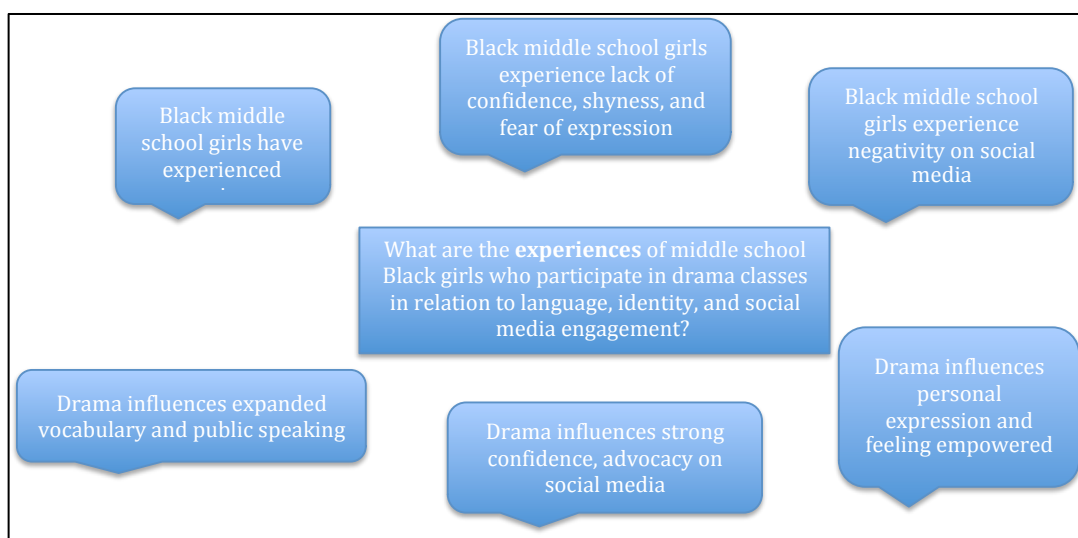
Figure 3

Results of Data Analysis for Research Question 2

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

"Drama builds you up as a person and makes you into a more positive person."
-Nasa Jupiter

The remainder of this paper includes the discussion of this study, informing

analysis of Black female middle school students exploring underexamined literacies

through practicing drama activities and strategies. Chapter 1 identified the lack of

culturally relevant drama programs in schools that strategically align with foundational,

digital, and Black Girls' literacies. Chapter 1 also noted the challenging experiences that

Black girls have in and outside of school concerning their reading, writing, speaking,

engagement on social media, and race and gender discrimination. Additionally, Chapter 1

proposed the Culturally Relevant Arts Education framework through the lens of Black

Feminist Thought epistemology for grounding arts-based instruction with cultural

significance to participation in drama classes and how drama influences Black female

students in urban settings to navigate their reading, writing, speaking, and social media

engagement. Furthermore, the study explored the vision of and instruction by a Black

female drama teacher working with Black middle school girls in an urban setting.

Chapter 2 contained a review of relevant literature that examined drama as an art form

and its linkages to foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies all in urban settings.

Chapter 3 outlined the framework for the research method employed to address two

critical research questions. Chapter 4 imparted a detailed presentation of the research

findings. Lastly, Chapter 5 concludes the study with a discussion of the key themes which

emerged from the data analysis, examines the implications of the findings and gives

recommendations for subsequent curriculum, instruction, research, and policies for drama

as an art form to influence specific underexamined literacies of Black girls enrolled in urban middle schools.

This study was designed to examine the links between drama participation and foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies among Black girls in an urban middle school. To explore this phenomenon, interview questions and focus group questions were developed to examine the experiences of Black middle school girls who participate in drama classes that were then analyzed to discover any influence of drama activities, techniques, and strategies on their reading, writing, speaking, social media engagement, and advocacy for themselves and other Black females. This study hinges on research findings that demonstrated drama participation pointed toward the influence of literacy achievement of urban students (Walker et al., 2011; Wasserburg & Rottman, 2016; Young et al., 2016). Given the lack of CRAE curriculum with drama, this study presents drama as a possible factor for curriculum and instruction to influence foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of Black girls in urban middle schools. The following research questions were used to explore the potential influence of drama on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies for Black girls attending an urban middle school: RQ1. What are the experiences, in relation to language, identity, and social media engagement of Black girls in an urban middle school who participate in drama classes? RQ2. What role does the drama teacher play with urban middle school Black girls who participate in drama classes as they address language, identity and social media engagement?

There were six themes, ten sub-themes, and three common ideas that emanated from the data analysis.

Themes:

1) Experiencing Racism

2) Exploring Underexamined Literacies

3) Literacies Development through Drama Participation

4) Cultural Relevance

5) Race and Gender Identity

6) Drama Practices and Activities.

