LOVING AND LEAVING THE CLASSROOM: CONTEXTUALIZING THE
ATTRITION OF BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS FROM URBAN SCHOOLS

by

Shanique Joan Lee

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

Charlotte

2021

Approved by:

_____
Dr. Chance Lewis

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Dr. Lisa Merriweather

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Dr. Tehia Glass

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Dr. Paul Fitchett

_____
Dr. Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling

ABSTRACT

SHANIQUE JOAN LEE. Loving and leaving the classroom: Contextualizing the attrition of Black women teachers from urban schools (Under the direction of DR. CHANCE W. LEWIS)

Since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling against school segregation, Black women teachers (BWTs) have had perpetually high rates of attrition, despite their legacy of providing high quality, emancipatory education (Acosta, 2019; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond; 2017b; Dixson, 2003). While scholars have sought to understand BWT attrition and remedy the issue through policy and practice recommendations, the phenomenon persists. Thus, the purpose of this study was to contextualize the attrition of critical BWTs to better understand the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools. While retention efforts aim to keep teachers in the profession, it is necessary to instead emphasize this population's sustainability, which is more complex and calls for "schools and other educational institutions [to] become more welcoming and supportive places for them, where their professional practice can be cultivated over time" (Mosely, 2018, p. 269). Specifically, I investigated (a) the relationship between Black women's intersectional identities and their experiences as critical educators in urban schools, (b) the compounding factors that led to their ultimate departure, and (c) the complexities of their decision to leave the profession.

Using Black feminist thought and cognitive dissonance theory as my framework, I employed sista circle methodology to study fifteen critical Black women teachers who left the profession. Thus, each participant engaged in one of three sista circles, which were my primary data collection method, in addition to an individual pre-interview and a final written reflection. After analyzing my data through an iterative process of multiple

data readings, memo writing, open coding, and axial coding, the findings revealed three major themes: *instinct vs. opposition*, *commitments vs. personal needs*, and *dissonance-reduction strategies*. *Instinct vs. opposition* highlights the participants' convictions about practicing emancipatory pedagogy, despite their efforts being sabotaged by various barriers. *Commitments vs. personal needs* captures the participants' dedication to their students, which conflicted with personal needs that required them to leave teaching. Finally, *dissonance-reduction strategies* depicts how the participants worked through the cognitive dissonance (i.e., discomfort from realizing contradictions between values and actions) resulting from their beliefs about teaching and decision to leave. These themes offer rich context and a complex narrative of why critical BWTs love and leave the classroom.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation provides a description of the problem addressed by this study, a thorough description of the conceptual framework, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive overview of the literature regarding the history, significance, and attrition of critical BWTs. Chapter 3 details the methodology used, and Chapter 4 presents the findings through three major themes and twelve subthemes. Finally, in Chapter 5 I situate this research in the broader literature, highlighting this study's contribution to the field, and offer recommendations to key stakeholders, including policymakers, educator preparation programs, school administrators, and BWTs to make meaningful impacts on the sustainability of critical BWTs in urban schools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

God, thank you for drawing me nearer to you and teaching me so many valuable lessons throughout this process. There is no way I could have made it without your grace and guidance. Thank you for being so kind and for seeing me through.

Study participants, thank you for giving me and one other the space to heal. Only you all know just how complicated it is to love and leave the classroom, so thank you for sharing your stories with me so honestly and vulnerably. You are my sistas, and the reason I will continue this work.

Committee, you are incredible. Dr. Lewis, thank you for pushing me throughout this journey and the invaluable opportunities you have given me to flourish. Dr. Merriweather, thank you for your expert guidance in research and generous support in every other way. Dr. Glass, thank you for your treasured mentorship and for boldly living out your commitment to liberation. Dr. Fitchett, thank you for advising key literature that strengthened this dissertation and refined the scope of my work. Dr. L-R, thank you for noticing my passion and connecting me with other scholars to grow my impact network.

Cato College of Education faculty, thank you for investing in me. Dr. Butler, your prayers and intense support erased every bit of doubt I had in my purpose. Dr. Wiggan, all the ways you urged me to think deeper helped developed me into the critical scholar-activist I am. Dr. Anderson, your consistently unapologetic and authentic way of being models the type of mentor and educator I aspire to be. Dr. Miller, teaching with you was deeply impactful and one of my favorite experiences of this journey.

Daddy, I don't have room to spell out how much I appreciate you. You have eagerly encouraged all of my dreams, and you are always the perfect listening ear

anytime I need to vent out my frustrations. Thank you for always validating me right before reminding me of my strength and encouraging me to keep going.

Rodney, you are the reason I move through this world so freely and confidently. You are my person and the one who I know, no matter what, will always make sure I am fully protected and fully loved. Thank you for sharing the growing pains with me and never letting go of my hand throughout this process.

Daniel Ray, thank you for being beside me during every step of this journey. You kept me reminded of my strength when I was sure I wouldn't make it. You encouraged me to grow spiritually, intellectually, and personally, and to never let one outweigh the others. Thank you for how you love me and always show up.

Family, you are my why! I could not imagine embarking on this journey without you all motivating me and gassing me into believing I can get anything I desire. I owe you all credit for my strong will and determination. Thank you for believing in me.

Church family, you are the most thoughtful, loving, intentional group of people I have ever met, and I am consistently blown away at how much you reflect the love of Christ. Pastor Bond, Leslie, Roz, Cheryl, Kaneka, Eryn, Nicole, Rachel, and so many others, you have encouraged me from the moment I began this journey and taken practical steps to make sure I stayed healthy and spiritually grounded no matter how busy I got. Thank you for always doing the small things that always matter the most.

Students, I wouldn't be here without you. You unlocked a love in me that I did not know I had, and your precious lives are the reason I began this journey and will continue to go hard in this work. Leaving you was the hardest decision I ever made, and I can only hope that the work I do makes up for it in the most meaningful ways. Thank you

for showing me my purpose and giving me four years of the most intense joy I've ever experienced. Korey, this is for you.

Friends, you all deserve all the flowers for the ways you have held me up throughout this journey. Olivia, Yesenia, Delton, Antoinette, Marilyn, and everyone else who encouraged me through this process, *thank you*! Olivia, the patient understanding you have shown me gave me the permission I needed to lock in and focus on finishing this journey. Thank you for loving me so practically and genuinely. Yesenia, you constantly re-center me by pointing to Christ, regardless of what's on my plate. Thank you for always rooting for me and never letting me believe anything is more important than my relationship with God. Delton, thank you for going through this journey with me! Our late-night conversations kept me sane and reminded me that I am not alone in this work. Antoinette, God knew I needed you. Thank you for being my person throughout this journey, and my forever friend now that it is ending. Marilyn, all the ways you made me feel affirmed, loved, and celebrated throughout this journey have meant so much. Thank you for your countless thoughtful gestures of support. To all my friends who have held it down over these last few years, I love you more than I can say, I am grateful, and I do not take your patience and support lightly.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Mommy and all the Black women in my life who made it possible for me to get here:

- Mommy, my best friend and loudest cheerleader, you are the reason I am. I could never repay you, but I will always try. I love you.

- Ma, losing you was the hardest part of this journey, but I know your spirit was in the room when I finished. I miss you. I love you.

- Grandma, you are a giant and I am honored to stand on your shoulders. I hope my work makes you proud. I love you.

- Sisters, you give my life the balance it needs and keep me reminded of the things that matter the most. I love you.

- Raven, I am here because you blazed the trail for me and turned back to offer light anytime I was lost. I love you.

- Territa, because of you, this journey became so much deeper than just earning a Ph.D. Thank you for always being a willing vessel. I love you.

- Family, I could not have dreamt up a better village of Black women. Your love for me nurtured the love I offer this world. I love you.

- Friends, I am blessed. Your support is genuine, your love is hard, and your encouragement is always in perfect timing. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Ample literature discusses the unique and often inequitable experiences of

teachers of color (e.g., Achinstein et al., 2010; Borrero et al., 2016; Boser, 2011; Bristol

& Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Dee,

2005; Dilworth & Brown, 2008; Kohli, 2009, 2012, 2018; Petchauer et al., 2018). While

there are many shared experiences of racism, oppression, inequitable opportunity, and

lack of access across people of color, clustering minoritized groups together makes

experiences of misogynoir (i.e., gendered racism unique to Black women; Bailey, 2021)

invalidated and blamed on the group itself as a deficit (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008,

2010). This "people-of-color-blindness" (Sexton, 2008) and embrace of multiculturalism

over discussions on anti-Black gendered racism assist many allies in feeling safe and

remaining comfortable (Dumas, 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Sexton, 2010).

However, the potentially unintended consequences of these inclusive approaches are that

Black women are pushed further into the margin, and the existence of the *afterlife of

slavery* is perpetually denied (Dumas, 2016; Gordon, 1997; Hartman, 2007; Kelley, 2002;

Sexton, 2008, 2010; Tillet, 2012).

Similarly, Angela Davis (1997) uses the term *camouflaged racism* to describe

how Black people experience racism but are unable to demand accountability because the

use of coded language disguises the racialized undertone of malicious legislation and

political positions. Tillet (2012) also articulated the following regarding the impact of

Black people's exclusion from U.S. rights and ideals:

Because racial exclusion has become part and parcel of African American

political identity since slavery, it cannot simply be willed or wished away. This

protracted experience of disillusionment, mourning, and yearning is in fact the

basis of African American civic estrangement. Its lingering is not just a haunting

of the past but is also a reminder of the present-day racial inequities that keep

African American citizens in an indeterminate, unassimilable state as a racialized

"Other." (p. 9)

Tillet's (2012) description of racial exclusion is reminiscent of Eng and Han's (2000)

discussion on *racial melancholia*, which, though conceptualized to describe the

experiences of Asian Americans, also accurately depicts the experiences of Black people

in the United States as: "suspended assimilation—this inability to blend into the 'melting

pot' of America—suggests that…ideals of whiteness are continually estranged. They

remain at an unattainable distance, at once a compelling fantasy and a lost ideal" (p. 671).

No matter how much they demonstrate their ability and humanity, Black people as a race

have yet to be able to freely enjoy the life and liberty promised by the U.S. Constitution.

Thus, as all the aforementioned scholars have pointed out, Black people in the United

States face unique experiences of racism that have been systematically erased, hidden,

and ignored. This has created a burden for Black people to identify and attempt to

dismantle barriers as they trek toward liberation.

Further, the added layer of gender discrimination has required Black women in

particular to create spaces for themselves that affirm the validity of their unique

experiences in order for them to establish appropriate solutions. *Intersectionality* is a term

coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to explain how the oppression experienced by

Black women is unique in that it occurs at the nexus of their race and gender. This makes

it possible for Black women to be systematically ignored amid progress toward racial and

gender equality (Bailey, 2021; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, the history and resulting present reality of Black women, and specifically Black women teachers, in the United States is unparalleled, which makes it critical that their experiences be examined independently of Black men, white women, and other non-Black people of color.

Statement of the Problem

Across P-12 public schools in the United States, 15% of students are Black, while only 6.7% of their teachers are Black (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016, 2019). More specifically, Black women teachers (BWTs) have perpetually been underrepresented since the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education,* and presently make up only 5% of the teaching force (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). Thus, Black students are educated by an overwhelmingly white teaching force, within an educational context that promotes white supremacy and anti-Blackness (Duncan, 2019; Foster, 1997; Walker, 2009). When this oppressive reality is not countered by BWTs who practice liberatory pedagogies, all students are at a disadvantage (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Hudson & Holmes, 1994). In particular, the disadvantages faced by Black students include: (a) a lack of Black teacher representation, which deters them from pursuing a career in the field and continues the trend of underrepresentation; (b) lowered academic performance, which is influenced by negative teacher perceptions and interactions with white teachers; and (c) culture demonization, making their experience with school one that does not feel safe or like a place where they can authentically engage in their education (Dee, 2004, 2005; Egalite et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Stewart et al., 1989; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018).

When discussing students' academic achievement as measured by standardized

tests, one cannot ignore the substantial data that suggests Black students' performance is consistently lower than their white counterparts (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). Seeking to remedy this phenomenon, several scholars have identified Black teacher representation as a key factor to improve the academic success of Black students (e.g., Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks, 2019; Egalite et al., 2015; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). This can be attributed to several factors, including the perceptions teachers hold of their students, which impact the ways they interact with their students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Fergus, 2017). For example, Dee (2005) found in their study that white teachers are statistically more likely to regard their students of color as disruptive and inattentive. Dee further argued that since "these teacher perceptions are clearly likely to influence educational opportunities as well as the classroom environment, this evidence implies that these classroom interactions make important contributions to the observed demographic gaps in student achievement" (p. 164).

Additionally, the lack of Black teacher representation negatively influences the likelihood that Black students will pursue a career in teaching, seeing the profession as one that is off limits to them and welcoming to white women, who represent the majority of the teaching force (Ladson-Billings, 2000; NCES, 2019). This perpetual cycle of underrepresentation "does not allow Black students to see themselves reflected in the professional realm" (Madkins, 2011, p. 417) and contributes greatly to the shortage of Black teachers, which then negatively influences Black students' cultural experiences in school (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). According to Ladson-Billings (2000), there is "a generalized perception that African American culture is not a useful rubric for addressing the needs of African American learners, and thus, that African

American culture is delegitimized in the classroom" (p. 206). One way to combat such a detrimental schooling experience is for Black students to be exposed to critical Black teachers, who work to disrupt inequity while also normalizing their culture by incorporating it into their pedagogies, allowing for more authentic classroom interactions and learner engagement (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Madkins, 2011). Further, while research findings reveal that all students benefit from being instructed by BWTs, Black students specifically reap increased motivation and effort to succeed, critical thinking capacity, enjoyment of school, racial and cultural pride, and character development, all of which position them "for academic, economic, civic, and social success" (Acosta, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Carrol, 2017, 2020, p. 8; Egalite & Kisida, 2018). However, while these findings have contributed to substantial initiatives aimed at increasing the recruitment of Black teachers, such initiatives are negated by a comparable lack of intention focused on retaining them, as evidenced by their chronically high rates of attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; Stanley, 2021; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). Moreover, initiatives to diversify the teaching force do not often consider the ways BWTs' historical and current experiences of misogynoir contribute to their underrepresentation, which furthers their alienation in the profession (Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Hill-Jackson, 2020; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). Even so, Black women have widely maintained a critical commitment to racial uplift, and many of whom have demonstrated this within the field of education (Horsford, 2012; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Perkins, 1981).

Today, many of the BWTs who enter the profession remain driven by a commitment to disrupt inequity through their critical pedagogies rooted in activism and

resistance (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Duncan, 2019; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017a; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021). These critical BWTs are imperative in urban schools with high concentrations of Black students, since they are the ones who "counter the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1979) in schools and work to protect Black children against the racialized trauma it can cause" (Acosta, 2019; Duncan, 2019; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021, p. 73; Watson, 2017). Their pedagogies benefit all students, but especially Black students, providing a context of learning that fosters high achievement, a sense of belonging, and cultural pride (Acosta, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; McKinney de Royston, 2020). Aligned with Acosta et al.'s (2018) conceptualization of *African American Pedagogical Excellence*, critical BWTs often embrace their role as an othermother (Case, 1997), foster a culture of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002), practice a warm demander pedagogy (Ware, 2006), and engage in political activism (Dixson, 2003).

Therefore, it can be concluded that critical BWTs are a tremendous asset to urban schools, which typically have high concentrations of Black students (Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2014). Often, however, critical BWTs must also navigate their own experiences of isolation and misogynoir (Acosta, 2019; Acosta et al., 2018; Bell, 2018). Specifically, while protecting their Black students from racialized harm, critical BWTs must also directly contend with policies, infrastructures, schoolwide procedures, and peer and administrative interactions that attempt to tokenize them and diminish their proficiency (Acosta, 2019; Bell, 2018; Carrol, 2017; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021). Misogynoir, a term conceptualized by Dr. Moya Bailey in 2008, refers to "the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their

simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (Bailey, 2021, p. 1). BWTs who go beyond their contractual duties for their students while also navigating their own experiences of misogynoir are at increased risk of stress, job dissatisfaction, fatigue, psychological distress, and turnover (Bailey, 2021; Collins, 2000; Hancock et al., 2020; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Milner, 2020). Compounding this, BWTs are too often not equipped with the necessary tools to be able to "identify the shifting manifestations and consequences of racism" (Mosely, 2018, p. 272), which ultimately contributes to their pushout from the profession (Hancock et al., 2020; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). Accordingly, the literature currently lacks the perspective of post-service critical BWTs (i.e., those who left the profession) concerning the specific, shared factors that ultimately led to their departure.

Purpose of the Study

Thus, the purpose of this study was to contextualize the attrition of critical BWTs to better understand the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools. While retention efforts aim to keep teachers in the profession, it is necessary to instead emphasize this population's sustainability, which is complex and calls for "schools and other educational institutions [to] become more welcoming and supportive places for them, where their professional practice can be cultivated over time" (Mosely, 2018, p. 269). Specifically, I intended to investigate (a) the relationship between Black women's intersectional identities and their experiences as critical educators in urban schools, (b) the compounding factors that led to their ultimate departure, and (c) the complexities of their decision to leave the profession. Through this in-depth examination of critical Black women's experiences from beginning to end, recommendations are made to improve their

sustainability in urban classrooms.

Research Questions

This study is primarily framed by Black feminist thought, which position Black women as agents of knowledge and validate their knowledge through the following: (a) their lived experience, (b) the use of dialogue, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000). Accordingly, the present study uses sista circle methodology (SCM; Johnson, 2015) to explore Black women's experiences as critical teachers in urban schools and their decisions to leave. Johnson (2015) explained that the purpose of SCM is to study Black women's lived experiences, and it includes "research practices that draw on the wisdom and social relations of Black women transnationally" (Johnson, 2015, p. 43). Thus, in alignment with the theoretical framework, epistemological foundation, and methodology of this study, the research questions that guided the examination are as follows:

1. How do Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools?

2. How do critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession?

3. How do critical Black women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession?

Conceptual Framework

The present study was primarily framed by Black feminist thought (BFT) and incorporates elements of Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory (CDT). BFT centers the lived experiences of Black women to foster their empowerment and social

justice (Collins, 2000). As such, this framework guides the analysis to center the participants' commitment and resistance to accurately depict the gendered and racialized backdrop of their experiences. A CDT framing is also necessary to properly understand the dual existence of BWTs' paradoxical love for and departure from teaching. CDT explains how individuals work to resolve inconsistencies between their beliefs, values, and actions (Festinger, 1957). Thus, this framework is critical to the study's purpose to contextualize the attrition of critical BWTs. Understanding how the participants were able to both love and leave the classroom will allow for more accurate analysis of the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools.

Black Feminist Thought

BFT has several core themes that expose the layers of oppression faced by Black women and highlight the many ways they resist and confront those oppressions. Among the themes of BFT are intersectionality, the power of self-definition, Black women's acts of resistance, challenging the controlling images of Black women, and addressing the politics around the unpaid labor of Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981). Each of these five themes and how they relate to the present study are further discussed in the following subsections.

Intersectionality

Inspiring the concept of misogynoir, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) used the term *intersectionality* in 1989 to describe the raced and gendered experiences of Black women, which were ignored in both feminist and anti-racist discourse. Prior to Crenshaw introducing the term intersectionality, other intellectuals including Sojourner Truth (1851), Anna Julia Cooper (1892), Frances Beal (1970), Angela Davis (1981), Audrey

Lorde (1984), the Combahee River Collective (1977), and Deborah King (1988) had previously conceptualized and critically examined the intersectional nature of Black women's experiences. For example, in 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered a powerful speech at the Women's Convention, posing the question, "Ain't I a woman?" In her speech, Truth called out many of the ways *her* women's rights were not being recognized, as they did not align with the norms of the white women who held the largest platform in the movement. Similarly, Black women scholars such as Ana Julia Cooper, Frances Beal, Angela Davis, Audrey Lorde, and Deborah King all explored the intersecting oppressions Black women face, and how their perspectives are left out of dialogue regarding freedoms and liberation of all people.

Accordingly, Collins (2000) linked the term *intersectionality* to the BFT framework, highlighting Crenshaw's (1989) argument that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (p. 140). Crenshaw further explained how Black women have been disregarded in anti-discrimination policy and legislation, thus effectively eliminating accountability of anyone practicing discrimination toward someone at the nexus of their gender and race. As is explored in the present study, BWTs' intersectional identity is at the core of their historical and contemporary presence (or lack thereof) in urban schools. However, because schools can demonstrate their enactment of anti-discrimination policies toward Black people and toward women, discrimination against Black women specifically becomes invalidated and ignored (Crenshaw, 1989).

Controlling Images of Black Women

The shared experiences of discrimination among Black women can indeed be

unique, especially since stereotypical and caricatured images have been widely adopted and attributed to Black women who demonstrate traditions and characteristics atypical to white women. These negative images, which Collins (2000) argued are created to control Black women, further perpetuate their oppression, and contribute to making "racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins, 2000, p. 69). Examples of such images are mammies and matriarchs, both of which operate to limit and trivialize the contributions of Black women.

In schools, BWTs are often typecast as mammies, being expected to "nurture their colleagues by taking on their instructional responsibilities in addition to their own" and to welcome "all the 'unruly' (i.e., African American children) [students] …when other teachers, particularly White women, were unsuccessful with them" (Acosta, 2019, p. 31). BWTs are also regarded as matriarchs—angry, aggressive, and hateful caricatures—when they resist oppressive norms of docility and blind obedience (Acosta, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009). However, understanding that these images are intended to control and oppress Black women, Black feminist scholars have sought to challenge negative stereotypes by embracing the power of self-definition (Collins, 2000; Dill, 1988; Rollins, 1985).

Power of Self-Definition

By reclaiming their power to self-define, Black women are empowered to dispel controlling images placed on them by choosing to operate outside of stereotypical narratives, or by redefining the underlying assumptions that uphold the images. For example, the mammy is a long-standing stereotype of Black women who work in faithful

domestic service to others. However, many Black women find great pride in their work within their homes and communities (Banks, 2020; Dill, 1988; Dixson & Dingus 2008; Harley, 1990), considering it to be a means "to address urgent community needs that arise out of racial and ethnic group disparities" (Banks, 2020, p. 343). These Black women decided to self-define what it means to operate in service to their people, and therein lies their reclaimed power. Within urban school settings, critical BWTs leverage ancestral and cultural wisdom to self-define how "good teaching" looks for Black students. They then boldly operate from this definition, even while being stereotyped, marginalized, and excluded from teacher evaluation rubrics (Acosta et al., 2018; Collins, 2000; Horsford, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Watson, 2017).

Acts of Resistance and Unpaid Labor

Self-definition is only one of many acts of resistance carried out by Black women (Barnett, 1993; Davis, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Terborg-Penn, 1986; Truth, 1851). Specifically in education, BWTs have consistently resisted the norms and curricula set in place to center whiteness and further the oppression of Black people (Dixson, 2003; Hill-Jackson, 2017; Muhammad et al., 2020). In the urban classroom, BWTs often serve beyond their contractual duties, providing their unpaid labor to ensure the progression and protection of their Black students (Farinde-Wu, 2018; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017; Hill-Jackson, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Perkins, 1981). They become othermothers toward their students and operate as warm demanders to facilitate learning that extends far beyond academics (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Foster, 1993; Ware, 2006). They fight to protect their students from experiences of racism while also demonstrating urgency for their students to meet their academic potential, which they insist is great (Acosta, 2019; McKinney de

Royston et al., 2021).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) discussed education as being a practice of freedom. Anderson (1988) highlighted that, in 1787, Thomas Jefferson was the first to propose universal education for white children, ignoring the existence of the Black children who were enslaved at the time. While no longer enslaved, it remains true that Black students in today's educational context do not receive access to education at large. However, through their acts of resistance, critical BWTs disrupt this norm by providing liberatory education that gives Black students the opportunity to experience education as a practice of freedom.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) has its origins in social psychology and was presented by Leon Festinger in 1957 during a time when there was heightened interest in understanding motivation and behavior, especially as it pertained to conflicting values and actions (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). In essence, the original CDT framework posited that individuals experience psychological discomfort when they realize inconsistency, or *dissonance*, between their beliefs, attitudes, actions, or values (Festinger, 1957). To rid themselves of this psychological discomfort and reestablish consistency, or *consonance*, between their cognitions, Festinger found that individuals try to reduce the dissonance by using *dissonance-reduction strategies*. These strategies are cognitive processes and often happen instinctively. Examples of dissonance-reduction strategies include: (a) changing one of the dissonant cognitions, (b) adding more consonant cognitions, or (c) minimizing the importance of the dissonant cognition.

For example, a BWT may teach her students about anti-Blackness in school policies but then instruct a Black boy to remove his durag in class. According to CDT, once the BWT notices the inconsistency, or dissonance, between her actions and beliefs, she will experience psychological discomfort and implement a strategy to regain consistency, or consonance. In this example, the BWT might (a) change one of the dissonant cognitions by taking back her request for her student to remove his durag, (b) add more consonant cognitions by rationalizing that she is protecting her student from other teachers by telling him to remove his durag before they get to him, or (c) minimize the importance of the dissonant cognition by concluding that asking her student to remove his durag is not *that* anti-Black. Over time, Festinger (1957) and several other social psychologists (e.g., Aronson, 1968, 1999; Aronson & Mills, 1959; Brehm, 1962; Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Steele, 1988) developed numerous experimental paradigms to explain dissonance and individuals' motivations to reduce it. However, none of these paradigms explained why dissonance occurred in the first place.

Action-Based Model of Dissonance

Harmon-Jones's (1999, 2000) action-based model of dissonance expanded the original CDT to explain what makes cognitive inconsistencies cause psychological discomfort. This model reframed conflicting "cognitions" as "action tendencies," stating that the reason people experience dissonance is because there are conflicting action-related implications associated with the different cognitions. Returning to the previous example of the BWT who asked her student to remove his durag, the action-based model explains that the reason she experienced dissonance in the first place is because her inconsistent cognitions had conflicting implications. As a critical BWT, having strong

beliefs against anti-Blackness implies that she would not subject her students to anti-Black policies. However, asking her student to remove his durag means that she supports this anti-Black policy. Therefore, she will intuitively employ a dissonance-reduction strategy to restore consistency between her beliefs and actions. The strategy she chooses depends on several factors that are explained in Cancino-Montecinos et al.'s (2020) emotion-regulation process model of dissonance reduction.

