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We Wear the Mask: Stories of the Black Girl Middle School Experience in Predominantly White, Elite, Independent Schools

Tina B. Evans
Loyola Marymount University, tevans7@lion.lmu.edu

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We Wear the Mask:

Stories of the Black Girl Middle School Experience in

Predominantly White, Elite, Independent Schools

by

Tina B. Evans

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

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in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2019

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Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
Los Angeles, CA 90045

This dissertation written by Tina Evans, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.
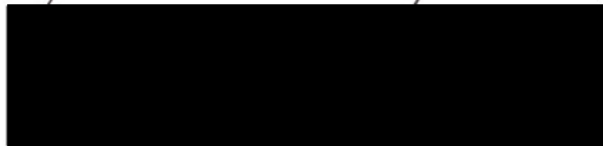
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Dissertation Committee

_____
Antonia Darder, Ph.D., Committee Member

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William Parham, Ph.D., ABPP, Committee Member

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Venus Evans-Winters, MSW, LCSW, Ph.D., Committee Member

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mom, Francis Davis Mims.

The only thing that I miss more than having you as my mother,

is having the opportunity to be your daughter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

x

ABSTRACT

We Wear the Mask:

Stories of the Black Girl Middle School Experience in

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This dissertation examined the experiences of Black middle school girls who attend predominantly white, elite, independent schools in the Greater Los Angeles area. Using Critical Race Theory, Black Identity Theory, and Black Feminism Theory as a conceptual framework, this qualitative research explored the role of race, class, gender, and parental support as contributing factors to the development of participants' racial consciousness. Utilizing timeline interviews and critical narratives to explore the lived histories of each student and parent participant, data analysis included content coding based on themes that emerged throughout the narrative examination. An analysis of the narratives of student participants revealed the absence of a Black faculty advocate, the burden of microaggressions, and the tension to define what it meant to be Black as important factors in the development of a racial consciousness. Additional findings based on data from the participants' mothers revealed their reasons for choosing independent schools for their daughters and an emphasis on nurturing Black identity and friendships to help guide them through critical racial experiences. Findings led to important recommendations to improve the educational experiences of Black girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools. These findings also indicated a need for further study of the

experiences of the Black girl middle school experience in predominantly white, elite,

independent schools.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We wear the mask that grins and lies,

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —

This debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see us, while

  We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

  We wear the mask!

— "We Wear the Masks," Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1896/1993, p. 71

"Mom, this time when you put my hair in a ponytail, can you make my hair long and straight so that it can move when I move?" As my five-year-old demonstrated a bounce

1

movement to get me to understand the sway of her desired hairstyle, I tried to conceal the anguish that undoubtedly peppered my face. I was immediately rocked to my core. Why did my child want straight hair and where did this longing come from? Her hair, with its corkscrew and zig-zag patterned curls, grew toward the heavens and created a nice, round Afro puff when pulled into a ponytail. Her hair could be braided, twisted, set in defined curls, and even rolled into a bun; the versatility caused both exhilaration and frustration during styling. In my mind, creating various hairstyles was a treasured past time in my home, one where my hands and styling tools worked magic creating designs and styles, and one that we shared together—or at least, that's what I thought. When I asked my daughter about her request for straight hair, I received a typical kid answer: all of her friends had that type of hair and she did not want to be different. I prevented myself from repeating the old parent adage that chastised kids for wanting to be and do everything like their peers. Instead, I thought about her response and realized that she was right: all of her friends did have straight hair and even if their hair was not long, per se, when pulled into a tight bundle, the resulting tail would sway and bounce. I did not want to straighten my child's hair, but more importantly, I did not want her to *want* to straighten her hair. I wanted her to love her natural curls and spongy texture. I wanted her to enjoy the versatility of her hair and share in the pride of our culture and heritage by doing so. I wanted her to feel good about what she looked like. I did not want her to want to be like everyone else.

As one of three Black girls out of a class of forty-five students and the child of a teacher at her school, my daughter stood out in more ways than one. She was one of few students of color and she also did not come from affluence. Perhaps my family should have thought longer before deciding to send our daughter to a predominantly white, elite, independent school where

2

her presence was extremely minoritized. While there were two other girls of African descent in her class, they were both multiracial, and my daughter was the only child whose parents were both Black. In the grand scheme of things, there was absolutely nothing wrong with my daughter wearing her hair straight; my hair had been straightened a few times over the years and it was never really a big deal to me. However, the underlying reason for her request was what gave me pause. I did not want my child to want to make a change to her appearance due to the fact that she was different from all of her peers. The truth of the matter was, the only reason that I was questioning whether or not the school was a good fit for my child was simple: she was Black and she was in the extreme minority.

My immediate search for reconciliation with what could possibly be a detrimental decision yielded frustrating results. My daughter insisted that straightening her hair would make it look better and make it more manageable. She also lamented about the fact that her peers would often touch her Afro puffs, pulling the coils out to see them pop back into place, which bothered her immensely. She also requested that I no longer pull her hair into a bun as her peers would often press the donut-shaped ball down into her head as if it were a button, often erupting in bubbling laughter after each press. She shared that she liked her hair and enjoyed the many styles we created, but that she was tired of having to explain and answer all of the questions about her hair. She just wanted to blend in.

But, what type of sacrifice would my daughter have to make in order to "blend in?" As a parent, I thought about other experiences that my child would encounter that might cause her to question herself, her culture, or even her race. As one of the few students of color in her predominantly white independent school, I wondered when she would experience racism and

how might these instances affect her sense of self. During class discussions, how would her voice be heard as one of the few Black students or even the only? What type of support would my daughter need from us to ensure that she had a positive experience? And, finally, but most importantly, would my daughter develop a positive racial identity amid the constraints of this particular educational context?

Unfortunately, I would receive an answer to a few of these questions sooner than I expected. In her fourth-grade year, my daughter had grown into a fun-loving, social child. Never one to miss out an opportunity for a playdate, she had developed several solid friendships over the years. She was also very active in sports and her height and coordination not only made her a fabulous addition to any sports team but also made her highly sought after by both her peers and coaches. After a particularly successful season of school sports with her friends, my daughter was suddenly left friendless. In noticing that she was being given the cold shoulder from a few of her "friends", my daughter began to seek out alternative activities during free and recess time. She often found herself wandering the halls, watching from afar, as other kids played soccer or basketball, which she loved, or attempting to find a teacher on duty with whom to converse. As her mother, and a teacher in the building, I noticed this change in her behavior and queried her as to its origin. She assured me that nothing was wrong and shared that it seemed like friends' groups were changing and she was fine with waiting until after the "shift" to re-engage in social interactions with her peers. It struck me as odd that my buoyant child would all of a sudden be withdrawn and left to wander alone during free time. I wondered what could be the root cause of the change, but decided to let it run its course.

After a week or so of this behavior, I received my answer. I was alerted by the administration that my daughter was the subject of what could only be described as a tactic to alienate her from the larger social group. Unbeknownst to my daughter, several of the other girls had agreed to take part in a pact, a promise where they agreed that they would no longer play with my daughter and would exclude her from the social aspects of the school day. This exclusion included but was not limited to play dates, sports teams, and recess free time. These activities would have gone on for a while had it not been for one girl who was asked to join the exclusion pact, refused, and shared the troubling story with her mother, who then alerted school administrators.

I was crushed. Not only had my child picked up on this exclusive behavior from her "friends", but she was unsure of how to respond and instead retreated. She was not even able to articulate to me how she had been feeling or how long the behavior persisted. She endured the feelings of rejection in isolation; unable to voice her thoughts or attempt to find a way out of the situation. As her mother, I was torn about how to address the situation. Was my child singled out due to her race? Why didn't she tell me what was happening to her so that we could address the issue together? More importantly, how would I be able to help her through this experience, so that she emerged much stronger than before?

In an unofficial poll of parents who had made the decision to enroll their melanated children in a predominantly white space, I queried many of them endlessly about why they had chosen an independent school above all others for their child. Their answers ranged from academic opportunities to social networks as they explained why they had taken a chance and made the commitment to place the fate of their child's education into the hands of such an

institution. When I asked parents specifically about their decision to have their child attend a predominantly white school in regard to their family's culture, many of them responded that they did not expect the school to meet the cultural needs of their family; therefore, they would not be disappointed if the school did not. But, why would parents accept admission to a school that was not inclusive of the culture that their family brought to the school? And, how would this invalidation of culture affect their child? It was questions such as these that motivated me as a parent of a Black child in a predominantly white, elite, independent school and as a Black educator and researcher committed to social justice to examine more closely this growing phenomenon.

Statement of the Problem

In America, the educational experiences of Black people have always been problematic. Mired by race and racism, Black Americans' quest for education has been an exercise in perseverance and fortitude. Major events that have shaped this nation have also had an effect on the education of Black people in America. During slavery, Anderson (1988) asserted, southern colonies forbade enslaved Africans from learning how to read, many of whom sought education clandestinely, as the pursuit of such endeavors was one of great risk. Institutionalized "compulsory ignorance" laws remained in place until the end of the Civil War of 1865 and effectively limited enslaved Africans attainment of literacy. Anderson said:

> Hence the South's postbellum movement for universal education is best understood as an
> expression of the ex-slaves' beliefs and behavior. External assistance notwithstanding,
> the postwar campaign for free schooling was rooted firmly in the beliefs and behavior of

former slaves. W. E. B. DuBois was on the mark when he said: "Public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea." (p. 6)

After Emancipation, newly freed slaves continued an educational pursuit amid the oppressive structure of Jim Crow laws as they created freedom schools and established historically Black colleges and universities, working tirelessly to educate themselves and mobilizing to bring public education to the South for the first time between 1865 and 1877 (Anderson, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Throughout the 20th century, Black Americans ascribed to the meritocracy of the dominant culture, believing in the utility of school to help them abscond their [often] impoverished circumstance (Carter, 2008). However, Black Americans continued to be denied access to quality education from which their white counterparts benefited greatly; thus, resulting in new legislature born from *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which called for the desegregation of white, public educational institutions. Unsurprisingly, this decision was met with extreme opposition from the ruling white class which held oppressive views of the Black race. With "all deliberate speed", public schools in America were desegregated and became the sector in a society where the crippling effects of racism, slavery, and segregation on Black Americans were made immaculately clear (Brown v. Board, 347 U.S. 483, 1954).

Initially informed by race, class, and gender, inequities in education have a documented legacy in the history of education (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Span, 2015). It is a history replete with centuries-long legal denial of education to Black people (pursuit of which was punishable by death); attendance at segregated public schools with subpar, often outdated materials; and a historic ruling that, in theory, granted Blacks access to once-segregated schools, but in actuality

brought to surface a number of other race-related issues. Scholar James Anderson (1988) contended that Black students in the South did not experience universal secondary schooling until 1968, which speaks to the achievement gap, or educational debt between Black students and their white counterparts. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) offered a summation of the historical wrongs done to Blacks in America and the damage they have caused: "Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole" (para.1). The impact and legacy of slavery, segregation, and racism have persisted and the notion of a "post-slavery" and "post-segregation" society is not the same as remedying the harms caused by the former laws and practices (Span, 2015).

Nevertheless, Black Americans met post-segregated public schooling with a renewed commitment toward educational achievement and continued to fight for the right to equal educational opportunity. By the 1980s, however, Black adults had become disillusioned by the failed articulations of public schooling and were choosing non-public educational options for their children (Jones-Wilson, Arnez, & Asbury, 1992). In a 1982 study entitled "High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared," Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) indicated that not only did students in Catholic and other private secondary schools academically outperform those in public schools, but also that these schools were, on average, more racially integrated than public schools. In the fall of 1999, approximately 26% of private school enrollment were minority students, with 9% being Black students. Parents of minority students, both Black and Latino, were increasingly embracing school choice to seek private schooling opportunities as an alternative to public schooling. Unlike public schools, which

struggled under the bureaucracy and top-down institutional changes imposed by the government, private schools offered parents the opportunity to participate in the education of their children and build relationships with both teachers and the institution which often resulted in the promotion of high levels of student academic achievement (Carper & Hunt, n.d.).

However, private schools have not been immune to criticism. They are often disparaged for their rising rates of tuition and noncompliance with government-sanctioned accreditation programs. Additionally, private schools are also critiqued for their tendency to be "elitist." The Free Dictionary defines elitism as "the belief that certain persons or members of certain groups deserve favored treatment by virtue of their superiority, as in intelligence, social standing, or wealth" ("Elitism," 2016). The private school admissions process differs from public schools in that students are chosen to attend, which suggests that these schools hand-pick their student body. According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), the 2015-2016 school year had an average enrollment of 66.6% European American students, 29.0% students of color, with 6.4% identifying as African American (Black) and another 8.1% identifying as multiracial. With a median tuition for day schools (grade eight) at an average of $20,358, a median of 22.7% of students on financial aid and another 5.6% on tuition remission grants, which, on average, covers less than half of the proposed tuition and additional fees, the conclusion can be drawn that the population of students who attend private, independent schools are members of an elite class and are predominantly white (National Association of Independent Schools [NAIS], 2016).

Thusly, this study questioned whether Black families were exchanging an assumed post-racial educational system for one in which the intersectionality of class further complicates their

educational pursuits. Public schools have long been criticized for providing subpar education to minority students, resulting in a significant number of families choosing nonpublic educational opportunities for their children (Jones-Wilson et al., 1992). Some of the movement toward school choice can be attributed to the existence and prevalence of the so-called achievement gap, which has been described as "a matter of race and class" that "persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress report, the gap between Black fourth graders and their white counterparts in reading scaled scores was 26 points, although this gap is narrower than the 32-point gap revealed during the first reading assessment year in 1992. In fourth grade mathematics, the gap was 24 points (Education Commission of the States, 2015). Using long term trend data, we see that although this gap has narrowed since the test was first administered in the 1970s, it has persisted over time (Education Commission of the States, 2015).

In the present-day United States, more Black families are opting to educate their children in places other than public schools. The emergence of multiple options for school—homeschooling, charter schools, or private schools (parochial, sectarian, and independent)—have allowed Black families to exercise school choice in finding the best environment in which to educate their child. As enrollment in public schools continues to decline, many Black families are looking elsewhere for options to educate their children. Although overall public school enrollment increased from 48.5 million to 50.0 million between fall 2003 and fall 2013, and is projected to increase to 51.4 million in the fall of 2025, the number of Black students enrolled in public schools has decreased from 8.3 million to 7.8 million (National Center for Education

Statistics [NCES], 2016). In addition to Black parents exercising school choice, this appearance of decline in Black student enrollment in public schools can also be attributed to the growing shift in demographics within large school districts, where Latina/o student populations have significantly increased in the last decade.

Assessing the history of Black schooling in public education in the United States, one finds that parents often view independent schools with a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling (Carter, 2008; Herr, 1999), seeing them as viable options toward academic success. However, it is naive to think that the predominantly white, elite, independent school environment in which Black students are expected to achieve is unaffected by the pervasiveness of racism. Thus, there must be a critique of these spaces to "unmask the persistent and oppressive nature of the normativity of Whiteness" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29), understanding that these educational opportunities may not be in the best interest of marginalized groups, and exist instead to serve the elite (Herr, 1999).

Given this historical background and the current state of urban public schools, many would argue that parents of students of color should exercise school choice and seek alternative educational opportunities for their children. Much of popular opinion would agree that the public schools in the US are, by and large, failing students of color. A quick analysis of race and the resegregation of the American school system (Stancil, 2018) can provide even the staunchest skeptic with fodder to describe how the quality of education for the majority of students of color in America remains fundamentally unequal. Consequently, the enrollment of Black students in public schools is on a steady decline and is projected to continue this downward trend (NCES,

2016). Thus, private schools and school choice have grown in popularity as they are seen as having the potential to provide viable options for quality education (Herr, 1999).

Unfortunately, the pervasiveness of racism is so normative within the school walls of American schools—public or private—that few are surprised when it appears (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As many Black families are trying their hand at private school, namely independent schools, instances of race relations often characterize their experiences. Given the "bubble" of protection afforded to the dominant culture at predominantly white, elite, independent schools, instances of racism often go unchecked or even acknowledged, leaving members of marginalized groups to reconcile their feelings, heal, and endure the experience on their own (Carter, 2008; Fordham, 1988).

For Black families, education is a liberatory process (Freire, 2000) by which they can ascend from the thresholds of economic instability. Despite the shifting view of the role of parents in education, many parents still believe that the school knows best and will act in the best interest of their child (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). However, the intersection of racism and classism that manifests in an independent school presents challenges for the racial development of Black students (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Fordham, 1988).

Purpose of the Study

Understanding the racial identity development of Black students is critical in the context of independent schools. Many predominantly white independent schools operate under a melting pot theory (Bakari, 1997), which assumes that everyone will fit into the mainstream ideals and culture. However, assimilation for Black students comes burdened with racial and cultural challenges. There exists a gap in the literature surrounding the particular context of Black

students in K-12 independent schools and an even greater dearth exists in terms of the middle school experience, and, specifically, that of Black girl middle school students. This research sought to explore the influence of independent schools on the racial and cultural identity formation through an examination of the narratives that emerged when Black girls describe their middle school experiences at predominantly white, elite, institutions. An additional purpose of this study was to better understand how Black mothers perceive their daughter's school experiences and the formation of their cultural identity as middle school students at predominantly white independent schools.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions in an effort to expand our understanding of the phenomenon of the Black girl experience in predominantly white, elite, independent schools and how their mothers perceive their school experience.

1) What issues or themes emerge when Black girls describe their experiences at predominantly white, elite, independent schools?

2) What do Black girls identify as positive experiences within this context and what do they believe should change, in order to enhance their experience?

3) How do mothers of Black girls in predominantly white, elite, independent schools perceive the experiences of their children with respect to their issue of racism?

Conceptual Framework

Racial and ethnic identities are manifested in very conscious ways (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). "[R]acial identity is a surface-level manifestation based on what we look like" and, therefore, has deeper and broader implications for how we are treated (Chávez & Guido-

DiBrito, 1999, p. 40). Ethnic identity, although understood as a social construct, was defined by Yinger as

> [an] individual's identification with a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and share segments of a common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients." (Yinger, 1976, as cited in Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 40)

These points of connection over shared traditions, values, and beliefs allow individuals to make sense of the world around them and to have pride in themselves. However, if positive ethnic group messages and support are not available to counteract the negative public messages, stereotypes, and microaggressions, individuals might experience difficulty in negotiating a healthy identification and view of their own ethnic identity (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999).

One way that identity manifests is in the acquisition of language. In many European, white-led, colonized societies, the language holds the power and culture. Frantz Fanon postulated the juxtaposition of a Black psyche in a white world and describes the phenomenon of Black men in the French Antilles as one where "the more [B]lack Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being" (Fanon, 2008, p. 2). Fanon ascribed this same behavior to any race subjected to colonization and asserts that the Black man has two identities: one with his fellow Black man and the other with white people. It is this "other" identity that is normalcy, the ideal, the standard in a colonized world. Therefore, advancing within this sphere—through education, status, and income—a Black man finds himself getting closer to the ideal, to the norm; closer to what it means to be white.

Unfortunately, in order to engage in this status shift, the Black man must reject his Blackness—an escape from his cultural originality—lest he be admonished from the broken-down borders created by colonialism (Fanon, 2008). This "disalienation of Blacks" affects the psyche, particularly because of the impossible idea of one's ability to ascend to whiteness (Fanon, 2008, p. 201). Moreover, Fanon further espoused the concept of race and denied that it can be transcended in a racist society (Fanon, 2008). Therein, the experience of racism in a white society creates psychological problems for Black people through the kinds of cultural representations it makes available and the access to opportunity it allows.

The experiences of Black students in predominantly white, elite, independent schools can be categorized as an exploration of both racial and ethnic identity. Black students in predominantly white independent schools are not only influenced by their particular ethnic group, but also those outside of it. Fanon (2008) moreover asserted that the influence of the dominant race upon the cultural originality of Black people contributed to an inferiority complex to which Black people either engaged with or full out denied. Once engaged, however, Black people often traded their culture for that of the dominant and wore the proverbial "mask" in their efforts to become more assimilated and accepted. For Black girls, this phenomenon of wearing the mask is further complicated as their experience with both race and class intersects with their gender identity and location within society (Few, 2007). As a result of their racial and ethnic identities, Black students bring vastly different experiences into the learning environment of independent schools (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), and an examination of how they construct their identities can help to foster healthy, positive identity construction in Black youth (Carter, 2008). The Cross (1971, 1978) model of Black Racial Identity is helpful to understand this

experience; particularly as it can be applied to a predominantly white space. The "white space" as defined by Anderson (2015) refers to any social setting or public place that has an overwhelmingly white presence and is often considered "off limits" by people of color.

Unfortunately, attending a predominantly white, elite independent school presents challenges toward the formation of a healthy racial and ethnic identity construction in Black students (DeCuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2011). Many Black students in predominantly white, elite, independent schools experience social isolation, increased experiences with racial discrimination, and feelings of cultural alienation (Carter, 2008; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The presence of a normative culture of Whiteness characterized in predominantly white independent schools upholds the presence of Eurocentric ideologies that do not include or affirm the positive experiences of Blackness.

Moreover, Black students are generally "recruited to private independent schools in part to affirm the school's commitment to diversity, while simultaneously being asked to enter a mainly Euro-American world with rules not of their making" (Fordham, 1991, as cited in Herr, 1999). Black students, consequently, are usually one of few students in their classes, have limited to no interaction with faculty and staff who look like them, and learn from a curriculum that ascribes to the White hegemonic meritocracy of education (DeCuir-Gunby & Dixson, 2004; Fordham, 1988; Herr, 1999). In an article on elite private schooling, Herr (1999) included a quote by Janice, a 17-year old student participant from her study, who spoke about the environment in private schools:

I think that parents need to realize that this is not an easy environment to deal with. It takes a lot of strength. It takes a whole lot of everything to be able to survive and you

16

want to be able to do more than survive; you want to be able to do well… my dad wanted

me to go to a private school because he believes that the only way that I can get ahead is

through education. (p. 117)

The ability to serve the needs of Black students is one of the greatest challenges for

predominantly white educational institutions. Combining the strengths of Critical Race Theory,

Black Identity Theories, and Black Feminism (see Figure 1), this study incorporates a conceptual

framework that will support an analysis suited to contributing to the field of critical pedagogy

and add to our more nuanced understanding of Black girls' experiences and needs within

predominantly white educational spaces.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) places race at the center of an analysis of educational

inequities. Stemming from the field of critical legal studies, CRT was developed upon three

propositions: (a) race continues to be significant in the United States; (b) U.S. society is based on

property rights rather than human rights, and (c) the intersection of race and property creates an

analytical tool for understanding inequity (Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT

has been applied to a variety of educational contexts to "explore the transformations of the

relationships among race, racism, and power" (Bell, 1992, as cited in DeCuir-Gunby, 2007, p.

28). Racism here is defined as "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions
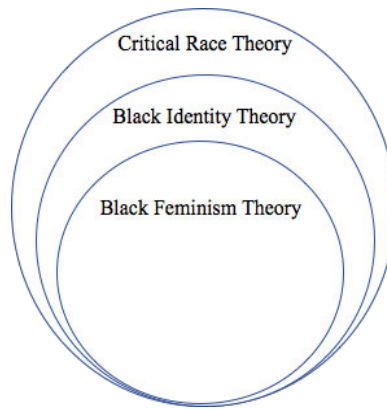
Figure 1: Conceptual framework

involved, defend the advantages whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial

minorities" (Wellman, 1993, as cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55). CRT analyzes how

race and racism perpetuate social disparities between marginalized racial groups (DeCuir &

Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and uncover "ingrained societal disparities that

support a system of privilege and oppression" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54).

CRT is a useful conceptual framework to examine the role of race in the educational

experiences of Black students. The CRT framework is based upon the following five tenets: the

permanence of racism (this explains how racism is endemic to our society), whiteness as

property (addresses the value of being white), interest convergence (when people of color

advance only when whites benefit), the critique of liberalism (the persistence of racial

inequality), and counterstory-telling (an alternative story told by people of color in opposition to

the dominant narrative) (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Hiraldo, 2010).

Black Identity Theories

Black identity development, conceptualized with the "Nigrescence" model formulated by

Cross (1971) and later modified by Helms (1984, 1986, 1990, as cited by Constantine,

Richardson, & Benjamin, 1998), remains one of the most enduring sociological models in discussing Black identity formation. Nigrescence refers to the developmental process of becoming Black (Cross, 1991). Cross (1971, 1978) proposed a multiple-stage model wherein each stage described implications for a Black person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. The stages include Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization/Commitment. This model begins with the negative belief that Blacks are inferior to whites and ends with an individual's commitment to challenge and obliterate systems of oppression for Blacks and other marginalized groups (Constantine et al., 1998).

First posed in 1903 by W.E.B. DuBois, double consciousness is a useful construct to describe the internal conflict experienced by the racialized communities in America, particularly Black people, who feel the pressures of simultaneously existing in multiple worlds, making it impossible to have one unified identity (DuBois 1903/1968). As an extension, critical bicultural theory (Darder, 2012) explores the impact of dominant cultural forces on the lives of students from disenfranchised and racialized communities. From this standpoint, Black students, whose lives and culture have been historically excluded from mainstream culture may experience a sense of racial dissonance within the context of predominantly white schools. That is to say, the process of Black identity development in not soley driven by Black culture. Rather, growing up in a racist society while simultaneously living and growing up within a particular ethnic and racial group with its own culture has the capacity to influence Black identity development (Jackson, 1976).

Black Feminism Theory

Black feminism examines the politics of location in the lives of Black women and the groups of which they are a part. Stated differently, "Black feminism allows a creative space where according to one's own social location or station in life, Black women can "legitimately" place a foot in two or more realities—what one individually and/or collectively may perceive of what it is to be "Black" and what it is to be a "woman" simultaneously" (Martin, 1993, as cited in Few, 2007, p. 454). Black women, and therefore Black girls, exist within the matrix of intersectionality; a specific location whereby multiple systems of oppression work in tandem to subjugate, marginalize, and amplify their "otherness". This positionality not only influences how Black women have come to define their shared and diverse experiences, but also creates a transformative space for Black women and girls to develop both a gender and race consciousness.

In all of the literature on mainstream racial identity theories, it is assumed that a positive sense of oneself as a member of one's group, which is not based on any assumed superiority, is important for psychological health (Cross, 1971; Tatum, 1992). The inclusion of racial, cultural, and gender identity models in understanding student development is critical to better address the needs of Black students, and Black girls in particular (Bakari, 1997). Given the prominent role of CRT in education, Black identity, and Black feminist theories, the literature related to each is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Methodology

Through the use of critical narratives and counter-storytelling, this study utilized critical race methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to critically engage the phenomenon of

Black girls' middle school experiences in predominantly white, elite, independent schools and the perceptions of their mothers about these experiences. This methodology is consistent with the counterstories principle and integral to knowledge construction efforts within a CRT and Black Feminism approach. The power of critical narratives allowed participants to shared their lived histories and experiences in a parameter-less experience within the context of predominantly white, elite, independent schools.

Utilizing purposeful sampling, I accessed contacts from a highly selective counseling and placement organization for students and families interested in independent schools in the Greater Los Angeles area (The Partnership). Through this method, I identified four middle school girls and their mothers who identify as Black and had attended an independent school for their middle school years (grades 6–8) and also currently attended an independent school at the time of the study. All student participants attended a middle school in the Greater Los Angeles area that either serviced solely middle school (grades 7–8), middle and upper school (grades 6–12), or operated as a K–12 independent school.

I engaged middle school participants through the use of timeline interviews as a method of life history research (Adriansen, 2012). This activity was conducted in an individual setting directly preceding the individual narrative sessions. Student participants were prompted to identify instances during the three years of middle school in which race was an intermediate factor that influenced the outcome of the situation. While using the timeline as their guide, I invited students to individually share the racialized experiences they identified on their timeline through critical narratives, which allowed them the opportunity to tell their stories without obstruction.

Following data gathering, which included both the timeline interview and critical narrative sessions with each student participant, I also engaged the mothers of each student in an individual critical narrative session. During the parent participant critical narrative session, I invited each of them to share about the racialized experiences that they identify as having affected or impacted their child during their middle school years. The purpose of the parent participant critical narrative session was to get a better sense of how mothers of Black girls in predominantly white independent schools perceive the school experience of their daughters and how they perceived their own contribution to their daughters' racial consciousness development amid the racialized experiences they encountered. The data gathered was analyzed for common themes, trends, and issues that emerged to further understand the phenomenon posed by the research questions for this study. Specifically, I looked for suggestions from the participants and their mothers that might encourage better outcomes for incidents of racism and that may also identify practices to improve the overall experiences of Black middle school girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools.

Positionality

I enter this research as both a Black parent and teacher at a predominantly white, elite, independent school. Having begun my teaching career in public schools and as a personal product of them, independent schools were new and uncharted territory for me. As a teacher, I have great autonomy in how and what I teach, although a diversity of ideas and actions are, at times, undervalued in my school. As the authority in my classroom, I have many opportunities to disrupt the liberal bubble of privilege in which many of my students arguably find themselves. My sphere of influence places me in spaces where I can encourage students, parents, and

colleagues to challenge the dominant paradigm and to turn their thoughts into action. As a parent, I believe, in some regard, that independent schools can provide a better experience for children, but this is not the reality for all children. Independent schools boast a safe environment, access to greater resources, higher teacher quality and offer an increasingly diverse population. However, as a Black parent, I am concerned by the potential effects that a predominantly elite and white educational community will have on the growth and development of my own Black children—particularly my daughter—as I work to foster a positive sense of self and identity in them. I also have a vested interest in the racial identity development of my kids' Black friends, particularly because they are also being educated in a predominantly white space.