The ten sub-themes were:

1) Teacher Pedagogy & Vision, 2) Confidence, 3) Expression, 4) Reading, 5) Writing, 6) Speaking, 7) Advocacy on Social Media, 8) Favorite, 9) Most Effective, and 10) Curriculum Development.

The Common ideas were:

1) Shaping the Future of Drama as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, 2) Black Girl Confidence, and 3) Foundational Literacy.

Each of these provided details and information on the influence that drama had on the experiences of the Black girls in the study and strategies that they used to face challenges related to language, identity, and social media engagement. Moreover, detailed information is included from the drama teacher giving her role and perceptions of how drama influences the actions and behaviors of her Black female students. Table 7 lists the themes, corresponding sub-themes, and common ideas, which emerged from the data analysis.

Table 7

Emergent Themes, Sub-Themes, and Common Ideas

Themes 1-2: Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls		Themes 3-6: Drama Influences			
Theme 1: Experiencing Racism	Theme 2: Exploring Under Examined Literacies	Theme 3: Literacies Development through Drama Participation	Theme 4: Cultural Relevance	Theme 5: Race and Gender Identity	Theme 6: Drama Practices and Activities
		Subtheme 3a: Reading	*Subtheme 4a: Teacher Pedagogy & Vision*	*Subtheme 5a: Confidence*	*Subtheme 6a: Favorite*
		Subtheme 3b: Writing		*Subtheme 5b: Expression*	*Subtheme 6b. Most Effective*
		Subtheme 3c: Speaking			*Subtheme 6c. Curriculum & Pedagogical Development*
		Subtheme 3d: Advocacy on Social Media			
Focus Group Common Ideas					
Common Idea 1: Shaping the Future of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	Common Idea 2: Black Girl Confidence	Common Idea 3: Drama Influence on Foundational Literacy			

Culturally Relevant Arts Education (CRAE) was the conceptual framework and

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was the epistemology used to guide my analysis. The

CRAE framework with BFT was used to examine the relationship between in-school

drama class participation having any influence on foundational, digital, and Black Girls'

literacies. CRAE also embodies the importance of social justice as a means to recognize

the roots of internalized oppression. This pedagogical model is useful for focusing the

arts on social justice and includes motivating artists and arts participants through a pedagogy that uses their cultural knowledge and experiences as an asset that explores action (Hanley, 2011). BFT speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people (Hill Collins, 2014), allowing the Black female students' voices and their teacher's voice to be heard from a Black Feminist Thought lens, not the dominant narrative. The data analysis process enabled me to develop themes that reflected the influences that drama participation had on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies based on the experiences shared by the study participants. The themes and sub-themes identified through the data analysis process provided insight into how the experiences of Black girls inside and outside of school intersect with the influence that their drama participation has on the three literacies examined in this study.

Findings and Conclusions

Key themes that emerged from the data analysis are outlined below in context to the current literate as they address the research questions for this study.

Themes 1-2: Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls

The themes of Experiencing Racism and Exploring Underexamined Literacies are categorized under Factors of Education for Urban Middle School Girls. They primarily centered around factors relevant to challenging race and discrimination scenarios that the girls faced while inadvertently calling on techniques they learned in drama class to help overcome hard situations.

Theme I: Experiencing Racism

The narrative data obtained from the participants in this study clearly

demonstrated that drama participation influenced how participants dealt with racism that they have experienced as Black girls. Racism refers to a hierarchy of superiority over inferiority when referring to humans (Grosfoguel, 2016), and thus data analysis from the interviews demonstrated that most student participants experienced racism or discrimination inside and outside of school. The student participants shared how participation in drama classes helped them to deal with their emotions and reactions to discriminatory actions toward them.

The CRAE framework highlights instructions for improving artistic expression and includes the importance of social justice to recognize the roots of internalized oppression. Social justice has a long history and has been described as an "equitable redistribution of resources" and as recognition of culture and identity for those who are marginalized and subjugated in society (Avineri et al., 2019; Barry, 2005; Bell, 2007). The CRAE framework is a foundation for drama class curriculum and pedagogy as it allows for exploration of arts, as Hanley (2013) explained social justice work as internal and external of self and the world to make meaning of the world. The middle school Black girls are attempting to make meaning of the world as they deal with racist and sexist encounters. Three of the four student participants discussed the importance of calling on strategies and techniques that they learned in drama class to overcome negative racial experiences that they encountered inside and outside of school due to being Black and female. They recalled hurtful name calling experiences spewed at them as a result of their race and gender. The data indicated that the participants believed overall that the drama strategies of breathing, going into character, or even improvisation to be critical components to maintain professional, positive, healthy composure and not slip into a

stereotype that society has set for Black females. The philosophical concepts of both Boal (1985) and Gallagher (2007) laid a foundation for exploring drama and its alignment with expression, identity, confidence, and advocacy for social justice (Freebody & Finneran, 2016), yet did not have a primary focus on exploring how Black teenaged girls navigated that space. However, the data in this current study suggests that the student participants embraced techniques from drama class that helped them feel confident and empowered in order to combat racism and maintain demeanor and composure. They also learned the importance of advocacy for themselves and other Black females by relying on being involved in social justice through dramatic art influences.