Emotion-Regulation Dissonance Reduction

Cancino-Montecinos et al. (2020) developed a model that situates dissonance-reduction strategies within a process of emotion-regulation to more broadly explain why individuals engage in certain strategies to reduce their dissonance. According to this model, several steps are involved in the process of dissonance reduction, which can also be thought of as emotion regulation. Once aware of the cognitive inconsistency, individuals experience their initial negative emotion during the *primary reduction stage*. This negative emotion is the first influence on the eventual reduction strategy, and the intensity of this emotion is determined by the *magnitude of dissonance*, or the degree of inconsistency between the cognitions (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). For example, a critical BWT is confronted by a member of her administration and told that her culturally relevant teaching practices are not aligned to the school's model, and she must adhere to a scripted curriculum. In the primary reduction stage, this teacher may initially feel rage because there is a large magnitude of dissonance between her beliefs about teaching and the expectations held of her as a teacher.

As explained by Cancino-Montecinos et al. (2020), individuals then move to the *secondary reduction stage* once they have overcome their initial negative emotion and

can think more critically about how to settle their cognitive inconsistency. To decide, individuals consider their *motivational goals* in relation to their *cognitive capacity*. Motivational goals are the factors that encourage a certain action, and cognitive capacity is one's ability (in general and in the moment) to employ an action (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). Returning to the example of the BWT being confronted by her administration, she would take this time to consider what is most important to her in conjunction with what she feels able to do. She must first decide where her motivation lies, and then she must decide what action she has the immediate and long-term to take.

The final stage of Cancino-Montecinos et al.'s (2020) emotion-regulation model for dissonance reduction is the *strategy employment stage*. As suggested by the title, this is the point at which individuals implement their reduction strategy and assess their emotions afterward to determine its effectiveness. Returning to the example of the BWT being made to teach a scripted curriculum, the dissonance-reduction strategy she chooses will depend on how her motivational goals and cognitive capacity (present and long-term) intersect. Considering her motivational goal is to meet her students' needs, she may reduce her dissonance using a more sophisticated strategy such as transcendence (i.e., telling herself her decision was for the greater good) on a day when she has high cognitive capacity. However, job security may be a long-term motivational goal for this same BWT. If this is met with low cognitive capacity, she may choose a less sophisticated strategy to reduce her dissonance, such as avoiding the thought of it. Figure 1 offers additional possibilities from this example that consider other motivational goals and cognitive capacities.

Figure 1

Example Emotion-Regulation Dissonance Reduction Strategies

		Motivational Goal	
		Students' Needs	*Job Security*
Cognitive Capacity	*Sophisticated Strategy*	<u>Compartmentalization</u> "Reading this script is just part of the job. I'm still committed to liberating my students."	<u>Transcendence</u> "It's better for me to be doing this than someone who doesn't care about my students."
	Primitive Strategy	<u>Attitude Bolstering</u> "This script isn't as bad as I thought. It's actually kind of culturally relevant."	<u>Denial of Responsibility</u> "I don't want to read from this scripted curriculum. They're making me do this."

Methods Overview

This study employed a qualitative research design, following the tenets of sista circle methodology (SCM; Johnson, 2015). This design was chosen because it honors and seeks to fully understand the lived experiences of Black women, as they shared through dialogue between Black women. The goal of using this approach was to establish a research context that was supportive, authentic, non-hierarchal, and culturally relevant, which would allow the participants to engage in a shared process of meaning-making. The final sample included fifteen BWTs who left the profession (i.e., post-service), self-identified as critical teachers who practiced emancipatory pedagogy, and taught for at least three years in an urban school. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling through email, social media posts, and direct contact with members of my professional network.

The primary data collection method of SCM is sista circles, which are a type of focus group that is specifically curated to align with the cultural ethos of Black women. Therefore, three two-hour sista circles were conducted virtually, one week apart for three consecutive weeks, and each participant participated in one circle based on their availability. As further discussed in Chapter 3, the first sista circle included four of the participants, the second sista circle included three participants, and the third sista circle included eight participants. Additionally, to triangulate the data, each participant also engaged in a 30- to 60-minute virtual individual interview and wrote a final reflection. The sista circles and interviews were transcribe and then uploaded to ATLAS.ti to be coded and analyzed using Ravitch and Carl's (2021) three-pronged approach. Data were analyzed through the BFT and CDT frameworks to explore the three research questions.

Significance of the Study

It is necessary to intimately examine the experiences of critical BWTs to make a well-informed, sizeable impact on their sustainability. Adding to the current literature, this study centered the perspectives of those who already left the profession, thus providing an authentic understanding of the factors that had detrimental impacts on critical BWTs' sustainability. Further, it is fundamental to understand how critical BWTs' experiences are distinctive because of their intersectional identities since it offers necessary insight into how oppressive ideologies have led to bias in the ways these teachers and their pedagogies are regarded by key stakeholders, which has subsequent implications for their recruitment, preparation, and retention. The findings of this study have implications for policymakers, teacher preparation programs, urban school administrators, and BWTs to promote the establishment of widespread commitment to

anti-oppression and employ strategies that improve the sustainability of those working to disrupt inequity in urban schools.

Finally, regarding how critical BWTs arrive at the decision to leave the profession, this understanding gives all stakeholders pertinent information concerning what issues need to be addressed and corrected immediately. It is necessary to understand the complexities of their decision to leave, including the cognitive dissonance they experience, since it highlights the specific concerns that undermined their commitment to disrupting inequity through education. With these collective findings, stakeholders will be able to properly discern what actions need to be prioritized that promote the sustainability of critical BWTs in urban schools.

Researcher Positionality

Reflecting on my positionality as a researcher is essential to strengthening the reliability of my study and the validity of my findings. Thus, it is critical to recognize that I decided on the topic of this dissertation because of my deep connection to it. I am a Black woman, and I taught at an urban high school for four years, passionately engaging in emancipatory pedagogy. However, I experienced deep levels of depression while teaching, which made me feel confused and ashamed because the *act* of teaching brought me so much joy. When I decided to leave the profession, I carried around an immense amount of guilt, believing that I had turned my back on the very students I was so dedicated to protecting. My guilt was compounded by the fact that I left in the middle of a school year, leaving my students to be instructed by a long-term substitute teacher who did not seem to care about them.

For a while after leaving, I avoided conversations about my decision to leave and the thought of my lingering pain. But as time went on, I started to tell people I left so that I could make a greater impact on my students and education in general. I knew this was not true, but it did make me feel less guilty. The truth was that I left because I no longer wanted to teach, even though the love and commitment I had to my students was undeniable. When deciding on my dissertation research, I initially considered completing an autobiographical study because I thought I was the only person who had gone through such a complicated and hard-to-explain experience. However, the reason I decided to engage SCM is because I wanted to know how my differences were similar to and different from other post-service critical BWTs. If I learned that other BWTs had gone through similar experiences as me, I desired to create a space of validation and healing for us all within the sista circles. While my positionality invites a great deal of subjectivity into this study, BFT gives me the power to self-define high quality research, Black feminist epistemology establishes my lived experience as a criterion for meaning, and SCM situates me, the researcher, as participant (Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2015). Thus, while remaining aligned with principles of ethical research, my proximity to this study's topic positions me as the most qualified researcher to conduct it.

Definitions of Terms and Concepts

This section provides clarification on key terms and concepts that will be used throughout this study.

- Black: Regarding the participant selection criteria, this term refers to individuals living in the United States who are members of the African diaspora.

- Capitalization rationale: This study's rationale for capitalizing *Black* while not

capitalizing *white* or individuals *of color* mirrors Crenshaw's perspective (1991):

> I capitalize "Black" because "Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other
> 'minorities,' constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require
> denotation as a proper noun." … [(MacKinnon, 1982)]. By the same
> token, I do not capitalize "white," which is not a proper noun, since whites
> do not constitute a specific cultural group. For the same reason I do not
> capitalize "women of color." (p. 1244)

- <u>Urban school</u>: In the call for participants, this term was defined as one that serves majority students of color, and regularly faces challenges such as overcrowding, underfunding, and inadequate resources (Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2014).

- <u>Post-service</u>: This term refers to teachers who have left the profession.

- <u>Critical teachers</u>: As used throughout this study and within the call for participants, this term is defined as teachers who demonstrate political clarity and a commitment to disrupting inequity through emancipatory pedagogies (Duncan, 2019; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; McKinney de Royston, 2020).

- <u>Emancipatory pedagogies</u>: In the call for participants *emancipatory pedagogies* were defined as:

> teaching methods by which teachers (a) hold high expectations of their
> students, (b) make their students knowledgeable of the positive
> contributions of their race, and (c) work to help their students develop a
> critical lens or consciousness to examine the root causes of their
> oppression and develop ways to end it. (Duncan, 2019, p. 198)

Delimitations and Limitations

Ellis and Levey (2009) differentiated limitations from delimitations by the intentions of the researcher. Delimitations are the deliberate boundaries of a study that allow the researcher to focus on their scope. In contrast, limitations are the "potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher" (Creswell, 2005, p. 198). This section details the delimitations and limitations of the present study.

Delimitations

This study was delimited by its participant selection criteria, which was narrowed to focus on post-service critical BWTs in urban schools. Therefore, purposive sampling was used to identify participants based on gender, race, former occupation, and pedagogical style.

Limitations

Limitations are inherent within any study, despite how much consideration is taken to minimize issues (Croswell, 2005). Thus, the present study had several potential limitations necessary to discuss. First, the virtual format of the sista circles may have limited the participants' ability to fully engage in verbal and non-verbal dialogue that "challenges and resists domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 131). While being on a virtual format allowed for a more diverse sample, it also allowed some participants the ability to turn their cameras off, or keep their microphones muted for prolonged periods of time. Additionally, the familial nature of sista circles typically invites the opportunity to engage in dialogue over a shared meal, but that was not an option for community-building due to the virtual meeting format. This study was also potentially limited in its recruitment process. Though social media allows for information to spread quickly and

widely, using it as a primary recruitment method limits the audience the information reaches. To this end, I may have inadvertently excluded potential participants who are not present on social media platforms.

Assumptions

I also made assumptions about the truth of certain factors as I engaged in the various stages of this study. During data collection, I assumed that all the participants were honest about their eligibility to participate, and that they would adhere to the *communication dynamics* and *centrality of empowerment* features of SCM. I also assumed during data collection and analysis that all the participants were honest and forthcoming about their experiences.

<div align="center">

Study Overview

</div>

It is crucial that critical Black women be represented in the teaching force. This study assists in increasing their representation and career sustainability by unearthing the holistic details of their experiences. Accordingly, Chapter 2 of this dissertation contains a comprehensive review of the literature regarding the historical and contemporary presence of critical BWTs. Chapter 2 ends with a discussion of the remaining gaps in the literature, and transitions into Chapter 3, which details the methodology carried out for this study. The findings are then presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion on the findings and their implications in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides an historical timeline of the commitment many Black women have demonstrated to the educational advancement of the Black population. Specifically, this chapter reviews literature that focuses on the work of *critical BWTs*, which are understood throughout this chapter as those who demonstrate political clarity and an urgency to disrupt inequity by using emancipatory pedagogies (Duncan, 2019; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; McKinney de Royston, 2020). Further, Duncan's (2019) definition of emancipatory pedagogies is used throughout this review:

> teaching methods by which teachers (a) hold high expectations of their students, (b) make their students knowledgeable of the positive contributions of their race, and (c) work to help their students develop a critical lens or consciousness to examine the root causes of their oppression and develop ways to end it. (p. 198)

First, Black women's role in education before and during enslavement is discussed. From there, attention is given to the sacrifices they made during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, followed by their experiences after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Finally, this timeline ends with descriptions of Black women teachers' (BWTs) current presence in urban schools. The reason for providing such an extensive historical foundation is to properly frame the present significance of critical BWTs, as well as the ways they are systemically regarded in the present educational context, both of which contribute to their current underrepresentation (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Stanley, 2021). Thus, included in this discussion is the prevailing present context of Black education, and the role that context has on the presence and pedagogies

of BWTs. This chapter concludes with a summary of remaining gaps in the literature, and how the present study aims to fill those gaps.

History of Black Education in the United States

Black people in the United States have a longstanding awareness of the value that lies in receiving an education (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1997; Walker, 2000, 2001; Williams, 2005). Recognizing the power that accompanies a quality education, Black people made every effort before and after their emancipation from slavery to provide themselves with as much and as excellent scholarship as possible (Anderson, 1988; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004; Williams, 2005). Black people, and particularly Black women, accomplished this goal in many ways. During enslavement, they established literacy among themselves, even under the risk of death since most of the country's southern states passed legislation banning the education of enslaved people (Anderson, 1988; Cornelius, 1983; Williams, 2005). Swiftly after the Emancipation Proclamation was passed, Black people "…helped to build and operate schools, secure funding and other needed resources, worked with the Black community, and worked as advocates for the education of Black children" (Tillman, 2004, p. 282). Then during the Jim Crow era, Black teachers and administrators maximized their use of minimal resources to ensure the quality of their students' education was comparable to that of white students (Anderson, 1988; Dingus, 2006; Suh et al., 2020; Tillman, 2004).

Well after segregation laws ended, the Black population still had to struggle for their rights to an equitable education; however, their determination to gain those rights never ceased (Anderson, 1988; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Walker, 2001; Suh et al., 2020; Tillman, 2004). In her historical review of segregated schools in the South, Walker

(2000) synthesized the comprehensive work of scholars who offered perspectives on

Black education that was not primarily characterized by oppressive circumstances.

Instead, the work of scholars such as Anderson (1988), Ashmore (1954), Bond (1939a,

1966), Foster (1997), Franklin (1974), Fultz (1995a, 1995b), Irvine & Irvine (1983),

Rodgers (1967), Sowell (1976), Walker (1996), and many others depicts Black people's

relentless pursuit of quality education as a means toward unbounded liberation.

Black Women as Pioneers for Black Education

Historically, Black women have undertaken active roles in every educational

capacity to ensure the success of Black students (Dixson, 2003; Hill-Jackson, 2017;

Horsford, 2012; Muhammad et al., 2020). An understudied and too often overlooked

group, BWTs can be regarded as the cornerstone of the Black population's educational

advancements. Indeed, it was the audacious foresight and resistance of Black women that

first established literacy among enslaved people (Williams, 2005). Royster (2000) stated

that Black enslaved women "were the interpreters and reinterpreters of what was going

on. They were the transmitters of culture as mothers, actual and fictive, as teachers, as

social activists" (p. 110). Despite being the recipients of inconceivable abuse and

exploitation, enslaved Black women used their storytelling abilities as a means to

preserve their culture and their people (Royster, 2000).

Added evidence of the pride and regard Black women held for education can be

found in the contents of an 1827 letter written by a woman named Matilda to the

Freedom's Journal, which was the first paper that was owned, operated, and edited by

African Americans (Gross, 1932). Entitled, "Letter from a Female Reader to the Editor of

Freedom's Journal," Matilda (2015) expressively discussed how valuable educated Black

women are to the advancement of the Black race. Matilda encourages Black men to

forget the days "when ignorance blinded [their] eyes" to the full intellectual range of

Black women (p. 65). Instead, she insisted to her male readers that they are responsible

for ensuring their daughters' intellectual growth. Matilda's (2015) way of thinking can be

regarded as a reflection of the longstanding, pre-colonial, cultural value that many Black

women place in their role to support their people (Royster, 2000). Regarding Black

enslaved women, Royster (2000) proclaimed the following:

> …the fact of their holding such a clear place of "value" in the economic order,
>
> despite the experience of pejoration that actually accompanied that place,
>
> permitted the women to construct a view of themselves as durable. They could
>
> survive and help others do the same. This view supported an ongoing
>
> commitment to long-standing cultural mandates—women's roles in assuring the
>
> survival and well-being of the community. (p. 112)

Black women's commitment to advancing the race was also embodied by those

who were not born into slavery (Johnson, 2017). Educational forerunners such as

Catherine Williams Ferguson, Ann Marie Becroft, and many other Black women secured

their legacies by founding schools all over the northern states (Brown, 1988; Hine et al.,

1993; Johnson, 2017; Marrow, 1993; Royster, 2000). Along with many other giants,

these women demonstrated how it looks to actively work toward liberation, which is why

it not surprising that after emancipation, Black literacy quickly multiplied across the

South (Royster, 2000). Much of this resulted from the feats of Black women such as

Lucy Craft Laney, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Elizabeth Evelyn Wright, and Mary

McLeod Bethune, all of whom established successful schools for Black students in the

South (Royster, 2000).

While several Black women possessed the resources to establish schools operating from within their homes or churches, Black students in the South maintained an ever-increasing need for more schools and teachers to staff them (Walker, 2000). For example, Ashmore (1954) reported that there were 200 counties in 1933 with high populations of Black people that had no high schools available for Black students to attend. To clarify such circumstances and how Black people overcame them, scholars including Anderson (1988), Bond (1939b), and Walker (2000) described how the Black community secured funding to meet the needs of students who did not have physical access to schools in their area. While often the community would come together and raise the necessary funds themselves, there were many other times when Black people felt it necessary to solicit the financial support of white northern philanthropists and southern citizens (Bond, 1939b; Walker, 2000).

This early financial support for Black education was most often not with equity-grounded intention. Instead, Bond (1939b) clarified that these donations were meant to "provide Negro education in keeping with their conception of Negro place" (p. 290). Essentially, white investors intended to control the curriculum of Black students to focus their education on moral and industrial training rather than intellectual growth. Most notably, the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Freedmen was established in 1882 in attempt to continue the indoctrination of Black people regarding their place in American society. Slater (1882) articulated his intentions for establishing the fund to his Board of Trustees:

But it is not only for their own sake, but also for the safety of our common

country, in which they have been invested with equal political rights, that I am

desirous to aid in providing them with the means of such education as shall tend

to make them good men and good citizens—education in which the instruction of

the mind in the common branches of secular learning shall be associated with

training in just notions of duty toward God and man, in the light of the Holy

Scriptures. (pp. 21-22)

While the objectives of Slater and other philanthropic organizations were attempts

to maintain a racist social and economic hierarchy, their contributions assisted greatly in

addressing the immediate needs of Black students and school personnel. Walker (2013)

explained that Black southerners seized these financial opportunities to build the schools

and secure the resources they needed, while "routinely [rejecting] the expectations of

purely industrial education as the foundation of Black education and unabashedly

[embracing] both industrial and liberal education" (p. 212). Though some complied with

philanthropists' stipulations that their education be focused on industrial training, many

Black southerners maintained their resolute commitment to intellectual education,

believing it to be to be their vehicle to liberation (Walker, 2000). They refused private

philanthropic "infringements that threatened to undermine their own initiative and self-

reliance" (Anderson, 1988, p. 12). Instead, this group created pathways to leverage their

resources for the establishment and maintenance of their own schools.

Teaching as a Revolutionary Act

Black women held onto their conviction for intellectual growth and continued

their trek toward uplifting the Black race through education (Hill-Jackson, 2017;

Johnson, 2017; Perkins, 1981). In general, women have been historically delegated to

teaching to preserve conservative moral traditions (Hill-Jackson, 2017; Vaughn-Roberson, 1992). Women were widely believed to be "pure, modest, devout, submissive, and naturally fragile caretakers and nurturers of the young" (Beauboeuf, 1997, p. 131). However, BWTs refused to demonstrate "a passive type of morality" (Spring, 1994, p. 107), and instead used the classroom as a platform for political resistance (Collins, 2000; Delpit, 1988; Beauboeuf, 1997). Thus, upon establishing their own schools, the teaching profession became one that was highly revered among Black people and especially Black women (Dingus, 2006; Ethridge, 1979; Foster, 1997; Gordon, 2000; Hill-Jackson, 2017; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004; Yeakey et al., 1986). This is evidenced by research conducted by Fultz (1995b), which pointed out that there were 7,106 BWTs in 1890 (51.3% of the Black teaching force), and this number grew to 46,300 in 1940 (78.7% of the Black teaching force). Though not all, most of the BWTs who represented these numbers, as well as those who continue to educate our students today:

> …readily demonstrate their political clarity: With their students, both in deed and in word, they share their understanding of society, an understanding that does not shy away from the reality of domination nor from the existence of resistance struggles against oppression. In essence, loving students means discussing such insights with them, not withholding knowledge from them. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 80)

This emphasis on social activism, referred to as "womanist caring" by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), is a longstanding characterization of BWTs' pedagogies, and has been presented by other scholars under different designations. For example, in her dissertation research, Beauboeuf (1997) gave the name "politicized mothering" to her participants'

"perspective on teaching that insisted on seeing relationships between teachers and students; schools and social reality; teaching and moral convictions" (p. 60). This also aligns with the othermother educational philosophy that Foster (1993) identified among her fourteen study participants, all of whom were BWTs. Foster's (1993) analysis of her life history interviews reveal that all her participants "fashioned a 'hidden curriculum' which is designed to reverse the one commonly taught in schools, one that will enable black students to use education to challenge the *status quo*, enrich their own lives and oppose ignorance, poverty and isolation" (p. 118). Though each of these conceptions of BWTs have their own unique nuances, what remains true of them all is that they are characterized by resistance and are historically and contemporarily unique to Black women. Such particularities of BWTs can be traced back to slavery but are also reflective of their pre-colonial cultural roles as women (Case, 1997; James, 1993). This commitment to bearing the weight of Black advancement was especially pivotal during the early establishment of Black education.

Working Conditions for Black Teachers

Even with such stout resolution among BWTs, it remains true that their working conditions were abominable (Hill-Jackson, 2017). In addition to Black schools being in "a pervasive state of disrepair" (Fultz, 1995a, p. 403), Black people, now technically free, remained in a perpetual state of violence and intimidation during the Reconstruction era. While Black people were no longer bound to laws of slavery, legislators in southern states created a system to circumvent this federal mandate. By establishing coercive labor laws, white southerners gave back to themselves legal rights to terrorize, exploit, and murder freed people via the 13th Amendment. The physical and mental terrorism endured

by Black people in the South promptly made its way to the Black schoolhouse. As such, Black people's pursuit of a quality education has never been innocuous. Contrarily, "a central theme in the history of the education of black Americans is the persistent struggle to fashion a system of formal education that prefigured their liberation from peasantry" (Anderson, 1988, p. 3).

However, through their determination, Black people continued to invest in the establishment of their schools and quality of their teachers, the population's literacy rates climbed, and opportunities for further educational pursuit continued to grow for Black people (Ashmore, 1954; Bond, 1939b; Walker, 2000). However, while these monumental strides should be celebrated, it is equally necessary to be reminded that they were operating within a system that actively pursued ways to hinder their progress. By understanding this violent social context, one may more thoroughly scrutinize the disparities between the resources available for Black education as compared to white education. Black schools were perpetually under-resourced since many white southerners believed during this time that it was not their responsibility, but that of the federal government or philanthropists, to fund the schooling of Black students (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 2000). Because of this lack of local support, the Black community leveraged the resources they had, nesting schools within churches and abandoned homes to accommodate the increasing numbers of students seeking an education (Walker, 2000). Classrooms were described as "primitive one-room frame structures, wholly lacking in modern facilities" (Ashmore, 1954, p. 28), and the demoralizing working conditions for Black teachers in the South continued during the 1920s and 1930s (Fultz, 1995a). These conditions, as highlighted by Fultz (1995a), are starkly similar to those faced by Black

teachers in urban schools today:

> Black teachers in the South during this period had substantially higher teacher-
> pupil ratios than did their White Southern (or Northern) counterparts and
> confronted potentially chaotic classrooms. The problems of overcrowding,
> irregular attendance, skewed grade distributions, and the general "overagedness"
> of African American students-—compounded by a dearth of supplies and
> equipment—all contributed to an environment that might "tax the ingenuity of the
> best trained teachers," as Ambrose Caviler [has] commented. (p. 404)

Fultz (1995a) resolved that Black people grew conditioned to this grim context of
learning, and therefore fostered expectations that Black teachers perform duties that
"extended far beyond the classroom setting" (p. 406) to ensure their students a quality
education. As will be further explored in subsequent sections, this sentiment, also
fostered among enslaved Black people, has not diminished over time (Acosta, 2019;
Irvine, 1988; Milner, 2015, 2020; Milner & Hoy, 2003; Weiler, 1989). Weiler (1989)
explained that society in the 1800s viewed teaching as an extension of the family, which
is how the career was made accessible to women. After adopting this perspective, it soon
became an expectation that women should dominate the teaching position, since it was
"appropriate to [their] own special natures" (Weiler, 1989, p. 18). Regarding the BWTs
who already embraced the cultural concept of othermothering, they "work[ed] on behalf
of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability"
(Collins, 2000, p. 192).

Black Women Teachers Pre-*Brown v. Board of Education*

Thus, even while the restrictive Jim Crow laws of this era fostered an

environment of hostility that plagued a significant portion of Black people's lives, Black women persisted. According to Foster (1977), 46,381 Black teachers worked in the South in 1940 (73% of all the Black teachers employed in the United States). Ramsey (2005) reported that by 1954 the total number of Black teachers in segregated schools had grown to 82,000. More impressive than the increasing number of teachers is that these teachers were characterized as exemplary (Walker, 2000). Amid unfavorable circumstances, teachers after 1930 were "consistently remembered for their high expectations for student success, for their dedication, and for their demanding teaching style" (Walker, 2000, pp. 264-265). Walker (2000) further explained that students during this time worked notably hard, desiring to make their teachers and principals proud because they knew how much they believed in them. Walker (2000) summarized the perceptions of Black teachers during the 1920s and 1930s:

> What emerges is a portrait of African American teachers who were professional educators steeped in an understanding of philosophies about children and teaching, but also committed to the development of the particular children they served and having their own set of beliefs about how the children should be motivated to achieve. (p. 266)

Most striking about this quotation is Walker's intention about highlighting the pairing of teachers' undeniable competence and care with *their* students. This sentiment is a reminder of Du Bois's (1935) assertion that, "[t]he proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and back-ground, and the history of his class and group" (p. 328). However inequitable, segregated Black

schoolhouses operated as spaces of hope and healing for Black students who were

constantly combating the evils of segregation and oppression outside of the building

(Ramsey, 2005). As they did while enslaved, BWTs, representing 78.7% of the Black

teaching force in 1940 (Fultz, 1995b), continued to serve as "…the transmitters of culture

as mothers, actual and fictive, as teachers, as social activists" (Royster, 2000, p. 110).

