JONES, RICKEYA RENEE. Ed.D. Understanding the Lived Experiences of Black Girls in a North Carolina Elementary School: The Importance of Student Voice. (2024)
Directed by Dr. Craig Peck. 111 pp.

Black girls' unique needs are often ignored in the educational system and left out of the literature, causing their voices to be unheard (Harrison, 2017). Their negative experiences in school can lead to frequent absences, gaps in education, and missed opportunities to pursue higher education. This increases the likelihood of Black girls dropping out of school, leading to potential unemployment and poverty down the road. Ultimately, the over-criminalization and harsh punishment Black girls encounter in schools place them at high risk of being incorporated into the school-to-prison pipeline (Chakara, 2017). The need for more research on Black girls and how to support them is more urgent than ever.

My study aimed to understand the lived experiences of Black girls in an elementary school, highlight their voices and perceptions, and offer recommendations to help school leaders better address their needs. My research question was: *How do fifth-grade Black girls perceive their schooling experiences?* To answer this question, I conducted a qualitative study that involved interactive focus groups with nine fifth graders at Lakeside Elementary (a pseudonym). During these interactive focus groups, I spoke directly with the girls about topics such as their general experiences with caring, gender, race, and identity. To encourage participation, I created different games and activities for some of the focus group sessions based on what I learned from the previous session.

In conducting my study, I found that the Black female participants felt that teachers sometimes cared about them less than they cared about their classmates of other races and ethnicities and that their teachers cared less about them than boys. I also found that the participants perceived teachers talked negatively to them and about them. In addition, I

discovered that the participants could recognize how others show care for them, and they knew how to show care for others. Further, my findings revealed that most of the Black girls in the study believed that others saw them differently than they saw themselves and that all the girls could share at least one positive and negative experience they had at Lakeside Elementary. Finally, the participants provided suggestions to teachers and peers on how they could support them better and to other Black girls on how to be successful in school.

Ultimately, the Black girls from my study highlighted the importance of the intersectionality of gender and race in their lives. One implication is that we need more studies like this one related to creating caring spaces where elementary school Black girls can be nurtured to be successful in their educational environment. In addition, a recommendation to schools and districts is to refine their classroom management practices eliminating racial and gender biases. Schools and districts also must take it one step further and operate from an ethic of care for Black girls. I recommend that schools and districts implement “other-mothering” approaches such as conducting home visits, feeding students, and providing authentic love and concern (Lane, 2018). Teachers, school leaders, school nurses, school counselors, and school social workers can help support this work. If we are to address the needs of Black girls in elementary schools, we must understand their lived experiences and commit to learning the most effective ways to support them based on the experiences they share.

Keywords: Elementary, Black girls, schooling, caring

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN A NORTH CAROLINA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT VOICE

by

Rickeya Renee Jones

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro

2024

Approved by

Dr. Craig Peck
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

Thank you, Dad, for watching me walk across the stage for my Masters. I know you will also be watching from above as I am hooded Doctor. I love and miss you!

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Rickeya Renee Jones, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Dissertation Chair

Dr. Craig Peck

Committee Members

Dr. Kathy Hytten

Dr. Tiffanie Lewis-Durham

February 26, 2024
Date of Acceptance by Committee

February 26, 2024
Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who supported me throughout this journey. Special shout-out to my supportive husband, Kahree, my intelligent and beautiful daughter, Kahniya, and my handsome, ambitious mini-me son, Kahyir. Thank you to my family (Mom, sister, brothers, grandmother) for your love and belief in me. Special thanks to Dr. Darby for being my Saturday writing buddy, accountability partner, and friend. Dr. Peck, thank you for your guidance and wisdom; I could not have done this without you. I also want to thank Dr. Hytten, Dr. Lewis-Durham, and Dr. Mansfield for being on my committee. Lastly, I want to thank the nine girls who participated in this study; you have made a lasting imprint on my heart!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In her article titled “Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?” Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), extrapolating from Delpit’s (1988) work, stated, “One of the tragedies of the field of education is how the dialogue of people of color has been silenced” (p. 14). As an elementary school principal, one of my primary goals is to bring the voices of my students to the forefront to create a school climate that is conducive to student voice and ownership. As Patton et al. (2016) noted, “Black women’s experiences remain largely invisible in unacknowledged ways” (p. 194). Patton et al. (2016) concluded that these experiences faced by Black women are also true for Black girls in their schooling experiences. The literature broadly suggests that the social constructions of gender and femininity intersecting with race shape the educational outcomes of Black girls (Annamma et al., 2016).

Black girls are not only neglected in the research but are also frequently perceived in schools as loud, aggressive, and disrespectful, resulting in differential treatment compared to their white counterparts. In addition, the marginalization of Black girls is often overlooked in favor of a focus on Black boys. Extensive research has examined the mistreatment of Black boys and how to support them effectively in their schooling experiences. Research has shown that Black boys are academically and socially marginalized, labeled as being prone to violence, suspended at a higher rate than their counterparts, and overly identified as students with disabilities. In addition, their presence is often blamed for evoking fear in others (Howard, 2013). Based on statistical data from the 2017–2018 school year, Black boys were suspended at rates more than three times their total student enrollment, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). With Black boys showing the largest

disparities in school suspensions, expulsions, and school arrests across all race/ethnicity and gender groupings, an abundance of studies has investigated ways to support them.

Like many others, former President Barack Obama saw the need to support Black males and other men of color while in office and created the My Brother's Keeper initiative in February 2014. My Brother's Keeper provides mentoring and support networks to help young men develop the necessary skills to find a decent job or attend college, with the goal of helping them work their way to the middle class. Public and private businesses, cities, and foundations have provided millions of dollars of resources to support this initiative (My Brother's Keeper Task Force, 2014).

Once again, however, Black girls were left out of the conversation as Obama's work heightened the attention to support Black boys and young males of color. The work of My Brother's Keeper was thought to have positive secondary effects on Black girls, but in reality, the lack of research and support for addressing the unique challenges faced by Black girls has persisted. Crenshaw et al. (2015) reaffirmed the lack of support specifically for Black girls by reporting, "the existing research, data, and public policy debates often fail to address the degree to which girls face risks that are both similar to and different from those faced by boys" (p. 11).

Existing data show that Black girls are the only group of girls across all races/ethnicities for whom a disparity was observed in school discipline, as Black girls were suspended from school at rates almost twice their total student enrollment, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions based on the 2017-2018 school year data (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Black girls also represent 30.8% of girls in juvenile justice centers while representing only 15% of girls enrolled in public schools (Buckles & Ives-Rublee, 2022). In addition, adults' racialized and gendered interpretations of Black girls' identities and actions often result in others

perceiving them as defiant, loud, and unruly compared to White and Latinx peers, and they are frequently reprimanded for being "unladylike."

Such negative experiences in school can lead to frequent absences, gaps in education, and missed opportunities to pursue higher education. This increases the likelihood of Black girls dropping out of school, leading to potential unemployment and poverty down the road. Ultimately, the over-criminalization and harsh punishment Black girls encounter in schools place them at considerable risk of entry into the school-to-prison pipeline (Chakara, 2017). By studying how race and gender affect Black girls as they navigate the education system, we can help slow down their incorporation into the school-to-prison pipeline. To do so, I examined the lived experiences of Black girls in an elementary school, seeking to understand the ways that race and gender affected their lived experiences.

Statement of the Problem

While all Black students face challenges in U.S. schools, previous research has primarily focused on the need to combat the overrepresentation of Black boys in school discipline and to yield positive educational outcomes for them. This is an important issue that deserves continued attention. However, the emergent literature on Black girls indicates they, too, have specific challenges and needs, and robust research is lacking on the needs of Black girls in elementary schools. Annamma et al. (2016) noted that Black girls often experience more disciplinary action that removes or excludes them from their educational environment than many males across racial groups. Furthermore, as Crenshaw et al. (2015) noted, "investigations into why Black girls are much more likely to be harshly disciplined than other girls have been few and far between" (p. 24). The problem that remains a concern is that Black girls' unique needs are often ignored in the

educational system. In addition, Black girls have rarely been the main focus of research. And as a result, Black girls' voices in the educational system have been unheard.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Black girls in an elementary school, highlight their voices and perceptions, and offer recommendations to help school leaders better address their needs. Therefore, I went directly to elementary Black girls to find out what their school experiences have been like and what they needed to have a positive school experience. My goal was to understand the lived experiences of fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary School (a pseudonym), so I engaged in interactive focus group sessions over several weeks. During these interactive focus groups, I spoke directly with the girls about topics around general experiences, caring, gender, race, and identity. In addition, I created different games and activities for some of the focus group sessions based on what I learned from the previous session. I modified the session delivery as needed; therefore, not all session formats were the same. Through my study, the girls and I together made meaning of the phenomenon of their lived experiences in school.

Research Question

The following research question drove my research: *How do fifth-grade Black girls perceive their schooling experiences at Lakeside Elementary School?* This research question provided me with an opportunity to design a study to encourage students to share their honest testimonies about their lived experiences, both positive and negative, in school. Participants also shared what they wanted the adults in the building to know and made suggestions as needed.

In addition, my study aimed to harness the power of student voice. Students who are empowered to use their voices learn how to be agents of change who impact leadership and

change in their communities. Fostering student voice strengthens students' personal and academic resilience and self-efficacy. It also encompasses students learning school governance to strengthen the citizenship skills they will carry into adulthood. Furthermore, offering students an opportunity to describe their experiences, eliciting their ideas on what caring is for themselves and others, and asking them to give advice to teachers, peers, and administrators can strengthen their sense of belonging. Through the power of student voice, the adults listen as the students speak (Azmitia & Mansfield, 2021; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014).

Methods

Methodological Elements

I conducted a qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in which I sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of Black girls in an elementary school. Talking to and interacting with the girls aligned with my worldview of interpretivism, which I brought to this research. The interpretive paradigm is concerned with describing, explaining, and interpreting phenomena and elucidating local meanings. Within this framework, humans construct reality as they engage with each other and the world, and the researcher and participants engage in making meaning together (Mansfield, 2020). I am not a post-positivist in that I do not believe in an absolute truth. Instead, I am a constructivist who believes we make meaning collectively (Mansfield, 2020).

In addition, research shows it is important for students to tell their stories, which allows educators to see how students can use their stories as background knowledge to access content and as a way to build classroom community (Campano, 2009). Therefore, my protocols for each round of focus groups were open-ended, with prompts and questions such as: *Tell me about life at Lakeside. How do you know when someone cares? What recommendations do you have to*

make Lakeside better? I also incorporated probes as needed, for example: *Tell me something really positive/negative about Lakeside. What do you wish the principal would do/not do? What would you tell other students/teachers about showing they care for others?* In addition, I created interactive activities such as games, painting, and writing for each focus group. I describe each focus group session in more detail in Chapter III.

Setting

Lakeside Elementary is in a metropolitan region of North Carolina. The county's political climate is Republican, and most of its citizens hold conservative views. Lakeside is situated within a mid-sized school district that encompasses elementary, middle, and high schools. Minority enrollment comprises more than half of the district enrollment; most of these students are of Hispanic descent.

I was familiar with Lakeside Elementary School and it seemed like a good setting for my study. Once verbal approval was given from the current principal, I applied to the School District Central Services Accountability Department. Once the district accountability person reviewed the application, I reached out to Lakeside Elementary to access the data I needed from the database PowerSchool to start the criterion search for all fifth-grade Black girls who attended Lakeside Elementary. As I note below, during the criterion search I worked with the Data Manager at Lakeside.

The previous and current school leaders at Lakeside are middle-aged and identify as white. From a historical perspective, the student demographics at the school transitioned from a predominantly white school in the late 1980s and early 1990s to approximately equal numbers of Black and white students from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. In 2008, the school demographics shifted to a predominantly Black and Hispanic student body, in which twice as

many Black and Hispanic students as white students attended the school. Currently, 80% of students identify as Black or Hispanic, while the other 20% identify as white or other. Meanwhile, on average, 95% of teachers at the school identify as white.

Approximately 500 students attend Lakeside Elementary in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. Lakeside is a Title I school and part of the Community Eligible Program (CEP) that provides all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, with free breakfast and lunch. The school zone includes two federal subsidized housing developments, which represent the homes for 25% of the total school population. Lakeside's average monthly attendance rate is above the district average rate despite a transient population, with many students moving frequently and often attending multiple schools in a single school year.

Sample Population

I used criterion-based sampling to identify the participants (Roulston, 2010). I purposefully sampled fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary School using the PowerSchool data to criterion sample students who identified as female, Black, and currently a fifth grader. All Black girls who met the criterion listed above were invited to participate in the study. There were 14 girls who met these criteria. To ensure all girls who met the criterion were invited, I used a generated list of their demographic information to also include their current fifth-grade teacher to visit the class. I then created an envelope for each girl with their name calligraphed on it. Each envelope included a copy of the flyer, a parent permission form, and my contact information if needed for any questions.

I then went to each fifth-grade classroom. There were three fifth-grade classrooms. I introduced myself, explained the purpose of my study, what we would be doing when we met each week, and what was in the envelope to take home to their parents. I told the girls they

would need to return their envelopes to their teacher and I would be stopping by once a week to see who had returned them. The classroom teachers were given a large manilla folder in which to place the returned documents to give to me when I came by their classroom. After 2 weeks, nine girls had consent forms signed, three girls did not have a parent permission form completed and their parent did not return my phone call to explain the study, one girl did not want to participate, and one girl's parents did not agree for her to participate. All the girls who wanted to participate and had permission were able to participate in the study, which amounted to nine participants. Each of the nine participants was then given an assent form at the first session to read and signed. In addition, before each session was started, the nine girls were reminded that they were not obligated to participate if they did not want to and could attend their encore classes (Music, P.E., Art, Media, Technology) if they so desired.

These nine girls, given their age and grade level, were able to discuss the culture of the school, share their experiences over time, and provide detailed descriptions of their school experiences. In illuminating the girls' stories, I followed the critical race theory approach of counter-storytelling, which Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) define as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (p. 1434).

Data Collection Methods

To answer my research question, I conducted interactive focus group sessions with fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary to engage in discourse about their school experiences. While I could have conducted a quantitative survey to garner some information about the students' experiences, that would not have given me the opportunity to get to know the girls, help them feel comfortable within the group, and ask follow-up questions. I also considered conducting semi-structured individual interviews with each participant. Ultimately, however, I

held focus groups to allow the girls to have conversations with each other, build a sense of community among them**,** and provide a space to elicit and understand multiple perspectives (Glesne, 2016). As the focus groups evolved, I adapted some of the sessions to meet the needs of the girls. Due to the varying approaches I also collected written samples and self-drawn portraits from the girls. I describe these artifacts in more detail in Chapter III.

Focus Groups

For this study, I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews (Marshall et al., 2022) in May 2023. I held six 45-minute focus group sessions scheduled twice a week for 4 consecutive weeks during the students' encore time, which is a 45-minute period each day where students attend Music, Art, P.E., or Media. In the first focus group session, we addressed general topics. Based on my assessment of the participant responses I received during this initial session, I began the process of creating specific subtopics in the consecutive focus group sessions (see Appendix A).

During our focus group sessions, I also quickly learned I needed to set up sessions that were more interactive to allow the participants to engage with each other and myself about each session topic. To do this, I used the notes from my reflexivity journal to adjust each upcoming session. In planning for each session, I would decide if I was going to continue with the topic or move on to another topic based on the richness of the data I had. After I solidified the topic, I then decided on the forum for which the discussion would occur (large group, small groups, independent, etc.). Next, I planned what activity the participants would engage in (games, writing, art, large discussion, etc.). Once I had these details, I then planned the activity, gathered the materials, and made any visuals or written plans to lead the next session. I continued this process after each focus group session, tailoring each new session based on my analysis of the

data I collected previously. For example, in Session 2, participants were in small groups to play a board game. I used multiple recording devices to capture the girls' responses and conversations in each group. While the girls were in groups of three playing the board game, I had one laptop centered to capture their conversations; then, I had the other group of three sit at a table on the other side of the room and had a laptop centered to capture their conversations. I went between each group to ask follow-up questions, clarify any questions they may have had, or provided support on how to play the game. Once the session was over, I stopped the recording and used the transcript the software produced to make meaning of the topic the girls discussed during that session.

In addition, I chose to schedule the focus groups twice a week to allow the participants enough time to process the experiences and ideas shared during the session, but without letting too much time elapse, such that key ideas would be lost before the next scheduled session. I provide more details about the activities I used in each session in Chapter III.

Data Analysis Strategies

I analyzed data during and after I conducted the study. Regarding data analysis during the study, as I noted above, after each focus group session, I reflected on the girls' discussions and comments to create new questions and activities for the following focus group session. After the last of the focus groups, I transcribed the recordings of the sessions and then coded them through "in vivo" coding. "In vivo" coding involves using the words or phrases of the participants as codes (Miles et al., 2020). Once I finished coding, I grouped the codes into categories. Using this process and referring to my notes, I identified the themes that reflected the experiences of fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

All focus group audio recordings and transcripts were kept and reported anonymously using pseudonyms. I completed IRB training and followed university and district guidelines to protect the rights and privacy of my participants. I received permission to conduct research from the school district within which the participants reside. I then sent home consent letters in a sealed envelope to the parents of all the fifth-grade Black girl students who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. I provided 2 weeks for the participants to return their signed consent forms to school. I then met with the girls whose parents had provided consent and gave them an assent form to indicate they wanted to participate in the study. Participants were also free to withdraw at any time during the research. I used two strategies to ensure trustworthiness: member checks and reflexivity.

Member Checks

During the study, I conducted member checks through check-in sessions after each focus group session. Member checking is a process in which researchers share the stories and themes captured in their study and ask participants whether those themes and stories accurately represent what they said (Creswell, 2016). At the beginning of the focus group sessions, I conducted a check-in as a review of what I had learned from the group from our previous session together. To do this, I created an anchor chart in which I presented the main points of the previous session. Each participant was invited to use colored sticky notes to communicate whether they agreed (yes, that is what I meant) or disagreed (no, that is not what I meant) and whether they wanted to give an example or provide further clarifying information. I continued to present an anchor chart with the ideas I gathered from our previous session. At the sixth focus group session, which was our final session together, participants had access to anchor charts from the previous sessions

(five in total) to communicate if there were anything they agreed with, disagreed with, or wanted to give an example of before moving into making recommendations or suggestions to various stakeholders, which was the sixth anchor chart.