Theme 2: Exploring Underexamined Literacies

Exploring underexamined literacies was the second theme, which emanated from interviews and conversations with participants. The data showed that the teacher participant in this study nicely aligned her role and her perceptions of her Black female students with her classroom pedagogy, her knowledge, and sensitivity as a Black female. However, there is scant literature that links the influence of drama on three literacies (foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies) of Black girls in an urban middle school. Two participants in this study provided valuable information on the effects that drama has on Black female middle school students. This data included one student and the results of Ms. Gomez, a Black female teacher who embraces the tenets of BFT.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) places the knowledge of Black women at the center of analysis and speaks to the importance that information plays in empowering oppressed people (Hill Collins, 2014). In this study, Ms. Gomez stressed the importance of her Black female students feeling comfortable within themselves in all scenarios. She

stated, "I want them to feel comfortable within themselves, enough to express themselves in whatever way they see fit." In comparison, a study conducted in New Zealand on performing arts for New Zealand secondary schools called Stage Challenge (Trayes et al., 2012) followed the 5-month experiences of a student-led girls team aged 10 to 17 and focused on the quality of the girls' experiences and what contributed to and detracted from their desire to repeat those experiences in future. Although the New Zealand study explored the varied life experiences and choices of the girls in the group through performance arts, it failed to dive deep into the center of what Black teenage girls deal with individually and collectively. The data from this current study focuses on Black adolescent girls whose life experiences are importantly acknowledged and addressed as a result of the activities, techniques, and strategies that their Black female drama teacher employs in the classroom. It is known that one of the challenges in urban education is the need for teachers to develop a cultural and contextual understanding of students in their classrooms (White et al., 2017). Ms. Gomez acknowledged that what she teaches is reality-based and offers life skills development for her students, aligning with the principles of BFT and the CTL non-arts pedagogy of CRAE. This allows Ms. Gomez to perceive her Black female students as intuitive cultural young ladies.

Themes 3-6: Drama Influences

Likewise, the themes centered on curriculum and pedagogy used in the drama classes allowed the drama teacher to form positive perceptions of her Black female students. These themes may be viewed as aspects that contributed to how drama influences the language, identity, and social media engagement of middle school Black girls based on the experiences that the participants shared, and how the teacher formed

perceptions of these students.

Theme 3: Literacies Development through Drama Participation

The experience of being a Black teenaged female exploring how reading, writing, and speaking may be influenced by participation in drama classes is highlighted throughout Theme 3. During the focus group discussion, the influence of drama on foundational literacy became significant (Common Idea 3). Literacies development through drama participation is the third prominent theme drawn from the interviews and conversations conducted with student and teacher participants. In this theme, respondents provided important insights into their experiences of being Black females enrolled at an urban school. The student participants spoke in depth about the importance of using specific techniques like improvisation, reading Shakespeare plays, and going into character to further develop their reading, writing, speaking, and advocacy on social media. The two non-arts pedagogies of CRAE are critical pedagogy, and Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). Critical pedagogy, as defined by Freire (1970), aims to challenge cultural and structural power relations through an analysis of systems of power. It is a teaching approach inspired by critical theory and it attempts to help students question and challenge the dominant narrative. CTL is defined as a way to introduce content using a variety of active learning techniques designed to help students connect what they already know to what they are expected to learn, and to construct new knowledge from the analysis of this learning process (Bonnet et al., 2018; Hudson & Whisler, 2008). Throughout subthemes 3a-3d, there is a foundation of CRAE's critical pedagogy and CTL, as the student participants shared how the pedagogy and contextual and cultural teaching and learning in drama classes influenced their responses and

reactions to their literacies development. Finally, during the focus group discussion, three student participants indicated that participating in drama class influenced their foundational literacy by expanding their vocabulary, using more words, speaking in public, and increasing their book reading list. Drama has proven to influence foundational literacy with these Black urban middle schoolgirls.

Sealy-Ruiz (2016) presented a framework of how educators can make changes to enhance the literacies of Black girls by adopting a Black Girls' Literacies Framework approach in the classroom. This allows Black girls to draw on their critical literacies skills by reading and writing about their individual and collective experiences of being a Black girl in today's context (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). All participants addressed the influence that practicing drama had on the development of their reading, writing, speaking, and advocacy for Black girls and Black people in general, even on social media platforms.