Moreover, although I may feel connected to the school community and powerful enough to make change where it is needed, I feel alone, for the most part, in this fight. Similarly, I know that other Black families feel as if they are not truly part of the larger school community. Black families take a risk by enrolling their children in predominantly white institutions, but many do so for academic value and not for the promise of joining an inclusive community (Arrington, Hall, & Stevenson, 2003). However, I contend that schools should serve as a place for both academic and personal growth, as they have a significant impact on the development of a positive racial identity in students.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

In general, qualitative research occurs within the natural setting (Creswell, 1997). Therefore, one limitation associated with this study is related to validity and reliability as it would be difficult to reproduce the exact parameters of this study in subsequent investigations.

Additionally, this study did not seek to generalize conclusions for all Black middle school girls in independent schools. Instead, the study aimed to present rich critical narrative data that, through a critical approach, will contribute to the growing body of literature and knowledge about the experiences of Black girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools. An additional limitation is researcher bias. The researcher is both a Black parent and teacher at an area independent school, which could contribute to bias about the experiences of Black students within the independent school environment. However, the random sampling method through which access to participants was gained helped to reduce the potential for researcher bias, as the participants and their schools were unknown to the researcher prior to the study.

Delimitations

This study assumed that the experiences of Black girls are of critical importance in predominantly white, elite independent schools. Research about this particular group in independent schools is scarce. Therefore, Black girls were chosen as the subject of study to bring credence to their experiences and allow them the opportunity to voice their experiences in their own words. This study focused on Black girls whose parents have chosen to educate their children in the independent school community for their middle and high school career. Additionally, participants in the study were Black middle school girls who have chosen to continue their transition into upper school at predominantly white independent schools. This study assumed that adolescents of middle school age have had critical experiences related to race in their predominantly white independent schools.

Link to Social Justice

The risk that Black families take when enrolling their children in independent schools results from the fact that these schools were not built and are not equipped to do the kinds of social justice work that is required to repair the historical damage of educational discrimination against Black students (Fordham, 1988). Freire (2000) would question the independent school's true commitment to humanizing Black students, questioning whether the admission of Black students into predominantly white spaces is an example of transformative (true generosity) or charity (false generosity). As Bell (2005) posited, "the interest of [B]lacks achieving racial justice is accommodated only when and for so long as policymakers find that the interest of [B]lacks converges with the political and economic interests of whites" (p. 1056). This interest convergence, as evident by the demise of *Brown v. Board* (1954), the contestable 1957 desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, and the current diversity and inclusion-focus of predominantly white independent schools, speaks to the existence of racial discrimination and how systems of oppression are challenged only when it "is bad for the country's image" (p. 1056). Again, I ask, are Black families exchanging an assumed post-racial educational system for one in which the intersectionality of class further complicates their educational pursuits? An exploration of this question requires an investigation of the current research on Black students and their history with schooling in the United States, an understanding of race relations and racism, and an in-depth study into the formation of racial identity that may or may not contribute to Black students' success.

Schooling should not be a site where students are indoctrinated to support imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy or any ideology (hooks, 2003). Elite independent schools

must reject their complicity in oppression and work diligently to understand its effects on their Black students if they are to have a fair chance toward true success. It is my hope that an independent school that is committed to enacting these types of social changes would enhance the critical consciousness of the entire school body—and not just the Black students. In this view of social justice, an educational vision of liberation, humanization, and larger social change becomes an actuality and not just rhetoric of "pie in the sky" possibility.

Definition of Terms

The following key terms were employed throughout this study. An understanding of how these terms function is essential to the central idea of this study.

Black: As race is a salient factor in identity formation in many minority communities, this study will primarily use the term Black in lieu of African American to describe the group of focus; however, though present less often in the text, the latter term will be used interchangeably. Although terminology in academia often uses the latter for political correctness, the term Black, relating to one who possesses racial pride and awareness of culture, seems most appropriate in this context (Thompson, 1994). Born out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, the term Black relates to an awareness of the societal struggles of Black people in the United States and is the counter to the often-used term "white" (Thompson, 1994). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education uses the term "Black" as a racial/ethnic category when analyzing student performance on standardized tests and other types of measured achievement assessments.

Black Space: The Black space is the "place" established during slavery and shaped by a history of state-sanctioned racial segregation. This space is typically characterized as lowly, caste-like, segregated and "ghetto", which speaks to the socioeconomic status of its inhabitants

as working-class laborers, who live in segregated, impoverished communities. Through resiliency, these communities were reinforced and solidified by the working class, which in turn built institutions that inspired rich Black cultural traditions (Anderson, 2015, p. 11). Despite the economic gains of the Black middle class, however, the traditional Black space is set against the backdrop of the iconic and desolate "ghetto", which continues to serve as a "touchstone for prejudice, a source of stereotypes, and a rationalization for discrimination against Black people in general" (Anderson, 2015, p. 13).

Independent School: Independent schools are non-profit private schools that are independent in philosophy: each is driven by a unique mission. They are also independent in the way they are managed and financed: each is governed by an independent board of trustees and each is primarily supported through tuition payments and charitable contributions. They are accountable to their communities and are accredited by state-approved accrediting bodies (NAIS, n.d., para. 1).

People and Students of Color: Politically correct terminology used primarily in the United States to describe any person who is not white, often emphasizing common experiences of systemic racism (Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, & Kelly, 2008).

Racial Identity: A social construction, which "refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1993, p. 3). This frame is often based on skin color and is one of many labeling tools that allow individuals and groups to distance themselves from those they consider different from themselves (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 1996, as cited in Chávez &

Guido-Dibrito, 1999). Racial identity is a surface-level manifestation based on what we look like yet has deep implications in how we are treated (Chávez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999, p. 40).

Racism: Any institutionalized program or practice of discrimination, segregation, persecution, or mistreatment based on membership in a race or ethnic group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

White Space: Spaces such as neighborhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, churches, and others that are overwhelmingly white. In these spaces, Black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). While white people usually avoid Black space, Black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence (Anderson, 2015, p. 11).

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Organization of Dissertation

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This dissertation is organized across five chapters. The following provides a brief description of each of the chapters:

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study and the essential ideas that led to an exploration of this phenomenon.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature as it pertains to the elite independent school environment, racism and classism in the independent school, the development of Black racial identity, Critical Feminism Theory, and the relationship of Black girls and their mothers. In addition, the literature centers the discussion through a conceptual framework of CRT as it is applied to issues of educational inequities.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the methodology of the research design, data collection, and approach to the research question.

Chapter 4 systematically presents the voices of Black middle school girls through their counterstories, as well as those from their mother. These findings were used to identify the major themes that emerged across both sets of data.

Chapter 5 offers an analysis and discussion of the findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations derived from the study. Considerations for future research are also noted.

Summary

This study examined the Black girl middle school experiences in predominantly white, elite independent private schools in a large city in the West. It includes a preliminary discussion of how Black girls develop, negotiate, and survive the daily trauma of oppression during this crucial stage of development, through an examination of narratives that emerge through the use of a timeline activity as well as the perception of their mothers about their middle school experiences in these schools. Since schools inform identity development for all adolescents, they remain integral in shaping Black girls' sense of themselves, and race and class are salient features of this process. To be clear, in predominantly white independent schools, discrimination based on the intersection of race and class has the potential to compromise key developmental processes (Bakari, 1997). These institutions expect Black students to conform to white cultural, hegemonic standards to achieve academic success. Despite this, many families choose to enroll their Black children in predominantly white independent schools with the hope of securing a prosperous future. Thus, it is necessary to understand the experiences of Black students, and Black girls in particular, as their mere presence on these campuses challenges the dominant cultural values espoused by independent schools.

CHAPTER 2

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AND THE ISSUE OF RACE

A Review of the Literature

Alternative options to public education such as homeschooling, charter schools, and private schools account for a demographic shift in enrollment of Black students. Private schools, and the more elite, smaller subset of these, independent schools, capitalize on parents' frustration with low performing public schools (Herr, 1999; Noguera, 1994). Since the 1960s, Black students have been found in increasing numbers in elite, predominantly white independent schools in New England and throughout the country. Many are there because of the active efforts of programs such as A Better Chance, Inc., which sought to open these traditional routes nationally to broader, more diverse American students (Johnson & Anderson, 1992).

In the face of adversity, Black people have collectively addressed educational struggles amid developing and maintaining a positive racial identity in the context of their achievement and academic success. Despite this devotion, schooling remains problematic for many Black students, particularly those who attend predominantly white independent schools. However, over the last decade, enrollment changes reveal a much larger increase in enrollment of students of color in independent schools (NAIS, 2017) as more Black families elect to send their children to independent schools over public schools with the hope of receiving a better quality of education, gaining access to resources, and positioning themselves toward success in school and beyond.

Despite a sizeable body of research that focuses on the public school experiences of Black students, additional studies are needed to specifically explore Black students' racialized experiences in private, independent schools. Thus, there is a great need to broaden the scope of

research that exists about the experiences of Black students in these institutions, particularly within the middle school context. As such, this dissertation employed the conceptual framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, Black Identity Theory, and Black Feminism theory to analyze the experiences of Black girls in predominantly white, elite, independent middle schools.

The first part of this literature review will examine the historicity of normative whiteness that permeates the culture of most independent schools, followed by an exploration of the prevailing and existing discourse about the experiences of Black students in predominantly white, elite, independent institutions. The second part will explore the literature pertinent to understanding the phenomenon of Black youth in white spaces. From here, part three focuses on literature that discusses the development of Black race consciousness. And, finally, part four provides a discussion of Critical Race Theory and education as an appropriate conceptual framework for this work.

The Independent School Environment

The lack of attention paid to privilege and the advantages of elite groups is particularly marked within educational scholarship.

(Cookson & Persell, 2008, p. 1)

According to the research, independent schools offer parents a reprieve from the low quality of public schools by providing a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum inside a closed, sheltered environment (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Herr, 1999). While the academic gaze has often been turned toward analysis of the disproportionate failure of public schools, "critical lenses are seldom applied to systems, practices, and policies that work to reinforce the social, political,

cultural, and economic privilege of dominant groups" (Cookson & Persell, 2008, p. 2). However,

Gaztambide-Fernandez and Howard (cited in Cookson & Persell, 2008) argued that gaining an

understanding of elite schools is imperative to understanding the American educational system

and its relationship to society and culture.

As previously defined, independent schools are non-profit private schools that are

independent in philosophy and are driven by a unique mission. They are also independent in the

way they are managed and financed as each is governed by an independent board of trustees and

each is primarily supported through tuition payments and charitable contributions (NAIS, n.d.,

para. 1). Independent schools are designed as an ecosystem; many are private and/or Catholic,

and elite. Elite independent schools are costly with annual tuition ranging from $20,000-$50,000

depending on attendance at a day or boarding school (NAIS, 2016).

With a roster of distinguished graduates, elite independent schools have the reputation of

preparing the next generation of leaders, in both the public and private spheres of influence

(Herr, 1999). Speede-Franklin, Slaughter-Defoe, Johnson, Zweigenheft, and Domhoff said:

> One should not underestimate the impact of independent schools on the development of
>
> public, civic, and corporate leadership among Americans . . . a staggering majority of
>
> independent school graduates go on to complete college and graduate school and enter
>
> the most influential professions and careers in business, medicine, law, journalism, and
>
> public service. (Speede-Franklin, Slaughter-Defoe, Johnson, Zweigenheft, & Domhoff,
>
> 1988, as cited in Herr, 1999, p. 115)

As Cookson, Jr. and Persell (2008) noted, it is "not coincidental" that "many U.S. presidents and

other national leaders are graduates of the country's most elite secondary schools" noting that the

last four candidates for president before the 2016 elections were graduates of elite independent schools: George W. Bush (Phillips Andover), John Kerry (Saint Paul's School), John McCain (Episcopal High School), and Barack Obama (Punahou School).

In a 1985 comprehensive study of over 50 of the nation's elite boarding schools, Cookson, Jr. and Persell identified that "elite schools play a critically important role in the reproduction of the upper class" as many of these schools are driven to "produce certain types of identifiable graduates" (p. 14). Built upon a foundation of mission statements and core values, elite independent schools often boast rigorous academics and educational philosophies that "transmit deep values from generation to generation" (Cookson & Persell, 2008, p. 14). The missions of elite schools traditionally emphasize that leadership is the responsibility of the powerful and privileged, and institutions should take an active role in preparing students for important social, political, and economic positions (Cookson & Persell, 2008). As with traditional elite societies, independent schools have maintained their exclusivity and "bubble-like" environment amid an increasingly global world.

Most of the students who attend elite independent, or prep schools are economically privileged. Their attendance at such "costly and luxurious schools allow them to maintain their economic advantages" (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2003, p. 26). With schedules that resemble Ivy League liberal arts institutions (see Figure 2), prep schools engage in the socialization of students who must master the curriculum, the culture, and their own transformation into highly privileged individuals. Such schools are meant to encourage and maintain upward mobility, create a strong network of individuals with whom a student associates, and shape students' lifestyles and life chances (Cookson & Persell, 2008).

Daily Schedule Dartmouth, Summer 1964		Typical Schedule Prep Schools, 1980s	
Day began	6:50 a.m.	Rising bell	7:00 a.m
Breakfast	7:15	Breakfast	7:15
Class	8:00–8:50	Work period	7:55–8:10
Class	8:55–9:45	Class periods	8:20–9:55
Break	9:45–10:05	Chapel	10:00–10:10
Class	10:05–10:55	Recess	10:15–10:40
Class	11:00–11:50	Class periods	10:45–12:20
Lunch	11:55	Lunch	12:30 p.m.
Faculty appts.	1:00–2:00 p.m.	Class periods	1:20–3:15
Athletics	2:30–4:30	Athletics	3:15–5:20
Free time	4:30–5:30		
Dinner	6:15	Dinner	5:55
Study period	7:15–10:30	Study	7:00–10:00
Lights out	10:00–12:00	Day ended	10:00

Figure 2: Daily schedules, Dartmouth 1964 and prep schools 1980s. Adapted from *Blacks in the White Elite: Will the Progress Continue?* (p. 18) by R. L. Zweigenhaft and G. W. Domhoff, (2003), Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Copyright 2013 Rowman & Littlefield. Used with permission.

"The spaciousness, the elegance, and in some cases, the grandeur of America's prep schools" is the first indication that a student has entered into a different world (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2003). Often situated atop a hill or across expansive and expertly landscaped acres of land, prep schools inhabit a space where students have access to libraries with tens of thousands of available volumes, state-of-art athletic complexes, advanced computerized technology, science, math, and art buildings, and auditoriums and professionally equipped stages that would rival most colleges (Gaines, 1972).

Although most present-day independent schools are coed, many were historically male-only; but most, if not all independent schools, continue to have populations that are predominantly white. According to NAIS Facts at a Glance (2015), during the 2014-2015 school year, white students comprise 64.3% of the independent school population, while the population of Black students is still only 6.3% (an increase from the 5.5% reported during the 2002-03 school year) with an additional 7% of the population identified as multiracial. Although the

literature on private, non-sectarian, elite independent schools is limited, there is a body of work on elite preparatory academies—such as Andover, Choate, Exeter, Groton, and Middlesex—that provide an analysis of the types of environments experienced at these exclusive institutions.

Private Segregationist Academies

> These are schools for whites. The common thread that runs through them all, Christian, secular, or otherwise, is that they provide white ground to which [B]lacks are admitted only on the school's terms if at all.

> (Nevin & Bills, 1976, p. 11)

Many white families responded to legal changes in the American public school system by exiting and avoiding schools that were "at-risk" for an increased population of minority students, a phenomenon most widely known as "white flight". Growing racial segregation in America's public schools after *Brown v. Board* (1954) has been associated with the movement of white families away from the center of cities to whiter neighboring suburbs (Wilson, 1997). This residential shift not only translated into a loss of funds of the tax-base that public schools relied upon but also left behind a growing concentration of lower-income families in the central or "inner" city (Van Hook & Snyder, 2007; Wilson, 1997). In fact, segregation in public schools has continued to increase over the past two decades with an increasing concentration in high-poverty neighborhoods, which has left Black and Brown families in both an academic and economic lurch (Clotfelter, 2001).

As a response to the threat of court-ordered desegregation, the South, in particular, experienced the emergence of what Kenneth Andrews (2002) has termed "private segregationist academies." The formation of these academies occurred as a direct response to desegregation and

was orchestrated by whites who had the resource capacity or capital to resist desegregation (Andrews, 2002). In Mississippi, for example, private academies grew exponentially from the years of 1969-1971 and gained a significant amount of local support. During this time, whites formed private segregationist academies when they could not move to a different school district or chose not to attend private schools that were already established. This countermovement strategy organized white resistance to not only the Civil Rights Movement but to the threat of the "level of contact between [B]lacks and whites that would result from changes in existing institutions" (Andrews, 2002, p. 915). Efforts to form segregationist academies required significant resources, which solidified this effort as a strategy sponsored by the elite. Accordingly, enrollments in private segregationist academies grew exponentially from 1966-1974 (see Figure 3), signaling the arrival of a new, yet still parallel system of schooling in Mississippi: one for whites and one for Blacks (Andrews, 2002).

In addition to the formation of segregationist academies in Mississippi, private schools, in general, were used as a safe haven for whites all across the South. Beginning in the 1940s, the exodus from public schools resulted in increased private school enrollment in the 15 states of the South by more than 125,000 students—roughly 43%—in response to the U.S. Supreme Court decisions outlawing segregation in graduate and professional schools in the South (Suitts, 2016).
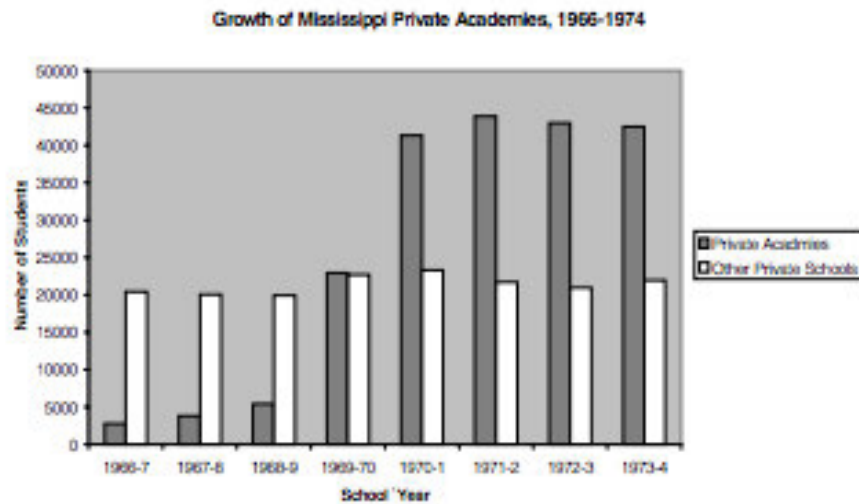
Figure 3: Growth of Mississippi private academies, 1966-74.
Source: "Movement-countermovement Dynamics and the Emergence of New Institutions of 'White Flight' Schools in Mississippi," by K. T. Andrews, 2002, *Social Forces*, 80(3), p. 912. Copyright 2002 by Oxford University Press. Used with permission.

Even though the decision by the US Supreme Court concerned higher education, the threat of desegregation spreading to both public elementary and secondary schools sparked a rash and swift reaction from whites all across the South. By 1965, the South's private school enrollment had increased to almost one million students (Southern Educational Foundation, 2016a, para. 3). During that same time period, private school enrollment grew in unprecedented numbers across the nation.

According to a 2016 study published by the Southern Educational Foundation, segregation was alive and well in private schools. The study found that:

- Private schools are whiter than the overall school-age population in most states, particularly in the South and the West.

- Black, Latino, and Native American students are underrepresented in private schools, particularly in the South and West.

- Private schools are more likely than public schools to be virtually all-white, defined

  as a school where 90% or more of students are white. Forty-three percent of the

  nation's private school students attended virtually all-white schools, compared to

  27% of public school students.

In summation, the majority of private schools continue to enroll a disproportionate

number of white students maintaining an over-representation of whites, virtual segregation, and a

near exclusion of students of color (Buchanan, 2016; Southern Educational Foundation, 2016b,

para. 3). Thus, it cannot be ignored that elite, white, independent schools, despite current

inclusivity rhetoric, have remained mired by exclusionary cultural values that have consistently

perpetuated, knowingly or not, attitudes and practices that have perpetuated economic and

racialized exclusion.

Black Students in White Spaces

As obvious as it may be, however, there seems a certain reluctance in independent

schools to acknowledge the basic fact that schools with a white majority—even those

schools strongly committed to diversity—often are psychologically complicated and

painful places for students of color in ways these schools are not painful for white

students. This is true regardless of class, but it's particularly true for students of color

from poor, urban environments.

(Thompson & Schulz, 2003, para. 1)

Due to the foundation and precipice upon which many independent schools were

founded, the organizational culture and environment of an independent school can be

challenging and problematic for Black students. Not only do Black students and other students of

color disrupt the majority or normative white culture of independent schools, but these students must often also carry the *racial stress* and burden associated with the difficult dynamics of desegregation at these schools. Black students find themselves in schools that were not only not built for them, but that are also not necessarily equipped to create a safe and healthy space for them to learn, grow, and develop a positive racial identity (Fordham, 1988).

Despite the hardship that may be experienced with respect to class and race differences, similar to the outcome of greater college and career options experienced by white students who attend independent schools, Black students from these schools also have greater opportunities. They are highly sought after by selective colleges, and this greatly increases their educational mobility (Cookson & Persell, 1991, as cited by Herr, 1999). This counter-narrative of Black students' academic success serves to motivate other families who might otherwise accept the consistent underperformance of public schooling (Carter, 2008). The appeal of the elite, independent school for the Black student and parent, then, is the "promise" of a seemingly "equal" educational experience, void of the subpar experience offered in public schools, and deemed a viable option for positive life outcomes.

However, for most Black students, this is not always the case. Racism is 'homegrown' in American society. As such, differences in race and class impact the experiences of Black students in independent schools; in fact, there is a complex relationship between Black adolescents' racial identity and their school performance (Fordham, 1988; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Black students' views of themselves as racial beings and as achievers interact in ways that shape their achievement ideology and school behaviors. For Black students to achieve, "they need to be sufficiently grounded in their identity as members of a racial caste group, such that they have a

way to interpret and make sense of instances when they experience discrimination, especially in school" (Perry, 2003, p. 106, as cited in Carter, 2008, p. 14). Subsequently, when Black students possess a critical race consciousness and understand the relationship between Blacks and whites in America, Black students are more likely to develop effective strategies to adapt to potential racial barriers and achieve their academic goals (Carter, 2008).

Power and race persuasively channels and constrains the lives of students, particularly Black students, in elite school environments. Racialized students are often permitted, but not accepted into these institutions of exclusion (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2003). This is a practice similar to that which is found in the creation and establishment of "sundown towns". By definition, a "sundown town" is "any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in and was thus "all-white" on purpose" (Loewen, 2005). The intentional creation of "all-white" sundown towns is parallel to the formation of elite, independent schools, in that historically these schools actively and deliberately worked to perpetuate their racialized and economic exclusivity with respect to student enrollment.

As the percentage of Black students continues to increase at independent schools, schools with greater financial resources can provide more scholarships and subsequently have even higher percentages of enrolled Black students. Without a critical mass, however, students of color—and in particular, Black students—experience schooling in the margins.

Although there have been limited studies that have addressed the experiences of Black youth in the "racially dissonant" contexts of predominantly white, elite independent schools (Arrington, 2001), a few have begun the task of bringing these experiences to light. Of them, a study by Arrington, Hall, and Stevenson (2003) examined variables that lead to success for Black

students in predominantly white, elite independent schools. While assessing students' view of themselves and their at-school self-esteem, they found that 75% of students felt that they had to make special efforts to fit into their school communities, 82% reported that they had negative racial experiences at their school, and 40% did not believe that the school treated all students the same (para. 1).

In another study, Coleman (2017) examined issues related to the schooling experience of Black males attending predominantly white independent schools through narratives with students and focus groups with parents whose children attended these schools. Although there were positive elements mentioned by both Black students and Black parents related to academic success and greater opportunities for the future, every student participant in the study shared racist incidents experienced within the school or classroom. Additionally, all of the parent participants spoke about racist situations that their child had experienced in these schools.

More specifically, Thompson and Schultz (2003) identified six psychological experiences that students of color are likely to face: (1) social loneliness, (2) racial visibility and social invisibility, (3) class and cultural discomfort among white parents and administrators, (4) the burden of explaining oneself to white people, (5) completing studies at a demanding school with minimal parent participation, and (6) the burden of having to feel grateful all the time. Unfortunately, the repeated marginalized experiences that Black students can face in the independent school environment can have long-term psychological impact (Thompson & Schulz, 2003). However, these experiences are often ignored by schools—even those "strongly committed" to diversity.

Development of a Black Race Consciousness

Racial identity is being shaped from the outside and constructed inside, meaning that children struggle to understand the connection between their external experiences and their internal feelings and reactions they have to observed differences.

(Parsons & Ridley, 2012, p. 2, para. 2)

In the mid-twentieth century, Black racial identity theories began to emerge in the psychological literature. Typically presented in a stage format, identity theory models were "developed primarily to address (1) the racial issues that were thought to influence the psychotherapy process and (2) the assumption that assimilation by Black individuals was necessary for healthy psychological adjustment" (Helms, 1990, as cited in Constantine et al., 1998, p. 95). Models of the Black identity-development process can be categorized into two main approaches: *mainstream* and *underground*.

Mainstream approaches are often referred to as Nigrescence racial identity models and have gained a lot of traction in psychological writings (Cross, 1971, as cited in Constantine et al., 1998). In contrast, underground approaches are characterized by the assumption that, "despite some of the oppressive experiences of Blacks, there are positive cultural influences that may help Blacks to shape a healthy self-concept without first having internalized a negative view of self" (Constantine et al., 1998, p. 96). These approaches were formulated to describe the formation of a Black personality with the origin being an understanding of the African self instead of a reactionary response to the position of Blacks in relation to white oppression (Constantine et al., 1998). Unlike mainstream approaches, the term "underground" has been used to illustrate the fact that these theories are not generally as valued in the psychological community (Gaines &

Reed, 1994, 1995; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997, as cited in Constantine et al., 1998).

First conceptualized by Charles Thomas (1971), the mainstream approach of Black racial identity development was described as "a five-stage process whereby Blacks began to shed a poor self-worth and move toward embracing a positive Black self-definition" (as cited in Constantine et al., 1998, p. 96). The stages ascend from *withdrawal*, which is seen when an individual begins to move away from a dependence upon Whites for self-definition*; testifying,* characterized by a confrontation of the anxiety caused by becoming a self-defined Black person; *information processing,* in which an individual acquires knowledge about Black history, heritage, and the Black experience; *activity,* when an individual is involved in a variety of cultural activities to commune with the Black experience*;* and finally into *transcendence*, which emerges once an individual becomes relatively free of personal conflicts related to issues of race, gender, social class, etc. (Constantine et al., 1998).

Black identity development was also conceptualized with the "Nigrescence" model as originally formulated by Cross (1971) and later modified by Helms (1984, 1986, 1990, as cited by Constantine et al., 1998), which remains one of the most popular models of the mainstream approach. Nigrescence refers to the developmental process of becoming Black (Cross, 1991). Cross (1971, 1978) proposed a multi-stage model wherein each stage had implications for a Black person's feelings, thoughts and behavior. The stages were identified as: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization/Commitment begin with the negative belief that Blacks are inferior to whites, and ends with an individual's commitment to

43

challenge and obliterate systems of oppression for Blacks and other marginalized groups (Constantine et al., 1998).

In most literature on mainstream racial identity theories, it is assumed that a positive sense of one's self as a member of one's group (which is not based on any assumed superiority) is important for psychological health (Cross, 1971; Tatum, 1992). In an adaptive version of Cross's (1971, 1978, 1991) racial identity theory, Beverly Tatum (1992) made use of William Cross's categories of racial identity development for youth of color (see Table 1). Unlike Cross's linear model, however, Tatum emphasized that the process was more dialectical and likened it to a spiral positing that a person may revisit an earlier stage as a result of a new encounter. The use of this model informed Tatum's subsequent analysis of the qualitative experiences of Black students.

According to Tatum (2004), the process of Black racial identity development typically occurs in adolescence and has implications for both self-esteem and academic performance. "Transition to the encounter stage is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the individual to acknowledge the personal impact of racism" (Tatum, 2004, p. 119). It is in these most vulnerable moments that Black students begin to wrestle with the idea of what it means to be a member of a marginalized group that is targeted by racism, as they struggle to locate a sense of identity, place, and belonging within the context of their school, community, and the larger society.

Table 1

Racial Identity Formation for Youth of Color

	Stages	Description	Result/Affect
1.	Pre-Encounter	Youth of color internalize negative stereotypes	Acceptance by white and/or distancing oneself from other people and youth of color
2.	Encounter	Youth of color are forced to acknowledge racism due to an event or situation that occurs	Realization that they (youth of color) cannot truly be "white"
3.	Immersion/Emersion	Youth of color learn about their history and surround themselves with symbols of their own racial identity group	Unlearn stereotypes and develop an oppositional identity
4.	Internalization	Youth of color are secure in their own sense of racial identity	Willing to establish a coalition with whites
5.	Commitment	Youth of color experience a personal sense of Blackness	Commitment is sustained over time

Note: Adapted from "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom" by B. D. Tatum, 1992, *Harvard Educational Review, 62*(1), pp. 10-12. Copyright 1992 by Harvard Education Publishing Group.