Reflexivity Journal

I kept a journal to jot down my thoughts and reflect on my own experiences and background and how they impacted the shaping of the participants' accounts (Creswell, 2016). Throughout the study, I used the memo strategy in my journal before and after the focus groups to allow time to sit with my thoughts and accurately situate my biases and beliefs prior to analysis. Glesne (2016) writes:

> [T]he term *memo* used widely in qualitative research refers to jotting down reflective thoughts. By writing memos to yourself or keeping a reflective field log, you develop your thoughts; by getting your thoughts down as they occur, no matter how preliminary or in what form, you begin the analysis process . . . it frees your mind for new thoughts and perspectives. (p. 189)

During the focus groups, I kept a notebook close by to jot down any feelings, thoughts, or wonderings that came up while the girls shared their stories. At the conclusion of each session, I sat in the room and quietly reflected on the session and reread what I wrote. An example of this process was that after the first session, I had jotted down phrases like "more interaction, short attention span, need girls to talk more." Before the next session, I developed a game for the girls to play during the next session to allow for more interaction and conversation.

Limitations

The use of criterion sample selection was a limitation of the study due to providing a small sample size. In addition, the study was conducted in one elementary school and is therefore

not generalizable to other Black girls at other schools. Despite these limitations, the findings and recommendations can be useful to and adapted by school leaders in different contexts.

Theoretical Framework

I used Black feminist theory to support my study. The theory provided a framework for investigating, analyzing, and comprehending the complex realities of the Black girls' school experiences and offering recommendations to school leaders. Collins (2000) outlined six distinguishing characteristics of Black feminist theory: (a) the importance of the lived experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) the use of dialogue to acknowledge knowledge claims, (c) the ethic of caring, (d) personal accountability, (e) recognizing social conditions that confront African American woman change, (f) and that all analysis and discussion of Black Feminist Theory when applied to varying research should be committed to racial justice and human unity.

The lived experiences are the personal experiences and claims of Black women, which are seen as truth and therefore not susceptible to questioning by the "White gaze" (Watson, 2016, p. 240). These experiences as a criterion for meaning are situated between the difference of knowledge and wisdom, which bring Black women together as connected knowers because of their lived experiences and unique voice in addressing societal issues (Clemons, 2019). The use of dialogue recognizes the connected interaction between the speaker and listener during knowledge claims, which are statements that the speaker makes that are justified to be true because they have good reason to believe them. This knowledge is built on the ethics of care. Collins argued that the ethic of caring is talking from the heart and allowing the capacity for empathy (as cited in Clemons, 2019). Lastly, the knowers (Black women) have personal accountability for their knowledge claims, or in other words, "Black women are held responsible for the words and actions made in relation to their experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 265).

In my study, I focused on the lived experiences of several Black girls in their elementary school using dialogue and activities. I specifically listened to their stories and held their stories as true because they believed them to be justified. During these conversations, the dialogue between the girls and me also allowed me to check if I was capturing and reporting their experiences accurately and the way they wanted their stories to be told.

Using a Black Feminist Theory lens when analyzing my data, I was able gain an understanding of the girls individually and collectively. Individually, the girls each brought their own experiences and personalities to the group. Some of the girls were confident in who they were and shared their experiences openly while others were shy and took time to open up. In addition, they each brought their own unique experiences that had shaped their schooling. Collectively, they were able to identify their racialized and gendered experiences. At times during the sessions, one girl affirmed what the other had said. They also came together to offer suggestions to others and more specifically suggestions to Black girls.

Through my study, I was able to learn about Black Feminist Theory. My study helped me to understand the intersectionality of race and gender and how elementary fifth-grade Black girls are able to recognize when they are being treated differently. I also learned as a Black woman how to create a space for Black girls to share their experiences. In addition, I learned ways to interact with Black girls to not only listen to their stories, but also how to empower them. Lastly, I learned the need to research and advocate for the unique needs that Black girls have in school and how to support them.

Positionality

Who I am, both personally and professionally, directly and indirectly, influenced the research and findings. I came to the research as a Black woman from the North. After graduating

from West Chester University of Pennsylvania, I began my career in Philadelphia, working in schools with predominantly Black and Brown staff and student populations, first as a ninth-grade teacher and later as a K-2 resource teacher. After moving to the South, I served in schools with predominantly Black and Brown students but predominantly white staff. I served as a pre-K exceptional children teacher, K-5 resource teacher, and finally, a fifth-grade general education teacher before attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for my master's degree in school leadership. Currently, I serve as the principal of a Title I elementary school with students in pre-kindergarten to fifth grade.

Throughout my roles as an educator, I have worked from my core beliefs and values to provide equitable opportunities for all students. My perspective on Black girls' experiences in elementary school has been shaped by the experiences I have had and observations I have made in my current administrative role. As a new principal, I am intrigued to learn about the experiences of Black girls at the school, especially given the current demographics of students and faculty, which have changed over the years.

My own personal educational journey does not mirror the experiences of Black girls attending a school with a predominantly Black and Brown student population with mostly white female teachers. Rather, I come to the research as a Black woman who is married, Christian, a school leader, and the mother of two children. I was born in a suburb of Philadelphia and raised by a single mother who was a steel mill worker. My twin sister, two younger brothers, and I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and attended a predominantly white school system.

I still remember the day a Black family moved in next door to us, and their children began attending the same school. I remember this day vividly because they were the first family

of color on our street other than our family. When I was growing up, children who lived in the city who were Black like me judged me because of where I lived. At the same time, I felt like I did not fit in at school or in the neighborhood because my skin was a different color. The controlling images of Black women have also been woven into these experiences. I experienced the stereotypical expectations that Black girls should be loud, confrontational, and ghetto (lacking resources). When I did not present with any of those characteristics, I was met with disgust from my peer group and admiration from white people.

My goal in undertaking this research was to help school leaders, teachers, and staff better understand students' experiences and needs and more effectively address the gender and racial inequities students face in schools. It is vital for those involved in this work to recognize that change starts with them: their attitudes, thoughts, and practices. Students, especially Black girls, need to know and believe they have genius, they are capable, they are loved and valued, they are leaders, and they are cared for.

I am aware that I came to this research with a degree of privilege my participants may not have experienced. Throughout my educational career, I was not the target of punitive disciplinary practices. I was a student who was viewed through the lens of high academic achievement, seen as well-mannered and well-behaved. However, I came to the research as an individual who lacked a sense of self and a sense of belonging while in school.

It was not until many years into adulthood that I began to feel comfortable in my own skin, stopped making excuses for who I was, and learned to be proud of that—which is not to say I had no positive experiences prior to that time. I want to understand the lived experiences of fifth-grade Black girls and identify how those experiences are shaped by the intersectionality of

race and gender. Lastly, I want to understand better the needs of Black girls and how school leaders can address those needs.

Significance of the Study

This study illuminated the experiences of Black girls in the fifth grade through their own voices. This study adds to the research literature on the experiences of elementary school Black girls and the intersectionality of race and gender within the school setting (Gholson, 2016; Ricks, 2014). As I described earlier, Black girls are often omitted from the discussion when researchers examine how to provide positive educational outcomes for Black boys (Harrison, 2017). If we are to address the needs of Black girls in elementary schools, we must understand their lived experiences and commit to learning the most effective ways to support them based on the experiences they share.

In this study, I provided rich details about the experiences of fifth-grade Black girls in an elementary school. By sharing their experiences, I hope to contribute to building a greater understanding of Black girls, with the goal of better identifying the needs of Black girls for other administrators and curriculum designers. Through this research, I hope to elevate the voices of Black girls and thereby help leaders more effectively shape school culture and provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in North Carolina.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter II of my study, I review the literature that pertains to Black girl's school experiences in elementary through high school. I divide the literature into three sections in which I share the unique challenges Black children face in U.S. schools, discuss the current research on Black girls, and discuss the benefit of student voice. In Chapter III, I describe the findings of my research. In Chapter IV, I analyze the findings of my study as they relate to existing research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary Black girls who are in the fifth grade by highlighting their voices and perceptions. My study adds to the literature on Black girls, who are under-represented in the existing research on schools. Importantly, it also contributes to recent findings specific to elementary Black girls' school experiences. My interest in this topic stemmed from my observations during my teaching and leadership appointments when I noticed the lack of space for Black girls to express their thoughts and opinions about their school experiences without judgment.

In this chapter, I discuss the research literature related to my topic. First, I describe research related to the challenges Black youth face in schools. Next, I consider literature specifically focused on Black girls, including research on caring and Black girls. Finally, I examine research related to the importance of centering student voice, which can encourage educators to listen to the voices of students as a critical solution to enact change.

Challenges Black Children and Youth Face in U.S. Schools

Countless studies have discussed school discipline and racial disproportionality in school discipline for Black students, especially Black boys. However, research specifically focused on Black girls continues to be an area of need. I explored what we know about the current situation of Black girls in schools, examined approaches, and discussed how to support work that is socially just.

Discipline Disproportionality

The American Psychological Association (2021) highlights that Black children are treated more negatively than their white counterparts in disciplinary action. Overall, Black students make up approximately 15% of total school enrollment, but their rate of expulsion from

school, approximately 36%, is more than twice that of total enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Skiba et al. (2002) explained that teachers referred Black students to the office for perceived threatening behavior, being in the hallway with apparent purpose, and overall being loud. In addition, based on 2017-2018 school data, Black students were more likely to be identified as having an intellectual or emotional disability compared to other non-Black students with a disability (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2022). However, this same school data showed that Black students were less likely to be identified as having a speech-language impairment or autism compared to all other students with a disability (IDEA, 2022).

Black Boys and Girls

Research on Black boys shows they are suspended from elementary and secondary school three times more often than their white counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Black male students received out-of-school suspensions at a rate twice as high as their white, Hispanic, and students without disabilities (Ryberg et al., 2021). They also are the most overrepresented racial/ethnic group in high-incidence special education eligibility categories (Ford, 2012). Nationally, 12th-grade Black boys perform 4 years behind their white male peers (Robinson, 2013).

Black girls face their own unique challenges in education. According to Georgetown Law School's Center on Poverty and Inequality (2019), "Nationally, Black girls are suspended more than five times as often as white girls" and "receive three times more corporal punishment and are twice as likely to be physically restrained" (para. 7). In addition, they were four times more likely to be arrested at school and twice as likely to be physically restrained as their white counterparts in the 2015-2016 school year (Ives-Rublee et al., 2022). Data also show the continuation of disproportionate disciplinary actions for Black girls with disabilities. Among

Black girls with disabilities, "18.6% received one or more out-of-school suspensions compared to 5.2% of white girls with disabilities and 2.8% of girls without disabilities" (Buckles & Ives-Rublee, 2022, para. 7).

Prejudice and Stereotypes

Black children and adolescents are more likely to have racial stereotypes applied to them than white children and adolescents (Todd et al., 2016). Black youth are often perceived as a threat to others. Black girls' attitudes and personalities are often measured by standards of white femininity, and Black girls are excessively surveilled and penalized in schools based on their lack of conformity to these norms (Annamma et al., 2016; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Morris (2016) conducted a two-year ethnographic study at a middle school with 1,000 seventh- and eighth-grade students. Through semi-structured interviews with teachers, Morris (2016) found that they often described Black girls as defiant, loud, and unruly compared to their white and Latinx peers and reprimanded them for being "unladylike." Carter Andrews et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study of seventy high school Black girls about their racialized and gendered school experiences. The researchers found that many of the girls described their behaviors as being a manifestation of the adults' perceptions of them as being rowdy and disruptive. Butler's (2018) research study (which I describe in more detail below) supports these findings that Black girls are labeled as ghetto and loud and engaged in behaviors that, when compared to those of their white counterparts, are often perceived by educators as requiring disciplinary action. Watson (2016) interviewed six Black girls in an urban high school and found that the teachers, administrators, and school resource officers who were charged with supporting students and keeping them safe were instead harassing and holding them back.

Lack of Access to Gifted Programs and Advanced Placement Courses

There are problems with defining, identifying, and serving students in gifted programs and advanced placement courses, and minoritized students are underrepresented in these programs (Anderson, 2020; Mansfield, 2015). Historical research shows the racist lineage of gifted education, resulting in small numbers of students of color, girls, and students of low socioeconomic status in gifted programs (Mansfield, 2015). Although 15.5% of the U.S. student population is Black, only 9.9% are enrolled in gifted programs (Ford, 2021).

Both historical and current research show the positioning of giftedness as a sign of status. The labeling of students as gifted or non-gifted establishes a social hierarchy that further segregates students in school (Mansfield, 2015). The underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs and advanced placement courses is due partly to the evaluation instruments used to identify eligibility for these programs, as some evaluation tools overlook or misconstrue the evidence showing students are gifted or high achieving (Anderson, 2020).

Research has continued to show the under-identification of Black students for gifted programming. Part of the under-identification of Black students for gifted programs stems from residential segregation and pockets of wealth within communities and school systems. Mansfield (2015) illuminates the problems with traditional intelligence theory, testing, and applications, which lead to racist practices. More specifically, Black girls are left out of current research and identification of giftedness in schools due to their intersectionality of both race and gender (Anderson, 2020; Gholson, 2016). The conversation not only leaves out the underrepresentation of Black girls in gifted education but also neglects the experiences of high-achieving Black girls. The school experiences of many high-achieving Black girls in gifted programs have left them feeling like they were met with many barriers and a lack of support from teachers. Some of the

barriers the girls faced were teachers' lack of acknowledgment of their abilities, bias around their abilities, and gendered racism (Anderson, 2020).

Research on Black Girls

The Struggles of Black Girls

Harrison (2017) stated, "As a collective group, Black young adolescent girls have been largely neglected in much of the research literature and by school-based personnel who often direct their attention toward their Black male counterparts" (p. 1024). Black girls have been left out of critical conversations and research on the overrepresentation of Black students in discipline and incarceration despite being affected by their own overrepresentation in these areas. Through historical events such as the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the question of whether Black women should prioritize their identities and support Black men in obtaining the right to vote was put on them as their gender was all but disregarded (Ricks, 2014). Even today, when we study Black women, we often fail to study their multiple identities of gender and race, causing them to be left out of the national discourse on education (Gholson, 2016; Ricks, 2014).

In the sub-sections below, I examine two aspects of the struggles of Black girls in schools: discipline disproportionality and others' perceptions.

Discipline Disproportionality of Black Girls

Black girls are often left out of the discourse on discipline disproportionality. In their quantitative study from a preestablished data set of Black girls in grades 4-11, Slate et al. (2016) found discipline disproportionality in each grade level (Grades 4-11) surrounding disciplinary practices that led to in-school referrals and out-of-school suspensions. This finding also included alternative education programs. In addition, they found that the greatest spike in Black girls receiving disciplinary actions occurred in Grade 6. Over the last decade, research has found that

Black girls have the fastest-growing suspension rate of all students, with minor infractions as the driving force (Annamma et al., 2016; Watson, 2016). Studying a large urban district in the state of Colorado, Annamma et al. (2016) used mixed methods to analyze the descriptive disciplinary actions taken against Black girls and whether those actions aligned with the dominant narrative about Black girls. Through their findings, they found Black girls are more likely to "experience exclusionary discipline outcomes for subjective rather than objective reasons, such as disobedience/defiance, detrimental behavior, and third-degree assault, all of which are defined by the subjective judgment of school personnel" (Annamma et al., 2016, p. 232).

Moreover, as Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) described, the "use of out-of-school suspension has approximately doubled since 1973, with much steeper increases for racialized students, and in the U.S. context, Black students in particular" (p. 116). More specifically, Black girls were seven times more likely to be suspended from school compared to white girls, according to the 2017-2018 data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2021). Multiple sources depict the shortcomings of many schools in meeting the needs of Black girls. Black girls comprise 15% of girls enrolled in public schools but represent 30.8% of girls in juvenile justice center schools (Buckles & Ives-Rublee, 2022). Not only are Black girls disproportionately represented in juvenile justice centers, but incarcerated Black girls are twice as likely to receive services under IDEA compared to their incarcerated White counterparts. When reviewing the data on the disciplinary actions to which Black girls in schools are subjected, the picture continues to suggest deficits in these disciplinary structures, systems, policies, and practices.

Others' Perceptions of Black Girls

Of those adult educators surveyed by Epstein et al. (2017), 74% identified as white, and 62% identified as female. Based on the study, adults across all age ranges perceived Black girls

collectively as needing less support, nurturing, and comfort than white children due to the "adultification" of Black girls. Epstein et al. (2017) defined adultification as a

> the perception of Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than white girls of the same age—as well as its possible causal connection with negative outcomes across a diverse range of public systems, including education, juvenile justice, and child welfare. (p. 1)

In addition, the study showed that adults perceived Black girls as being more independent and knowing more about adult topics and sex than their white peers (Epstein et al., 2017). Furthermore, the research suggested that Black girls bear the brunt of a double bind: "viewed as more adult than their white peers, they may be more likely to be disciplined for their actions, yet they are also more vulnerable to the discretionary authority of teachers and law enforcement than their white counterparts" (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 14).

These perceptions have real-world consequences for Black girls. Koonce (2012) conducted a phenomenological study of two adolescent Black girls to understand how their race and gender affected their lived schooling experiences. She wanted to understand how the use of "talking with attitude," which she described as an African American woman's speech practice, combined with their multiple identities of race and gender, affected their schooling. Through her analysis of the interviews and narratives, Koonce (2012) discovered that the girls overwhelmingly found their school environment to be hostile. These girls' perceptions of school impacted their learning and caused them to feel unhappy and uneasy in their school environment.

Similarly, Annamma et al. (2016) and Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) illustrated that Black girls' attitudes and personalities are often measured by standards of white femininity, and they are excessively surveilled and penalized in school based on these norms. Morris (2016)

discussed the multiplicity of Black girls' identities (race and gender) and how these multiple identities push them to the outer margins of schooling, which leads to Black girls being pushed out of school. According to Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020), pushout can be defined as a "collection of policies, practices, and consciousness that fosters their invisibility, marginalizes their pain and opportunities, and facilitates their criminalization" (p. 1426).

Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) used critical race feminism and figured worlds as frameworks for examining the literature on school discipline of Black girls and the use of zero tolerance policies. Through their analysis, they advocated for adults to investigate how Black girls are targeted and disciplined in schools that use zero-tolerance policies by collectively using the intersectionality of Black girls and the space in which disciplinary action occurs. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) argued that pushing out Black girls from schools begins with adults' racialized and gendered interpretations of their identities and actions, leading to their overrepresentation in both in-school and out-of-school punitive disciplinary practices. Similarly, Carter Andrews et al. (2019) conducted a research study of seventy high school Black girls who participated in critical conversation space sessions. The participants shared collective toxic narratives that revealed the racialized and gendered experiences they faced with adults and students in their schools. In the study, many of the girls shared how they experienced double standards of appropriate behavior, white-normed constructions of femininity, policing of their Black bodies through dress code, and the dismissal of sexual harassment complaints (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Watson's (2016) study also found that the school was unable to counter pervasive perceptions that Black girls were aggressive and loud.