The data showed that three of the student participants believed that drama influences their reading (sub-theme 3a). In fact, two of the four participants loved reading Shakespeare in their drama classes and believed that it enhanced their vocabulary and made reading even more intriguing. It is important to remember that for nearly a decade, the reading scores of eighth grade students in the United States have been stagnant or have dropped, particularly in large city urban school districts, which show achievement scores below state and national averages (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). Although the student participants in this study have not been evaluated to determine any increase in their national reading scores after participation in drama classes, the data revealed that the participants acknowledge their own interest in reading more and different texts, as well as the enhancement in their vocabulary.

Next, the data revealed that two of the four student participants expressed their reasoning for how drama influences what they write (sub-theme 3b). They learned how to express themselves better through writing in drama class. Bobo shared that studying Shakespeare in drama class has helped with her writing and expanded her vocabulary. She stated, "It like enhances my vocabulary. Some words that I can say some people wouldn't really understand cause they weren't like in drama." The students' experiences and success with stronger writing skills aligned with the Black Girls' Literacies framework that allows Black girls to draw on their critical literacies skills by reading and writing about their individual and collective experiences of being a Black girl in today's context (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). In alignment with that, Ms. Gomez creates lessons where the students can write about their experiences and their feelings and thoughts on particular topics and scenes from plays. This skill development in writing allows the students to create narratives about themselves and others through their lens as Black females, where the entire lesson is grounded in BFT epistemology.

The next sub-theme deals with the speaking literacy. Black girls are often stereotyped as not effective speakers or lack the confidence or vocabulary to speak well or in public. The data from this study showed that two of the student participants believed that participating in drama influenced their speaking (sub-theme 3c). For example, Nasa Jupiter shared, "When I started doing drama class, I've been able to speak out more and speak up. So it's helped me with my speaking a lot." It is evident in the study that practicing influenced the speaking skills of these Black girls. As a result of participating in the drama classes, they can speak publicly with enhanced vocabulary.

Digital literacy is broad, and consequently, in this study, digital literacy pertained

specifically to social media platforms and usage. Many middle schoolers indicate concerns about social media activity due to inappropriate postings, getting their feelings hurt, lack of privacy, inappropriate pictures, bullying, and other negative behaviors directed at them (Martin et al., 2018). When coupling these stats with the additional challenges that Black girls face with racism and feeling voiceless, the data revealed all of the student participants in this study felt comfortable in social media spaces (TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter) to advocate for themselves and others as Black middle school girls (sub-theme 3d). Through interviews and conversations, the girls expressed the ways that they are able to refrain from participating in negative and inappropriate activity online, even though they each have experienced negative moments on social media. They all shared that they consciously work at not acting out of character on social media and attribute the management of their actions to drama strategies like breathing exercises and writing assignments to learn to express themselves in all situations appropriately.

Theme 4: Cultural Relevance

The arts can open pathways toward understanding the richness of people and cultures and fosters a sense of being (Symposium: Arts as Education, 1991). The arts can give rise to one or many voices in educational settings that impact academics and cultural contexts for students and teachers as addressed through emerging Theme 4 of Cultural Relevance. The data from this study indicated that the CRAE framework laid the foundation for what is already happening within the instruction of Ms. Gomez's drama class (sub-theme 4a). Her students not only do a lot of writing and reading in her class to enhance foundational literacy, but her vision is for her students to embrace drama

strategies, activities, and practices so that they feel comfortable in being themselves and embracing their cultures (sub-theme 4a). Ms. Gomez stated,

> I love the fact that I allow my students to be anything that they want to be. Sometimes my students come from a very hard background and hard home life, and so I want for my students in my class to just be able to become a doctor, become a lawyer or become a cowboy or whatever they want to be.

Although Ms. Gomez was not initially aware that she was employing many of the tenets of CRAE from a BFT lens with her Black female students, she displayed specific pedagogy in the classroom to support their academics along with their diverse cultural backgrounds. Theme 4 supports Research Questions 1 and 2 as the data referred to specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create to affirm the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Theme 5: Race and Gender Identity

Black females are often relegated to the margins, and most national statistics ignore the experiences, performances, and outcomes of Black girls (Ricks, 2014), continuing the narrative on where Black girls fit within a society that has historically marginalized them based on race and gender. Muhammad (2014) conducted a study highlighting a summer writing collaboratives for Black girls where they spent time writing in a space influenced by Black women writers of the past which provided a roadmap for these young girls to understand self-identity among dominant narratives and charged the Black girls to create similar pathways for Black girls in future generations. This literature not only encouraged the self-identity of Black girls but also supported the research in this dissertation study by addressing the foundational and Black Girls'

literacies of Black girls in this study. Subsequently, the data in this dissertation study indicated that four student participants shared experiences of the influence that participating in drama had on their confidence, expression, and advocacy skills as Black females. The study focused on creating spaces for Black adolescent girls to explore and express their gender and race identities supporting Research Questions 1 and 2.