In addition to the social and emotional impact BWTs had on their students, they

were also highly qualified. Rodgers (1967) reported that in 1950, Black teachers were

more prepared to teach than white teachers, averaging 4.1 years of college experience to

white teachers' 3.8-year average. Further, data presented in a report by Thompson (1953)

revealed that the level of training Black teachers received was comparable to that of

white teachers; in Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia,

and the District of Columbia, Black teachers' preparation exceeded that of white teachers

(Walker, 2001; Thompson, 1953). To name only a few, Mary McCloud Bethune, Anna

Julia Copper, and Nannie Helen Burroughs are among the Black women who made

significant strides through their "educational activism and scholarship" (Muhammad et

al., 2020, p. 421) to uplift the Black race in segregated schools.

Consequences of *Brown v. Board of Education*

Education pioneers like Mary McCloud Bethune, Anna Julia Copper, Nannie

Helen Burroughs, Clara Muhammad, Fanny Jackson Coppin, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells,

Dorothy Height and countless other "Black women have contributed to transforming the

landscape of educational practice and theory" (Muhammed et al., 2020, p. 425). Though

under abhorrent circumstances, BWTs provided education to their students that was

holistic in nature. The safety, love, and rigor felt by their students was not by accident,

but because of the great lengths BWTs went to foster that environment (Walker, 2000; Ware, 2006). However, this all changed after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling against de jure segregation. At this time, Black students began getting bussed to white schools, which did not often hire Black educators, thus igniting the scarcity of available jobs for them (Ethridge, 1979; Foster, 1997; Gordon, 2000; Hudson & Homes, 1954; Irvine, 1988; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004). As summarized by Tillman (2004), the following were among the consequences of the *Brown v. Board* ruling that Black teachers faced:

- Between 1954 and 1970, over 31,000 Black teachers across 17 states in the South were fired from their jobs.

- Between 1975 and 1985, 66% fewer Black students sought education as a career path.

- Between 1984 and 1989, 21,515 Black teachers were displaced due to the new requirements for teacher certification and admission into teacher education programs (Ethridge, 1979; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Orfield & Lee, 2004).

As discriminatory educational policies continued to damage the teacher workforce, the once highly sought-after teaching career became far less attainable for Black women (Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004). After the federal *Brown v. Board* ruling, white supremacy and anti-Black racism manifested in less explicit ways. Government officials insidiously implemented laws, policies, and practices that all but denied Black students access to a quality education, and curtailed the significant strides being made by Black teachers (Franklin & Collier, 1999; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 2001; Wilson & Seagall, 2001).

These changes did not come entirely as a surprise. In 1935, nearly two decades prior to the *Brown v. Board* decision, W. E. B. Du Bois argued against the integration of Black and white schools, stating that, "[t]he plain fact faces us, that either he will have separate schools or he will not be educated" (p. 329). Du Bois's arguments were informed by the experiences of Black students already attending desegregated schools in the North, as well as logic that the pervasive racism against Black people would not stop at the doors of a schoolhouse. Du Bois (1935) anticipated that the damage Black students would suffer would result from them being instructed by white teachers who, based on his witness of integrated schools in the North, "despised and resented the dark child, made mock of it, neglected or bullied it, and literally rendered its life a living hell" (p. 329). This observation of the desegregated learning environment for Black students is in total contrast to that within segregated Black schools, and Du Bois (1935) cautioned that placing Black students in these abusive and traumatizing contexts could result in a long-term destruction of their character, unique gifts, and desire to learn.

*Black Teacher Recruitment, Preparation, and Retention Post-***Brown**

Du Bois's reservations against school desegregation proved to be warranted. Black teachers were forced out of the profession after *Brown v. Board*, which had devastating lasting impacts on their recruitment, preparation, and retention (D'Amico et al., 2017; Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Dumas, 2014; Dumas & ross, 2016; Ethridge, 1979; Fultz, 2004; Morris, 2001; Tillman, 2004). In 1965, eleven years after the *Brown v. Board* decision, a National Education Association task force published a report on the resulting displacement of Black teachers in southern states. This task force, comprised of the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, the

Commission on Professional Rights and Responsibilities, and the Department of

Classroom Teachers (1965), provided the following insight in their report:

> It is clear that in the past, Negro teachers were employed specifically and
> exclusively for the purpose of teaching Negro pupils in racially segregated
> schools…In a system with no classes for Negroes, there were simply no positions
> for Negro teachers…It has been, and still is, widely assumed by many white
> citizens, school board members, and school administrators that Negroes, both
> students and teachers, are intellectually inferior. From this specious premise, it
> follows that "quality education" can be attained or maintained only if pupils and
> teachers are separated along racial lines: quality education and school
> desegregation are seen as antithetical…Usually, the white schools, even after
> being integrated, remain in spirit and often in name "white schools" …As has
> been demonstrated, "white schools" are viewed as having no place for Negro
> teachers. (pp. 22-23)

This perspective of Black teachers was demonstrated by their loss of employment and the

lack of job availability for many highly qualified Black teachers. In fact, Black teachers

who held doctoral degrees were fired over white teachers who were only provisionally

licensed (Ethridge, 1979). Notably, this happened in Moberly, Missouri the year *Brown v.*

Board was enacted, when eleven Black educators were dismissed by the Moberly School

District almost immediately after the court ruling. Once this discriminatory practice was

brought before the court in *Brooks v. School District of Moberly, Missouri* (1959), the

presiding judges ruled that, though zero Black teachers were employed in the district the

subsequent school year, their dismissal was not an act of racial discrimination. Upheld by

the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals, this ruling served as the precedent for over a decade, allowing white administrators to continue practicing racist hiring procedures against highly qualified Black educators (Detweiler, 1967; Ethridge, 1979; Fultz, 2004; Tillman, 2004).

Accordingly, recruitment of Black teachers experienced a dramatic decline. Because the decision to desegregate schools rested on the assumption that proximity to whiteness would result in positive outcomes for Black students, the importance and desirability of Black culture was ignored by proponents of desegregation (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Dumas, 2016). This is evidenced in the *Brooks v. School District of Moberly, Missouri* court proceedings, which justified their ruling by citing the *Morris v. Williams* (1944) case regarding salary discrimination:

> Teaching is an art; and while skill in its practice can not be acquired without knowledge and experience, excellence does not depend upon these two factors alone. The processes of education involve leadership, and the success of the teacher depends not alone upon college degrees and length of service but also upon aptitude and the ability to excite interest and to arouse enthusiasm. The superintendent is justified in believing that many people with college degrees can not teach school, whether white or colored. It is entirely proper in our opinion when fixing salaries of teachers to consider such intangible factors. (p. 708)

It should be noted that the original 1944 *Morris v. Williams* ruling was reversed by the Circuit Court of Appeals in 1945, fourteen years before it was egregiously used to uphold discriminatory hiring practices in Moberly. Further, by choosing to cite this portion of the *Morris v. Williams* proceedings, the Moberly ruling established a model for not only

denying the legitimacy of Black teachers' superior credentials, but also for denying their "aptitude and ability to excite interest and to arouse enthusiasm" (*Morris v. Williams*, 1944, p. 708).

On the contrary, Dumas and ross (2016) argue that "school desegregation has been deleterious to the stability of Black communities and families, the development of healthy Black racial identities, and the emotional and social well-being of Black children" (p. 432). By forcing Black teachers out of the profession, Black students were simultaneously forced out of receiving a learning environment of community, care, and racial uplift (Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Dumas, 2016; Tillman, 2004). Indeed, Dumas (2016) insisted that, instead of regarding desegregation as a means to achieve greater access, promote cross-cultural interaction, and enforce equitable resource allocation, it is more appropriate to theorize school desegregation as being policy rooted in anti-Blackness. Doing so "allows one to capture the depths of suffering of Black children and educators in predominantly white schools, and connect this contemporary trauma to the longue durée of slavery from bondage to its afterlife in desegregating (and now resegregating) schools" (Dumas, 2016, p. 16).

It was not until 1970 that a court ruling set a new precedent aimed at protecting Black teachers against hiring and displacement discrimination. The federal ruling in the *Singleton v. Jackson Municipal Separate School District* (1970) case was three-fold. First, the judge mandated that each school's ratio of Black and white teachers be equal to that of the entire district. Next, it was ruled that school staff "be hired, assigned, promoted, paid, demoted, dismissed, and otherwise treated without regard to race, color, or national origin." Finally, it was ruled that any teachers who were dismissed must be

replaced by someone of the same race. However, even with this hopeful ruling, disproportionality between Black students and teachers continued (D'Amico et al., 2017; Dumas, 2016; Tillman, 2003).

While the *Singleton v. Jackson Municipal Separate School District* decision seemed to be a step in the right direction, systematic progress retrenchment continued the suppression of Black liberation. Racism and anti-Blackness continued to drive policy and practices in the United States, sabotaging the recruitment, preparation, and retention of Black teachers for decades to come. Further, Tillman (2004) reported that Black teachers' recruitment and preparation were also hindered by teacher certification programs at Black colleges and universities being eliminated, and newly mandated standardized tests screening out Black teachers. The nationwide education reform movement that began in the 1980s required tests for all teachers, which served as gatekeepers and further excluded Black teachers from the profession (Cole, 1986; Dilworth, 2012).

The Need for More Black Teachers

Considering all the significant shifts in the context of Black people's schooling experiences after the passing of *Brown v. Board*, the perspectives and attitudes of Black students toward education naturally shifted as well. The Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy (1986) reported that:

> The race and background of their teachers tell [students] something about
> authority and power in contemporary America…These messages influence
> children's attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their
> views of their own and others' intrinsic worth. The views they form in school
> about justice and fairness all influence their future citizenship. (p. 390)

At least two rationales can be attributed to this report. First, the vast representation of white teachers makes white students constantly see themselves in the classroom, thus yielding an ideology that they are members of a powerful, dominant group that is capable and worthy of accomplishments in this country. On the contrary, it may also be established that the underrepresentation of Black teachers sends opposite messages to Black students: that they are members of a group that does not hold power, is only sometimes capable, and is not worthy of accomplishments in this country.

The underrepresentation of Black teachers negatively affects the academic, social, and personal experiences and outcomes of Black students (Dee, 2004; Dixson, 2003; Dumas, 2016; Easton-Brooks, 2019; Hodge, 2017; Johnson et al., 2013; Klopfenstein, 2005; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Robinson & Baber, 2013; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The 1986 Carnegie Report was among the surge of national appeals in the 1980s to diversify the teacher workforce, and since then, the efforts have remained constant though the rationale has varied (Cole, 1986; Graham, 1987; Irvine, 1988; Matcznski & Joseph, 1989; Mercer & Mercer, 1986; Stewart et al., 1989; Waters, 1989). According to Villegas and Irvine (2010), most of the advocates for diversity in the 1980s argued about the social and moral significance Black teachers have on Black students. This "role model rationale" has survived over several decades, echoing early arguments of scholars like Du Bois (1935), and contemporary arguments of scholars such as Bristol and Martin-Fernandez (2019). For BWTs, the accuracy of this rationale is evidenced by the continual racial uplift and advancement that results from their classroom-based political activism (Dixson, 2003; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Hodge, 2017; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Robinson & Baber, 2013; Watson, 2007).

However, perhaps more accurately, Irvine (1989) argued that Black teachers "are more than mere role models. They are cultural translators and intercessors for black students, thereby directly contributing to their school achievement" (p. 51). Irvine's statement is supported by several studies that reveal several academic benefits Black students reap when they are taught by Black teachers (Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015; Joshi et al., 2018; Yarnel & Bohrnstedt, 2018). For example, the findings from Dee's (2004) seminal study on student-teacher race matching validated the "frequent recommendations for the aggressive recruitment of minority teachers" which he argued had previously "been motivated by the putative educational benefits for minority students" (p. 209). Dee found that students in kindergarten through fourth grade who were exposed to a teacher of their same race experienced "large and statistically significant achievement gains" (p. 204) in both math and reading. Similarly, Yarnell and Bohrnstedt (2018) found in their study of 165,410 students and 23,710 teachers that fourth grade Black students who were instructed by a Black teacher earned higher reading scores than those who were taught by a white teacher.

One of the considerations Dee (2004) discusses is that his findings on the academic benefits of student-teacher race matching "do not address the effects of own-race teachers on important long-term student outcomes such as educational attainment" (p. 209). His point was addressed by Gershenson et al. (2018), who used longitudinal data to find that Black students who have at least one Black teacher in grades K-3 school are "5 percentage points (7%) more likely to graduate high school and 4 percentage points (13%) more likely to enroll in college than their peers who are not assigned to a black teacher" (p. 37). According to this research, the role model rationale for increased Black

teacher representation, which was previously criticized for having no empirical backing, can be applied beyond social and moral influences on Black students. The statistical findings of Gershenson et al.'s (2018) research revealed that the role model effect, separate from teacher effectiveness, provides a powerful understanding to Black students of their academic potential, thus positively impacting their educational attainment.

Accordingly, though schooling in the United States operates widely as a site of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014), Black teachers, and critical BWTs in particular, have etched a space that allows Black students to safely inquire, learn, resist, and grow. At the same time, however, tradition continues in that these same exemplary BWTs endure hostile work environments, being regarded as caricatures of superheroes and bodyguards rather than human educators whose effectiveness reflects their sociocultural consciousness, racial clarity, and "transcendent cultural ethos" (Acosta, 2019, p. 34). By ascribing the success of BWTs to superhuman magical powers, their legitimate positionalities and pedagogies remain invisible within teacher education curriculum, unprotected by education policy, and ignored by teacher evaluation criteria (Acosta et al., 2018; Acosta, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1989; Delpit, 1988; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Hodge, 2017; Hudson-Vassell et al., 2018; Milner, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2020; Pierre, 2010). In addition, "the impact of such negative stereotyping leaves Black women feeling alienated, restricted, physically drained, and emotionally taxed" (Acosta, 2019, p. 34).

Current State of Black Women Teachers

The trauma faced by BWTs continues to manifest today (Dumas, 2016). Now, over six decades following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling, the "white

supremist foundation of American society and schools" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021, p. 1) continues to reveal itself in Black education. As quickly as they were desegregated, school have been resegregated by racist policies such as the *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) prohibition of court-ordered busing, the *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell* (1991) decision regarding neighborhood school zoning, and several other court rulings between 1991 and 2009 which released over 200 school districts from desegregation court orders (Dumas, 2016; Reardon et al., 2012; Tatum, 2007; White et al., 2020). As such, Black teachers presently remain underrepresented while also being disproportionately staffed in high-poverty, low-resourced urban schools that serve mostly students of color (Farinde-Wu, 2018; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Ingersoll & May, 2011).

As previously mentioned, Black teachers represented 7.2% of the teaching force in the United States in 1954 (Foster, 1997; Ramsey, 2005; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1975). Today, Black teachers make up 6.7% of the public teaching force (NCES, 2019), and BWTs represent a mere 5% of the total teaching force (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). However, despite being systematically banished from the profession, BWTs remain passionate and actively demonstrate their love and commitment to the Black race in many ways including committing to serve in urban schools (Farinde-Wu, 2018; McGary, 2012), approaching teaching as "a moral and political undertaking" (Hodge, 2017, p. 63), and utilizing pedagogies that cultivate cultures of care and achievement (Acosta, et al., 2018; Dixson, 2003; McKinney de Royston, 2020; Ware, 2006).

Black Women Teachers in Urban Schools

Milner (2012) conceptualized urban schools as those that have a large population of students that often exceeds the availability of funds and resources necessary to adequately educate them. Considering historical trends of inequity and Black education neglect, and noting that urban schools have increased concerns including overcrowding, underfunding, and inadequate resources, it is no surprise that they tend to be disproportionately staffed by teachers of color and populated by mostly students of color from low-income communities (Farinde et al., 2016; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2014). The prevailing beliefs about segregated urban schools, therefore, are highly deficit oriented. Harper (2015) summarized the dominant narrative of urban schools that many have adopted:

> They are large, overcrowded, dark, and dangerous settings in which little learning occurs. Most educators find them undesirable places to work; hence, few apply for jobs at them, which results in perpetual shortages and a reliance on emergency certification initiatives. Teachers who end up there tend to stay only a year or two because the students are so apathetic and underprepared, there are too few resources, and incompetent leaders repeatedly fail to ensure safety and stability. Their highly qualified professional peers who produce outstanding results all work at suburban and wealthy independent schools with up-to-date textbooks, new technologies, highly engaged parents, and motivated kids. (p. 140)

Part of the reason this is the dominant narrative of urban schools is because substantial research primarily highlights the pervasive inequities within them (e.g., Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kitzmiller, 2013; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Zhou,

2003). This research is necessary to illuminate the ways countless students are being poorly served. However, history reveals that when awareness is raised of Black people's oppression and injustice, the public does not often get outraged and organize mass mobility. Instead, the group itself gets blamed as having (or being) a deficit, and the actual issues remain unaddressed (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008, 2010).

Nevertheless, recent studies have produced findings contrary to the dominant narrative that urban schools are not desirable places to work (e.g., Farinde-Wu et al., 2017a; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; McGary, 2012). Farinde-Wu and Fitchett (2016) conducted a quantitative study to identify indicators of satisfaction among BWTs, and one of their findings suggested that BWTs experience higher job satisfaction when they work in urban schools versus non-urban schools. In a follow-up qualitative study, Farinde-Wu (2018) further explored this finding, which she conceptualized as the "urban factor." According to Farinde-Wu's (2018) analysis of twelve in-depth interviews, she found that BWTs have a desire "to fulfill the urgent need for highly-qualified teachers in many under-resourced, urban schools" (p. 255). This expressed conviction to stand in the gap characterizes the activism of critical Black women educators throughout history (Hilliard, 2003). Farinde-Wu's (2018) findings also align with those of McGary (2012), who examined why seven Black teachers (five of whom were women) migrated from suburban school districts to urban ones. Among the themes McGary derived from his participant interviews was a desire the teachers held to be social change agents. Similarly, Dixson and Dingus (2008) found in their study that BWTs enter the profession so that they may "function as cultural workers and act as community othermothers" (p. 806).

Thus, it is established that many BWTs enter the classroom to operate from a

framework informed by their historical and contemporary embrace of culture, resistance to oppression, and commitment to social justice (Acosta et al., 2018; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson, 2003; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Hodge, 2017; Hudson-Vassell et al., 2018; Pierre, 2010). As it has been for centuries, the educational exchange between BWTs and Black students continues to be characterized by othermothering (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005), a culture of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Farinde-Wu et al., 2017b; Hambacher & Bondy, 2016), warm demander pedagogies (Bondy et al., 2013; Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Vasquez, 1989; Ware, 2006), and activism (Dixson, 2003; Farinde-Wu, 2018). These characteristics all align with Fried's (2015) definition of a passionate teacher, which is one who is "in love with a field of knowledge, deeply stirred by issues and ideas that change our world, drawn to the dilemmas and potentials of the young people who come into class every day" (p. 44). This trait is critical since it has been found that passionate teachers meet their job requirements more effectively (Mart, 2013). The passion of critical BWTs has always been evident and has serves as the foundation of their African American Pedagogical Excellence (AAPE; Acosta et al., 2018).

Acosta et al. (2018) recognized the legitimacy and excellence of critical BWTs' pedagogical approaches, but how they are not recognized in current teacher evaluation criteria or teacher education curriculum. Accordingly, these authors developed a conceptual framework for AAPE, which "includes factors such as political clarity, oppositional consciousness and sense of urgency, and connectedness, and is ground in the epistemic lived experiences of African descent people, both historically and contemporarily, in the United States" (Acosta, 2019, p. 26). The AAPE framework was

developed out of a collection of literature that describes the common perspectives and practices that Black teachers in the United States have demonstrated for centuries. Accordingly, Acosta et al.'s (2018) three-tier framework includes the ideology, beliefs, and instructional practices of Black teachers. Regarding their *ideology*, the authors describe political clarity, racial uplift, an affirmative view of African American culture, an ethic of care, and oppositional consciousness as underpinnings that shape Black teachers' pedagogy. The *beliefs* Black teachers hold under the AAPE framework include high student intellectual potential, that all children can learn, teachers are accountable for student learning, and positive views of families and communities. Finally, Acosta et al. (2018) described the *instructional practices* of teachers within the AAPE framework as demonstrating insistence, connectedness, interdependent learning communities, collective success, and curriculum relevant to their students' lives.

All the components of the AAPE framework align with existing literature on the effectiveness of critical BWTs (e.g., Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Dixon, 2003; McKinney de Royston, 2020; Ware, 2006). Specifically, the early concepts of othermothering (Case, 1997) and a culture of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) are present in the ideology pillar of the framework, citing that AAPE teachers exhibit an ethic of care, which "sometimes embraces gender- and kinship-based roles with students such as other-mothering and other-fathering" (Acosta et al., 2018, p. 343). Similarly, warm demander pedagogy (Ware, 2006) is aligned within the authors' description of AAPE teachers' beliefs and instructional practices. Teachers under this framework have a firm belief that their students have high intellectual potential, and they provide accountability to push their students to reach that potential. This is done effectively by

fostering positive conceptions of the families and communities that their students come from, delivering curriculum that is relevant to their students, maintaining an interdependent learning community, and having a "willingness to exert personal power and assert teacher authority judiciously but firmly" (Acosta et al., 2018, p. 343). Finally, activism (Dixson, 2003) plays a large part in the AAPE framework, especially under the ideology pillar. According to Acosta et al.'s (2018) framework, AAPE teachers demonstrate political clarity, racial uplift, and oppositional consciousness. Central to all three of these practices is Black teachers' "emancipatory intentions on behalf of students" (Acosta et al., 2018, p. 343).

As demonstrated by Acosta et al.'s (2018) framework, the proven-effective pedagogy of critical BWTs transcends time and preserves culture. For this reason, it is essential that critical BWTs be staffed in environments where Black students learn. There is substantial literature that acknowledges this and urges stakeholders to enhance efforts to recruit them into urban schools (e.g., Acosta, 2019; Gist et al., 2018; Hill-Jackson, 2017, 2020). Dishearteningly, this appeal places BWTs in environments that are not much different from those in the 1950s when schools were segregated, resources for Black students and teachers were scant, and policies to correct these inequities were misdirected. Therefore, it is counterproductive to recruit BWTs into urban schools without also implementing strategies to retain them (Ingersoll & May, 2016). Even with such clear commitment to and success within the classroom, BWTs still continue to leave the profession at rates higher than their white counterparts (Farinde et al., 2016; Kohli, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to examine what scholars have found to be among the factors that contribute to BWTs' attrition.

Turnover of Black Women Teachers

Recently, there has been an uptick in literature seeking to elucidate and remedy the factors that contribute to the attrition of BWTs (e.g., Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Gist, 2018; Hancock et al., 2020; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Milner, 2020; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020). Over two decades ago, Kirby et al. (1999) examined attrition data of Texas public school teachers and reported that 20% of Black women left the teaching profession after only one year of teaching, and this rate consistently increased as their years of service increased. However, the implications of this concerning statistic were superseded by the researchers' finding that Black men teachers had consistently higher attrition rates than BWTs. For this reason and the fact that Black men constitute only 2% of the teaching force (Lewis & Toldson, 2013; NCES, 2019), literature regarding the attrition rates of Black teachers has given considerably more attention to that of Black men than women. However, in recent years several scholars have demarginalized the experiences of BWTs and commanded attention toward the need for targeted interventions to retain them.

Farinde et al. (2016) uncovered administrative support, salary, and advancement opportunities as reasons BWTs consider leaving the profession. Interestingly, these authors found that poor administrative support did not make their participants desire to quit the teaching profession, but to consider teaching at another school. In fact, their consideration to move schools is not uncommon among BWTs. Teacher turnover can be described as a teacher's departure either from their school to teach at another (movers), or from the teaching profession altogether (leavers) (Ingersoll & Connor, 2009). According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017a), movers and leavers make up 67% of

national teacher turnover data, however the turnover rates of BWTs are consistently higher than the national statistics (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; NCES, 2016; Sun, 2018). According to the most recent NCES data, there was a 21.8% turnover rate among BWTs in 2012, 10% of which were movers and 12% who were leavers (NCES, 2016).

Interpreting these data in conjunction with Farinde et al.'s (2016) findings and BWTs' longstanding educational activism, it can be posited that some BWTs choose to move rather than leave due to their staunch dedication to Black students. Despite the barriers BWTs face in K-12 urban school settings, many of them remain focused on their commitment to uplifting the Black race through education by moving to different schools, which are most often still urban and serve mostly Black students (Hanushek et al., 2004; McGary, 2012; Sun, 2018). Accordingly, in addition to insufficient administrative support, the reasons researchers have found that BWTs who leave the profession typically fall into the remaining categories of inadequate compensation, poor working conditions, and burnout resulting from racial battle fatigue (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; Farinde et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Haberman, 2005; Hancock et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2015; Stanley, 2021; Sun, 2018).

Inadequate Compensation and Poor Working Conditions

Achinstein et al. (2010), Farinde et al., (2016), Farinde-Wu and Fitchett (2018), Haberman (2005), Ingersoll and Connor (2009), and several others have identified inadequate compensation, especially over time, as a factor contributing to Black teacher attrition. However, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond's (2017b) analysis of this finding is unique due to the connection they make to salary dissatisfaction and working

conditions. In their study of national data, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017b) discovered that "Black women were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their salary (65%) than other teachers were (just over 50%)" (p. 172). These authors argued that, because BWTs do not get paid statistically less than others, their higher rates of dissatisfaction may be due to their increased likelihood to teach in high-poverty, low-resourced urban schools that require additional labor from them. This idea of unpaid labor will be further explored in the next section; however, it is necessary to unpack the working conditions in which BWTs are defaulted to work, due to their desire to remain connected to Black students.