There is even a discrepancy in disciplinary measures for Black girls based on skin tone. Blake et al. (2017) explored the role of colorism in Black females' risk of suspension. They used

the data from a national longitudinal study of adolescent to adult health they extended upon prior research to find out whether African American female skin tones impacted their risk for school suspension in relation to their white peers. They found that colorism was a significant predictor of school suspension risk and that Black girls with darker skin were almost twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as their white female peers. This phenomenon was not seen among Black girls with lighter skin complexions.

While not directly related to school disciplinary measures, A. Thompson (1998), in her study, asked Kindergarteners to draw themselves. She analyzed their drawings based on race. In her findings, she found the Kindergarteners to be literal and found it important to have the right color when drawn. The skin tone drawn was critical to the African American children in the study.

Summary

In sum, a range of factors impact Black girls' ability to succeed in the school environment and may have long-term implications and consequences. Such negative experiences within the school system can lead to frequent absences, gaps in education, and missed opportunities to pursue higher education. They also can lead to a higher likelihood of dropping out, unemployment, and poverty for Black girls who will one day be Black women.

The existing research literature vividly illustrates the struggles Black girls endure in schools. Black girls continue to receive disciplinary referrals for offenses based on the subjective judgment of school personnel. They are overrepresented in disciplinary actions and exclusionary practices, increasing their risk of involvement in the criminal justice system. Black girls are often perceived as loud, having an attitude, and unladylike, and they are routinely left out of the conversation on inequities in schools. It is critical for scholars to focus on the experiences of

Black girls in schools for multiple reasons, perhaps most urgently to combat the funneling of Black girls into the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2016).

Approaches to Supporting Black Girls

Some models and approaches already exist for supporting Black girls. Watson (2016) described how Black girls feel unsafe and unsupported in high school due to harassment by administrators, teachers, and fellow students. As a remedy, she recommended friend groups, new support networks through affinity groups, support from mental health professionals, teachers posting clear rules in classrooms, schools forming a task force, and providing professional development for staff. Gay (2018) specifically supports professional development for staff by culturally responsive leaders facilitating culturally sustaining professional development and teacher training in schools. It is through this type of professional development that teachers can then develop consciousness and clarity about their cultural/racial beliefs (Gay, 2018). Additionally, teachers also learn how to handle student discourse with opposing viewpoints, which widens their understanding of their students' and communities' cultures (Samuels, 2018). Ezzani (2020) goes on to suggest the importance of going further when providing professional development for teachers by coaching, creating a tiered support system for students, asking tough questions, and supporting teachers by providing a safe place to have open discussions and reflection.

In their work, Watson and Baxley (2021) use the approach of incorporating anti-Blackness and MotherWork as their conceptual framework to review earlier research on Black women in their roles as mothers, activists, and school leaders. They focused in particular on Black women educational leaders in a Black Panther Party Community School. Based on their assessment of the literature, they asserted that "the elements of MotherWork—physical power,

survival, and identity—are essential in reframing school leadership and leading school leaders to rethink policies, practices, and ideologies that are antithetical to Black girlhood" (Watson & Baxley, 2021, p. 146). Similarly, Slate et al. (2016) recommended that school leaders, district leaders, and teachers evaluate disciplinary practices at their schools and assess and refine classroom management practices to eliminate racial and gender biases in classrooms and school buildings. As schools refine their classroom management practices, there also is a need to create spaces that reflect the academic and social emotional needs of girls. Specifically, educators can increase opportunities for girls to use technology as an avenue for advocacy and meaning-making (Greene, 2016).

Academic identity represents how Black girls see themselves in the domains of education and schooling (Rouland, 2020). Two models that highlight approaches specific to addressing Black girls and their identities are F^2AME and Black Girl Cartography. First, the Ford Female Achievement Model for Excellence (F^2AME) model is intended to increase resiliency, self-efficacy, racial pride, and gender pride for Black girls. In addition, the model targets four areas of need for Black girls: psychological, socioemotional, academic, and cultural. The model may be implemented through small groups led by professionals; mentoring by same-sex, same-race adults, such as women in universities providing a connection with Black female students; small social circles of support with the girls together; and scaffolding to provide a culturally responsive curriculum for students that connects to their prior experiences (Middleton & Ford, 2022). Preliminary research has demonstrated that the model can be effective; however, more research is needed to investigate its long-term effectiveness and the possible benefits of implementing it across settings and schools (Middleton & Ford, 2022).

In addition, Butler's (2018) framework of Black Girl Cartography examines how and where Black girls are mapped in education socio-politically and physically, with the goal of understanding Black girls' experiences. Black Girl Cartographers are defined as "researchers, scholars, advocates, and individuals who self-identify as a 'Black girl' who have a deep concern for Black girls' health, lives, well-being, and ways of being" (p. 33). Within this framework, Black women move through the process of seeing, hearing, believing, understanding, and articulating why Black girls matter through the method of mapping, which includes explicit conversations about place, race, and gender. In this model, Black girl cartographers are dedicated to improving Black girls' well-being and ways of being beyond the school and helping them make commitments to "sustaining, imagining and mapping sites of learning, self-love, and critical discourse together" (p. 33).

An academic support model that is not specific to Black girls but that has been found to be effective in promoting a positive school climate and positive adult connections is restorative practices (Elias, 2016). Restorative practices involve educators using a variety of positive behavioral supports to cultivate a respectful school environment through communication and mutual understanding (Mansfield et al., 2018). The benefits of these practices are increased staff morale and stronger student-teacher relationships. Restorative practices also decrease the need for external behavioral interventions, reduce exclusionary practices, and value student voice (Mansfield et al., 2018).

The characteristics of the restorative practices model called Whole-School Change (formerly SaferSanerSchools) encompasses the traits of restorative practices and includes "care, nurture, tolerance and diversity" (Mansfield et al., 2018, pp. 307–308). Whole-School Change is a tiered model that provides universal support to all students and then becomes more targeted as

student needs are identified. School-wide practices include restorative questions (informal questions to allow those affected by the offender to be heard), small impromptu conferences/circles (answering restorative questions in front of others to resolve low-level conflict), and reintegrative management of shame (anticipation of shame but it is not attributed to a person, and it is not focused on). All these techniques are meant to repair harm and adopt corrective measures (Mansfield et al., 2018). For some students, additional support is needed and provided by incorporating responsive circles. In these groups, students discuss the negative behavior that has affected the group, and they can share their feelings and offer suggestions for correcting the behavior. The final tier of approaches, which is administered by selected and trained staff, is the most formal restorative practice and occurs after a serious incident or behavior pattern (Mansfield et al., 2018).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another model with an evidence-based, tiered framework. PBIS helps support students' behavioral, academic, social, emotional, and mental health. When implemented with fidelity, the framework helps to establish favorable, dependable, fair, and secure learning environments in which everyone can succeed (Center on PBIS, 2023). At the school level, Tier 1 systems, data, and practices support all students across all school settings. The goal of Tier 1 is to provide proactive and positive support for all. Tier 2 is for students who need specific behavior support for their behavioral needs. Tier 2 provides an additional layer of systems, data, and practices layered on top of Tier 1. The next layer, Tier 3, is more intensive and provides individualized support for each student's specific behavioral needs (Center on PBIS, 2023). As in the Whole-School Change model, PBIS provides tiered levels of support and begins with proactive measures for all students. By implementing PBIS with fidelity in schools, they can begin to dismantle systemic racism by examining school-

wide expectations, supporting teachers in replacing exclusionary responses with instructional responses for behavior concerns, revising punitive policies that disproportionately harm Black students, and individuals identifying their own biases about student behavior (Center on PBIS, 2023).

Caring

While not specific to Black girls, caring is an educational construct that is important to all students' engagement and belonging. Valenzuela (1999) reported that the essential relationship between teachers and students is reciprocal from the carer (teacher) to the cared for (student). When Noddings (2013) developed the framework on caring, she emphasized that the teacher's role was to initiate, model, and facilitate an outcome that resulted in the student feeling cared for.

A critical component of caring is listening to and allowing for voice. This approach improves student discipline and academic performance (C. S. Thompson, 2018). To have strong teaching and learning environments, students need to have a voice and feel respected (Kohn, 2008; S. W. Thompson, 2010). The importance of listening and respecting students allows them to share their needs, concerns, goals, and feelings (Mendler, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Wang and Degol (2015) and Preble et al. (2011) suggest that the best school leaders create these methods to facilitate open communication between teachers, administrators, and students through four areas to include: teaching and learning, interpersonal communication, safety, and infrastructure.

Boynton and Boynton (2005) found that negative student-teacher relationships were attributed to a lack of respect from adults. Jeffrey et al. (2013) added that caring teachers "listen to students, compliment them and take time to understand their needs" (p. 102), while Preble et al. (2011) suggested that the school must develop opportunities for adults and students to get to

know each other, including their strengths, areas of need, and who they are in different contexts in order to build positive student-teacher relationships.

Teachers also demonstrate care for students by supporting positive student outcomes and providing challenging academic tasks for student growth (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Embedded in the theory of care is the importance of relationships between teachers and students. According to Marzano (2003), when students have a positive relationship with school personnel, they are more likely to follow the rules and expectations. In contrast, when students do not feel cared for, they, in return, do not care about or pay attention to classroom rules and expectations (Cothran et al., 2003). Additionally, scholars have found that when students have positive relationships with teachers, they have higher goals for achievement (Boynton & Boynton, 2005; Duke, 1986; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015). In particular, elementary-level students who have close, supportive relationships with teachers have an increased level of engagement and a decrease in student suspensions (Decker et al., 2007; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Owens and Ennis (2005) emphasized that teachers should create positive relationships with students so that they feel cared for and then can care for themselves and each other. Importantly, the development of caring school environments involves modeling from the adults in the building (Noddings, 2013). Furthermore, the school principal plays a key role in modeling caring, and the principal's behaviors and actions must be directly aligned with maintaining a safe learning environment (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Moreover, school principals have the power, position, and authority to impact the school environment by developing feelings of trust, facilitating open communication, and promoting effective feedback, which are common themes throughout the literature (Ezzani, 2020; Gay, 2018; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2015).

Researchers recognize that it is important to understand how students and teachers experience caring. Jeffrey et al. (2013), for example, sought to understand how 17 elementary students and six elementary teachers perceived caring in student-teacher relationships. Jeffrey et al. (2013) found that students viewed caring student-teacher relationships as meeting students' "physical needs, fostering emotional well-being, and providing strategic assistance" (p. 106). Based on their research, students believed teachers cared for them by keeping them safe and meeting their basic needs, such as food and play. In addition, the study found that students felt a teacher cared when they provided a level of comfort, helping them feel valued and personally recognizing them. Lastly, the study showed that students felt that their teachers cared when they provided strategic assistance, which was perceived as a willingness to provide academic support as well as support with personal issues.

In terms of students who are different from the white majority, Valenzuela (1999) studied Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students at a high school and how they experienced and viewed education. Valenzuela (1999) highlighted the complexity of caring theory when students are already dealing with barriers and an environment that does not support their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, known as subtractive schooling. In her research, she provided a framework for understanding the patterns of immigrant achievement and U.S.-born underachievement. She suggested that there are two areas where schools subtract resources from students, including ignoring their definition of education and through assimilation policies and practices that minimize students' culture and language. Valenzuela (1999) found authentic care to be difficult to create but essential in equalizing the opportunities for minoritized students. In summary, Valenzuela (1999) discovered that authentic caring can exist in subtractive school environments; however, it is much more productive to have a school environment that supports

and respects the barriers and history of Mexican-American students, resulting in equal opportunities.

Caring and Black Girls

While the research specifically regarding the ethics of care for Black girls is limited, there is some emerging research on Black educators and leaders who practice and express care for Black children in the educational system. For instance, "other-mothering" is a term coined by Collins (2000), where female teachers and leaders engage in maternal leadership approaches with Black students by rebuilding their students and communities through nurturing, teaching, and leading. Lane (2018), in her study, examined the politics of care of 27 Black female students in an urban high school. Her findings illuminated that many students had negative perspectives of the care their teachers provided, including emotional disconnection, feeling unworthy of their teachers' time, and lack of sincere affection. In response, some teachers did provide conventions of other-mothering by offering authentic love and concern, feeding students, and conducting home visits. Lane (2018) called this approach "fo-real love" (p. 280).

Extending on Lane's (2018) previous study, McArthur and Lane (2018) examined a smaller segment of the larger sample of 27 Black female students in an urban high school. In this work, McArthur and Lane (2018) highlighted the testimonies of two Black women's analysis of the central element ("fo-real love") of the politicized ethic of care framework embodied in Lane's (2018) study. McArthur and Lane (2018) found that pedagogical love ("fo-real love") can be applied in the classroom. McArthur and Lane (2018) examined how educators can channel social change by first knowing what their students need, such as by beginning class sessions with check-ins where students share their praises and grievances from the day or week. The researchers also found that teachers who listened to students' lived realities and allowed them to

share their stories aided in the healing of Black and Brown students. Lastly, the authors found that intentional and deliberate acts of care from teachers could influence positive identity construction and improve the school experiences of Black girls.

Watson and Baxley (2021) proposed that, through the approach of other-mothering, school leaders can develop a practice of justice and feel at ease in identifying and eliminating destructive structures to support Black youth, specifically Black girls. They explained that school leaders need not fear rejecting oppressive institutions and be adamant about creating substitute structures for Black children so they can be successful, happy, and healthy (Watson & Baxley, 2021). By doing so, school leaders can oppose oppressive systems and advance ideologies that support love and celebrate Black adolescents, with a specific focus on Black girls (Watson & Baxley, 2021).

Summary of Research on Black Girls

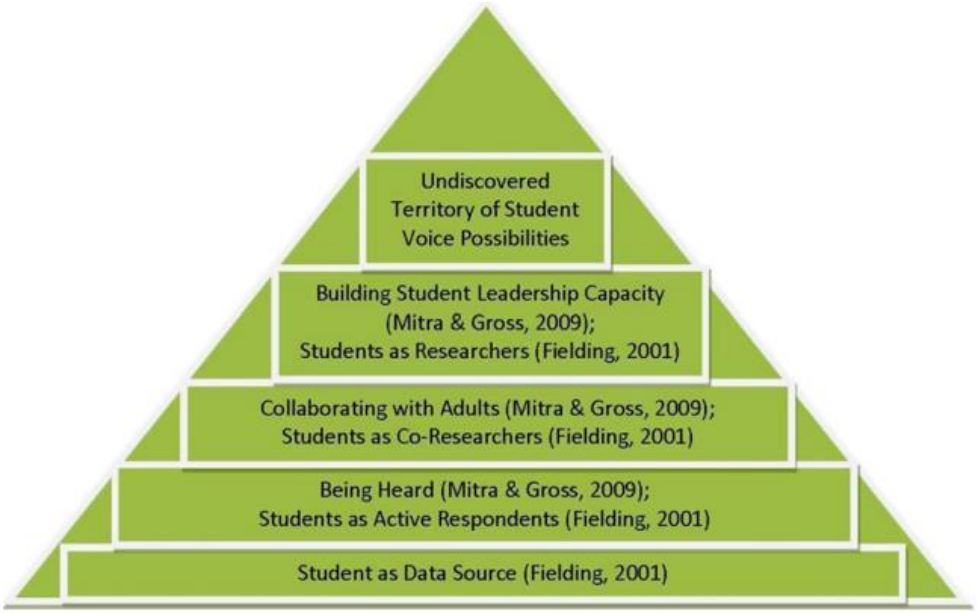
In sum, Black girls have multiple identities, including Black and female, that are overlooked in extant literature. Black girls are disproportionately subject to disciplinary action in school and disproportionately referred to the juvenile justice system. They are often viewed as loud, unladylike, and researched in comparison to or alongside Black boys. School leaders and teachers have tried to remedy this problem by implementing models such as F^2AME, Black Girl Cartography, restorative practices, PBIS, and showing care. More specifically for Black girls, Black leaders have encouraged caring by being othermothers and providing Black girls with maternal love and concern. Each of these models works to foster student voice, which is further explored in the next section.

Student Voice

While researchers' definitions of student voice vary, they typically include three key components: (a) students' sharing of beliefs and concerns (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mansfield, 2013); (b) building relationships (Mansfield, 2015); and (c) advocating for school and community change (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Mitra, 2008). Scholars have emphasized that through student voice initiatives, students and adults collaborate to address significant problems in their schools, and students take on leadership roles and advocate for change (Mitra, 2008; Preble et al., 2011).

Mansfield et al. (2012) reviewed various ways of understanding student voice and developed a student voice continuum (see Figure 1). Beginning at the lowest level and progressing upward, this continuum involves students as data sources, students as active participants, students being heard, students as co-researchers, students as researchers, building student leadership capacity, and at the highest level, the undiscovered territory of student voice possibilities.

Figure 1. Mansfield et al.'s (2012) Student Voice Continuum



Benefits of Student Voice

The benefits of student voice can be seen in students' belief in themselves (Lac & Mansfield, 2018), their civic habits (Mansfield, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2012), improvement in student-teacher relationships (Mansfield et al., 2012), and the ability to advocate for school and community change (Preble et al., 2011), all of which lead to curricular improvements (Mansfield et al., 2012). Specifically, Scarparolo and MacKinnon (2022) identified two benefits of student voice that emerged from their study: student choice and student engagement. By supporting student voice through classroom-level consultation with students as part of differentiated instruction, students became more engaged and motivated.

A common theme throughout the literature is the application of Lundy's Model of Participation, in which giving students space, voice, an audience, and influence over their own learning yields positive outcomes (Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2022). Lastly, some research has suggested that listening to students' voices improves conditions of learning, teacher pedagogy and practice, and student engagement (Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2022). Overall, the implementation of student voice led students to feel their teachers valued their input and gained access to leadership opportunities.

Speaking and Being Heard

Multiple components must be incorporated to facilitate student voice. These include utilizing particular approaches to gathering data, creating a safe space in which students can use their voices to share their unique experiences, and allowing for critical conversations, which requires creating time and space for both the students and teachers. The final, crucial component is listening to student stories (Azmitia & Mansfield, 2021; Mansfield, 2015).

Gathering Data About Student Voice

Researchers have used methods including surveys, focus groups, photo elicitation, student forums, and student-led initiatives to understand student perspectives (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Leren, 2006; Mansfield et al., 2012). However, researchers need to go beyond surveys to understand the complexity of students' experiences (Mansfield, 2015; Mansfield et al., 2012). Two ways to go beyond surveys are to hold student forums and to invite students to serve as co-researchers and eventually lead a research project on their own. In her study of students and teachers collaborating toward total school improvement, Mitra (2008) identified the need to focus on building partnerships and improving communication between teachers and students as imperative for student voice. In addition, students hoped the focus on teacher-student connections would lead to greater equity for all students (Mitra, 2008).