Further discussion of the findings of Theme 5 revealed that Black girls are often left voiceless and feeling invisible in school, potentially receiving inequitable education (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Generally, an adolescent girl's self-confidence begins lagging in sixth grade, with a rise in anxiety and questioning her academic abilities and intelligence around seventh grade (Hough, 2019). However, the data analysis revealed that three of the student participants felt more confident navigating being Black and female in society as a result of participating in drama class. Nasa Jupiter shared, " I feel like drama class has made me feel like I can be so much more than what life stereotypes Black girls because we can be so much more than we can express in our feelings and we can be more than just us, basically being more than what life thinks that we are." (sub-theme 5a). Additionally, data that emerged from the focus group around confidence steered toward Black girl confidence (Common Idea 2). The gist of the conversation focused on how Black females are strong, powerful, and confident, and do not need to succumb to imposed societal expectations.

The philosophical concepts of both Boal (1985) and Gallagher (2007) lay a foundation for exploring drama and its alignment with expression, identity, and confidence. Although that seminal work supports this dissertation study, the work is deficient in examining drama's influence on Black girls in urban settings as it relates to

expression, identity, and confidence. Additionally, there is sparse literature that supports this specific research on Black middle school girls in urban settings. When Black girls are in conditions where they are repeatedly told that they are invisible, it is important for them to develop survival, coping, and defensive skills (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). An example is when Bobo shared that she had learned to express herself in different areas of her life despite the fact that her Liberian culture does not permit females to express themselves. These students were able to express themselves by learning techniques in drama class aligning with Black Girls' literacy as they felt comfort in creating and sharing their own narratives as Black females. It is important that Black middle school girls express themselves to create the narratives that they want to be known. Through drama practice, the Black girls learned to not shy away from self-expression, in person, or on social media. In this study, drama used as a cultural creative art employed the CRAE framework as the foundation for the middle school Black girls to explore expression and confidence (sub-themes 5a and 5b), thus supporting Research Question 1.

Theme 6: Drama Practices and Activities

Drama is creating meaning and visible mental models of our understanding together through exploration (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998). Theme 6 unveiled data from the drama teacher who gave insight into curriculum and pedagogy that helped with students' development and use of foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies, while the data from the Black girls gave insight on drama techniques and strategies that have been put to use while navigating their lives. All four student participants had favorite drama practices or activities (sub-theme 6a) that they learned in the class and felt positively influenced their foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies, as well as

other areas of their lives. Drama techniques like improv, breathing exercises, projecting voice, and reading Shakespeare were some of the favorite activities that they practiced in class. Although the girls may have listed those activities as their most favorite and those drama activities have influenced the underexamined literacies in this study, they may not be the most effective for navigating their foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. This is an opportunity for further research to determine if the favorite drama activities learned are in fact, the most effective to enhance the proposed underexamined literacies in this study.

The data revealed three student participants spoke of drama practices and activities that were effective when dealing with regular challenges in their lives (sub-theme 6b). Three examples listed as effective strategies were breathing, speaking publicly, and taking a walk in someone else shoes, whereas their most favorite strategies listed were improv and Shakespeare raps. As explained by Drama Resource (Drama Resource, n.d.), additional strategies that may be used in drama instruction with students in schools are mime, fourth wall, storytelling, forum theater, narration, and thought tracking. Further research is needed to determine if these techniques provide an effective influence on the foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of urban middle school Black girls. Examining those paths opens the door to drama curriculum and pedagogical development from a cultural lens. Through her curriculum and teaching, Ms. Gomez is making a connection between drama and foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies by delivering a form of critical pedagogy that aims to challenge cultural and structural power relations through an analysis of systems of power (Freire, 1970). As a Black female, Ms. Gomez showed solid use of the CRAE model through her cultural

understanding of her diverse student population as she prepares and employs lesson plans, recognizes culture and identity, and embraces CTL through the practice of the dramatic arts (sub-theme 6c). Moreover, a common idea that emerged through the focus group was when students shared their favorite drama strategies and how those strategies have worked well for them in different scenarios, as well as Ms. Gomez creating perspectives of her students based on their discussion of personal experiences (Common Idea 1). Through the use of a focus group, data revealed that the students and their teacher formed common ideas and added meaning and understanding to existing knowledge (Bostan, 2015). Furthermore, through the focus group discussion, Ms. Gomez gained insight into shaping future drama classes (Common Idea 1).