While Black students and teachers continue to create pathways for themselves to excel, the learning environments of urban schools are most often distressing. Highly reminiscent of the environments of segregated Black schools during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, scholars have characterized urban schools, which are populated by mostly Black and Brown students from low-income communities, as being overcrowded, underfunded, and possessing inadequate resources (Anderson, 1988; Ashmore, 1954; Farinde et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2014; Walker, 2000). Also epitomizing the landscape of segregated Black education are the ways that the working conditions of urban schools are widely socially and legislatively ignored, thus propelling Black educators to have to continue performing duties that "[extend] far beyond the classroom setting" (Fultz, 1995a, p. 406; Acosta, 2019; Milner, 2015; Milner & Hoy, 2003). As evidenced by their persistent display of commitment to serving students in urban schools, many BWTs provide this additional unpaid labor with fervor (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson & Dingus, 2008;

Farinde-Wu, 2018; Kokka, 2016; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Pierre, 2010). However, this unpaid labor does come at a cost (Acosta, 2019; Conway-Phillips et al., 2020; Hancock et al., 2020; McCarthy et al, 2020; Milner, 2020; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020).

The Unpaid Labor of Black Women Teachers

Regarding the ways critical BWTs serve beyond their contractual duties, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) characterized womanist caring among BWTs who demonstrate "an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk" (p. 71). Further, McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) described how Black educators demonstrate their political clarity and commitment to justice by systematically working to protect Black students from racialized harm. Case (1997) similarly found that, through othermothering, BWTs "play an integral role in fulfilling the psychoeducational needs of the urban child" (p. 25). Ware (2006) identified and operationalized warm demander pedagogy among BWTs in urban schools, which includes those who, among other traits, operate as authority figures, disciplinarians, caregivers, and othermothers. Dixson (2003) and McKinney de Royston (2020) also found that BWTs' pedagogies are "inherently political" (p. 217) and "designed to disrupt anti-Black racism" (p. 379).

In sum, critical BWTs can be characterized as going above and beyond their contractual duties as teachers and demonstrating politicized mothering toward their Black students (Beauboeuf, 1997). "However, descriptions of 'highly qualified' teachers often ignore the critical insights and practices that undergird the success of Black teachers, and one consequence of this pedagogical negligence has been the professional alienation of effective Black female educators" (Acosta, 2019, p. 26). Acosta (2019) argued that this

"professional alienation rooted in racist and sexist perceptions of Black women may contribute to [their] mass exodus" from the teaching profession (p. 34). The unpaid labor BWTs engage in is often a result of "the communal and spiritual connectedness they feel with [*sic*] students in their classrooms, particularly with their Black students" (Collins, 1989, 2000; Dunmeyer, 2020, p. 11).

However, unpaid labor becomes taxing for two reasons, among potential others. First, the exemplar pedagogies of BWTs are excluded from rubrics for teacher quality and in teacher training on effective practices (Acosta, 2019; Delpit, 1988; Dunmeyer, 2020; Kohli, 2018). Instead of being considered, their contributions to urban education are attributed to reflections of racist stereotypes such as mammies or matriarchs (Acosta, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Whitaker, 2013). The perpetuation of these harmful images further marginalizes BWTs and casts them into a catch-22. According to research conducted by Acosta (2019), BWTs who excel at promoting excellence among marginalized Black students may be typecast as mammies or superheroes and shoulder a burden to coddle their white colleagues by assuming the added responsibility of welcoming the students they have regard as unteachable. Similarly, critical BWTs may also be regarded as bodyguards, matriarchs, or sapphires when they demonstrate an urgent, warm demander pedagogy (Acosta, 2018, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ware, 2006). According to Milner (2020), these "unfair and unrealistic expectations… are both tacitly and overtly communicated to them" (p. 400), and the potential consequences include stress, job dissatisfaction, psychological distress, and attrition among BWTs (Collins, 2000; Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Fitchett et al., 2017; Hancock et al., 2020; Kohli, 2018; Kokka, 2016; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Milner, 2020). This leads to the

second implication for the unpaid labor of Black women: they are at increased risk for

"fatigue and depression as they navigate the professional resistance to teach from a Black

feminist perspective" (Hancock et al., p. 411).

Teachers in urban schools experience psychological distress at higher rates than

those in non-urban schools (Lee et al., 2019). For critical BWTs specifically, their

demonstrated tenacity to operate as activists, uplifting the Black race while protecting

Black students from racism, places them at heightened risk for racial battle fatigue

(Hancock, 2020; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Smith,

2008). Smith (2008) defined racial battle fatigue as "the psychological, emotional,

physiological, energy, and time-related cost of fighting against racism" (p. 298). This cost

ranges in intensity, and includes emotional, mental, social, and physical health concerns

such as stress, trauma, depression, anxiety, extreme fatigue, sleeplessness, cardiovascular

disease, chronic inflammation, and suicidal ideation (Conway-Phillips et al., 2020;

Dunmeyer, 2020; Fitchett et al., 2017; Hancock et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2020; Perry

et al., 2013; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Accordingly, while it is of utmost importance to

retain BWTs inside of urban schools, doing so responsibly means establishing systems

intentionally curated to protect them from the structures and interactions that cause racial

battle fatigue and push them out of the profession. This protection, which cannot be

generalized to all teachers, all women teachers, or all Black teachers, is what has been

missing from initiatives aimed at retaining and sustaining critical BWTs.

Conclusion

Black women have been risking their lives to promote education and scholarship

among the Black race for longer than the construct of race has existed (Horsford, 2012).

While enslaved, Black women daringly operated as language interpreters and transmitters of culture. After emancipation, the BWTs of the Reconstruction era established literacy among the Black population under direct threats of death and violence. For a century following the Civil War, BWTs led Black students to academic excellence, despite grossly inequitable circumstances. For decades post-*Brown*, BWTs continued to leverage their classroom platforms to fight against oppression, discrimination, and anti-Blackness. Today, critical BWTs confront norms of inequity, racism, and white supremacy head on, while standing on the frontlines to ensure Black students receive a quality education. Like Matilda in 1827, many BWTs today believe that "it is [their] bounden duty to store their daughters' minds with useful learning" (Matilda, 2015, p. 66).

In 1935, Du Bois argued that the cultural hegemony in the United States rendered it dangerous for Black children to attend integrated schools. He stated that it was detrimental and abusive for Black students to be forced into environments that did not understand, value, or celebrate their culture. Du Bois's words ring true today, as the United States has still not reached a place where Black people are fully liberated. However, BWTs have continued to agitate the norms of these abusive environments, and endeavor to protect Black students from the harm they cause. Their efforts are not without sacrifice. Though many BWTs aspire to serve in urban schools to protect and uplift Black students, their activism is often met with structural issues that disrupt their mission. Accordingly, attrition rates among Black teachers are higher than that of other races since they face challenges reflective of their acute history of opposition to equitable access to education.

However, the pedagogical practices of critical BWTs are undeniably effective.

For this reason, some scholars have created models to operationalize their pedagogy in order to cultivate it among other teachers. This is a rational approach, considering Black women make up only 5% of the teaching population and therefore cannot reach every student (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). However, Dixson and Dingus (2008) cautiously posed this question: "How are these pedagogical beliefs transmitted in a way that respects and honors the work of BWTs and does not trivialize their teaching or render them invisible?" (p. 831). This question is of utmost importance for several reasons. First, the cultural, historical, and political positionality of Black women in the United States provides them with a "political clarity that is part of the legacy of Black women educators' pedagogies" (McKinney de Royston, 2020, p. 380). In addition to their work and dedication, much of Black women's effectiveness in the classroom can be attributed to generational ways of being which are grounded in a moral ethic of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 2000; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Therefore, attempting to mirror the specialized pedagogies of critical Black women among other groups may, at best, water down their effectiveness, or at worst, cause harm to the very Black students the pedagogies are intended to benefit. Second, if not consistently carried out with strict intention to paying homage to historical *and* contemporary BWTs, attempting to operationalize their pedagogies will contribute to this nation's tendency to suppress, silence, and/or appropriate the intellectual contributions of Black women (Collins, 2000). As stated by Dixson and Dingus (2008), "African American women teachers come to teaching as part of a legacy of Black feminist activism that has sought to maintain cultural practices, address racial and economic inequity, and facilitate the development of youth" (p. 832). Accordingly, the most authentic way to ensure critical

Black women's pedagogical practices are experienced by all children is to ensure their sustained presence in all schools.

The list of reasons BWTs leave the classroom is extensive. They are faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, many of which are unique to them due to the perilous point at which their race and gender identities intersect. For decades, advocates have contended to protect BWTs in many ways, including but not limited to:

- confronting the structural barriers that prevent them from entering the teaching force (Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Hill-Jackson, 2020),

- seeking to have their knowledges and practices legitimized through inclusion in educator preparation curriculum and teacher evaluation criteria (Hodge, 2017; Hudson-Vassell et al., 2018),

- promoting policies that reform the working conditions of the urban schools in which they work (Hancock et al., 2020; Kokka, 2016),

- creating spaces for them to receive culturally affirming professional development (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Mosely, 2018), and

- conceptualizing frameworks for a Black woman teacher pipeline (Dillard & Neal, 2020; Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Gist et al., 2018; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020).

However, even with these and other efforts, Black women still represent a small number of teachers who enter the profession and a high number of those who exit the profession. As such, the literature is missing a targeted, thorough examination of critical BWTs' compounding experiences that ultimately led them to leave the profession. From making the initial commitment to teach in urban schools, to practicing pedagogies rooted in activism and resistance, to making the final decision to leave the profession, these

teachers hold the solutions necessary to disrupt the cycle of attrition among critical

BWTs. Centering the holistic stories of these individuals is crucial to gain a clear

understanding of policies that need to be written, amended, or dissolved in order to

improve the sustainability of BWTs.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contextualize the attrition of critical Black women teachers (BWTs) to better understand the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools. Grounded in Black feminist epistemology (BFE) and framed by Black feminist thought (BFT), data were collected via individual interviews, sista circles, and written reflections. Eligible participants were Black women who taught in an urban school for a minimum of three years, were no longer in-service teachers, and identified themselves as *critical teachers* based on pre-defined criteria, which are outlined further into this chapter. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools?

2. How do critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession?

3. How do critical Black women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession?

Accordingly, Chapter 3 addresses the methodology used to meet the study purpose. Included in this chapter are the research design, recruitment and selection of participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

Ravitch and Carl (2021) define qualitative research as the following:

Qualitative research uses interpretive research methods as a set of tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences,

themselves, each other, and the social world. (p. 2)

Thus, I utilized multiple methods of qualitative data collection (i.e., individual interviews, sista circles, and written reflections) to both triangulate my findings and provide more detailed insight into the experiences of post-service critical BWTs. Since the present study was designed to understand Black women's shared knowledges, which are shaped by their lived experiences and framed by their worldview, it was necessary to use an approach that honored and sought to fully understand their experiences as Black women. Thus, sista circle methodology (SCM) was used, which is "simultaneously a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women. It… [includes] research practices that draw on the wisdom and social relations of Black women transnationally" (Johnson, 2015, p. 43). This section describes the nature of SCM and its distinguishing features.

Sista Circle Methodology

Johnson (2015) developed SCM in response to a widespread need for a research methodology that is culturally relevant to Black women and "maintains allegiance and substantive connections to the very communities under study" (Dillard, 2006, p. 2; Gaston et al., 2007; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Accordingly, SCM draws upon the historical nature of sista circles, which were sacred affinity spaces that Black women created for themselves in the late 1800s due to their being excluded from social clubs designated for women (i.e., white) and Black people (i.e., men) (Giddings, 1985; Johnson, 2015; McDonald, 2007; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011; White, 1999). Today, "the major goal of sista circles is to gain an understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomena impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves"

(Johnson, 2015, p. 45).

Accordingly, sista circles are an effective approach for Black women to study Black women (Cokley, 2020; Collier, 2017; Gaston et al., 2007; Johnson, 2015; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). As a Black woman researcher who is also a post-service critical BWT, SCM was the most appropriate approach for this study since my personal experiences and knowledges are relevant to the study topic. Further, SCM is a type of collaborative inquiry since it is "participatory, democratic and reflective in design, method and dissemination" (Bridges & McGee, 2011, p. 213). Therefore, it was necessary for me to join the participants in the meaning-making process by engaging in critical reflection through dialogue to develop a deep understanding of the factors influencing critical BWTs' sustainability in urban schools (Bridges & McGee, 2011).

Distinguishing Features

As such, Johnson (2015) distinguished sista circles through three of their features: (a) communication dynamics, (b) centrality of empowerment, and (c) researcher as participant. Each of these features are discussed in the following subsections.

Communication Dynamics. Following BFE's embrace of verbal and nonverbal dialogue that "challenges and resists domination" (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989, p. 131), SCM encourages authentic discourse between Black women researchers and participants. The name of the methodology itself, sista circle, resists Eurocentric standards of speech and legitimizes the dialogical intelligences of Black women (Lanehart, 2002, 2009; Smitherman, 1977; Washington, 2020). As such, the participants in the sista circles were encouraged through researcher modeling to speak authentically in ways that reflect their cultural norms. Lanehart (2009) described African American Women's English as the

standard language of many Black American women which is often criticized and regarded as inferior (e.g., Orr, 1997). However, this language is "just as logical and just as viable a means of communication as 'standard' English," which is most regularly spoken by white Americans (Lanehart, 2002, p. 6). Thus, within sista circles, authentic dialogue is encouraged to establish familial dynamics that foster "natural social interactions" (Johnson, 2015, p. 47). In this case, the process of meaning-making is elicited through dynamic discourse and nonverbal conversations (Johnson, 2015).

Centrality of Empowerment. Aligned with BFE, Johnson (2015) clarified that the purpose of sista circles is not to facilitate conversation or to simply understand an experience. Instead, the purpose is for the researcher and participants to be on level ground, supporting and empowering one another in a "sister to sister context" (p. 46). Because all the Black women who participate in sista circles have gone through a similar experience, the practice of empowerment should be mutual among the participants through validating dialogue and "the sharing of their wisdom and experiences" (Johnson, 2015, p. 48). It is the role of the researcher to establish and center empowerment in a sista circle. In the present study, this was done through BFE's ethic of caring and ethic of personal accountability tenets. As the facilitator of the sista circles, I was intentional about encouraging empowerment among the group by modeling it through my use of validating language and appropriate emotions as the participants shared their experiences.

Researcher as Participant. The final distinguishing feature of sista circles is participation from the researcher. Undergirded by Black feminist epistemology, SCM requires active engagement from the researcher through dialogue, emotional exchange, and the sharing of personal experiences as it is necessary to establish empowering and

dialogical contexts of experience sharing (Collins, 2009). Accordingly, to guard against

leading the conversations, I used these techniques only to affirm participants after they

first shared their experiences. This type of engagement minimizes oppressive power

dynamics, invokes connectedness among the group, and operates as a source of

empowerment (Collins, 2009; Johnson, 2015). As articulated by Johnson (2015), "Sista

circles are a way to give back to participants and not just take from them" (p. 48). In the

present study, giving back to the participants meant providing them the space to engage

in dialogue that substantiated their once isolating experiences. Thus, my role in the sista

circle was not to objectively facilitate, but to collaboratively share my own experiences,

as necessary, to center empowerment and encourage connectedness among the

participants.

Black Feminist Epistemology

A researcher's epistemology indicates their beliefs regarding who or what holds

the power to determine truth. Acknowledging an epistemological stance provides the

researcher a framework to "[determine] which questions merit investigation, which

interpretive frameworks will be used to analyze findings, and to what use any ensuing

knowledge will be put" (Collins, 2000, p. 252). Thus, in alignment with this study's

Black feminist thought theoretical framework, it was grounded in Black feminist

epistemology (BFE), which resists "the suppression of Black women's intellectual

traditions" (p. 19) by validating the construction of their wisdom through dialogue

(Collins, 2000). The tenets of BFT and SCM are consistent with the four BFE

assumptions for methodological adequacy, which are: (a) lived experience as a criterion

for meaning, (b) the use of dialogue, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal

accountability (Collier, 2017; Collins, 2000). Each of these dimensions are further explained in the following subsections.

Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning. Collins (2000) asserted that "living life as Black women requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women's survival" (p. 257). To this end, wisdom is differentiated from knowledge by the inclusion of lived experience, and BFE considers the wisdom of Black women as being "more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 257). Thus, as self-identified critical BWTs who left the classroom, the participants met the assumption of lived experience as a criterion of meaning, and the wisdom they share from their lived experiences can be regarded as reliable data.

The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims. In describing the necessity of dialogue as a dimension of BFE, Collins (2000) quotes bell hooks (1989) who asserted, "dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (p. 131). BFE assumes Black women to have the cultural and ancestral means to invoke connectedness, meaning, and truth through verbal and nonverbal dialogue, which fundamentally requires active participation from the researcher (Asante, 1987; Collins, 2000; Gwaltney, 1980; Kochman, 1981; Smitherman, 1977). In the present study, the participants engaged in dialogue during the interviews and the sista circles, which invoked feelings of connectedness around shared experiences as post-service critical Black woman teachers. As outlined by BFE, this active exchange of speaking and

listening allowed myself and the participants to accurately assess, test, and validate one another's knowledge around the topic of leaving the teaching profession (Collins, 2000).

The Ethic of Caring. BFE also positions Black women to possess an ethic of caring, which includes "personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy" (Collins, 2000, p. 263), and is fundamental to be able to validate knowledge (Collins, 2000). BFE identifies the ethic of caring to have three components, which are: (a) a placed value on individual uniqueness, (b) a demonstrated understanding of the appropriateness of emotions, and (c) a capacity for empathy (Collins, 2000). Rather than attempting to establish objectivity, truth and knowledge from a BFE positionality are established through connection and care. Individuals cannot be separated from their ideas, and to be a *connected knower* means to "see personality as adding to an individual's ideas and feel that the personality of each group member enriches a group's understanding" (Collins, 2000, p. 264). In the present study, I encouraged the participants' expressions of emotion by verbally validating them and soliciting thoughts of affirmation from other group members. This encouraged the participants to practice authentic experience sharing among one another without prompting, which enabled them to connect with each other and collectively make meaning of their experiences (Collins, 2000).

The Ethic of Personal Accountability. The final assumption of BFE is the ethic of personal accountability, which deems individuals fully responsible for all their knowledge claims. BFE asserts that all claims made by participants are a direct reflection of their "character, values, and ethics" (Collins, 2000, p. 265), all of which are assessed through each of the other dimensions—lived experience, dialogue, and the ethic of caring. Culturally, Black women often assess truth in knowledge claims by leveraging

what they know of that person's demonstrated character, values, and ethics. Thus, the sista circles in this study encouraged dialogue that allowed room for the sharing of personal viewpoints and convictions, which provided a context of accountability among the group. This was necessary since, according to Collins (2000), "neither emotion nor ethics is subordinated to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims" (p. 266).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board, I utilized purposive sampling to identify a participant group that could provide a rich and detailed account of post-service critical BWTs' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To do so, I shared the call for participants (see Appendix A) via email and social media to my personal and professional networks. In the emails and social media posts, I included an appeal for recipients to forward the call to any post-service critical Black woman teachers they knew. Specific groups to whom I sent the call for participants included the local alumni chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council; Profound Ladies; the Research, Advocacy, Collaboration, and Empowerment mentoring group; the UNC Charlotte Black Alumni Chapter; and the Center for Racial Equity in Education. On the call for participants, interested individuals were instructed to contact me via email.

Once women contacted me indicating their interest to participate, I replied to their inquiry with further information about the study, participant inclusion criteria, and a link to an online eligibility and consent form for them to complete (see Appendix B). The purpose of the form was to confirm their eligibility, secure their consent to participate, collect preliminary demographic information, and gather their availability to participate

in a virtual interview and sista circle. The inclusion criteria for the final sample included

the following: (a) self-identification as a Black woman; (b) former full-time teaching

status with at least three years of lead teaching experience in an urban school; and (c)

self-reported identification as a critical teacher who practiced emancipatory pedagogy.

Definitions for *urban school*, *critical teacher*, and *emancipatory pedagogy* mentioned in

criteria b and c were also provided on the call. *Urban school* was defined as one that

serves majority students of color, and regularly faces challenges such as overcrowding,

underfunding, and inadequate resources (Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2014).

Critical teachers were defined as those who demonstrated political clarity and an urgency

to disrupt inequity through emancipatory pedagogies (Duncan, 2019; Lisle-Johnson &

Kohli, 2020; McKinney de Royston, 2020). Finally, *emancipatory pedagogies* were

defined as:

> teaching methods by which teachers (a) hold high expectations of their students,
> (b) make their students knowledgeable of the positive contributions of their race,
> and (c) work to help their students develop a critical lens or consciousness to
> examine the root causes of their oppression and develop ways to end it. (Duncan,
> 2019, p. 198)

With a target sample size of 12-18, I concluded participant recruitment after

securing consent from fifteen eligible participants. Limiting my sample permitted me to

carefully report findings by allowing for reciprocity and authenticity (Bridges & McGee,

2011; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Wolcott, 1994). Further, to understand a shared experience

among BWTs, my recruitment methods allowed me to secure a diverse sample that

included BWTs who taught different grade levels and subject areas, served in different

states across the country, taught for varied amounts of time, and differed in their route to certification. Of the fifteen participants, one taught only elementary school, six taught only middle school, three taught only high school, and five had experience teaching at multiple school levels. They taught in twelve different cities across the United States and their time teaching ranged from three to nine years. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' teaching experience and sista circle participation.

Table 1

Participants' Teaching Experience and Sista Circle Participation

Pseudonym	Years Taught	Grade Level	Teaching Location
		Sista Circle 1 Participants	
Janay	2008-2015	Middle	Winston Salem, NC; Charlotte, NC
Dionna	2016-2021	Middle, High	Charlotte, NC
Noelle	2015-2021	Middle	Charlotte, NC
Carmen	2011-2019	Middle, High	Harlem, NY; Brooklyn, NY
		Sista Circle 2 Participants	
Adelaide	2014-2018	Middle	Brooklyn, NY
Nina	2016-2019	High	Charlotte, NC
Joy	2015-2018	High	Charlotte, NC
		Sista Circle 3 Participants	
Jamie	2000-2003, 2011-2012	High	Columbia, SC; Atlanta, GA; Charlotte, NC
June	2015-2018	Middle	Charlotte, NC; Los Angeles, CA
Saige	2009-2016	Elementary, Middle	Toledo, OH; Houston, TX
Jada	1999-2002	Middle	Las Vegas, NV

Lena	2012-2021	Middle	Charlotte, NC
Marissa	2011-2018	Middle, High	Nashville, TN
Amara	2017-2021	Elementary	Charlotte, NC
Brittney	2015-2018	Elementary	Charlotte, NC

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected during the summer of 2021. After receiving IRB approval in June, I spent the remainder of that month conducting individual interviews with each participant. After all participants engaged in a pre-interview, they each participated in one of three sista circles that were offered in the month of July. One sista circle was conducted during three different weekends in July, which were scheduled based on the participants' stated availability. Initially, five participants confirmed their availability to participate in each sista circle, however last-minute scheduling conflicts caused the final participation to include four participants in the first sista circle, three participants in the second sista circle, and eight participants in the final sista circle. Finally, each sista circle concluded with the participants engaging in a written reflection to document their final reflective thoughts about being a critical Black woman teacher who left the profession. With the participants' consent, all methods of data collection were audio and video recorded. Because the interviews and sista circles were conducted virtually, those who did not consent to being video recorded were instructed to keep their videos turned off for the duration of data collection.

Interviews

Interviews are a conversational style of qualitative research method that seek to "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their

experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 3). The interviews conducted in this study were semi-structured, meaning I developed a set of questions to ask to each participant that guided the conversations (see Appendix C), but I made necessary adjustments across interviews such as the order each question was asked and the inclusion of probing and follow-up questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As summarized by Ravitch and Carl (2021), the key characteristics and values of qualitative interviews are that they are relational, contextual and contextualized, non-evaluative, person-centered, temporal, partial, subjective, and non-neutral. I ensured my study adhered to these foundational characteristics and values as I developed and conducted the interviews.

Accordingly, each participant scheduled a time to interview, which lasted 30 to 60 minutes and served as a one-on-one opportunity for me to gather background information before they engaged in a sista circle. The interviews were all conducted virtually via Zoom, were semi-structured, and included the following set of open-ended questions:

- Why did you decide to become a teacher in an urban school? When you initially made the decision to teach, what were your long-term goals?

- Explain how your teaching style makes you to identify as a critical educator.

- How would you describe your experiences as a critical Black woman teacher in an urban school?

- Why would you say you ultimately left the teaching profession?

- Is there anything that you think could have kept you in the classroom?

Sista Circles and Participant Reflections

Sista circles were the primary method of data collection. As previously described,

sista circles are a type of collaborative inquiry that is culturally specific to Black women and distinct through its features of communication dynamics, centrality of empowerment, and researcher as participant (Johnson, 2015). Based on their availability, each of the participants engaged in one of three sista circles that were conducted virtually via Zoom. The sista circles were conducted one week apart, all during the month of July 2021, to allow time for me to transcribe one sista circle before conducting the next one. Before conducting each sista circle, I sent the participants a reminder email, which included copies of Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) and McKinney de Royston's (2020) articles about Black womanist teachers. The purpose of sending these articles was to begin centering empowerment by providing them with information about the legacy of BWTs and to affirm their value as part of this legacy. These articles did not serve as a form of leading since their focus was on teaching practices, which was not related to this study's purpose.

Because SCM calls for an informal, familial approach, they were semi-structured with me acting as a researcher and participant, "posing pre-constructed questions to stimulate in-depth conversations around the topics" (see Appendix D; Johnson, 2015, pp. 58-59). During the sista circles, I also used native language to encourage the participants to dialogue with one another authentically, rather than in a structured and formal way, which allowed the centrality of empowerment (Johnson, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Accordingly, I began each sista circle by describing the nature of sista circles and facilitating introductions. For the first sista circle, I then asked the participants to spend 10 minutes reading their choice of one of the articles I sent via email. We then engaged in dialogue around how the information in the article aligned with their teaching

experiences. However, through formative data analysis, I determined that this starting approach promoted dialogue that was focused more on teaching strategies, which was a diversion from the study. Thus, in the subsequent sista circles, this activity was only used as it was necessary to build understanding about the legacy and impact of critical BWTs, and it was introduced with that stated context. Instead, the final two sista circles began with me reading the following quote from Muhammad et al. (2020):

> Throughout time, Black women have given us a playbook and roadmap for social change, educational justice, and civic education. Black women have always been at the forefront of making education inclusive for all children. A tradition exists— historically and in contemporary times—of Black women speaking on behalf of Black children and deeply working toward the success of all children. If we consider our history, Black women… have been said to "uplift the race," and in the process uplift all of humanity. (p. 420)

After reading, I encouraged dialogue by asking the participants to share how the quote resonated with them. After this initial discussion, I leveraged the following points of dialogue as necessary during the sista circles:

- (After spending 10 minutes reading through one of the articles I sent) Which article did you read, and how did it resonate with you and your experiences as a teacher?
- When you think about your identity and how you show up as a Black woman, how much of that would you say contributed to your teaching experience?
- What factors influenced your decision to leave the profession?
- What was it like to make the final decision to leave?