In gaining student voice, students begin as co-researchers and, with experience, move on to conducting research on their own (Fielding, 2004; Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Students become meaning makers through co-facilitation of the research process. In alignment with the work of Preble et al. (2011), Fielding (2004) discusses the role of students as researchers who can identify issues and whose training in the skills and values of research and inquiry enables them to support teachers. In this context, students and teachers participate jointly in training sessions where they evaluate, monitor, and make recommendations for identified issues. Through their role as researchers, students learn to effectively utilize their individual and collective agency (Fielding, 2004).

Developing Safe Space

The goal of developing a safe space and student voice in schools is to achieve social justice in serving minoritized learners. Mansfield (2015) defined safe space for girls "as a 'girl-

only' space where girls have access to a supportive environment; their physical, psychological, and emotional needs are met; and where they can express themselves without repercussion" (p. 26). Specifically, Mansfield (2015) identified four interrelated elements for creating a purposeful, safe space for girls: building robust relationships, engaging in critical conversations, providing time and space, and creating mentoring and networking programs.

Mansfield (2015) observed that "careful attention to building relationships amongst peers and teachers is essential to creating a safe space for girls in schools" (p. 27). Adults must be intentional in fostering relationships with girls within peer and teacher groups due to the lack of access to friendship groups and support networks for many. Often, the restraints imposed by educational and extracurricular tasks, specifically school obligations and the need to watch younger siblings, create this lack of access for girls. Therefore, providing opportunities for girls to engage in dialogue around their experiences is a key element in creating a safe space.

Creating a "girls-only" safe space allows girls to engage in critical conversations with each other. Topics such as how youth experience gender, race, and class; the entrenched "isms"; and societal norms form the focus of these direct, open, and honest conversations (Mansfield, 2015). The safe space allows girls to focus on their multiple identities and what that means for them individually and collectively. By providing girls with space for critical conversations, adults also create time and space to listen to the girls' voices (Azmitia & Mansfield 2021).

The adults who offer this safe space environment must ensure that it is conducive to the girls' self-expression, self-resolution (confidence), and voice. In the space, the adult is intently listening, and the girls are speaking. The adult speaks only to ensure that they understand the girls' unique experiences. However, the safe space must also go beyond school walls to incorporate the creation of mentoring and networking programs for girls (Leren, 2006).

Building mentoring and networking programs provides girls with safe spaces within and outside their school and community. It is essential for creators of safe spaces to reach out to the families and community to build a network of long-term support. Such an effort will also provide the girls with mentors who serve as role models, sharing stories and advice on intergenerational efforts in education, health, financial literacy, and vocational work (Mansfield, 2013). Though researchers have explored ways to amplify student voice, there remains a need for more research on creating safe spaces for girls in schools, specifically Black girls.

Time and Space for Critical Conversations Around Their Current Realities

For critical conversations to occur, time and space must be available for students to engage in discourse around the intersectionality of race and gender. This type of discourse helps adults understand how the spaces students occupy function as both unique personal and social identities for them (Azmitia & Mansfield, 2021). When creating time and space for critical conversations, not only do students need the opportunity to talk, but so do teachers.

Mansfield (2015) noted the importance of providing flexibility during class time to allow students to talk about real life. This means that when the time comes for students to talk, teachers and school leaders must be comfortable with perhaps not covering all the material in a lesson in a vulnerable moment. By providing students with space and time, families begin to perceive the school as a safe place and feel more comfortable with their children attending the school. This ultimately leads to students growing as leaders within the school community.

In addition to students, teachers also need time and space for critical conversations. These conversations may center around barriers students face and ways the curriculum needs to be adapted, informally and formally, to address these obstacles (Mansfield, 2015). Teachers also need space and time to share their experiences and discuss barriers they face around societal

"isms." Collectively, students and teachers engaging in courageous conversations can counteract the harmful impact of society's "isms" that often make their way into the classroom (Mansfield, 2013, p. 645).

Listening to Their Stories

When engaging in critical conversations with girls, it is important to listen intently as they give voice to their most heartfelt concerns inside and outside the school community (Mansfield, 2013). Rivera-McCutchen and Watson (2014) emphasized the importance of listening to student voice. In this situation, the action of giving students a voice provides moral authority for students to ask tough questions and act on civic issues.

Valuing student voice creates an environment in which girls can express themselves, providing an opportunity to promote conflict resolution. Specifically, teachers listen to their students' experiences and perspectives by eliciting student voice through class discussions, exit tickets (a tool used at the end of the lesson to assess student knowledge or feedback to the teacher), and one-on-one conferences, among other methods (Conner, 2021). Teachers who engage students in sharing their ideas and interpretations increase students' investment in the classroom, which enhances not only the student-teacher relationship but also the overall climate of care and trust (Conner, 2021).

Another approach to listening to students involves women in the community serving as mentors. These mentors share with students how they found their own voice and reached their full potential (Mansfield, 2015). Students are then able to share the processes they are going through with their mentors.

Leadership Opportunities

As school leaders, it is important to listen to, value, and respond to student voice (Brasof & Mansfield, 2018). Actively seeking out students as change agents to participate in school governance provides students with the experience of being leaders (Lac & Mansfield, 2018). By listening to students, school leaders gain insight into students' perspectives on school challenges, resulting in positive change (Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Over time, this process becomes a part of the school culture (Lac & Mansfield, 2018).

Incorporating a student council in schools through monthly meetings gives students a permanent outlet to have a voice (Leren, 2006). By enabling students to take ownership of and participate in planning classroom activities, they learn the skills needed to become change agents. Other school reform approaches include student-led class meetings about the pros and cons of their school-day interactions and learning outcomes. Additionally, students can elect committee members to provide direct feedback to school leaders on behalf of their class (Leren, 2006).

Policy

Students can serve as change agents within and beyond their school community. Mansfield and Lambrinou (2022) researched "The Identity Project," in which students, staff, and community leaders worked together to rename their public high school due to negative racial connotations associated with the school's previous name. In their efforts, student voice was incorporated into analyses of the curricula, teacher diversity, AP and gifted placement, and building and monument names. Upon completing the analysis, a student representative went before the school board and presented information on the racial history of their school and their city. They also advocated for a new name for their school building. Mansfield and Lambrinou

(2022) emphasized the need for policymakers to include students, families, and community voices in their decision-making process. For students to have a voice, there needs to be opportunities for them to literally speak and be heard, as well as have access to leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

Creating spaces for Black girls to feel safe and heard to share their schooling experiences to affect change for them is complex, given existing research, data, and public debates. Based on a review of existing literature, I discovered that school personnel have neglected Black girls as a collective group. The research shows that Black girls are disproportionately disciplined with the use of exclusionary practices. Researchers have found that Black girl's attitudes and personalities are negatively compared to their white counterparts when it comes to what is accepted. However, there is limited research on how to support Black girls specifically and how to provide an ethic of care toward them. While I found research illustrating that many Black girls experience discipline and other disparities in their schooling, I could not identify a significant amount of literature on these issues for elementary Black girls.

Through this research project, I contribute to the scholarly conversation by focusing on the accounts of the lived experiences of nine elementary Black girls and sharing their proposed suggestions for improvement. I accessed student voice through the creation of a safe space for the participants (Mansfield, 2015). In these ways, I add to the body of literature on Black girls and how to support them in schools.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

In this study, I examined the perceptions and experiences of fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary School. In the previous two chapters, I introduced the background of the study, discussed the methods I used in conducting my study, and reviewed existing research that is related to my study. In this chapter, I present the thematic findings of my research based on an analysis of the six focus group transcripts, student writing samples, and students' drawn self-portraits that helped me answer my research question: *How do fifth-grade Black girls perceive their schooling experiences at Lakeside Elementary School?*

I organized this chapter into three sections. In Section I, I introduce the nine participants and provide basic information about them. In Section II, I provide an overview of the focus group sessions, explaining the questions, structure (i.e., games, self-portraits, etc.), and number of participants. As I explained in Chapter I, I altered the structure of the focus groups as the study progressed to meet the needs of and better engage with the participants. Finally, in Section III, I describe my findings in the form of the six themes that emerged from my work with my participants in the focus groups.

Section I: Participants

To conduct this study, I conducted a series of six focus groups with nine students from a single elementary school, Lakeside Elementary (pseudonym). The participants were current fifth graders who identified as Black females. I used pseudonyms to protect the students' anonymity.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms, Race, Age, Years Attending Lakeside, and Focus Group Participation

Student Name	Race	Age	Years at Lakeside	Focus Group Participation
Amelia	Black	11 years, 6 months	K-1, left and came back for the second half of the fifth grade	1, 2, 3, 4
Beatrice	Black	11 years, 5 months	Since first grade	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Chyna	Black	11 years, 4 months	Since fourth grade	1, 3, 4, 5, 6
Diana	Black	10 years, 2 months	Since third grade	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Melody	Multiracial	11 years, 10 months	Since fifth grade	1, 2, 4, 5, 6
Peyton	Black	10 years, 2 months	Since third grade	1, 2, 3, 5, 6
Sienna	Black	11 years, 7 months	Since Kindergarten	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Verity	Black	10 years, 10 months	Second half of fourth grade, left and came back for the last half of fifth grade	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Zoey	Black	11 years, 1 month	Since fourth grade	1, 2, 3, 4, 6

Participant Profiles

Below, I provide brief profiles of my participants. When applicable, I provide details from their self-portraits to help illuminate the profiles.

Beatrice is an 11-year-old who has been at Lakeside since first grade. She shared both positive and negative school experiences but reported that her overall experience was not positive. She focused primarily on teachers' behavior toward herself and others. She described herself as "kind, smart, and pretty." Beatrice was the most vocal member of the group and often led the discussion or started the group off when asked. She did not shy away from sharing her

experiences with others in the room. When creating her self-portrait, she portrayed herself with light-brown skin and blue eyes. She drew large red lips and then black eyebrows. Her nose was long and curved. In her self-portrait, she wrote she was "a Black girl, and nice, and kind and pretty, and smart." Beatrice, in her written self-reflection, wrote that the hardest part was "how I look, how my eyes look, how my lips look, how my skin look, how my eyebrows look, and paint our skin."

Chyna is an 11-year-old who has been at Lakeside since fourth grade. She shared both positive and negative experiences she has had at the school. Chyna described herself as "nice, respectful, and smart." She was hesitant to share her experiences throughout the focus group meetings, perhaps due to concerns about how others in the room might perceive her. In her self-portrait, she portrayed herself with light-brown skin from her eyes up to her forehead, leaving everything else white. She drew her nose as rounded and curved. Her eyes were brown with long eyelashes. She wrote on her portrait that she is "smart, beautiful, Black, and nice." During her written reflection about composing her self-portrait, Chyna wrote, "Everything was hard except for the eyes and nose because it was hard to do my lips and ears."

Diana is a 10-year-old who has been at Lakeside since kindergarten. She shared both positive and negative school experiences, focusing primarily on interactions with teachers. She described herself as "respectful, nice, and beautiful." Diana was vocal from the first session, and as the sessions continued, she became even more comfortable sharing stories about her experiences. In her self-portrait, she portrayed herself as brown-skinned with a small, curved nose. She added red lipstick to her lips and a red scrunchie to her hair bun. She drew thin black eyebrows and long eyelashes. She wrote on her portrait that she is "Black, kind, and friendly." During her self-reflection, she wrote that the hardest part was, "I do not look like me because I

don’t have the same eyes and I thought I look ugly and don’t look the same as the picture.” She suggests she can “make myself be more happy.”

Melody is an 11-year-old who has been at Lakeside since fifth grade. She shared both positive and negative experiences she has had at the school but overall reported having a positive experience. She describes herself as smart, kind, and beautiful. Melody is very soft-spoken and, at times, was overshadowed by other students who were more vocal. She expressed that she felt she was “treated differently by her teacher because she is Black and white and identifies as Black.” In her self-portrait, Zoey portrayed herself as light-skin shading using a light beige. She drew a curved nose and green eyes. She also drew yellow cross earrings. Zoey adds make-up to her eyes and lips with an addition of a blue scrunchie in her hair bun. She wrote about herself on the portrait, stating, “I am a happy friend, I am a Black girl who is nice kid and smart, but sometimes mean.” Melody, during her written self-reflection, wrote, “The hardest part is thinking what I look like. Thinking what to write about me.”

Peyton is a 10-year-old who has been at Lakeside since third grade. She shared both positive and negative school experiences, with a focus on how students treat each other. She described herself as “nice, smart, pretty, goofy, and weird.” Peyton struggled with expressing her thoughts to the group and seemed nervous about sharing her experiences with her peers. However, she did share through her self-portrait and through writing prompts that were more private. In her self-portrait, she colored from her ear to her forehead a medium brown and left the rest white. She drew a big, curved nose. Her lips were drawn full of light red lipstick. She also drew dark black eyebrows, brown eyes, and short eyelashes. She wrote in her self-portrait that she was “nice, Black, weird, pretty, goofy, and smart.” In her self-reflection, she wrote, “The

hardest part was trying to make my self-portrait look good. And making it to where I won't get judged or made fun of."

Sienna is an 11-year-old who has been at Lakeside since kindergarten. She shared both positive and negative experiences she has had at the school. She described herself as "smart, nice, and kind." Sienna was nervous about sharing her thoughts with her peers and, at times, would cough or giggle to deflect before answering a question. Sienna, in her self-portrait, portrayed herself as a medium brown-skinned girl with brown almond-shaped eyes. She drew thick black eyebrows and full, long eyelashes. She wrote in her self-portrait that she is "loyal, nice, smart, beautiful, and Black." When reflecting on her writing, Sienna writes, "The hardest part about creating my self-portrait was drawing my nose. And eyes, and eyebrows, and my mouth."

Verity is a 10-year-old who attended Lakeside for the last 3 months of her fourth-grade year and then returned for the last 4 months of fifth grade. She shared both positive and negative school experiences but overall reported having a good experience. She described herself as "kind and respectful." While Verity had not been at the school long, she consistently shared her experiences or added to stories that other girls shared. In her self-portrait, she drew herself with medium-brown skin and dark black hair. She drew small round eyes and a small upside-down heart-shaped nose. She drew her mouth as if she were speaking, and you could see her pink tongue. She wrote in her self-portrait that she was "smart, Black, and nice." Verity, in her written self-reflection, wrote, "The hardest part was when we had to paint our skin and when we left some parts white and some parts brown, that was the hardest part. The same for the nose I made the way I do my hair."

Amelia is an 11-year-old who attended Lakeside for kindergarten through first grade before moving away. She then returned to the school for the last three months of her fifth-grade year. She shared positive and negative experiences but overall had a negative perception of the school. She described "herself as smart, playful, and pretty." Amelia was vocal throughout the focus groups and freely shared her experiences. From my observation, Amelia appeared to be comfortable when in the focus groups. She got along with the girls in the group, was cooperative, and overall wanted to be accepted. However, Amelia seemed to have trouble outside the focus groups getting along with others because she had been involved in previous negative school incidents. Since Amelia was suspended on the day of Session 5, where participants created self-portraits, I have not included a description of her project.

Zoey is an 11-year-old who has been at Lakeside since fourth grade. She shared that she has had good days and bad days at school, but overall has not had a pleasant experience. She described herself as "respectful, calm, and nice." Zoey was reserved in the early sessions, but by the last two sessions was speaking more in the group. From my observation, Zoey appeared to want to share but really struggled to articulate her thoughts during the group. In whole group sessions, she would speak softly or whisper her response to the person next to her, and they would repeat it for her. She was not present during Session 5 to complete her self-portrait; therefore, this description is not provided.

Section II: Explanation of Focus Groups

In this section, I provide an overview of the six focus group sessions that I conducted, including the focus of each session. After the first focus group, I noticed that the girls did not speak much or gave one- or two-word answers. Some of the girls seemed shy. Others seemed nervous to share what they were thinking. Based on the first session, I decided to find different

ways to interact with the girls that provided them opportunities to talk in groups through games, independent writing activities, and painting. I used these methods to interact with the girls, knowing their age and grade level and previous experiences in teaching.

Session 1: General Experiences

During the first focus group, I spent time introducing myself to the nine participants. I told them who I was and why I was conducting my study. In addition, I shared why the girls were selected and what would occur during our time together. All nine girls were present for this initial focus group and introduced themselves to the group. Some of the girls were a part of friend groups, while others did not have previous interactions before coming together for the group. After the logistical conversation, I asked the girls to share the positive and negative experiences they had and are currently having at Lakeside Elementary. The girls were also asked what they would change about Lakeside Elementary if they had a magic wand. After 45 minutes, the girls were dismissed to return to class.

As I reflected on the session, I found the girls had difficulty elaborating on their experiences and provided short responses. Most of the girls needed follow-up prompting to get more than a one- to two-word response. In response to the lack of discussion, I decided to create a game for Session 2.

Session 2: Caring and Identity

During the second session, eight of the nine participating girls were present, with the ninth girl arriving late due to being at the nurse's office. I asked the girls to share their views on caring and how they would describe themselves. Questions ranged from how they behave when others show care for them, how do they show care, and if they had to answer the question, who am I, what would they say. In the game, the girls were divided into groups of three, with each

group given a game board, question cards, and a question scoresheet. These groups were strategically created based on the girls' personalities and friendship groups I learned about in the previous session. Students would pop a die on the game board and answer a question that corresponded with the number on the dice. The girls played the game for 20 minutes before coming back together as a whole group to discuss their responses to the questions.

What I learned from this session was that some of the girls had difficulty with cooperative learning. Some of the girls would be annoyed by others that they did not go in the right order or they were not getting the number needed on the dice to get onto the gameboard. I also learned that the smaller grouping was beneficial to increase participant talk, which was not as evident in the previous session.

Session 3: Caring

During the third focus group session, we went back to a large group format. There were eight of the nine participants present. For this session, we focused on questions about caring. The girls were asked to extend on previous questions on how they showed care, how others showed care, and if they felt they were treated differently than others. There were five questions during this session. The girls were asked each question, and each girl answered the question before moving on to the next question.

The purpose of this session was to capture the girl's views on caring that may not have been captured in the previous session or more information was needed. It also provided an opportunity to hear how the girls felt about caring for others and for them. The girls did require prompting to elaborate when answering the questions during our time together. When I reflected, I went back to a large group format, like Session 1, because the girls had engaged in dialogue about caring in the previous session together. I felt that since the girls would not be presented

with any new questions, it would provide the girls an opportunity to share their experiences with others who were not in their group during Session 2. In addition, I thought the girls would be more comfortable sharing with the larger group because they had time to ponder the questions about caring.

Session 4: Care, Identity, Race, Gender

During this focus group, eight of the nine participants were present. This focus group focused on caring and identity. The girls sat in a large circle and rolled large dice to answer questions related to caring and identity. For example, when the first girl rolled the large dice, she read aloud the question facing up, then beginning with the girls on her right, each girl answered the question. Once all the girls had answered the question, the next girl rolled the dice. Questions ranged from whether teachers cared more or less for particular groups of students to asking the girls to describe themselves in three words. In addition, once all six questions were answered on the dice, questions were switched out related to care and identity to account for the number of girls in the group that day.