The categories of Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls and Drama Influences divide the six emergent themes of this study. In this section, these six themes and ten sub-themes have been examined in the context of the existing literature and research. Moreover, the academic and social-emotional success and overall well-being of Black girls in school and personal contexts cannot be achieved without their teachers and researchers who produce data to help inform educators and policymakers of their academic needs (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016).

Implications

This study's findings have implications for researchers, educators, and education reformers committed to improving academic and personal outcomes for Black middle school girls in urban schools. This study aimed to explore and investigate dramatic art strategies, activities, and techniques that influence traditionally underexamined literacies (foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies) that impact Black girls in urban middle

schools. The body of existing literature is full of studies exploring drama with elementary or high school students, males, Black males, non-Black students, non-urban students, or outside of academic settings, but few are specific to drama and these underexamined literacies of Black middle school girls. According to the literature, the lack of arts in education can hinder achievement (Chappelle & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2013; McDermott et al., 2017), not only in core academics, but also in varied literacies that affect confidence, expression, identity, and navigating other layers in the lives of Black female adolescents. As an extension to the existing literature, this study connected the CRAE framework and BFT epistemology to drama curriculum and pedagogy that influence foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies for Black middle school girls.

The existing literature indicates that drama enhances language arts in urban schools (Walker et al., 2011) and influences literacy (Young et al., 2016). The existing literature also highlights drama enhancing effective communication and creative problem solving for elementary students (McFadden et al., 2010). There is scarce existing literature informing education of any influence of drama on digital literacy for Black girls, more specifically, on social media engagement. However, the literature does inform us that social media platforms have become facilitators of reality drama events with users occasionally and conveniently engaging in a communicative play activity (Ehiemua & Omoera, 2015). This literature does not give speculation on how Black girls navigate social media. Lastly, there is an absence in the literature pertaining to drama and Black Girls' literacy. Although Carney et al. (2016) presented a case study on how drama-based pedagogy was used with an underserved population in an elementary school setting focusing on language arts skills, the study lacked the focus on middle school Black girls

in an urban setting and how they address the multidimensionality of being a Black female. One closely related study focused on creating spaces for Black adolescent girls to write in collaborative groups that served as a roadmap for the girls to understand self-identity among dominant narratives about Black girls (Muhammad, 2014), but few studies directly explore the influence that drama has on the foundational and Black Girls' literacies of middle school Black girls in urban schools.

The results from this study indicate that researchers, educators, and education reformers must be open to curricular approaches which may improve performance for Black middle school girls to enhance learning and gain knowledge (Moss et al., 2018), but also have curriculum inclusive of cultural relevance and be committed to moving the curriculum forward. This study suggests that drama may be an effective strategy for improving language, social media engagement, and Black girls' identity. According to the interviews, all participants in this study experienced benefits from participating in drama classes at the school, which offered students skill development in their reading, writing, vocabulary, public speaking, social media engagement, and advocacy. This raises questions about drama curriculum and pedagogy that may be deficient or lacking in urban middle schools. If drama participation has such a positive effect on Black middle school girls, then perhaps drama education programs in urban schools should not lack the funding and innovative curriculum and instruction that include cultural relevance to specifically enhance the literacies of Black girls.

Limitations

This study was limited by the sample size. A larger sample may have provided a greater variety of responses from participants. This study was also limited by the

researcher's decision to focus primarily on drama. It is possible that collecting data from students participating in the visual or fiber arts may have produced different results and widened the scope of the study by providing the researcher with richer and more varied data concerning the connection between the arts broadly and the foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of middle school Black girls in urban settings. Another potential limitation concerns my role as the researcher. As the only researcher working on this project, there was a risk of researcher bias. To mitigate potential researcher bias, I used data triangulation, reflexivity, and rich, thick descriptions.

Recommendations

The six themes, ten sub-themes, and common ideas comprised the categories of Factors in Education for Urban Middle School Girls, and Drama Influences, to help present a rich exploration of the influences that drama has on the foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of middle school Black girls. The hope is that this study can serve as a basis to increase both dialogue and research related to access to drama programs for Black girls in urban middle schools, funding for drama courses in urban middle schools, as well as the development of culturally relevant arts-based drama curriculum to include teacher training.

Findings from this study reveal the need for researchers, educators, and education reformers to consider drama as a potential strategy to influence foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of urban middle school Black girls, and impact their lives. This study was conducted to fill a noticeable gap in the literature on drama education and literacies development of adolescent Black girls. Thus far, very few research studies have been conducted which specifically target drama and the particular foundational, digital,

and Black Girls' literacies for Black female middle school students. Several speculative

explorations of the potential benefits of drama for language arts development, teenaged

girls, or Black females have been researched and written (Snyder et al., 2014; Walker et

al., 2011; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010), but few studies have been conducted which

explicitly address the effects of drama and the total defined literacies for this study. The

studies within the existing literature have demonstrated the capacity for drama to be used

with language arts, girls groups, mixed-gender and race populations, and elementary or

high school students, however, there is still insufficient literature on how drama with

cultural relevance may be used effectively to influence foundational, digital, and Black

Girls' literacies of Black teenaged girls in urban middle schools.