To allow for authentic experience-sharing, all the questions were not asked in all the sista circles. As the participants engaged in ongoing dialogue related to the research purpose and research questions, I allowed the conversation to follow where their shared experiences led it. Each sista circle lasted approximately 120 minutes, with the last 15-20 minutes reserved for them to record their final written reflections in response to the following prompt, "Based on today's discussion, what insights did you gain about being a critical Black woman teacher who left the profession?" My inclusion of these written reflections in my analysis allows for methodological triangulation, thus strengthening the trustworthiness of my findings (Bridges & McGee, 2011; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Data Analysis

For qualitative data, analysis includes "the intentional, systematic scrutiny of data at various stages and moments throughout the research process" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 234). Data for this study were analyzed using Ravitch and Carl's (2021) three-pronged approach, which is non-linear and includes data organization and management, immersive engagement, and writing and representation.

Data Organization and Management

Data organization and management were my first step to analyzing the data. This step, allows for more refined data analysis, helps with formative data analysis, and allows the researcher to identify gaps in the data that need to be filled (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Accordingly, this phase of my analysis began before I started collecting data, when I created a plan and timeline for data collection and management. Following this plan, I first transcribed and precoded each participant's pre-interview before conducting the first

sista circle to familiarize myself with the preliminary data and determine where emphasis would need to be placed during the sista circles. For example, during the interviews, several participants discussed issues with their health as an impetus to leaving teaching. Therefore, during the sista circles, I explored how they may have connected their health with their pedagogical practices or their intersectional identities. Similarly, I transcribed and precoded after every sista circle before conducting the next one so that I could identify gaps in the data and ensure each research question was ultimately addressed (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used the Temi online software to transcribe my data, which is a paid service that uses artificial intelligence to quickly deliver encrypted transcriptions of uploaded media. Once the Temi software delivered each completed transcript, I made revisions while listening to the recorded interviews and sista circles. This process, while enabling me to ensure the transcripts' accuracy, also served as my first, unstructured reading of the data and allowed me to begin familiarizing myself with the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During this process of transcription, I did not translate the participants' speech so that I could minimize interpretive authority in my analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Next, I uploaded all the interview, sista circle, and final reflection transcripts to the ATLAS.ti software (version 9.1.2) to begin reducing the data. ATLAS.ti is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that assists in organizing, managing, and coding data on a single platform. While reading through each transcript for the second time, I was able to reduce my data by using the quotation feature of ATLAS.ti, which allowed me to assign open codes by selecting and saving bits of data that were relevant to the research questions. Finally, I wrote analytic memos during this phase,

which are "sites of conversation with ourselves about our data" (Clarke, 2005, p. 202).

Throughout the processes of data collection and analysis, I wrote memos regarding how I

related to the participants and their experiences, patterns that were emerging in the data,

possible patterns and connections between codes, and problems within the study

(Saldaña, 2016). Documenting my reflections through analytic memo writing improved

the validity of my findings since I was "thinking critically about what [I was] doing and

why, confronting and often challenging [my] own assumptions, and recognizing the

extent to which [my] thoughts, actions, and decisions shape how [I] research and what [I]

see" (Mason, 2002, p. 5).

Immersive Engagement

During the second phase of Ravitch and Carl's (2021) three-pronged analysis

approach, I immersed myself in my data through multiple data readings, memo writing,

open coding, axial coding, and identifying themes. The first way I immersed myself in

the data was through multiple data readings. My first reading was unstructured and

happened while I revised the computer-generated transcripts. I then followed these

readings with formative analytic memo writing to document my thoughts before

engaging in my second round of reading, which was structured to precode the data

through open coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After completing the precoding process, I

categorized my open codes using axial coding, which is an iterative process of identifying

patterns and connections between codes (Miles et al., 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021;

Saldaña, 2016). From here, I was able to identify and refine themes within the data based

on how they clustered throughout the coding process, as informed by the research

purpose, theoretical framework, and research questions (Dey, 1993; Patton, 1990). These

themes served as the findings of the study (Dey, 1993; Patton, 1990).

Writing and Representation

The third prong of Ravitch and Carl's (2021) approach to data analysis includes all the written and graphic displays involved throughout the research process. The present final report is a form of writing that is part of this phase of analysis. Analytic memos and coding, both discussed in the previous sections, are also forms of writing that occur during this phase. Data displays are another part of this phase that can assist with the analysis of data and presentation of findings (Miles et al., 2014). I used matrices in this study to organize the reduced data into categories and refine the categories into themes. Matrices are a type of data display that use columns and rows to draw connections between similarities in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I also used graphics throughout the presentation of my findings in Chapter 4 to provide summarize my data and findings.

Reciprocity and Authenticity

As previously discussed, SCM is considered a type of collaborative inquiry (CI), so it was necessary that this study minimized potential limitations by adhering to the ethical principles of reciprocity and authenticity. Aligned with the tenets of BFE and SCM, Bridges and McGee (2011) described reciprocity as being "concerned with non-hierarchical, mutually beneficial relationships" (p. 215). Thus, to ensure mutually beneficial and authentic findings, I remained intentional about building genuine relationships with my participants through authentic dialogue, and by engaging with them transparently as collaborators in this inquiry. Using specific examples, I used the native language of Black women during dialogue, including verbal and non-verbal communication norms; and I offered my personal cell phone number to the participants to

emphasize the familial aspect of this research. After data collection concluded, I sent all

the participants a copy of *A Black Women's History of the United States* by Berry and

Gross (2020) with a thank you note for participating; and I invited them all to attend my

final defense of this dissertation. Further, the Black feminist epistemological framework

does not call for researchers to enter then leave the lives of their participants. Rather,

genuine relationships are evidenced by maintaining communication after the research is

conducted. Thus, reciprocity was also demonstrated by the sista circle participants who

supported one another's current initiatives and maintained contact through social media

once the study concluded. As a result of upholding reciprocity in this study, several of the

participants discussed the interviews and sista circles as healing spaces and mentioned

that if similar spaces were offered while they were teaching, would have felt more able to

remain in the profession.

Regarding data authenticity, Lincoln and Guba (1986) developed five criteria,

which ensures validity in the findings being "directly related to the inclusive, ethical and

fair treatment of respondents, to the value of the research and its reciprocity, and to its

usefulness in terms of proficiency at calling participants to action" (Bridges & McGee,

2011, p. 217). Therefore, the five criteria for authenticity are: fairness, ontological

authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Guba

& Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I achieved fairness in this study by providing

detailed informed consent to all participants, including all their perspectives in the

analysis and findings, and using their written reflections and individual interviews as

triangulation. Regarding ontological authenticity, the sista circles served as "time and

space for participants to engage in dialogue about their experience, understanding, and

knowledge regarding the research problem in an environment where dialogue is open and nonjudgmental" (Bridges & McGee, 2011, p. 220). This context created space for the exchange of genuine and authentic experience sharing between the participants.

Next, educative authenticity is concerned with participants' access to differing perspectives. This criterion was achieved through the *centrality of empowerment* and *ethic of accountability* principles of SCM and BFE discussed previously, for which I fostered an open space for participants to feel safe to express standpoints that are different from one another without fear of appraisal. The last two criteria are often grouped together, and they are catalytic and tactical authenticity. Catalytic authenticity is the participants' *willingness* to act once the study is completed, and tactical authenticity is the participants' *ability* to act once the study is completed (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). It is my responsibility as the researcher to both empower and equip the participants to be change agents after engaging in the sista circle. As such, part of the inclusion criteria for this study is that the participants practiced emancipatory pedagogies while teaching. Thus, tactical authenticity was met because each participant already has the demonstrated ability to act. To ensure tactical authenticity, certain dialogue during the sista circles were directed to be action-oriented, particularly when exploring the last research question regarding what could have prevented them from leaving the profession.

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of this study's qualitative research design, including an introduction of sista circle methodology and a detailed rationale for why I utilized this approach. Next, I outlined the Black Feminist Epistemological framework and how this study adheres to the epistemology's methodological criteria. Next, I detailed

the participant recruitment and selection processes I used, as well as my data collection

and analysis procedures. I concluded this chapter by discussing the validity of my study

validity through adherence to the principles of reciprocity and authenticity. The findings

of the study are detailed in Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the

findings and offers recommendations.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contextualize the attrition of critical Black women teachers (BWTs) to better understand the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools. The insights that emerged unveil a complex web of conflicting thoughts and feelings that spotlight the paradox that is critical BWTs loving and leaving the classroom. This exploration was undertaken through a Black feminist epistemological framework, thus honoring the legitimate knowledges of Black women under the assumptions that lived experience is a criterion of meaning, knowledge claims may be assessed through dialogue, and Black women possess an ethic of caring and an ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2000). This study contributes to the broader literature by providing a deep contextual understanding of how critical BWTs can have such love for and effectiveness within the urban classroom, and yet make the decision to leave. The findings derived from this study are useful to educational stakeholders invested in education, since sustaining a population of critical BWTs means improving all students' learning, and Black students' opportunity access (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; McKinney de Royston, 2020).

The research questions that guided the present analysis were: (a) How do Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools? (b) How do critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession? and (c) How do critical Black women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession? To address the questions, Black feminist thought (BFT) and cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) were used to analyze individual interviews, sista circles, and final reflections from each of the

participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, this exploration minimized potential study limitations by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1986) criteria for data reciprocity and authenticity, which align with the distinguishing features of sista circle methodology (Johnson, 2015).

Research Question 1 (RQ 1) sought to demarginalize BWTs' professional experiences and pedagogies, understanding that the historical, political, and cultural significance of their intersectional identities position them to have lived realities that are often different from dominant narratives (Crenshaw, 1989; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; hooks, 1981; McKinney de Royston, 2020). In connection to the study's purpose, exploring this research question was necessary to gain a foundational and holistic understanding of the space critical BWTs occupy in urban schools. Further, Research Question 2 (RQ 2) intended to continue the exploration from RQ 1 by understanding how the educational praxis of post-service critical BWTs fared in spaces that have historically served as sites of Black suffering (Du Bois, 1935; Dumas, 2014; Dumas & ross, 2016). This question stemmed from research that suggests critical BWTs often experience deleterious effects of professional isolation and marginalization (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Therefore, exploring this research question was important to draw clear connections between the participants' enactment of emancipatory pedagogies and their eventual departure from the teaching profession.

Finally, the aim of Research Question 3 (RQ 3) was to (re)center the participants and explore the paradox of their love for and departure from teaching. As the purpose of this study was to contextualize BWTs' attrition, it was critical to garner their affective views about leaving the classroom. To determine the factors that would support critical

BWTs' sustainability in urban schools, it would not have been enough to only discuss their experiences. Instead, this study sought to prioritize how the participants managed the thoughts and feelings associated with their decision to leave the profession despite their love for it. With this insight, more appropriate recommendations can be made regarding the experiential and wellness elements of sustaining BWTs in urban schools (Mosely, 2018).

Accordingly, the three major themes and twelve subthemes that emerged from the data were identified from analysis guided by the research questions, framed by BFT and CDT, and informed by the study's purpose. As discussed in Chapter 3, these themes were identified through immersive engagement with the three forms of data, which involved an iterative process of multiple data readings, memo writing, open coding, and axial coding (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Through this process, combined with data organization and representation, the final themes provide a collective yet nuanced representation of the participants' experiences. The remainder of this chapter is organized thematically by research question to present a narrative that provides detailed context to the perpetual attrition of BWTs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). First, profiles for the fifteen participants are provided. Next, each major theme and their subthemes are described, allowing for inclusion of all the participants' perspectives. This approach also demonstrates the shared complexities of their experiences and strengthens the authenticity of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Finally, this chapter concludes with a synthesis of the findings and their connection to the study's purpose.

Participant Profiles

The fifteen Black women who participated in this study contributed a wealth of

knowledge, insight, experience, and value to this study. The virtual means of data collection allowed for a diverse sample that represented a broad range of personal and professional backgrounds. Each of the participants were given the opportunity to provide their own pseudonym, and I assigned one to those who said they did not have a preference. In this section, I provide brief narratives for each participant, and then Table 2 offers summaries of their in-service and post-service demographics.

Janay

Janay is a 34-year-old woman from Fayetteville, North Carolina, and currently works as a real estate agent in Charlotte, North Carolina. She taught middle school science for seven years, beginning in Winston Salem, North Carolina before relocating to Charlotte. She began teaching in 2008 when she was 21 years old and stopped at age 28 in 2015 to move into a district-level role, which she remained in for four years before going into real estate. Janay explained that 9th grade was when she knew she wanted to be a teacher, though she displayed teacher-like qualities since she was in elementary school. Once she got to college, Janay knew she wanted to teach in a space that was majority-Black since she cherished her academic experience growing up:

> Once I went to college and met other people that they were like, "I never went to school with all Black people," I was like, oh. Or like, they was struggling with identity, and I just didn't have those same issues because I had Black teachers. So, once I got to college, I decided I'm absolutely going to teach in the same environment that I grew up in.

Dionna

Dionna, 32 years old, transitioned from corporate America into education after

realizing that she wanted to make a meaningful impact. In 2016 when she was 27, she

started her 5-year journey of teaching marketing at the middle and high school levels in

Charlotte, North Carolina. Currently, Dionna is an entrepreneur, using her platform to

teach life skills, which is what her primary desire was when she went into education:

> I wanted to teach early what I learned late. I wanted to bring something to the
>
> forefront so they can see, it doesn't have to be this way. Your normal doesn't have
>
> to be your forever normal. Like let's create new normals…So, when I got into the
>
> classroom, I was like, I want to be able to sit with the student and say, "I get it.
>
> Let's dive into that." Or "that attitude, like, let's see how we can turn this attitude
>
> around. Cause I'm not trying to change who you are, cause that fire, you need that.
>
> Like you're gonna need that fire, we just need to figure out how to curtail it and
>
> use it in the right way. I don't want to strip you from who you are because you're
>
> going to need, everything that you have, you're going to need that."

Noelle

Noelle is 30 years old and lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is where she

is from and where she taught middle school Spanish for six years, beginning in 2015

when she was 24. Currently, Noelle develops e-courses and instructs at the organization

she founded, which teaches Spanish to children starting at age three. Evidenced by her

continued work in education, Noelle has always had a heart for teaching even though she

initially began her post-secondary education in a different field:

> I remember when I was in fourth grade, I still have the book where I was like
>
> taking the attendance in my class. I just, I used to play teacher. And my mom, you
>
> know, before when I was thinking about what I wanted to do, she even said, I feel

like you should be a teacher. And I'm like, oh yeah, I would love to do that, but they don't make enough money…So, I guess I just, you know, I was rerouted to where I was supposed to be and what my passion was.

Carmen

Carmen, 32-years-old, is originally from South Central Los Angeles, California and currently lives in New York, which is where she taught for eight years beginning in 2011 when she was 22. Carmen began in Harlem, New York teaching middle school history and science, then moved to Brooklyn, New York to teach high school science before beginning her Ph.D. journey in science education. Though Carmen took a non-traditional route into teaching, she always knew that she would be teaching Black students:

> I was so excited to work in Harlem. I was like, "This is the Black Mecca, I'm excited to be here." …So, I think that there's no way I could teach a white child, even now I'm like…that is beautiful, but that is not my ministry…I grew up with, Black is it. So, I don't even, like, teaching non-Black students as an option didn't even pop in my head.

Currently, Carmen serves as a teacher educator as well as a curriculum specialist, creating antiracist curricula for teachers in her local school district.

Adelaide

Adelaide, 35 years old, is originally from Jamaica and moved to New York City to attend college, during which she double majored in psychology and biology. However, instead of going into the counseling profession like she originally intended, Adelaide made the decision to become a teacher after meeting a friend who helped her become

more conscious of race relations in the United States. Her own process of racial identity development is what prompted Adelaide to reflect on the inequities of her academic experiences as a Black woman in a U.S. university. This is when she decided to become a teacher so that she could buffer that experience for other Black girls learning science and math:

> Then I just had this passion. I was just like, I know kids are out there feeling like this, and I know half of it is confidence. Half of it is knowing that you are capable, right. So fast forward …I went and did a second bachelor's in education and got my teaching license and then did the master's in education.

With this training, Adelaide began teaching middle school science in Brooklyn, New York in 2014 when she was 28 years old, and continued until 2018 when she was 33. Currently, Adelaide is an international Ph.D. student in the Netherlands, conducting research focused on the science identity development of students from minoritized populations.

Nina

Nina is 27 years old, from Durham, North Carolina, and currently works as a Recruitment Director for a teacher lateral entry organization. She began teaching high school English in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2016 when she was 22, and remained at her school for three years before beginning her current role in 2019. Originally, Nina was in the field of criminal justice, working with high school students who were struggling with recidivism. She decided to reroute her career to education after reflecting on the fact that her caseload only consisted of students of color:

> … And the more I talked to them and got to understand their story, I realized that

a lot of it was their lack of fellowship, community, and support in the education sector. They hated school… And so, I shifted into education because I wanted to be more of a part of the solution, as opposed to perpetuating the problem, or dressing the problem up to make it seem like people should be more acceptable of it because I look like them.

Joy

Joy is a 27-year-old woman from Winston Salem, North Carolina, who taught high school English in Charlotte, North Carolina for three years, beginning in 2015 when she was 21. Currently, Joy works at a post-secondary institution, serving as an academic counselor to support high school students' entry into college. Always knowing that she wanted to eventually work in a college setting, Joy realized when she was in college that working with students in urban areas was her passion, which is why she loves her current position:

I love it because it's exactly what I wanted to do when I decided I was going to stop teaching and then go back to grad school. Cause I knew I wanted to get on the college campus, and I wanted to work with at-risk students. I wanted to work with students that looked like me, students who probably came from similar backgrounds as me, you know, and the students that I worked with when I was at [the urban school where I taught].

Jamie

Jamie is a 43-year-old Higher Education Administrator in Roanoke, Virginia, and taught high school English and social studies for a collective total of four years. She began teaching in Columbia, South Carolina in 2000 when she was 22 years old, then

moved to begin teaching Atlanta, Georgia in 2001. Jamie remained there for two years before going into administration for another two years and then taking a break from education. She then returned to the classroom for one more year in 2011 in Charlotte, North Carolina before going on to pursue her Ph.D. While Jamie knew she would always be in advocacy work, she knew she would not be a career-long teacher. However, her inspiration to begin her work as a teacher came from a Black woman teacher that she had in the 12th grade who "pushed [her] beyond mediocrity:"

> She's who actually encouraged me to go into education, and I wanted to be like her because I wanted to make that type of positive impact on somebody else's life, the way that she did for me. You know, it goes back to that whole notion of it takes one person. So, she was my, at that time, she was my one person in my life that helped, you know, that inspired me to do better, to be better. And so, I wanted to be that for somebody else.

June

June, 28 years old, currently resides in Charlotte, North Carolina but is originally from Virginia Beach, Virginia. In 2015, she began teaching middle school science in Charlotte when she was 22, then moved Los Angeles, California in 2017 to continue her teaching career for one more year. June is now back in Charlotte, working as a full-time education community organizer. When reflecting on her entry into education, June said her aim was not to think ahead and make long-term career goals, but to focus on being present with her students. Now, as a grassroots educational activist working passionately for equity, June is glad she did not make early attempts to map out her future:

> When I got into teaching and knew that I was going to be teaching in an urban

area, I was just more so excited to build relationships with the students. That was what I was most eager for. And because I was young, I didn't realize that what I was embarking on was deeper than just building relationships.

Saige

Saige, 36 years old, is from Detroit, Michigan and began teaching elementary school in Toledo, Ohio when she was 24 in 2009. She then relocated to Houston, Texas in 2013, where she continued teaching until 2016 when she was 31. Currently, Saige is an assistant principal in a school with 100% enrollment of students of color. She attributes the great deal of success she has had in her current role to all the years she spent serving in alternative placement and other elementary schools with high needs:

> I started in an alternative school for students that had been kicked out of multiple elementary schools… And once I moved to Houston, I wanted a break from severe emotional behavior, and I ended up in the same type of environmental circumstances, just with no special ed umbrella…It was a challenge and it made me, which I didn't see then, it made me a better administrator, made me a better coach, it made me a better teacher, all the different hats that I've worn in education.

Jada

Jada, 48 years old, began teaching middle school special education in Las Vegas, Nevada in 1999 when she was 26. She remained in the classroom for three years before moving into higher education. Currently, she is an Associate Professor in an educator preparation program at an historically Black university in North Carolina. As someone who initially tried to pursue a career in the medical field for financial reasons, Jada

described her shift to education as one that was spiritual:

> I had an experience with the Boys and Girls Club working a summer job, and that
> was when the light bulb clicked on like, I really don't care. I'm supposed to be
> doing this and the money will come. That will occur and that will happen…I
> wasn't even in a teacher education field, but it was that switch, and after that,
> opportunities just started coming, when I finally started moving in the direction I
> was supposed to be going.

Lena

Lena is a 37-year-old woman who moved into education from corporate America in 2012 after her brother was tragically killed. While coping with her loss, Lena began reflecting on the differences between her brother's lifestyle and her own and came to the realization that their educational experiences were the root of the divergence in their life choices:

> I was just four years younger than my brother and I experienced something
> completely different from him. I had teachers that loved up on me. If I challenged
> them, the teacher saw that as an opportunity rather than as a threat… And so those
> outcomes, they just bothered and plagued me. Like it got to the point where I
> couldn't accurately do my job when I saw little boys getting kicked out of school.
> Like, I would just be obsessing about the statistics, you know, especially
> specifically for [my school district] …and I felt like the only way that we could
> go back for those kids is somebody who understands that plight. I know what it
> feels to be young, urban, Black, and inquisitive, and feel like, you know, the
> school systems can't match what's going on here and I don't feel reflected here.

So, I was like, I'm gonna go back to school.

Lena began teaching middle school English in Charlotte, North Carolina when she was 28 years old, and remained there for 9 years. Currently, she works as an Education and Outreach Coordinator for a community organization, creating antiracist curricula and professional development programming for teachers.

Marissa

Marissa is 33 years old and currently lives in Dallas, Texas. She taught middle and high school students between 2011-2018 in Nashville, Tennessee, beginning when she was 23. Marissa taught multiple subject areas over the span of her teaching career, including special education math, English, science, and global literacy. She referred to her current role as an edupreneur who works in several leadership capacities, including consultation, to establish equity in education. Her passion for this is longstanding and the reason she made her original decision to become a teacher:

> I also knew the impact of just growing up in K-12 Black. And so, I wanted to make a difference. I knew I would never teach at an all-white school. I thought about it. You know, well, there's another little [Marissa] there somewhere, you know, but I didn't want that. I wanted to reach the brilliant students that are not recognized.

Amara

Amara, 29 years old, is from Charlotte, North Carolina and began teaching there in 2017 when she was 25. She taught for three years, starting her career in high school social studies, then moving to kindergarten, and then to pre-kindergarten. Because of her experiences in school, Amara knew early on that she wanted to be a teacher:

I struggled with auditory processing… And, you know, I had amazing resources

all throughout school and that inspired me. It really inspired me. And I wanted to

teach at that point, like this had to be like my junior or senior year in high school.

And I was like, you know what, I'm going to help those kids that struggled like

me. That's gonna be me.

At the time of data collection, Amara was working a freelance social media manager, despite her longing to still be in the classroom. However, after sharing her traumatic experience of pushout during the sista circle, rallying efforts between other participants led to her being hired to teach again. Currently, Amara is back in the classroom as a fourth-grade teacher in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Brittney

Brittney is 28 years old, from Louisville, Kentucky, and currently resides in Dallas, Texas. She began teaching in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2015 when she was 22, and remained a 4th grade teacher there for three years. Currently, Brittney is the president and owner of a company she began in order to help women entrepreneurs improve their business' branding and profits. While Brittney's current position is where she knew she would eventually land, she believed that teaching was an important step for her to be able to impact younger generations:

I definitely wanted an experience where I was able to give back. When I grew up,

I went to low-income schools that were in the hood. And so, I wanted to be able

to give students the opportunity to experience someone who looked like them,

who came from where they're coming from, and to be able to share my gifts with

the younger generation.

Table 2

Participants' In-Service and Post-Service Demographics

Pseudonym	Current Age	Teaching Age	Entry to Teaching	Years Teaching	Current Profession
			Sista Circle 1 Participants		
Janay	34	21-28	Traditional	7	Realtor
Dionna	32	27-32	Lateral	5	Entrepreneur
Noelle	30	24-27	Lateral	3	Education Program Founder and Instructor
Carmen	32	22-30	Lateral	8	Ph.D. Candidate
			Sista Circle 2 Participants		
Adelaide	35	28-33	Traditional	5	Ph.D. Student
Nina	27	22-25	Lateral	3	Teacher Recruitment Director
Joy	27	21-24	Lateral	3	Academic Counselor
			Sista Circle 3 Participants		
Jamie	43	22-25, 34	Lateral	4	Higher Education Administrator
June	28	22-25	Lateral	3	Education Community Organizer
Saige	36	24-31	Traditional	7	Assistant Principal
Jada	48	26-29	Traditional	3	Associate Professor
Lena	37	28-37	Lateral	9	Education and Outreach Coordinator
Marissa	33	23-30	Lateral	7	Edupreneur
Amara	29	25-28	Traditional	3	Social Media Manager
Brittney	28	22-25	Lateral	3	Company President and Owner

Themes

The three major themes that emerged from data analysis are organized by the

research questions and elucidate the complex nature of critical BWTs' struggle between

loving and leaving the urban classroom. The first major theme is *instinct vs. opposition*,

the second is *commitments vs. personal needs*, and the third is *dissonance-reduction*

strategies. All three major themes include two categories and four subthemes, which

work in tandem to answer the research questions. The themes, categories, and subthemes

are outlined in Table 3 and detailed in the discussion below.