I found during this focus group that the girls were more engaged with the dice game. I decided to create the dice game for this session for several reasons. First, the girls were engaged with each other while playing the board game together in Session 2, so I wanted to see if I could get that same level of engagement if we played another game together. Second, the girls had previous sessions around the idea of caring and were becoming familiar with the topic to discuss and would be more comfortable talking about it. Lastly, the girls were becoming more familiar with each other and started to share more with others outside of their friendship group. Once the girls adjusted to the flow of the game, they were able to roll the dice, go around the circle, answer the question, pass the dice, etc. In reflection, I believe this was the most active session

with the girls. While I am not sure if it was due to the type of questions that I asked the girls, most of the girls were more vocal than in previous sessions.

Session 5: Who am I? and Perception of Others

In Session 5, seven of the nine participants were present. The purpose of this session was for the girls to identify who they were and then reflect on the question of whether they believed others saw them the way they saw themselves. This focus group session was different from the others in which the girls created self-portraits. Specifically, the girls were asked to create their self-portraits using words and drawing utilizing crayons, colored pencils, and watercolor paints. After the girls created their portraits, the girls were asked to demonstrate and then discuss if the way they saw themselves as drawn was the same way others saw them. The girls used words around their portraits to convey what others thought. Then the girls were asked to share their portraits with the group, how they saw themselves, and if they thought others saw them that way or in a different way.

When reflecting on the focus group session, I chose to have the girls engage with the topic of self-perception using art because I felt imagery would allow the girls to express their thoughts differently. Additionally, I felt this was a topic that asked the girls to focus on themselves and not those around them. Therefore, the girls had to use self-reflection and create an image they felt represented them as individuals.

Session 6: Needs and Recommendations

In the last session, the girls engaged in timed writing prompts. There were eight of the nine participants in this session. As a follow-up to their self-portraits in the previous session, the girls were asked to write about the hardest part of creating their self-portraits. This question was to allow the girls time to reflect and to give me an opportunity to understand why the previous

session seemed hard for the girls. The girls were then asked to complete two additional writing prompts to include what they would tell peers, teachers, and administrators if there were no consequences or judgment and what recommendations they had specifically for Black girls. After the timed writing prompts, the girls were provided time to review the six posters made from each session that captured their overall experiences and provide feedback.

In reflection, the girls needed a session to reflect quietly and write. I found from our previous session that the girls hyper-focused on what others around them were drawing or how others might interpret their self-portrait once they saw it. Therefore, I planned for the girls to have 3 minutes per reflection prompt to write to reflect on their portrait and how it made them feel.

Section III: Thematic Findings

In this section, I describe six themes that emerged from the data collection approaches in the focus groups, which included games, self-portraits, and writing prompts. These six themes help illuminate the experiences of fifth-grade Black girls at Lakeside Elementary.

Theme 1

Black girls at Lakeside Elementary feel that teachers sometimes care about them less than they care about their classmates of other races and ethnicities and that their teachers care less about them than boys.

During the dice activity that I conducted in Focus Group Session 4, the girls were able to share their experiences with teachers and how teachers with whom they came in contact demonstrated care or lack of care. I determined that the participants felt that teachers sometimes cared less about them than children of other races and genders.

Some Girls Perceived That Teachers Cared Less About Them Due to Their Race or Ethnicity

Many of the participants believed their race influenced the way their teachers treated them. A few of the girls did not feel they were treated differently because of their race or did not have an opinion. Verity and Melody believed race did not play a role in how much their teachers cared for them. Melody observed, "They treat … all students equally."

The other participants felt that race did play a role in how teachers showed they cared for them. Beatrice recalled a time when she felt she was treated differently by her teacher, who is Black and Hispanic. Beatrice explained, "Like, it's my teacher. She is Mexican and Black, but she seems to always like spoil the Mexican people more and like even though she is Black she still be like giving Black people attitude." Beatrice elaborated,

> Like every time she'll be mad, like mad at all the Black people because she be saying we be gettin' on her nerves. All the Black girls, she be gettin' mad at the Black girls, and they need to be quiet, and she said she wasn't going to teach us anymore. So, I went to tell the principal. So, she started acting different when principal came.

She continued, "Then we had that little family thing, yeah, so my momma came, she started changing her accent. But her accent, she started changing her voice." When asked how the situation made her feel, Beatrice replied, "Like why she trying to change?" Beatrice pointing out the change in the teacher's voice and accent may show that Beatrice perceived the way the teacher talks when she is with Black people outside of the classroom was different than when she was in the classroom and talking with her students.

Diana discussed an interaction with her teacher that made her feel the teacher cared less about her due to her race. Diana shared,

> I feel like my teacher don't like me … the other day we were at media and [the teacher] had gotten mad at us and she was saying the kids that don't got books was over there being loud and stuff. And she said we had silent lunch, but that happen with other students. Then she gave us silent lunch for 2 days, but it was all Black kids and then all white kids, it was only one white kid, Chad. Total it was two Hispanic kids, one Black kid, and she kept getting mad at us. Then [a white female teacher] yells at us, but then we try to tell her something about like one of the other kids, like they do something, be talking. But when they talk, she doesn't give them silent lunch or yell at them like she be doing to us.

Amelia added to the conversation when she discussed her interaction with another teacher. She recounted, "When I asked to go to the bathroom, he said in a little bit. Another student, a Hispanic girl, asked and he let her go right away. And [when] I said I asked first, he said go sit down."

In the end, Beatrice, Diana, and Amelia shared how their experiences with various teachers left them feeling that their teachers cared less about them than about other students. The girls felt that these teachers treated them unfairly because of their race based on the girls' stories and perceptions. While Beatrice's story illustrated how a teacher of her own race showed less caring for her, Diana's story showed how a teacher of a different race made her feel less cared for because of her race. Amelia expressed her frustration at being prohibited from leaving class to go to the restroom, although her teacher did not hesitate to give her Hispanic classmate permission to leave.

Participants Perceived They Are Cared for Less Than Boys

While only some of the participants reported feeling that their teachers cared less about them than about girls of other races, all participants of Focus Group Session 4 reported feeling that some teachers care more about boys than girls. When I asked the participants if they thought their teachers cared more about boys than girls, they responded unanimously, "Yes!" Given this strong and unified response, I will share the response of each girl who participated in Session 4 below:

Melody replied, "Yeah, they care more about the boys. Sometimes, the boys blame the girls, and the girls get in trouble." Amelia agreed that teachers cared more about the boys than the girls and explained a situation she encountered in her class:

> I was in a group; when I came back, juice [was] spilled on the ground. My teacher said if someone spilled juice on the ground, they get a check or silent lunch. And then when I came back, I was like, "Who spilled it [juice]?" And I just went to clean it up, then [a male student] was like, "Was it you?" Then Kai said yes, it was me. And I got a check for it, and he really did it.

Similarly, Chyna noted of her male peers, "They get more attention, more positive [attention]."

Diana and Amelia viewed teachers as caring more about boys because, unlike girls, boys did not get in trouble when they acted inappropriately. Diana noted, "There is always this one boy that kept messing with me, and Ms. Crawford gets mad at me." Similarly, Amelia explained, "They be bad, but be changing how they be acting out, but the teachers they didn't do nothing." Verity and Zoey agreed with this statement. Additionally, Diana reported, "Boys, my teacher said because they get more attention than me because we are always rolling our eyes and stuff like that."

Beatrice thought her teachers cared more about boys than girls because she saw her teachers ignoring boys' negative behavior. She felt boys changed the way they acted when teachers were present. Beatrice explained that "by them acting a certain way around the teachers," boys do not get in trouble, which led her to feel less cared for than boys.

Sienna shared that she felt teachers cared more about boys than girls because girls often ended up getting in trouble for responding to a boy's negative behavior. She shared a situation that happened with a boy in her class, explaining, "The boy says something to you, and you say something back. Then the teacher ends up saying something to you because they feel like you're the person that shouldn't have said something." Sienna expressed disappointment that the teacher did not recognize the boy's bad behavior and instead blamed her for the problem.

Summary

Some of the girls felt that teachers cared less about them than they did about other students because of their race or ethnicity. The girls shared stories about times in which they felt a teacher interacted with them differently or imposed a consequence on them due to their race. More specifically, the girls reported differences in the way teachers treated them in comparison to their treatment of Hispanic students.

All the girls in Focus Group Session Four reported feeling that their teachers cared less about them than they cared about their male classmates. The girls had strong feelings about the differences in the treatment they received and provided examples to illustrate this dynamic. The girls believed teachers showed favoritism toward boys, allowed them to get away with things the girls could not, and blamed the girls for actions the boys had done. In general, the girls perceived that their teachers cared less about them in comparison to their Hispanic and male counterparts due to the influences of race and gender.

Theme 2

Black girls at Lakeside Elementary perceive that teachers talk negatively to them and about them.

While the participants were able to describe how they receive care from some teachers, they also reported receiving negative feedback from other teachers as well. The theme of Black girls perceiving teachers talking negatively to them and about them developed over time. The theme first appeared in Focus Group Session 1 and emphasized in Session 4. Some of the girls noted that their teachers treated them differently from other students, particularly by conveying a lack of respect. Teachers also yelled at Black girls and frequently inserted their opinions into conversations occurring between one of their colleagues and a Black girl that did not involve them.

Some of the girls recounted experiences in which they felt their teachers treated them unfairly in relation to their peers. Amelia and Beatrice described a situation that occurred in the hallway with a teacher. Amelia began, "When we were coming here, [the teacher] kept asking where we were going." Beatrice interjected, noting, "She was being disrespectful." When I asked the girls how the teacher was being disrespectful, Amelia continued,

> because we didn't see the other girls, so we were standing outside our classroom. Then this boy named Chris kept bothering [us], and then we got mad. We had to wait for them to come, we didn't see her yet. And then [the teacher] was like, "What are you guys doing? I can hear you all the way in my classroom." And we weren't even talking.

Verity interjected, observing, "The door wasn't even shut." Amelia looked at Verity and then continued,

> She said, “You going with the girl group thing?” And then she was like, “Well, you guys need to shut up.” Well, she didn’t say shut up, but she said, “You guys need to be quiet” and stuff like that, and we weren’t even talking.

This interaction gave the girls a negative perception of the teacher. Conversely, according to the participants, the teacher’s perception of the disturbance in her classroom resulted in her viewing the girls negatively.

When asked if they thought they were treated differently than their peers, a few of the girls felt they were sometimes treated differently by a teacher for various reasons. The belief among some of the girls was that teachers yelled at them too much. One teacher in particular elicited strong feelings of resentment among the girls due to her frequent yelling. When discussing this teacher, Amelia recounted,

> Okay, because when we was coming the first time, I mean the second time we was coming with you, me and two other girls in the group were waiting outside of the room. And then [the teacher] came outside her classroom and was like, “I can hear you all the way in my room.” And we like was not the ones yelling, so she yelled at us for no reason.

Amelia illustrated how the same teacher she and Zoey encountered previously continued to target them unfairly.

Chyna noted of this teacher, “She likes coming in people’s conversations.” In the focus group, the girls shared that this teacher and others like to insert their opinions into conversations occurring between another teacher and a Black girl. Beatrice shared her experience with this teacher and a woman who works in the cafeteria. Beatrice asked, “Can I say what [the teacher] did?” She continued:

> Okay, so she came up to me, [the teacher]. She had came up to me when I was with the lunch lady because the lunch lady was acting like she was going to hit me. And then [the teacher] was like, she was not fittin' to hit you. And then when I walked out, and then she came up to me and my teacher because my teacher was coming back from using the bathroom. And then she came up, and she was like, "She did not try to hit you." She was just yelling for no reason because I never did nothing to her. She just came up and started yelling, so that's when I started yelling back at her because she didn't have no reason to yell at me.

Beatrice continued the story, explaining what happened after she left the cafeteria:

> I went to [the principal]. I just told her the incident, and she was like, she is mad at these teachers and stuff like that because they are doing too much. She said she mad at these teachers because they doing too much.

In this situation, the conflict between another staff member and Beatrice led to the teacher inserting herself into the situation. Once in the situation, the teacher yelled at Beatrice, again reinforcing the negative perception Beatrice had of the teacher and the negative perception the teacher had of Beatrice.

Most of the girls echoed the perception of negative interactions with this teacher and the cafeteria worker. While not all the girls shared a story about this teacher, the girls in the focus group session knew of incidents that occurred with multiple teachers in the school, and an incident with a particular emphasis on this specific teacher.

Summary

When Black girls in this study perceived that teachers were talking to them and about them in negative ways, or when teachers yelled at them or interfered in ongoing situations, they

felt angry and disrespected. Most of the girls could readily list teachers and other staff who habitually yelled at them and inserted themselves into situations involving the girls. When speaking about this, the girls were very vocal about one teacher and confirmed one another's reports about this teacher's behavior. Teachers and staff who yell at them and interfere in their interactions lead them to see themselves negatively, expressed in self-image. For example, some of the girls, when they talked about their self-portraits, referenced how others saw them and were expressed through negative words written around their portraits.

From my observation, the girls began to internalize the interactions and negative feedback they received from teachers and school personnel. This was evident in their explanation of their self-portrait. They described themselves as not smart and annoying. This is further unpacked in Focus Group Session 5.

Theme 3

Black girls at Lakeside Elementary can recognize how teachers, peers, and administrators care for them, and they know how to show care for teachers, peers, and administrators.

While the participants felt their teachers treated them differently and that some yelled at them too much, they also discussed how care was exhibited by teachers, fellow students, and administrators and how they reciprocated care toward them.

How Black Girls at Lakeside Elementary Recognize That Others Care for Them

The participants were asked how they knew when teachers, students, and administrators cared about them. The girls reported feeling cared for when their teachers were helpful, complimented their successes, and made them feel happy. The girls felt cared for by fellow students when a student gave them a hug when they were feeling down, when other students

helped them, and when students were nice to them. They recognized care from administrators when they checked on the girls' overall well-being and provided help.

Black girls felt most cared for by their teachers when the teachers were helpful and made them feel happy. Most of the girls stated that they knew their teachers cared about them when they were helpful. Peyton knew her teachers cared for her "when they help you a lot." The other girls offered similar responses. For example, Amelia knew her teachers cared for her "when they help with something you do not know." Verity and Melody agreed, responding that teachers show they care "when they help you." Diana stated that when teachers check on how she is doing, that lets her know she is cared for. Peyton added that when teachers compliment her on her success, she knows they care about her.

When I asked them how they knew other students cared for them, the girls identified their peers as being helpful, nice, and inquiring about them when they noticed something was wrong as signs that they cared. Several of the girls said they knew other students cared about them when those students helped them when they were feeling down. Diana explained,

> Like if you crying in the middle of class, and then you have that one friend that comes up to you and be like, "What's wrong with you? Let me give you a hug." Like giving hugs, and that is how you know they care about you.

Diana's quote makes evident the need for authentic relationships between peers.

The girls spoke of knowing their administrators cared about them when they asked the girls what was wrong, gave them advice, and were helpful to them. Several of the participants stated that they knew their administrators cared for them, as Verity said, "when they help you." And others reported that they knew the administrators cared when they asked a student if something was wrong. Amelia felt cared for by administrators "when they say, 'What's wrong

with you?' or 'What's the problem?'" Zoey shared that she felt cared for by an administrator when she would give her advice to do well in school.

How Black Girls at Lakeside Elementary Demonstrate Care

The findings of Focus Group Session Two illustrated that Black girls in this study show they care for teachers, students, and administrators by asking if they are okay, demonstrating respect, being nice, and listening.

Several of the girls noted that they show care for their teachers by asking if they are okay. Zoey said she would "ask them if they were okay" and "if they needed help." Some of the girls felt that showing respect for teachers showed they cared for them. Peyton responded, "I respect them." Sienna added that she would "be nice," and Chyna said she would show care "by listening."

When asked how they would show care for other students in the school, a couple of the girls said they would ask the students if they were okay. A few of the girls would ask if the student needed help. Amelia said she would "help them with their work." And others stated that showing another student respect is how they would show they cared for them.

Zoey contributed to the conversation by saying, "I be kind," and Chyna said she would convey care for fellow students "by not leaving them out." When asked how she showed care for other students, Beatrice replied, "Not really … I don't care for them that much . . . not people I do not know." Beatrice shows care only for the students she knows, not for those she does not know.

The girls were asked to describe how they showed care for their administrators, which we defined as the principal and assistant principal. A few of the girls responded that they would ask if they were okay. Diana stated, "I ask them if they are okay, or something." While some of the

girls said they expressed caring by behaving in school, as Peyton noted, “I behave.” One girl stated that she showed she cared about the administrators by not getting into trouble.

Beatrice and Melody noted that they did not have relationships with the administrators and had never talked to them; therefore, they could not directly answer this question. Melody stated, “I do not talk to them.” These students interpreted the administrators not talking to them as not having a relationship, and thus not caring about them as students.

Summary

Most frequently, the girls expressed care towards teachers, students, and administrators by inquiring about their well-being and asking if they were okay. While a few of the Black girls felt they did not have relationships with other students and administrators and, therefore, would not go out of their way to show care. The experiences shared by the girls show how building relationships is key to showing care toward them. Generally, the girls were able to identify how they showed care to others in the school, with their responses highlighting relationships as a critical component of care.

Just as the participants expressed caring by inquiring about the well-being of others and asking if they were okay, they wanted the same type of behavior reciprocated. Some of the girls had difficulty explaining how they would show care for their peers. When asked this question, Diana responded, “Oooh, that is a hard one!” For the most part, the girls were able to describe how they convey care for others and how care is shown to them.

Theme 4

Most Black girls at Lakeside Elementary believed that other people see them as weird, goofy, dumb, or not pretty, which is different from how they see themselves.

The theme that developed in Focus Group Session 5 was that most of the girls described at least one positive attribute about themselves; however, some of the girls felt others perceived

them negatively. In this session, the participants were asked to draw a self-portrait based on their perception of themselves and discuss whether others' perceptions of them differed from their own. In the subsequent session, the girls were asked to write about the hardest part of creating the self-portrait. The positive attributes the girls assigned themselves were nice, smart, and a Black girl. However, Diana identified herself as "not smart." When I asked her, "So you don't believe you're smart?" she replied, "Well, I am sometimes."

When I asked if they thought others saw them the way they saw themselves, some of the girls' believed others had a negative perception of them that differed from their self-perception. Verity and Beatrice felt they were not perceived differently by others. Melody felt others perceived her differently but could not articulate what that looked like. Peyton and Diana both felt others viewed them as "weird." Peyton added that she felt other people saw her as "dumb" and "not pretty." Chyna and Sienna believed others viewed them as "mean," and Sienna also thought others perceived her as "annoying."