In the "racially dissonant" contexts (Arrington, 2001) of predominantly white, elite independent schools, Black youth must negotiate race and racism while undergoing identity formation. As Arrington posited, "constructions of race shape how race is subsequently experienced [and] it becomes clear that race is largely a psychological process" (p. 19). In these white spaces, there is a limited representation of what it means to be Black, which may complicate the development of a positive racial identity for Black youth in these contexts. Therefore, notions of race, and more specifically, what it means to be Black originate and are reinforced within this context, but have the capacity to yield unfavorable results.

Black Girl Identity and Race Consciousness

Although identity formation is a "multifaceted negotiation process that asks questions regarding one's present, past, and future", this period of adolescence has been "considered the most critical" (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009, p. 104). Erikson's (1950) seminal theories of developmental psychology explained the importance of adolescence and described how it serves as a bridge between childhood and adulthood. This period between childhood and adulthood begins at 12 or 13 years of age and ends at 18 (Russell, 2008). In *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, Bettis and Adams (2005) explored how adolescent girls begin to make sense of who they are in relation to the larger world in which they live. They exist in the space between what it means to be a girl and what it means to be a woman. Adolescence, then, links a childhood "when the bodily self and the parental images are given their cultural connotations" to young adulthood "when a variety of social roles become available and, in fact, increasingly coercive" (Erikson, 1950, as cited in DeCuir-Gunby (2009), p. 104).

Adversely, Black girls must reconcile the internal conflict in the space between girlhood and womanhood wherein they exist. DeCuir-Gunby (2009) described their actions as a continuous effort of code switching as they come into a sense of integrity about who they are and who they can become in relation to the messages they receive from society. The development of their identity cannot, therefore, be simply influenced by their age in years and societal norms; they must toggle between what it means to be Black and also what it means to be their gendered self.

According to DeCuir-Gunby (2009), the "cultural connotations" and "societal roles" reflected upon by Erikson describe race and its impact on the formation of identity during

adolescence. However, what was missing in Erickson's notion of human development was the impact of racism on the development of bicultural children (Darder, 2012). For Black girls in predominantly white environments, for example, the development of race consciousness is complex as it often heightens during adolescence. In addition, the various cultural, political, and social components that impact education define an ideal context for understanding the experience of Black girls in white spaces. In general, a student-teacher relationship is integral to student success, sense of belonging, and overall happiness in school (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Tatum, 1992). In predominantly white, elite independent schools, Black girls interact primarily with white teachers and white peers (Good & Nichols, 2001).

Accordingly, Black students, and Black girls, in particular, often perceive that:

- White teachers treat them differently based upon their gender, race, and academic abilities (Good & Nichols, 2001).

- Teachers have different, often lower academic expectations for them and higher expectations for their white peers (Marcus, Gross, & Seefeldt, 1991).

- Most schools fail to recruit and retain Black teachers (Grantham & Ford, 1998).

- Most teachers are not culturally competent or sensitive to the needs of Black students (Gay, 1999).

- There is a significant lack of Black cultural representation in the school curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Thusly, the predominantly white faculty of an independent school has a significant impact on the race consciousness development of Black students (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

Moreover, during adolescence, Black girls—like all students—have a need to belong and commune with others with whom they share the same interests and characteristics. In schools, according to Tatum (1992) one common characteristic that connects students is race. However, for Black girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools, the support of a race-based peer group is often not an option. Black girls, then, find themselves on a quest to blend in and assimilate into the larger group or bend to the demands and pressure of being one of few Black girls in the space (Ricardo, 2015), while exercising their right to be Black. As such, Black girls must contend with

- the phenomena of "acting white", which is an insulting claim levied against Black students who exhibit characteristics most often associated with the dominant narrative of whiteness which includes academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986);
- stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), which can "affect a student's sense of self-efficacy in that domain and eventually result in academic deidentification" (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009, p. 116), which involves having both a positive identification with school and a meaningful connection between academics and one's sense of self, including racial identity;
- racelessness, "an effort to minimize the effects of race on their aspirations," in which one must adopt a persona that indicates a lack of a strong relationship with the Black community; in other words, becoming "un-Black" (Fordham, 1988, p. 58);
- differential treatment based on hair texture and skin color (Hall, 1992) that can impact the racial identity formation as appearance is often directly tied to self-esteem, and

- racial isolation, which poses challenges to their ability to develop and maintain a healthy and positive sense of identity (Ricardo, 2015).

Consequently, Black girls can develop both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies to help deal with the ambivalence of their experience as one of the few in a predominantly white space.

Black Mothers and their Daughters

Black motherhood is "deeply political" (McClain, 2019). Black mothers are characteristically expected to go above and beyond, not only for their children, but for others, as well. They inadvertently participate in the concept of "other-mothering", a phenomenon Collins (1990) described as a system through which Black mothers care, are accountable to, and work on behalf of Black children within a particular community. Beyond the currently inequalities at work in their lives, Black mothers have inherited a childhood memory of a racist America and this history requires them to vigilantly protect their young, navigate through both gendered and racist discriminations, and to live above the precursor of extreme fear and anxiety, which is ominously present in white spaces.

As part of the personal difficulties they face, Black mothers develop a series of coping mechanisms that may or may not work in the interest of their daughters. According to Iloabugichukwu (2018) some of these include

- using humor to mask their pain;
- carrying past trauma from relationships or friendships, and shielding these feelings from the world and their children;
- participating in the "adultification" of Black girls, either inadvertently or in an effort to protect them from the advances of men;

- failing to apologize and humanize the woman experience with their daughters.

For Black mothers whose children attend predominantly white, elite independent schools, feelings of uncertainty and anxiety are ever present. As the number of Black families who choose independent schools for their children continues to increase, Black mothers find themselves at the crux of this decision-making process: (1) Do they believe that this environment will serve as a safe space that will nurture, grow, and academically prepare their child for the next step? Or (2) Do they cautiously enroll their Black children in a white academic space and ensure that their consistent presence and interference will act as a shield?

In an exploration of the traditional white dominant framework of the mother-daughter narrative, adolescence is the period of rebellion in which a teenager typically pushes herself away from the umbrella of her family and aligns herself more closely with her peers (Crew, 1994). However, for Black adolescent girls for whom the environment of a predominantly white, elite independent school poses a threat, Crew (1994) has noted that Black girls have a relationship with their mother that becomes "transform[ed] rather than abandon[ed]" (p. 82). About this she wrote,

> Studies of Black adolescence stress the double jeopardy of being both Black and female, and emphasis is placed on the role of mothers in the enculturation of daughters and the effects of this role on their relationships. (Crew, 1994, p. 83)

What is essential, then, is how much and in what ways does a Black girl identify "with the voice of her mother in relation to the double jeopardy of being both Black and female" (Crew, 1994, p. 84).

In a variety of ways, Black mothers serve as a "buffering system to the risks that the ideals of the white dominant culture poses" to Black children, particularly Black girls during adolescence as they work to develop their self-esteem, and self-identity (Ricardo, 2015, p. 4). However, according to Ricardo (2015), if that buffer by the Black mother is missing,

> it can be argued that Black adolescent girls who are both living and being educated in predominantly white academic settings can be argued to be at greater risk of lacking that buffer and of developing negative body image that is specifically promoted by their experience of racial isolation. (Ricardo, 2015, p. 6)

Black mothers, then, must be understood as important conduits between the racialized space of a predominantly white, elite independent schools and the healthy, positive development of race consciousness in their daughters.

Critical Race Theory in Education

> CRT is not so much an intellectual unit filled with natural stuff—theories, themes, practices, and the like—but one that is dynamically constituted by a series of contestations and convergences pertaining to the ways that racial power is understood and articulated in the post-civil rights era. . . . I want to suggest that shifting the frame of CRT toward a dynamic rather than static reference would be a productive means by which we can link CRT's past to the contemporary moment.
>
> (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1261)

Over the last 25 years, researchers have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytical framework to explain the educational achievement differences between students of color and their white counterparts. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) posited that race "continues to be

51

significant in explaining inequity in the United States that class- and gender-based explanations are not powerful enough to explain" (p. 48). Given the history of the education of Black students in public schools in the United States, it is clear that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and racism has had a pervasive impact on the educational opportunities available to Black students. However, it is helpful to provide a more in depth description of the disillusionment caused by an endemically racist meritocratic system that has failed Black students.

In this regard, Critical Race Theory, offers researchers effective ways in which to think about:

> how to conduct qualitative research in education that described racialized conditions of discriminatory impact and treatment and could serve as data forum to discuss policy, legal action, or social and political trends and their impact on racialized communities [in] the United States (Parker, 2015, p. 201).

Given the tumultuous history of Black Americans pursuit of education, it is important to examine the way in which race has played an integral role in dictating this journey. Due to the institutional and legalized racism in public schools, Black students endured subpar education in substandard, dilapidated buildings. To address this debt, efforts were made to desegregate schools with Black students bearing the brunt often travelling more than an hour outside of their neighborhood to better quality schools. By the 1990s, however, the nation saw a reversal of desegregation gains made in the preceding decades (Span, 2015). In fact, Orfield, Frankenberg, and Lee (2003) concluded that the "nation's schools were as segregated in 2004 as they were 14 years after the *Brown* decision" (as cited in Span, 2015, p. 67).

In "Introduction to Critical Race Theory in Educational Research and Praxis", Roithmayr surmised:

Critical race theory can be used to deconstruct the meaning of "educational achievement" . . . to recognize that the classroom is a central site for the construction of social and racial power. . . . It can also be used to provide the theoretical justification for oppositional "counterstories" that challenge educational assumptions from an outsider's perspective. (1999, p. 5)

To conceptualize CRT, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) posited five tenets to provide the framework through which we can explore its application to the field of education: (1) the *permanence of racism* explains how racism is a pervasive fixture in American society; (2) *whiteness as property* addresses the supremacy of whiteness and white privilege and how it relegates and sustains a subjugated position of people of color in America; (3) *interest convergence* describes the advancement of people of color only when there is a benefit to white people; (4) *the critique of liberalism* examines the persistence of racial inequality; and (5) *counterstory-telling* validates the narratives and stories of the marginalized groups.

Access to equitable and quality education in this context represents a form of intellectual property to which Black students have been denied access. The use of CRT analyzes how the U.S.-based system of property rights is applied to the educational context. In an analysis of the educational inequities experienced by Black students, the CRT tenet of whiteness as property elucidates how access to a high-quality, rigorous curriculum and safe and well-equipped schools "has been almost exclusively enjoyed by white students" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Educational opportunities were given and withheld based almost exclusively on race.

This was confirmed in a 1966 address to the graduates of Howard University by President Lyndon B. Johnson who attempted to acknowledge the "compounding debt" incurred by Black Americans due to slavery, segregation, and racism, stating:

> You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please… You do not take a person who, for years has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say you are free to compete with all the others, and still believe that you have been completely fair. (as cited in Span, 2015, p. 54)

Upending slavery or segregation by law was then not enough to change the hearts and minds of everyday Americans who held fast to the beliefs and ideologies of a stratified society (Span, 2015). Public schooling, therefore, remains a place to explore the cumulative impact of these harms to Black students. Although the concept of universal public schools was initially spurred on and brought into existence by the enthusiasm and initiatives of former slaves, the beneficiaries of such forethought were overwhelmingly white (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2015).

As regions in the Northeast, Midwest, West, and the South established a dual system of schools – one for white children and the other for "colored", by the 20th century, the legalization of educational racism relegated Blacks to a "system of second-class education" (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2015). Between 1915 and 1920, about a half million Blacks would leave the South for better opportunities in northern cities with another million following by 1930 (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2015). The response to this migration from White Americans was swift, legal, and anti-Black. Economic and housing opportunities were redlined and Blacks were segregated into specific areas to live, work, and attend school. This prejudiced strategy continued after *Brown vs.*

Board of Education (1954), as whites outright refused to attend desegregated schools, opting instead to use tuition grants and vouchers to attend private schools. Policies in the 1960s used coded language to unite whites against desegregation and hinder Black advancement, civil rights, and equal protections measure for Blacks and other underrepresented groups (Anderson, 1988). During his term in office, President Richard M. Nixon effectively reversed any strides previously made in the legalized version of school desegregation, appointing four Supreme Court justices and over 400 federal, district, and appeals court judges who were, collectively, less sympathetic toward ongoing educational equality efforts (Span, 2015). Under Nixon, officials weakened enforcement of most federal court school desegregation orders and removed numerous strong civil rights advocates from federal government positions; this in turn weakened educational equality efforts spurred by *Brown.* The 1970s brought further resistance to desegregation including a residential shift that concentrated Blacks and Latino in major cities and Whites in the suburbs, which made it demographically impossible to desegregate the public schools.

Thus, the history of Black students in public schools has led to the disillusionment of Black families as pervasive educational inequities have limited and almost completed negated the "gains" of the *Brown* decision, and also account for the increased interest of Black families in predominantly white independent schools. This access, however, has come with a price as the racially dissonant context of predominantly white independent schools has the capacity to impact the critical race consciousness of Black students as they negotiate race and racism within these spaces.

Summary

Racism is endemic in American society and has contributed to systemic inequities in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Much work remains to be done to bring today's embattled public schools into line with the ultimate vision of Black parents. Many of the steps toward this goal have been effectuated by Black parental choice and a denunciation of public schools for their inadequate financing, abysmal facilities, and underqualified teachers. Instead, some Black parents have sought alternatives within the sector of independent schools, despite a long history of racialized and class exclusion. Given this growing movement, this chapter has also examined some of the important issues related to Black students in white spaces, particularly from the standpoint of race consciousness. With all this in mind, the conceptual power of critical race theory within the context of education is presented as a significant analytical tool for examining the middle school experiences of Black students and to consider more closely, whether predominantly white, elite independent schools are genuinely a viable alternative.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examined the impact that the intersectional conditions of racism and classism have on the development of Black middle school girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools, in an effort to identify how students' experiences in these white spaces have the potential to either catalyze the positive development of Black identity and race consciousness or inhibit their development due to experiences that require cultural sacrifice (Fordham, 1988). Additionally, this study hopes to identify potential hazards that may impact the positive racial identity formation of Black middle school girls, in ways that can inspire educators in these settings to disrupt the hegemonic cultural normative culture that exists in predominantly white, elite independent schools.

Research Questions

As identified through a review of the literature in Chapter 2, the intersection of racism and classism that manifests in these "white spaces" presents challenges for the racial development of Black students (Anderson, 2015; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Fordham, 1988). Black girls, in particular, have an even more complex experience as their gender provides an additional layer of intersectionality. Thus, this study seeks to answer the following research questions in an effort to expand our understanding about the experiences of Black middle school girls in white, elite independent schools, as well as the perception of their mothers about their daughter's experiences related to issues of race at the school.

1. What issues and themes emerge when Black girls describe their experiences at predominantly white, elite independent schools?

2. What do Black girls identify as positive experiences within this context and what do they believe should change in order to enhance their experience?

3. How do mothers of Black girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools perceive the experiences of their children?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research can be described in many different ways. It is often a response, companion, or precursor to a quantitative study, which is frequently regarded as the more valid of the two (Flick, 2014). By one definition, it can be defined as "any kind of research that produces findings that are not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (as cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 6). Researchers often choose to conduct qualitative research studies as they can provide both verbal and nonverbal evidence of things taking place, inform future questions of one's study, and give an in-depth understanding of particular settings and the individuals within them (Hatch, 2002). These principles directly align with the framework of Critical Race Theory, and in particular, the method of using storytelling to provide a counter-narrative to the singular story of the dominant culture that is most often told.

Unlike the quantitative approach to research, which uses various data-gathering tools to collect information, the qualitative approach uses the *researcher as data gathering instrument*. However, the data collected takes on no significant meaning until it is processed critically through human knowledge and understanding of phenomenon. In other words, qualitative researchers must "make sense of the actions, intentions, and understanding of those being studied" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Qualitative researchers study to uncover answers to many different issues. As a social justice educator, issues surrounding the effects of the conditions created by

the intersection of racism and classism require scholarship that engages with these institutional structures, provides critical and thoughtful analyses, provides data-backed solutions, and works to reform the educational system within the specific context of independent schooling.

This research design sought to identify common themes that emerged from the narratives and perceptions of Black girls and their mothers about their experiences with issues of racism and classism in predominantly white, elite, independent schools and the relationship of these to the formation of racial identity. These experiences are integral to understanding how institutions can break down the barriers of exclusivity and injustice that impact the experiences of Black students in these white spaces, and it can inform parents about the cultural impact that their children may encounter as students in these environments. Critical race methodology centers race and racism in all aspects of the research process and also challenges the separation of race, gender, and class discourses showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This qualitative methodology serves, then, to center the voices and experiences of Black girls and also provide them the latitude to describe their experiences in their own words and through their own sensibilities.

Research Design

Through the counter-storytelling of critical narratives, this study utilized critical race methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to "conduct and present research [that is] grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Narrative approaches can be a valuable framework for understanding participant data collected in qualitative research (Sandelowski, 1991). With a systematic method of data collection and analysis, critical narratives allow the researcher to: view the narrative as a formative mechanism

in the construction of self and reality; come to a greater understanding of how narrative is conceptualized in terms of linguistic features and how this is studied in relation to social interactions tied to issues of societal power and material inequalities; and understand and employ narratives as a method of social research (Merrill, 2007).

Student Participants

This study was conducted with four Black middle school girls who attended predominantly white, elite, independent schools for their middle school years (grades six, seven, and eight). Participants were selected according to the following criteria: (a) they were Black adolescents who had attended an independent school throughout their middle school years (grades six through eight), (b) they were female, (c) they attended an independent school in the Greater Los Angeles area, (d) they would be ninth grade students in an independent school during the 2018–2019 school year, and (e) they had at least one parent who was willing to participate in the study.

Mother Participants

The mothers of student participants were invited to engage in an individual critical narrative session about their perceptions of their daughters' experience as a Black middle school girl who attended a predominantly white, elite, independent school. Each mother understood that her participation was focused on gathering additional parental insights into this phenomenon. Each mother was given a series of prompts to help draw out the story of their individual experiences. Critical narrative sessions ranged from 45–60 minutes.

Recruitment

Participants were identified through a purposeful sampling of the network of the Partnership for Independent School Education (The Partnership). The Partnership is a leading organization in private school admissions counseling and placement. It was founded by independent schools in the greater Los Angeles area for the purpose of placing underrepresented students of color at the elementary and secondary levels. It is the mission of the Partnership to inform members of racial communities presently underrepresented in independent schools of the option of independent school education; to identify applicants from these communities and assist them in the application process; to provide ongoing support programs for students and their families; and to act as a resource to member schools assisting them in their individual efforts to address issues of racial diversity and multicultural education. In concert with 50+ member schools, the Partnership works to enhance professional development and the implementation of diversity and multiculturalism through expert counseling, workshops on emerging educational topics, and annual meetings of school leaders.

Consent and Assent

At the beginning of each session, parent participants read and signed an informed consent that granted the researcher permission to interact with the student participants. Student participants read and signed a child assent form that outlined the study and their role as participants, which indicated their agreement to participation in the study. In addition, parent participants also read and signed a parent participation form to indicate their agreement of participation in this study.

Profile Questionnaire

Once the participants were identified, I distributed and collected a questionnaire to gather demographic information about the family such as household income, parent level of education, name of school the student attends and other characteristics to identify themes and trends among participants.

Setting

All interactions—timeline interviews and student and parent critical narrative sessions—took place in the conference room at the Partnership during non-work hours at a time convenient for participants or via video conference. These options provided the space and comfort level required for the type of open and honest responses that were asked of participants. Additionally, given the expansiveness of the metropolitan area, the Partnership had a centralized location to meet the needs of the population with whom they serve.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted utilizing timeline interviews, student participant critical narratives, and parent participant critical narratives. What follows is a discussion of how these two methods were employed. To note, maintaining anonymity was integral to this study. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of the data. Each student participant selected a pseudonym and their mothers' perspective is shared in tandem with the name the student selected.

Timeline interviews. Most qualitative approaches rely solely on the aspect of spoken language as the preferred medium for collecting data. To preempt the sharing of stories, I employed the instrument of a timeline interview. At the beginning of each one-on-one session,

student participants were introduced to the concept of creating a timeline of events as a method to chronicle their life history during their middle school years. Adriansen (2012) described life history research as the intention to understand how the patterns of different life stories can be related to their wider historical, social, environmental, and political context (p. 41). Student participants were given a blank sheet of paper and were instructed to draw a line (horizontal or vertical) to represent each school year from grades six through eight. Students were instructed to plot important dates during the school year that they remembered, including their birthdate, beginning of the school year, major school events, and national and international news, etc. Participants were prompted to identify examples of experiences where they felt race was a key factor. Participants were allowed to use illustrations, words, short phrases, and captions to describe their experiences and the "collective memory" of their middle school years allowed the participants to take ownership of their story (Adriansen, 2012). The timeline activity was approximately 5–10 minutes in duration and was followed by an individual critical narrative session with the researcher, as students described and shared their middle school experiences.

Student participant critical narratives. Using the self-constructed timeline as a guide, student participants recounted the events and incidents that they believed situated them as racialized beings in the white space of their respective institutions through critical narratives. Critical narrative sessions ranged from 45–60 minutes. Student participants provided their stories and counterstories about their middle school experience in grades 6 through 8. In this manner, critical narratives were utilized to uncover the workings of oppressive or repressive power and the marginalization of learners, teachers, or administrators (Chapman, 2003). All conversations

were voice-recorded and participant-checked for accuracy. This methodology did not utilize a script, but it allowed for the participant to be the guide of their own sharing.

Mother participant critical narratives. Mother participants were invited to share their experiences as the mother of a Black middle school girl attending a predominantly white, elite, independent school and participating in this study. Open-ended prompts were utilized to encourage mothers to describe their daughter's experiences through the lens of race. These prompts included the following questions, as well as any questions that emerged during the critical narrative session that were needed for clarification of ideas expressed by parent participants:

1. Describe your schooling experience (grades K–12). Where did you attend school? What was the demographic makeup of the teachers and student body?

2. Why did you choose to send your child to a predominantly white, elite, independent school?

3. What experiences, if any, with racism did you feel that your child encountered during their middle school years?

4. In what ways does the school affirm your child's identity as a Black person?

5. How did your child react to the racialized experience of being one of few on a predominantly white campus?

6. As the mother of a Black girl, what is your sense of what your child is dealing with related to race?

7. What in the school environment could be done to enhance their experience?

Data Transcription and Coding

Each critical narrative was transcribed using Temi.com and was shared with each participant for an accuracy check. After confirmation, the participants selected pseudonyms. The first round of coding or data analysis was done by hand where I began to identify key trends and shared experiences between both the student participants and parent participants. The second round of coding utilized the function of Dedoose Version 8.0.35 (2018) online data management software which allowed me to further track key themes and concepts that emerged from the transcripts without individual manipulation. I was then able to identify commonalities and differences between the experiences of student participants, which involved grouping codes together and identifying key divergent trends. A final round of analysis included utilizing some of the analytic features of Dedoose to identify patterns of co-occurrence that emerged once data from the parent critical narratives was transcribed. To determine how to present the data, I considered the mode or frequency of occurrence between coded patterns and themes.

Analysis of the Data

The organization of data in this chapter was further informed by the conceptual framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Feminism Theory (CFT). Through the lens of CRT and CFT, the data were coded for themes that emerged at the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in the experience of the participants. Furthermore, the research questions also informed the organization of the data. The themes identified were brought together with the literature in the field, in an effort to determine the findings and make salient conclusions and recommendations.

Limitations

The idea of *reflexivity* considers that researchers are not only a part of the world they study, but they also influence it: "There is no way to escape the social world in order to study it; nor, fortunately, is that necessary" (Hatch, 2002, p. 10). Qualitative researchers have the capacity to be reflexive as they must be cognizant of the impact that their involvement, influence, biases, and other actions will have on the setting. By reflecting on the impact that their involvement has on the subjects they study, qualitative researchers are better able to understand these connections and get close enough to human action to understand what is going on. As a researcher but also a teacher in the community in which I studied, I knew that my presence would change the dynamics of the observation and subsequent interview of the subjects in the study. Additionally, being a teacher of color, and specifically a Black woman teacher added an additional layer to the interaction that I had with both the Black girls and the Black mothers in this study. In this regard, positionality was key for me, as I came to terms with how my presence and own experiences influenced the study. My underlying assumption, however, was that my positionality was a positive factor rather than limitation.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Within this study, I developed an outline for the timeline activity with general prompts used to gather data from Black adolescents about their racialized experiences within the independent school context. I then analyzed this data to draw parallels and find themes that seemed to move across both student and parent narratives. This analysis of themes and their significance was shared with participants in order to support the triangulation of the data in ways that will enhance the validity of findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

— "We Wear the Masks," Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1896/1993, p. 71

The purpose of this study was to examine the middle school experiences of Black girls in predominantly, white, elite independent schools. An underlying assumption is that middle school is a critical time in the development of positive racial consciousness. As race and racism are endemic to American society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Black girls in predominantly white spaces must navigate not only the academically rigorous culture created at an independent school, but must also contend with school experiences tied to the intersectional realities of their race, class, and gender location. Thus, this study provided a space for participants to describe the racialized events that colored their middle school experience and to offer insight about how to improve the schooling experience for future students of color, particularly Black girls.

Moreover, an additional focus of this study considered the role of mothers in helping their daughters formulate positive Black racial identities amid the backdrop of a predominantly white environment. The underlying assumption is that parents choose to send their children to predominantly white independent schools for the promise of academic rigor and enrichment

opportunities; a lesser concern being the possible impact of the predominantly white environment on their child's racial identity development.

The first part of this chapter recounts the stories of each student participant through data collected from critical narratives. Their voices tell their experiences within a predominantly white independent school. In the next section of the chapter, we hear from the mothers of each participant. The chapter concludes with a summary of the major themes that were identified from the critical narrative sessions from both student and parent participants and highlight key similarities or differences that surfaced from the two sets of data.

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Composite Portrait of Participants

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The participants in this study included four Black girls and their mothers. The following provides a composite portrait of the participants, first looking at student participants and then the mother participants.

Student Participants

Student participants in this study included four Black girls who currently attend independent schools (see Table 2). Each girl entered their respective independent school through their participation in the Partnership for Independent School Education. Each girl was in the ninth grade at the time of this study and currently attends a predominantly white independent school for high school. They ranged in age from 14–15 at the time of the study. Each girl self-identified as Black and two girls also identified as biracial. All four girls attended a predominantly white, elite independent school located in the greater Los Angeles area, and one girl attended an all-girls school. Two of the girls had attended an independent school for the duration of their schooling years (K– Eighth) and two of the girls matriculated to the independent

school community in sixth grade for middle school. The participants shared their stories in one-on-one sessions and were eager to engage in conversation about their middle school experience.

Table 2

Black Girl Participants in the Study

Name	Age	Type/location of independent school	Grades attended	Racial identity
Sloan	14	Lower (K-6) Lower/Middle/Upper (K-12) North Los Angeles	First–Sixth Seventh–current	Black/African American
Layla	14	Middle/Upper (6-12) West Los Angeles	Sixth–current	Black/African American
Zuri	14	Lower/Middle (K-8) North Los Angeles	Sixth–Eighth	Black/African American
Alex	14	Lower (K-6) Middle Northeast Los Angeles	K–Sixth Seventh–Eighth	Black/African American/White

Mother Participants

Parent participants (see Table 3) included four Black mothers whose daughters attended predominantly white, elite independent schools for their middle school years and had also transitioned into an independent school for high school. All four mothers had attended some degree of college, with one holding an advanced degree in psychology. Two mothers grew up in the greater Los Angeles area and two mothers moved to California during their adult years. One mother had additional children who also attended area independent schools. Three mothers were divorced and one mother was married. Only one of the mothers in this study had attended a predominantly white, elite, independent school during her schooling years.

69

Table 3

Black Mother Participants in the Study

Name	Marital Status	Highest level of education	Annual Household Income	Attended a predominantly white independent school	Racial Identity
Sloan's Mom	Divorced	Some education	$150,000 – $200,000	No	Black/African American
Layla's Mom	Married	Doctorate	> $200,000	Yes	Black/African American
Zuri's Mom	Divorced	Bachelor's	$50,000 – $75,000	No	Black/African American
Alex's Mom	Divorced	Bachelor's	< $50,000	No	Black/African American

Stories by Black Girls and Their Mothers

For this inquiry, four student participants were asked to share their experiences about being a Black girl in a predominantly white, elite independent school during their middle school years. In addition to the stories of Black girls in predominantly white independent schools, this study also collected perspectives of the girls' mothers with respect to their daughters' experiences race-related experiences and development of Black race consciousness. The following provides insights into the stories of Black girls in predominantly white independent schools and how each of the mothers engages with this phenomenon in their daughters' lives.

Sloan's Tale

> My mom, she brought it up quite a few times and talked to me about it and how like I
> need to be confident in who I am and like, don't, she says this all the time, she always
> says, "Don't let them take your Blackness away."
>
> —Sloan, study participant

Sloan was a 14-year old, self-identified Black girl who lives in West Los Angeles. She describes herself as "strong", "loving", and "Black". She is the middle child and only girl from the union of her parents, who divorced when Sloan was a young child. She began her independent school experience in Kindergarten when she attended Deer River, a predominantly white K-6 independent school located in mid-city Los Angeles. She began attending Willowbrook School at the start of her seventh-grade year.