Table 3

Major Themes, Categories, and Subthemes

Major Theme 1	Instinct vs. Opposition			
Categories	1.1 Instinct		1.2 Opposition	
Subthemes	1.1a	Spiritual Knowing	1.2a	Interpersonal Issues
	1.1b	Critical Disposition	1.2b	Institutional Issues
Major Theme 2	Commitments vs. Personal Needs			
Categories	2.1 Commitments		2.2 Personal Needs	
Subthemes	2.1a	Valuing Black Students	2.2a	Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health
	2.1b	Liberating Black Students	2.2b	Professional Growth
Major Theme 3	Dissonance-Reduction Strategies			
Categories	3.1 Transcendence		3.2 Differentiation	
Subthemes	3.1a	Taking a Different Approach	3.2a	Fulfilling Original Aspirations
	3.1b	Protecting Students	3.2b	Engaging in Radical Self-Care

The first major theme, (1) *instinct vs. opposition*, highlights the participants'
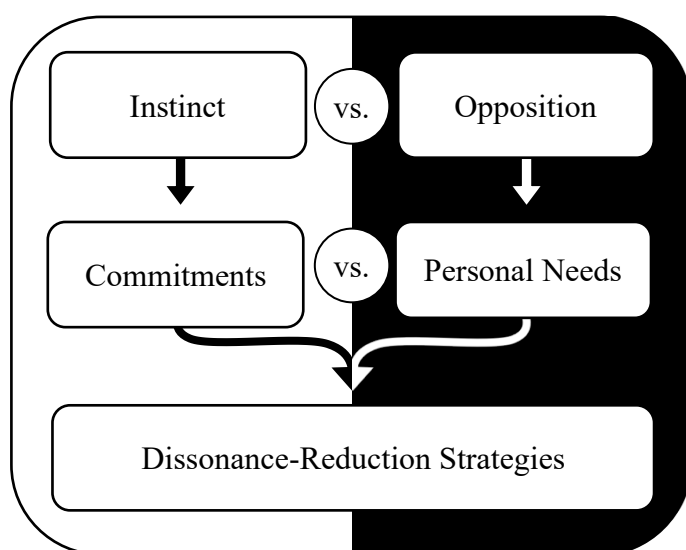
intuitive capacity to engage in emancipatory pedagogy, despite their efforts being sabotaged by various barriers. Thus, the first category for this major theme is (1.1) *instinct*, which has the subthemes of (1.1a) *spiritual knowing* and (1.1b) *critical disposition*. The second category is (1.2) *opposition*, and it has the subthemes of (1.2a) *interpersonal issues* and (1.2b) *institutional issues*. The second major theme, (2) *commitments vs. personal needs*, has the two categories of (2.1) *commitments* and (2.2) *personal needs*, and captures the participants' dedication to their students, which conflicts with their personal needs. Accordingly, the subthemes for commitments are (2.1a) *valuing Black students* and (2.1b) *liberating Black students*, and the subthemes for personal needs are (2.2a) *mental, physical, and emotional health* and (2.2b) *professional growth*.

The tension that resulted from the participants' contrasting commitments and personal needs uncovered the third major theme, (3) *dissonance-reduction strategies*, which depicts the ways the participants worked through the cognitive dissonance (i.e., discomfort from realizing discrepancy between values and actions) resulting from their beliefs about teaching and decision to leave. Thus, the first category, (3.1) *transcendence*, includes the strategies participants used to justify their departure as a way of fulfilling a greater purpose. The subthemes for this category are (3.1a) *taking a different approach* and (3.1b) *protecting students*. The second category for the third major theme is (3.2) *differentiation*, which captures how some of the participants disconnected their inconsistent thoughts to rationalize their decision to leave. The two subthemes for differentiation are (3.2a) *fulfilling original aspirations* and (3.2b) *engaging in radical self-care*.

The major themes are organized into three phases to demonstrate the complexity of the conflict experienced by the participants. Figure 2 aims to simplify this complexity using a flowchart to outline the three major themes' relationships to one another. Each row of the flowchart represents one of the themes, with the first two being split down the middle to characterize the participants' conflicting realities. On the left side of the flowchart are the beliefs and values that they held about teaching, while the right side includes the barriers that operated against the durability of those beliefs and values. Ultimately, the participants decided to leave the profession to tend to their personal needs, which caused them to experience varying magnitudes of cognitive dissonance. As a result, they all engaged in dissonance-reduction strategies to make meaning of their decision to leave the classroom, despite their love for it. The following section details each major theme and subtheme, discussing how the participants' experiences and beliefs impacted their sustainability in the teaching profession.

Figure 2

Relationships Between the Three Major Themes

Theme 1: Instinct vs. Opposition

The first theme that emerged from the data was *instinct vs. opposition* and responded to RQ 1: How do Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools? Findings revealed that the participants' intersectional identities gave them an intuitive ability to engage in emancipatory pedagogy, but it also meant their efforts were sabotaged by various interpersonal and institutional issues. Regarding the first category of this theme, *instinct*, participants demonstrated innate abilities that allowed them to fully engage in emancipatory pedagogies. However, the second category of this theme is *opposition*, which explains the various challenges they each experienced that operated against the impact of their abilities. Accordingly, instinct is understood here as the participants' *spiritual knowing* (subtheme 1.1a) and *critical disposition* (subtheme 1.1b) regarding how to enact emancipatory pedagogy, and the opposition faced by the participants were in the forms of *interpersonal issues* (subtheme 1.2a) and *institutional issues* (subtheme 1.2b) they attempted to navigate while teaching.

Subtheme 1.1a: Spiritual Knowing

Spiritual knowing captures the prevailing idea among the participants that their approach to teaching was innate and not further developed through any of their teacher training, which made it difficult for them to try to help others develop similar teaching praxis. Specifically, the participants expressed how their ways of being as critical Black women gave them the resolve and ability to engage in emancipatory pedagogy. During SC 3, Jada expressed the spiritual nature of this existence:

In terms of the purpose, the divine purpose, in terms of your role in the family.

> You set the tone, you create the tone, you manage the tone. That's why we have certain emotions, and we are able to conceptualize and pull things together that others can't do.

Carmen's sentiments during SC 1 mirrored Jada's, as she expressed how many of the ways BWTs operate are sacred and cannot be operationalized and taught to others, stating:

> Historically, Black women's practices can be commodified and sort of whitewashed in order to make best practices available for white teachers, and really trying to find ways to get all folks able to create the magic that Black women creating their classroom. And it's simply not possible.

As articulated by Carmen, Black women have instinctual understandings that position them to be able to provide learning experiences that are authentic to their Black students while honoring their human needs. Carmen continued her statement saying the following:

> When we talk about things being innate, or things being spiritual, or just like, I didn't expect my coworkers to be able to understand that my students couldn't receive that day, so that's why I was shifting. Because that's not even what you were looking for.

This sentiment was shared among most of the participants, though it was articulated in a variety of ways. However, consistent among all the participants was the awareness that their spiritual knowing would be best situated in a school where Black students were the majority. Statements such as these: "there's no way I could teach a white child" and "I knew I would never teach at an all-white school" were often followed up with statements like this one: "I thought about it, you know, well, there's another little [Marissa] there

somewhere, but I didn't want that. I wanted to reach the brilliant students that are not recognized." This sentiment was common among the participants and highlights their awareness of their spiritual knowings and their urgency to apply them with the Black students they knew were in need.

Subtheme 1.1b: Critical Disposition

The second subtheme of the *instinct* category is *critical disposition*, which offers a nuanced perspective on the participants' seemingly innate abilities to enact emancipatory pedagogy. As defined by Moore (2019), teachers with a critical disposition are able to understand how "language, discourse, power, and hegemony…relate to education and schooling" (p. 107). Thus, several participants detailed how they developed critical dispositions from their lived experiences as Black women. For example, Adelaide and Nina explained in SC 2 how, due to their intersectionality, Black women have been positioned in the United States to advocate for the liberation of others. Nina continued with this perspective, highlighting the ways Black women have been conditioned through the intersectional forms of oppression they face to have a desire and determination to support the freedom and well-being of others without benefitting from any personal gain:

> If we think about the level of advantage and the resources and opportunities and experiences, and like they trickle down the ladder of hierarchy, we literally are always getting the crumbs and the drops of the system. And it's like, we have realized that we have to liberate all people for us to be able to get it…But then the problem turns into, it's like the liberation of you, you're so selfish, you don't realize what just happened here with my advocacy for you. And then you get

yours and then you turn around and say, "well, I hope you get yours, sis, cause I'm out of this line." Right. And then you feel gipped because you're like, I know I didn't just stand in here fighting behind you to make sure you good, and then you went into the club and ain't make sure I got my $20 to get in behind you. You know what I mean? And I think that, that's the part that makes me feel overwhelmed sometimes. Because it's like, why doesn't everybody else want what I want? Like, why is it that I want everybody to get dubs, and somehow, we can decide that it's okay for me to not get them? And I don't know how to, that's the part that makes me upset. Cause then that's why I was running from this whole educational experience of like being an educator because I'm like, I don't have time to be out here trying to make sure everybody gets theirs. I gotta get mine. But literally I realized I can't get mine if folks don't get theirs. So how do I, I couldn't disconnect the two of prioritizing myself, because prioritizing me means that I still gotta prioritize other people.

Nina's thoughts, which were supported by other participants, underscore the instinctual resolve Black women have for liberating and speaking up for others. While the source of the critical disposition may vary from one critical BWT to the next, the disposition itself is consistent. Nina also introduced a form of conflict that several participants expressed throughout data collection: even with their firm anti-oppressive resolve, their instincts were often met with opposition that reminded them of the white supremacy and anti-Black racism that is perpetuated in and through public education (Gillborn, 2005; Keisch & Scott, 2015; Onwuachi-Willig, 2019; Suh et al., 2020).

Subtheme 1.2a: Interpersonal Issues

The first subtheme of the *opposition* category is *interpersonal issues*, and it captures how many of the participants had to resist pushback from their administration and harm caused by their colleagues. For example, Lena described her experiences as being in a boxing ring with her administration: "I would describe it as a boxing ring, and I was, 'alright, today I just got punched, I'm gonna have to be like, you know, left-hand tomorrow.' Like I would have to counter their punches with another punch." Lena's analogy described what a lot of the other participants also felt. Notably, however, their "counter-punches" were not always in front of their administration, having lowered feelings of confidence and agency. For example, while the participants cultivated their classrooms to operate as spaces of safety and freedom for their students, there were moments that made them believe that they had no power over their students' safety. For example, some participants discussed how they had very supportive administration, but their opposition came from their colleagues, who were causing harm to the same students they sought to protect. Marissa offered the following reflection during her interview:

I think what changed for me was when I got into the leadership positions, because I realized how difficult it is for teachers who are not like me to see the successes that I saw. And a lot of it was their mindset around our students. And half the time when I tell you, I just wanted to be like, "are you sure you're at the right school? Like, I don't think this is the right school for you."

Marissa alluded to the beliefs her colleagues held of Black students, which were reflected in their harmful actions. She realized after learning how widespread this deficit thinking was, that she wanted to leave teaching to make a deeper impact on education.

Similar was the case for June, who left teaching so she could work full-time as an organizer for equitable education policy. In SC 3, June reflected on an experience she had that she described as traumatic. She discussed how a white woman who held a position of power came into her classroom to reprimand a student, and she felt unable to protect him:

> With the ability for us to show up in spaces the way we do and that just to be our natural born gift, but also the burden of carrying that weight. Like the burden that I heard [Saige] saying of like speaking up in this space, I was immediately reminded of the most traumatic experience I had in the classroom, where I had to speak up for one of my children, to someone who was in a position of power, who could very much reprimand me, who was a white woman. And I really lost that battle in front of my kids who had a lot of trust for me. So, they're looking at me like, "Ms. [June], you gonna let them get away with that?" When there's not this shared perspective on how we should be working with our kids.

Aligned with June's regretful remembering, several participants discussed similar feelings of having ability without agency. While their resolve remained present, the participants' lack of antiracist training made them lack the self-efficacy necessary to reach their emancipatory goals, especially in the face of opposition from their administration and colleagues (Bandura, 2001). This was especially true among the participants who entered the teaching profession laterally and at young ages. Nina offered the following reflection during her interview:

> There are moments when I reflect and I wish that I had more of the language and more of the confidence, you know, cause I was 23, right. Now that I'm 27, there are certain things I can say very directly and very explicitly with confidence of

like, "This is unacceptable. This is actually very anti-Black" and like not be shaky in the voice about how I address my administrators about it or not be passive about my addressing it.

Some participants did, however, have the confidence to address issues with their administration and speak up on behalf of their students' needs. However, in doing so, several participants faced the issue of pushback. During her interview, Dionna reflected on being turned away from creating an after-school group for her students who needed a social support space:

I even asked the principal at the school at the time, "Hey, there's a girl's group that I have, and I would like to bring it to the school, and we just want to meet after school. I'll provide everything. I'll have permission slips and if their parents say it's okay, then I'll have that." And I was shot down with the easy, no.… And I said, "Well, what if I want to reach students before they get there? So, can we bring this into the school? Can we even do like a, like a pilot? Just try it for one month, and see?" Easy no. Easy no.

As reflected by Nina previously, Dionna was confused by the rejection she received for this idea, which she believed was helpful and substantive. Ultimately, this is the reason Dionna said she left the profession. As a marketing teacher, she grew weary of adhering to what she believed were meaningless standards, and desired to teach content that mattered. She also connected this rejection to the pushback she received for praying with her students. Dionna and other participants were no longer interested in sacrificing their morals to accommodate institutional policies that they knew were harmful to their students.

Subtheme 1.2b: Institutional Issues

Institutional issues is the second subtheme of the *opposition* category and captures the systemic harm that their students were facing, which ranged from anti-Black school cultures to anti-Black federal policies. For example, Joy discussed in her interview the frustration she felt about the ways her elder colleagues were harming students.

> And then you had all these teachers who, "I've been here 10, 15 years." And I'm just like, "But they don't like you. They don't like you. Like, they hate going to your class." But I mean, you didn't say that stuff to them, but I wanted to say that stuff to them, you know? And just like sitting through staff meetings used to feel like torture sometime cause you had people talking about all the things that we need to do for our kids and all the resources, but then yet they get in your classroom the next day and you sent them to ISS. Or they come to my class talking about how they done cussed you out and now they're in trouble and all, and I'm just like, it was just, it was frustrating.

The frustration articulated by Joy reflects the resentful remembering that many of the participants described of the harmful realities of education. While there were a number of reflections regarding the violence perpetuated through oppressive school policies, there were also reflections about the systemic inequities the participants found themselves up against. During SC 3, Brittney described how the anti-Blackness present in education policy ultimately pushed her out of the classroom.

> I loved teaching my first year, like loved it. I got there at like 5:00 AM, didn't leave till 7:30. Like that was my life my first-year teaching and I was happy…And then due to like the policies and politics behind testing and just

knowing what those tests are used for, and the data is used for just didn't sit right

within my spirit as a teacher, and I felt like I was part of the issue. Even if I

moved to a different school, I knew that I would be dealing with the same types of

issues…I realized that those things were just, I didn't want to be a part of that

anymore. I didn't want to be a part of the downfall of kids whose lives were in my

hands in some kind of way that I felt like I was obligated to, I guess, play a part in

this system that I didn't want to play a part in anymore.

During her interview, Carmen discussed similar feelings, naming what Brittney described

as "working outside of [her] integrity." For these participants, it was impossible to ignore

the hypocrisy of following the policies of a system that was not designed for Black

people to succeed. Even those participants who did not leave education altogether after

teaching expressed similar feelings when they moved into their new leadership positions.

They described how their new perspective and responsibilities are what pushed them

outside of their integrity, resulting in their departure from the public education system.

Marissa reflected on how her position outside of the classroom allowed her to witness

what was happening in other classrooms:

I had moved into a role, it was called restorative justice specialist and classroom

management specialist, right after I left the classroom. And that's where I just

experienced the most identifiable racism as it relates to discipline and how we

treat our kids and stuff like that. And that really, I think forced me all the way out.

While Marissa expressed concerns regarding what she saw, others expressed guilt about

what they were expected to do in their new positions. For example, Jamie provided the

following narrative during her interview to describe how she was perpetuating systemic

issues:

> I was passing kids along and they didn't know the content. They didn't know what
> they needed academically; they didn't ascertain that knowledge for them to be
> able to be promoted. And then suspending students for the same issues. Fighting.
> Right. Um, the ones that you knew were going to fail the state tests, you
> suspending them out. I mean, it's to meet yearly progress, right? …And so, for
> me, that was problematic because these were kids that look like me. And we were
> putting them out in the street, and they didn't, we didn't need them on the street.

Thus, many of the participants detailed their great concerns regarding the role they were playing in a system they found to be harmful against the very students they aimed to liberate. While their anti-oppressive instincts never shifted, their feelings about being a teacher did. The next major theme, *commitments vs. personal needs*, outlines the contradicting feelings the participants held about teaching.

Theme 2: Commitments vs. Personal Needs

RQ 2 was how do critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession? The second major theme, *commitments vs. personal needs*, answers this question by unveiling the inconsistencies between the participants' dedication to impacting their students and their own personal needs that competed for their attention. Specifically, this theme showed how the participants' instincts established within them commitments to value and liberate their students, but their opposition contributed to issues with their health and/or an urgency to make a greater impact in education by advancing their profession. Referencing the visual from Figure 2, the first category of this theme, *commitments*, accounts for the implications of

the participants' anti-oppressive instincts. Due to their spiritual knowing and critical disposition, the participants demonstrated commitment to *valuing Black students* (subtheme 2.1a) and *liberating Black students* (subtheme 2.1b). However, the opposition they faced created an urgency for them to prioritize their *personal needs*, which is the second category of this theme and includes the participants' *mental, physical, and emotional health* (subtheme 2.2a), as well as their *professional growth* (subtheme 2.2b).

Subtheme 2.1a: Valuing Black Students

Resulting from their *instincts*, the participants expressed a great deal of commitment to *valuing their Black students*, which is understood here as holding them to a high regard. Many of the participants used storytelling to remember nostalgically the ways they used pedagogical practices that made sure their Black students knew how much their lives and brilliance mattered. They worked to make their content relevant to their students, foster critical consciousness among their students, challenge content that was harmful to their students, and grow their students' activism. For example, Saige discussed how she was able to create a positive classroom culture at the alternative elementary school where she taught:

> I know the type of environment I grew up in and I knew I wanted better for them. I don't have any children, but they're as close as I had gotten to having my own children. And when you talk to them, you know, they may be disrespectful initially, but just like any other skill they have to be taught. And so, once we started teaching them coping skills and how to deal with their anger, and "is that an appropriate response?" Um, doing affirmations in the morning…And so, we

started celebrating the small victories and you started to see a shift in the culture

of the classroom.

As articulated by Saige, she was able to create this classroom culture because she

consistently approached her students from a source of love and understanding. This

approach was common among the participants. Dionna explained during SC 1 how she

made the love she had for her students known to them, and that her love for them was not

conditional:

> I literally told my students I loved them every single day before they walked out
>
> my room. Like, they didn't even open the door yet. And it got to the point where
>
> they was like, "wait, Ms. [Dionna], you didn't tell us you loved us yet." And I was
>
> like, "love you guys." Even if it was a day that was rocky, like those days when it
>
> got real unorthodox and I had to tell them I was cut from a different cloth, I still
>
> told them that I loved them.

The range of emotion Dionna allowed herself to express in front of her students without

compromising her display of love allowed her to make lasting impacts on her students

and their sense of value. Similarly, Janay reflected during her interview on a time when

she had an opportunity to value one of her Black boys in a way that were clearly

meaningful:

> But a young man got sent to my classroom, he got sent to my classroom a whole,
>
> whole lot. And so, during that time, I was just learning more about him, asking
>
> him questions…He got taken from his mother. So, he was living with his grandma
>
> and didn't talk to his mom a lot. And I said to him, "You are important." He
>
> looked at me, he looked at me and he said out loud, he said, "Ms. [Janay],

nobody's ever said that to me." I had to be in that moment with him. And I told

him another 10 times. I kept repeating it because I wanted him to know I meant it.

What was instinctual to Janay made a powerful impression on her student. As she described, the participants had a proficiency and commitment to making sure their students knew how important they were, despite whatever circumstances they may be in. The student Janay referenced was not on her roster and was sent to her classroom for behavioral correction. However, by prioritizing his humanity, Janay knew that what he needed was to be valued, not reprimanded. With a similar mindset, Carmen mentioned in her interview how she created a classroom culture that allowed her students to grow in their academic integrity:

> The approach to really having students see themselves as the operators of their own brilliance and like really sharing that before I confirmed anything, became like a part of my pedagogy in a way that was more obvious, I think than before. So that felt good. And I was like, okay, I'm doing this well.

To the participants, their students' value was well beyond academic performance and competitive demonstrations of ability. Instead, they committed to valuing and affirming the whole child, just as they were. In the above reflection, Carmen mentioned that her students were brilliant, and her job was to make sure she taught them that idea, not content. With this, she introduced a concept that was common across participants and data collection methods: positioning students to be self-sufficient. The participants knew that their time with their students was limited, so they were intentional about creating a firm and substantive foundation from which their students could continue growing.

Subtheme 2.1b: Liberating Black Students

Liberating Black students is the second subtheme under the *commitments* category and it includes how the participants committed life-affirming acts aimed at their students' emancipation from oppressive ideologies and growth toward critical consciousness. The participants reminisced on times when they were able to deeply connect with their students, personally and academically, in ways that were borne of their commitment to liberation. For example, during her interview, Lena reflected on a time when one of her 8th grade boys came out to her as gay. She responded to him by easing his worries, normalizing his sexuality, and reminding him that he was still a child who did not need to have everything about his identity figured out. Later that school year, Lena noticed this student standing up for another boy who was openly gay and being bullied by other students. At the end of that school year, Lena's student came out to his entire class, expressing how she gave him the courage to be himself:

> Once they graduated, I asked them what their favorite moment in middle school was. That little boy said, when that boy helped him; when he validated him in front of everybody…He told that little boy, "oh I did that cause I'm gay, too." Girl came out to the whole classroom. "Oh, that's cause I'm gay too, though." The girls, I'm talking about, it was a collective gasp. And I know he was like, "I'm leaving so I can give my truth." And the look of shock on his face and gave him a hug. And he was like, "all gay people ain't alike, that's what Ms. [Lena] told me."

Moments like the one described by Lena gave the participants much to appreciate about the deep meaning of their work and how they unlocked for their students the freedom to be. In many ways, they knew they were working toward their commitment to liberate. As

described by Joy during her interview, the participants saw teaching as going well beyond

delivering content. Their desire was to provide an education that grew their students'

critical consciousness:

> I wasn't just thinking about the grades. I wasn't just thinking about the rules in the
>
> school—having to have an escort to go to the bathroom. Let's challenge that.
>
> Like, why do y'all feel like you need an escort to go to the bathroom? Let's have
>
> that conversation.

Joy's reflection revealed how she used her platform as a teacher to critique the

education system from within it. This was the approach of several of the participants'

attempts to liberate their students—directly confronting, through conversation and action,

the oppression and anti-Blackness that they were presently experiencing in school. Since

this type of activism was a large part of the participants' reasons for becoming teachers,

the fulfillment they felt in response to their work was palpable. However, it often was not

enough to counteract the growing urgency of their personal needs, which resulted from

the constant opposition they faced as outlined in the first major theme.

Subtheme 2.2a: Mental, Physical, and Emotional Health

The first subtheme of the *personal needs* category is *mental, physical, and

emotional health.* It captures the ways many of the participants' health became

jeopardized from the opposition they constantly faced. Ultimately, the harmful realities of

being in education caused nine of the participants to experience racial battle fatigue

(RBF) that resulted in various forms of mental, emotional, and physical health concerns.

Figure 3 provides data regarding some of the specific ways participants were impacted by

RBF.

Figure 3

Participants' Stress Responses to Racial Battle Fatigue

Psychological Stress Responses		Physiological Stress Responses		Emotional/Behavioral Stress Responses	
Nina	I hate how something that I love, and that makes me feel so full makes me feel so empty all at the same time.			Noelle	Although I would say I'm only going to give 60%, but then I find myself up at 10 o'clock at night, like going over my lesson plans.
Brittney	When I look at the overall look of education, it's like this ain't never going to change…it feels like it's bigger than me.	Nina	I'd get in the bed at nine o'clock and still not fall asleep till one or two o'clock in the morning because my anxiety was so damn high from not being able to sleep from the depression…	Nina	I wasn't doing lesson plans because I couldn't think, because my creativity and ability to be able to process my own thoughts were so stifled…
Lena	Being in the classroom created a myriad of mental health issues, where I was acting as a shield for myself and then acting as a shield for my babies…	Carmen	I only realized 30 minutes later when I went to go put my arm down, that I must've been in this like unsafe position for so long that my arm had completely cramped out.	Nina	That's when it turned into taking on the extra roles, "I'll lead after school tutoring. I'll coach that."
Carmen	I don't think I had realized how intensely I was resentful of being a teacher at that point.	Marissa	I'm in the hospital because I'm physically reacting to my work and my body is not agreeing with it…	Amara	It was to the point where I cried almost every day throughout that entire quarter.
Adelaide	Everything kind of accumulated. I had anxiety attacks.			Amara	I pushed myself to go back within that next week, sick as a dog.
Joy	I just felt like I was there for the kids and there were other people who were there for the kids, but the majority were not. And it used to frustrate me.	Adelaide	I had a full-blown panic attack on that crowded train where I couldn't breathe. My chest was tight and I felt so helpless, and I was just crying. I was just like…something had to give.	Lena	I would go in there armed with all my stuff… Every evaluation was like that, though. Like every evaluation I'm going to war.
				Marissa	And now I'm holding life, and I'm hooked up to monitors, still responding to texts and emails…

The RBF these participants experienced were in response to many factors

centering their identities as Black women, including hyper-invisibility and hyper-

visibility. While some participants expressed their disappointment in not receiving any recognition for their work or opportunities to grow their skills (hyper-invisibility), others felt targeted as Black women practicing emancipatory pedagogy (hyper-visibility). For example, Amara discussed during her interview how she was systematically pushed out of the classroom by her administration who professionally bullied her, then took steps to prevent her from being able to leave that work environment and continue her career at another school. During her participation in SC 3, Amara tearfully expanded on her experience:

> If I'm being transparent, my admin, they pushed me out. They pushed me out. I feel like, in a lot of ways I was an advocate for my students. A lot of them with the same types of issues that I experienced growing up, behavioral, all types of different things, I could relate to my students. And it was to the point where I wasn't willing to stick to a script that was given to me. And essentially, I tried to rework things to where they could understand it, and that wasn't working for my admin. And it was a consistent issue to the point where they decided to put me on an action plan and, yeah. I just couldn't do it anymore. And it wore on my mental health as well. And it makes me feel bad cause I feel like I turned my back on my students, and a lot of them were like, you know, "How can we keep you here?" Like a lot of my parents were like, "How can we fight to keep you here? You know, my child loves you. My child wants you here. What can we do?" And I'm just like, you know what? I'm tired. Like, I'm tired.