A theme that emerged during the discussion was that they were "friends," but they feared others' judgment when it came time to talk about themselves. This often resulted in participants talking in lowered voices or pausing for extended periods of time until I prompted them by repeating the question. This experience was challenging for the girls as it was a different type of focus group format for the girls, as well as placing them at a level of vulnerability.

Another issue that emerged was the difficulty they encountered in drawing their actual physical features. Most of the girls said one of the hardest parts of the self-portrait was drawing physical features such as their lips, eyes, nose, and skin tone. A few of the girls identified non-physical features of the assignment they felt were the hardest. Melody wrote that determining "what I look like" and "what to write about" were the hardest parts. Peyton wrote that the hardest

part was believing “I won’t get judged or made fun of” because of sharing her drawing. Zoey identified “thinking about all the details and what to draw” as the most challenging aspect of the assignment for her.

In my observation of the girls, I noticed they had difficulty speaking nicely to each other during this exercise. For example, some of the girls made unkind remarks about other girls based on the person’s self-portrait. When I noticed this dynamic, I asked the group, “How are we talking about each other? Are we talking about each other in a positive or a negative way?” I also noticed that the girls felt more comfortable writing privately than creating and sharing with the group. Although this was one of the most challenging sessions for the girls, they learned a lot about themselves and one another through this activity.

Self-Portraits

All the girls who participated in Focus Group Session 5 were able to identify positive traits about themselves. Revisiting the self-portraits that I referenced in the participants’ individual profiles earlier in this chapter, all the girls drew themselves with a high hair bun with their natural hair color. Most of the girls represented their natural eye color as brown, with one representing hers as blue. A few of the girls extended the portrait to include the shirts they wore.

Most of the girls thought others perceived them negatively, with a couple of the girls reporting that others perceived them the same as they perceived themselves. Lastly, some of the girls struggled with speaking positive words to others in the group. In a space where negative words are spoken, this can create positive or negative experiences at the school for the girls. In my observation of the girls, the negative talk that occurs in the various aspects of their school day they brought with them to the focus group by laughing at each other at times, making sly

remarks when one would share, etc. This did not occur all the time but particularly when the girls shared their personal thoughts or were engaging with each other through play.

In my analysis, I studied the portrait of each participant to look for the way their eyes, mouth, nose, and hair were drawn. I loosely used the approach from A. Thompson (1998), where she analyzed her Kindergarten students' drawings based on race and found them to be very literal and exact in color. Next, I looked at their written responses in relation to their portraits. From the information gathered from their written responses and self-portraits, I laid out the portraits and analyzed the features that were most frequent, as indicated in their written responses. I further analyzed the words and phrases written on the girls' portraits to answer the following questions:

1. How do you see yourself?
2. How do you think others perceive you?

In general, the girls had difficulty with drawing physical features. Some of the girls had trouble with identifying what skin tone to use in the drawing. Some of the girls asked what color they should use. A few of the girls used a brown crayon to color in their portrait; some did not shade their portrait a color, while others left the skin tone incomplete (shaded partially). All the girls in Session 5 drew their hair in a high bun on the top of their heads. If a girl did not know how to draw the bun, she would ask someone nearby who did. While all the girls drew their hair in a high bun, none of the girls in the focus group session had their hair in a high bun. A few of the girls drew from their chest up, while others only provided a headshot. Most of the girls were able to write positive words about themselves around their portraits.

While we talked about race in our sessions, when the girls had to draw themselves, I found that Verity and Beatrice had difficulty identifying a shade to color or drew themselves a

lighter shade of brown than their skin tone. In my observation, I found it surprising that the two girls struggled with skin tone because, during the sessions, they would verbally identify themselves as Black girls, but when it came to the drawings, they seemed to shy away from identifying what shade of brown they were or identified as a lighter shade than their complexion. The girls also wrote in their self-reflection that they felt painting their skin tone was the hardest part for them. Verity writes, “The hardest part was when we had to paint our skin,” while Beatrice said the hardest part was “how my skin look” and “paint our skin.”

When I reflected on Melody’s portrait, she portrayed herself as the most realistic. Melody is bi-racial and represented herself as a light-beige color. She depicted her natural eye color, which is green. While she was not wearing makeup, she added blue eyeshadow and lipstick. She also included the cross earrings that she wore. While Melody struggled with “thinking about what she look like,” I found the portrait similar to her live image.

When I reflected on Beatrice’s portrait, her portrait had features that did not depict her live image. Beatrice portrayed herself as a brown-skinned girl with blue eyes. In the live image, Beatrice is brown-skinned with dark-brown eyes. From this depiction, I wondered why Beatrice felt she needed to change her eye color. In her portrait, she makes her lips big with red lipstick on them, which is not an accurate perception of them. She writes, “The hardest part was how my lips look.”

When I pondered over Sienna’s image, her image looked like she was sad. She drew her eyes as if they were in a down slump, and her mouth frowned. From my observation, her behavior of deflecting and clearing her throat before answering a question demonstrated her low self-confidence. She wrote that the hardest part was drawing her “eyes and mouth.”

When I thought about Diana's portrait, she drew herself with a very small nose, medium-brown skin, and small red lips. While Diana has brown skin, the shade she used to color is darker than her actual skin complexion. She drew her eyes as if almost hidden, as they were the only feature etched with the pencil. She wrote how the hardest part for her was to make herself look happy and that she felt that she looked ugly and not like the picture. I found this statement to be interesting because earlier in Session 5, she described herself as unsmart. Diana, at times, tended to refer to herself negatively, but once asked to clarify, she would say, "Sometimes I am smart."

Summary

All the participants from Session 5 were able to identify a positive attribute about themselves, while some of the girls felt that others perceived them negatively. A few of the girls felt others perceived them as weird, unsmart, annoying, and dumb.

The girls appeared to be "friends" with each other but struggled to share their personal thoughts with each other. At times, the girls would also make unkind remarks and jokes to each other during the focus group session. From my observation, Focus Group Session 5 was the most difficult for the girls. This may be due to the level of vulnerability the girls were asked to engage in during the conversation.

The analysis of the girls' self-portraits provided me with insight into how the girls perceived themselves. I found some of the girls had difficulty with skin tone while others had difficulty with physical features. Some of the girls were able to depict themselves close to their live image, while others struggled to do so. I also found that some of the girls embellished their physical features.

Lastly, from my observation, the girls were accustomed to saying unkind things, and joking-like comments to each other as they created their work or shared what they were thinking

on a personal level. I believe they behaved this way because they are used to talking like this to each other in other settings outside of the focus group and it was brought into our focus group sessions.

Theme 5

Black girls reported having positive and negative ***experiences at Lakeside Elementary.***

The positive and negative experiences Black girls have had at school shape their thinking about how they experience school, which was developed over time. This theme appeared in Session One where the girls identified several positive experiences they have had at their school. One of the positive experiences was participating in engaging activities. Amelia and Zoey spoke about "field days" and how they would like to have more of them. Diana felt that having "outside time" was a positive experience, while Chyna mentioned that "having that one concert" was an experience she enjoyed. Additionally, Peyton, Beatrice, and Sienna all agreed that they enjoy delayed start days. Beatrice explains why: "You gotta wake up at like six or seven something in the morning. You have to start getting ready and stuff like that. Some people want to sleep in. It like helps your brain."

While most of the girls responded to this question by identifying pleasurable school experiences, Melody attributed positive experiences to positive relationships with others, noting the benefits of meeting "kind people" and making friends. Lastly, Sienna identified academic success as an important positive experience; she shared that one of her best days at the school was when she "got 100% on the test."

While each of the girls could recall a positive experience, they also shared negative experiences they had with teachers, peers, and the school's physical environment. Negative

teacher interactions were an area the girls identified as an issue at the school. Beatrice spoke of the need to "change these teachers."

Some of the girls felt their negative experiences resulted in them getting in trouble or being disrespected. Diana recalled a time "when Mrs. Whatchamacallit made me really mad, and I almost went bop" on her head. Sienna shared that her negative experiences were centered around peer relationships; for example, "when I found out Ziggy liked Maria." Other interactions related to peer relationships, such as other students being mean and not saying nice things, were the source of negative school experiences for the girls.

When it came to the physical environment, the girls also reported some negative experiences and areas where they hoped to see change, specifically the playground, the cafeteria, and the restrooms. Verity shared, "The playground, it is boring. The third-, fourth-, fifth-grade playground has nothing to do." The quality of the cafeteria food was mentioned in the session as well, with some of the girls describing the food as "nasty."

When Diana mentioned the bathrooms, a few of the girls shook their heads in agreement and wanted to share their experiences. Diana discussed the condition of the bathrooms:

> So, in the bathroom, when we go to the bathroom, like yesterday, this girl, she was in the bathroom doing her business, whatever, she was pooping, I guess, and she just ran out the bathroom without flushing or washing her hands. And I said that is nasty, because who goes into the bathroom and just do whatever, then come out and don't wash your hands or nothing? And that's germs, and then when you go into the bathroom, it be blood in the bathroom, pads hanging out, they just be everywhere, and that's just nasty. And they don't be flushing the toilet.

Sienna and Amelia agreed that the "look" of the bathrooms needed to be changed and that they were "dirty." Based on their accounts, a cleaner facility would promote a more positive school experience for the girls.

Summary

The girls reported both positive and negative experiences at the school. Their positive experiences were centered around fun activities such as field day. They also enjoyed delayed start days because they could sleep in. One participant described positive experiences centered around relationships, while another associated positive experiences with academic success.

The girls also identified negative experiences related to teachers, peers, and the physical facilities. For some of the girls, negative interactions with teachers left them feeling disrespected. Some of the girls also reported that peers who were not nice to them or having difficulties in their peer relationships led to negative experiences. The girls' comments about the physical facilities focused on the playground, the cafeteria food, and most heavily on the cleanliness of the school bathrooms, which they identified as an area that must be addressed for them to have a positive experience at the school.

Theme 6

Black girls at Lakeside Elementary provided suggestions to teachers and peers on how they could support them and made specific recommendations to other Black girls on how to be successful in school.

In Focus Group Session 6, the girls wrote to share general suggestions to teachers and peers of other races and genders on how they can support them at school. In addition, the girls provided specific suggestions to Black girls by describing clear strategies and solutions to help other Black girls achieve success in school.

Suggestions for Teachers

A few of the girls felt teachers needed to mind their own business. Chyna's recommendation was "to tell the teachers to mind they business and to worry about their own class and students." A few of the girls discussed the need for teachers to check their attitudes; as Verity wrote, "They need to change their attitude." Some of the girls addressed the need for teachers not to treat them meanly or rudely, as noted when Sienna wrote, "They need to be nicer or treat me better." The girls felt it was important for teachers to understand and get to know them on a personal level. And some of the girls wanted teachers to take a real interest in them outside the classroom.

Some of the girls recommended that teachers help them, as Verity and Melody stated, "when they help me," as discussed in Session 3. Also, these girls wanted teachers and others to take the time to talk to them by asking them "what is wrong" or "giving advice on how to do well in school," shared Zoey.

Suggestions for Peers

Some of the girls also had suggestions for fellow students at Lakeside who were of different races and/or genders. The girls wanted students to be nice to others. Specifically, Sienna urged students to "be nicer to kids with Autism." Chyna wanted to be able to "tell my friends how I feel," and Melody wanted students to "be kind." In addition, Melody encouraged students "to be leaders." The girls who made recommendations focused on improving students' behavior.

Participants' Recommendations Specifically for Black Girls

Another theme that emerged from Focus Group Session 6 was specific recommendations and solutions for other Black girls regarding their behavior in school and how they interact with

teachers and peers while at school. The girls recognized behaviors they could be doing and offered these recommendations to other Black girls to provide an opportunity to have success in school. Most of the girls provided recommendations to other Black girls. The girls were able to brainstorm fourteen recommendations addressing how Black girls should behave, how they should treat their peers, and how they should engage with others while in school illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Recommendations Specifically for Black Girls

1. Make friends you can count on
2. Be respectful
3. No getting into fights
4. Help people
5. Be a leader
6. Pay attention
7. Stay humble
8. Stay out of trouble
9. Have good grades
10. Listen to your teachers
11. Ignore the negative comments
12. Have common sense and book sense
13. Be nice
14. We are smart, and you can be successful without them if you want to be

The girls recommended that Black girls stay out of trouble and not get into fights. This recommendation came from several of the girls who had been involved in a fight previously at the school. Peyton added to the session that care is shown when you behave. The girls also

wanted Black girls to make friends and could do that by being there when someone was feeling down. As Diana explained,

> Like if you are crying in the middle of class, and then you have that one friend that comes up to you and be like, "What's wrong with you? Let me give you a hug. "Like giving hugs, and that is how you know they care about you."

In general, the girls advised other Black girls to be respectful by listening, doing their work, and getting good grades. In addition, the girls advised other Black girls to ignore negative comments from others, including peers and adults, to be nice to others even if they were not nice to them, and to help people. The final recommendation came from a saying Verity wrote for Black girls to remember: "We are smart and can be successful without them, if you want to be."

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to report the findings based on data collected from the nine Black girls who participated in the study. Through the process of collecting, analyzing, categorizing, and coding the data, common themes emerged. These included findings regarding how Black girls demonstrate care for students, teachers, and administrators by asking if they are okay and checking on their well-being. As a result, it was found that the girls wanted the same forms and level of care reciprocated toward them.

Relationships were the critical component of how care was being shown and received. All the Black girls reported that their teachers' words and actions toward them made them feel that the teachers cared more about their peers of other races and their male classmates than about them. The girls shared stories illustrating their perception that teachers and other staff talk negatively to and about them. The girls participated in an artistic activity in which they reflected on their self-perceptions and how others perceived them, and whether those perceptions aligned

or differed. The girls were able to share their general school experiences, including their favorite part of the day, what they would change, what a typical day is like, etc., with each other. Lastly, the girls made general suggestions and recommendations to teachers and peers on how to create a positive school experience and gave specific recommendations for other Black girls on how to be successful in school.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In my study, I addressed the need to hear Black girls' voices on how to meet their unique needs in the educational system. Educators and researchers who study schools often neglect Black girls compared to their fellow students. To learn more about this important topic, I designed a qualitative research study that relied on interactive focus groups as the main data collection tool. I hoped to elucidate the school experiences of nine Black girls who were currently in the fifth grade. To get an in-depth picture of the fifth-grade Black girls' experiences at Lakeside Elementary, I designed six focus group sessions to include topics such as general experiences, caring for others, caring toward others, race, gender, identity, and perception. The focus groups included discussions, games, writing prompts, and creating portraits through art.

In this chapter, I begin by answering my research question and analyzing my findings. Next, I examine the implications of my study before sharing recommendations for various stakeholders and future researchers. I conclude with my final thoughts on what I learned.

Analysis

Through my focus group sessions with the fifth-grade Black girls, I learned more about their positive and negative experiences during their time at Lakeside Elementary School. Though each Black girl had their own unique experience at Lakeside Elementary School, I discovered that the girls' experiences were shaped by their interactions with peers, teachers, and administrators. In addition, their experiences were also shaped by gender and race. As I discussed in Chapter III, through my study, I was able to identify six main themes that answered my research question, which was: *how do fifth-grade Black girls perceive their schooling experiences at Lakeside Elementary School?* These themes represented my findings.

In this section, I answer my research question with my findings. I also analyze my findings by connecting them with existing research.

Finding 1

First, I discovered that **Black girls at Lakeside Elementary feel that teachers sometimes care about them less than they care about their classmates of other races and ethnicities and that their teachers care less about them than boys.** During my study, some of the participants shared that teachers treat Black girls differently compared to their Latinx counterparts. Illuminating one of the various stories that the girls told me about how they felt their teachers treated them differently. Beatrice noted that her teacher shared her discontentment in class one day; she shared, "She be gettin' mad at the Black girls, and they need to be quiet, and she said she wasn't going to teach us anymore." Diana echoed this perspective when she described a time that she was with other students of different races and ethnicities. In this situation, Diana believed they were all being loud, but Diana was the student who was reprimanded with a silent lunch.

These stories highlight how Beatrice and Diana saw race as the key influencer in the way their teacher spoke to and acted toward them and their Black peers. This left them feeling that their teachers cared less about them and other Black students compared to non-Black peers. This finding is like the findings of Morris (2016), who discovered that teachers describe Black girls as "unladylike" compared to their white and Latinx peers. While Beatrice and Diana did not say that their teachers found them to be unladylike, they did imply that the teacher interacted with them differently because they were Black and not white or Latinx.

My participants' experiences support previous research that has demonstrated that Black girls' attitudes and personalities are often measured by standards of white femininity and that

Black girls are excessively surveilled and penalized in schools based on their lack of conformity to racial and gender norms (Annamma et al., 2016; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Diana, for example, shared a story about when she encountered a consequence she believed was due to race from her teacher. Diana shared, "I feel like my teacher don't like me." She continued, "When [the white female teacher] yells at us, but then we try to tell her something about like one of the other kids like she doesn't give them silent lunch or yell at them like she be doing to us." Diana believed her teacher's disregard for what she tried to tell her about other students' behaviors and then imposing consequences like lunch detention to specific children was based on race, and it made her feel uncared for by her teacher. This is like findings from Boynton and Boynton (2005), who attributed negative student-teacher relationships to a lack of respect from adults.

While some of the girls believed race played a factor in how teachers interacted with them, all the participants in Focus Group Session 4 expressed that they were cared for less than boys. For example, Chyna responded, "They get more attention, more positive [attention]," regarding her male peers. In addition, Diana explained, "Boys, my teacher said, because they get more attention than me because we are always rolling our eyes and stuff like that." Also, Amelia went into further detail about a situation with her teacher when she felt she was cared for less than a boy in her class. She shared how "juice was spilled on the ground," and she cleaned it up, but when the teacher asked about the juice on the floor, a boy blamed her, and she got in trouble. Like the findings from the Harrison (2017) study, the participants in my study felt that they were treated differently than their male counterparts.

Finding 2

I also found that **Black girls at Lakeside Elementary perceive that teachers talk negatively to them and about them.** During the focus groups, participants described a common disappointment and frustration with teachers' actions toward and perceptions of them. They all could recount a time they were negatively talked to or witnessed another student being negatively talked to. While each student knew what negative talk sounded like, they did not know how to advocate positively for change. They shared stories about particular teachers making comments and taking privileges away. They also talked about navigating a teacher who continuously spoke to and about them negatively.