Sloan exhibited maturity beyond her years when retelling the story of her middle school experiences. Although she was under the weather at the time of our narrative session, she was determined to tell her story. After a brief introduction to the timeline interview process and observing my on-site demonstration of how to construct it, Sloan took about 10 minutes to think about what she wanted to share. Once she had completed her timeline (see Figure 4), she immediately began to speak about her experiences.

Around the world
Day)

6th grade -

Friend says she's more
comfortable around me because
I'm not "really black"

white girl accused black
girl of stealing money +
pulls her pants down in gym

7th grade -

Diversity week
"Mixed" + European

"Sevie" = N-word

8th grade -

Curly
Hair Questions

New Kids = more diverse
, buddy

9th grade
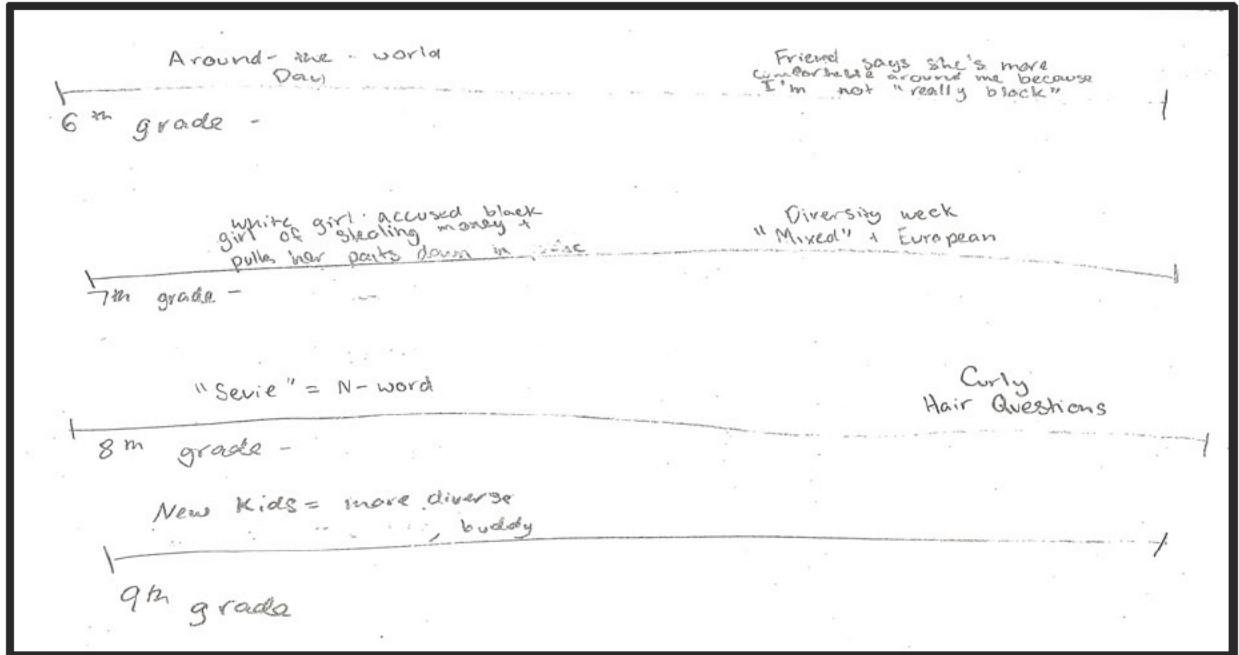
Figure 4: Sloan's timeline. Original artwork by Sloan.

What Is Culture?

At a young age, Sloan expressed being aware of the small number of students of color who attended her school. She began her story by recounting this racial awareness during her sixth-grade year at Deer River:

> Well, at that age I don't think I was very aware of like different racial issues and things like that going on at the time because I was younger and didn't really pay as much attention to things like that. I remember there only being like five Black kids in the grade, mostly Korean and white kids because it was in the middle of Korea town.

Although she did not recall any specific events or instances related to Black culture, she went on to describe a famed cultural celebration that the school held yearly.

> We had something every year called, well it was more of like a week, but we called it "Around the World" Day. There was this week that sort of was supposed to be like,

72

centered around learning about different cultures and things like that. Um, but the specific "Around the World" day was everyone's favorite because that's when we, we got to try a bunch of different foods from different countries or places like if the parents [pause] grew up in a different country or like knew different foreign recipes. They'd make food and bring it in, and like all the kids would go into this huge hall and eat it. And uh, we'd also have a parade where each grade would have to do like a dance or some sort of performance that related to a different culture. Like in sixth grade, I remember we did some dance. I don't remember what it was called. It was called like the Haka or something. I dunno, it was like this, this dance from like a[n] island. But we had to like dress up in this face makeup. And we do, we'd learn these dances by watching different videos of like people doing them.

Sloan described in further detail how she later came to feel that this event was problematic. She expressed uncertainty and questioned whether or not events that were intended to celebrate cultural diversity might actually be instances of cultural appropriation.

And then I remember my little brother had to learn how to do salsa or like the tango or something dressed up and like dance with his class and um thinking back, I never really thought about it before, but thinking back, I don't, I don't really think they handled that in the correct way and especially in terms of us dressing up as different cultures because I remember in like fourth grade wearing a kimono, which sounds a little bit like cultural appropriation. Just thinking back on it, but I don't know.

Sloan continued to explore the meaning of culture and stereotypes during her later middle school years. In fact, she came to later link the experience above to one that occurred when she was in seventh grade:

> [The school] had a whole assembly about cultural appropriation because the year before there was an incident of kids dressing up as Indians or Native Americans or people dressing up as Mexicans and walking around with maracas and mustaches and really stereotypical outfits and things like that. I guess it might not be the same thing because it [the Around the World Day] wasn't super stereotypical when I did it at Deer River in elementary school. Um, but I mean, it's a fine line.

You're Not Really Black

Sloan went on to describe an experience with race that occurred later during her 6th Grade school year with a Latina friend of hers with whom she had grown up.

> Uh, I remember we were just hanging out doing things and she was like, "I feel really comfortable around you because you're not like, like my other Black friends." And I was like, "Well, what does that mean? What do you mean by that?" And she's like, "Well, I don't know, you just seem more approachable, like you're not really Black."

In this incident, Sloan had to directly address her identity and what it meant to be Black.

> And it was like, what, what do you mean by that? Like, how am I not really Black? And she was like, I don't know, you just, you don't act the same way. And I was, I was thinking like, is it because I have lighter skin? Is it because I dunno, like you've known me longer and you just feel more comfortable around me. It was like I didn't know what she was trying to say by saying that I wasn't really Black.

As she reflected on the issue of Black identity, Sloan continued to ponder her friend's intent and questioned her further.

I kept like asking her about and she kept giving the same answers and started getting more defensive and making it sound like what she said was like I was supposed to be happy that she was saying that to me. Like, oh, I'm not really Black. I should be honored that she feels that way about me, that I shouldn't be like a normal Black person. But I found that disturbing.

When Sloan shared this incident with her parents, her father, who is white, "didn't really think it was that big of a deal." However, her mother, who is Black, responded differently. Sloan shared, "My mom, she brought it up quite a few times and talked to me about it and how like I need to be confident in who I am and like, don't, she says this all the time, she always says, 'Don't let them take your Blackness away'." Although her friendship with the young girl would continue, Sloan began to have a different perception of the girl and began to distance herself from that relationship.

Sloan would go on to say that her mother would talk often to her and her siblings about how to handle racial incidents. She shared:

Usually, when situations like that happened to any of us, my mom likes to sit down and talk to all of us about it together. Um, just so we can like hear what she has to say, not only to one of us but in case where any of us are in similar situations. We know how to handle it.

Sloan spoke about how she would continue to seek out the support of her mother when dealing with issues of race throughout her middle school years.

Hypervisibility

Sloan transitioned to a new school for the remainder of her middle school years. She described her seventh-grade year as a time when the social aspects of her independent school experience shifted greatly. She recalled an uptick in the number of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, sometimes two in one weekend, as the school had a significant Jewish population. Sloan recalled enjoying this sense of newfound freedom, but acknowledged that her parents did not enjoy "driving [her] everywhere and having to buy gifts all the time." Additionally, Sloan noted that the social aspect did not erase the racialized aspect of her and her peers' daily existence at the school.

She described an incident where a Black girl, Yana, whom she had known from her previous elementary school, got in trouble with the administration. Yana was the only Black girl who had transferred to Willowbrook along with Sloan. And, although they were not "super close friends" before transitioning into the new school, their friendship had begun to grow in the summer leading up to seventh-grade. An incident involving Yana and a white girl, Sami, tested Sloan's idea of what it meant to be Black at Willowbrook.

> One incident that I remember was when she was in the math and science building, which we call the Atrium and there was this other white girl whose name is Sami [who] was like paying someone money for [something]. She was giving [someone] $5 and then Yana was close by and as a joke she thought it'd be funny to just like take the money from her. She didn't like snatch it out of her hand, she just like took it in, sort of like a, like walking away slowly, but like in a joking way, thinking it would be funny. Then Sami thought she was stealing from her. She had a different, a completely different side of the story saying

76

that Yana like snatched the money out of her hand and started running away. But

anyway, what happened was Sami reached for her and pulled her pants down like pantsed

her in front of this and this huge building where there were a ton of kids walking to class

coming out of classes of like a huge public area. I know there were two boys who saw it

happen and saw what she did and um, they ended up talking to the middle school dean

about it, which of course makes sense. The two boys told everything, told them

everything that happened, said that, like Sami was completely out of hand with doing

that. Even if she was stealing her money and running away, like that's not an acceptable

action. Um, but in the end, even after talking about it with, like to the, to the deans about

it, um, Yana ended up getting suspended.

Sloan described being shocked at the disparate discipline actions leveled against the Black girl,

Yana, while the white girl, Sami, was seemingly unpunished. Sloan recalled an additional event

involving Sami where she hacked into a girls account and sent threatening messages to her peers.

Sloan recalled that Sami, again, was not reprimanded. Although others seemed to have forgotten

the incident, Sloan was aware of the differences in treatment and made mental notes and

questioned the unfairness, which she kept to herself. In recalling the incident, Sloan reflected:

I recognized, like even though I wasn't good friends with Yana I could, I could tell that

like that situation was not dealt with correctly and how Sami was the person in the wrong

in the situation, but yet Yana got suspended and [Sami] got off with a warning. I

remember hearing that and talking to [Yana] about it, asking her how she felt and she felt

that it was completely unfair. She said that she talked to her mom about it, and her mom

had talked to the deans about it and they had their conversation, but I don't really know what happened after that. It sort of just died down and everyone forgot about it, I guess.

Race in the Independent School

Sloan went on to describe the community of students of color at Willowbrook. In addition to her and Yana, Sloan recalled there being eight other Black students in her grade. Sloan described one other student, a Black boy named Kadeem, as an activist and one of her closest friends.

> He was a young activist. He was very, like "woke" as my mom says. I always had these talks with him about different shootings going on. We had like arguments and debates about different things happening and most of the time we were on the same page about things happening, but like if they were political. Usually the ones that we argued most about were like the more feminist issues or I had to like explain more things to him because he was a boy. But like with many issues revolving around race, like we talked about those, had conversations about those.

Sloan went on to describe an incident in class during her 8th Grade year in which she, Kadeem, and several other Black kids created a presentation about the incarceration of Black people, police brutality, and the misrepresentation of Black people in the media. Sloan felt that the presentation was "essential" to developing other students' understanding about what it meant to be Black in America. She noted that although her teachers received the presentation positively— even asking she and her co-presenters to share it again the following year—her peers mostly just "sat and listened". Sloan recognized that her white peers needed to have more of these

conversations and expressed dismay at their unwillingness to engage in conversation about race

when the opportunity presented itself. Sloan described this in the following way:

Like there weren't a lot of questions, a lot of comments, because since all of the Black

kids in the class did the presentation together, it was like five of us, I think, and the rest of

the kids just listened. They didn't really have anything to say or maybe like a few

questions here and there [pause] but no one really had any questions, which I wish they

talked about it more because I don't know, I'd rather them get their questions out then or

say something offensive then than doing it later on in society or when they're older. Just

get those stereotypes and biases corrected now.

Sloan went on to also describe efforts the school had made toward diversity and

inclusion, and noted that there seemed to be more focus placed on gender identity rather than on

issues of race.

We have diversity week actually, which is when we have, usually they're more centered

around gender, which I think is just then sort of like trying to make it seem like they have

some like diverse inclusivity event, but it's always more focused on gender or sexuality or

something which is a sort of like a shortcut around talking about like diversity problems.

We just had diversity week recently. It was... the theme was "Gender Beyond Binary" or

something like that. Which I mean everyone at Willowbrook pretty much knows about

that stuff already. I mean, we have a lot of LGBTQ plus students and like there's a, there's

a club sort of like [the Black and multiracial group], but just centered around kids who

are different genders in there, like, like non-cisgender students, or kids with different

sexualities [pause] I don't really know how to say that or just LGBTQ plus children. Um,

and so everyone pretty much knows about that already, which I don't really think it's one of the major problems going on. I mean, it's definitely something that needs to be recognized and talked about. Like we haven't really had a diversity week that's specifically centered around racial problems, racial issues.

In exploring different identities, Sloan expressed the want to explore in greater detail, topics and issues related to race. She did report, however, that during Diversity Week, the school formed affinity groups. She then went on to lament about the blurred lines that existed in the way they were organized according to identity.

You can choose which one you want to go to. There's a Jewish one, there's a Black one, there's a mixed kids one, there's a Latino and a Middle Eastern one, a European one, which is the white kids one. Um, just like different groups. Uh, and [the] first year in seventh grade I went to the Black one of course, and then the second year, eighth grade I went to the mixed one just to see like what they'd be talking about. It was, I don't think it was like what I thought it wouldn't be at all. Instead of just having like biracial or multiracial kids, it was just, they were talking about mixed in terms of everything. Like there were kids who are adopted there talked about like being mixed because they had different backgrounds. It was like, it didn't make any sense to me all. So, I just stuck with the, with the Black affinity group.

Despite affinity groupings used by the school during Diversity Week, for Sloan, the search for an identity space that genuinely met her needs would continue.

The N-Word

During eighth-grade year, Sloan recalled an incident where the middle school dean admonished students for using the nickname "sevvies" to describe seventh graders. About this, Sloan shared:

> She said like uh calling kids "sevvies" was equivalent to calling people the n-word and like how if we are allowed to say "sevvies" like she should be [allowed] to say the n-word. And that was a huge problem. But like no one, none of the faculty members did anything about it. It was just a huge conversation around me and my friends and like our grade at the time and no one really did anything about that, which I think is terrible that she just got away with that. She didn't get punished for that situation.

About this incident, Sloan expressed shock and anger that there was not one adult at her school who would think to say something of this manner, and expressed frustration at the lack of reprimand for or even attention to this behavior by the faculty.

Being a Black Girl

As Sloan continued her middle school years at an independent school, she was bothered by a recurring action from her peers concerning the nature of her hair. Sloan recounted often being accosted by her peers due to her various hairstyles and expressed her discomfort with their seemingly endless questions and efforts to touch her mane.

> People ask me questions about my hair all the time. I usually wear braids to school. Um, people ask me things all the time, like how long does it take you to wash your hair? Like, do you braid your hair up every morning, which is fine. I'm fine with these questions because I get that they're curious. They've been in predominantly white schools all their

lives, but then a lot of the questions are ridiculous and me and my other friends laugh

about them sometimes, like the other Black kids in the grade or just the curly haired kids

in the grade. I always laugh because people ask like, "were you born with braids" or like

"how, how do you get your hair to be curly like that?" And I was like, I was born this

way. What do you mean? I'm like, this is just how my hair is. We laugh about that all the

time because it's just ridiculous.

Fortunately, Sloan was able to connect with a few of her other Black peers, who could also

empathize and share in this uncomfortable experience. For the most part, the faculty seemed

unaware of the issue and its impact on Black students.

A Sense of Belonging

As uncomfortable as these experiences were, Sloan continued to search for ways in which

to become connected to her school community. She involved herself in the school offerings and

joined the group on campus that was dedicated to supporting Black and multiracial students.

Sloan noted, however, that the "meetings aren't that often because the only time when we have

time to have club meetings are during lunch and everyone's busy during those times, like making

up tests or just wanting to hang out with their friends." Sloan described the happenings at the

meetings she was able to attend:

Usually there's a different theme, like every meeting we have and like we've watched

videos about different things going on. We, if there's like a political event that happened,

we'll talk about that. Or if there was another shooting of a Black man, which happens

pretty often, unfortunately, we'll talk about that. Just like different events going on in

America at the time or we'll just check in with each other and ask like, what's going on, how's it going in school and stuff.

Sloan expressed that these meetings were open to students of other races if they wanted to join, "but I guess just honestly no one cares now, unfortunately." Sloan acknowledged that having "allies" at the meetings could be beneficial so that others could better understand the "Black experience".

Sloan acknowledged that there were "a few Black faculty members" who were open to talking to the Black students at Willowbrook. Although she was unsure about their specific job title, she noted that they assisted with organizing the events for the Black and multiracial affinity group and also made sure to include parents in the out-of-school activities, as well. Two to three times during the year, this group would meet at someone's home or a park as a way to help build community.

And there's music and food and different activities and it's not like specifically, um, like going towards something like, there wasn't like a, it wasn't a particular purpose, just like to hang out for us all to meet each other and get to know each other before we got far into the school year. It was fun. I really love when those happened because the food is good and it's just nice to be around everyone.

Sloan understood that even without a focus, the Black and multiracial affinity group was a good space for her.

Sloan's Mother

I literally tell my kids, I'm not sending you there to learn "them". Yes, we love people, but you gotta love yourself. You don't need to be cheap imitations of "them". They do "them" very well.

—Sloan's Mom, study participant

Sloan's mother was born and raised in a large city in the Midwest in a predominantly Black environment. She describes her schooling years as being greatly influenced by the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s and works hard to impress the values of that time period on her three children. Sloan's mother was very deliberate when recounting her story and often paused to ponder a particular question before responding.

All Black

Sloan's mother met me at the offices of the Partnership to share her story. We began our session with a recall of her K–12 educational experiences:

I grew up in Wabash, matriculated in Wabash, uh, and at that time Wabash was, and still is [pause] a predominantly Black city. Middle school for me, unlike my children's experience with race, mine was really more or less just gender. It was never about race because like I said, it was pretty much all Black. Um, but still, you know, overall, I had a, you know, what I can remember a good experience.

Sloan's mother recalled having positive experiences with her teachers who were predominantly Black.

[School was a] very supportive environment because it was the seventies, so I had white teachers that were a byproduct of the Civil Rights Movement. And [there were] the ones

that wanted to, you know, do better by us and come to our neighborhoods. Although I

didn't live necessarily in "the hood", but, you know, we saw white teachers, um, in a very

supportive environment. We didn't necessarily speak about our race [with them], but they

were still very supportive. So, in other words, I felt still very supported by them even

though race wasn't a topic that they discussed. Only the Black teachers, you know,

reinforced our abilities as far as, you know, reflecting themselves in us. [From the Black

teachers], we would kind of get "[this is the] education your ancestors fought for", you

know, "you can achieve," you know, "you are the pride of your ancestors," you know,

just very supportive.

Sloan's mother reiterated that along with a predominantly Black faculty, the "three or four or

five non-Black teachers" were well-meaning and supportive to her throughout middle school.

What's Missing

After reflecting on her middle school experience, Sloan's mother contrasted her

experience with her daughter's. She shared:

[Sloan] definitely didn't get the reinforcement of our contributions even as just African

Americans, you know, the ones that we can take for granted, you know, W.E.B. DuBois,

Frederick Douglass, you know, the ones that we all learned in elementary. Like they

didn't even get that! I only know that because I can still say [or] bring things up to Sloan

[and] she doesn't know who [it] is. In fact, just this week, I said, "Sloan, what Black

authors, what Black female authors have you read?" And she's like, "I don't know what I

read, I can't remember all that!" and she got defensive. I was like, hold on, I'm just, you

know, can you remember any? I said, "Do you know who Toni Morrison is?" "That name sounds familiar." "You ever read *The Bluest Eye*?"

Sloan's mother reflected on what was missing from her daughter's education and noted that because she herself was "a product of [her] upbringing", she would have to approach things differently with Sloan. When speaking about the race of people, Sloan's mother stated:

My kids know we are [the] 'first person'. If you're talking about somebody else, then it is "the white girl," but you don't have to identify Black people because if you're talking about our people, if you're talking about something I'm going to assume it's us. We're the first people.

She went on to note:

I teach them, you know, I don't sugar coat. But especially because, you know, I didn't and I will say unfortunately, I didn't marry a Black man, it just wasn't, the opportunity wasn't there by the time I got ready to get married. But we don't sugar coat, right. We discuss race and deal with it head on. Um, so I tell my kids, you go there to get your education but you leave [pause] Their culture is not our culture, their ways are not our ways.

Sloan's mother acknowledged that there were things that Sloan would "need to know" about Black culture that she wasn't "gonna learn in that school" acknowledging that these were things that she "would have to teach [them]" because "they're not going to learn through osmosis".

Sloan's mother also reflected on the lack of family infrastructure that her kids have versus that with which she was accustomed.

And that was the difference between my children's experience and mine and probably part of it is because I came here for college and stayed here. But my family was [back in Wabash]. And so, I had you know my aunt that [would] pick me up, my grandmother [pause] And [my kids] don't have that here. So, I realized that's what that's about.

School Choice and School Change

Sloan's mother decided on Willowbrook for school, but she admits that it wasn't either of their first choice. While she wanted Sloan to attend the all-girls school across town, Sloan had her sight set on the prestigious Timber Creek. She shared that financially, Willowbrook was "what we could afford."

During the interview process, Sloan's mother recalled the instant when she felt that Willowbrook wanted Sloan on their campus for more than the racial diversity her presence would bring.

> As we sat in the interview and I listened to Sloan's answers and I watched the
> interviewer's face and I thought, "She's nailing this." My gut tells me part of the reason
> they really wanted her, not just for diversity as far as, you know, looking black, but
> Sloan's answers. She's very, um, you know, outspoken and she talks about race and a lot
> of even [the] kids that are Black don't particularly. I remember when the interviewer asks,
> "If you could have three people living or dead to dinner, who would you have?" And
> Sloan thought about it and said, "I would have [pause]" And, I'm not knowing who she's
> going to say because this hasn't been rehearsed at all. And she said, "Michelle Obama,
> um, Dr. Ernest E. Just," and the interviewer said, "Wait, wait, who is that? Who was Dr.
> Ernest Just?" And she said, "Oh, [he]'s one of the first Black marine biologists." And she

wrote it down and she said, "And Dr. Martin Luther King," and I knew and then. Then she was writing and then she flipped a few pages back and forth and she said, "I'm sorry, what grade are you applying for?" And [Sloan] says, "Seventh grade." She said, "Okay. I thought maybe ninth grade." And I thought, okay, she's good.

Sloan's mother surmised that the interviewer was impressed with Sloan's answers and recalled this interaction with a sense of pride.

In regard to other aspects of the school, Sloan's mother recalled that Sloan "realized that she needed to step up her game" academically, but that she "knew that going in". The biggest change, according to Sloan's mother, was social.

Social was a big one for her because [it was] seventh grade and Willowbrook has a large Jewish population. So those are all the bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs. So now my daughter's going to parties and you know, it was just immediate, you know? She went to birthday parties, you know, in elementary school. But the bar mitzvahs that literally was every weekend, literally every weekend. Fortunately, someone here at the Partnership—another parent—had told me to get ready because it can get expensive and she said it's someone here. And so, because I didn't grow up around, you know, I worked with [pause] you know but they were adults. So yeah, [her social life] just improved. Let her tell it.

Sister Friends

Sloan's mother went on to discuss Sloan's closest friends. She reflected that due to the predominantly white environment of Willowbrook, she expected Sloan to have a particular affinity to other Black people and people of color. However, this was not exactly Sloan's experience.

Her best friend is a white girl. So, again, let me, let me just be very blunt with you and honest with you. I teach my kids, especially when it's in white spaces, [that if] you see another Black person, you give them a nod; you acknowledge your people. I'm not saying you got to be best friends with them, but you would acknowledge your people. Um, so, uh, you know, there's only a handful of girls of color and I'm including, I think one is Latina. I'm trying to think of the Black girls. I can only think of three that she hung out with in the middle school, but a couple of Latinas, but she claimed a white girl to be her best friend. This was a conversation [that] she and I had and I said, "You know, I want you to be friends with everybody. You need to have, you know, be friends with everybody." I learned there's nothing wrong with that. I said, "But the fact that you, I seem to have to push you to, you know, hang out with your Black girlfriends on the weekends is problem for me. I need you to be comfortable around your people and as you get older, the person that's going to understand you and understand, you know, what you go through in life is gonna be another Black woman. You, I need you to have some Black girlfriends that are closer." Um, and, and it's not that she doesn't have any. She does at home. Actually, one of her closest friends and our neighbors is Black, um, but I needed her to have a touchstone at school, as well. Now another Black girl came with her over to Willowbrook from elementary school and they're friendly. They're not the best of friends and it's kinda one of those things that they're not enemies, they're friendly, but they weren't really best friends in middle school. So, I guess they do kind of have one another. I don't know if their situation is like, like "I know she's there because she's been there, so

we need to know new people." Yeah. But yeah, I mean I, I told her I need, you just need some Black girlfriends.

Sloan's mother emphasized the need for Sloan to have Black girlfriends, a "touchstone" at school, someone who could understand her experience. Sloan, however, pushed back at her mother's friend suggestion, and responded:

"I know mom, I, you know, I'm not, I love my people. I don't know, I'm not trying to, you know, not be around my people. Um, but everybody has their own set of friends, social friends." I said, okay, I just want to know that you know, that I know that, you know, this is what I expect from you. Hang around everybody, you know, but I need to know that, you know…

For Sloan's mother, having close Black friends was essential for Sloan's development as a Black girl.

Racial Incidents

Sloan's mother shared that since kindergarten, Sloan has had issues with both white and Black students commenting negatively about her ethnicity. At the time of this narrative session, Sloan had recently shared with her mother that two Black girls had called her "half-breed". As a response, Sloan's mother recalled sharing the following:

That wasn't anything we hadn't already talked about. We talked about that before because she actually had that in I think kindergarten. And I told her your answer to that—because I know, I know. I love my people. I love my people, but I know we got our ways about us ourselves. I said, but you being light skinned, you're going to have to deal with that. Your

hair, you're going to deal with that. I said, but your answer should be, "I'm no less Black than has been the African experience in America."

Sloan also coped with her peers remarking about her hair. While some Black girls would try to reel Sloan into conversations to support their notion that "Black hair doesn't grow" to account for their often shorter length, the white girls would often remark about how "different" Sloan's hair was from the other Black girls. To this, Sloan's mother informed and encouraged Sloan to "have discernment" and understand that there are "some things that [people] are just not as educated about.'

Dating While Black

Sloan's mother reflected on her marriage to Sloan's father and how complicated the issue of an interracial relationship was during that time:

As I shared with you, unfortunately I didn't marry Black and I [had] only liked Black men. So, Greg, her dad, is not white. That's a whole 'nother story. Greg's part—his mom was Indonesian. So, she's brown, she's got some color. His dad is Dutch, he's white. Um, so I've only loved brothers and had been engaged to one, but by the time [pause] I've never wanted to get married to be honest, I just didn't, I was just not eager to get married. So, I married late. So, by the time I was ready to get married, you know, my other people are already married off and I mean, I was in love, don't get me wrong, I was in love. But again, race was an issue. Race was an issue for me.

She went on to describe her concerns about Sloan's prospects toward dating as she continues to be a Black girl in a white space.

So, her prospects, not just necessarily being at Willowbrook, just the whole, you know,

we want our children to be educated, we want girls to succeed and you know, we're still

struggling with prospects, period. And the more education you get, you know, if you

don't marry by a certain age [pause] I was not taught that. It wasn't until I went to college

and [it was] a predominantly white college that I even heard, "They're here to get their

M.R.S." I was like, Oh wow. Like, I didn't, I didn't even understand that.

She went on to describe that Sloan was beginning to ask her mother when she would be "old

enough" to begin dating, so she believes that her daughter is thinking about the possibilities.

Sloan's mother also spoke to the challenge of Black girls and boys finding other Black

prospects to date in predominantly white schools. She shared that another mother with whom she

was friendly, reached out to Sloan's mother to address this very issue:

I really liked the mom, but we talk because of our boys. She called me last October and

said, "I need to ask you something out of the norm." Long story short, she wanted to

know if she could borrow my son to take her daughter [to the dance] at Timber Creek.

Unfortunately, that's what you gotta do.

Because of the predominantly white environment, Sloan's mother believes that Sloan and her

older brother are aware of what to expect in regard to dating and she is committed to helping

them navigate that space.

The Importance of Culture

As we wrapped up our narrative session, Sloan's mother shared about the cultural

activities in which Sloan was involved outside of her school community. These included

attending summer programs at the local community college that were designed to increase the

92

number of Black people in STEM-related fields, being active in one of the largest Black churches in Los Angeles, and being a part of the mentoring program led by the largest Black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, Sorority, Inc. Sloan's mother stressed that it was important for Sloan to have a life outside of school that mirrors more of her culture.

> … for nourishment of our souls and a spirit and 'cause you have to. I literally tell my kids, "I'm not sending you there to learn *them*. You know, you know, again, I say to [my kids], we love all people. Yes, we love people, but you gotta love yourself. You don't need to be cheap imitations of *them*. They do *them* very well. I don't want you to tolerate that. I'm not going to tolerate that. We are us. Love us. Love us.