Future research should include the following for researchers to extend this study:

- Examine potential correlations between drama and foundational, digital, and

  Black Girls' literacies separately for teenaged Black girls in urban school

  settings. This will seek deeper connections of the influence that drama has on

  these specific literacies to determine any impact that it may have on the lives on

  Black middle school girls.

- Examine additional art forms (fiber arts, dance, paiting) with foundational,

  digital, and Black Girls' literacies separately to provide a deeper dive into the

  benefits of arts education on the individual literacies for urban middle school

  Black girls. This research will seek potential avenues that may enhance how

  Black middle school girls navigate life.

Such studies would reveal valuable information about how art forms such as dance,

theater, crochet, and painting influence literacies skill development, as well as personal

and identity growth for Black girls. Future research studies should be replicated on a

larger scale to determine a greater impact on middle school Black girls more broadly.

The results of this study also necessitate the inclusion of recommendations for education

reformers, and policymakers to conduct assessments to open pathways for teenaged

Black girls in urban schools. The recommendations are:

- Use the research study results to seek funding through grants and policy briefs for

    enhanced drama programming that can support Black girls within urban middle

    schools. The policy will request the appropriate allocation of funding to urban

    schools. This could entail combining resources of schools within systems to

    appropriately allocate funding and train staff within urban schools to create and

    fully develop drama programs allowing for more Black girls to benefit from the

    drama programs.

- Use the study results to write policy briefs that implores public middle schools

    provide culturally relevant arts education programs focusing on drama and

    foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies to support middle school Black

    girls.

The findings from this study suggest that educators who work with and support

Black girls also familiarize themselves with this data on drama and specific literacies

development. This will provide them with a level of understanding concerning the effects

of drama on foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies. The recommendations for

educators are:

- Develop learning communities of varied content teachers (drama and core

    content) to work together to redesign or create new curriculum and instructional

practices in which to integrate research-based culturally relevant drama education into lesson plans for Black girls in middle schools. These communities should include the Black Girls' literacy framework along with the curriculum and instructional practices.

- Develop teacher training and professional development experiences for drama teachers and core subject matter teachers to become experienced in integrating culturally relevant drama lessons together.

This study was designed to contribute to the literature on arts education and the influence that drama has on the literacies of teenaged Black girls in urban middle schools. Researchers, educators, education reformers, and policymakers could further explore several areas of research from this study. The study should be replicated on a larger scale in other urban schools to see if there are any consistencies in the experiences of Black middle school girls or perspectives of Black female drama teachers.

Summary

This study examined the influence of drama participation on the foundational, digital, and Black Girls' literacies of middle school Black girls in an urban setting. Narrative data from interviews revealed that, while participating in dramatic arts classes at Stonybrook School, participants experienced a positive influence in their language, vocabulary, public speaking, and engagement on social media. Finally, data derived from this study suggests that participating in drama classes at Stonybrook School helped participants develop more positive gender and race advocacy skills. The student participants benefitted from the positive interaction and instruction from their Black female teacher and utilized practices that they learned from drama class in other areas of

their lives. Overall, the student participants in this study stated drama strategies, techniques, and activities influenced their language, engagement on social media platforms, and their advocacy of being Black and female. Additionally, the teacher who participated in the study voiced that her perceptions of Black middle school girls were positive prior to her students taking drama classes, although she witnessed many significant results of how drama activities enhanced Black Girls' language, identity, and social media engagement. Such findings indicate that drama education warrants more considerable attention from researchers, educators, education reformers, and policymakers who are committed to improving academic outcomes and personal life experiences for Black middle school girls in urban U.S. schools.

"Drama is my everyday life now" - Bobo

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APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DRAMA
TEACHER

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR DRAMA TEACHER

Date:

Demographics/Warm-up

- What is your first name?
- Tell me a little bit about yourself and how you came to teaching drama in middle school.
- Explain what you enjoy the most about teaching drama.

Culturally Relevant Arts Education through drama

- What are your beliefs on arts integration or arts education?
- What is your level of familiarity with culturally relevant teaching?
- What is your level of familiarity with culturally relevant arts education?
- Would you say that drama strategies align with social justice?
- What drama strategies would you use to explore challenging oppression?
- How could drama strategies be transferred to support social justice issues?