When I reflected on their feedback in the focus groups, I thought back to existing research and recognized how widespread this experience is for Black girls, with teachers speaking and referencing them negatively. For instance, in a study that examined the experiences of Black girls in high school, Watson (2016) emphasized that Black girls were perceived as aggressive and loud. Similarly, the elementary school Black girls in my study perceived that their teachers found them to be loud and that teachers unfairly targeted them. Amelia explained: "… me and two other girls in the group were waiting outside of the room. And then [the teacher] came outside her classroom and was like, 'I can hear you all the way in my room.' And we like was not the ones yelling, so she yelled at us for no reason." This example is like findings in Annamma et al. (2016) and Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020), which demonstrated that Black girls are surveilled and penalized more often in the school environment. The previous literature, along with the findings of my study, support the idea that Black girls perceived that the school personnel who were hired to support and protect them were instead harassing and holding them back (Watson, 2016). In the end, the Black girls' experiences in my study are like what

other scholars have found in other educational settings pertaining to the perception of Black girls in school (Annamma et al., 2016; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Morris et al., 2018; Watson, 2016).

Finding 3

In another finding, I discovered that **Black girls at Lakeside Elementary can recognize how teachers, peers, and administrators care for them, and they know how to show care for teachers, peers, and administrators.** Black girls in this study emphasized the need for a school environment where they are asked about their well-being and listened to by teachers, peers, and administrators. For example, some of the participants made recommendations that they wanted to be listened to and have a voice. Chyna captured this idea when she wrote, "Having teachers that understand me." And Peyton wrote, "Get close, nice, and understanding teachers." As I found in my study, previous research has shown that teacher-student relationships are critical for a caring school environment (Alder, 2002; Boynton & Boynton, 2005; Cothran et al., 2003; Jeffrey et al., 2013; Noddings, 2013; Owens & Ennis 2005; C. S. Thompson; 2018; Valenzuela, 1999).

Importantly, the participants did want to be recognized for their academic success and associated teacher caring with this desire. The girls emphasized the importance of gaining assistance with their academic work, which was also emphasized in Alder's (2002) research. For example, Amelia stated that she knew her teachers cared for her "when they help with something you do not know." Verity and Melody agreed when they responded that some teachers show care "when they help you." Similarly, Jeffrey et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of teachers listening to, complimenting, and forming relationships with students by spending time with them and "taking the time to understand their needs" (p. 102). Peyton affirmed this idea when she said that she knows that teachers care about her when "teachers compliment her on success."

The girls from my study explained that they practiced caring when they would show kindness and demonstrate respect. To show care for teachers, some of the girls would ask if they were okay. Peyton would show care to her teachers because, she said, “I respect them.” Some of the girls discussed showing care for their peers by “not leaving them out,” as Chyna explained. Some of the girls said they would show care for administrators by not getting in trouble. Beatrice, for instance, emphasized the need to know someone to show care. When asked how she would show care for her administrator, she replied, “I don’t know her.” After prompting, I discovered that Beatrice was trying to articulate that she did not know her administrator on a personal level and, therefore, would not show her care because she shows care only to people she knows. Ultimately, the girls in my study would demonstrate their care for others by helping maintain a respectful school environment, communication, and mutual understanding, which are elements like findings in Mansfield et al.’s (2018) study.

Finding 4

Through my study, I also found that **most Black girls at Lakeside Elementary believed that other people see them as weird, goofy, dumb, or not pretty, which is different from how they see themselves.** While most of the girls thought others perceived them negatively, two did not interpret their school environment this way. During the focus group session, there was silence in the room from a level of uneasiness. Overall, the girls had difficulty expressing themselves through art and discussion. However, all the girls were able to identify at least one positive attribute they saw in themselves.

In my analysis of the Black girls’ self-portraits and their written reflections on others’ perceptions of them, I discovered the impact of the environment on their perception of self. This aligns with Anderson’s (2020) and Mansfield’s (2015) findings that Black girls’ intelligence is

underestimated and undervalued, as some of the participants in my study perceived themselves as dumb or unsmart. I recall asking Diana to clarify her response that she is not smart. Diana responded with, “Well, I am sometimes.” In my opinion, Diana was trying to grapple with the negative message she is getting from her school environment about her ability versus what she believes to be true about herself and her ability. While describing their self-portraits, some of the Black girls described being perceived by others as weird, goofy, or not pretty, which is different from Epstein et al. (2017) finding that Black girls are less innocent and more adult-like.

In reflecting on my study, I recalled that when my participants created their self-portraits, it was evident that they had trouble drawing physical features such as their lips, eyes, nose, and skin tone. A possible reason some of the girls had these difficulties is due to their perception and the way they think others perceive them. I wonder if some of the girls wrestled with their perceptions of skin tone and the implications of the different tones. This challenge was evident in their comments, such as when Verity said, “It is difficult to color my skin tone.”

Finding 5

In an additional finding, I noted that **some Black girls reported having both positive and negative experiences at Lakeside Elementary School.** Each Black girl reported on a positive and negative school experience. Positive experiences centered on events and positive relationships with others. The negative experiences focused on the challenging relationships they had with peers and teachers, as well as the school’s substandard physical environment. The Black girls in my research study described how field days, concerts, and late starts were positive experiences for them. These are positive experiences for the girls because they meet their biological and social emotional needs. Three of the girls shared why a delayed start was also a positive experience for them. Beatrice explained that normally, “You gotta wake up at like six or

seven something in the morning. You have to start getting ready and stuff like that. Some people want to sleep in. It like helps your brain." Late starts create a space for students to meet their individual needs before coming to school.

While some of the girls attributed their positive school experiences to events, other girls attributed their positive experiences to strong relationships with peers. Melody revealed that strong relationships involve "kind people" and "making friends." For Sienna, a good school experience involved getting "100% on the test." In line with what previous research, such as Annamma et al. (2016) and Greene (2016) explained, my study suggests how the fostering of positive experiences for Black girls is important because it may increase their school attendance and help them avoid missed learning opportunities.

When positive relationships and a nurturing school culture are not present, it can lead to negative experiences, as discussed by the Black girls in my study. The negative experiences involved a lack of teacher support, difficult peer relationships, and a substandard physical and social-emotional environment. Beatrice, for example, related an account of a lunchroom incident she had with a teacher and cafeteria worker. Beatrice shared, "[the teacher] came up to me," and "the lunch lady was acting like she was going to hit me." However, the teacher said, "She did not try to hit you." Beatrice went on to tell how the teacher yelled at her and felt it was for no reason because she did not do anything. The impact of this negative experience made Beatrice feel like she was in a hostile school environment, making her feel unhappy and uneasy. As studies like Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) have shown, Black girls risk being pushed out of schools due to adult racialized and gendered interpretations of their identities and actions.

This and other evidence from the participants suggest that the school may need more attention in developing what Preble et al. (2011) described as a four-step process for a positive

school culture, which includes relationships, respectful teaching practices, the physical environment, and a sense of belonging. While Preble et al. (2011) did not specify the type of relationships that needed to be developed, some of the participants from my study identified the importance of peer relationships. The girls discussed peers being mean about interpersonal relationships and using mean words to degrade each other. In my observation of the focus groups, when the girls had sidebar conversations or were creating their portraits, they sometimes criticized each other's work and feelings.

Some of the Black girls also connected their negative experiences to the physical environment. For example, the girls vividly discussed the lack of upkeep of the group bathrooms. Like findings in McKinney de Royston et al. (2020) and Preble et al. (2011), the Black girls I engaged with at Lakeside Elementary emphasized the importance of a clean physical school space. Listening to the participants, they want to be able to have pride in the physical environment of their school. The girls also wanted to be able to go into a space that was clean, be provided with privacy, and feel respected again.

In reflecting on the positive and negative experiences of the Black girls in this study, I will note that they had difficulty sharing positive experiences. The positive experiences some of the girls shared were surface level, such as a one-time special event or not having to attend school due to an early release, delayed start, or cancellation. It appeared they were able to illuminate a variety of negative school experiences, ranging from interpersonal interactions to the physical environment of their school. Providing Black girls with positive school experiences is important to help them stay in school.

Finding 6

As a final finding in my study, I discovered that **Black girls at Lakeside Elementary provided suggestions to teachers and peers on how they could support them and made specific recommendations to other Black girls on how to be successful in school.** I provided a list of the recommendations they made in Chapter III. Notably, the girls wanted the attitudes of their teachers to change toward a more positive demeanor for them to have a more pleasant experience. For example, Verity wrote, "They need to change their attitude," and Sienna wrote that teachers "need to be nicer or treat me better." Statements like this connect with previous literature like Mansfield (2015) to illustrate the need for careful attention to be made in building relationships with girls to provide a positive space for them within schools.

Some of the girls also felt it was important for their teachers to understand them and get to know them on a personal level. This is like the findings of Jeffrey et al. (2013), who discovered that students developed caring teacher-student relationships when their teacher fostered emotional well-being for them. Owens and Ennis (2005) also emphasized the positive chain reaction that can occur: when teachers show care for their students, it encourages students to care for themselves and then for each other. In the end, my study and the literature support the need for teachers to initiate, model, and facilitate the outcome of a student feeling cared for (Noddings, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999).

Most of my participants wanted other Black girls to show care for peers through actions and behaviors to help them be successful in school. Some of the girls expressed the need for other Black girls to provide physical touch, such as a hug, to their peers when they showed signs of sadness, while others expressed the need for Black girls to listen to each other and show compassion. Diana's response illustrated the girls' general suggestions when she shared,

> Like if you are crying in the middle of class, and then you have that one friend that comes up to you and be like, "What's wrong with you? Let me give you a hug." Like giving hugs, and that is how you know they care about you.

Diana's response shows the importance of physical touch, which has not been studied enough. My participants recommended that Black girls treat others with respect regardless of how they were treated. The girls' suggestions were also primarily about the actions and behaviors other Black girls should display in school.

Summary

My study supported several of the findings in existing research. My study affirmed extant research suggesting that Black girls have racialized and gendered experiences in schools and, as a result, are treated differently (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Koonce, 2012). My study also supports the idea that Black girls often have stereotypes applied to them and are shown prejudice compared to other race and ethnicities (Morris, 2016; Todd et al., 2016). While my study supported existing research, it also challenged it. One way my research challenged existing research is the study was conducted with elementary students, and there is limited research with this age group. My study also challenged how the girls perceived their racialized and gendered experiences in relation to race. In my study, the girls felt they were treated differently compared to Hispanic children while most extant research compares the treatment of Black girls to their white counterparts.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the voices of fifth-grade elementary Black girls at Lakeside Elementary School. To do this, I had to go beyond surveys to access student voices to understand the complexity of the girl's experiences (Mansfield, 2015; Mansfield et al.,

2012). Together, we engaged in interactive focus groups. In doing so, I learned about the girls' positive and negative school experiences and how they perceived and demonstrated care. In addition, I learned the girls' thoughts and feelings about topics such as race, gender, and perception. In this section, I share three implications of my study.

The Importance of Race and Gender Experiences

I sought to learn if the girls recognized the intersectionality of race and gender within their school experience. Similarly, Annamma et al. (2016) suggest that the social constructions of gender and femininity intersecting with race shape the educational outcomes of Black girls. My study showed that intersectionality is important in understanding the experiences of Black fifth-grade girls. Furthermore, my study showed that fifth-grade Black girls have a basic understanding of intersectionality and how it shaped their school experiences. Through my study, I learned the girls had a basic understanding of intersectionality. Specifically, when sharing their experiences, they asserted that the treatment they received from others was a direct result of their race and/or gender. While the girls may not have known the *term*, they knew the spirit of the idea of BFT and recognized that what they were experiencing was unwanted.

My research illustrated the positive and negative school experiences as they relate to race and gender. The girls reported on how teacher interactions around race and gender affected their perception of a positive school culture. Some of the girls shared experiences about a teacher talking negatively to them or being quick to make judgement; however, some of the girls also, at times, talked to each other negatively. Therefore, during the focus group sessions, when this would occur, I would redirect them to speak positively to each other since they were there to empower each other.

Through the course of the focus group sessions, the girls came together to have a better understanding of their own experiences and the experiences of the other girls in the group. This is important because some of the girls were in the same friend group, while others were not. Through the focus groups, the girls learned how to engage in discourse without argument. All the girls agreed that they were treated differently than boys and felt boys were better treated. The fifth-grade Black girls were able to have their voices heard by sharing their stories in the focus groups. They also expressed their voice by offering suggestions in Session 6. As a result, the Black girls were able to vocalize how they wanted to be perceived and treated.

The implication of this is the need for professional development for educators, specifically on how to support Black girls in schools. In addition, we need more studies like this one that relate to caring and creating a space where elementary Black girls can be nurtured to be successful in their educational environment. Lastly, this study furthers the understanding of how Black girls in elementary school experience the intersectionality of race and gender.

Creating Safe Spaces for Research with Black Girls

The interactive focus groups I designed allowed for the Black girls to have a safe space to talk. During the focus groups, the girls were provided with a set of ground rules, which included the ability to share anything within the group; group members needed to show respect to each other through their words and actions during the session, and no information they shared left our safe space unless it related to harm. Over time, the girls opened up, and I felt they were being genuine with their responses. The focus group approach empowered the girls to use their voices. It was pleasing to know that for some of the girls, the focus group experience offered them a "girl-only space where the girls [had] access to a supportive environment; their physical,

psychological, and emotional needs [were met]; and where they can express themselves without repercussion" (Mansfield, 2015, p. 26).

I believe there are implications for school leaders and teachers in the way I approached conducting this study in relation to improving Black girls' experiences in school. Specifically, the way I executed my research suggests how school leaders and teachers can create a nurturing environment by implementing the four-step process identified by Preble et al. (2011) for creating a positive school culture. Using these principles helped me establish the culture necessary to conduct my study. In addition, school leaders and teachers need to provide the physical space and time for Black girls to discuss their unique experiences with other Black girls.

In my research, I also suggest the importance of student voice. When considering how to create a space that lends itself to student voice, one must also consider the limitations. For my study, I think there was a limitation on the amount of student voice, given the age of the participants and the length of the study. Based on the Mansfield et al. (2012) student voice continuum, my study was at the second stage of the pyramid—students being heard. To increase student voice, I suggest extending the study over the course of the school year. Over time, with this age group, I think student voice could expand to the Black girls being able to collaborate with adults. In addition, I would increase the number of focus groups per week to allow the girls time to collaborate with the adults. As a result, the girls and the adults would be able to create new ideas and strategies with each other.

The Need to Adapt a Study to Engage Participants

I came into the study with my own assumptions on how the focus group sessions would run. I assumed the girls would be able to engage in conversational dialogue with a prompt or sentence starter. I also assumed the girls would be able to provide details about their experiences

when asked. After the first session, I realized my assumptions were incorrect. In response, I had to recreate the focus groups. In the subsequent sessions, I had to intentionally plan topics that allowed the participants to engage in critical conversations with each other about gender, race, and class and add interactive components to get the girls to have conversational dialogue.

The adaptations I made in this study revealed the larger need to consider multiple ways to interact with Black girls to learn about their experiences (Azmitia & Mansfield, 2021). It also showed a need for the support of Black girls through an interactive experience that is created for them. I learned that student-centered qualitative research is the most beneficial approach when working with Black girls in elementary schools. This approach provides a framework for rich data outlining experiences that would not be seen from a survey.

Recommendations

It would be beneficial for school personnel and future researchers to consider the following recommendations.

School and District Leadership

Recommendations on how to support Black girls in school start at the school level and lead to the district leadership. This starts with school leaders providing culturally sustaining professional development to teachers (Gay, 2018). School leaders must also develop a practice of justice and feel at ease in "rethinking policies, practices, and ideologies that are anti-Black and antithetical to Black girlhood" (Watson & Baxley, 2021 p. 153). In addition, teachers need to build positive student-teacher relationships and provide a nurturing and caring learning environment for Black girls. Preble et al. (2011) suggest schools do this by providing opportunities for students and teachers to get to know each other, including their strengths, needs, and who they are in different contexts. At the school level, this could involve creating a

"girl's space" within the school where Black girls can come for short periods of time during the day to engage in conversations specific to their needs and interests (Mansfield, 2015). The school counselor, social worker, interventionists, coaches, or any other employee who have connections with students can support this type of work.

Many of the girls' negative experiences were based on gender and race. Therefore, another recommendation to schools and districts is to refine their classroom management practices to eliminate racial and gender biases. In addition, schools and districts must take it one step further and operate from an ethic of care for Black girls. I recommend that schools and districts implement "other-mothering" approaches such as conducting home visits, feeding students, and providing authentic love and concern (Lane, 2018). Teachers, school leaders, school nurses, school counselors, and school social workers can help support this work.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although there is a body of literature on Black girls, they are typically left out of the conversation. In addition, when Black girls are discussed, it is often in relation to their counterparts. For future research, it would be beneficial to investigate the experiences of Black girls at multiple elementary schools. Surveying methodology would provide a broader knowledge base to investigate Black girls. In addition, a qualitative study where the researcher had the opportunity to have more focus groups over the course of the year, as well as individual interviews with each participant, would allow for more in-depth responses from the participants. Additionally, observations of the girls during the school day would supplement the previous data collection approaches as well. A future study could include an initial interview to gain basic information about the participant before beginning the focus group sessions. The study could

also have the participants complete a survey and individual exit interview at the conclusion of the study.

Future researchers also need to keep in mind the age of their participants. This study showed that for fifth-grade girls to feel comfortable talking in a focus group, multiple approaches like games needed to be used. Qualitative research provides a strong framework for illuminating the voice of Black girls. There is also much potential in devising a methodology to better research young Black girls on their complex and diverse experiences in schools. For example, the self-portraits in this study provided a starting point for gaining an understanding of how Black girls perceive themselves. A future study could have Black girls create a self-portrait and keep a reflective journal where they respond to prompts pertaining to their identity as it intersects with their school experiences.

Personal Reflection

My study allowed me to work directly with elementary Black girls. I was able to learn about their elementary school experiences directly from them. My professional role allows me to work with elementary Black girls, but not in the same capacity as a researcher. This study provided me an opportunity to get to know the group of girls on a deeper level, allowing me to understand their experiences and to support them in developing the tools and strategies to communicate effectively to their peers and adults about their needs, wants, and dissatisfactions. I also learned the need to adapt the data collection method to meet the needs of the participants. I found that creating different games and activities for the girls to engage in each week was one of the highlights of the process outside of meeting with the girls each week. For example, I enjoyed taking a game like “Trouble” and adapting it to have the girls play in small groups to answer questions. This study has also taught me that more small group sessions with Black girls in

elementary school are needed to allow them the space to discuss topics and issues that relate to them.

I was surprised how the girls initially found it difficult to talk with each other, given that most of them were a part of the same peer groups. I was also surprised at how the girls initially responded to others with sarcastic or judgmental comments to some of the question responses. I found that the girls benefited from feedback and modeling on how to react to others' thoughts and opinions. However, the girls also showed their resiliency. I think they left the study with at least one thing they could take outside of the group to apply to their interactions with others in their school day. Lastly, the girls showed me that when you put them in small groups and give them something of interest to do, they can talk at length.

My personal goal is to continue the work I began in this study by engaging with more Black girls in small groups to discuss their personal experiences around social justice topics. I want to expand this work to include fourth-grade students as well. In my own school, I want to provide the opportunity for Black girls to participate in small group sessions to discuss issues that arise in our community that directly affect them. Currently, I am working on a grant to provide students with the opportunity to engage in these types of small-group discussions at my school.

This study has also left me thinking about what is next for me professionally and as a researcher. Professionally, I have thought about how to use the knowledge and skills gained through my educational career and research to expand my efforts to support disadvantaged youth in the educational system. Being a former special education teacher and now school administrator, I have also thought about being an educational attorney for minoritized students. As a researcher, I would like to expand the study by working with elementary Black girls in

different schools to learn about their experiences in those institutions. More specifically, I am interested in studying the experiences of elementary Black girls through the altering of data collection methods based on the analysis of the participants during each session to yield authentic responses. I have also wondered how this study can be continued with the nine girls who participated and are now in middle school.

Most importantly, the girls in this study reminded me why I went into education and to continue to advocate for Black girls. I am reminded that not only are the nine girls who participated in this study counting on me to share their stories, but other Black girls across the world have a story to be told and need to be heard. Ultimately, I want to reach as many Black girls as possible to help them believe "they are smart and can be successful … if you want to be," as said by Verity. Come and let me show you the way!

REFERENCES

Alder, N. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care. *Urban Education, 37*(2), 241–266. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085902372005

American Psychological Association. (2021). *For Black students, unfairly harsh discipline can lead to lower grades*. https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2021/10/black-students-harsh-discipline

Anderson, B. N. (2020). "See me, see us": Understanding the intersections and continued marginalization of adolescent gifted Black girls in U.S. classrooms. *Gifted Child Today, 43*(2), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1076217519898216

Annamma, S. A., Anyon, Y., Joseph, N. M., Farrar, J., Greer, E., Downing, B., & Simmons, J. (2016). Black girls and school discipline: The complexities of being overrepresented and understudied. *Urban Education, 54*(2), 211–242. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042085916646610

Azmitia, M., & Mansfield, K. C. (2021). Editorial: Intersectionality and identity development: How do we conceptualize and research identity intersectionalities in youth meaningfully? *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.625765

Blake, J. J., Keith, V. M., Luo, W., Le, H., & Salter, P. (2017). The role of colorism in explaining African American females' suspension risk. *School Psychology Quarterly, 32*(1), 118–130. https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000173

Boynton, M., & Boynton, C. (2005). *The Educator's Guide to preventing and solving discipline problems*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Brasof, M., & Mansfield, K. C. (2018). Student voice and school leadership: Introduction. *Journal of Ethical Educational Leadership, Special Issue, 1*, 5–9.

https://www.academia.edu/36304398/Special_Issue_1_Student_Voice_and_School_Leadership_JEEL_JOURNAL_OF_ETHICAL_EDUCATIONAL_LEADERSHIP

Buckles, M., & Ives-Rublee, M. (2022, May 6). *Expanding education access for Black girls with disabilities*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/expanding-education-access-for-Black-girls-with-disabilities/

Butler, T. T. (2018). Black Girl Cartography: Black girlhood and place-making in education research. *Review of Research in Education*, *42*(1), 28–45. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x18762114

Campano, G. (2009). Honoring student stories. In M. Scherer (Ed.), *Supporting the whole child: Reflections on best practices in learning, teaching, and leadership* (pp. 242–254). ASCD.

Carter Andrews, D. J., Brown, T., Castro, E., & Id-Deen, E. (2019). The impossibility of being "Perfect and white": Black girls' racialized and gendered schooling experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, *56*(6), 2531–2572. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831219849392

Center on PBIS. (2023). *PBIS*. https://www.pbis.org/

Chakara, M. (2017, December 8). *From preschool to prison: The criminalization of Black girls*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/preschool-prison-criminalization-black-girls/

Clemons, K. M. (2019, August 28). Black feminist thought and qualitative research in education. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1194

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Conner, J. O. (2021). Educators' experiences with student voice: How teachers understand, solicit, and use student voice in their classrooms. *Teachers and Teaching*, *28*(1), 12–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2021.2016689

Cothran, D. J., Kulinna, P. H., & Garrahy, D. A. (2003). "This is kind of giving a secret away …": Students' perspectives on effective class management. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *19*(4), 435–444. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-051x(03)00027-1

Crenshaw, K., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected*. African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2016). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Sage.

Decker, D. M., Dona, D. P., & Christenson, S. L. (2007). Behaviorally at-risk African American students: the importance of student-teacher relationships for student outcomes. *Journal of School Psychology*, *45*(1), 83–109. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.004

Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, *58*(3), 280–299. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.58.3.c43481778r528qw4

Duke, D. L. (1986). *School organization, leadership, and student behavior*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED318091.pdf

Elias, M. J. (2016, November 23). *Why restorative practices benefit all students*. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-restorative-practices-benefit-all-students-maurice-elias

Epstein, R., Blake, J., & Gonzalez, T. (2017, June 27). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood.* Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695

Ezzani, M. (2020). A principal's approach to leadership for social justice: Advancing reflective and anti-oppressive practices. *Journal of School Leadership*, *31*(3), 227–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620908347

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, *30*(2), 295–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236

Ford, D. Y. (2021, February 16). How public schools fail to recognize Black prodigies. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/how-public-schools-fail-to-recognize-black-prodigies-154330#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20while%20Black%20students%20represent,in%20gifted%20and%20talented%20programs

Ford, D. Y. (2012). Culturally different students in special education: Looking backward to move forward. *Exceptional Children*, *78*(4), 391–405. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291207800401

Furrer, C., & Skinner, E. (2003). Sense of relatedness as a factor in children's academic engagement and performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *95*(1), 148–162. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.1.148

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Georgetown Law's on Poverty and Inequality (2019). *Research confirms that Black girls feel the sting of adultification bias identified in earlier Georgetown Law Study.* https://www.law.georgetown.edu/news/research-confirms-that-black-girls-feel-the-sting-of-adultification-bias-identified-in-earlier-georgetown-law-study/

Gholson, M. (2016). Clean corners and algebra: A critical examination of the constructed invisibility of Black girls and women in mathematics. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(3), 290–301. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0290

Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (5th ed). Pearson.

Greene, D. T. (2016). "We need more 'US' in schools!!": Centering Black adolescent girls' in literacy and language practices in online school spaces. *Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(3), 274–289. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0274

Harrison, L. (2017). Redefining intersectionality theory through the lens of African American young adolescent girls' racialized experiences. *Youth & Society*, *49*(8), 1023–1039. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x15569216

Hines-Datiri, D., & Carter Andrews, D. J. (2020). The effects of zero tolerance policies on Black girls: Using critical race feminism and figured worlds to examine school discipline. *Urban Education*, *55*(10), 1419–1440. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917690204

Howard, T. C. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*(1), 54–86. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732x12462985

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (2022, December 20). http://idea.ed.gov/

Ives-Rublee, M., Buckles, M., Sozan, M., Villagomez, A., & Ross, K. (2022, June 9). *Black women and girls with disabilities*. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/series/Black-women-and-girls-with-disabilities/

Jeffrey, A. J., Auger, R. W., & Pepperell, J. L. (2013). "If we're ever in trouble they're always there." *The Elementary School Journal, 114*(1), 100–117. https://doi.org/10.1086/671062

Kohn, A. (2008). *Beyond discipline from compliance to community*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Koonce, J. B. (2012). "Oh, those loud Black girls!": A phenomenological study of Black girls talking with an attitude. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education, 8*(2), 26–46. http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Loud-Black-Girls.pdf

Kutsyuruba, B., Klinger, D., & Hussain, A. (2015). Relationships among school climate, school safety, and student achievement and well-being: A review of the literature. *Review of Education, 3*, 103–135. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3043

Lac, V. T., & Mansfield, K. C. (2018). What do students have to do with educational leadership? Making a case for centering student voice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education, 13*(1), 38–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775117743748

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 7–24.

Lane, M. (2018). "For real love": How Black girls benefit from a politicized ethic of care. *International Journal of Educational Reform, 27*(3), 269–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791802700303

Leren, T. H. (2006). The importance of student voice. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 363–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120600895502

Mansfield, K. C. (2013). “I love these girls—I was these girls”: Women leading for social justice in a single-sex public school. *Journal of School Leadership*, *23*(4), 640–663. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461302300404

Mansfield, K. C. (2015). The importance of safe space and student voice in schools that serve minoritized learners. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, *30*(1), 25–38. https://doi.org/10.21307/jelpp-2015-004

Mansfield, K. C. (2020, October 5). *Introduction to scholarly inquiry* [PowerPoint slides]. School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Mansfield, K. C., Fowler, B., & Rainbolt, S. (2018). The potential of restorative practices to ameliorate discipline gaps: The story of one high school’s leadership team. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *54*(2), 303–323. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x17751178

Mansfield, K. C., & Lambrinou, M. (2022). “This is not who we are”: Students leading for anti-racist policy changes in Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia. *Educational Policy*, *36*(1), 19–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211059214

Mansfield, K. C., Welton, A., & Halx, M. (2012). Listening to student voice: Toward a more inclusive theory for research and practice. In C. Boske & S. Diem (Eds.), *Global leadership for social justice: Taking it from the field to practice* (Advances in Educational Administration, Vol. 14, pp. 21–41). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-3660(2012)0000014006

Marshall, C., Rossman, G. B., & Blanco, G. L. (2022). *Designing qualitative research* (7th ed.). Sage.

Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

McArthur, S. A., & Lane, M. (2018). Schoolin' Black girls: Politicized caring and healing as Pedagogical love. *The Urban Review*, *51*(1), 65–80. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0487-4

McKinney de Royston, M., Madkins, T. C., Givens, J. R., & Nasir, N. S. (2020). "I'm a teacher, I'm gonna always protect you": Understanding Black educators' protection of Black Children. *American Educational Research Journal*, *58*(1), 68–106. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831220921119

Mendler, A. N. (2001). *Connecting with students*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Middleton, T. J., & Ford, D. Y. (2022). An implementation of culturally responsive protective factors to meet the needs of girls of color in gifted and talented education. *Gifted Child Today*, *45*(2), 117–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/10762175211070053

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage.

Mitra, D. (2008). Amplifying student voice. *Educational Leadership*, *66*(3), 20–25. https://www.academia.edu/2005795/Amplifying_student_voice

Morris, E. W. (2016, November 30). *"Ladies" or "loudies"? Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms*. *Youth & Society*, *38*(4), 490–515. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X06296778

Morris, M. W., Conteh, M., & Harris-Perry, M. V. (2018). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. The New Press.

My Brother's Keeper Task Force. (2014). *FACT SHEET: Opportunity for all: President Obama launches My Brother's Keeper initiative to build ladders of opportunity for boys and young men of color.* https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/27/fact-sheet-opportunity-all-president-obama-launches-my-brother-s-keeper-

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics & moral education*. University of California Press.

Owens, L. M., & Ennis, C. D. (2005). The ethic of care in teaching: An overview of supportive literature. *Quest, 57*(4), 392–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2005.10491864

Patton, L. D., Crenshaw, K., Haynes, C., & Watson, T. N. (2016). Why we can't wait: (Re)examining the opportunities and challenges for Black women and girls in education [guest editorial]. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(3), 194–198. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0194

Preble, W., Gordon, R., & McNulty, R. J. (2011). *Transforming school climate and learning: Beyond bullying and compliance*. Corwin.

Ricks, S. A. (2014). Falling through the cracks: Black girls and education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *4*(1), 10–21. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1063223

Rimm-Kaufman, S., & Sandilos, L. (2015). *Improving students' relationships with teachers to provide essential supports for learning: Applications of psychological science to teaching and learning modules.* American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/relationships

Rivera-McCutchen, R. L., & Watson, T. N. (2014). Leadership for social justice. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, *17*(4), 54–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458914549663

Robinson, S. A. (2013). Educating Black males with dyslexia. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, *3*(3), 159–174. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1063059

Rouland, K. (2020, April 27). *Racial identity, academic identity, and academic outcomes for students of color*. MAEC, Inc. https://maec.org/resource/identity-and-race/#:~:text=Academic%20identity%20(or%20academic%20self,she%20navigates%20the%20school%20environment.

Roulston, K. (2010). Considering quality in qualitative interviewing. *Qualitative Research*, *10*(2), 199–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109356739

Ryberg, R., Her, S., Temkin, D., & Harper, K. (2021, August 10). Despite reductions since 2011-12, Black students and students with disabilities remain more likely to experience suspension. *Child Trends.* https://www.childtrends.org/publications/despite-reductions-black-students-and-students-with-disabilities-remain-more-likely-to-experience-suspension

Samuels, A. (2018). Exploring culturally responsive pedagogy: Teachers' perspectives on fostering equitable and inclusive classrooms. *SRATE Journal*, 27(1), 22–30. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1166706.pdf

Scarparolo, G., & MacKinnon, S. (2022). Student voice as part of differentiated instruction: Students' perspectives. *Educational Review*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2022.2047617

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review, 34*(4), 317–342. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021320817372

Slate, J. R, Gray, P. L., & Jones, B. (2016). A clear lack of equity in disciplinary consequences for Black girls in Texas: A statewide examination. *The Journal of Negro Education, 85*(3), 250–260. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0250

Thompson, A. (1998). Not the color purple: Black feminist lessons for educational caring. *Harvard Educational Review*, *68*(4), 522–555. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.68.4.nm436v83214n5016

Thompson, C. S. (2018). The construct of 'respect' in teacher-student relationships: Exploring dimensions of ethics of care and sustainable. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *17*(3), 42–60. https://doi.org/10.12806/v17/i3/r3

Thompson, S. W. (2010). *The caring teacher: A multiple case study that looks at what teachers do and believe about their work with at-risk students* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska Lincoln). DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska – Lincoln. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsdiss/77

Todd, A. R., Simpson, A. J., Thiem, K. C., & Neel, R. (2016). The generalization of implicit racial bias to young Black boys: Automatic stereotyping or automatic prejudice? *Social Cognition*, *34*(4), 306–323. https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2016.34.4.306

U.S. Department of Education. (2016, July). *Report: The State of Racial Diversity in the educator workforce*. Report: The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce. Youth.gov. https://youth.gov/federal-links/report-state-racial-diversity-educator-workforce

U.S. Department of Education. (2021, June 4). *U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights seeks information on the nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline.* https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-educations-office-civil-rights-seeks-information-nondiscriminatory-administration-school-discipline

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: Issues of caring in education of U.S.-Mexican youth*. State University of New York Press.

Wang, M.-T., & Degol, J. L. (2015). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, *28*(2), 315–352. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9319-1

Watson, T. N. (2016). "Talking back": The perceptions and experiences of Black girls who attend city high school. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *85*(3), 239–249. https://doi.org/10.7709/jnegroeducation.85.3.0239

Watson, T. N., & Baxley, G. S. (2021). Centering "Grace": Challenging anti-Blackness in schooling through Motherwork. *Journal of School Leadership*, *31*(1-2), 142–157. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684621993085

APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Prologue: Share with participants who I am as a Black woman, and I want to get to know about them as Black girls and their school experiences.

Focus Group Session 1: General Experiences
1. Tell me about life at Lakeside
2. If you had a magic wand, what would you change about life at Lakeside?
3. What would you want to see more of?
4. What would you want to see less of?

Check-in Anchor Chart
Present the main points from our General Experiences discussion. Do the girls agree (yes, that is what I meant), disagree (no, that is not what I meant), or want to add anything before we move into our discussion today?

Focus Group Session 2: Ideas Around Caring
1. How do you know when a teacher cares about you?
2. How do you know when a student cares about you?
3. How do you know when an administrator/principal cares for you?
4. How do you show you care? (For students? For teachers? For administrators?)

Check-in Anchor Chart
Present the main points from our Caring discussion. Do the girls agree (yes, that is what I meant), disagree (no, that is not what I meant), or want to add anything before we move into our discussion today?

Focus Group Session 3: Caring
Students in groups of three will play the game Trouble. However, students will answer questions about caring as they play the game based on the number of the dice.

Trouble Dice Game Questions:
Question 1: If you could tell other students how to be more caring toward other students, what would you tell them?
Question #2: If you could tell teachers how to be more caring toward students, what would you tell them?
Question #3: How do students behave when they think their teachers care about them?
Question #4: How do students behave when they think their teachers don't care about them?
Question #5: What is one thing you can do every day to show you care?

Wild Card Questions
Tell me a song or famous person that best fits who you are as a person. Why?
If you were creating a 30-second "Who am I" TikTok video, what would you say?
How would you answer the question, who am I?
How would you describe yourself in three words?

What does it mean to be a girl? A Black girl?
Tell me about your best day at Lakeside.
Tell me about your worst day at Lakeside.

Check-in Anchor Chart
Present the main points from our Caring discussion. Do the girls agree (yes, that is what I meant), disagree (no, that is not what I meant), or want to add anything before we move into our discussion today? We will look at all anchor charts and make sure all their experiences are captured.

Focus Group 4: Caring

1. Research says some Black girls do not do well in school. What stops/limits Black girls from doing well in school?
2. Are you treated differently in schools than other students? Why do you feel that way?
3. Do teachers care more about white students vs. students of color? Why do you feel that way?
4. Do you think teachers care more about some students than others? Why or why not?
5. Do you think teachers care more about boys or girls? Why do you feel that way?
6. What type of students do teachers care most about? Less about?
7. Describe yourself in three words.

Check-in Anchor Chart
Present the main points from our Caring discussion. Do the girls agree (yes, that is what I meant), disagree (no, that is not what I meant), or want to add anything before we move into our discussion today?

Focus Group 5: Self-Portrait Drawing Perception
Draw for me your self-portrait based on this question:

1. Who do you see yourself as, and what do you see yourself as?
2. Discussion: Do you think others see you the way you (drew) see yourself?

Check-in Anchor Chart
Present the main points from our Perception self-portrait discussion. Do the girls agree (yes, that is what I meant), disagree (no, that is not what I meant), or want to add anything before we move into our discussion today? We will look at all anchor charts and make sure all their experiences are captured.

Needs and Recommendations
Review all five anchor charts with girls. Have students flag what they agree and disagree with and add any thoughts and experiences to make sure all experiences are captured.

1. Let's reflect on what we've shared about life at Lakeside so far.
2. What have you noticed about what people have said?
3. What are some positive aspects that stand out?
4. What are some negative things that you feel need to change?

Writing prompts:

1. What was the hardest part about creating your self-portrait?
2. If you could say anything to people, students, teachers, and adults at Lakeside without fear of judgment or punishment, what would you say?
3. What strategies or solutions do you have to help Black girls be successful in school?