Sloan's mother continued to describe how intentional she is about exposing her children, and Sloan, in particular, to information about her ancestors, her culture, and her identity.

> Um, I try to intentionally again being, you know, being here as opposed to a city like Wabash. Um, where again, let's talk about messages. So, you know, [here] billboards reinforce any and everybody [all cultures], which is good. But yeah, I reinforce who WE are. So again, having that conversation with Sloan, like you haven't read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? Like, she knows who Maya is but she don't really, you know, and I think I read that in middle school and she hasn't! So, I'm intentional, you know. I redid my house and purposely put up, you know, the quote from Langston Hughes; not a quote, it's a poem. *The eyes of my people*, you know, I love the color of my people. [pause] So, stuff like that at my house when we [are] reinforcing who [we are] [pause] [reinforcing] us.

Layla's Experience

> I mean the teachers are so understanding and they do work really hard to, um, to, uh,
> educate themselves on everything that the students are going through and to be inclusive.
> But it, it's just not the same as having a teacher who's had the same experiences as you
> see the world the same way.
>
> —Layla, study participant

Layla is a 14-year old Black girl who attends Pine Hills School for Girls, a predominantly white, elite independent school that services grades 6–12. Layla was instrumental in choosing the school she currently attends and has a keen interest in the sciences. She lives with her mother and father who are both products of independent schools in predominantly white environments. She has no siblings and was very pensive and intentional throughout the narrative session. Layla completed her timeline (see Figure 5) quickly and was eager to describe the racialized events that
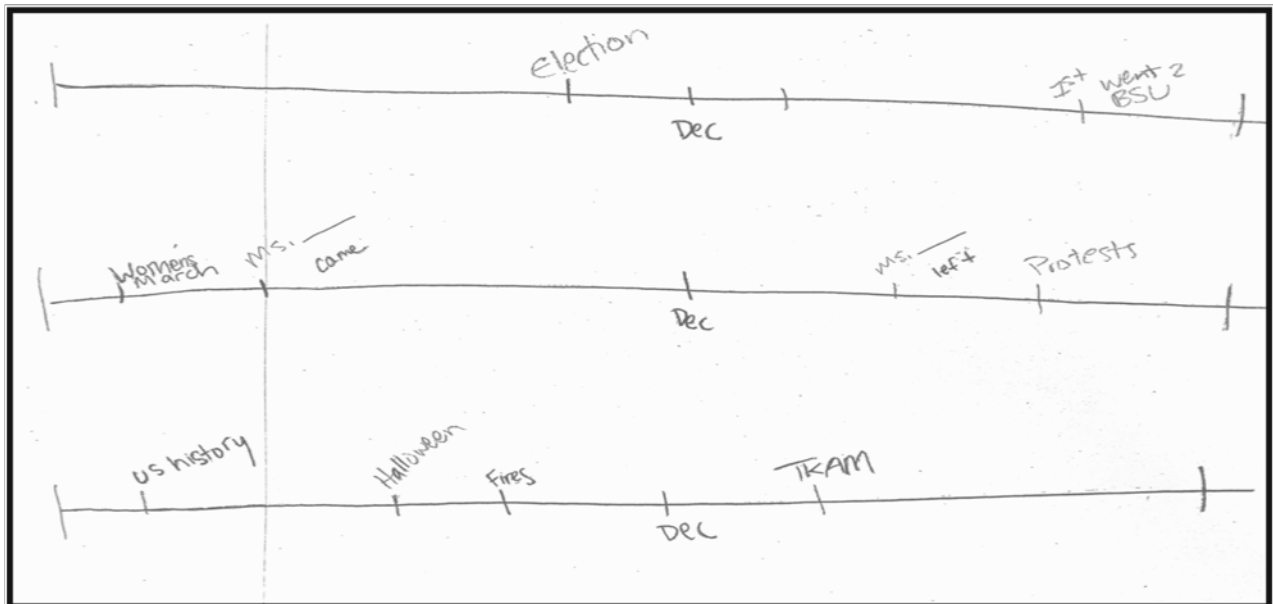
Figure 5: Layla's timeline. Original artwork by Layla.

she felt most characterized her middle school experience. During our narrative session, Layla was very deliberate in her speech; often pausing to search for the specific word or idea to adequately describe the event.

Entry into Middle School

When Layla began middle school at Pine Hills School for Girls, she recalls that the transition was not very difficult due to the fact that everyone was new. Pine Hills is a unique independent school as it is one of several independent schools in the Greater Los Angeles that has a specific-gender focus. Having transitioned into Pine Hills from a predominantly white public charter magnet elementary school that was also located in West Los Angeles, Layla describes being "pretty happy" that she was no longer the "only one".

> I want to say there were actually more Black students in my class than there were at my elementary school. Um, and I remember being pretty happy that like I wasn't the only one. My parents prepared me a lot, like, "Layla, you will probably be one of just a few," and um, so I was pretty happy that I, I wasn't. Um, I think there were about maybe four or five Black girls in my class [out of 42].

Layla continued by describing her interactions with other Black students who attended Pine Hills, as she encountered many on her bus ride to and from school. She lived in a suburb of "Black L.A." as did all of the other students on the bus. Layla described a dual transition into her new school; one that took place on the bus to and from school as she interacted with kids from her neighborhood and the other that happened on the school campus. She explained it in the following way:

95

All [the] Black kids in the school were on the bus because of the area we are coming

from [Black suburb in L.A.] [pause] so the bus was very different from, our bus was very

different from other buses [pause] and from being at school, um, but it was nice to have

that. Like, I have an hour-long bus ride, so it's kind of nice to have that time [pause] with

like a different group of friends and it was a time that we could bond with the older kids

in high school or just other middle school kids that we wouldn't see during the day at

school. And um, that's where I like made my first friends in the school.

A Political Climate

Layla soon learned that her new school was committed and dedicated to the happenings

of the world. During the sixth grade, Layla recalls the events surrounding the 2016 Presidential

election and how it was addressed on her middle school campus:

So, the election was first in November, that was, well, pretty big for everyone at my

school. It's such like a feminist environment. Um, it was, it was very big. It consumed all

of our classes. We didn't have school the day [after] the election, mostly for like grieving.

Well, the day of and after. The day of the election, we didn't have classes and in every

class, we were streaming the election and um just like watching it on TV, following it in

every class and then the day after the election we, um [pause] well, the day before we

didn't have any instruction the day after we didn't have any classes at all; we just came to

school and um, they put us in the, the dining hall with like a bunch of pillows and

blankets and we just sat there watching, um, Hillary's commencement speech, not

commencement [pause] her concession speech. Um, and yeah, that was pretty big.

An undercurrent of the commitment to exploring the political climate of the times, Layla found that her school was dedicated to exploring issues of gender equality. Layla continued to describe how her school typically handled issues related to gender. Yet, she also questioned their positionality on issues related to race, in that she noticed the differences in the way the school responded to issues of injustice were dependent upon the particular issue.

My school makes a lot of, um, a lot of, uh [pause] adjustments to political events within our classes. Everything's kind of shaped around what's happening in the country. Having time off from class and changing the curriculum, I have noticed, um, that just like what people choose to focus on and uh, it's, it's mostly like things having to do with women. And I'm like, we have school after the Women's March, we had the election, but there's never been anything of [pause] Like, I remember the day of, um, there was a shooting [in] I think seventh grade, a Black boy got shot and I remember he was like 16 or something, uh, by the police and um a student was crying in class and she asked the teacher if she could be excused and go to the bathroom. And the teacher, uh, was all of a sudden very strict. Like, "No, you have to stay here. We all can power through it. So, can you." Uh, it just seemed like such a night and day from the school, um, being so open to change and adjustments for all of these other events and then something happens that doesn't directly affect anybody there. Um, they're very, um, they're not very open about that stuff.

Similarly, she also recalled a conversation with a friend after the Parkland shooting in which schools around the nation had a national day of protest.

We were talking about how we would never be able to get, um, the involvement that we

had for Parkland for police brutality or any non-white issue really, and just how people just weren't very concerned with things that didn't affect them.

An Abrupt Shift

Although Layla's transition to Pine Hills required a shift to a same-sex schooling environment, she noted one other shift that was impactful on her daily life: no Black teachers. Layla was surprised about the reality of her new environment and wondered how the absence of Black teachers, or any teachers of color, impacted the mission and goals of the school. About this, she noted:

> Something I also forgot to mention about my adjustment into sixth grade was uh all of a sudden, I didn't have any Black teachers. Um, I had more Black teachers and Black students at my old school [pause] but um here at Pine Hills, I've never had a—well, I had one but she wasn't my teacher. Um, and that was pretty hard because of how much my school does talk about politics, never having not even a teacher of color um a person of color, to teach any of this, any of the events in the state of the world. The only people of color were in the language department. Yeah. It's all white women and men. Um, through middle school, at least. In high school it changed. Um, yeah. So that was a, a big change.

Microaggressions

In addition to gender equality, Pine Hills presented itself as a school that was committed to diversity. Layla explored this phenomenon at her school and described one such effort:

> Then, um like, our diversity department, that was all led by white teachers. Um in sixth grade, they decided to implement something called 'Community Connections', uh, to uh, I guess unite the school and I think there was something going on, uh, relating to race in

98

the upper school during this time. But I didn't know about it because I was like a sixth

grader. Um, but when they started community connections, we had like our dean who

was a, he was white and he came and he would talk to us for an our every Wednesday

about, um, some different way people could be more accepting or something. I mean they

did their research and they were pretty well informed, but I remember one time they came

up and they talked about, um, microaggressions. And maybe it was just that they were

trying to teach something that was too much to understand for, um, kids that young, but

nobody really took in the lesson. And what people got from that was more of a joke

about, uh, about like hurting people through, uh, race-related microaggressions. Um, and

they took it as a joke and I remember for like the rest of that year, students were making

jokes about race and um, it was, it was like little things that kind of built up. I remember

that affected me.

Layla also noted that many of her peers began to make jokes about anything related to race,

which she felt was insensitive.

Well one of the things that they addressed in the assembly was hair and like not touching

people's hair and how making comments on somebody's hair could be considered

microaggression. And at an all-girls school there's a lot of touching hair and braiding hair

and stuff like that. And whenever somebody would like be doing something like that

somebody would come up and be like, "Oh, that's a microaggression!" And then

everybody would just start laughing. Like somebody would do something without the

intention of hurting anybody and nobody was really trying to hurt anybody but somebody

would do something and then people would call them out jokingly. Or, like [they would say something] for real. And everybody would just take it as a joke.

For Layla, this environment created a sense of imbalance for her and she began to grow increasingly "uncomfortable". She felt that this "was the first time that people [were] really addressing race in this new environment" and unfortunately, it wasn't in the way that she "would have hoped."

Finding Support

The discomfort that Layla felt as a result of this joking led her to join the Black Student Union (BSU). She recalled being intimidated to join previously because they were "all high schoolers" in the meetings. To circumvent these feelings, she made a friend go with her to the meeting. Even though the BSU was open to the entire school, Layla and her friend were the only two middle school kids who attended along with the upper school students.

> When I [first] started going to BSU, I would never speak. It was, um, we just like sat in a circle and talked for lunch. I would never say anything, but I just liked being there and hearing what everybody [was] talking about. I mean they discussed everything. They discussed police brutality, um, hair microaggressions, uh, just like being Black at a majority white school. A lot of the times we were there, there wasn't like a strict schedule or anything. It was like a council style. So, we would just like [pause] anybody could bring up anything they wanted to talk about. Um, and then we just talk about that for the time. We talked about like the curriculum, um, and like things like US history and in English, reading books by Black authors and how teachers should inform themselves.

After Layla and her friend began attending BSU meetings, however, things shifted. More and more middle school students began to come. Additionally, several teachers also attended the BSU meetings. We revisited the statement that Layla had made earlier about there being "no Black teachers" to which she reiterated that there were no Black teachers in the middle or the upper school classrooms at Pine Hills; however, the faculty advisor was a Black fitness teacher. The teachers attending the BSU meetings were the "white teachers who were mostly in charge of diversity." Layla went on to talk about the advisor to the BSU as well as the how it felt to have white teachers and sometimes white students attend the meetings.

> Our advisor was a fitness teacher who was Black, so I guess maybe I shouldn't have said that, but we never had an academic Black teacher. We had days when it would just be students, um, and the advisor and then we had days when we would welcome the teachers as well. BSU was also like, there were times when it was like half Black, half white. Um, but that was never, it never felt like an intrusion. It never felt like, um, it was always comfortable at differ [pause] What I'm trying to say is, it felt the same as it would have felt if it had been, um, all Black in a way.

Layla, moreover, credits the BSU for helping her to deal with some of the microaggression jokes and uncomfortable situations that she had been experiencing because she was able to "just [know] that there were other people experiencing the same thing" and she was able to process by "hearing other people's stories."

The Right Kind of Black

Layla went on to describe the racialized events of her seventh-grade year which began with the hiring of a Black teacher to head the diversity board. She described the experience as one that brought a shift to the school community.

In seventh-grade, they brought in this teacher who immediately became the head of the diversity board. She was Black and she was a math teacher and I remember she was just, I mean she was [pause] everybody [pause] nobody liked her. She wasn't a very good teacher. Um, and she didn't really care about her position on the diversity board. She, she didn't, um, connect with the students at all. So, she left midyear, like she left like maybe January, February, but that changed the way the students saw things.

During the recall of the above incident, Layla chose her words very carefully as she described the impact that the sudden departure of the Black teacher had on the school community.

I dunno just sometimes when um, you don't have any experiences with like with a Black teacher and then one Black teacher comes and it's not the best experience, everyone gets it into their head that, um, that you couldn't have a good experience with somebody. Nobody really felt connected to her. That year, the entire structure of the diversity council at school and the connection between the students and different affinity groups and the teachers broke off, and they had to kind of rebuild that the next year.

Layla reflected on the experience with the Black teacher and felt like her brief time at Pine Hills and abrupt departure "changed students' and teachers' perceptions of Black teachers" as it "left an impression." Layla further explained:

Since she didn't connect with any of the students, I think it taught the students that they couldn't connect with a Black teacher, um, and that they needed the same kinds of teachers that they had then in order to do well in their classes and just [throughout] school.

Layla surmised that the experience with this Black teacher affected both white and Black students. White students were left with the "impression that they didn't need any Black teachers" and Black students felt that there was "less hope for getting [another] Black teacher in the further." Layla went on to describe the effect this experience had on her:

It makes me feel kind of hopeless. I mean, every year during the assembly on the first day of school, they come up and they introduce all the new teachers and I've always been kind of hopeful that maybe I'd have a lack teacher that year, um. But yeah, I guess that just kind of ruined part of that, especially with the conversations that we have in class and the way that the school works differently from other schools. I mean the teachers are so understanding and they do work really hard to, um, to, uh, educate themselves on everything that the students are going through and to be inclusive. But it, it's just not the same as having a teacher who's had the same experiences as you see the world the same way.

Aside from that experience, Layla shared that she felt good about having access to the Black fitness teacher who served as advisor to BSU and would feel comfortable seeking support from her, if needed.

Racial Stress

In eighth grade, Layla found that the curriculum of her English and history courses followed a similar sequence. While her English class read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her U.S. History course addressed the racial context of the time. She described:

> Um, so we talked a lot about race that year and I remember being the only Black kid in my history class. Um, and that was just hard, like talking about slavery and segregation and like, you know, people always look to you, uh, to, um, represent your group. And um, I was really vocal in that class that year.

Layla recalled feeling like she had to speak up and offer her opinion.

> When I think about it, I think I did feel like I had to. Um, I don't think I realized that at the time because I do just love history, um, but I, I think I felt like I had to speak up or because if I didn't, no one would, there was no one else to. Um, and people also just look to me to, uh, represent Black people in general. Um, yeah.

To deal with the pressure of having to represent Black people, Layla just "took on that role at times" and "just went along with it." She described her history teacher as being "very supportive and open to discussing the topics that we want[ed] to talk about" and "if something was making someone in the class uncomfortable she would steer [them] away from that."

Layla also recalled a school issue surrounding Halloween costumes that became a topic of conversation for the BSU.

> There was a group of about 10 high upper schoolers and, um, they were just like wearing the painting smocks and afro wigs. Um, and they were all white. Well, within BSU there was a debate over if it's not really blackface [pause] should like, is it really blackface and

if it's not, should we care? Should we try to stop it? And then the teachers were um like trying to figure like having that same debate themselves. Um, and a lot a lot of teachers came to BSU to talk it over with us and they were like, if, if you guys want us to say something to the school, we will stop it. Um, and I don't think anybody specifically addressed the wigs, but we did have an assembly this year before Halloween going over how to be respectful and um, yeah, just how to be respectful with your costumes and not offensive, I guess.

In this instance, the group of students had attempted to dress as an artist for Halloween who had become a popular meme at the time. Although the students had not "worn blackface", they wore afro wigs, which was discussed in BSU due to it being a "Black issue". Layla described further:

> I don't think the students were trying to be offensive. It was, it was definitely the, the Afro wigs. I think they just, I think it was, um, the older kids like juniors and seniors and in BSU that were first offended and what really made it so big was well the magnitude of the students that had done it. When confronted about it, um, there was a lot of like defending themselves. So, somebody would bring it up and then they'd be like, "No, you know, technically it's not against the rules. I can, I can do this if I want to." And then somebody would say, "Yeah, well that makes me uncomfortable." And they'd be like, "Well, he wasn't even Black. You know, and um, you're not allowed to tell me what to do."

Layla stressed that the response from the students who wore the offensive Halloween costume was dismissive and, therefore, resulted in many dedicated BSU conversations about the issue.

For Layla, the school responded by "having outside speakers come" and assemblies that addressed how to "avoid offensive language" and "how to be inclusive of other people." But nothing more was done within the everyday life of the school to address the situation.

Later that year, however, Layla recalls hearing about a situation in the upper school where "a student called another student the n-word" and through a "chain of events, got expelled." Layla described that the atmosphere of the upper school became "more polarized between Black students and white students."

> There was a lot of talk about it on my bus and um like, there were big friend groups splitting. Something happened with the basketball team that students would like refuse to play with other students. But once that class graduated, the class that it really affected the most, it just kind of went away. But the school did keep addressing it after they left, which is good. They didn't just try to ignore it.

Layla expressed that in response to this incidence, the Black students on her bus talked about "having more Black teachers" because "people felt like there was nobody on their side in the administration" and even with the people who were "addressing the problem, none of them see it through their lens." She also expressed becoming "closer to other Black students in other grades" through her involvement with BSU, but also having multiple friend groups. She has "one close friend who is Black and two who are white" noting that she and the other Black students are not "separated from everyone else by friend groups." She described being overall "kind of friends with everybody."

Layla's Mother

Mom, why do you keep making me do all this Black stuff? You send me to this white

school and I [still] have to go to all this Black stuff.

—Layla, study participant

Layla's mother was very eager for her daughter to participate in this study. Having

attended predominantly white schools for the majority of her life, she was familiar with what it

meant to be Black in a white space. Layla's mother, along with her father, decided that they

would seek admission for Layla to an independent school education because they wanted their

daughter to have access to educational opportunities that she otherwise might miss.

Comparing Schooling Experience

Layla's mother and I met over video conference for our narrative session. We began our

session with a recall of her middle school experience:

So, at that time, there weren't middle schools; there were junior high schools. I was on the

earlier end of the L.A. public schools, we call it bussing, but it was called PWT [permit

with transportation]. And if you're familiar with what was happening then it was with the

goal of integrating schools. So, with that said, I was one of the first to start that process. I

was definitely still one of the few Blacks, but it was growing as I kind of went from year

to year, there were more and more Blacks every year. Um, and still very little Latinas,

very little anything else. It was just either white or Black. And there was no designation

between like Jewish people that were at the school or any other race. I don't even

remember. I'm sure there were Asians at the school. I don't even remember how many

Asian Americans I went to school with then.

Layla's mother went on to describe her experience as one of the few Black students who participated in the program:

[All] the kids on the bus were Black, but we were, there were far fewer of us than there were of the entire population at the school. But on the bus, it felt, you know, inclusive, I felt like I was included in my environment. I felt comfortable. I felt, you know, part of this kind of elite group that was being bused into this environment. Um, and I felt welcome. I didn't, you know, it didn't feel like I was shunned or that I was an outcast or that there was anything wrong with, you know, me being bused in, you know, I'm sure there was probably some of that with some of the kids. I also am the product of a mother who worked for LAUSD. So, I think that that also felt very different for me than it might have for others. Like, you know, I remember my parents explaining to me why they were sending me there. And, you know, it was natural, it was like a natural environment for me to be in. I didn't feel uncomfortable.

Layla's mother recalls that her parents felt "that [she] would be more successful in an environment that was as rigorous as L.A. Unified could be."

School Choice

Layla's mother carried a similar school of thought when deciding upon which schools to choose for her daughter's education.

[Layla]'s determined, you know, she strives to do everything on her own. She doesn't even need us to motivate her to do her homework. She just starts doing it. That's just the rigor that she requires. So, I think that's the part that played into it more than what my parents had to think of. I wasn't that self-determined kid. I liked learning, but I didn't love

learning like Layla. So, in terms of that sense, I think, you know, we just kind of looked

for what are the best environments for Layla, and let's aim at that. And so, she, you know,

she consequently applied to those types of schools and you know [we were very] I'm

going to say blessed to get accepted into all the private schools that she applied to.

Layla's mother expressed letting her daughter's interests steer the school selection process.

Socioeconomic Diversity

Layla's mother went on to describe the racial demographics of Pine Hills stating: "I can't speak

about race without looking at socioeconomic status."

I think there was less of a[n] issue or a concern that came up with race, but definitely SES

status came up in the sense that there are some very wealthy families there and those girls

from those families would have these real exclusive bat mitzvahs and birthday parties. I

mean, just wow, like things that I don't even know adults that have those kinds of parties.

But with that said, it didn't present much of a problem because before we got there, we

had this talk with Layla about what that was going to look like. I had conversations with

other friends and I think I knew most of this any way that she was going to be kind of

dropped into this environment with a lot of very wealthy girls and they're going to be

things that she could not afford that they could do.

Layla's mother went on to also describe how the families with extreme wealth contributed to the

environment at Pine Hills. She recalls a discussion with Layla about families who would

"vacation in Italy for spring break or go wherever they wanted" and wanted to make sure that

Layla knew that things would be "more exclusive" than what their family was accustomed to.

Layla's mother's primary goal was for Layla to be "comfortable" within her new environment. She went on to note:

> You know, she grew up in an environment where she was always secure. So, it wasn't like I was concerned that she would feel insecure if she didn't have or if she wasn't afforded these opportunities because of the financial piece. Um, it was more about her understanding that this is what they do and this is what we do and you know, we'll do the best to try to get you where you need to be. But the reality is that some of that won't happen and because we had that conversation, I think she managed it a lot better.

Hence, overall, Layla's mother felt that Layla "adapted well" to her new environment and had friends from all different backgrounds.

Black Stuff

Layla's mother acknowledged that there were likely things happening to her daughter in regard to race that she didn't know about.

> There [were] probably some things that she never brought up because we had already said, you know, this is our limit, but, um, but for the most part I think she kind of adapted well and again, you know, that it wasn't so much about race because she has friends from several different backgrounds and she and some of her friends come from the same socioeconomic status (SES) as she does that are not Black. I think it was, like I said, less about [being] Black and more about the SES status.

Layla's mother recalled that in seventh grade, Layla began to attend BSU meetings and became "enlightened".

> So, um, she started going. When she was in middle school, she didn't go regularly, but

she did always come back with, you know, all of the topics that I would expect them to, to put on the table, you know, the issues of girls and hair, girls and body type and how that was different from their peers. Um, and then she would kind of start those conversations with us at home. So, she was definitely, you know, experiencing some things that I thought were healthy topics and conversations [they should] have.

Layla's mother continued to describe Layla's interest and interaction with the other Black kids on campus.

What's been an interesting dynamic is that I've noticed with Layla and her friends that it's not like, "Oh, we're Black, we're supposed to go to the Black room," you know, she doesn't feel this, this need to kind of present there. At her current level of development, [she] is interested in more, you know, women and Black women issues so to speak. But I think then she just didn't, you know, I don't know that she didn't so much identify herself as Black because if you were to ask her, she would say she was Black. She had, you know, it wasn't like she was denying it. She just didn't feel this need. I mean, I feel it because I went to an HBCU. I'm not Mrs. Pro-Black everything, but I certainly identify with my peers that are African American and I looked for her to do that and she just doesn't do that so much. So, I think that's what it was. I don't think it was like anything other than that she didn't feel the need to.

Layla's mother recalled a specific event that she and Layla attended and Layla's response that left her speechless.

We were at the HBCU college fair and [Layla] just did not want to go. I don't know, maybe it was the rain, but she was just like, "Mom, why do you keep making me do all

this Black stuff? You send me to this white school and I have to go to all this Black stuff!" I was blown away, I didn't [pause] I was like, speechless, I didn't know what to say. I was like, "Well, you're kinda right." And then there was a part of me that was like, "Because I said so," you know? There's another part [that's] like, "Because you need [pause] this is part of your development," you know? "All of this is part of your development."

Layla's mother reflected on Layla's outburst and wondered how concerned she should be about the development of her child.

It was such an interesting moment for me to hear her feelings about that. And then to also kind of reflect on my, you know, my forcing her to go to the white school and keeping her away from her Black friends. Should I be more pro-Black and force that more, should I force it less, you know? My parents told me, "You're going to an HBCU," because both of them did and you know, I didn't have a choice. They said, "You're going for a year. If you want to come home, come home." But they knew I was going to get to Howard and love it, which is what happened. But, you know, I often wonder, should I force [Layla] because now we're having more and more conversations about college, you know, so we're kind of talking more and more about it, but it's interesting to see her because, you know, even though she made those comments, I do find her more and more very interested in African American culture. She's in speech and debate now and she chose to do an amazing speech on Black women in healthcare.

School Support

Layla's mother went on to describe the support systems that were in place at Pine Hills to help Black girls navigate issues related to race. She cites the "BSU, as one example" of how the school supports Black girls. She reflected that parents should "have access to the administration" so that they know "what's really going on." "I do feel that they are genuinely supportive and recognized that there is the potential to be a huge void there for our girls. I think that they do what they can to make sure that doesn't happen."

Layla's mother then described that recently, she and two other parents initiated the formation of a Black parent affinity group at Pine Hills.

> I just wanted to make sure it was kind of going. But my husband has been fairly active, too. So that's been nice. We want the parents to know that if their girls are coming home with issues or concerns, that there's a network of parents to help to kind of guide that. What was nice was that the head of school was very supportive and came to our first meeting to let us know that she's right here with us. And you know, it just felt genuine; it didn't feel like it was contrived in any way. I mean I think half the battle is the girls knowing what to vocalize and whatnot, you know, like to know that they can say this, it's safe. It's okay. But definitely when they do voice [their opinion], there'll be someone there to support them.

Layla's mother went on to describe the issues that the group has focused on so far.

> The funny thing is the biggest issue is that our bus is always late. It seems bizarre and you know, it could just be random but it's such an issue. It is constant and it affects the girls because you know, they get to school a little late. It's, you know, [an] excused [tardy], but you know, they're unsettled by the time they get there. And I don't know that

113

the other buses aren't having the same issue, but I mean at least once every other week I'll

say the bus is like really late. I mean it's, you know, majority Black because the bus picks

up in the Black neighborhoods [Black L.A.]. So, that's an interesting dynamic. [This has]

been brought to their attention several times by several of the moms on our bus.

Layla's mother expressed frustration that the school had yet to do anything to address

these concerns aside from "switch[ing] bus drivers."

Since the Black parent affinity group was the first of its kind at Pine Hills, they initially

invited other racial groups to join their meetings. "We included them in our group and made it

clear, you know, the focus of our group is to give support to African American parents, but we

want to let you know you are also welcome here." She then described that other parents of color

first came to the Black parent affinity group meeting, but are now looking into beginning their

own affinity group.

No Black Teachers

Layla's mother recalled that there was "literally one" Black teacher on faculty at Pine

Hills. She admits to not ever thinking about this possibility and pondered if having a Black

teacher actually really made an impact on Layla.

I don't notice it that much and I don't think she does, either. I mean, so um, her coach is

the dean of something now. I can't remember what she is the dean of, but she's very

visible on campus. What I will say is that if there is a racial issue, [she is the one]

everybody goes to. She's also kind of my counterpart because she oversees the, you

know, she's a faculty representative for the BSU. So, um, you know, I have contact with

her as well, but she's very approachable and the girls definitely feel support there.

Sometimes they just go and hang out with her. But it's interesting [pause] Like, it would be nice to have more African American teachers. but it's not a loss that we don't have them, if that makes sense. I mean, I think the great thing is that the teachers that are there have a real clear acceptance of the African American students. It's, you know, I think that there's a fairness that happens.

Layla's mother admits that her daughter has "not said anything about" not having a Black teacher to her.

She hasn't complained that there are no other Black teachers. That's more my assessment and other parents, other Black parents feeling like there's that void. I don't think she notices, but maybe she does. I don't know. She hasn't mentioned it, though.

Racial Difference

During her narrative session, Layla's mother shared an experience of racial difference and how Layla responded.

So, they go on this outing every other year. So, they went as they went into seventh grade, and [they will] go again in ninth grade. It was a big deal because when she went in seventh grade she was very upset and kept talking about how she had to get her hair braided because who was gonna do her hair, you know, if I'm not there because it was a week long. Apparently, several, not just one or two, but several of the girls in her class, not Black, got their hair braided, too, and they were making such a big deal about "I'm getting my hair cornrowed." And Layla was so annoyed that they had the nerve to do this and even wanted to do it. And then they had to, you know, they were like forcing the issue and Layla was like, you know, like they just don't even appreciate that I really have

to and they're just like making it seem like it's a necessity for them. She talked about that a lot. she brought it up so many times. That was what I noticed. It was like she just wasn't letting it go. She was really offended by that.