Amara worked hard to resist the harmful curriculum set in place at her school, seeking instead to provide her students with an equitable education. This was met with what she

named as harassment from her administration, which she reported to her district's human resources (HR) department before learning that her principal was close friends with her assigned HR representative. And while Amara could have taken additional steps to receive justice in this situation, her exhaustion from having to constantly fight to prove her value caused her to experience depression. Thus, as further notated in Figure 2, Amara demonstrated all the possible stress responses to her racial battle fatigue: psychological, physiological, emotional, and behavioral (Smith et al., 2011).

Other participants also experienced all Smith et al.'s (2011) interrelated types of stress responses to RBF. For example, Nina's RBF resulted in psychological, physiological, and behavioral stress responses that were cyclical—she took on extra work responsibilities to avoid facing the depression and anxiety caused by her RBF, which then led her to have insomnia, thus resulting in her consistently late arrival to work. This complicated web of internal conflict that opposed the participants' moral commitments to their students caused a sense of cognitive dissonance among several of them. While they valued the impact they were making on their students, many of them simultaneously felt powerless or that they were becoming part of the systemic issues within education. However, for other participants, their personal need that conflicted with their commitments was for professional growth.

Subtheme 2.2b: Professional Growth

The second subtheme of the *personal needs* category is *professional growth*, which captures some of the participants expressed need to broaden the impact of their pedagogical practices and move beyond what they believed to be confinements of teaching. The need these participants had for professional growth resulted from multiple

starting points. Some participants grew exhausted from the invisible tax imposed on them as Black women who practiced emancipatory pedagogy, as expressed by Nina during her interview: "At 24, while I had the energy for it, it was just so exhausting. And it was really beating me down and then to do all of that work, to make $50,000 a year?" While pay was not part of their motivation to teach, these participants began to feel burdened by the lack of adequate compensation for the tremendous amount of unpaid labor they put into their work. For others, their need for professional growth came from an internal desire to grow. Carmen expressed this desire during her interview:

> So, I went from, this is my jam, I teach what I want to teach. Even with like, we had state tests, my kids always did, they, we had the strongest scores historically in that entire school's history. I felt good about that, whatever, whatever. But I needed to move on because I wasn't getting better in my craft.

Like Carmen, other participants expressed their desire to move into leadership roles. While for most of these participants this move operated as the first step of their transition out of public education, that was not the case for Saige, who was still working as a school administrator at the time of data collection. In her words, "I never really felt like I left the classroom. I feel like I entered more classrooms." Saige's reason for leaving teaching was to make a bigger impact, recognizing that she was limited in the number of students she could reach as a classroom teacher. Marissa, who did ultimately leave education, expressed similar sentiments regarding her decision to move from a teaching role into a coaching one. She praised how her administration was so great, and how she was supported as a critical teacher so much that she was moved into leadership roles to support the critical development of other teachers.

For others, moving into administrative roles was not an option for them as they were contemplating leaving the classroom. However, immediately after leaving the classroom, fourteen of the fifteen participants remained in education through other means; at the time of data collection, twelve of the participants were still working in education in some capacity; and at the time of writing this report, that number increased to thirteen. This demonstrates the authenticity of the participants' commitments to valuing and liberating Black students, despite their personal need for professional growth. This also highlights the dual existence of the participants' love and resentment for the classroom.

Theme 3: Dissonance-Reduction Strategies

The final major theme that emerged from the data was *dissonance-reduction strategies*, and responded to RQ 3: How do critical Black women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession? In response to this research question, the participants made meaning of their decision to leave by adjusting the way they thought about it and allowing their love for teaching to coexist alongside their need to leave. This theme yielded the two categories of *transcendence* and *differentiation*, which depict the different ways the participants adjusted their thoughts to make sense of their paradoxical love for and departure from teaching. As depicted in Figure 2, this theme highlights the ways the participants worked to reduce the dissonance that resulted from their decision to leave teaching, despite their commitments to their students. Janay's final reflection articulates the cognitive dissonance prevalent throughout the data:

> Critical Black women teachers are creative, nurturing, and resourceful. We leave the classroom for many reasons that ultimately are around our work/life balance.

Critical Black women teachers find themselves frustrated with the duties of teaching outdated curriculum, maintaining safe spaces for all Black children, and attempting to dismantle systemic racism. It's overwhelming. Nevertheless, Black women still feel guilt when deciding to leave the classroom.

The internal conflict that arose from the participants' simultaneous commitment to liberatory teaching and decision to leave the teaching profession yielded multiple dissonance-reduction strategies. While ultimately all the participants left the teaching profession, there was variation in the ways they made sense of leaving as the most appropriate way to restore consistency between their values and actions. Some participants framed their departure as *taking a different approach* to making an impact (subtheme 3.1a), while others claimed they had to leave to *protect their students* (subtheme 3.1b), both of which are transcendence forms of dissonance-reduction strategies. Using a differentiation dissonance-reduction approach, some participants allowed their departure to be their opportunity to *fulfill their original career aspirations* (subtheme 3.2a), while others rationalized their departure as an act of *radical self-care* (subtheme 3.2b). Table 4 details the strategy or strategies each participant employed to reduce their dissonance.

Table 4

Participants' Dissonance-Reduction Strategies

	Transcendence		Differentiation	
	Taking a Different Approach	Protecting Students	Fulfilling Original Aspirations	Engaging in Radical Self-Care
Amara				✓
Nina	✓			✓
Janay	✓			✓
June	✓			✓
Adelaide	✓	✓		✓
Lena	✓	✓		✓
Carmen	✓	✓		✓
Noelle	✓	✓		✓
Jamie	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brittney	✓	✓	✓	✓
Joy	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marissa	✓		✓	✓
Jada	✓		✓	
Dionna	✓		✓	
Saige	✓			

Subtheme 3.1a: Taking a Different Approach

Taking a different approach is the first subtheme for the *transcendence* category and it captures how fourteen of the fifteen participants made sense of leaving by declaring that they were going to continue making an impact in education using a different approach. Often, the participants expressed that their departure from teaching allowed them to make a greater impact on the students and communities to whom they

were committed. For example, the dissonance experienced by Saige resulted from her desire to move into an administrative role, which would subsequently pull her away from being a teacher—a role she cherished. However, Saige was able to restore balance between her conflicting thoughts by realizing that a leadership position would allow her to impact a greater number of students:

> I left the classroom because I wanted to impact more kids. Uh, I realized that the few that I had within my classroom are the ones that highly benefited from what I was doing. And I had to identify that I was doing something right, and what I was doing was effective…And so, I left to become a coach. And in my coaching role, I worked with a lot more teachers that were receptive, and as a school we made a lot of gains…And then once I moved on from being a coach and I became an assistant principal…now I know that 900 students, if the teacher is receptive, almost 900 will be able to be impacted by what we're doing as a team now.

The magnitude of Saige's dissonance was not high, and her reduction strategy proved to be effective, as she is still working as a school administrator and maintains the attitude that she never left the classroom. Similarly, June reduced her dissonance by transcending her thoughts to be that leaving the classroom would allow her to make a greater impact:

> That's why I had to transition to the work that I do now. Because I was voiceless inside of the classroom. I had a huge impact but was voiceless. And I felt like people weren't taking me seriously, the things that I was raising. And so, I had to step outside of the classroom to build that space for myself and for others.

> Though June spoke with immense joy as she reflected on teaching, this

dissonance-reduction strategy was successful. June now works full-time as a community

organizer, where she uses her voice on a broader scale to demand the social justice for her students that she was working toward while teaching. However, different from Saige is that June's impetus for leaving was the lack of regard she perceived herself to have as a teacher. Thus, June had to engage in multiple dissonance-reduction strategies to make sense of her decision to leave. This was also the case for Nina, who had grown weary of teaching and acted without hesitation on her first opportunity to leave the classroom:

> And so, there I was, year three again and depressed. And the moment Teach For America offered me a job, I didn't care what it was, I was up out of there with the quickness. Cause I just knew I could not feel the way that I felt anymore. And it took time for me to unpack what those feelings were and why I was so depressed…Cause I was even more depressed when I left the classroom. No one talks about that. I felt like absolute trash the first six months I left. From that August when I turned in my resignation, all the way until January, I literally was depressed. I was not sleeping, I was not eating well, I was getting drunk every weekend because I was trying not to process how upset I was about the fact that I left those kids.

While Nina, like many other participants, was eager to leave teaching because she saw it as a way of escaping her misery, her decision resulted in intense guilt and feelings of depression. These emotional responses indicated that Nina's dissonance-reduction strategies were not successful, evidenced also during data collection as she shared her lingering feelings of guilt. For Nina, the strategy of transcendence to insist that she left to make a greater impact (and to engage in radical self-care) was not strong enough to counteract the love and commitment she had for her students. Failed dissonance-

reduction strategies were common among the participants.

Subtheme 3.1b: Protecting Students

Protecting students is the second theme under the *transcendence* category and captures how six participants made sense of their need to leave teaching. Specifically, some of them attempted to reduce their dissonance about leaving by discussing how they were beginning to cause more harm to their students than good. Adelaide was among these participants, and she, like Nina, experienced a great deal of guilt after leaving, signaling that her dissonance-reduction strategies did not produce the intended results:

> But it was just a lot of things that, at the time I wasn't even thinking, that I wasn't healthy. I wasn't in a healthy space of mind to continue to teaching people's children. But it was just that moment where like I needed space to breathe. And it was after leaving the classroom that I started doing all this reflection and thinking about the students, and crying, like bawling tears…So when you talk about, I didn't seem to think about that, [Nina], you were saying like that six-month gap, I didn't even think about how that was just me, I don't know, grieving. Grieving because you felt like you failed and not even sure why, but also knowing that, for your own health and prosperity, you had to leave.

Adelaide engaged multiple dissonance-reduction strategies to make meaning of her departure from teaching. However, as with several of the other participants, her transcendence and differentiation strategies were not strong enough to satisfy the guilt she felt for leaving. Carmen, who also rationalized her departure to make a greater impact, offered a profound articulation in her final reflection of how complicated the participants' feelings are of loving and leaving the classroom:

Reminiscing about my teaching career brings lots of intense joy but also trauma. Needing to leave my classroom for a taste of freedom although knowing I have left my students in bondage is a realization I would like to avoid because I am not sure there is adequate enough response. Going back to the classroom still entails engaging in anti-Black school policies and being ostracized when anything is done differently. Developing my own school still includes getting involved in systemic inequalities; even in all Black spaces, anti-Blackness still exists. So, while I'm sure there is a glass half full approach I could take to processing, right now it's really wild to consider leaving the magic of being a critical Black woman teacher. Being a teacher educator now is my best bet so far.

Carmen's reflection highlighted the feeling of hopelessness that several of the participants felt, leading them to engage in dissonance-reduction strategies that could resurface their motivation to continue working toward liberation. However, this reflection also brings to light another variation of the *protecting students* subtheme, which is that some participants left the education system as a whole because they felt they were contributing to a system that was harmful to their students. For these participants, dissonance was caused by the inconsistency between their need to abandon the system and their commitment to liberating their students. Brittney is one of these participants, and one of the ways she attempted to reduce her dissonance was through the rationale that her departure was an act of protection for her students. As she was quoted previously under subtheme 1.2a, Brittney believed leaving was necessary since she felt like she became "obligated to, I guess, play a part in this system that I didn't want to play a part in anymore."

For Brittney and others, departing from the teaching profession was the most plausible way to disconnect from the education system that they regarded as harmful. However, because that action was inconsistent with the commitment they had to valuing and liberating Black students, they reduced their dissonance by portraying their departure to protect their students. For Brittney, this strategy was effective, as evidenced by the satisfaction she felt by her decision. However, though her commitments to her students were as deep as the other participants, it is worth noting that Brittney, among others, entered the profession knowing her tenure would be limited.

Subtheme 3.2a: Fulfilling Original Aspirations

The first subtheme for the *differentiation* category is *fulfilling original aspirations*, which is a dissonance-reduction strategy that six participants used to make meaning of their departure. Using this strategy, they denied their decision to leave as a reflection of their love for teaching and reasoned it as a necessary step for them to move forward in their original career plans. Each of the six participants who used this strategy knew that teaching would not be a long-term career for them, so when they decided to leave, there was not a great magnitude of dissonance. Further, all the participants who used this dissonance-reduction strategy also employed the *taking a different approach* strategy, which made it easier for them to make meaning of their conflicting values and actions. Joy, for example, knew that she wanted to one day work on the college level. Thus, when the opportunity arose for her to work for a Federal TRIO Program, she eagerly accepted the offer with a small amount of dissonance to be reduced:

> But it's weird cause like I know I don't ever want to go back into the classroom and teach K-12. I know that like, I feel that in my bones. Like I just don't even, I

served my time. That's what I tell people. I did my time. It is what it is. I love

those kids, but I'm not done with that population, which is why with TRIO, I'm

super excited because I get to work with 6-12, preparing them for college. So,

helping them do things that's still going to get them through middle school, it's

gonna get them through high school, but exposing them to this world in ways that

they may have never imagined before…I want to still work within the school

system, but I don't want to work for the school system.

It was helpful that Joy was still working with her target demographic inside of schools.

This way, she no longer felt like she was contributing to systemic issues, and she was

able to continue the impact she was committed to making. Similar was the case for

Dionna, who left teaching to pursue her dream of becoming a talk host and delivering

more authentic and relevant content. Thus, in addition to her transcendence approach, she

reduced her cognitive dissonance when she decided to leave the teaching profession by

differentiating her commitments to social justice and her original career aspirations:

I know that we may have loved but left the classroom, but we are still teachers,

we still teach in some aspect, we still have a sphere of influence, we still can

communicate, we still resonate with the hearts of others, like minds or not…I was

preparing to leave the classroom, so I saved up. And then I started an earring

business during the pandemic…And I am currently in media school. So, one of

my desires is to be able to host whether, it's radio personality, events. Love all

things speaking.

Dionna, who expressed her desire to no longer teach content that she believed was

irrelevant to her students' lives, effectively reduced her dissonance by adjusting both her

thoughts and her actions. Each of the other participants who left teaching to fulfill their original career aspirations were also successful in their dissonance-reduction strategies. However, for those who also employed the final strategy, *engaging in radical self-care*, their dissonance-reduction process was not as seamless since they had higher magnitudes of cognitive dissonance.

Subtheme 3.2b: Engaging in Radical Self-Care

The second *differentiation* subtheme is *engaging in radical self-care*, which is defined here as the participants choosing to preserve their mental health and well-being as an act of resistance to their dehumanization as critical BWTs (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021). As stated by Wyatt and Ampadu (2021), "radical self-care as a Black feminist ideology/praxis has denoted a necessitated self-care act rooted in the principles of self-determination, self-preservation, and self-restoration" (p. 2). Accordingly, twelve of the fifteen participants reflected on their departure from teaching as an act of radical self-care. However, in the face of their seemingly contradictory commitment to social justice, this dissonance-reduction strategy was not effective for many of them. For these participants, reckoning with their need to prioritize themselves brought on feelings of intense guilt, since it seemed to imply that they needed to de-prioritize others. When asked to reflect on her initial feelings about deciding to leave to preserve her mental health, Lena shared a powerful analogy:

> I cried like a baby…It was like I was leaving my children to the enslavers so I could go on for freedom. That's the best way for me to describe it. I'm going to leave my babies in the hands of their enslavers so I can go be free. And it really, it still makes me like, well up. But it felt like I left my babies in bondage, so I could

go see what freedom feels like. And then what I'm trying to do is trying to one by

one, go back and get educators so they can see what it feels like and know what it

feels like to be free so they can go back for those kids. But it makes me emotional

to this day.

For Lena, this dissonance-reduction strategy ironically brought about added dissonance,

which she is now actively working to reduce through her current advocacy work. Nina

was another participant for whom this dissonance reduction strategy was not effective.

During SC 2, she tearfully shared her experience engaging in radical self-care:

And the one moment I chose myself over everybody else, I saw the exact

outcomes of what I had been avoiding the whole time as to why I was doing all

that work in the first place. Because I was doing it because I didn't want to ever

have to feel like if I choose myself, people are going to get left out. And then I did

it and then people got left out. And those people I actually knew by name, I knew

by face, I knew by background, I knew by community, and it made me feel even

worse and even more depressed.

Many of the participants, including Nina, knew that engaging in radical self-care

was necessary for their self-preservation, but accepting that as a valid reason to leave the

profession was not an effective strategy to reduce their cognitive dissonance. This is

evidenced by the prolonged feelings of guilt, shame, and even depression many of the

participants retained well after leaving. However, others, like Marissa, who also felt

guilty about prioritizing their wellbeing, did not abandon their dissonance-reduction

strategy, and maintained an optimistic view of the long-term benefits of their decision to

leave:

I felt some guilt, you know, but also, I felt relief in terms of, I can give myself a

minute to really think about what my next steps are going to be in this fight, and

in this protection and role as a student advocate, as an educator. In that sense I

was relieved, but I'm also, I'm pregnant, just having babies, so I'm tired, I'm

exhausted and stuff like that. I needed to go through some kind of healing overall,

you know, both professionally and personally to even be mentally ready to even

take any type of next steps.

Like Marissa who understood that radical self-care is a tool for social justice, others also

maintained that their departure was a necessity enactment of radical self-care, despite any

residual negative feelings they bore. Noelle, for example, plans to return to the classroom

one day, but she discussed in her final reflection how this can only happen after she has

taken the time to properly cared for herself:

For us, it wasn't that we were incapable or unwilling to put in the work as a

teacher, but teaching caused extrinsic issues such as poor mental health, strains on

family life and finances as well as the same systemic issues that our students

faced that made it hard for us to stay and be the teachers that we aspired to be. So,

I feel like there's a lot of mental work that has to be done before going into an

urban school because it does take a lot of time and dedication.

For many of the participants, leaving the classroom was their boldest

demonstration of self-care, and considering their longstanding commitment to working

for the liberation of others, citing radical self-care as their reason for leaving the

classroom ironically caused added layers of cognitive dissonance, rather than meeting its

intended goal of reducing their dissonance. Chapter 5 provides potential implications of

this finding as well as suggestions for stakeholders to support critical BWTs' engagement in effective radical self-care that helps to prevent them from feeling the need to leave the teaching profession altogether.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal much about post-service critical BWTs' complex relationship with teaching and their decision to leave the profession. The three major themes that emerged are connected in a way that highlights the cognitive process critical BWTs go through to reach their final decision to leave the classroom. The first theme, *cultural instinct vs. opposition*, emerged in response to RQ 1, which explored how Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools. This theme captured how the participants' identities as Black women created within them spiritual knowings and critical dispositions that formed their ability to practice emancipatory pedagogy. However, varying degrees of interpersonal and institutional issues that were in opposition to their work.

Thus, the second theme, *commitments vs. personal needs* emerged in response to RQ 2, which explored how critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession. This theme showed how the participants' cultural instincts established within them commitments to value and liberate Black students, but their opposition contributed to issues with their health and/or a desire to make a greater impact by advancing their profession. In response to these personal needs, all the participants decided to leave the teaching profession, which created within all of them varying magnitudes of cognitive dissonance. Accordingly, the final major theme, *dissonance-reduction strategies*, answered RQ 3, which explored how critical Black

women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession.

The participants' cognitive dissonance required dissonance-reduction strategies to regain consistency between their values and actions. Some participants employed transcendence strategies to make sense of their departure as fulfilling a greater purpose, while others used differentiation to mentally disconnect their love for teaching from their decision to leave. For some of the participants, these strategies allowed them to effectively make meaning of their paradoxical love for and departure from the classroom. However, other participants continued to struggle with their decision to leave teaching, harboring feelings of guilt for what they perceived as abandoning their students. Chapter 5 offers discussion on these findings and how they are situated in the broader literature concerning BWTs.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter provides a focused interpretive summary of the present study to present its scholarly significance as informed by Black feminist thought (BFT) and cognitive dissonance theory (CDT). Accordingly, the information is presented in five sections. First, the need for the study is reestablished and an overview of Chapters 1-4 is provided. Next, the study's findings, which are organized by the major themes, are situated within the broader literature to discuss the areas of alignment, deviation, and new insights. Following that discussion, policy and practice recommendations are offered to key stakeholders based on the implications of the findings. Potential future research possibilities are then discussed before the chapter closes with a final summary and conclusion.

As discussed throughout, the purpose of the present study was to contextualize the attrition of critical Black women teachers (BWTs) from urban schools. The need for this type of investigation derived from two conflicting streams of literature. The first is that which positions Black women as historical and contemporary forerunners for racial equality and social justice, especially within education. In line with their pre-colonial gender roles, enslaved Africans carried on their tradition of acting as "transmitters of culture as mothers, actual and fictive, as teachers, as social activists" (Royster, 2000, p. 110). Thus, once emancipated, Black women entered the teaching profession to uplift the Black race as a revolutionary act of political resistance (Dingus, 2006; Irvine & Hill, 1990; Perkins, 1981). This commitment has remained throughout generations, and today critical BWTs continue to operate as othermothers, foster an embrace of culture, resist oppression, and advocate for social justice (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; McKinney de

Royston, 2020).

Accordingly, the second stream of literature that prompted the need for this study is the consistently reported finding that, since the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, BWTs have remained underrepresented and maintained chronically high rates of attrition. According to the most recently published NCES data, BWTs make up only 5.3% of the teaching force, yet had a turnover rate of 21.8% in 2012 (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; NCES, 2016). Longstanding evidence of this post-*Brown* trend among BWTs has prompted scholars to advocate for policy changes on the school, district, state, and federal levels to address the variables BWTs cite as reasons for their attrition. However, even with consistent findings and strong policy and practice recommendations to remedy BWT attrition, the issue persists.

As such, the present study aimed to use BFT and CDT frameworks to disentangle the dual existence of BWTs' passion and effectiveness in the classroom, and consistently high rates of attrition. Chapter 1 provided descriptions of these frameworks and presented the research questions to guide the investigation, which were as follows:

1. How do Black women's intersectional identities contribute to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools?

2. How do critical Black women teachers' pedagogical practices impact their sustainability in the teaching profession?

3. How do critical Black women teachers make meaning of their decision to leave the profession?

Chapter 2 gave thorough historical and contemporary context to BWTs' role in urban education, particularly as it pertains to their protection and liberation of Black children in

the face of their own experiences of oppression. This discussion provided a foundation for the study's qualitative methodology outlined in Chapter 3. Specifically, Chapter 3 presented (a) how sista circle methodology was used to approach the RQs from a Black feminist epistemological perspective, (b) the three modes of data collection, and (c) the approach used for data analysis. The findings of this analysis were discussed in Chapter 4, which were organized by the research questions and presented as three major themes and twelve subthemes.

Comparison to Literature

The findings from this study provide a deep and thorough explanation to the ongoing attrition of BWTs. Some of these findings align with those of previous studies, some deviate from widely accepted narratives, and others offer new insights to be considered in current discourse regarding BWT attrition. This section discusses each theme from the present study, their implications, and how they fit into the broader literature.

Black Women's Experiences as Critical Teachers in Urban Schools

The first major theme, *disposition vs. opposition,* offered insight into RQ 1, which sought to understand how the participants' intersectional identities contributed to their experiences as critical teachers in urban schools. Across participants, findings revealed that their identities established within them instincts that allowed them to "create magic" or effectively engage their students in emancipatory pedagogy. They believed that several of their ways of knowing (e.g., how to engage their students, confronting anti-Blackness, etc.) were spiritual and could not be translated into best practices for other groups to adopt. This finding aligns with the broader literature that describes the pedagogical

legacy carried on critical BWTs, including the investments they make to liberate and protect their students from various forms of oppression. McKinney de Royston (2020) articulated the magnitude of critical BWTs' education of Black students:

> Black women educators' voices demonstrate how their political clarity serves as praxis; as the practical enactment of their distinct ways of knowing about teaching and learning within an anti-Black society. Their political clarity about anti-Black racism offers an intellectual intervention that shifts the unit of critique away from the Black child as "problem" toward unsettling hetero-patriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist logics that get leveraged within contemporary perspectives on teaching and learning and baked into pedagogy and curriculum; and a pedagogical intervention that repositions the Black child as worthy of care and protection and as always educable. (p. 380)

As McKinney de Royston alluded, the investments made by critical BWTs are political in nature, considering how their intersectionality positions them at the bottom of social hierarchies crafted from misogynoiristic ideologies.

This is another point of alignment between the present study's findings and that of literature that recognizes the "mental, curricular, and professional aggression" (Hancock et al., 2020, p. 409) BWTs must navigate while attempting to enact their emancipatory pedagogy (e.g., Acosta, 2019; Dumas, 2016; Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). While all the participants in this study maintained a clear passion for enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy, their efforts were opposed by tiered forms of resistance such as structural racism and administrative antagonism. Because of their identities as Black women, some of the participants felt invisible while others felt hyper-

visible. Some believed that, because they did not require administrative oversight or intervention to be effective, they were disregarded and lacked opportunities for growth. Similarly, other participants felt that their contributions were invalidated, and they were not taken seriously as educators. On the opposite end of the spectrum, other participants felt targeted and bullied as critical Black women teachers. They were told to tone down the ways they presented as Black women and engaged their students in emancipatory pedagogy. These participants received administrative pushback that, to them, was clearly in response to their intersectional identities. The professional marginalization and controlling images the participants sought to resist are not new phenomena in research on BWTs (e.g., Acosta, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Whitaker, 2013).