Perceptions of drama influence on Black girls

- What influence, if any, does drama have on the literacies (foundational, digital, Black Girls') of Black girls? (allow me to define these literacies first).
- Would you say that drama connects with self-expression?
- How would you explain the participation of Black girls in the drama class having any impact on how they feel about themselves as Black girls?
- Are you aware of any of the Black girls using the strategies that they are practicing in class for combating oppression from race and gender inequality?
- Tell me about a strategy that you use in class that may help Black girls with expressing themselves in writing or through body language.
- Please explain how drama strategies can assist Black girls with how they express themselves on social media platforms?
- Are you aware of any of the Black girls using the strategies that they are practicing in class for expression on social media?

Black girls in co-ed, multi-racial drama class

- Please share how you teach cultural relevance through drama to a mixed-race and mixed-gender class.
- Do you see the Black girls in class using the strategies to overcome race or gender inequality?

- Can you explain how any strategies that you use in the class deal with race, culture or identity?
- Tell me about a strategy that you use in class that may help students with their exploring cultural reading and/or writing.
- Please share your beliefs on how drama teachers may use culturally relevant arts education as a form of social justice.
- Please share any additional information that you would like me to know about the drama class.

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BLACK GIRL
STUDENTS

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**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BLACK GIRL
STUDENTS**

</div>

Date:

Demographics/Warm-up

1. What is your first name?
2. What grade are you in?
3. How do you identify your gender?
4. How do you identify your race?
5. How long have you been in drama classes?
6. Tell me a little about what you do in the drama class
7. What has been your experience participating in the drama class with students of other races and genders?

Experiences with foundational literacy through drama

1. What activities have you practiced in drama class that has helped with expressing yourself through writing?
2. How has participation in the drama class impacted how you speak?
3. Tell me about a time in drama class where you learned how to use your body to express what you want to say.
4. From your experiences, how does practicing drama influence what you read or write?

Experiences with digital literacy through drama

1. Let's shift the conversation a little. Please share with me any social media platforms that you use.
2. How much time do you spend on social media each day?
3. Tell me how you express yourself through your posts or comments on social media platforms.
4. Share an example of a post on social media where you acted out of character.
5. Have you ever felt unsafe while using social media? If so, what was that like?
6. Please tell me how using social media may help you feel empowered?
7. From your experiences, does practicing drama influence what you post on social media?
8. Tell me about a technique that you practiced in drama class that may influence what you post in text messages or on social media.

Experiences with Black Girls' Literacy through drama

1. What strategies or activities practiced in your drama class helped you express how you feel about your race or culture?
2. Tell me about a time when you felt oppressed.
3. In your opinion, can practicing drama be used to challenge oppression and fight for social justice?
4. Please explain how participating in drama classes helps you feel empowered.
5. Please explain how your participation in the drama class has any impact on how you feel about yourself as a Black girl.
6. Please share with me an experience that you had in drama class that made you feel empowered as a Black/African American female.
7. Please share with me if participating in drama class helps you feel confident about being African American/Black.
8. Please share with me if participating in drama class helps you feel confident about being female.

Students' understanding of the influence of drama/Wrap-up

1. Based on your participation in the drama class, how do you believe the strategies that you are learning and the experiences that you are having will help you in the future with how you express yourself and communicate?
2. What activities or strategies have you learned in the drama class that are your most favorite?

Wrap-up
1. Please share any additional information that you would like for me to know about your participation in the drama class and how it shapes you as a Black girl in middle school.

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS PROTOCOL

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS PROTOCOL

Probe Questions:
1. How have you learned how to apply the things that you practice in drama class to your everyday life?

Follow-up Questions:
1. Have drama strategies and techniques helped you deal with feelings of discrimination or oppressions? If so, how?
2. What are your favorite drama strategies to use when trying to manage feelings or emotions?
3. How often do you use drama techniques and strategies when you speak in conversations?
4. How often do you use drama techniques and strategies when you post on social media?

Exit Question:
- Is there anything else that you would like to say about the influence that practicing drama may have on how you speak, what you say, what you post on social media, or how you navigate being a Black female?

APPENDIX D: WRITING PROMPTS

WRITING PROMPTS: 3 MINUTES TIMED

Students:

You are on a popular social media site and run across a post that negatively depict Black girls as loud, rude, not smart, and unattractive. You see your friends and others reposting and making comments both for and against the negative post. You think about techniques that you have learned in drama class. How do you express yourself after seeing the post? What are your next steps?

Teacher:

You are teaching a group of students in a drama class and one of the Black female students is not in a good mood because she experienced disrespect as a Black female by someone inside or outside of school or on social media. Her behaviors in class were uncharacteristic of her and out of line, altering her language, tone, expression (body, facial, etc.), and interaction with other students. Your next teaching instruction for the drama class to assists this student in dealing with racial disrespect or oppression is...