Later, Layla's mother recalled an instance where her daughter "described someone by their race," which also surprised her as Layla had not displayed this type of behavior before.

I was listening to them talk as I'm driving and Layla made a comment and she was like, "Yeah, but it was mostly the white girls, you know, they just did whatever." I don't know, it was something about swimming and probably hair. But she was just making a comment. It was interesting because I'd never heard her make comments like that and describe someone by their race. She usually doesn't and she definitely has not described white girls, you know. She's very sensitive about issues like that. She is clearly aware of the fact that she's Black and that she has experiences that are different and I think she's okay with that now. I think her biggest issue is that I forced her to do the 'Black things,' like she made it clear, but I think if she chooses to do the Black thing, [then] she's good. I mean, it might just be like a parent child dynamic happening.

Layla's mother shared that her daughter "seems to have a healthy balance of her Blackness" as she is "still kind of developing." "She's still getting there."

Zuri's Story

I was the only Black person in the room—but she had said like, "If you feel uncomfortable with me saying the word then just like tell me," but I didn't. I like, I felt uncomfortable with her saying the word, but I didn't feel comfortable telling her that I was uncomfortable.   —Zuri, study participant

116

Zuri is a 14-year old Black girl who currently attends Willowbrook School as a 9th grader. She lives with her mother in the valley of the Greater Los Angeles area and is an only child. Zuri completed her timeline (see Figure 6) with minimal assistance and was prepared to describe the racialized events that she felt most characterized her middle school experience.
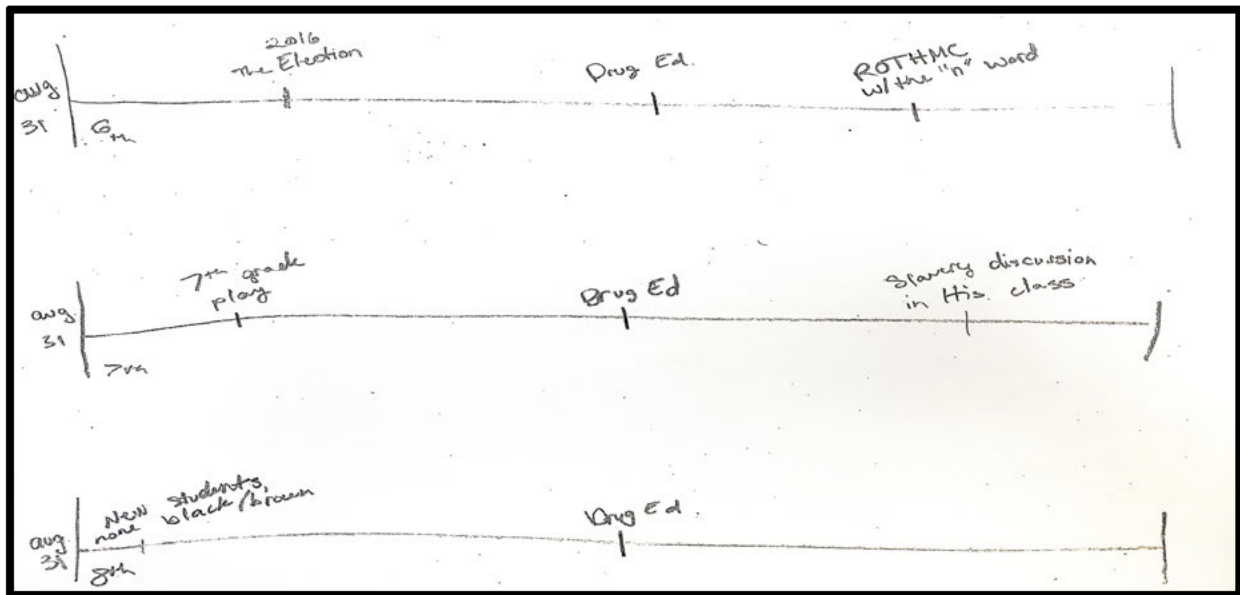
Figure 6: Zuri's timeline. Original artwork by Zuri.

During our narrative session, Zuri was intentional when sharing her story. She spoke clearly and with ease.

Entry into Middle School

Zuri began her independent school experience at Delano Academy, a K–8 co-educational day school located in North Los Angeles, which she entered in the sixth grade. As she thought about her experiences, Zuri recalled her transition to middle school:

Um, it was kind of difficult the first year because, well, first of all I didn't know anyone. And the academics were harder than elementary school. But mostly it was even more predominantly white than my elementary school. So that was a little scary to me.

117

Zuri described that she attempted to "deal with the differences" by hanging out with "a group of minorities" and not anyone else "because [she] just didn't feel comfortable." Zuri self-identified as a "minority" stating that there were "five or six minorities" out of her sixth-grade class of 36. Including Zuri, only three of the "minorities" were Black.

One of the first events Zuri remembers from her sixth grade year was connected to the 2016 Presidential election:

> So, there was the 2016 election that was, it was a big change at my school for me. I felt like because there were so many things that Trump had said or that were, I dunno, just shown or portrayed in the media and I felt like I stood out more in my, in my mostly white class because of those things and what was going on in the country. So, yeah that was a lot of that because most of my class was white. It was different. There were so many people—or not so many—but there was a good amount of people who were happy that he won because they didn't want someone else to win. And so yeah, it was just a more, it was a different atmosphere. It just, it was kinda weird because people of all races were upset that he won, but it was mostly white people who were glad that he, that he won.

Zuri also expressed surprise that "so many people" were happy that Trump won the presidency. However, she and her friend group intentionally "tried not to talk about it because a lot of us were so upset [pause] it was just a little too soon."

The N-Word

Later in her sixth grade year, Zuri recalled her class reading the book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. As the only Black kid in English class, Zuri described this experience in the following way:

It was very scary because we were dealing with a lot of racism in the book and my white teacher had said the n-word when we were reading the book and it was different because I had heard a lot of different words when I was in elementary school, but I had never heard that one before, but I just knew it was a really bad word that you weren't supposed to say. I just didn't feel comfortable with her saying it because she was white; it didn't really matter that she was reading it from a book. I just think she didn't have to say it in order to read it and get the meaning across. I feel like not saying it would actually get more of the meaning across because it would show the importance of the word and the impact.

During the time of that particular incident, Zuri felt both isolated and hyper-visible at the same time. She worked to process it, but struggled alone.

I felt kind of lonely because whenever it was said or something racist was said, a couple of people would like turn around and look at me because I was the only Black person in the class. I was really the only person that had like "had experience with this".

I prompted Zuri about how she responded when her classmates turned around to look at her. To this, she replied:

I just kind of kept my head down and kept reading. I didn't really say anything back or do

anything because I didn't want more attention on myself than there already was. In the classroom, [the teacher] just said—I mean this was obviously pointed towards me because I was the only Black person in the room—but she had said like, "If you feel uncomfortable with me saying the word then just like tell me," but I didn't. I like, I felt uncomfortable with her saying the word, but I didn't feel comfortable telling her that I was uncomfortable.

Zuri's feelings were further complicated as she felt that "the only person I would have been able to be comfortable with was someone Black and I didn't have any Black teachers." Zuri went on to describe that there was only "one Black faculty member, but he was a PE teacher and he wasn't exactly the easiest to talk to because he was kinda like a bulldozer."

As she processed her responses to the experience with *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Zuri talked about what she learned about racism then and now:

Just how intense racism used to be and how, when you really think about it, like when you really think hard about the things they aren't really putting in the media and aren't really shown a lot in the news, it hasn't gone down as much as it should have. I mean there shouldn't be any racism but it should have gone down a lot more than it has.

Zuri also recalled that her peers became "more sensitive" around her. "Even if they didn't say anything that could even possibly be racist, they were very specific about what they said around me."

Zuri also recalled an experience in history class where she was once again faced to deal with the "racist part of history."

Later that year we were going over slavery in history class [pause] and about the civil rights

movement. Me and another Black girl were the only two Black kids in the class and

people still kept on looking at us and we just felt very uncomfortable. Sometimes I would

ask to go to the bathroom because it was a bit much, so I would like cool down in the

bathroom and kind of brush it off and then go back to class.

Further, Zuri shared that any discussion about this incidence she had with the other Black girl in

her class was never done in a "serious manner."

We were just like, not really joking but we didn't, we never had a serious conversation

about how we felt. It was just how like, "Oh, ha ha, it's so annoying being only two Black

kids, am I right?" It was just that kind of a sense of relation to each other.

For Zuri, there was no teacher in which to confide her feelings and with the other Black

kids, these experiences were only joked about. Zuri shared that although she also had a few white

friends during this time, "they weren't really like my FRIENDS" (emphasis hers). She described

only having "one good friend throughout middle school" who was "Hispanic" and "still her best

friend". This friend was there for Zuri "in these kinds of situations"; however, Zuri "wasn't able

to really confide in her because she didn't understand" what Zuri was going through. For Zuri,

dealing with this issue of race early on set the precedent for other experiences she would have at

Delano Academy.

The Play

During the seventh grade, Zuri described a play where she was one of only two Black

kids who were cast, but neither of whom received a main role.

There were only two, three Black kids [with a total of] five to six minorities in the entire class. And um, only two of the Black kids were in the play and [we] didn't have like main parts, which was weird because no, neither of [us] had main parts in the play. [We] were just mostly background characters. But all the leads in that play were white. I felt like it shouldn't have made a difference, but it still did to me because there were so few minorities in the grade that I just thought maybe the teacher would have like gone the couple extra steps to make sure that at least one of them was the lead or something. And maybe she wasn't even thinking about it.

With respect to this incident, Zuri was unsure about what specifically made her uncomfortable about the casting of the play, but she knew that it "didn't feel right." To add to this discomfort, Zuri questioned the roles that she and the other Black girl were assigned.

The play was about our phobias and how we could overcome them. But the other girl, I think her phobia was swimming, which I thought even though I don't think it was meant to be racist, it was a little racially insensitive because of like stereotypes.

According to Zuri, she just continued to question these incidents and sought ways to make sense of their connection to her identity as a Black girl.

Weed = Blackness

In eighth grade, Zuri recalled two specific racialized incidents that stood out for her. She recalled that "there were a couple of new students, but none of them were Black." For Zuri, she considered "how many new students came into the school" and further realized just how "predominantly white" her schooling environment was.

Another key event for Zuri took place during a drug education class, when there was a class discussion about cannabis or weed.

We had drug ed. in eighth grade education and there was a lot of talk of like weed. I'm Jamaican and a lot of people would like look at me when weed was mentioned because just Jamaicans—most of the people when they think of Jamaican, they think weed and food [pause] The other Black girl in my class, she was like, ha ha. Um, I think she said something about like being a Rasta or something because her stepfather is like a quarter Jamaican and she thought that that made her Jamaican. So, she like made a joke in a Jamaican accent, which I didn't really like. So, I kind of dismissed it. I didn't really say anything but I just kind of chuckled and walked away.

As with other incidents, Zuri continued to deal with the discomfort of the racialized incidents that occurred in the classroom, for the most part, alone. There was no mention of the teacher intervening to address Zuri's experience.

Angry Black Girl

As Zuri reflected on how she coped with these incidents, she realized that she never really "stood up for" herself. In her narrative session, she explained why this may have been so:

I think because there were so many situations where I felt uncomfortable that when I thought about standing up for myself or standing up and saying like whites, what they said or what was going on was unnecessary, I think my brain just put all the uncomfortableness together and I didn't. I was unable to stand up for myself or say anything about it because I just got even more uncomfortable because then I started

thinking about people's reactions and stereotypes about me, how I was supposedly an

angry Black girl. It's things like that.

When asked if she thought others viewed her as an "angry Black girl," Zuri offered an

affirmative "absolutely." She noted that she often got impassioned about issues related to

"politics or feminism." She described how she experienced this within herself.

When I really get deep into thought or like discussion, many people mistake that for

anger, so if I'm just getting really passionate about something I'm saying, then people will

mistake them and be like, "Oh, you're getting really mad. Like, calm down," and I feel

that stereotypical angry Black girl pops into their brain [pause] I think that opinion [of

me] formed around seventh grade. Not really in sixth grade because I was so

uncomfortable in my surroundings that I didn't really [pause] I was kinda quiet. Besides

to my best friend in sixth grade, so like most of the sixth grade I was just kinda shy

around everyone and in seventh grade I got more comfortable. So, then that's when, I

started like having more discussions in class and participating a lot more.

Zuri went on to describe that on free dress days, she "would wear hoop earrings" and her

peers would ask why hers "weren't big" like other Black girls they had seen before. She went on

to describe that "a lot of people apparently see Black girls as like having huge hoop earrings and

long fake neon nails and weave." It was this type of stereotypical characterization that first

sparked an angry response from Zuri, but also a dilemma that provoked her current approach to

stereotypes.

It made me feel very angry, but then I felt that I couldn't express that anger because I

would further [pause] I would give them a reason to believe that stereotype if I got angry at them for saying that. But now I don't really care about the stereotypes. I just care about having my opinion known not in an extreme way but in a way where I'm like, where I make sure that it matters and it's not a stereotype, but it's just the way I feel.

After making a commitment to herself to "speak out more", Zuri felt that her voice began to "come naturally" to her and she was able to "let it out in a specific way" where she was "not too angry" or "not overreacting."

Being Black at Delano

Zuri also shared her ideas of what it meant to "be Black" at Delano:

I think to be Black at Delano is to be told that you're accepted and you're in a diverse community, but you're being told this by white people in a predominantly white school. So, I think just personally my experience at Delano was kind of uncomfortable, but it also depends on who you're talking to.

By accepted, Zuri meant that she was "accepted into the community" and "welcomed very warmly."

Zuri also described her perspective on the experiences of the other two Black students in her grade:

I think in some ways their experiences were the same [as mine], but in some ways their experiences were different. The other Black girl, she had been there for a couple years. Like she didn't, she wasn't new; she had been there since like second grade, I think. So, she wasn't new. But the Black guy, he was new but he just didn't let anything quiet him down. He was just always so out there with his thoughts, but like in a good way because

125

then it let people know that like, not that he's not "someone to mess with" quote, but like

he's just not there to be stereotyped or made fun of or thought of differently.

Zuri shared that after 8th Grade promotion, she was separated from these two peers. The Black

boy and Black girl from her grade went on to a different predominantly white independent upper

school, the prestigious Timber Creek, while she transitioned to Willowbrook School.

When asked if there was anything that she would change about her Delano experience,

Zuri responded by saying:

Probably my reaction to *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in sixth grade. I think if I had

talked to the teacher about how I felt uncomfortable, I would have had more confidence

throughout the rest of my Delano experience and I don't think I would've been as quiet.

Zuri believed that voicing her discomfort would have changed the trajectory of her ability to

speak out. As such, Zuri saw the problem within herself to fix.

Lack of Support

Zuri noted that in addition to there being no Black teachers at Delano, there were also no

affinity groups or specific events which highlighted Black culture. She recalled an assembly in

which Black culture was mentioned, noting "it would just be like facts about the month" and

"why Black history month was a 'thing'". Zuri also reiterated the need for more Black teachers

at Delano during her tenure. She felt that both her confidence and comfort level would have

improved with the presence of a Black teacher. About this, she stated:

I think along with if I had gone back in, like stood up to the teacher about the n-word

when we were reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, I feel like as well as that, along

with a Black teacher, I would have felt a lot more comfortable there. Comfortable to like

speak my mind and say how I feel and why what I feel is different than what others might

feel because of their experiences versus my experiences.

As inferred in her narrative above, Zuri struggled to connect with the other two Black

students in her grade level, stating:

I think they were influenced by the people they hung out with a lot. So, like the girl, she

was part of the "popular group", which was mostly white people. And then the Black, the

Black guy, he was part of like the really athletic group and he just didn't, he would, he

and I just didn't get along.

As the critical narrative came to a close, Zuri described herself as an "outsider" and a

"floater":

Like I would say outsiders, but when most people think of outsiders, [they] think of like a

bad thing, but I think of it as like a good thing because we're not part of any like specific

group. We're just there, you know, we're floaters and we would usually hang out in the,

in the library and we would like draw or read or listen to music or watch movies.

Zuri spoke of her "crew" as an "acquired taste" acknowledging that it was not necessarily a

"crew that other people would be in". For Zuri, this space allowed her the chance to "be herself"

at Delano when most other spaces were places of discomfort.

Zuri's Mother

Because I even said to her, I was like, "Zuri, you have Black friends now!"

—Zuri's Mom, study participant

Zuri's mother grew up in a large urban city on the East coast. She lived in a Black

neighborhood during her childhood but attended predominantly white schools. She is a divorced,

127

single mother, and is very dedicated to the academic success of her child. As an entrepreneur, Zuri's mother espouses the traits of motivation, hard work, and dedication. Zuri's mother and I met at the offices of the Partnership for our narrative session. She was very direct in her responses, yet open to share about her and her daughter's experiences.

Schooling Experience

Zuri's mother described her schooling experience as having had issues with her Black peers.

> For the most part I went to a predominantly white school. It was a public school just because of the dividing lines of the school district, but I lived in a black neighborhood. So, just ironically that's how it worked out. Uh, there were some other Blacks there. I had more problems with the Black kids than I did with the white kids. Never had problems with the white kids. Never ever, ever, but had big problems with some of the Black girls.

These peer interactions shaped Zuri's mom opinion of intra-racial group experiences. She went on to describe what she believed was the cause of this strife.

> Um, I think it was probably jealousy because they were, you know, literally welfare families and you know, we had a house. My mother was a teacher. I had long straight hair, you know, they didn't and I dressed well. Just the typical like I don't like you just because. You have everything I don't.

Zuri's mom recalled a particularly upsetting interaction that she had with other Black girls at her school:

> There was one time in the summer, I'll never forget, and they were only around for a couple of years. I was walking down the street. They were walking the opposite way; this

one girl came up to me and didn't say one word to me and just punched me dead in my nose. And her mother really didn't even care because when my mother went to talk to her, she was literally 25 or 26 years old and [already] had five kids just like [pause] okay.

Zuri's cites her participation in honors classes as "caus[ing] a divide" between she and her Black peers. She recalled that she "wasn't really friends with a lot of them" because she "wasn't in classes daily with them." These early interactions with Black girls colored Zuri's mother's experiences. As she became older, Zuri's mother has come to realize that she "doesn't have a lot of Black friends" stating that she doesn't know "if people just don't get" her.

School Choice and School Fit

Zuri's mother placed Zuri in public school for elementary and decided to go through the Partnership to help with the decision process for middle school. On why she transitioned her daughter into an independent school, Zuri's mother shared the following:

We were in public for elementary [and then] I found out about the Partnership. My thought process was that being in a classroom with less kids in schools with usually less kids than public school, there would be less, for lack of a better term "drama" going on because middle school is the age where kids are going off the deep end or can go off the deep end. So, if they're monitored a little bit more because there's less kids around then that's what I wanted. That's the environment that I'm wanting to put her in.

Zuri's mother recalled being less particular about specific schools when deciding on Zuri's placement for middle school. Included in the considerations were the available "bus to be able to get her to school" and the size of the school.

It really came down to money and if there were schools where we got the same amount of aid from each, then it came down to size and what I felt was a better fit by how we were accepted at that school or how we were, the interaction we had with that school.

Zuri's mother described her daughter's experience at Delano Academy, where Zuri entered into a class of only 34 students:

I thought it was a really good fit. She does better, I think in a smaller environment and it was much smaller school than some of the other schools. So, I felt that was where she needed to be. Ironically, that school would be, they would have booths and they would have different things at our elementary school and I was talking to the admissions head at that point, you know, and I wanted it to be able to get her into [both a middle and] high school so that I [wouldn't] have to think about it. And [the head of admissions] said something that made a lot of sense to me because she said what [kids] need in middle school, may be very different from what they need in high school. And I don't know [if] that [is] so much the case now [that she's] in high school, but I think where she ended up at middle school was definitely the right place for her compared to some of the other schools that we had applied to.

Race and Diversity

During middle school, Zuri's mother recalled that there was only one situation in regard to race with Zuri had to contend.

For the most part there were no issues whatsoever. There was an instance, just one instance with another girl, ironically, who she had known and went to school with from Kindergarten. [This girl] actually came through the Partnership [but she is] not Black.

There was just an incident one time [Zuri wore] her hair out natural and the girl was running around trying to chase her to touch her hair. But I think she was just trying to fit in with some of the other kids and just do it to be funny because at one point they were, you know, really good friends, um, you know, never best of friends, but they definitely had playdates and hung out with each other a lot and stuff. That was really the only thing racially that I can think of that ever happened there.

Despite that incidence, Zuri's mother recalled there being great emphasis placed on diversity.

[Delano] would always do, you know, throughout the year, um, in their community or whatever you want to call it, where they held assemblies type things. They would always, do, you know, Black History Month, they would do something for Chinese New Year. They would do something for, I dunno, whatever else comes up. Um, Cinco de Mayo and you know, they would do different things throughout the year. They always made a point of doing that. I felt that they were just very inclusive.

Although Zuri's mom did not recall there being a particular support or affinity group offered to parents, she recalled that there were ways for her to become involved with the school.

They didn't have a diversity group. I forget what it was called, but they did have a group and then for the entire school, they would have like a multicultural potluck and people would bring, you know, obviously all different types of dishes. And then if you wanted, you could "adopt a table" to decorate it in whatever your culture or your history was.

Different Experiences

When asked to compare Zuri's schooling experience to hers, Zuri's mother shared the following:

> I mean it's definitely different because times are different. Um, she also goes to school with people that are very wealthy. So, some of her experiences are very different than what I may have experienced. Even just what the school offers is very different, you know, speaking specifically of middle school, you know. Like for instance, her school, the entire eighth grade goes to [Europe], that's part of the tuition. So that wasn't even anything extra I had to pay for. [When I was] in middle school, I can't even think of a field trip that we went on because all the, you know, typical East coast field trips like that all [happened] in elementary school.

She went on to describe other opportunities that Zuri had available to her:

> I just find that schools in general are very different from [the East Coast] to here. So, you know, it's just, I dunno, like in middle school here we didn't have organized sports after school where they did in her school. I don't know if they do it in public school, but they do it in private school, so she got to play sports. She's not an athlete, but she just liked playing at that particular time. Uh, so she was able to do those things. Even in the curriculum, you know, they do plays or they do performances or whatever. We didn't do that in middle school. High School, yes. Really. I don't remember doing anything in middle school but regular school stuff.

In regard to curriculum, Zuri's mother had additional things to share regarding the curriculum:

Things just move at a faster pace now. So, things that Zuri was learning in sixth and seventh grade, I may have learned in ninth or 10th, you know. They started Algebra or even just touched on it, like even at the end of fifth grade, which I didn't do Algebra until I think 10th grade. I think ninth grade was geometry and 10th grade was Algebra, so maybe that's just a sign of the times, but everything just seems to move a lot faster.

Black Friends

Similar to her own schooling experience, Zuri's mother noted that Zuri has multiple friendships, but none with Black girls.

Well, her best friend who is still her best friend because they still go to school together, which is good, is Latino or Latina. And then everybody else is just white. There was one other Black girl and one biracial boy who was Filipino and Black, but everybody else was just [pause] there were like two or three Asian kids and then everybody was white. So, all of her other friends were just white. Even in elementary school, most of her friends were white. Even though the school was very diverse, most of her friends were white.

Zuri's mother reflected on her own experience and compared it to that of her daughter's.

I mean having had the same kind of experience, it didn't bother me. I really didn't think about it at all, quite honestly, because if it was something that really bothered me, she probably wouldn't have gone to private school.

When asked to describe if she thought the racial composition of Zuri's peers and friends affected Zuri in any way, she noted:

I mean nobody's blind so you see, you know, what is there, but I don't think it affected her in any way. Negative or positive. She is a kid that is just very adept in any situation. So, I don't think it was, if it that it had anything to do with it.

Once Zuri transitioned into a new school for high school, she joined a larger, more diverse community. Zuri's mother noted that Zuri's friend experience changed in high school "just based on who's there" and noted her surprise when she realized that Zuri "had Black friends."

Nothing Is Missing . . . or Is It?

Initially, Zuri's mother stated that she did not feel that Zuri had to deal with any issues or situations in regard to race at her school, nor was she having any interactions with her peers that involved race. Additionally, Zuri's mother believed that her daughter would not hesitate to talk to her if there were any issues because they "talk about everything". Zuri's mother also noted that although there was a lack of teachers of color on the faculty, particularly Black faculty, she did not think their absence "made much difference" for her daughter.

Later in the conversation, Zuri's mother recalled several instances where race was a factor, particularly when racialized words are presented through the curriculum. To this, she stated:

Um, there have been situations that have happened and I really haven't had to intervene or do anything because she understands. When those things even have come up because they have read books, you know, whatever the books are or whatever, I don't really need to talk to her because she'll tell me about things that are happening. She'll tell me everything that went on and she's fine with it, you know, very mature and very well

adjusted to things and she's just able to deal with the kinds of differences. And I think

also for kids, what I find is that [the n-word] doesn't have as much weight because they

hear it so much in music or in movies. It's almost desensitized perhaps for them slightly. I

wouldn't say all the way because she doesn't like hearing the [n-word], but it doesn't, you

know, unless somebody called her the word directly, she understands that it's part of the

times, you know, like even, you know, when we go see movies, if they, it's at the movies.

I mean it's [pause] you just can't avoid it.

Although Zuri's mother did not necessarily think of instances from middle school in which Zuri

had to contend with her race, she noted that race continued to be a factor in our everyday lives.

She felt confident that if faced with an issue, her daughter would not hesitate to bring her into the

conversation so that they could work to solve it together.

Alex's Dilemma

Just everything is like white and then you get like one Black thing. It's like whoa! That's

crazy. It's amazing.

—Alex, study participant

Alex is a 14-year old Black girl who currently attends Sun Valley School for Girls as a

9th grader. She lives with her mother and stepfather, but ceased having a relationship with her

biological father after her parents' divorce several years prior. Although Alex self-identifies as a

Black girl, she is also coming to terms with her biracial identity. Alex is a quiet and pensive girl

who struggled a bit with the timeline (see Figure 7) and recounting the events of her middle

school years, but opened up more as the narrative session proceeded.
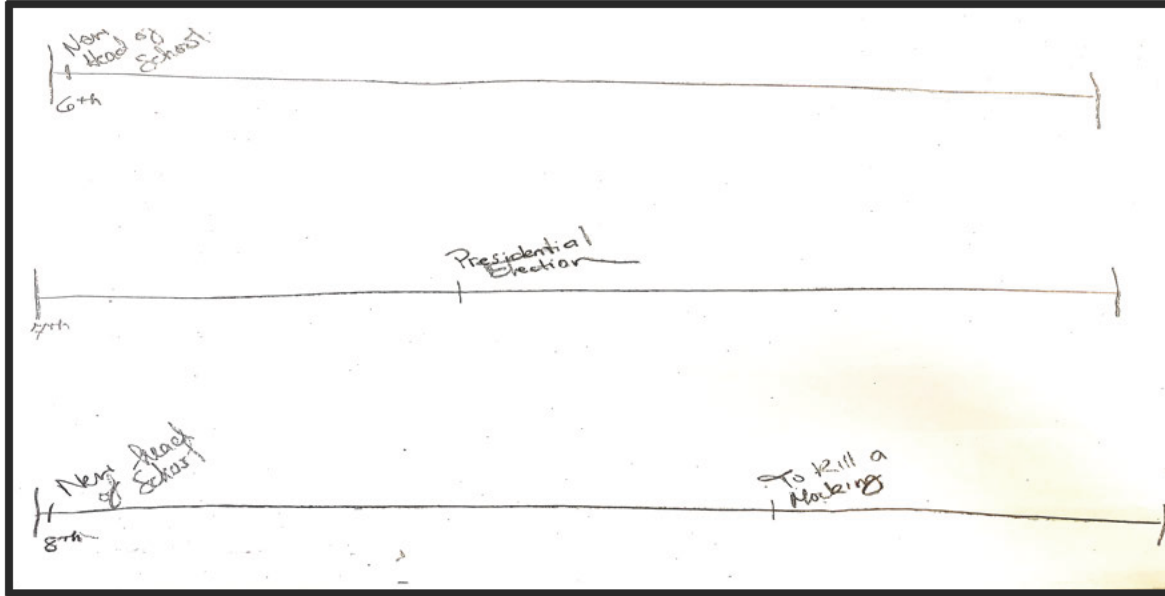
Figure 7: Alex's timeline. Original artwork by Alex.

Entry into Middle School

Alex spent her sixth-grade year at River Falls, which services students in grades K–6th. She was one of two Black girls in the sixth grade class of approximately 40 students. That year, the classes departmentalized and there were two sections of history, math, science, and language arts. Alex and the other Black girl were placed in two different homerooms, but they shared the same history class.

> So, in Kindergarten, [there] was one [other] Black kid. Can't even remember his name, it was so long ago and then he left that year. He went through the end of that year and there were no Black kids except for me up until fifth grade when this other girl came. [In sixth grade], we had about 40 kids and it was split up into sort of the homerooms about 20 each. The two Black students were split—like one in each.

Alex also shared that she and the other Black girl had not been placed into the same class in fifth grade.

136

Although she had entered River Falls in Kindergarten, Alex did not notice a shift in the school until her sixth-grade year and this was due to a change in the leadership.

> We had a new head of school that year [pause] our old head of school had been there for 25 years, she was a white lady but she was really nice. We had a Black woman come as our new head of school. So, the new head of school, she started a gospel choir at church and for the school.

The gospel choir was something new to the predominantly white environment at River Falls School and church. During her sixth-grade year, both the head of school and the principal were Black. Alex went on to describe the response of community to this shift.

> I just remember being at the whole Gospel Choir and I just saw a bunch of the white parents like really freaked out in the back just like, eh! They were just uncomfortable I guess. It was their kids [performing], but I guess they [weren't used to them singing that kind of music]. There were me and two other Black kids in the choir and then the rest of them which that was like 10 other kids were white.

Alex recalled having serious stage fright but still wanting to participate in the choir performances. She contended that the school environment "just felt better" with the addition of the gospel choir. Additionally, she recalled having Black teachers for both history and science, one of whom she occasionally "ran into at the neighborhood grocery store." Alex expressed real love for the school, which was headed by a Black head of school and this translated in greater comfort with speaking about race. About this, Alex said:

I would say it's a great school to anyone. Like no matter what your race is or anything, it's

an amazing school. It's great. I love it. And the new head of school, she kind of made it

more comfortable to talk about [race] if you needed to.

As her own words demonstrate, for Alex, finding a space of comfort was most favorable and she

fondly recalled her time at River Falls.

Lack of Diversity

Alex transitioned to Ogilvie Academy for seventh and eighth grade. There were only 22

students in the entire class, which made for a much smaller group of peers than her previous

location. Alex described her new surrounding in the following way:

It, it's just, there's no Black teachers. The only chance you get to talking to a Black person

would be maybe one student cause the entire eighth grade there was one [other] Black

girl and then the seventh grade it was [the same] Black girl and that's it. And then there's

about 20 to 25 kids in the whole grade. So, I mean, I mean I never really liked Ogilvie in

the first place, not just for that, but I just didn't like it. There were two kids who were

supposed to come but from other schools, but they ended up coming later in the middle of

the year. Um, so it was me and that other girl, we were the only Black students and then

[later in the year] after the two new kids came we were still the only Black students.

In contrast to her sixth-grade year at River Falls, Alex found that Ogilvie did not have

any specific cultural events to "celebrate or educate" about Black History Month.

It just, eh, it wasn't a lot. I guess, eh, just kind of like talked about it for like couple of

days. We watched like one short video something and then it's like move on to a history

lesson, or something. We had a whole school assembly thing for like Asia and other

places. [pause] I'm trying to remember, but if I don't remember it, it probably wasn't even

that significant, cause I don't remember whatsoever.

For Alex, the lack of attention paid to cultural differences and diversity made a significant

impact on how comfortable she felt on the campus.

Not Black Enough

Alex explained that she chose to attend Ogilvie because "they just accepted me within

like three seconds!" She went on to describe her initial feelings about the school:

And I mean uh, on the tour [to visit Ogilvie] I felt uncomfortable. It was, it was kind of

fun because there was like this history thing where we had to like walk around the entire

campus and like count our steps. It's a lot of steps. It's like 10,000 but um, I just didn't

feel like I liked it but I ended up going anyway and I didn't like it for those two years.

Alex continued to describe why she felt uncomfortable at Ogilvie. "I mean like [pause] I was the

only Black kid there. I mean I don't look Black I guess you would say, but I could just feel it. I

guess [pause]." At this point in our narrative session, I questioned Alex about her statement

about Blackness and prompted her to explain further what she meant by her statement of "not

looking Black". She responded:

I mean, I've asked so many people and they are like, "Oh, you look white." I'm like, okay.

Yeah. And then there's some other people that are like, "Oh, you totally look Black." I'm

like, um, there's no like middle, I guess I am white or it's like there's no one that says. I

think there was like one person who's like, "Oh yeah, you're probably like mixed." And

then everyone else is like, you're white or totally Black. Like okay [pause] I mean like I

asked them, "Do you think I'm mixed?" And they were like, "No."

With a shrug, Alex then added that when her peers would see her alongside her mother, "usually, they think I'm adopted." This really bothered Alex as only the people who "knew her well" would pair her as her mother's child.

Mistaken Identity

During the two years at Ogilvie, Alex's "looks" and those of the other Black girl in her grade level were consistently confused quite a few times. The other Black girl was "mixed, as well" with an "Irish father and African American mother." Alex spoke about this experience and the confusion this caused her teachers.

> I would get [the name] Macy on my tests. I'm like, "um, that's not mine." Or like, or homework or anything or like someone will tap my shoulder and be like, "Hey, Macy!" I'm like, "I'm not Macy." Or they'll tap her shoulder [pause] and we, and we don't look anything alike whatsoever!

Alex described that Macy's hair, which was curly like hers, was as far as the similarities went.

> She, she always was her hair down—always. I always wear my hair up. I think two days in my life, I've worn it down. But like we look nothing alike and she's taller than me by like this much. I'm like, "Are you blind?" They just said, "Oh, you wear your hair down, you wear your hair up." [To them], that was like really the only difference. [We have] totally different body types, too. Her skin's like darker skin than mine. [pause] Yeah, like I just, I don't get it. If we wear the same outfit and wore our hair the same way, we would still look different, completely. It's like just pay attention.

Alex expressed that she grew increasingly frustrated by the constant confusion. Alex specifically revealed that this constant mix up came from "two of her teachers", "the English teacher and Spanish teacher." Alex continued by describing how she and Macy responded to the confusion.

> I mean, we just took it as a joke because we didn't want to like get offended about it, so we just kinda made it a joke and like laughed about it. Yeah, it was. I just like, I would read through [my returned tests] and I'm like, wait, this isn't, I didn't answer this question like this. I'd look at it and say like, "Oh, that's not even my handwriting!". That's not mine. This is someone else's.

Alex's peers were appalled that the teachers continued to mix up the girls. "In fact, they would like talk about the teachers doing that. They're like, 'Oh my God, why do they still do that?'" With her peers' support, Alex shrugged off the mistake, but silently remained flustered by it all.

The N-Word

Later in eighth grade, Alex would have another interaction with her English teacher during the reading of one of the "classics", *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

> One time in eighth grade, we read the mockingbird and our teacher was being "considerate" and he asked the whole class, "Should we say the n-word in the book?" And we were like, "No." But then a bunch of the white kids were like, "Yeah." Like half the class said no. Half the class said yes to get a feel of the book [pause] And then, he just all of a sudden said it in front of the class, the teacher. And we were just [confused] because we agreed on "no." And then we were just confused. I guess. We were just like, "Why?" We already agreed on no. After class ended, we just kinda walked outside and we were just like grouped together like, "What is wrong with him?"

Alex and her classmates were puzzled by her teacher's actions. She explained that he continued to use the word in class whenever it appeared in the text. However, "it did not come up super often in the book." Alex went on to describe that when the class was required to read the text aloud, she and her classmates "skipped over [the n-word]." For Alex, using the n-word "was not appropriate for the time." Moreover, she spoke about experiencing the discomfort of a sense of hypervisibility: "And every time that he said it, everyone looked at us—me and Macy," and expressed that this made her "extremely uncomfortable."

Alex's Mother

We were strangers the whole time.

—Alex's Mom, study participant

Alex's mother moved around a lot during her childhood. Her family settled in a small suburb north of Los Angeles where she attended middle and high school. She enjoyed the "feel of a small town" and made the decision to send her daughter to schools that reflected similar values. She is a divorced mother of one and devotes her time to ensuring that her daughter, Alex, is afforded the best academic opportunities. Alex's mother and I met via videoconference due to the terrible weather storm that had enclosed the area. She was quite nervous to share about her experience as the mother of a Black girl in a predominantly white independent school, but she was also determined to speak her truth.

Schooling Experience

Alex's mother attending public school for her schooling years. She reflected fondly on her experience, and recalled only one incident of strife.

Um, I went to King Junior High. Seventh and eighth grade was when it was called junior high. I had a fine experience, for the most part, nothing [that was] major life changing. The only teacher I had a problem with actually was a Black teacher. I was in the seventh grade and I was a student in English class and she seemed to adore me or like me as a student. Then, [an] open house came and my mom came and coincidentally the teacher— my mom recognized the teacher. They [had gone] to school together. But it was my aunt who was in class with this teacher, you know, and of course there [was] a guy involved. From that point on, I got Ds and Fs in her class, and it was such a problem that my mom went to the principal and changed me out of her class. That was terrible. Aside from that, I mean I was, I enjoyed middle school, and I liked my school.

Strangers the Whole Time

Alex's mother described the difference in her schooling versus her that of her daughter's. I would say class size is number one major difference. Her middle school was so different from her elementary. We were only there for two years, [and] we were strangers the whole time. She and I. Even though, you know, she had people that warmed up, I had people that warmed up [pause] the attitudes were nice. I think when we first got there, when she was in the seventh grade, I don't know how she felt. She won't discuss race, she shuts the conversation down, so I've never really gotten her to engage on that conversation.

Alex's mother continued to describe her perception of how the community received her and Alex once they arrived to Ogilvie.

I felt [that they were] surprise[d] at our appearance, especially with our last name, but the head of school was a personal friend and that always makes things better. And also, Alex has just a delightful, delightful personality and the teachers just warmed up to her. So, I would say socially, I don't know where she was at. I would always have parents say nice things about her, but I also had parents that were cold towards me that I was surprised [pause] you know, just a little more white, um, and not knowing what to do with a Black person there.

In talking about her experience, Alex's mother recalled an issue that she ran into as a parent volunteer.

A problem is [that] I volunteer a lot at the schools, so I came in with a nice reputation. [Other parents would say], "Oh, she's the one that did the such and such at such and such school." And, I was talking about just certain situations where I was received nicely, but some people sort of resented taking instruction or leadership from me. If I chaired a particular event at the school, um, they would sort of let things fall to the wayside and see, you know, just sort of let's watch and see what she does type thing. I think Alex was, um, happy for the most part, but it was a small school and she was ready for the big time, but um, I mean she had nice friends . . .

At this point in the conversation, her daughter, Alex, made her presence known and interrupted her mother by saying, "Did I hear that you thought I was happy there?" to which her mother replied, "you weren't miserable, were you?" Alex's mother continued saying, "Well, what I'm saying is [she] got along fine and she was looking ahead at where she was going to go next."

A Better Experience

Alex's mother reflected on what she thought would have made for a better experience for her daughter at Ogilvie.

I think fellow students involving her in different activities more outside of school [would have been great]. They were all friendly and you know, she went to a sleepover early in her seventh grade [year] and she [had] friends, from what I was told by her. One of her teachers, one of the things they liked so much about her was that the school she came from, there were five other students that came from that school into Ogilvie. And, the teacher made a point to say, "I just love the way Alex doesn't just hold on to who she came here with, but she also broadens her circle and she's made friends with everybody." And so, um, I mean I just always got great feedback, and I never heard anything about her disliking too many people. It was like maybe one or two people that I heard her say that, but I think it's just personality, you know, and she would never act on it. It was just, you know, that person's blah, blah, blah and move on. She was very observant.

Alex's mother continued her reflection by recalling Alex's lack of a social life with friends outside of the regular school day.

I don't know if that was her not wanting to or if she wasn't invited. I just don't know because I know when we would go to school events and then they have after, um, you know, a little social time after an event, she'd run off with tons of friends and they'd go into the village and have a good time together. So, I don't know if that's her or not and she's not one to [pause] I have to wait for her to talk because if I ask questions, it's a whole other [pause] not a conversation.

145

School Choice

Alex's mother explained that on the first try, Alex was not accepted into the program at the Partnership for her sixth-grade year, but ultimately was accepted for her seventh-grade year. Alex's mother described the factors that influenced her decision to send Alex to Ogilvie and involved her daughter in the process.

> Well, honestly, we didn't have a big choice. When she came out of elementary school, she had like a 3.8 average. She was very good in her school. We took a chance. I had limited money and I decided we [could] apply for three schools. She and I discussed it and we decided to target the larger schools, honestly, so I wouldn't have to pay the new family fee all over in another two or three years. So, we targeted Sun Valley School for Girls, Peak Valley Prep [pause] the only reason we targeted Peak Valley Prep is because it was suggested by her head of school because of Alex's athletics, because that was not the school for her. She didn't think so. I didn't think so. But we're like, okay, we'll try. And the third school was Ridgeley Academy.

Alex was waitlisted at both Sun Valley School for Girls and Ridgeley Academy. She was rejected from Ridgeley Academy. Alex's mother then described being contacted by another, more rigorous school in the area, but feeling "uncomfortable because [she] had heard how academically rigorous they were" and she did not know "if it would be a good fit" for Alex.

> I knew that if we applied, there was a real good chance we'd get in and I didn't want to set her up down that road of that kind of rigor. So, I didn't even want that opportunity to be in front of us. So, that's why I just passed on it. And they were lovely, you know, but I just thought I just didn't want to set her up that way. Then, I went to the head of school

[at River Falls] and she said, "Well, let me call Ogilvie." And they said, "Yes, they can take Alex's late application," and give them a call. And, so I called the head of school, um, I knew her from different events that we worked together on at River Fall School. And, so when I called her, she was just lovely and made me feel welcome. And she said, "I was so disappointed when you didn't apply. We would certainly love to have Alex here." And so, boy, you know, it was just a relief and just so wonderful. And so, we went there and she put in her application and shortly thereafter she got her acceptance letter and um, they were genuine in wanting her to be there. They, they were, had no problem with giving her extended time for testing or you know, any of that. So, that's how that worked.

Alex's mother described that she never considered sending Alex to the public school in the area even though she had attended when she was younger.

I'm not putting her in that mess over there. [They were too] overcrowded. And I see the way the kids socialize, like when they're getting out of school and all of that. I don't want my daughter in that. There are good kids I know that go to the public schools, but I felt like being a single mom [independent schools] was the road for her.

Alex's mother described what ultimately led to her decision to send Alex to an independent school.

When she went to a private preschool that was at my old church, the director there said, "If your children go private, take them private all the way. If they're going public, take them public all the way, don't mix it up," and blah, blah, blah, whatever. And this was the conversation me and my ex-husband had at the time—we were married—and the plan

147

was to send her through private school. We had a friend whose child was a year older than mine, so they had started elementary in the public schools and they had had fights already in kindergarten! I'm like, "Oh my God!" I don't even want to deal with that.

Alex's mother and father made the decision early on to send Alex to private school. Then, it was just a matter of "finding a good fit" for her.

The Good and the Bad

Alex's mother shared about the things she liked about the school and that which she didn't.

I love their English program. I liked the way they have a nice mix of traditional expectations of the students as well as keeping up with the times. I love that every student has to play an instrument, whether they came in playing one or not. I love that every student has to take Latin plus another language. I liked the class sizes, I liked the individual attention that the students get. I like the continuation of having the kids be involved in everything. I like how they recognize the student for not only [their] academic but social behavior and encouraging the sorta outside getting together. Every Friday they go down to the village together and, you know, just those little small-town values.

In contrast, Alex's mother recalled things that she thought Ogilvie could do better.

I think the things that I had issue with [was] better organization with their various clubs. The parenting stuff. I don't know about the students because Lauren got along fine. The parents are very cliquey. I think if they did a better job at sort of promoting a more well-

rounded [pause] some people have been in certain volunteer positions a long time and it's sort of like their career and they take it a little more seriously than it needs to be.

Being Black in a "Diverse" Space

Alex's mother shared about Alex's life outside of school and contrasted it with her experience during adolescence.

My game night group [is] all Black [laughter]. Other than that, our church is diverse. So, of course the youth group there is diverse, but there are, you know, there's a handful of Black kids there who have grown up together, you know. But that's just what it is when you're in the independent school. I grew up that way as well. I would usually be like the only Black person in my class [because] my mom traveled a lot [for her job], so I was always the new student and typically the only Black one in a class.

Alex's mother surmised that in independent schools, "diverse is considered Asian," stating that schools often tout their numbers of diversity, but often only have a "handful of Black students". At Ogilvie, Alex's mom recalled the following:

[They didn't] have any Black boys. I would [have] liked for her to have seen Black boys. She sees them, well not really, [there are] a couple at my church. That's one thing I noticed at the independent schools. You don't see a lot of Black boys.

This realization transitioned into a conversation on dating. Alex's mother noted being slightly concerned about Alex's dating options, but stated that she "was not going to put her in a public school to find a boyfriend."

As a response to the white "diverse" spaces that Alex occupies, her mother involves her in cotillion and other community events. Although she does not believe that Alex "will have an issue" dating, she took precaution to secure Alex a date to cotillion.

I called one of my girlfriends who has two black sons and I said, "Why don't you guys come to cotillion?" because I just wanted her to be able to dance with somebody who was Black. And he was so lovely. I mean, they didn't date or anything but he was just crazy about her and I wanted her to feel that, you know. And so, she got that a little bit of it and you know.

Sense of Self

Alex's mother spoke about her perception of Alex's development of race consciousness and sense of self.

I'm sure that when you're in a space that many hours it's going to contribute to how you feel about yourself racially, socially. Um, you know, all of it. I don't know, I feel bad that there's a lot that I feel I don't know, you know, but um, I guess it remains to be seen. She's been raised to know who she is and to be proud of who she is. I mean, I don't try to force it because it is what it is, you are who you are. I don't need to tell her, you know? I had to tell her when she was in preschool because she went to an all-Black preschool and [the kids] used to tell her she was white, so I had to tell her, "No, darling, you're light brown, you're Black, you're not white." But I don't know if she's had those challenges in elementary or middle school. I don't know.

Alex's mother shared that Alex has not told her that "anybody has said anything" to her about race. Yet, she contends that she still "does her part" to make sure that Alex is educated about what it means to be Black.

I just feel like we walk in this world, you know, we're Black, we're always going to be Black and proud of it, but we're going to have those social things in most settings that we go and that we're involved in outside of our house. It doesn't give me any kind of complex and I don't think that Alex has any kind of complex that I know of. Like, she's kind of, we're talking about driving now. So, I'm talking to her about if the police ever stop you, you know, so we're having that conversation.

Alex's mother went on to share about a time when Alex was younger and seemed to have a particular response to people with darker colored skin.

You know, there was a time where she didn't like dark skinned black people and I started to notice that [and thought], "Where are you getting this from?" I gave you all this positive Black stuff. And my boyfriend is chocolate, his best friend is super chocolate, you know, and she loves them. So, I didn't know where it was coming from. And my boyfriend's friend said, "Don't worry because she's going to come into her own." And that's just something [pause] something maybe with people that are strangers, I don't know. But she's not that way anymore. But her best friend is brown skinned and you know, a lot of her friends, she's drawn to the Black girls. If they're on campus, they're going to end up being friends as long as they have personalities that are appealing to her, you know. So, maybe she's like me; I'm that way, too. I'm going to be drawn to the Black

person, but if they turn me off, I'm just going to move on. It has nothing to do with them being Black; it has to do with personality.

We ended our conversation with a discussion about how Alex would describe herself.

She fully knows that she's a Black woman; but she fully identifies with the other half of her culture and that's perfectly fine, you know. All that comes under the umbrella of African American because we're all blended up into some kind of way. And in the end, you get African American.

Major Themes from the Critical Narratives

The stories of the Black girls provide us a better sense of the impact that a predominantly white, elite independent school environment can have on the racialized experiences and race consciousness development during middle school. These narratives, in particular, revealed several overarching themes that seemed to connect the middle school experiences of each of the girls: (a) Black teachers are necessary; (b) The heavy burden of microaggressions; (c) The N-Word; (d) hypervisibility; and (e) What does it mean to be Black?

The mothers, having experienced schooling in a different generation than their daughters, relied on external communication from the school as well as other parents to make sense of their daughters' experiences. Although each of the mothers had a unique and individualized experience that ebbed between synchrony and asynchrony with that of their daughters', three major ideas were consistent: (a) independent schools opened the door to educational access for their daughters; (b) the mothers nurtured the Black identity of their daughters and encouraged friendships with other Black girls; and (c) a mother's support was integral to their daughter's understanding of self.

Summary

In Chapter 5, an analysis and discussion of these themes will be presented along with policy, theoretical, and institutional conclusions, and recommendations. The critical analysis of the stories shared by the Black girls and their mothers is specifically aimed toward better understanding issues faced by Black girls in predominantly white, elite independent schools and the ways in which institutions can be more supportive, responsive, and attentive to their need for a sense of belonging and positive race consciousness development.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In no way must my color be felt as a stain.

Frantz Fanon, 2008, p. 63

The purpose of this study was to explore the schooling experiences of Black middle school girls who attend predominantly white, elite independent schools. An additional purpose of this study was to gain insight from Black mothers on their perceptions about their daughters' experiences at predominantly white, elite independent schools. At the heart of this study was the desire to better understand the impact of the racialized experiences of the participants and what their experiences had to tell us about the racial consciousness development of Black middle school girls on predominantly white, elite, independent school campuses.

Through a detailed analysis of the rich narrative stories of four Black girl participants who attended middle school at predominantly white, elite independent schools, this study provides a space for all participants to share their racialized experiences and offer insights into how we could create better spaces for future Black girls in their position. Additionally, the narratives of the girls' four Black mothers provide perspectives about the girls' experiences from the mother's point of view. The similarities and differences between the mother-daughter dyads about the racialized experiences of the girls weave a picture of the predominantly white, elite independent school landscape that Black girls must navigate, endure, and persevere daily. The findings and themes will be presented in response to the research questions that inform this investigation.

Data were collected over a period of four months, with participants sharing their stories in person or using a video-conference tool. The first section of this chapter discusses Black girls' experiences at predominantly white, elite, independent schools. The discussion is partly guided by a discussion of the themes that emerged from the critical narratives of the four Black girls that participated in this study. This is followed by a discussion of Black mothers and the issues of race and independent schools, based on the narratives form the girls' mothers. The last section of this chapter includes conclusions and recommendations, and thoughts on future research.

Black Girls' Experiences at Predominantly White, Elite, Independent Schools

The stories of the four Black girls provide us a better sense of the impact that a predominantly white, elite independent school environment can have on the racialized experiences and race consciousness development during middle school. More specifically, five overarching themes seemed to connect the middle school experiences of each of the girls: (a) Black teachers matter; (b) The heavy burden of microaggressions; (c) The N-Word; (d) hypervisibility; and (e) What does it mean to be Black?

Finding 1: Black Teachers Matter

Through the girls' narrative, it became very apparent that having a strong, Black faculty advocate was integral to the development of a grounded racial consciousness of Black girls who attend middle school in predominantly white, elite independent schools. Stories across the narratives repeatedly spoke of the impact that the absence of Black faculty left on the girls' sense of self in relation to the larger, predominantly white community. The value of diversity within the faculty, particularly Black faculty, at an independent school is visible as their presence can often shift both formal and informal conversations around diversity, equity, inclusion and justice

(Coleman & Stevenson, 2013). Excerpts from the four participants help to illustrate the necessity of a Black faculty member as an advocate.

Sloane: Having [Black] teachers could be beneficial so that others could better understand the "Black experience." [There are only a] few Black faculty members who were open to talking to the Black students.

Layla: . . . [A]ll of a sudden, I didn't have any Black teachers. Um, I had more Black teachers and Black students at my old school [pause] but um here at Pine Hills, I've never had a—well, I had one but she wasn't my teacher. Um, and that was pretty hard because of how much my school does talk about politics, never having not even a teacher of color um a person of color, to teach any of this, any of the events in the state of the world. The only people of color were in the language department. It's all white women and men. Um, through middle school, at least. So that was a, a big change. It makes me feel kind of hopeless. I mean, every year during the assembly on the first day of school, they come up and they introduce all the new teachers and I've always been kind of hopeful that maybe I'd have a Black teacher that year, um. But yeah, I guess that just kind of ruined part of that, especially with the conversations that we have in class and the way that the school works differently from other schools. I mean the teachers are so understanding and they do work really hard to, um, to, uh, educate themselves on everything that the students are going through and to be inclusive. But it, it's just not the same as having a teacher who's had the same experiences as you see the world the same way.

Zuri: I think along with if I had gone back in, like stood up to the teacher about the n-word when we were reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, I feel like as well as that,

along with a Black teacher, I would have felt a lot more comfortable there. Comfortable

to like speak my mind and say how I feel and why what I feel is different than what

others might feel because of their experiences versus my experiences.

Alex: It, it's just, there's no Black teachers. The only chance you get to talking to a Black

person would be maybe one student cause the entire eighth grade there was one [other]

Black girl and then the seventh grade it was [the same] Black girl and that's it. And then

there's about 20 to 25 kids in the whole grade.

Finding 2: The Heavy Burden of Microaggressions

A common thread among participants illustrated the heavy burden of microaggressions

they encountered on a daily basis. "Racial microaggressions are subtle but powerful slights,

insults, and demeaning occurrences in social places that are experienced by people of color, but

they can be as challenging to voice and dialogue in the classroom for students and teachers"

(Coleman & Stevenson, 2013, p. 549). These microaggressions included mistaken identity as one

girl was often confused with another Black girl; racially-tinged taunts; comments related to hair

texture; and being mischaracterized as an "angry Black girl." "These racialized themes that occur

daily can be confusing for Black girls and can cause various emotions from rejection and sadness

to anger and self-hatred" (Ricardo, 2015).

Sloan: People ask me questions about my hair all the time. I usually wear braids to

school. Um, people ask me things all the time, like how long does it take you to wash

your hair? Like, do you braid your hair up every morning, which is fine. I'm fine with

these questions because I get that they're curious. They've been in predominantly white

schools all their lives, but then a lot of the questions are ridiculous and me and my other

157

friends laugh about them sometimes, like the other Black kids in the grade or just the curly haired kids in the grade. I always laugh because people ask like, "were you born with braids" or like "how, how do you get your hair to be curly like that?" And I was like, I was born this way. What do you mean? I'm like, this is just how my hair is. We laugh about that all the time because it's just ridiculous.

Layla: I remember one time they came up and they talked about microaggressions. And maybe it was just that they were trying to teach something that was too much to understand for, um, kids that young, but nobody really took in the lesson. And what people got from that was more of a joke about like hurting people through race-related microaggressions. Um, and they took it as a joke and I remember for like the rest of that year, students were making jokes about race and um, it was, it was like little things that kind of built up. I remember that affected me. One of the things that they addressed in the assembly was hair and like not touching people's hair and how making comments on somebody's hair could be considered microaggression. And at an all-girls school there's a lot of touching hair and braiding hair and stuff like that. And whenever somebody would like be doing something like that somebody would come up and be like, "Oh, that's a microaggression!" And then everybody would just start laughing. Like somebody would do something without the intention of hurting anybody and nobody was really trying to hurt anybody but somebody would do something and then people would call them out jokingly. Or, like [they would say something] for real. And everybody would just take it as a joke.

Zuri: When I really get deep into thought or like discussion, many people mistake that for anger, so if I'm just getting really passionate about something I'm saying, then people will mistake them and be like, "Oh, you're getting really mad. Like, calm down," and I feel that stereotypical angry Black girl pops into their brain [pause] I think that opinion [of me] formed around seventh grade. Not really in sixth grade because I was so uncomfortable in my surroundings that I didn't really [pause] I was kinda quiet. Besides to my best friend in sixth grade, so like most of the sixth grade I was just kinda shy around everyone and in seventh grade I got more comfortable. So, then that's when, I started like having more discussions in class and participating a lot more. It makes me feel very angry, but then I felt that I couldn't express that anger because I would further [pause] I would give them a reason to believe that stereotype if I got angry at them for saying that. But now I don't really care about the stereotypes. I just care about having my opinion known not in an extreme way but in a way where I'm like, where I make sure that it matters and it's not a stereotype, but it's just the way I feel.

Alex: I would get [the name] Macy on my tests. I'm like, "um, that's not mine." Or like, or homework or anything or like someone will tap my shoulder and be like, "Hey, Macy!" I'm like, "I'm not Macy." Or they'll tap her shoulder [pause] and we, and we don't look anything alike whatsoever! She, she always was her hair down—always. I always wear my hair up. I think two days in my life, I've worn it down. But like we look nothing alike and she's taller than me by like this much. I'm like, "Are you blind?" They just said, "Oh, you wear your hair down, you wear your hair up." [To them], that was like really the only difference. [We have] totally different body types, too. Her skin's like darker

159

skin than mine. [pause] Yeah, like I just, I don't get it. If we wear the same outfit and wore our hair the same way, we would still look different, completely. It's like just pay attention.

Finding 3: The N-Word Assault

One of the most recurrent themes presented by the participants was the use of the n-word within their classrooms or on the school campus or by their white teachers or administrators. The majority of participants commented on the discomfort brought on by having to hear the n-word in their school setting. Since the curriculum of an independent school mirrors the dominant culture, English classes often read the "classics", which includes texts written by dead, old, white men. Unfortunately for Black students in these spaces, these texts often include an "extensive and complicated use of the n-word in text" without training teachers on how to address the racial complexity of these texts (Grieve, 2012, para. 2). For the participants, the majority were, as Ricardo (2015) noted, one of the few Black students or the only Black student in the classroom when the word was used and they recalled feeling damaged by the teacher's use of the word.

> **Sloan:** [The administrator] said [that] calling kids "sevvies" was equivalent to calling people the n-word and like how if we are allowed to say "sevvies" [then] she should be [allowed] to say the n-word. And that was a huge problem. But like no one, none of the faculty members did anything about it. It was just a huge conversation around me and my friends and like our grade at the time and no one really did anything about that, which I think is terrible that she just got away with that. She didn't get punished for that situation.
>
> **Zuri:** It was very scary because we were dealing with a lot of racism in the book and my

white teacher had said the n-word when we were reading the book and it was different because I had heard a lot of different words when I was in elementary school, but I had never heard that one before, but I just knew it was a really bad word that you weren't supposed to say. I just didn't feel comfortable with her saying it because she was white; it didn't really matter that she was reading it from a book. I just think she didn't have to say it in order to read it and get the meaning across. I feel like not saying it would actually get more of the meaning across because it would show the importance of the word and the impact.

Alex: One time in eighth grade, we read the mockingbird and our teacher was being "considerate" and he asked the whole class, "Should we say the n-word in the book?" And we were like, "No." But then a bunch of the white kids were like, "Yeah." Like half the class said no. Half the class said yes to get a feel of the book. [pause] And then, he just all of a sudden said it in front of the class, the teacher. And we were just [confused] because we agreed on "no." And then we were just confused. I guess. We were just like, "Why?" We already agreed on no. After class ended, we just kinda walked outside and we were just like grouped together like, "What is wrong with him?"

Finding 4: Hypervisibility

Several participants offered reflections about how hypervisible they felt in their predominantly white, elite environment. Many participants remarked on being the only or one of the few in their classes or entire grade level. They recalled instances where "the entire class" would turn to look at them when there was an issue or discussion related to Blackness or Black culture. At least one participant also recalled that she and other Black girls she knew felt

invisible on campus due to the inadvertent actions of their peers. In these instances, Black girls are both hypervisible and invisible, with the control of their Black bodies being a top priority and their voices rarely, if ever, heard (Brown, 2009, as cited in Russell, 2015).

> **Sloan:** I recognized, like even though I wasn't good friends with Yana, I could tell that like that situation was not dealt with correctly and how Sami was the person in the wrong in the situation, but yet Yana got suspended and [Sami] got off with a warning. I remember hearing that and talking to [Yana] about it, asking her how she felt and she felt that it was completely unfair. She said that she talked to her mom about it, and her mom had talked to the deans about it and they had their conversation, but I don't really know what happened after that. It sort of just died down and everyone forgot about it, I guess.

> **Layla:** Then, um like, our diversity department, that was all led by white teachers. Um in sixth grade, they decided to implement something called 'Community Connections', uh, to uh, I guess unite the school and I think there was something going on, uh, relating to race in the upper school during this time. But I didn't know about it because I was like a sixth grader. Um, but when they started community connections, we had like our dean who was a—he was white and he came and he would talk to us for an hour every Wednesday about, um, some different way people could be more accepting or something. I mean they did their research and they were pretty well informed, but I remember one time they came up and they talked about, um, microaggressions. And maybe it was just that they were trying to teach something that was too much to understand for, um, kids that young, but nobody really took in the lesson. And what people got from that was more of a joke about, uh, about like hurting people through, uh, race-related microaggressions.

Um, and they took it as a joke and I remember for like the rest of that year, students were making jokes about race and um, it was, it was like little things that kind of built up. I remember that affected me.

Zuri: We had drug ed. in eighth grade education and there was a lot of talk of like weed. I'm Jamaican and a lot of people would like look at me when weed was mentioned because just Jamaicans—most of the people when they think of Jamaican, they think weed and food. [pause] The other Black girl in my class, she was like, ha ha. Um, I think she said something about like being a Rasta or something because her stepfather is like a quarter Jamaican and she thought that that made her Jamaican. So, she like made a joke in a Jamaican accent, which I didn't really like. So, I kind of dismissed it. I didn't really say anything but I just kind of chuckled and walked away.

Alex: [When the class was required to read the text aloud], we skipped over [the n-word]. And every time [my teacher] said it, everyone looked at us—me and Macy (the one other Black girl)—[that made me] extremely uncomfortable.

Finding 5: What Does It Mean to be Black?

Chávez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) posited that the experiences of Black students in predominantly white, elite independent school is an exploration of racial identity, the construction of which can be complicated by the clash of the experiences they bring to the space, which differ from those dominant peer narratives of Whiteness. Participants often negotiated their ideas of what it meant to be Black. "Black girls learned to practice silence as a strategy for getting ahead in class, but also practiced strategies of 'talking back' to speak out against classroom discourse and practices" that were not in the girls' best interest (Evans-Winters &

Esposito, 2010, p. 13). Although several of the girls received consistent messages from their mothers about their Black identity, others filtered messages hampered upon them by members of their independent school community. These conflicting messages, in concert with concerns expressed by Brittian (2012), presented challenges toward the development of a healthy race consciousness construction for the girls.

> **Sloan:** I remember we were just hanging out doing things and she was like, "I feel really comfortable around you because you're not like my other Black friends." And I was like, "Well, what does that mean? What do you mean by that?" And she's like, "Well, I don't know, you just seem more approachable, like you're not really Black." I kept like asking her about and she kept giving the same answers and started getting more defensive and making it sound like what she said was like I was supposed to be happy that she was saying that to me. Like, oh, I'm not really Black. I should be honored that she feels that way about me, that I shouldn't be like a normal Black people. But I found that disturbing.

> **Layla:** I remember the day of, um, there was a shooting [in] I think seventh grade, a Black boy got shot and I remember he was like 16 or something, uh, by the police and um a student was crying in class and she asked the teacher if she could be excused and go to the bathroom. And the teacher, uh, was all of a sudden very strict. Like, "No, you have to stay here. We all can power through it. So, can you." Uh, it just seemed like such a night and day from the school being so open to change and adjustments for all of these other events and then something happens that doesn't directly affect anybody there. They're not very open about that stuff. We would never be able to get the involvement that we had for Parkland for police brutality or any non-white issue really. People

just weren't very concerned with things that didn't affect them.

Zuri: I think to be Black at Delano is to be told that you're accepted and you're in a diverse community, but you're being told this by white people in a predominantly white school. So, I think just personally my experience at Delano was kind of uncomfortable, but it also depends on who you're talking to.

Alex: I mean, I've asked so many people and they are like, "Oh, you look white." I'm like, okay. Yeah. And then there's some other people that are like, "Oh, you totally look Black." I'm like, um, there's no like middle, I guess I am white or it's like there's no one that says. I think there was like one person who's like, "Oh yeah, you're probably like mixed." And then everyone else is like, you're white or totally Black. Like okay… I mean like I asked them, "Do you think I'm mixed?" And they were like, "No."

Mothers and the Issue of Race in Predominantly White, Elite Independent Schools

The stories of the four Black mothers provide a sense of the perceptions they hold regarding their daughters' experiences at a predominantly white, elite independent middle school. Though the mothers' perceptions varied depending on what information their daughters shared, there were several congruent ideas that emerged from their stories. In general, three interconnecting themes linked to the mothers' impressions about their daughters' middle school experiences: (a) independent schools opened the door to educational access for their daughters; (b) the mothers nurtured the Black identity of their daughters and encouraged friendships with other Black girls; and (c) a mother's support was integral to her daughter's understanding of self.

Finding 1: Educational Access

Each of the mothers chose an independent school education for their daughters based on the academic rigor of the school and perceived access to greater and more educational opportunities (NAIS, 2017). Over the last two decades, independent schools have grown in popularity as they provide a viable option for a quality education (Herr, 1999). As more Black families opt to exercise choice over where to educate their children, they are utilizing various methods to gain access to multiple choices and sustainable options. The narratives of the four mothers were consistent with the literature in the field.

> **Sloan's Mother:** As we sat in the interview and I listened to Sloan's answers and I watched the interviewer's face and I thought, "She's nailing this." My gut tells me part of the reason they really wanted her, not just for diversity as far as, you know, looking Black, but Sloan's answers. She's very, um, you know, outspoken and she talks about race and a lot of even [the] kids that are Black don't particularly.

> **Layla's Mother:** [Layla]'s determined, you know, she strives to do everything on her own. She doesn't even need us to motivate her to do her homework. She just starts doing it. That's just the rigor that she requires. So, I think that's the part that played into it more than what my parents had to think of. I wasn't that self-determined kid. I liked learning, but I didn't love learning like Layla. So, in terms of that sense, I think, you know, we just kind of looked for what are the best environments for Layla, and let's aim at that. And so, she, you know, she consequently applied to those types of schools and you know [we were very] I'm going to say blessed to get accepted into all the private schools that she applied to.

Zuri's Mother: We were in public for elementary [and then] I found out about the Partnership. My thought process was that being in a classroom with less kids in schools with usually less kids than public school, there would be less, for lack of a better term "drama" going on because middle school is the age where kids are going off the deep end or can go off the deep end. So, if they're monitored a little bit more because there's less kids around then that's what I wanted. That's the environment that I'm wanting to put her in. It really came down to money and if there were schools where we got the same amount of aid from each, then it came down to size and what I felt was a better fit by how we were accepted at that school or how we were, the interaction we had with that school. I thought it was a really good fit. She does better, I think, in a smaller environment and it was a much smaller school than some of the other schools. So, I felt that was where she needed to be.

Alex's Mother: When she went to a private preschool that was at my old church, the director there said, "If your children go private, take them private all the way. If they're going public, take them public all the way, don't mix it up." I would say class size is a number one major difference. Her middle school was so different from her elementary. We were only there for two years, [and] we were strangers the whole time. She and I. Even though, you know, she had people that warmed up, I had people that warmed up [pause] the attitudes were nice. I felt [that they were] surprise[d] at our appearance, especially with our last name, but the head of school was a personal friend and that always makes things better. And also, Alex has just a delightful, delightful personality and the teachers just warmed up to her. So, I would say socially, I don't know where she

was at. I would always have parents say nice things about her, but I also had parents that were cold towards me that I was surprised [pause] you know, just a little more white, um, and not knowing what to do with a Black person there.

Finding 2: Nurturing Black Identity and Friendship

Consistent within the narratives of each mother was an emphasis on providing their daughters with a "Black education" outside of what the school provided, and particularly the idea of the necessity of establishing a network of Black girlfriends. The mothers anticipated that the predominantly white, elite independent schools would not adequately prepare their daughters with the tools necessary to develop as a Black girl, so they sought out experiences on their own. They nurtured what Fordham (1988) called a fictive kinship and impressed the values of a collective social identity onto each of their daughters. Fictive kinship "implies the particular mind-set, or world view, of those persons who are considered to be 'Black' and is used to denote the moral judgement the group makes on its members" (p. 56). Similarly, several of the mothers spoke to the importance of their daughters having Black girlfriends with whom they could develop this fictive kinship and create a support system that would protect and sustain them throughout the racialized experiences on their predominantly white campus.

> **Sloan's Mother:** Her best friend is a white girl. So, again, let me, let me just be very blunt with you and honest with you. I teach my kids, especially when it's in white spaces, [that if] you see another Black person, you give them a nod; you acknowledge your people. I'm not saying you got to be best friends with them, but you would acknowledge your people. This was a conversation [that] she and I had and I said, "You know, I want you to be friends with everybody. You need to have, you know, be friends with

everybody." I learned there's nothing wrong with that. I said, "But the fact that you, I seem to have to push you to, you know, hang out with your Black girlfriends on the weekends is a problem for me. I need you to be comfortable around your people and as you get older, the person that's going to understand you and understand, you know, what you go through in life is gonna be another Black woman. You, I need you to have some Black girlfriends that are closer." Um, and, and it's not that she doesn't have any. She does at home. Actually, one of her closest friends and our neighbors is Black, um, but I needed her to have a touchstone at school, as well. But yeah, I mean I, I told her I need, you just need some Black girlfriends.

Layla's Mother: We were at the HBCU college fair and [Layla] just did not want to go. I don't know, maybe it was the rain, but she was just like, "Mom, why do you keep making me do all this Black stuff? You send me to this white school and I have to go to all this Black stuff!" I was blown away, I didn't [pause] I was like, speechless, I didn't know what to say. I was like, "Well, you're kinda right." And then there was a part of me that was like, "Because I said so," you know? There's another part [that's] like, "Because you need [pause] this is part of your development," you know? "All of this is part of your development." It was such an interesting moment for me to hear her feelings about that. And then to also kind of reflect on my, you know, my forcing her to go to the white school and keeping her away from her Black friends. Should I be more pro-Black and force that more, should I force it less, you know? My parents told me, "You're going to an HBCU," because both of them did and you know, I didn't have a choice. They said, "You're going for a year. If you want to come home, come home." But they knew I was

going to get to Howard and love it, which is what happened. But, you know, I often wonder, should I force [Layla] because now we're having more and more conversations about college, you know, so we're kind of talking more and more about it, but it's interesting to see her because, you know, even though she made those comments, I do find her more and more very interested in African American culture. She's in speech and debate now and she chose to do an amazing speech on Black women in healthcare.

Zuri's Mother: Well, her best friend who is still her best friend because they still go to school together, which is good, is Latino or Latina. And then everybody else is just white. There was one other Black girl and one biracial boy who was Filipino and Black, but everybody else was just [pause] there were like two or three Asian kids and then everybody was white. So, all of her other friends were just white. Even in elementary school, most of her friends were white. Even though the school was very diverse, most of her friends were white. I mean nobody's blind so you see, you know, what is there, but I don't think it affected her in any way. Negative or positive. She is a kid that is just very adept in any situation. So, I don't think it was, if it that it had anything to do with it.

Alex's Mother: I just feel like we walk in this world, you know, we're Black, we're always going to be Black and proud of it, but we're going to have those social things in most settings that we go and that we're involved in outside of our house. It doesn't give me any kind of complex and I don't think that Alex has any kind of complex that I know of. Like, she's kind of, we're talking about driving now. So, I'm talking to her about if the police ever stop you, you know, so we're having that conversation. You know, there was a time where she didn't like dark skinned black people and I started to notice that

170

[and thought], "Where are you getting this from?" I gave you all this positive Black stuff. But she's not that way anymore. Her best friend is brown skinned and you know, a lot of her friends, she's drawn to the Black girls. If they're on campus, they're going to end up being friends as long as they have personalities that are appealing to her, you know. So, maybe she's like me; I'm that way, too. I'm going to be drawn to the Black person, but if they turn me off, I'm just going to move on. It has nothing to do with them being Black; it has to do with personality.

Finding 3: A Mother's Love

Several participants struggled to describe the reality of their daughter's experience in regard to race and a few were unaware if their daughter had experienced any racial unrest at their school. However, each of the mothers worked hard to instill a sense of safety and security within their daughters and worked to maintain an open line of communication. Whether or not they were aware, the mothers acted as a buffer against the racial realities their daughters encountered at school (Ricardo, 2015). They shared their daughters' experience of the "double jeopardy of being both Black and female" and their consistent messages of strength, aptitude, and focus encouraged their daughters to persist in an environment that was not always accepting or appreciative of their person (Crew, 1994, p. 84).

> **Sloan's Mother:** Let's talk about messages. So, you know, [here] billboards reinforce any and everybody [all cultures], which is good. But yeah, I reinforce who WE are. So again, having that conversation with Sloan, like you haven't read [Maya Angelou's] *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? Like, she knows who Maya is but she don't really, you know, and I think I read that in middle school and she hasn't! So, I'm intentional, you

know. I redid my house and purposely put up, you know, the quote from Langston Hughes; not a quote, it's a poem. *The eyes of my people*, you know, I love the color of my people. [pause] So, stuff like that at my house when we [are] reinforcing who [we are] [pause] [reinforcing] us.

Layla's Mother: There [were] probably some things that she never brought up because we had already said, you know, this is our limit, but, um, but for the most part I think she kind of adapted well and again, you know, that it wasn't so much about race because she has friends from several different backgrounds and she and some of her friends come from the same socioeconomic status (SES) as she does that are not Black. I think it was, like I said, less about [being] Black and more about the SES status. What's been an interesting dynamic is that I've noticed with Layla and her friends that it's not like, "Oh, we're Black, we're supposed to go to the Black room," you know, she doesn't feel this, this need to kind of present there. At her current level of development, [she] is interested in more, you know, women and Black women issues so to speak. But I think then she just didn't, you know, I don't know that she didn't so much identify herself as Black because if you were to ask her, she would say she was Black. She had, you know, it wasn't like she was denying it. She just didn't feel this need. I mean, I feel it because I went to an HBCU. I'm not Mrs. Pro-Black everything, but I certainly identify with my peers that are African American and I looked for her to do that and she just doesn't do that so much. So, I think that's what it was. I don't think it was like anything other than that she didn't feel the need to.

Zuri's Mother: Um, there have been situations that have happened and I really haven't had to intervene or do anything because she understands. When those things even have come up because they have read books, you know, whatever the books are or whatever, I don't really need to talk to her because she'll tell me about things that are happening. She'll tell me everything that went on and she's fine with it, you know, very mature and very well adjusted to things and she's just able to deal with the kinds of differences. And I think also for kids, what I find is that [the n-word] doesn't have as much weight because they hear it so much in music or in movies. It's almost desensitized perhaps for them slightly. I wouldn't say all the way because she doesn't like hearing the [n-word], but it doesn't, you know, unless somebody called her the word directly, she understands that it's part of the times, you know, like even, you know, when we go see movies, if they, it's at the movies. I mean it's [pause] you just can't avoid it.

Alex's Mother: She won't discuss race, she shuts the conversation down, so I've never really gotten her to engage [in] that conversation. But that's just what it is when you're in the independent school. I grew up that way as well. I would usually be like the only Black person in my class [because] my mom traveled a lot [for her job], so I was always the new student and typically the only Black one in a class. I'm sure that when you're in a space that many hours it's going to contribute to you feel about yourself racially, socially. Um, you know, all of it. I don't know, I feel bad that there's a lot that I feel I don't know, you know, but um, I guess it remains to be seen. She's been raised to know who she is and to be proud of who she is. I mean, I don't try to force it because it is what it is, you are who you are. I don't need to tell her, you know?

Conclusions

As a theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory (CRT) situates itself within this study. In a review of the tenets of CRT, which describe: (a) the permanence of racism, (b) whiteness as property, (c) interest convergence, (d) the critique of liberalism, and (e) counter storytelling as integral to understanding the Black experience, we note that the white spaces of independent schools are a model for the microcosm of race relations in America. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described the permanence of racism as the basis of educational inequities in the United States. Moreover, the effects of racism in an exclusive atmosphere such as a predominantly white, elite, independent school must continue to be explored, particularly in relation to Black girls, one of its most precious and often overlooked populations. As the foundation of CRT rests solidly on the use of storytelling, the narratives provided the necessary context to explore, understand, and acknowledge the middle school experience of Black girls who attend predominantly white, elite independent schools.

Black identity development theory is helpful within the context of this study in analyzing and understanding the internal conflict experienced by racialized communities in America as well as the impact of the dominant culture on the lives of young, Black girls in predominantly white, independent school contexts. The process of becoming Black (Cross, 1991, 1978, 1971) has implications for understanding the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of both the girls and their mothers who participated in this study. For the Black girls in this study, the impression of the dominant culture during their adolescent formation of self and development of race consciousness confirms a sense of racial dissonance (Arrington, 2001) when analyzing their relationships between the girls and their white peers as the girls often experienced schooling in

the margins of the larger community. For the Black mothers, concerns and issues were raised regarding their daughters' school experiences that could also be linked to this phenomenon.

In addition, Black Feminism provided a necessary lens with which to analyze the experience of both the Black girls and their mothers. Black girls coped with the added complexity of their gender in addition to the racism and classism that exist in the predominantly white space of the elite. Black mothers, in contrast, were tasked with helping their daughters navigate the space while simultaneously helping to nurture and grow a healthy development of race consciousness. Black feminism, therefore, expands to include what could often be described as the tension-filled relationship between mother and daughter (Crew, 1994), which could prove to be more complicated within the space of the predominantly white, elite independent school.

What is quite evident from this study is that there exists a gap in the literature on the experiences of Black girls who attend predominantly white, elite independent schools. As many of these institutions lack a significant presence of Black faculty and staff, Black mothers have had to stand in the gap for their daughters. Unfortunately, this action is not without cost as the strain to the mother-daughter relationship is at risk (Iloabugichukwu, 2018). Black girls with a solid relationship with their mothers have developed strong adaptive coping strategies to deal with the multiple instances of racism, classism, and gendered nuisances that exist within the white academic space. However, what of the Black girl whose relationship with her mother is not as solid? Who, then, does she have to serve as a buffer from the assault on her humanity? Black girls who are without a relationship with their mothers are left to fend for themselves. For them, coping strategies are not taught from someone with a shared identity to their own; instead, they must deal with the consequences of racism alone. Oppressive environments such as a

predominantly white independent school can have an impact on Black girls and the development of their racial consciousness as the contentious racialized terrain of the elite can leave Black girls vulnerable, weary, and unable to negotiate their dual role independently. Independent schools, therefore, must attend to the racial climate of their institutions and address these issues from within so as to provide support for Black girls; both those who have a Black mother to help them navigate and for those who do not.

The question then remains: can predominantly white, elite, independent schools ever provide a place where Black girls can exist without a mask? As Fanon explored, the connection between the perception of the colonizer and the lived life of the colonized leaves an indomitable stain, damage, per se on the psyche (Fanon, 2008). By saying "in no way must my color be felt as a stain," Fanon asserted that those who are subjugated to the cruel effects of a racist society must reject the idea of inferiority completely; instead, one must come into the truth about themselves, about their personhood that occurs beyond the system of racism. The same is true for the Black girls who attend predominantly white, elite independent schools. Although they wear the mask of obscurity as they navigate the racialized spaces of their independent school, they mustn't give in to the idea that they are less than or feel the pressure to deny themselves in order to be part of that world. Black middle school girls must not fall victim to a dehumanization of their being.

Black girls who attend predominantly white, elite independent schools struggle against the daily burden of being racially isolated from others who share similar racial characteristics; the assault on their person via the n-word, assumptions about their hair, and whether they are "Black enough"; and the conflict of having no one on campus with which to advocate for their

176

very being. "Their behaviors and actions fall under intense scrutiny because they do not resemble accepted institutional norms, which usually stem from a White normative frame" (Jacobs, 2017, p. 11). These challenges during a critical developmental stage of adolescence can negatively impact the formation of healthy race consciousness, school performance, and emotional wellbeing.

Recommendations

While predominantly white, elite independent schools have worked expeditiously over the last few decades to improve their efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campus, there is still much work to be done to improve the experiences of Black girls in these spaces. The racial climate of a school, both within the classroom and outside of it, influences the experiences of Black girls. For Black girls, the environment of a predominantly white middle school can pose a threat to their sense of self, racial identity, and race consciousness development, as has been discussed in this study.

Increasing Black Faculty

A commitment to not only increasing the number of Black faculty on the campus but also ensuring their health and well-being is necessary. Changes to the hiring process at an independent school are required to facilitate this shift. Efforts for recruitment and retention should include: 1) recruitment through non-traditional routes including primarily Black organizations (churches, fraternities and sororities) and diversity recruitment fairs, and 2) establishment of a mentor/faculty affinity group to support Black teachers in these predominantly white spaces.

Integrating Cultural Proficiency

Cultural proficiency and sensitivity training for the predominantly white faculty is paramount at a predominantly white, elite independent school. To this end, nationally mandated cultural proficiency training should be part of every teacher education program. Additionally, independent schools must actively assess their curriculum to identify bias and to eradicate the promotion of a singular narrative of non-dominant cultures and groups. An honest evaluation of the curriculum will allow an institution to identify their blind spots in regard to equity and inclusion and acknowledge whose story is being left out. Independent schools must promote a diversity responsive pedagogy to not only increase the quality of the teacher student relationship, but to also make sure they are not obscuring differences under the guise of promoting a colorblind ideology and approach to diversity. Ongoing professional development must include learning communities in which racial equity in predominantly white spaces is a recurring conversation. Schools must also hire a director of equity and inclusion to help facilitate a strategic overhaul of the school's practices, mission statement, and admissions policy. Special attention must be paid to identify areas of inequity in school culture, access, and transportation.

Creating Safe Spaces

Additionally, predominantly white, elite independent schools must be intentional about creating safe spaces on campus for Black girls to commune and convene—within and across grade levels—so that they have space and time in which to develop a healthy race consciousness and nurture relationships with one another. Moreover, schools must address the biases they enact when disciplining white students in comparison to Black students so that responses are more equitable. Most importantly, they must educate their faculty on how to teach controversial and

uncomfortable topics related to race relations in America, given the impact that this can have on Black girls' experiences within the classroom.

Mother-Daughter Supports

This study also revealed that Black girls who commune and converse regularly with their mothers are better able to navigate the white space of a predominantly white, elite independent school and simultaneously form a healthy, positive racial identity. To help facilitate the positive outcomes of this relationship, schools should encourage mother-daughter events on campus to invite the mothers into the school life of their daughter in more deliberate and consistent ways. In this manner, mothers are made more aware of the direct issues that affect their daughters, even when their daughters do not reveal their experiences specifically.

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Future Research

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In light of the findings of this study, future research should take a multi-pronged approach to further add to the body of literature on this phenomenon. Initially, I set out to also secure Black boy participants, which proved to be a challenge for me. Future research, then, should aim to conduct a study on the Black boy experience in predominantly white middle schools to explore the construction of their racial identity development. Further exploration of how fathers support their Black sons throughout their schooling experiences could also identify specific aspects of the father-son dyad that overlap or coincide with that of the mother-daughter. A cross-comparison analysis could yield rich responses and facilitate a deeper conversation across gender lines.

Although narratives with the mothers provided an opportunity for prolific analysis, a focus group with both mothers and fathers could have captured more of the stories from the

parents about the experience of their daughters. An alternative research study with Black girls

and their fathers has the potential to reveal a layer yet unexplored as this relationship is unique

and often unlike that between a mother and daughter. Black girls may, in many cases, share more

about their experience in a racialized environment with their fathers than with their mothers.

Additionally, it would be of interest to recruit small groups of student and parent participants

from a specific independent school to provide a streamlined set of conclusions and

recommendations tailored to that institution. Lastly, it would be of interest to conduct a

comparative analysis of Black students in predominantly white public schools where the majority

of students were not affluent to see how, if any, the race-related experiences varied.

Other studies that should be considered include an examination that explores how the

socioeconomic status of parents contribute or influence their decision to send their child to a

predominantly white, elite independent school; as well as a study that examines the experiences

of Black students in predominantly white, elite independent schools who have access to two or

more Black faculty or staff members. Finally, I would like the opportunity to follow my

participants for the remainder of their K-12 schooling years and hear their narratives as they

recount their high school experience in a predominantly white, elite independent school.

Epilogue

When I first conceptualized the idea for this study, I did not envision a focus on Black

girls. In fact, I fought tooth and nail against it. I initially wanted to focus on the narratives of both

Black boys and girls, but for whatever reason, I could not secure any male participants. It was

frustrating to say the least, particularly because I really wanted to do a comparative analysis of

both genders to gain insight into their experiences at predominantly white, elite, independent

schools. Selfishly, though, my want to include both genders was particularly motivated by the fact that I am a mother to both a girl and a boy.

But, something kept drawing me to the stories of Black girls. Once I began to engage in narrative sessions with the Black girls in my study, I was hooked. While I listened, their stories sent me through a whirlwind of emotions; I was sad, frustrated, in disbelief, fraught with tension . . . it was hard to listen objectively without attempting to "fix" the situation and offer suggestions for improvement. I thought long and hard about each girl even after our narrative session ended, and I pondered over what I could do to help the girls better cope with the racial isolation and microaggressions they felt on their school campuses. Frankly, I was angry that these girls had to deal with this type of adversity at such a young age.

Once I spoke with the mothers, though, I felt a sense of calmness that only a mother's love and dedication could provide. I listened to Black women who not only sacrificed their time and money to provide their daughters with a great education, but fully believed that their girls were brilliant enough, resilient enough, and more than enough to be successful in their school environments, regardless of the racial and socioeconomic demographics. The mothers showed great fortitude and tenacity in their commitment to their daughters and I was inspired by their unwavering dedication.

I was both amazed and distraught by the interactions I had with the girls. Amazed because I was surprised that they felt so immediately comfortable with me in order to share their innermost feelings without reserve. Amazed because they brilliantly presented, analyzed, and evaluated their experiences and easily reflected upon how these experiences impacted their sense of self and identity. At the same time, I was distraught by the stories they told. I wondered how I

could convey their messages in a way that independent schools could better understand their feelings and in a way that could also eliminate the racial stress they felt in regard to not belonging. In many ways, my positionality as a Black female researcher served as an asset by providing the girls with a safe space in which they could express themselves without fear of judgment or retribution. I feel grateful for having held that space for them.

I thought long and hard about why I hesitated to focus on the stories and experiences of Black girls and I believe there are a few reasons. Having lost my own mother at such a young age, I was reluctant to unpack the mother-daughter relationship and to delve into how it ebbs, flows, and changes with time. Additionally, I am a mother to a daughter and as our relationship grows and changes, we run into various challenges with communication, meeting emotional needs, and balancing advice with direction. How could I, then, expect to analyze the data of both Black girls and their mothers when I am learning daily how to navigate the relationship with my own daughter? Having also attended a predominantly white, elite institution for undergrad, I was nervous to revisit the uncertain and problematic nature of an environment in which I resided precariously in the margins. Wearing the mask as a young adult affects your sense of self and belief in your ability. Although I ultimately recall my time in undergrad fondly, had it not been for the strong peer network and affinity group of which I was a part, I would not have made it.

Honestly, I believe that it is past time for us to look closely at these institutions that are predominantly white by choice, both K–12 and higher education, and to become more critical about the normative cultural values to which they ascribe and how this actuality impacts its students, and in particular, Black students. I've learned that although predominantly white, elite institutions may not have been built with Black people in mind, we are here now and folks need

to get really comfortable with our presence real fast because we aren't going anywhere anytime

soon.

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