However, a finding from this study that adds to previous research has to do with working conditions. Among all the factors named by participants as contributing to their desire to leave teaching, lacking resources was not among them. Instead, the ideological root of critical BWTs' oppressive treatment is what ultimately pushed the participants out of the classroom. Aligned to Farinde-Wu's (2018) "urban factor" finding, all the participants in this study desired to teach in urban schools because they knew that was where the need was the highest for Black students. With that desire, they were not offput by having poor work facilities or being under-resourced. Fultz (1995a) made a similar evaluation of Black teachers in the 1920s and 30s, who he found had grown conditioned to the abysmal working conditions and were expected (by others and themselves) to still provide excellent and emancipatory instruction.

Research conducted in more recent years has also consistently found that the factors Black women cite as reasons they leave the profession include inadequate

compensation, poor working conditions, administrative support, and burnout (e.g.,

Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b; Farinde et al., 2016; Stanley, 2021).

Typically, recommendations are given to remedy the issues themselves rather than the

ideological root. However, some of the participants in this study reflected on having very

supportive administration, and they, along with others who did not have supportive

administration, became weary of their salary only after they realized how much unpaid

labor they were putting into their job. Instead of adequate compensation, their labor was

often met with poor working conditions (here, hyper-visibility, hyper-invisibility, and

racial battle fatigue) and administrative pushback. This is what caused them to burn out

from the profession. Simply put, the findings of this study reveal that there are no simple

fixes to BWT attrition. While working to liberate their students, they find themselves in

need of their own liberation from the oppressive structure of the education system.

Critical Black Women Teachers' Sustainability in the Profession

The second major theme, *commitments vs. personal needs*, addresses RQ 2, which

sought to understand how critical BWTs' pedagogical practices impact their

sustainability in the teaching profession. While all fifteen of the participants maintained

their commitment to valuing and liberating Black students, nine of them experienced

conflicting race-related stress responses to cumulative "distressing mental and emotional

conditions" (Smith et al., 2011, p. 220) such as receiving constant administrative

pushback, being marginalized and isolated, providing extensive unpaid labor, and

confronting and protecting their students from racism. As critical BWTs, the participants'

pedagogical practices solicited responses that made the teaching profession one that was

unsustainable for them. This is not a new insight. In her qualitative study of five BWTs,

Acosta's (2019) "participants expressed being positioned in ways that reflect negative stereotypical images of Black women despite their effectiveness in promoting student success" (p. 26). This sort of professional isolation and marginalization among Black teachers often leads to racial battle fatigue (Hancock et al., 2020; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; Stanley, 2021).

Smith (2008) coined the term *racial battle fatigue* (RBF) and described it as the cost of fighting against racism that can manifest in psychological, emotional, and/or physiological ways. In this study, nine of the participants experienced racial battle fatigue in response to their constant fight against racism through their pedagogical practices. As a result of their racial battle fatigue, six of the participants in this study experienced psychological responses including anxiety and depression, four of the participants experienced physiological stress responses such as insomnia and hospitalizations, and five of the participants experienced emotional/behavioral responses such as high-effort coping and neglect of responsibility. These conditions impacted several of the participants' sustainability, making them eager to leave the profession despite their love for teaching toward liberation. This is critical to note, since the liberatory instincts they all maintained meant that leaving the profession was the only considerable option they had, as opposed to changing their pedagogy or work environment.

The RBF finding aligns with research that discusses the health implications of misogynoir-induced stress among Black women. Regarding physiological health, for example, studies have shown that, across gender and race, Black women are at increased risk of concerns such as cardiovascular disease, chronic inflammation, and preterm birth (Kershaw et al., 2016; Margerison-Zilko et al., 2017; Saban et al., 2018; Troxel et al.,

2003). While some of the participants in this study found themselves hospitalized for physical health concerns, others were faced with mental health concerns such as panic attacks, anxiety, and depression. Seamlessly aligned with Pizarro and Kohli's (2020) reporting, these participants dealt with "ongoing and cumulative [experiences] with racial subordination [that] was exhausting and debilitating, and…[led] to a pushout from the profession" (p. 976). Pizarro and Kohli's study more broadly focused on urban teachers of color, however their data included narratives from BWTs who reported experiences starkly similar to those of this study's participants. Other scholars have produced similar findings in recent years related to the misogynoir, stress responses, and attrition of BWTs (e.g., Acosta, 2019; Stanley, 2021). These scholarly consistencies invite the need for BWTs' counternarratives regarding their career sustainability to be positioned as the crux of policy and practice recommendations.

Contextualizing Black Women Teachers' Exit from Teaching

The final major theme was *dissonance-reduction strategies* and responded to RQ 3, which explored how post-service critical BWTs make meaning of their decision to leave the teaching profession. The findings revealed that all the participants experienced varying magnitudes of cognitive dissonance due to the contradictory nature of their love for teaching and exit from the profession. Thus, they reduced their dissonance and made meaning of their decision to leave the profession by finding ways to allow their decision to coexist alongside their love for teaching. This finding is a new insight, as the current literature on BWT attrition does not place considerable value on the affective or cognitive components of their decisions to leave. For the most part, the critical BWTs in this study did not want to leave the profession—they felt that it was their only option for self-

preservation. The implications of this finding will be discussed further in the recommendations section.

Loving and leaving the classroom was a cognitive inconsistency among the participants. Thus, aligned with the BFT framework, they reclaimed their power to self-define by employing various dissonance-reduction strategies that fell under the categories of transcendence and differentiation. Those participants who used a transcendence strategy made meaning of their decision to leave by reframing their departure as fulfilling a greater purpose. For some participants, this meant they were taking a different approach to social justice outside the classroom by moving into new roles such as administration, education consulting, curriculum writing, or higher education. Others claimed their departure was part of the greater good because they were doing it to protect their students. For these participants, leaving the classroom allowed them to escape their participation in anti-Black and other oppressive policies and practices. These transcendence strategies brought ease to many of the participants, who loved their students and experienced guilt about feeling a need to leave. Thus, they were able to cognitively reframe their departure as a necessary way for them to make greater or more effective impacts on education.

Conjointly, other participants used differentiation dissonance-reduction strategies to make meaning of their decision to leave teaching. The differentiation strategies allowed them to separate and therefore maintain their love for teaching and the necessity of their decision to leave. These were the participants who spoke more confidently about their decision to leave since they knew that it was their only option to properly care for themselves. Cognitively, they were able to maintain that their love for teaching remained

genuine and coexisted with their need to leave. Six of the participants differentiated their love for and departure from teaching as a need to fulfill their original aspirations. These participants, while committed to social justice, knew before they began teaching that it would not be a lifelong career. Therefore, they were able to remember this and effectively curb their guilt when they felt that it was time to leave. However, four of the six participants who used this strategy also recognized leaving as an act of radical self-care, denoting that their original career aspiration was not the only reason they felt the need to leave.

In fact, as detailed in Table 4, all but two of the participants employed multiple dissonance-reduction strategies, demonstrating that the magnitude of their dissonance created negative emotions too great to be reduced by only one strategy (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020; Carver & Scheier, 2008; Vaidis & Oberlé, 2014). Specifically, literature on dissonance reduction highlights how critical one's affective state is on determining what reduction strategies they adopt, and to what extent the strategies are employed (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020; Carver & Scheier, 2008) In the present study, some of the participants' chosen strategies worked for them to be able to make sense of their paradox. However, this was the case for others who continued to harbor feelings of guilt and shame during data collection. This finding suggests that these participants' love for the classroom was so great that seemingly no rationalization could eliminate their guilt for leaving.

New Insights into the Attrition of Critical Black Women Teachers

This study's cognitive approach to understanding BWT attrition is novel, yet it provides significant contextual insight into literature that discusses factors affecting their

retention and why current mitigation efforts have not been successful. From a Black feminist epistemological perspective, the use of dialogue may be necessary for deeper examinations and more accurate interpretations of BWTs' reasons for leaving, and their lived experiences should be more highly regarded as a criterion for meaning. Additionally, the current literature on post-service BWTs is almost exclusively quantitative, which does not allow much room for depth in examination, and the current qualitative literature tends to focus investigation on BWTs who are presently still teaching. This qualitative study's focus on post-service critical BWTs allows for more authentic descriptions of the factors that contributed to their departure and the meaning they made of their departure.

The findings of this study, which derived from a diverse group of BWTs who taught at urban schools in various cities throughout the country, indicate that critical BWTs struggle with deciding to leave the profession. As reported by the participants, they would have remained in the profession to continue making an impact if they were not constantly subjected to oppressive policies and practices inflicted upon them and their Black students. This explains why many of them leave teaching to enter professions that allow them to continue their commitment to liberate within less oppressive work environments. However, the participants' continued feelings of guilt underscore the difficulty of their decision to leave. The weight of this burden that post-service critical BWTs carry with them after leaving was summed up by Lena who said, "it felt like I left my babies in bondage, so I could go see what freedom feels like." Like the pre-*Brown* BWTs, all the participants, including Lena, entered the profession knowing that they would go above and beyond for their students. Therefore, the labor they put into resisting

oppression was initially invigorating. However, over time they grew fatigued from providing such a great amount of labor and receiving back inadequate compensation, administrative antagonism, hyper-invisibility, and other forms of resistance to their efforts.

Recommendations for Key Stakeholders

The findings of this study suggest that there are no simple solutions to the issue of BWT attrition. Critical BWTs leave the profession because the current structure of public education does not allow them to engage in emancipatory practices fully and freely. Therefore, this section offers recommendations to various stakeholders, emphasizing the need for initiatives that improve the ideological and structural influences on BWTs' sustainability.

Policymakers: Apply a Critical Race Perspective on Education Policy

The reasons the critical BWTs leave teaching are rooted in oppressive ideology. Therefore, policymakers should apply a critical race perspective and examine education policies to determine which need to be modified, eradicated, or established to eliminate the structural barriers to liberatory education. According to Wilkinson (2005), social suffering is "a cultural struggle to reconstitute a positive sense of meaning and purpose for self and society against the brute force of events in which these are violated and destroyed" (p. 45). Thus, the findings of this study agree that, more than six decades after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, the U.S. education system continues to be a site of suffering for BWTs, thus making the teaching profession unsustainable for them (Dumas, 2014). The reason for this is because, when schools were ordered to desegregate, subsequent policies were not passed that welcomed the unique gifts of Black

students or the quality of Black educators into white educational spaces. Instead, the ideologies of white supremacy and anti-Blackness were embedded in education policy, entailing "an evacuation of the historical richness, intellectual intensity, cultural expansiveness, and political complexity of Black experience" (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008, p. 15).

Therefore, it is critical that policymakers employ a critical race perspective when engaging in education policy analysis, discourse, and implementation to eradicate the hegemonic and oppressive standards for teaching (Dumas & ross, 2016). Dumas and ross (2016) discuss how certain education policies need to be reexamined to understand their deleterious effects on Black students, and the findings of this study warrant a similar interrogation of how those policies impact BWTs. For example, current policies that regulate teacher education and define teacher effectiveness do not consider the value of critical BWTs' emancipatory pedagogies, which marginalizes them and pushes them out of the profession (Acosta, 2019). As education reform initiatives most often center the need to improve the academic performance of Black students, it is critical for education policymakers to support BWTs' sustainability, since they are key to improving Black students' academic success (Acosta, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Carrol, 2017). Thus, the following suggestions to policymakers may help them identify and eliminate hegemonic teaching policies:

1. Hire professional consultants who specialize in education policy and critical race theory, especially as it relates to intersectionality, to lead widespread trainings on whiteness, hegemony, anti-Blackness, and misogynoir in education.

2. Allow the consultants to lead discourse regarding the need to dismantle such policies and replace them with ones that welcome and support critical BWTs throughout teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention initiatives.

3. With the help of the consultants, apply learnings by modifying, eradicating, and establishing education policies that positively impact the professional sustainability of critical BWTs.

Educator Preparation Programs: Provide Relevant, Honest, and Supportive Development

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) must provide their pre-service teachers with relevant, honest, and supportive preparation. According to Johnson (2017), "historical African American women educators' social critiques on race and racism are *rarely* examined, particularly as they pertain to how their critiques influence their teaching practices" (p. 49). This marginalization sends BWTs into the profession underequipped to fully implement the critical pedagogies borne of their lived experiences, and unsuspecting of the likely resistance they will face (Hudson-Vassell et al., 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020). Therefore, teacher educators must properly teach about historical and contemporary BWTs' pedagogical excellence. To do so effectively, EPPs should first hire critical BWT educators to teach examples of BWTs' pedagogical traditions such as warm demander pedagogy, othermothering, womanist caring, and African American Pedagogical Excellence. These traditions should be clearly included among "best practices" to demarginalize the value of critical BWTs' pedagogical practices. Further, critical BWT educators must also develop their BWT candidates' capacity to implement such pedagogy by providing them opportunities to practice and

receive feedback. Simultaneously, it's critical that teacher educators facilitate conversations about why these pedagogies are not widely recognized, which, as articulated by Gist et al. (2018), "necessitates identifying and addressing systems of White male patriarchy and racist oppression" (p. 64).

Therefore, while working to develop the BWT candidates' pedagogical skills and self-efficacy, it is also critical that teacher educators support their development of radical self-care practices (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021). Currently, the context of education does not encourage the sustainability of critical BWTs, which compels their need for self-care that is "rooted in the principles of self-determination, self-preservation, and self-restoration" (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021, p. 2). Drawing on Wyatt and Ampadu's (2021) conceptual model of radical self-care, EPPs can provide the *self-care support* necessary for their BWT candidates to develop *self-care orientation*, *motivation*, *skills*, and *behaviors*. Example practices EPPs may consider include: (a) introducing their BWT candidates to radical self-care as a "social justice tool for Black wellness" (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021, p. 1), (b) creating sista circles as closed affinity spaces for BWT candidates (and potentially Black women faculty mentors; Richardson, 2018), and (c) implementing a self-care component to evaluation rubrics. By providing relevant, honest, and supportive pre-service development, EPPs are equipping critical BWTs with foundational knowledge and skills that will improve their professional sustainability.

Urban School Administrators: Resist, Recognize, and Reduce Racial Battle Fatigue

School administrators play an essential role in creating sustainable work environments for critical BWTs. Without properly understanding or regarding the value of their pedagogy, administrators may allow the creation of isolating or hostile work

environments for their critical BWTs (Stanley, 2021). Both implications can lead to RBF and are detrimental to urban schools, as losing critical BWTs means leaving students at an academic and social loss (Muhammad et al., 2020; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Thus, urban school administrators should remain intentional about resisting, recognizing, and reducing RBF among their BWTs. The first step in doing so is to gain thorough understandings of (a) the transformative value of critical BWTs' pedagogies, (b) the systemic oppressions they operate against, (c) the harm of misogynoir and the ways it manifests, (d) how one's own ideological perspectives support or restrain their social justice efforts, and (e) the psychological, physiological, and emotional/behavioral manifestations of RBF. Establishing this basis will give administrators the proper lens through which they can resist, recognize, and reduce RBF, and subsequently help to sustain their critical BWTs. Listed are potential strategies to do so:

- Provide BWTs access to spaces of support, safety, healing, and community, such as sista circles (Gaston et al., 2007; Richardson, 2018).

- Do not marginalize, attempt to tone down, or punish BWTs' critical pedagogies. Instead, determine how you may effectively use your platform to work alongside them, develop their pedagogical instincts, and position them as leaders among their colleagues.

- Establish anti-oppressive school cultures. This requires that all faculty and staff be required to engage in effective, ongoing critical professional development that emphasizes intersectionality (Lisle-Johnson & Kohli, 2020). Alongside this training, standards of behavior should be established and any personnel who perpetuates oppressive harm or apathy should be held accountable.

- As discussed in the previous section, administrators should provide their critical BWTs with the support necessary for them to develop and engage in routines of radical self-care (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021).

Black Women Teachers: Maintain the Priority of Your Health and Wellness

The final set of recommendations is reserved for critical BWTs since, from a systems perspective, their sustainability in the teaching profession ultimately hinges on the education power structure's commitment to anti-oppression. However, operating outside of this commitment in the current backdrop of education, scholars have identified strategies that BWTs may implement to prioritize their health and wellness while engaging in critical pedagogies. As the findings of this study suggest, critical BWTs struggle with various manifestations of racial battle fatigue, which ultimately push them out of the profession. Thus, implementing strategies that curb the onset or development of RBF may allow critical BWTs to improve their sustainability.

Previously mentioned among the recommendations to EPPs and administrators, practicing radical self-care is one way critical BWTs may center their wellness and resist RBF (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021). While ideally their self-care orientation, motivation, skills, and behaviors would have been developed during their pre-service preparation, this is presently not the typical case. Therefore, critical BWTs may strengthen their self-care orientation by recognizing it as a necessary component to enacting social justice efforts. Similarly, they may strengthen their self-care motivation by creating a regular self-care plan and making sure to follow through on it. This regular engagement in self-care practices is also how critical BWTs can improve their self-care skills and behaviors, as the consistency will allow them to build the necessary self-awareness of their affective

state and effective response strategies (Miller et al., 2019; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021).

It is important to reiterate that BWTs cannot effectively engage in sustained radical self-care efforts without proper self-care support. If their school administration makes it difficult for them to engage in supportive community without it feeling like an additional responsibility, it is likely that BWTs will not establish the orientation or motivation to engage in that practice of self-care. However, if they are able to do so, participating in sista circles as spaces for safety, healing, and community is a promising way to promote BWTs' sustainability (Richardson, 2018; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2021). In the present study, several of the participants discussed how their engagement in a sista circle was healing for them and wished they had a similar space while teaching. Nina offered the following reflection during SC 2 regarding her struggle with depression resulting from her RBF:

> It took me so long to sit down and try to figure out what had me upset, what had me sad, what I had control over and what I didn't, and I think the part that sucked the most was having to do it alone. So, like if I had a space like this, where I had people that could process with me and could allow me to feel and to help me understand what I was grappling with, it would have been so much easier for me to pull myself out of that hole faster. But it took so much longer because I didn't know what or where to even start when it came to unpacking all of those experiences at one time.

Thus, regular engagement in spaces of affirmation and healing could ease critical BWTs' experiences of RBF, mitigate their cognitive dissonance, and in turn improve their sustainability in the teaching profession.

Future Research Possibilities

The scope of this study was to gain a holistic understanding of BWTs' experiences from the perspectives of those who left the profession. However, with the goal of improving critical BWTs' sustainability, this investigation leads to several possibilities for future research. In general, the literature is lacking in-depth perspective from post-service BWTs, which does not allow for authentic understanding of their attrition. Therefore, future research should continue centering this perspective from different angles. For example, studies can compare post-service critical BWTs' experiences across demographics (e.g., grade bands, teacher age, lateral versus traditional entry, etc.). Additionally, this study's findings identified a heavy affective component to BWTs' departure from the profession, which is not presently represented in the literature. Future studies should explore this further, since critical BWTs' love for teaching and struggle with leaving suggest that exiting the profession may be a survival action that many of them would rather not take.

This study can also be extended to interrogate critical BWTs' experiences while they are still teaching, particularly in their beginning years in the profession. While the current literature on BWTs is mostly focused on in-service teachers, I am not aware of any studies that are angled to assess novice BWTs' likely trajectory and implement interventions that improve their sustainability. Further, future research could be longitudinal and follow the career trajectories of multiple critical BWTs. While regularly measuring degrees of RBF, this inquiry could employ sista circles as an intervention tool that supports their sustainability.

As such, another possibility for a future research study could be creating a scale that measures critical BWTs' career sustainability. Considering their "pedagogies are unique and reflective upon their identities, histories, and traditions" (Muhammad et al., 2020), it is necessary for a sustainability scale to be uniquely crafted specifically for BWTs and not adopted from pre-existing measurements. This research endeavor would allow for more accurate assessments of structural equity and more targeted intervention against RBF. A tested and reliable BWT sustainability scale could then be used to test the effectiveness of current retention efforts. Further, such a scale could also be adapted for BWT candidates to identify and improve how their insights and pedagogies are being developed in ways that support their career sustainability. Finally, one of the participants in this study went into administration as a way expand her educational impact, and it worked as an effective dissonance-reduction strategy. Thus, another possibility for future research is to study the initial intentions of critical Black women administrators, and how their work furthers their commitment to disrupting inequity.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to contextualize the attrition of critical BWTs to better understand the factors that would support their sustainability in urban schools. Accordingly, three research questions were developed that were framed by Black feminist thought and cognitive dissonance theory. The findings did not reveal simple solutions to BWT attrition, but rather deep cognitive complexities regarding their decision to leave the classroom despite their evident love for it. Thus, the following conclusions can be drawn from the study's findings:

- Critical BWTs carry on a legacy of emancipatory pedagogies that need to be recognized, protected, and developed. These pedagogies simultaneously teach Black students how to effectively navigate their schooling and build their critical consciousness about the oppressive ideologies that permeate their schooling.

- As it currently is, the teaching profession is unsustainable for critical BWTs because they are tasked to operate within a system that is designed to discourage movements of anti-oppression and liberation. This eventually pushes them out of the classroom in direct and indirect ways and leaving is often a decision with which they struggle, sometimes well after leaving. This suggests critical BWTs' desire but perceived inability to stay in the profession.

- BWT sustainability can only be truly ensured through the eradication of oppressive systems. In the meantime, their sustainability can be supported by implementing strategies to minimize their development of racial battle fatigue. One way they can do so is to develop radical self-care plans, which ideally should include routine engagement with communities of other critical BWTs.

This study provides crucial insight into current literature regarding BWT attrition. The participant inclusion criteria, qualitative design, methodological approach, and selected frameworks allowed for findings would warrant participation in authentic, extensive, and contextual discourse about why initiates have not been effective. The participants, all of whom were post-service critical BWTs in urban schools, were able to provide a unique insight on loving and leaving the profession that, to my knowledge, does not yet exist in the literature. This study's qualitative design provides deeper meaning to the current literature on reasons for BWT attrition, which is exclusively

quantitative as I am aware. The use of sista circle methodology along with Black feminist theory and epistemology created a study that centered Black women in its development, implementation, and analysis. Finally, the use of cognitive dissonance theory to frame this study provided a distinct perspective and allowed BWTs to reclaim the meaning of their attrition data.

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APPENDIX A: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FOLLOW-UP SCRIPT

Recruitment Follow-Up Script

Hello {name},

Thank you so much for expressing interest in participating in my dissertation study entitled, *Loving and Leaving the Classroom: Exploring the Attrition of Black Women Teachers in Urban Schools*. The purpose of this study is to contextualize the experiences of critical Black women teachers who left the profession in order to ascribe meaning to their attrition and identify measures to support their sustainability in urban schools. I hope to use the findings of this study to influence policies, practices, and structures that work to improve the sustainability of critical Black women teachers in urban schools.

Participation in this research includes first completing a 10–15-minute online screening questionnaire, which will confirm your eligibility, gather your consent to participate, collect preliminary information regarding your teaching background, and obtain your availability to participate in a pre-interview and a sista circle. The pre-interview will be 30-60 minutes on Zoom, and serve as a one-on-one time for me to ask questions regarding your route to teaching, teaching experiences, and why you considered yourself to be a critical educator. Finally, will also be asked to participate in a virtual sista circle based on your availability, which will last 60-120 minutes in length. The sista circle will be a time for you to engage in familial-style dialogue over Zoom with a group of other critical Black women teachers who left the profession. Collectively, your total time commitment for this study will be 100-195 minutes.

In order to be eligible to participate in this study, you must:
- identify as a Black woman
- be a former full-time teacher with at least three years of teaching experience in an urban school setting
    - *Urban school* is defined as one that serves majority students of color, and regularly faces challenges such as overcrowding, underfunding, and inadequate resources)
- identify as a former critical teacher who practiced emancipatory pedagogy
    - *Critical teacher* is defined as one who demonstrates political clarity and a commitment to disrupting inequity through emancipatory pedagogies
    - *Emancipatory pedagogy* is defined as using teaching methods that (a) held high expectations of your students, (b) made your students knowledgeable of the positive contributions of their race, and (c) worked to help your students develop a critical lens or consciousness to examine the root causes of their oppression and develop ways to end it (Duncan, 2019, p. 198).

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the screening questionnaire, which can be found here. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to email me back or give me a call at (803) 331-8360. Thanks for your consideration!

APPENDIX C: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Individual Interview Guide
[Interview Date]
[Interview Time]
[Interview Duration (trimmed duration)]

Participant Name:
Participant Preferred Pseudonym:
Date Consent Form Signed:
Name and Location of Urban School:
Years Taught:
Number of Years Taught at Urban School:
Grade and/or Subject Area Taught:
Current Age:
Current Profession

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to become a teacher in an urban school? When you initially made the decision to teach, what were your long-term goals?

2. Explain how your teaching style makes you to identify as a critical educator.

3. How would you describe your experiences as a critical Black woman teacher in an urban school?

4. Why would you say you ultimately left the teaching profession?

Is there anything that you think could have kept you in the classroom?

APPENDIX D: SISTA CIRCLE GUIDE

Sista Circle Guide
[Date]
[Time]

Participant Name	Participant Preferred Pseudonym

- Describe sista circles and their importance

- Facilitate introductions

  o Name, who you are, your teaching experience, what you hope to give to this space today, and what you hope to get from this space today

- A scholar named Dr. Gholdy Muhammad wrote the following in an article about the role of Black women in education:

  o Throughout time, Black women have given us a playbook and roadmap for social change, educational justice, and civic education. Black women have always been at the forefront of making education inclusive for all children. A tradition exists—historically and in contemporary times—of Black women speaking on behalf of Black children and deeply working toward the success of all children. If we consider our history, Black women… have been said to "uplift the race," and in the process uplift all of humanity. (p. 420)

    ▪ How does this quote resonate with you?

- When you think about your identity and how you show up as a Black woman, how much of that would you say contributed to your teaching experiences?

- What factors influenced your decision to leave the profession?

- What was it like to make the final decision to leave?

- **Final reflection**: Based on today's discussion, what insights did you gain about being a critical Black woman teacher who left the profession?

Researcher Thoughts: