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They, those, and other pronouns used to describe them: A qualitative study of the lived experiences of the African American girls in the Girls to Women group

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THEY, THOSE, AND OTHER PRONOUNS USED TO DESCRIBE THEM:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE AFRICAN

AMERICAN GIRLS IN THE GIRLS TO WOMEN GROUP

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

African American girls are more likely to experience social barriers in a society

that values White over Black, men over women, and wealth over poverty. They are more

likely to encounter race, class, and gender discrimination in classrooms, curriculum, and

pedagogy putting them at grave risk of school failure. Notwithstanding the deficit

research approach, African American girls are invisible in both social theory and

educational research. Their virtual absence from existing research is the catalyst for this

autoethnographic study of the lived experiences of African American girls in the Girls to

Women group at an urban high school.

In this research, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is employed as a theoretical lens

providing a useful framework for examining how race and gender combine to shape

African American girls' school experiences. CRT authenticates critical raced

epistemologies by celebrating methodological approaches that acknowledge experiences

of oppression and validates them as appropriate forms of data.

The girls' counterstories reveal very prevalent themes: they all desired to belong;

they all felt that they were scrutinized by teachers and administrators; they all discussed

inherent challenges of being a Black female in our society; and they all were influenced

by their family dynamic ranging from absent fathers to othermothers, as widely respected

staples in Black culture.

Based on these themes, the research offers recommendations for teacher to

embrace critical pedagogy, challenging them to deconstruct traditional teacher/student

roles by creating inviting spaces for learning by legitimizing life experiences of students

of color. Recommendations for administrators include a call to mandate *meaningful* professional development for new and veteran teachers and to encourage the creation and maintenance of peer like groups so that students of color have a place to belong.

Implications for further research are based on the failure of traditional mainstream educational scholarship to provide a useful paradigm to examine the realities of African American girls and for research that speaks to the resiliency and strength of them as an antidote. Further research should be concerned with the knowledge of African American girls, who constructs understanding of their experiences, and how this knowledge is validated or not validated.

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Approved:

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Dr. Nicholas J. Pace, Chair

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Dr. Dewitt Jones, Committee Member

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Dr. Charles McNulty, Committee Member

Amber Nicole Boyd

University of Northern Iowa

May 2014

DEDICATIONS

For my mother who demanded that I make my own path

For my father, I finish his dream for me.

For Kinnie who took me as his own

For my sisters who love me in spite of

To the Boys whom my heart beats for

To my girls who expected nothing less than my all

For my church family who prayed me through

And with nothing less than God matchless, merciful grace

This is for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I sit down to reflect on how many people have had a hand in the success of this project, my heart swells with gratitude. I am eternally grateful for the invaluable work of my committee. First and foremost, I am indebted to my chair Dr. Pace. I have to thank him for the random texts, the venting emails, and the encouraging phone calls regarding the work that I always and never wanted to do. This paradoxical love affair with my research changed the course of both my professional and personal life. He was there from day one, accepting nothing less than perfection.

To Dr. McNulty who introduced me to a theoretical framework that has forever altered the manner in which I view race, I have to give many thanks. His extensive knowledge that binds theory and practice, helped give voice to issues that needed a stage. He was one who encouraged me to go where few researchers have.

I am also very appreciative of the relationship that Dr. Jones and I share. I met him years ago, as a high school student, when still very unsure of my future path. He always took a personal, caring, and empowering interest in me and what I could achieve. I am, today, as impressed with the practical and personal element he brings to educational leadership. His zero tolerance for nonsense and his occasional interjections of harsh reality have been my saving grace many a time.

I have heard of small giants, but have only met a few in my lifetime. Dr. Logan is one of these. When I asked her to be a part of my committee, she admonished that she would hold me to a higher standard to safeguard against lesser expectations sometimes associated with scholars of color. She held true to that by leaving no page unturned and in

her own way provided a prototype to aspire to. I always thought that if that "sista" could do it, so could I. Thank you.

I would also like to thank my girls, for without them this work would be just another research paper. They poured their hearts out and gave me their all, as we grew together. They were the first to call me Dr. Boyd years before it came to fruition – as they were speaking positive things over my life even then. They have thanked me time and time again for being an inspiration, a role model, an othermother; however, they unknowingly gave meaning to my life's work. For that reason, they will also have a special place in my heart.

To my parents and my sisters who are visibly overjoyed at the completion of this work, I thank for being my number one fans. My stepfather, Kinnie, who has told everyone he knows (and to many he does not) his daughter is a doctor now. I love you. My mother, who was a teacher of 21 years, in her very unyielding, loving way, has always been an inspiration modeling both by word and action. It warms my heart to know that they are proud of me.

To my sister Stephanie whose eyes have not been dry since the onset of this project and Jadell who, in her very own way, has been Team Amber since Day 1– I love them both more than they will ever know. I love them more so because they have both given me three of my most prized possessions, my nephews. To Taj James, JMarion James, and Jashon James I am just enough. I am just Tete Amber. I look at them and know that every day I can work longer, do better, and try harder. They inspire me exceedingly more than they could ever imagine.

I would be remiss to not mention the work of the prayer warriors in my church family, under the fearless leadership of Pastor Arthur E. Mills. They were all very busy petitioning God's grace on my behalf. This, I believe, was essential to my success. I am reminded of a song that I heard in church growing up entitled, "Somebody Prayed for Me." The lyrics say, "Had me on their mind, took the time and prayed for me." For those who did or for those who just spoke encouraging words over me, I thank you.

As I begin to end this section, I am inclined to also acknowledge and dedicate this work to those whose intentions for me were questionable at best. This is affirmation that my work is doing exactly what it was intended to do: confront those whose thwarted perception of reality has failed too many of our children of color. For without you I would not have worked so hard. Without your push – I would not have jumped.

Last but certainly not least, I thank those who have gone on before, as I am still riding on the coattails of their blessings. I often think of my dad and how important this work was to him and I smile – I know that he would be brimming with pride. James L. Boyd instilled in me a desire to question the status quo, to go beyond what was expected, and to blaze my own trail. With the help of many others, my prayer is that I have done just that.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I have loved my work, I have loved people and my play, but always I have been uplifted by the thought that what I have done well will live long and justify my life, that what I have done ill or never finished can now be handed on to others for endless days to be finished, perhaps better that I could have done (Dubois, 1928, p. ix).

African American girls are more likely to experience social barriers in a society that values White over Black, men over women, and wealth over poverty. They are more likely to encounter race, class, and gender discrimination in classrooms, curriculum, and pedagogy putting them at grave risk of school failure (Evans-Winters, 2005). Notwithstanding the deficit research approach, African American girls are virtually invisible in social theory, educational research, and qualitative studies (Evans–Winters & Esposito, 2010; Henry, 1998; Morris, 2007). Their virtual absence from existing research is the catalyst for this study of the lived experiences of five African American girls who were members of the Girls to Women group (GTW) at a predominately White, Midwestern, urban high school of approximately 1600 students. Due to the dearth of research that exists regarding the school experiences of African American girls, this work contributes to that absence in the existing literature.

This study offers an amalgam of qualitative research and lived reality. The title of this work reflects my goal of shedding light on the lived experiences of the African American girls who were members of the Girls to Women group, during both the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), I highlight the experiences, struggles, and successes of the girls in their current reality. I

seek to shed light on the girls' lived experiences by discussing how race and gender shape their experiences in school. In alignment with CRT, this research recognizes the girls as holders and creators of their own knowledge. "For too long, the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 105). Although students of color should be considered holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, and cultures are devalued (Delgado Bernal, 2002). I use CRT to demonstrate how critical raced epistemologies celebrate methodological approaches that acknowledge experiences of oppression and validate them as appropriate forms of data (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Having a stage created for the stories of the girls will be empowering as their voices will be heard through this study.

This research allows me to answer the challenge put forth by other African American female scholars pleading for the need of more scholarship to attest to the social and political circumstances affecting women of color in the field of education and scholarship that specifically address the educational experiences of African American girls (Austin, 1989; Evans-Winters, 2005; Evan-Winters & Esposito, 2010). I feel compelled to conduct this research refuting the subtle (and sometimes not so) pressures on female scholars of color to turn their energy toward race and gender neutral research (Austin, 1989). When asked to consider what I would pursue as a focus for my research, more than one cautioned me to choose a topic that I was passionate about because of the immense commitment of research and continuous learning required to successfully

complete a dissertation. This project will answer that call with a resounding and heartfelt response.

Throughout this work I use the terms African American and Black interchangeably. Although some researchers would argue for a clear and concise bifurcation between the two classifications for race and ethnicity, I will remain consistent with cultural norms by using them simultaneously (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Mruijnzeels; 2005; Cokley, 2005; Williams & Jackson, 2000). In discussing the participants of this study, I will refer to them as young ladies as much as possible because I addressed them as such in all of our interactions both formally and informally. The young ladies or girls that I will be referring to throughout this study are female students ages 17 or older and are either seniors in high school or one year out of high school.

This study is arranged in distinct chapters. The functionality of this chapter is to serve as an introduction and roadmap for this work. Chapter 2 is an autoethnography detailing my hiring and the process in which I inherited the group by nature of my ethnicity and gender. The second chapter also provides a personal and historical context to consider my own paradigm as the researcher and to account for any biases. As the researcher, I have chosen to actively engage in critical self-reflection about my personal predispositions and how that could potential color my perspective. Through the process of reflexivity, I have become more self-aware and able to monitor and control for conscious and subconscious biases (Johnson, 1997).

Chapter 3 is a review of literature that will examine the issue of the dearth of literature that is readily available regarding the schooling experiences of African

American girls. I will take into account the historic, economic, and political conditions that affect the ways in which Black girls experience schooling. Through the lens of CRT, I will use intersectionality as a basis to understand how race and gender combine to shape the experiences of these girls within certain contexts at recognized sites of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

Chapter 4 is the methods section. CRT shapes the methodology of this study as it recognizes that students of color struggle to work against the dominant worldview. I aim to show how these girls work against many inherent and dominating hegemonic viewpoints with the use of their narratives or counterstories, as they will be referred to throughout this work (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Counter-storytelling is a tool that CRT researchers use to contradict racist characterizations of social life. A critical raced epistemology supports methodological approaches that affirm experiences of varying forms of oppression and authenticates them as appropriate forms of data (Delgado Bernal, 2002). The text of the story will form the data set.

The method of data collection was a taped recorded semi structured interview process. I conducted one or two semistructured interviews per participant at approximately two hours each at a place of their choosing over the course of three months. I designed the interview questions to encourage the girls to reflect on their experiences and their implications related to their schooling experiences. I was particularly interested in their experiences growing up, their association with GTW, interactions with teachers and administrators. Overall, I sought to understand how they navigated the hallways of high school as an African American female in our society. The

mode of analysis for this project was a constant comparative method as Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection thereby informing both the sampling and the questions being asked.

Chapter 5 presents individual counterstories derived from semi structured interviews of the five girls who were involved in the GTW during the two years. This research paradigm alone lends itself to the ability to delve deep to discover emotions, motivations, behaviors, build new theories, and raise new questions not rigidly defined by value laden variables. It enables the discovery of more complex aspects of the girls' experiences to be studied. The girls are given voice to provide data in their own words in their own way (Mariampolski, 2001).

In Chapter 6, I discuss the themes that emerged from the counterstories within the framework of CRT. I will consider recommendations for further research, implications for teachers, administrators, and teacher education programming. I support my implications by arguing for the need of critical race methodologies in education to address the needs of marginalized students of color within the institution of education.

Among the many benefits, it is my hope that through the counterstories of the girls, the knowledge gleaned could lead to academic and social achievement for students who have been traditionally marginalized in school. Their stories have the ability to breathe life into the experiences of students of color and other marginalized groups. Interviewing multiple participants allowed for more reflexivity through the analysis of multiple voices and not just my own as comparison and interpretation of biased meanings.

I would be remiss in leading the reader to believe that this qualitative work is prescriptive in nature. This study does not, nor is it intended to provide a checklist of how to "deal" with troubled African American girls. It merely forces to the surface a conversation about meeting the needs of our young African American girls who are slipping through the proverbial cracks by shedding light on their lived experiences. In the very least, my hope is that this study can be used as a discovery and reflective tool for educators, researchers, and practitioners to begin conversations of how to best educate and meet the needs of the students who have the greatest need.

CHAPTER 2

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word…And yet being a problem is a strange experience – peculiar even for one who has never been anything else… (Dubois, 2005, p. 6).

I received the call on a blistering hot Wednesday afternoon in early August. It was my second day back to work after summer vacation. I was so excited to begin my fourth year at Academy Middle School. Although we had not made it off the Persistently Low Achieving School (PLAS) list according to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements from the prior year, I was ready to begin with a renewed and revived motivation.

My phone rang. "Amber, there is an administrative opening here at City High School and we would like for you to interview for it." Not expecting to hear the principal of City High School on the other end of the phone, it took me a minute to get my bearings. "Sure!" I exclaimed without inquiring as to what the position entailed. "How's tomorrow morning for an interview for you?" I quickly said yes and immediately began wondering if nine years of post-secondary training, including a bachelor's degree, two masters, an advanced studies certificate and a couple of years in a doctoral program should have equipped me for a more measured or thoughtful response. I hung up the phone having agreed to a 7:30 interview the next morning. I was ecstatic and unsure at the same time.

That same day, I began doing some preliminary informal research about the building culture, demographics, staff and faculty dynamics, student activities, and parent involvement at City High. I updated my portfolio that I originally created in my

principalship program and began to feel more confident. I arrived early to my interview

in a black suit and Coach bag that doubled as a briefcase. I was ready. The interview

team consisted of the head principal, three assistant principals, and the athletic director.

    The interview itself went exceptionally well but the team told me they intended to

interview a few more candidates. I had been the first. I returned to Academy Middle

School and waited on pins and needles the remainder of the day, having a hard time

concentrating on preparing the Gifted and Talented curriculum for the coming year. I was

too busy checking my cellphone every half hour to make sure the ringer was turned on

and that I had not missed a call about the job.

    At the conclusion of the day, having received no calls, I decided to pack up my

things. I began to put the interview out of my mind when, walking to my car, the phone

rang. It was the City High principal.

    "Hey Amber, we would like to offer you the position and I really hope you

accept."

    I could not believe it. I felt honored to even be considered for a position at the

young age of 26. Furthermore, I was an African American female in a district of about

10,000 students, in which the majority of the administrators were White. They selected

me over all other candidates. I accepted immediately and without hesitation.

    On the drive home, I began to feel an overwhelming sense of apprehension. With

it being the start of the school year, I felt as if I were leaving my kids at Academy Middle

School high and dry; yet I felt a strong pull toward the new opportunity. I felt more

comfortable once I had the opportunity to meet with my principal at Academy, who had

served as my mentor throughout the principalship program. He assured me that the City

High position was a wonderful growth opportunity and one that would influence the rest

of my life. No truer words had ever been spoken.

The next day, I met with the City High School principal and administrative team

to discuss my responsibilities and a dizzying list of what they termed "other duties as

assigned." Among those were bus referrals, In School Suspensions, after school

detentions, the Social Studies data team, discipline for a new online learning initiative,

school uniforms, and the building and district Safety Committee.

As our meeting concluded and I gathered my belongings, the principal spoke.

"There is just one more thing that I would like for you to take on," she said. "We had a

girl's group here a couple of years ago called Girls to Women and I would like for you to

get that up and running again." The principal explained that the group, which had been

student-run and aimed at African American girls, had stalled since the student leader had

graduated. Further explanation revealed that previous administrators had not been able to

successfully restart and sustain the group.

The principal then she spoke more directly and gave more background on the girls

and the program. "I will be honest with you, Amber, please sit down. *They* are a problem

and a continual disruption in our building. The majority of our fights originate with *them*

and *they* are extremely disrespectful to teachers. We are really hoping you can help with

this problem."

Although the opportunity intrigued me, the word *they* rang harshly in my ears.

Whether it was intended or not, I could hardly ignore what I interpreted as a sweeping

generalization of African American girls' behavior. I was beginning to feel like the one clear advantage that I did have over the other applicants was being a Black female. I mentally vacated to what Delgado and Stefancic (2001) describe as having a voice of color, or the ability to communicate and relate to members of one's own group more effectively than those who are not a part of that group. Was there a secret code that I possessed as an African American female? Was my gender and ethnicity the reason I had been selected over the others? Should I care if that were the case? Was I was hired to "fix" the Black girl "problem?" If so, was that necessarily a bad thing? I repressed my questions instantaneously. Whatever the reasons for my selection, the assignment was tremendously appealing and I was elated and anxious to begin. I began making plans for the group immediately.

Although my job included a host of responsibilities, I found myself spending a lot of time thinking about the group. I began by considering the fundamentals. When would I meet with them? What would we discuss? What would the group goals be? In the past, the girls met during the school day on a rotating schedule. The principal did not want to entertain this option because some of the girls fell behind in their schoolwork. After school was not an option because many of the girls had responsibilities at home or at work.

Considering all other options, the principal and I decided that I would be the equivalent of a Homeroom teacher. This would allow me to meet with the girls once a week for half an hour during Homeroom time, a district initiative designated to build community within the classroom. Every Wednesday, during Homeroom, teachers met

with their group to discuss goal setting, career options, life choices, bullying, and a variety of other topics.

The beginning of the school year came with its usual chaos. Some students spent a majority of their effort trying to get around the new district dress code while others were merely attempting to assimilate into high school culture. I spent time forging relationships with the frequent office visitors that had not quite made the transition from smaller middle schools to our diverse, urban high school of over 1,600 students. I also began guiding the Social Studies department through data teaming and analysis of instructional strategies. As a new administrator, I wanted to look and act the part. I busied myself with lunch duty, ensuring students followed the dress code, after school detentions, the frequent In School suspension referrals, and monitoring the progress of the Social Studies data team.

Though I was deluged with new responsibilities, the group continued to consume my thoughts. I decided that I wanted to solicit the help of the teachers to recruit students via email. I would ask them to consider students who they thought would benefit from a group specifically for African American girls centered on self-empowerment through a cultural lens. Indicators could include, but were not limited to failing or falling grades; behaviors or attitudes that may be rebellious in nature; or girls that would benefit from a support group of sorts that would create a forum to discuss issues that were specific to the experiences of African American teens.

 The emails came pouring in. I decided that I would take the 48 names that I received, in addition to those who self-selected, to begin planning what the year would

look like. I sought opportunities to spend thinking about how I could bring the group to

life because I knew that half an hour, once a week was not nearly enough time to develop

relationships. These seemed vital. With the large number of girls, they not only needed to

trust me, they needed to begin to trust each other. This would require time, which we

lacked.

With this in mind, I began planning a tone-setting, trust-building retreat for the

girls at the local YWCA. I planned to take the girls out of school for an entire day, with

the goal of beginning to build unity within the group. I solicited the help of an Area

Education Agency (AEA) Consultant, Lisa, with interest and experience planning

workshops that centered on self-esteem and team building. Her role with the AEA was to

implement the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program district wide.

Lisa and I met extensively to plan the retreat. We fleshed out three main areas of

focus: self-efficacy, self-esteem, and challenging stereotypes. We felt it was important to

focus on *self-efficacy* more so than merely *self-esteem* based on research that identified a

stronger relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement over self-esteem

(Jonso-Reid, Davis, Saunders, Williams, & Williams, 2005).

The final focus of the program was confirming and negating stereotypes. Popular

culture's portrayal of African American girls as loud, talkative, aggressive, and

argumentative (Weitz & Gordon, 1993) had long stung and irritated me. I wanted to

confront these stereotypes in an effort to negate them.

Having grown up in the same Midwestern city of about 65,000, I knew that many

of the girls' experiences were very different from mine. I knew that, unlike my childhood

in which I had married parents, extended family, and a very involved church family, many of the girls had likely had a different experience growing up.

As I reflected on the differences between the girls' upbringing and my own, I heard my mother's voice ringing in my head, scolding me for not wanting to wear a slip under my dress on top of a pair of pantyhose in the dead heat of summer. I remember her teaching me how to "sit properly" and how to place a laced scarf over my lap if my skirt came above my knees in church. I also remember the First Lady (Pastor's wife) of our church taking the liberty to scold us if we became too chatty during the sermon.

I felt as if times had changed. My uninformed perception was the young women had not learned the same lessons or been afforded those same teachable moments. I grew up in an environment in which everyone was invested in my well-being because they held fast to the concept of the village raising a child.

Even though I had my casual observations of the girls, I sensed a dichotomy that suggested I was physically and aesthetically very similar to the girls. However, my gut told me that might be where the similarities ended. I knew that I had very different experiences from theirs growing up.

The day of the retreat finally arrived. The 48 girls, with signed permission slips in hand, stood around with their black and khaki uniforms awaiting the arrival of the Blue Bird (previously a few of the girls attempted to make a case for abandoning the dress code for the day but the principal would not even entertain the thought). Most of them knew me by name. There were, however, a few that were along for the day free from instruction. I attempted to control the loud banter while teachers began closing their

doors. The girls were respectful and compliant as I made my request to quiet down. The bus finally arrived. The sun was shining brightly as Lisa and I, along with the ninth through 12th graders boarded the school bus.

We arrived at the YWCA as scheduled. We began with an activity on group building. Because it was beginning of the school year, some of the girls did not know each other. It was important to build unity within the group. Absent that, there was no way we would achieve any level of success.

As the morning began, I could see pockets of girls gravitating to the cliques to which they belonged. Others sat alone waiting to be invited, but most just seemed to be excited to be free from the confines of the school walls. I saw laughing, hand slapping, conversations about the latest fashion and hair trends, and debates about why school uniforms stifled their sense of individuality, among other things. I sensed their curiosity about what the day would bring.

We began with an Instant Challenge in which the girls had to work together to create the tallest possible freestanding structure out of eight pieces of spaghetti, a large marshmallow, 12 inches of masking tape, and a piece of dental floss. I had used this activity often while teaching Gifted Education at Academy Middle School and found that the kids truly enjoyed it.

In planning for the retreat, specifically the Instant Challenge, I solicited the opinion of the principal. It was very important, initially, that I garner the leader of the building's support for the retreat and the group. I surreptitiously wanted to alter her perception of African American girls by demonstrating that when expectations were set

high, they would seamlessly rise to the challenge. When I described our plans, s/he

hesitated. "I'm not sure that *these* particular students are capable of *that* level of

thinking." Taken aback by her skepticism, I was even more determined to prove her/him

wrong.

I divided the girls up into teams of five and off they went. They competitively

manipulated the materials that I gave them to build their structures. It was quite the scene.

Highly engaged, the girls spent energy engaging in espionage and self-preservation

techniques, spying on other groups, stealing ideas, and engaging in a few other battleship

tactics. The girls had replaced their talk about fashion, hairstyles, and high school gossip

with creative problem solving and competition. Their evaluations would later reflect that

this was one of their favorite and more challenging activities.

After awarding a winning team for the Instant Challenge, we turned our attention

to establishing group norms. The girls identified what they believed to be important keys

for being productive and effective within our group. These included being respectful of

other's opinions, being honest, one person talking at a time, and no talking behind each

other's backs. I wanted the girls to create all of these rules themselves because they

would be invested in following them. I explained that our group norms would help in the

work that we were going to do together. I hoped the norms would encourage us to be

more thoughtful, productive, and proactive. I reminded them that we should all take

responsibility for making sure that the norms are respected and adhered to. They

affectionately named that process *Checking Each Other*.

After establishing the group norms, we immediately moved into our next activity. The goal was to get the girls to examine particular unrealized stereotypes they may have held. I hoped to use that conversation as a springboard to begin discussing how to negate such stereotypes. I asked the girls to describe a typical African American female.

To facilitate the conversation, I told them to pretend that I was from another planet and I wanted them to describe what a Black female would look like, talk like, etc. I told them that they were to share their ideas and I would write them down on poster paper at the front of the room as they thought of them.

Their hands shot into the air and I began calling on the girls to prevent them from all sharing at once. "She got five kids and she get food stamps." "She got four baby daddies." "She always cussin' somebody out." "She do hair in her house." "She keep her hair and nails done." "She ain't got no job." "She live with her Momma." This activity continued for about seven minutes as the girls laughed and slapped hands as the description of a mythical girl they named Loquesha continued.

Although I tried to remain focused on recording what they said, I was truly appalled. I felt a plethora of emotions: irritation, heartbreak, anger. It was hard to listen to their horrendous depiction of an African American young woman. Though I was cognizant of the stereotypical African American girl, their description was not at all consistent with *my own* vision of an African American woman. Despite our common ethnicity, our pictures and experiences were vastly different.

I wondered if they realized that they were essentially offering degrading, negative descriptions of themselves, of me, of their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. Resisting

the urge to scream at the top of my lungs, I kept my composure. After recording their long list of descriptors, I simply asked, "Ladies, is *this* who *you* are?"

The question hung in the air. I shuddered to think that the description they had given and who they believed themselves to be appeared to be consistent. A long silence lingered in the room with no answer to my question. I wanted the girls to process what had just happened. Had they made the connection or was Loquesha independent of their own self-concepts?

Based on the prolonged silence it became clear that the activity essentially encapsulated what these girls believed to be true about African American women, about themselves. I was astounded at their portrayal of Loquesha. My head spinning, I pondered how my personal upbringing and extensive education yielded beliefs so vastly different from theirs. My assumptions that we had been raised differently, and thus held different perceptions of African American women were not only realized, but brought to fruition tenfold.

I needed to take a break to recollect my thoughts. Lisa and I quickly went back to the drawing board during the impromptu ten-minute break. I assumed that we would have to spend some time reshaping some stereotypical answers but I wasn't prepared for the magnitude and severity of the answers that the girls gave in the description of Loquesha. We spent the remainder of the day redefining what it meant to be an African American woman and how we have to work hard to negate these very stereotypes that the young ladies identified.

As I reflected on what I heard that day, I realized that although my perspectives were different, I was not ignorant of the portrayal of African Americans that is thrust not only upon the girls but the rest of society. African American women are pointed out and gawked at as the media portrays them as loud, ghetto, ignorant sex objects. These girls internalized this very sentiment.

The need for a program that focused on defining self and the concept of self-efficacy became irrefutable in my mind. This became the basis of the work for the rest of the year. In a larger sense, it served to inform my work as an African American woman. I began to really internalize and reflect on the dire need for a more focused intervention by considering the outcome of this activity.

I considered the spring 2007 furor over the New York City syndicated radio personality Don Imus' racist and demeaning characterization of a group of African American women on the Rutgers' College basketball team. The comment referred to the young women as, "nappy headed hoes." Listening to the girls produced an overflow of reflection and emotion in me. They seemed to confirm Imus' prejudiced views about themselves. What was even more disheartening about that comment was the fact that very little of the discussion surrounding that event centered on the broader constructions of African American women as unattractive and undesirable.

I felt I had confirmed, beyond a doubt, that those constructions from popular culture find their way into education (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The day's exercise solidified the fact that these particular girls internalized those demeaning characterizations in their depiction of Loquesha. I saw a culture of acceptance that

expects the girls to function in an environment that is accepting of behaviors that harbor racist undertones of African American women as ugly misfits.

My mind filled with a sad reality in which African American girls are not encouraged to succeed or excel because of the aforementioned demeaning stereotypes. The girls' words and description of Loquesha put a young Black female face on issues of which many others have written. The fact that the face looked so much like their own, haunted me. Based on the events of the day, I knew that I wanted the group to empower African American young women through a focus on self-efficacy, self-empowerment, self-esteem, and self-respect.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this would become my life's work. With what I learned that day, I wanted the GTW to focus on development and cultivation of self-efficacy among African American girls. These girls had ignited a fire within me that revealed my mission, my passion, and what I believed to be my purpose.

For the girls in the group, despite the flawed and corrupt system, my expectations for them would be no less. They would be required to attend and participate in all of their classes, obtaining good grades would be an expectation, and they would be required to be respectful to both peers and adults. It is unacceptable to me that a flawed system suffice as an excuse for not giving 100% when they walked through the school doors every day.

Program Summary

GTW was created to empower African American young women through a focus on self-efficacy, self-empowerment, and self-respect. The target audience was African American girls in ninth through 12th grades. The group met once a week and the activities

that I created centered on one of the aforementioned focus areas. Group activities were always self-reflective in nature and challenged girls to make decisions that would push them closer to goals that they have set for themselves. I, as often as possible, utilized additional community, resources and members.

Throughout the two years, girls participated in a number of activities, field trips, seminars, and workshops that served to accentuate group goals and focus areas. These included Diversity University, the African American Women's Conference, and the Historical Black College Tour just to name a few. Teachers recommended students that they thought would benefit from an intervention of sorts. Indicators that they may consider include failing or falling grades and behaviors or attitudes they may be rebellious in nature. Enrollment has, in the past, been all African American young women. This is attributed to the nature of the culturally specific discussions and activities.

Meetings were always discussion oriented. Each girl is addressed as Miss *first name*. This is done to communicate high standards of respect. We deal with the concerns that may surface from issues of intersectionality, being female and African American. We began each weekly meeting with these moments or opportunities to celebrate positive decision-making. Called growing moments, these may range from, "I got an "A" on my geometry test" to "I wanted to snap out, but I didn't because I thought of the group and I thought about how it would look" (interview with Serenity, 2011).

Topics ranged from assertive versus aggressive communication styles to healthy relationships. Throughout the year, community service projects were required. Grades,

behavior, and attendance are continually monitored and I stayed in constant communication with parents regarding both positive and negative behavior. If the girls were sent to the office for discipline, we would discuss whether we were confirming or breaking away from stereotypes. This active problem solving process proved to be an efficient and immediate self-check for them.

The expectation was that they would be successful inside and outside of school. They would attend and participate in all of their classes, they would obtain good grades, they would be respectful, and they would attend a post-secondary institution.

Personal and Historical Context

As an African American woman, I have always known of the legacy of prejudice, denial of opportunities, and overt racism that have plagued our country and its people. My parents cultivated awareness in me of issues that have been well documented in the literature. Traditionally, views of education in the African American community have evolved out of a multigenerational legacy of hope that values cultural uplift through education (Carter-Black, 2007). Throughout history, African Americans have sought education and made tremendous sacrifices for the education of their children. Inconsistently, however, African Americans are among those most disadvantaged by low achievement in the United States today (Denny, 1992). Heavily laden with a history that includes unequal access, preceded by denial of education, the quest for a quality education in this country remains a struggle for African Americans.

Because of slavery, segregation, and other social injustices, education has always been seen as empowering and liberating in African American culture. Perceived as the

most direct route to liberation, access to education historically has always been invaluable to African Americans. Slaves were not allowed to become literate in fear that it would compromise the institutional structure of racism by undermining the power of slaveholders. When slavery was outlawed de jure, sharecroppers were discouraged from obtaining education as well. My grandfather, Mr. Lee O'Dell Ray, was no exception.

Born in 1923, in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, my grandparents, along with everyone they knew, were sharecroppers on a plantation belonging to Mr. T.A. Tharp. Mr. T.A, as they were required to call him, was well known. He owned quite a bit of land near Belzoni, MS just as his family had for many generations. I remember Granddaddy relating how Mr. T.A. frequently commented about how his grandfather's slaves raised the best crop around. He rarely let anyone forget it.

Granddaddy, having dropped out of third grade, tells stories of how conniving Mr. T.A. was. My Granddaddy could not read or write (and still cannot), however he held fast to the dream of owning his own home. He, my grandmother, and their five children toiled the cotton fields in an effort to pay off their rent debt to Mr. T.A.

At the conclusion of every season, Granddaddy would take what he owed to Mr. T.A. who would then falsify a document stating that Granddaddy would have to remain in his service until whatever newly acquired debt was paid. Dubois (2005) noted this very trend by landowners dates back to 1890. "The keynote of the Black Belt (Southern United States characterized by a history of slavery and sharecropping with a high percentage of African Americans) is debt….debt is the sense of continued inability on the part of the mass of the population to make income cover expense"(p.134).

Mr. T.A. continued for this practice for years. He would trump up allegations that ranged from broken tools to improperly reporting the weight in cotton. Granddaddy was of course getting no closer to having his alleged debts settled. As a result, Granddaddy began to hide money in various places in the house. My mother, the second eldest of five kids, attended school and held the responsibility of reading in the house.

My mother and Granddaddy figured out exactly how much he owed at the end of the next season (Granddaddy to this day, comments on how smart my mother was). Granddaddy saved enough to pay Mr. T.A. and place a small down payment on a house within the city limits. He accomplished this by refusing to utilize the credit system that did nothing short of perpetuate the vicious cycle of servitude. One pitch-black night, Granddaddy awakened everyone and he left an envelope on the wood table in Mr. T.A.'s cabin marked with his "X." In silence in the dark of night, the family of Grandma, my mom, two sisters and two brothers, moved to their newly built home in Belzoni, MS.

My mother, alongside her brothers and sisters, continued to toil the cotton fields until she graduated from high school. She says she knew every time she stuffed another cotton plant into her bag that getting an education was a must. Immediately after graduating from McNair High School, Class of 1968, she took her seat in the back of a Jim Crow's Greyhound and headed north. She settled in Kalamazoo, MI to live with her aunt and attend Western Michigan University. She worked hard and received a BA in psychology education.

My mother had long decided that she would raise her children to value and cherish education. She believed education had been her escape from the harsh conditions

of the unforgiving bigoted ways of the South. During one of the many summer trips we took down South, I can remember Dad pulling our red '88 Buick Skylark over on the side of the road I was simply grateful for the opportunity for my sisters and me to stop to stretch our legs, after12 hours in the car. I could tell we were close to seeing Granddaddy but I assumed Dad, who had driven the entire way, needed to stretch his legs, too. It soon became clear why my mom wanted to stop.

I remember very vividly, her opening the car door, walking through the ditch along highway – to the edge of a cotton field before stooping down to pick up a piece of cotton off of the cotton plant. This, to her, was a relic of what she had left behind; and an ever-present reminder that she would raise her children to value and cherish education. She brought back to the car a piece of cotton for each of us. This memory is one of the most powerful of my childhood.

Along with my mother's inherit passion and commitment to education, my father also pushed education as a form of true liberation. He instilled in us a love for learning and a cultural appreciation infused with confidence and self-pride. As an active member of the Black Panther Chapter of the 1970s, he would dress my sister and me as African princesses. He would say, "Sugarlumps, you know what the best part of you is? You are Black and you are beautiful. Do you know why you are going to have to work one hundred times harder in this world? Because you are Black and you are beautiful."

A number of the stories that were read to us as children reinforced these messages. Growing up we had an extensive collection of books that had heroes that looked like us, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), *Follow the Drinking*

Gourd (Winter, 1992), or African stories that told *How the Snake Got its Rattles* (Lester, 1969).

My father died of cancer when I was nine years old and I did not fully understand what his Black and beautiful anecdotes meant at the time. It never occurred to me that he was preparing me for the reality of the harsh world. If he were here today, I would tell him I get it now. I understand what he meant. These, among many, create the backdrop of experiences that have colored my world.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being Black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (Dubois, 2005, p.3).

<u>Historical Context</u>

In the *Souls of Black Folks,* written in 1903, W.E.B Dubois discusses what it means to be Black at the dawning of the 20th Century. He solicits the attention of all by stating the following, "This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colorline" (p.3).

At the turn of the century, Americans were one generation removed from the Civil War and African Americans, more notably so, were one generation removed from the deleterious system of slavery. Born in the North and later residing in the South, Dubois saw a preponderance of evidence that the system of slavery left behind. Jim Crow, the name given to the racial caste system of the South used to legitimize racism and discrimination, was king. Derived from the Black Codes, a series of laws designed to restrict the newly freed slaves' activities and ensure availability of a labor force; the Jim Crow laws systematically depleted the rights of all emancipated slaves and essentially became an imbedded part of Southern living. The system of Jim Crow was designed to dehumanize African Americans by segregating and denying them all inalienable rights guaranteed to "all men." Under this injurious system, many considered African Americans subhuman. "The White man, in order to justify slavery and, later on, to justify segregation, elaborated a complex, all pervasive myth which… classified the Black man as a… mindless Supermasculine Menial" (Cleaver, 1968, p. 80).

In 1781, Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, "I advance it as a suspicion only that the Blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance are inferior to the Whites in endowments both of body and mind" (p.155). These ideas and practices supported and justified the notion of White superiority. Eventually, ideas about Black's inferiority became the accepted ways of thinking, thus maintaining social and political oppression. Ng's (1993) analysis of common sense ideology supports how these central ideas became hegemonic and natural over time. Essentially every realm of society reinforced these very ideals, including the church, media, and the legal system.

Many Christian ministers taught that Whites were the "chosen" people as descendants of the 12 tribes (Revelation 21:12), Blacks were cursed to be servants as the darker brother Ham (Genesis 9:25), and God supported racial segregation. Ministers commonly used scriptures from the Bible to justify the institution of slavery. Ephesians 6:5 (New International Version) states, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." Slaves were taught "to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them (Titus 2:9). Whites oftentimes manipulated the Bible to make slaves feel inferior and dependent upon them. This means of justification became an integral part in the maintenance of slavery as an institution (Giles, 1994).

Newspaper and magazine writers perpetuated similar sentiments by purporting that Black men were not men in the sense that White men were. People were to think of them as "congenial wards and children, to be well-treated and cared for, but far happier

and safer here than in their own land" (Dubois, 1962, p.5). As the Richmond, Virginia

Examiner stated in 1854:

> Let us not bother our brains about what Providence intends to do with our Negroes in the distant future, but glory in and profit to the utmost by what He has done for them in transplanting them here and setting them to work on our plantations…true philanthropy to the Negro, begins, like charity, at home; and if Southern men would act as if the canopy of heaven were inscribed with a covenant, in letters of fire, that the Negro is here and here forever; is our property, and ours forever;…they would accomplish more good for the race in five years than they boast the institution itself to have accomplished in two centuries…(Olmstead, 1856, p.299)

Being enslaved was thought to be the best thing for Blacks, essentially. Thought

of as an act of charity, Whites rationalized the inhumane treatment of slaves. "When the

mass of their field hands were compared to the worst class of laborers in the slums of

New York and Philadelphia, and the factory towns of New England, the Black slaves

were as well off and in some particulars better off" (Dubois, 1962, p.9). The ideal slave

was one who did exactly what he was told, efficiently and cheerfully. "Slaves," said

Frederick Douglass, "are generally expected to sing as well as to work" (Douglass, 1865).

Many of our social institutions were founded on the principals of the color line.

The government, for example, used the legal system as a vehicle to aid and abed

discriminatory, racist, and sexist practices. Existing prior to Jim Crow, the Black Codes

were laws that restricted the civil rights and liberties of Blacks. It was an attempt by the

government to control the labor, migration and other activities of freed slaves after the

Civil War during the Reconstruction period (Dubois, 1962). Another example of the use

of the legal system was our Constitution. The United States Constitution, as adopted in

1789, sanctioned the system of slavery. Because the Constitution was built on the belief

that all men were created equal and were born with certain inalienable rights, it was used to rationalize slavery. In determining each state's quota of Representatives in Congress, it stated that each Negro slave was to be counted as three-fifths of a person (U.S. Const. art. I, § 2, cl. 5). The practices of bargaining rights and liberty of Blacks was witnessed when the framers of this American credo failed to address the injustices of slavery, giving up the slaves' rights in an effort to maintain slave-owners' support of the Constitution (Smith, 1999). Later modified with the addition of the 13th and 14th amendments, slavery was abolished de jure.

For the newly freed slaves, freedom appeared to be an artifice at best. The system of segregation that would fall in its stead would be just as injurious as the prior (Dubois, 1962). Because the illusion of inferiority had to be maintained, laws that forbade the listlessness and unemployment of Blacks were set in place. The vagrant laws, as they were called, made it a criminal offense for Blacks not to work (Alexander, 2010). "All free Negroes and mulattoes over the age of eighteen" were to have proof of a job at the beginning of every year (Alexander, 2010, p. 28). The freedmen, without a definitive place to live and work, turned to slavery's close kin. Slavery then accepted its new alias and called it sharecropping, a system that forever indebted the tenants (slaves) to the landowner (master). Dubois wrote, "The slave went free; stood for a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery" (Dubois, 1962, p. 30).

Under Jim Crow, Blacks were systematically relegated from all realms of society. They were kept from voting by poll and literacy tests, slavery continued to be a viable consequence for menial crimes, and the Klu Klux Klan used intimidation by committing

heinous lynchings and other tactics (Alexander, 2010; Kennedy, 1959). These dehumanizing acts were the result of "an unjust order that engendered violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanized the oppressed" (Freire, 1968, p. 28).

Whites routinely referred to Blacks as niggers, coons, darkies and other derogatory names that denigrated and reinforced anti-Black stereotypes (Kennedy, 1959). In Kennedy's *Jim Crow Guide* (1959), he explicates beliefs that were indicative of societal sentiment. He states that Whites were superior to Blacks in all ways, including intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior. People of the time believed that sexual relations between Blacks and Whites would produce a mongrel race that would destroy America and if necessary, violence should be used to keep Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Along with these known philosophies, existed Jim Crow etiquette. Kennedy (1959) found rules that were typical across the South such as this one found as part of Louisiana State Black Code:

> Free persons of color ought never to insult or strike White people, nor pressure to conceive themselves equal to White; but on the contrary they ought to yield to them in every occasion, and never speak or answer them but with respect, under the penalty of imprisonment according to the nature of the offense (p. 205).

Jim Crow etiquette functioned successfully because it established a realm in which "laws had left empty; they defined and repressed a mass of behavior that … systems of punishment had allowed to escape" (Foucault, 1975, p.178). In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault describes a system in which "each subject finds himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality…a certain coldness, a certain indifference, a humiliation" (p.175). The penalty for not adhering to Jim Crow's law was imprisonment. The penalty for not

acknowledging Jim Crow's etiquette was far worse, as evidenced by countless lynchings and murders (Alexander, 2010).

<div align="center">New Era of Racism</div>

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of society and more to do with the language used to justify it (Alexander, 2010). What has essentially taken place, as Foucault would argue, is our society has traded one overtly racist oppressive system for another more operationalized covert system of oppression (1975). Our society has transitioned to what some scholars have termed the era of a colorblind society (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2000; Schiele, 2007). Today, we use the criminal justice system to label people of color, "criminals" and engage in the same activities claimed to be abandoned but are indicative of the era of Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010). In a colorblind society, a felon who does not have access to certain housing, funding for education, jury duty, governmental assistance, has seemingly less rights than a Black male under the vestiges of Jim Crow (Bonilla-Silva, 2000).

School segregation is now an acceptable reality in this era of new racism termed colorblind society. In Chicago during the 2000-2001 school year, 87% of public school enrollment was Black or Hispanic; less than 10% of the students in the schools were White. In St. Louis, 82% of the students were Black or Hispanic while Philadelphia and Cleveland boasted 78%. Los Angeles came in at 84% while Detroit took the lead at 95%. In Baltimore 88% was the population of Black and Hispanic students (Kozol, 2005). In one district that Kozol (2005) studied in New York, there were 11,000 children in the elementary and middle schools in 1997. Of these 11,000, only 26 students were White,

which equated to be a segregation rate of 99.8%. What is remarkable to note is that this was 2/10 of one percentage point from the legally enforced apartheid in the South of 1954 (Kozol, 2005). More recently in our nation's capital, 79.4% of all students were Black, and 99.1% and 90.4% attended a 50-100% and 90-100% persons of color school, respectively (Orfield, Kucsera,& Siegal-Hawley, 2012). The desegregation of Black students, which increased steadily from the 1950s to the late 80s, has now receded to levels not seen in decades. In this colorblind society instead of the term racially segregated schools, we attempt to use misleading euphemisms by calling them "diverse" social environments (Kozol, 2005). The remnants of Jim Crow linger yet.

<div align="center">Implications Today</div>

Aside from new designations for familiar practices, what is most intriguing in considering Dubois's prophecy, is that it was not only relevant during his time but it has continued well over 100 years past its inception. Dubois's prophetic declaration is evident in many realms in today. African Americans continue to lag behind Whites in virtually every aspect of society. They are about three times as likely to be poor than Whites and earn about 40% less than Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). One study found that the net worth of a typical White family was $81,000 compared to $8,000 for Black families (Shapiro, 2004). When comparing White to African American upper-income families, earning more than $75,000 a year, White families have a net worth nearly three times that of African American families. The average White family owns nearly ten times the property and other assets than the average Black family owns. Sadly, about two thirds of all African American households own zero assets or less than zero (Malveaux, 1999).

In terms of housing, Black owned homes compared to White owned homes are valued at 35% less (Collins & Margo, 2000). African Americans have less access to the housing market because of exclusionary practices by White realtors and homeowners. Blockbusting, one common practice, was a result of the legislative and judicial branches dismantling legally protected racially segregated real estate practices after World War II supported by state and federal policy. Realtors and building developers encouraged White homeowners to sell their home at a loss to prevent what they foreshadowed as drastic property depreciation by the movement of people of color to previously segregated neighborhoods. Realtors would then sell the homes to people of color at inflated prices thereby making significant profits (Smith, 2003).

The judicial branch is no exception. No other country in the world imprisons as many of its racial or ethnic peoples. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its Black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. Nationally, Black men are incarcerated at 9.6 times the rate of White men. In Washington D.C., three out four Black males can expect to serve time in prison (Alexander, 2010). Many cities across the United States tell a similar story. Human Rights Watch (2000) found that in eleven states, Black men were incarcerated at rates that are 12 to 26 times greater than those of White men. The study found that in no state Black men were incarcerated at rates even close to those of White men. For example, in Minnesota, which happens to be the state with the greatest racial disparity in incarceration, a Black man is 26.8 times more likely to be in prison than a White man. In Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, a Black man is more than 15 times more likely to be in

prison than a White man. In Minnesota and Iowa, Blacks account for a portion of the prison population that is 12 times greater than their share of the state population. In every state in the United States, the proportion of Blacks in prison considerably exceeds their proportion of the population.

The rate at which Black men are incarcerated is astonishing. The same Human Rights Watch (2000) study revealed that there are 4,630 Black men in prison nationwide per 100,000 Black men in the population, whereas the rate for White men is 482 per 100,000. The highest rate of White male incarceration (1,151) is lower than the lowest rate of Black male incarceration (1,195; Human Rights Watch, 2000). In cities across the nation, as many as 80% of young Black men have criminal records and are thereby subjected to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives (Alexander, 2010).

The problem of the colorline is even more visible in education. For evidence, one could look to the disproportionality of placement in special education and the suspension rates of African American students (Ford, 2012; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Townsend, 2000). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2007 African American children, ages 6 to 21, only accounted for 17% of the student population in the United States and of those, 12% were placed in various categories of special education. To add perspective, from 1998 to 2007, the percentage of 6 to 21 year olds served under IDEA increased by less than 1 percentage point. Increases in this percentage were seen for all ethnicities, with the exception of Whites. Nine percent of all 6 to 21 year olds, or 5.9 million people in this age group, were served in 2007(Aud, Fox, & Ramani, 2010).

Kunjufu (2002) continually questions the possibility of only three percent of African American students placed in gifted education while 61% of eighth grade African American students are below grade level in math. Sadly, African Americans continue to lag behind their White counterparts on all standard measures of achievement well into the 21st Century (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010 & Toldson, 2012).

<u>Dearth of Research</u>

In looking further into the literature regarding the education of African Americans, there tends to be a significant amount of research that focuses on the plight of the African American boys (Ferguson, 2000; Grimmett, 2010; Husband, 2012; Noguera, 2012). Morris (2007) found that most studies focus on the experiences of African American young men and how they experience schooling. One study's findings were consistent with much of the previous research assessing the disparate disciplinary practices used by schools on African American male student cohorts. The findings conclude that African American males are overrepresented in school discipline sanctions (Fergus & Noguera, 2010). In addition to overrepresentation, another study revealed that African American males, as a whole, receive harsher punishments than their White peers for similar acts of disobedience. As a result, African American males are being suspended at rates higher than that of their counterparts leading to missed school days and missed opportunities to learn (Lewis et al., 2010). Noguera (2012) found that even class privilege and the material benefits that accompany it, fail to inoculate Black males from low academic performance *w*hen compared to their White peers.

Notwithstanding the critical state of African American males, it leaves a dearth of research to the discussion of African American girls and their experiences. Because race based epistemologies tend to focus on the educational barriers negatively effecting African American boys, the needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Research on race, class, gender, and schooling rarely takes into consideration how Black girls experience schooling or on the complexities that Black girls face.

This societal trend is detrimental because there is a tendency to label the crisis of the Black males as a crisis of all Black people (Gilroy, 1993). "The experience of Black women is apparently assumed, though never explicitly stated, to be synonymous with that of Black males or White females….It is mistakenly granted that either there is no difference in being Black and female from being generically Black (i.e. male) or generically female (i.e. White)" (King, 1988, p.43). hooks made a similar point in stating, "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have Black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from Black men …When Black people are talked about the focus tends to be on Black men…"(1981, p.7).

<div align="center">Theoretical Framework</div>

Black girls are virtually invisible in social theory, educational research, and qualitative studies (Evans – Winters, 2010; Henry, 1998; Morris, 2007). The absence of Black girls from existing research has compelled me to study the lived experiences of African American girls in the Girls to Women group. In this research, I employ the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical lens because it provides a useful theoretical

framework for an examination of the current discussion on how African American girls experience schooling.

This framework challenges dominant liberal ideas such as structural functionalism as a notion of meritocracy, which would hardly suffice as an interpretive analytical tool. Talcott Parsons (1951), one of the well-known authorities on this theory, would repudiate structural racism and second-class citizenry as a permanent institutional structure. According to Parsons' theory, these short-term anomalies should self-correct. Such theories further disadvantage people of color and further advantage White people. CRT, in stark contrast, becomes a more useful approach because it contends that racism is ordinary, not aberrational (Bell,1992; Delgado & Stefancic,2001; Ladson-Billings,1998; Ng,1993). Raced - based epistemologies, such as CRT, directly challenge a variety of currently popular research paradigms from positivism to constructivism and liberal feminism to postmodernism, which all draw from a shallow spring of knowledge based on the social, historical, and cultural experiences of Anglos (Stanfield, 1994). CRT challenges the dominant discourse on race as it relates to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Utilizing one of the tenets of CRT, I employ an intersectional approach by discussing how race, gender, and class combine to shape the experiences of African American girls; along with the obstacles created by these social and biological constructs. Intersectionality lends itself well to examining how Black females exist at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). In 1904, Mary Church Terrell, the

first president of the National Association of Colored Women wrote, "Not only are

colored women…handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere

baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because

they are colored women" (King, 1988, p. 42). Intersectionality is a useful approach in that

African American girls do not experience being Black or being female independently.

Categories such as race and gender do not act independently of one another but are

interrelated and influenced by one another (Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie, 2011).

The research that exists on African American girls generally focuses on deficits

such as dropout rates, teen pregnancy, sexual practices, etc. (Payne, 1994). Various racist

theories, disciplines, philosophies and society's interpretation of these inherent

deficiencies present a threat to Black girls' social and educational development (Evans-

Winters, 2005). According to Payne (1994), he offers that research trends are indicative

of society's belief structure. If blame can be placed at the feet of the victim, as does teen

pregnancy, rates of incarceration, dropout rates, etc. we can continue to negate the degree

of racism's embeddedness in our society thereby keeping it on the peripheral as opposed

to acknowledging its centrality in our society. As a result, with the emphasis on deficient

research approach, there is very little attention given to achievement, success, and

resiliency of African American girls currently (Evans-Winters, 2005).

In conjunction with this deficit oriented approach to research, media's portrayal

both currently and historically, have made quite accessible the objectification of Black

women. Foucault (1982) wrote extensively regarding this particular practice of

systematizing and universalizing political and scientific theories that act to turn people

into things. Foucault (1982) called this type of objectification of the subject a dividing

practice and saw these dividing practices as both social and spatial. Socially African

American women exhibit differences that are subjected to certain means of

objectification by society and spatially because they are physically separated from the

norm for exhibiting perceived differences. The actions of dividing practices are justified

throughout society and perpetuated by the media (Madigan, 1992).

Because of this objectification, media is seemingly justified in historically

portraying Black women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, Jezebels, and more

currently as welfare recipients, gold diggers, video vixens, and chickenheads (Morgan,

1999; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010;

Wallace, et al., 2011). These socially constructed images are designed to make racism

and sexism appear to be an acceptable part of life (Collins, 1990).

Stephens and Phillips (2003) examined how images of African American women

have been framed within a racialized and sexualized sociohistorical context. This

research has implications in the educational field because self-concept and identity

mediates and regulates one's behavior (Wallace et al., 2011). How a girl thinks about

herself, how she relates to others, and how others think and relate to her are based on

these symbolic meanings, which in the case of African American girls have been

associated with sexuality (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). For African American girls, the

associations available to them are indicative of negative stereotypes that have minimally

been altered over the past century (Collins, 1990).

Historically, Black women have been portrayed as one of three main images: the mammy, the matriarch, and Jezebel (other interpretations are variations or a metamorphosis of the three mentioned). The asexual, overweight mammy is often illustrated as one who enjoyed her job being subservient to the White family by placing their needs before her own. Fiercely loyal and not considered attractive at all, she gratefully served as nanny, housekeeper, and cook (Townsend et al., 2010).

The emasculated matriarch is portrayed as a callous, contemptuous, and controlling female. Emulating from the Aunt Jemima image and eventually morphing into a deviant called Sapphire, the matriarch was made popular with Moynihan's 1965 report. This report, casted the Black woman as the independent, emotionless head of the household and blamed the regression of the entire African American family structure on Black women (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male…" (Moynihan, 1965).

The promiscuous and oversexed Jezebel character was created as a justification for the inhumane sexual exploitation of Black women during and after slavery (Gordon, 2008). Black women were classified as breeders, mistresses, whores (Davis, 1981; Morgan, 1999), and "vile seductresses who lured White men away from their chaste female counterparts" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p.56). The licentious and immoral Jezebel is portrayed typically by using sexuality to get attention, love, and material goods. American society accepted this characterization as an explanation for the seduction of

White men, particularly slave owners, as an attempt to satisfy her own sexual desires (Stephens & Philips, 2003).

Remnants of these images remain but are exemplified by similarly current interpretations (Wallace et al., 2011). Stephens and Phillips (2003) outlined these contemporary stereotypes. These include the diva seen as always having an attitude while pouring money into superficial self-maintenance and scant clothing; the gold digger who openly seeks material and economic rewards while bartering sex; and the freak who is a reincarnation of the historic Jezebel caricature, as a sexually aggressive and wild woman.

Hip Hop has become a dominant form of youth culture in the United States. The sexual objectification of Black girls and women has become standard in American popular cultural and marketing (Harris-Perry, 2011). These negative stereotypes propagated in the media have helped to shape the self-perception of African American girls. The messages that society perpetuates that emphasize the appearance of girls are proven to foster self-objectification (Stephens & Philips, 2003). Townsend et al. (2010) explored contemporary stereotypical images and identity components of African American girls to determine the impact of these variables on girls' sexual attitudes using the Modern Jezebel Scale. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship among stereotypic images and sexual risk. A further look into the study also revealed that these particular girls, as a result, were highly sexual, aggressive, and even combative.

Gordon (2008) examined associations between Black media use and African American girls' focus on beauty. Using a data from a survey of 176 African American adolescent girls (mean age = 15) the results indicated that both exposure to and

identification with portrayals of Black women as sex objects contribute to African American adolescent girls emphasizing the importance of being the "young, sexy, and beautiful objects of male attention, regardless of their occupation and intelligence" (p.247).

How Black Girls Experience Schooling

According to Kunjufu (2002), the future of the African American student population lies in the hands of White female teachers. Ninety-three percent of the American teaching staff is White with 83% of elementary school teachers as White females (Kunjufu, 2002). This transracial trend, a predominance of White teachers teaching Black students, has been a common practice since desegregation. This can be accredited to the governmental action to replace Black teachers in Black neighborhoods (Evans-Winters, 2005 & Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Transracial teaching may have implications in educating African American students, namely girls.

Ogbu and Simons (1998) conducted a study in which he attributed Black students' awareness of their status as inferior (educationally, socially and economically) to that of White students, to their mistrust of White teachers and the educational system as a whole. They developed a cultural – ecological theory in which in he attributed Black students' poor academic achievement to their interpretation and responses to racism or discrimination because of their status as involuntary minorities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This issue of distrust of White teachers by Black students is evident in an ethnographic study by Evans-Winters (2005) in which she discovered that many urban adolescents do not believe that their teachers are able to identify with the students like the African

American girls she studied. "I think Black teachers would treat us different from White teachers, because I think some of them prejudice at that school. Like this one teacher hate to see me coming" (p. 86).

In addition to mistrust, many African American girls face barriers from the lack of preparedness in their classroom teachers. Many teachers feel ill prepared to meet the high educational needs of African American students, particularly girls (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teacher preparation may be culpable in the failure of teachers to teach African American students effectively. Most teachers report that their pre-service preparation did little or nothing to prepare them for today's diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Howard(2006), in *We Can't Teach What we Don't Know,* poses a very salient question by asking: "How is it possible, with so much research and information available about multicultural issues today, that prospective educators can complete their entire teacher education and certification program without gaining a deeper grasp of social reality" (p.30)? This question is predictably answered by students, parents, and colleagues that call for greater racial and cultural awareness on the part of White educators (Howard, 2006). In a study conducted by Howard (2001), students' perceptions and interpretations of their teacher's pedagogy revealed that they considered them to be culturally relevant because of their ability to incorporate features of the students' cultural capital into their practices. Central to the idea of culturally relevant instruction is the facilitation of academic success without compromising cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

African American girls face additional impediments from their classroom teachers. Esposito (2011) examined hidden curriculum in predominately White schools.

She noted that many classrooms were punctuated with unspoken norms and rules and social expectations were not stated educational goals, but mastery of them was essential for success in school. Carroll (1997) researched the personal narratives of Black girls in her work entitled, *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls in America.* One participant recalls her classroom interaction with her White teacher. "My math teacher and I have a long history of not getting along. One day I just came to class, put my books down and listened…I decided to just listen as well as I could, be attentive… and that is how I moved my average up from an 87 to a 91" (p.41).

Teachers' expectations tend to vary with race and gender. It has been noted that teachers look for and reinforce more achievement oriented behaviors in White students more often than in Black students (Evans-Winters, 2005). Morris (2007) conducted a study that demonstrated how African American girls encounter unique obstacles in the classroom. In his study, Black girls in a predominately Black school performed well academically, but teachers often questioned their manners and behavior. Some tried to alter the personalities of these girls into "ladies" which entailed curbing behavior that was perceived as loud and assertive. Morris (2007) argues that encouraging this definition of "lady-like" ultimately limits their academic potential. Fordham (1993) suggests that African Americans have been stereotyped as loud, aggressive, and masculine but argues that this is a result of being overlooked and unheard in classrooms that ignore and marginalize them.

Henry (1998) found in her research on the schooling experiences of 10 and 11 year olds that African American girls position themselves in multiple and contradictory

ways. Henry (1998) believed that girls seemed passive and invisible in the classroom but were willful, audacious, and womanish outside of the classroom. Belgrave (2002) conducted a similar study in which she found African American girls were socialized to develop what she called masculine characteristics such as assertiveness, self-confidence, nonconformity as well as feminine characteristics such as nurturance, emotional and expressiveness. Both studies suggest that Black female students have to confront gender dynamics that overlook and/or suppress differing identities as Black women. African American women are frequently confronted with dissociating themselves from the image of "those loud Black girls" to meet the standard of femaleness as measured by White middle class womanhood thus contributing to the barriers that they already experience in the classroom (Fordham, 1993). Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) argue for a need for research that seeks to understand Black girls' multiple realities. African American female students' multiple identities affect their schooling and have distinctly separate consequences from their White female and male peers (Evans-Winters, 2005).

<p align="center">Black Girls and Discipline</p>

Black girls' violations of traditional standards of femininity may influence their involvement in the school discipline system. It is possible that Black females receive more discipline sanctions because they exhibit greater levels of behaviors that disrupt classroom instruction and management, thereby warranting adult intervention (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2010). Raffaele and Howard (2003) conducted a study in which they looked at 142 general education schools within one district in Florida. Results indicated that Black females were suspended at a much higher rate than White and

Hispanic females at all three school levels. Most suspensions were for relatively minor misbehavior.

Other researchers have found that African American students are sent to the office for less serious and more subjective reasons as well (Blake et al., 2010; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000). Blake et al.(2010) examined the type of discipline infractions exhibited by Black female students in an urban school district to explore whether the pattern of discipline referrals differed from all female students. The results from this study suggested that Black girls are overrepresented in exclusionary discipline practices for reasons that differ from White and Hispanic. Skiba et al. (2000) found that regardless of methodology, racial and gender discrepancies in school disciplinary were consistent. They found no evidence that racial disparities disappear even when controlling for poverty and instead disproportionality in suspension rates appeared to be due to prior disproportionality in referrals to the office. The researchers concluded that the disproportionate representation of African Americans in office referrals and suspensions is evidence of a pervasive and systematic bias that may well be inherent in the use of exclusionary discipline.

<p align="center">Conclusion</p>

"Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being Black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colorline (Dubois, 2005, p.3). These words have lent great understanding as to what should continue to demand our dire attention well into the 21st

Century. What is amazing is that Dubois's resolute and shrewd synopsis of the state of society still has resounding implications. This review of literature has taken into account the historic, economic, and political conditions in which Black girls experience schooling. Through the lens of CRT, intersectionality has lent itself to understand how race, gender, and class combine to shape the experiences these girls within certain contexts at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression.

We know that teachers, both Black and White, feel ill prepared to teach African American girls. Because of their violation of traditional standards of femininity, it is more likely that they will be disciplined and graded based on behavior. Media has historically called them Mammys, Jezebels, and Welfare queens and has now taken to more culturally relevant terms such as gold diggers, chicken heads, and video vixens (Morgan, 1999; Wallace et al., 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Townsend et al., 2010). What now do we expect of them?

It is imperative not to ignore or minimize the impact that societal factors have on African American girls. "African American girls are more likely to experience social barriers, in a society that values White over Black, men over women, and wealth over poverty. African American female students are more likely to encounter race, class, and gender discrimination in classrooms, curriculum, and pedagogy, which puts them at great risk of school failure" (Evans-Winters, 2005, p.17).

Through this research, I attempt to answer the charge given by Austin (1989) in her article entitled, "Sapphire Bound", encouraging female scholars of color to refute the Sapphire stereotype by attesting to the social and political circumstances affecting

women of color. Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) echo this sentiment by calling for "more scholarship in the field of education that looks at the educational experiences and schooling processes of African American girls" (p.12). I feel a certain obligation to conduct this research due to the dearth of research that does exist regarding the school experiences of Black girls. "I refute the subtle and not so subtle pressures on minority female scholars to cast their scholarship in race and gender neutral terms" (Austin, 1989, p.539).

We need our sisters to be present in the literature and not grouped in with Black boys and White girls. Black girls are invisible in social theory, educational research, and qualitative studies (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Henry, 1998; Morris, 2007). Our struggle is not their struggle. This study will aim to breathe life into the experiences, struggles, and successes of these girls in their current reality.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best studying can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest...(Dubois, 1980, p. 36).

This auto ethnographic study offers an amalgam of qualitative research and lived reality. The title of this work reflects my goal of shedding light on the lived experiences of the African American girls who were members of Girls to Women (GTW) at an urban, diverse high school during both the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years. Through the lens CRT, I highlight the experiences, struggles, and successes of the girls in their current reality. By using the counterstories of the girls, I seek to bring light to their stories and lived experiences while examining how race, gender, and class combine to shape their experiences in school.

The data in this study are the counterstories created from the interviews of the five girls who were members of the group. In this chapter, I provide an explanation of why qualitative methodology is the most efficient and competent research paradigm, how I chose participants, why the terminology counterstories versus narratives or traditional stories is used, and how the girls' counterstories were analyzed.

<u>Historical Context</u>

The history of qualitative research reveals that the modern social science disciplines have taken as "its mission the analysis and understanding of the patterned conduct and social processes of society" (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 23). Many years

before the term qualitative research was coined, people were asking questions about other people's lives and the way in which they understood their worlds. Piaget (1969), for example, created the theory of cognitive development by studying his own children (1969). Dubois (2005) studied the problem of the colorline through observations of small town Black folks in comparison to those in the bigger cities, interviewed African Americans in the Black church, and studied propaganda to come up with a reasonable explanation for why African Americans had not progressed much since the outlawing of slavery de jure.

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As the study of things in their natural setting, researchers attempt to make sense of the meaning that people bring to them. Focused on quality, the goal of investigation in qualitative research is providing a rich description to generate a well-supported hypothesis. Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and their interactions (Merriam, 2009).

I chose to do a qualitative study because, like all qualitative researchers, I am interested in understanding "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). What differentiates qualitative research from other forms of research is the focus on meaning and understanding. The aim of qualitative research is to understand people's experiences from their own perspectives rather than attributing them to a universal framework (Hadjistavropoulos & Smyth, 2001). Essentially, the understanding that will come from this study may not be a predictor of what will happen in the future, as in

quantitative research, but it will be used to gain insight into how the African American girls in the group experience schooling.

The Study

This study, being ethnographic in nature, is both a process and a product. Ethnographies, as a type of qualitative research, are a means in which researchers observe the world in a way that can describe the relationships among previously unknown themes by expanding and informing perspective. My task, as the researcher, becomes simultaneously conveying the meaning that the girls make of their lives with accurate interpretations of my own (Dieser, personal communication, June 12, 2011). I strived to understand the interaction these girls had not just with others, but also with the culture of the school in which they attend from their eyes.

Calling this an ethnographic study allows me, although guided by my own paradigm and/or theory about the way things are, to understand the culture from a participant observer perspective (Merriam, 2009). Because the lens of culture must be used to understand the phenomenon being studied, in this case the girls, culture is central to ethnography. Geertz (1973) explains "that culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can intelligibly be described" (as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 28).

Data

With a focus on culture, CRT becomes an apposite lens because it allows for discussions on how race and gender combine to shape the experiences of African

American girls; along with the obstacles created by these social and biological constructs in their existing culture. In addition to being a theoretical lens, CRT shapes the methodology of this study. Ladson-Billings (2000) explains to teachers preparing to teach African American students how schools and society are both designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview. CRT recognizes that people of color struggle to work against this worldview. Throughout this work, I aim to show how these girls struggle to work against many inherent and dominating hegemonic viewpoints through the use of their counterstories.

Stories have become a popular source of data in qualitative research and are continually used as a way to make sense of the world and varying experiences. They surround us in our everyday lives and have been used to pass invaluable information from one generation to another, particularly in the African American community (Lester, 1969). My interest in stories and counterstories can be accredited to my work with CRT. A critical raced epistemology supports methodological approaches that affirm experiences of varying forms of oppression and validates them as appropriate forms of data. "By incorporating a counterstorytelling method based on narratives…or life histories of people of color, a story can be told from a nonmajoritarian perspective – a story that White educators usually do not usually hear or tell (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p.116). Counter-storytelling is a tool that CRT researchers use to contradict racist characterizations of social life. According to Knight, Norton, Bentley, and Dixon (2004) researchers use counterstories as opposed to traditional narratives to challenge how power is used to privilege some stories over others; to challenge knowledge produced

within stories; and to challenge who is privileged to tell stories. I consider how African American girls experience schooling through examination of their counterstories. Collectively the girls' counterstories help to illuminate successes and struggles throughout their time in school. The text of the story forms the data set.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

The method of data collection for this study was a taped recorded semi structured interview process. I conducted one or two semistructured interviews per participant at approximately 1.5 hours each at a place of their choosing over the course of three months. Semi-structured interviews, often the sole data source for qualitative research projects, are the most widely used interviewing format (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview questions were used as a guide to encourage the girls to reflect on their experiences and their implications related to their schooling experiences. I was particularly interested in their experiences growing up, their association with the GTW, interactions with teachers and administrators. Ultimately, I sought to understand how they navigated the hallways of high school as an African American female in our society.

Qualitative data analysis ideally occurs concurrently with data collection so that the researcher can generate an ever-evolving understanding about the research questions; thereby informing both the sampling and the questions being asked (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The mode of analysis for this project was a constant comparative method and was a simultaneous process that happened throughout the entire research project (Merriam, 2009). Varying from other traditional forms of research, this recursive

approach involved me analyzing the data from the transcription of the interviews and finding similar or constant themes.

In employing this process, my goal was to gain a perspective that was relevant to the context of the data being observed and recorded. Essentially the process involved me conducting the interviews, transcribing them, writing the stories, and employing member checking to ensure that the stories are accurate. I returned the stories to the girls to present the entire written narrative, as well as the interpretations derived from the information, with the intention of confirming the accuracy and credibility of my findings. I then compared the themes thereby refining them in hopes to find major or primary themes after which I identified examples in the data that supported the findings (Merriam, 2009).

<div align="center">Participants</div>

The participants in this study were non-probabilistic and selected from GTW. I selected participants in an effort to maximize the depth and richness of the data to address my research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) by selecting girls who reflect differing experiences in home life, grade levels, academic and behavioral performance. I chose purposeful sampling as a method because I wanted to understand from whom the most could be learned (Merriam, 2009). The young ladies are the experts were invited to participate because of their experiential relevance (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Researchers DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) would call the girls key informants because they were intentionally selected for their knowledge, their role in a setting, and their willingness and ability to serve as translators and/or commentators for the

researcher. The girls were "more of a participant in meaning making than a conduit from which information is retrieved (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314).

<div align="center">Trustworthiness and Limitations</div>

External validity or trustworthiness refers to the generalizability of the findings of the study (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). This qualitative study emphasizes the thick description of a relatively small number of girls within the context of a specific setting. The descriptions of the girls are sufficiently detailed to allow for transferability to other settings considering the context of their individual lives. Validating or assessing the trustworthiness of a study means defending the soundness and whether or not the results are generalizable. This is of particular difficulty in qualitative study and important to note. As Richards (2005) points out, reliability is not the same as consistency, no more than the basic regularity of train schedules implies predictability (as cited in Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The goal of employing standardized measures in a controlled setting is likely to be incompatible with qualitative studies. This challenge is noted.

Criticisms of qualitative research speak to the challenges of providing an objective picture of a cultural reality and would call said study a nonrepresentative sampling (Johnson, 1997; Pring, 2000; Hadjistavropoulos & Smyth, 2001). Because I chose to work with a small number of participants, information collected is not intended to be fully representative of all possible experiences or even tap the predominant cultural perspective. Such representation is not my goal. I am fully aware of this limitation and generalized this totality from a relatively microcosmic view. Notwithstanding, I was interested, more so, in the girls' personal experiences and how they navigated school.

Direct quotations were reported in first person to further minimize this limitation to accentuate themes, findings, and implications.

Another limitation worthy of note is my inherent bias whether accredited to my theoretical perspective or my personal experiences. I would be remiss to negate that my personal experiences do not color my own interpretations. Both my involvement and perspective could have potentially influenced my interpretation of the data. All researchers' perspectives have been tainted by their experiences, personal beliefs, and theoretical affiliations (Johnson, 1997). According to Johnson (1997) the key strategy to understanding researcher bias is reflexivity, which means that the researcher actively engages in critical self-reflection about their potential bias and predispositions. To account for my researcher biases, I have shared my personal experiences and experiences growing up in Chapter 2. Through the process of reflexivity, I have become more self-aware and was able to monitor and control both my conscious and subconscious biases (Johnson, 1997).

One challenge that has presented itself is the existing relationship that I have already established with the girls. I essentially already have what Rudestam and Newton (2007) call membership status as I saw these girls day in and out for two full academic school years. I grew to care for every one of the girls in the group. I shared tears and celebrations. I have scolded some, out of love, for less than desirable decision making and in some instances, been the proxy or othermother in the absence of or in addition to the custodial parent. I not only fulfilled my role as administrator in the building, but I had

essentially taken on what Booker (2006) calls an othermother or a natural mentor (Sullivan,1996).

Natural mentors are nonparental adult women who serve as inspirations for successes for African American girls. Sullivan's (1996) study concluded that natural mentors such as aunts, older friends, teachers, neighbors, etc. were characterized by their ability to listen, understand, and validate experiences and feelings of the adolescent due to the adult's ability to identify with the adolescents' community, culture, and gender.

Although this perceived challenge had the potential to be an inherent bias, I have found what Evans-Winters (2005) calls the "sister" status to be quite advantageous. Trust is essential in the African American community, especially among women and adolescents, like many other oppressed and victimized groups (Evans-Winters, 2005). The fact that I am a "girl" and African American has essentially created a safe place for dialogue that was evident at the onset of my role as the group's sponsor. Being a cultural insider, I have learned to come to love my role and embrace it as a research strategy. As Delgado Bernal (1998) states, "cultural intuition is a complex process that is experimental, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic" (p.568). My goal is that the convergence of all the aforementioned biases inherent in this ethnographic process will result in a description that is uniquely the product of the observed.

<div align="center">Ethics and Potential Shortcomings</div>

Ethical issues permeate qualitative research, particularly studies in which interviewing is the primary method for data collection. Often ethical problems in qualitative research are a function of its open-ended methodology and the nature of the

questions posed to participants (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). More so, as in conducting any study in which there are human participants, there are potential risks.

One such risk, as noted by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) is the power differential that can exist between researcher and participant. Using a critical race lens, this is of particular interest to me because CRT examines the use of privilege and considers who is privileged to tell stories. I would argue that we should also take into consideration who would be privileged to interpret them as well. I am ever mindful and reflective of my social role and role as researcher. I am also cognizant of how invasive and potentially oppressive the interview process can be to a participant in this same regard. To alleviate this risk I integrated reciprocity in the construction of knowledge in the data analysis process by viewing the girls as true experiential experts (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The girls were essentially a conduit from which information is retrieved (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Based on the existing relationship between the girls and myself, however, I did not foresee this as being a potential roadblock. To ensure this, member checking as previously mentioned was also used.

Another risk that can exist in qualitative research is the protection of the confidentiality of third parties mentioned in the narratives. Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe (2001) cautioned that although "qualitative research occupies a useful and important role in social science inquiry….when ethical issues surrounding this research are discussed, elements of risks may be neglected" (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001, p. 163). Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe (2001) would argue that the existence of the issue of confidentiality of third parties is the result of the largely public availability of research

studies. As a result, there exists the possibility of identifying third parties mentioned in narratives. Participants may disclose sensitive information about third parties that may prove to be problematic. To account for this risk, I used pseudonyms for both names and locations. I also used generalizations when such did not compromise the integrity of the information shared.

The very nature of semi structured interviewing could have welcomed the discussion of past traumatic and negative experiences. Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe (2001) identify this as another potential risk and contend that issues may surface that the researcher may not have anticipated and were not necessarily prepared to deal with. I monitored for signs of distress and was prepared to cease questioning immediately if the need arose. Moreover, I ensured that I did not put pressure, directly or indirectly on them to respond to any of the questions asked.

To account for further unknown risks that may surface, Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe (2001) recommend that consent to participate in a study should always be ongoing and negotiated between the researcher and participant rather than a one-time signing of a consent form. They suggest using multiple consent forms or a periodic verbal check as a way of implementing process consent (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). I took the necessary precautions to ensure informed consent to minimize the risk to my participants by doing a periodic verbal check. I respected the right to privacy of all of my participants. Confidentiality and anonymity are means by which researchers also protect their participants (Smythe & Murray, 2000). I disclosed in the signed consent of my intent to keep private any personal and identifying information collected or any such

means of tracing such information, only disclosing on the condition of the participant's

informed consent (Appendix). In addition and in accordance with the guidelines of the

University of Northern Iowa regarding the protection of human participants, a request for

review was submitted and approved by the to the IRB for approval to interview

participants for this study.

CHAPTER 5

THE COUNTERSTORIES

…the Negro is…born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity... (Dubois, *2005, p.7*).

<u>Miss Danesha</u>

I received a text message an hour before I was scheduled to meet with Danesha. It read, "Do you mind if CeCe joins us?" Understanding that the dynamic of this 18 year old's relationship with her eight year old little sister was very maternalistic in nature, I responded right away, "of course not," knowing that it would not in any way compromise the integrity of our time together.

As I walked into the Mexican restaurant, CeCe was concentrating on a kid's menu word find. She had already settled on the pizza. Danesha and I greeted with a long hug. This was the first time I had seen her after she successfully completed her first year at a Historically Black College (HBCU) five hours from the Midwestern city of about 69,000 that she calls home. With her light caramel complexion, garbed in a summer dress and jean jacket, Danesha's hair was pulled up in a ponytail bun with a side swooped bang. Her hairstyle was familiar.

We immediately began catching up on the latest from her year away at college: boys, family, professors, and classes. Danesha's baby face was glowing, speaking on all of the happenings of her first year in college. She was elected to the Royal Court for

Homecoming, she was voted Ms. Sophomore of her class, and she was selected to be

secretary of her student government. I was so proud of her.

Danesha began reflecting on what it was like growing up as we ordered our food.

"Me and BJ were real close. We did everything together." BJ, Danesha's brother, was

just two years younger. "Then came CeCe ten years later." Danesha's family consisted of

BJ, CeCe, mom, and dad – perfect in her eyes. Dad worked for a number of companies as

a human resource manager. As a result, Danesha's earlier experiences were interspersed

with frequent movement. Her family lived in three Midwestern cities in a period of about

ten years. "I never needed for anything though…We always lived in a good house, nice

car. I went to a lot of schools with White kids."

Danesha recalled the year that she turned eleven. For her, this year would be a

year that would change the rest of her life. Reflecting, she began by referring to those

years as the "Cold Years." Her mother died that year. "I was a momma's girl…I did

everything with her…But I feel like growing up everyone was closer and everyone

communicated and it's not like that now… but I'm used to it…" For a short time after her

mother's death, the family moved back home to live with her grandmother, whom she

affectionately called Nanna.

Danesha spoke very highly of Nanna for keeping her grounded through spiritual

guidance and filling the role absent her mother. "[Nanna] is my mother…she is always

there, she knows everything." Danesha and Nanna spent a lot time together growing up

and still do whenever possible. A good portion of their time together, growing up,

usually revolved around church. "I was raised in church…I loved it…and I thank my

Nanna for it." She reflected that even today she knows that there are times that she needs

to go to church and pray just to weather life's everyday trials. She accredited Nanna for

providing that spiritual foundation that she has to turn to.

Notwithstanding the support of Nanna, Danesha recounted the difficulty of

returning to her mother and father's hometown after the death of her mother.

> When seeing all my friends doing stuff with their mom and uh him [Dad] coming back…it was totally different because when I was here, she was here. Yeah those were some cold years… I was mean to any-everybody…I didn't want to be here but I got through that; but it is still hard.

Danesha, the oldest child of then three, says she felt like she grew up before her

time. "Like I feel like I had to grow up and I feel like I don't regret it cuz I feel smart …

Me, I wasn't thinking about me at the time, I was thinking about her and cuz she was

only two (points to CeCe)." She talked about herself stepping into the role of mother at

great length particularly when her dad began dating again. "I felt like when my mom

passed, these are my kids…my responsibility."

Danesha's dad remarried a year after the death of her mother which, in turn,

created tension within their relationship. "I felt like it was too quick….and I'm not finna

be nice." Danesha describes how difficult it was communicating with her dad at that time

in her life.

> It just [felt] like you [couldn't] never do or say nothing because it all leads to an argument…My dad was like oh yeah, she is moving with us, is that ok? I…gave him the coldest face…but then everything starting flowing and I actually liked her…Brenda is a good person and [now] we have a good relationship but I don't see it as mother/daughter.

Danesha and her stepmother's relationship resemble more of a friend relationship than a mother daughter relationship. "Sometimes I come to her with motherly things…but I don't [call her Mom] never have and probably never will…as long as she does what she is supposed to do for CeCe and BJ, I didn't care."

Despite the turbulence in their relationship brought about by her dad's remarriage, she now admittedly credits her first year of college success to her dad.

> I act just like him and didn't realize that til I came to college. I realized that he is always going to tell me nothing but the best. So all those times looking back when we bumped heads in high school, he ended up being right…he pushed me...He has a man-way at coming at these things…I wish my mom was here but I give all thanks to him because I feel like, you know, a lot of his words are in me and the way I talk--it's him. I'm just a nicer version (laughs). I can't do nothing but, you know, give him thanks…even though he get on my nerves! Ugh!..But a good dad, a good dad (laughs).

Danesha began describing her path through school by focusing first on her weight. She recalled,

> I got teased for being overweight in middle school…[Then] I hated everything and I didn't like nothing about me…but [in elementary] I loved school…I liked to read. I was advanced in reading and writing, but now I hate to read and write – hate it. Probably because they make me do it. Growing up…I loved my teachers and I made friends easily. ..I loved my 5th grade teacher, Mrs. Coldman…she was Black. I made sure I purposely got put in her class…because I wanted the best education… She is the best teacher. I loved her.

Danesha clarifies that she did not request to be put in Mrs. Coldman's class because she was Black. She stated that she felt that it was the best class "compared to what I heard the other students doing – I just wanted to advance….I specifically asked what teacher was better." Her personal informal research study, along with Nanna's position in the district Human Resource office, led her to Mrs. Coldman as the apposite

choice. Danesha continued to reminisce on all of the teachers she had throughout her K-12 school career. Noting the distinction in Mrs. Coldman's teaching style, the only Black teacher she ever had, she laughed out loud as she explained the difference in her disposition and the manner in which she interacted with her students compared to her White counterparts. She explains,

> I felt like they had the same goal, but I felt like with her it was more of a personal connection … she was more passionate than all of my other teachers. Her versus my third grade teacher… I love both of them… They both had a passion but I felt like hers was stronger; she really, really cared.

Danesha quickly recognized that Mrs. Coldman's teaching style was redolent of how she was raised. It was a familiar authority. Small and petite in stature, Mrs. Coldman's presence commanded respect and compliance from both students inside and out of the classroom.

> She was tough and growing up at home, you show tough love… Ahh naw, she serious…versus, you know like a White teacher… You know they're serious but you know when you see Mrs. Coldman... she did not play that… Get in line, *we in line*. But you know, like I felt like it was more genuine, like it was more personal. She really like, ok, you need to learn this; you don't know, she *tell* [you]…I probably felt more comfortable with her…I felt that she was more passionate.

As the conversation shifted to color, Danesha recalled starting to become aware of its implications at about middle school age. She stated that prior to high school she chose not to pay attention to color because she felt that it could potentially lead to judgmental behavior. "I feel like when people pay attention to color, they judge…I didn't pay attention to it for the negative reasons."

Reality quickly smacked Danesha in the face as she entered high school. She began to notice that certain privileges were given to certain students. Up until that point, color had not been one of Danesha's primary considerations. "I could see the looks and people judging me and I didn't realize that *oh it's because I'm Black*…." She now admits that choosing to disregard color as a reality during those middle school years was naïve. She quickly began to experience the effects of inequality and privilege. "She just got to do this and I didn't. Is it because I am Black? Ok that's when it snapped. The real world – so it's not all equal." Danesha being in a mixed high school with a population of 33% students of color, along with her progression in maturity, made this discovery inevitable. "It made me mad but it was really a big eye opener that racism still existed…"

Danesha's awareness of the implications of race was solidified in high school. She continued the discussion by considering other aspects of her life in which she felt her color also had implications,

> … getting hired at Karen's I'm like I have to work twice as hard because I am the only one here. .. they have so many ignorant questions and I'm like what? You know so I can't slip because they have it…easier because of their color. I have to work twice as hard because of my color. That's not fair. So I learned that in high school. Oh ok so this is how the world really is, this [racism] still exist. Just not as bad and not as reckless.

Danesha chose to be a member of GTW during both her junior and senior years; unlike some of the young ladies whom teachers identified and recommended. She recalled her favorite experiences while in the group with a big smile as we shared a bowl of corn tortilla chips with salsa. Among them were the Soul Food dinner and the historically Black college tour. The Soul Food Dinner was an opportunity for the young

ladies to get together to cook their favorite dishes that were customary in the African American culture. They sold tickets prior to the event, spent all day cooking, and presented their dishes to their family, peers, and the community. The historical Black college tour was a three day trip to two historically Black colleges in the Midwest. The tour exposed the young ladies to the culture and atmosphere of a Black college, thereby widening their options for post-secondary education. The young ladies got the opportunity to participate in an actual college class. "I can't thank you enough…Without the group, I would not be at Washington if I would not have gone on that trip."

Danesha was a young lady who had great insight and tended to be the voice of reason within the group. On days when the group deviated from the objective or was excited from happenings during the school day, she was typically the one that politely reminded the other ladies of how important and limited their time together was.

Notwithstanding her perceived role of task manager, Danesha was often accused of "talking and acting White," typically from her African American peers. She expressed her frustration with the fact that being articulate and behaving appropriately was synonymously defined as "talking or acting White." "It makes me so mad…So they say you want me to act White? No! Ugh…I've always talked proper, never talked ghetto." She emphasized that being accused of talking and acting White is not just an experience she had in high school but one that continues in college, particularly among African Americans females at her school. "It is teaching me to be patient, since I want to be a teacher."

Danesha believed the purpose of the group was to acquire the skills to discount what society has defined as "typical Black girl behavior." "We don't have to settle for what people say…never let someone define you." Danesha began to become more excited as we recalled a number of fights that we both witnessed over the course of our two years together; regretting that a good portion of them involved Black females. "It made us look bad when we go to class and teachers talk about it. Then the teachers just look at you a whole different type of way. I hate that."

Danesha continued to discuss ways in which to combat stereotypes living inside the skin of a Black girl. She learned from the group that one way to do so was to defy what people say. "Just because people say we have attitudes or we dress like this or we act like this doesn't mean that we have to."

Another function of the group was to help the girls academically. Danesha felt that this was helpful in that the girls who did well were rewarded for their hard work. The reward usually came in the form of group recognition and a balloon to carry around the school with "Congrats" written on it. Every quarter the young ladies and I would look at the Ds and Fs, highlight them, and discuss an action plan to improve the grade in question. I also offered after school tutoring as a means to improve the grades of the young ladies. "I felt like it woke me up… I need to go to college…I don't want no highlights on my paper…that's way too many."

Although she says the GTW program had a transforming impact on her, she questioned if others, including teachers, took it seriously. She recalled a few difficult interactions with teachers. She detailed her interaction with one teacher in particular that

had very strong opinions about the group. Danesha classifies who we will call Ms. Paige

as

> …just a straight up hater. Always had a comment every time…I don't know why
> you guys have to go with Ms. Boyd….Why is it just a group for African
> American girls?...How you gon be a teacher and you say something like that…I
> wanted to be like are you racist?...Made me mad. Got treated in front of the whole
> class, though.

Despite feeling that only one teacher harbored ill feelings toward GTW, the

majority of her teachers were supportive of the work that the group was doing throughout

the school and in the community. This then led to a discussion about administration in the

building. She explained that it was a different level of discomfort than that of the "hater"

teacher. She felt that the relationship or interactions from one administrator in particular

were contrived and insincere.

> I feel like it was fake…you know but I don't care if you speak to me or not…Like
> the principal…I know you be talking stuff. Just quit, you don't have to speak to
> me…I can see it all in your face and in your voice and how you act around us…I
> might be 17, but I ain't stupid…I felt like she was doing it because it looked good.
> I don't think she believed in the group.

Danesha took offense to what she believed to be the disingenuous dealings of the

principal because she believed so strongly in the group. Overall Danesha felt as if the

other administrators were unbiased in their dealings with the girls. As long as they

followed school rules and policy, they were consistent and predictable. Some were even

friendly at times.

As our time neared an end, Danesha detailed a plan to emulate GTW at

Washington University, stating that there was so much that African American girls could

still learn about themselves even at the college level. She desired to start a group to preach the same message, "We don't have to settle for what people say about us." It had become increasingly important to Danesha to defy society's definition of a typical Black female. She resents the Loquesha that became the focus of a number of our conversations in group. "I'm not finna act ghetto – like I will have ghetto moments but I am saying I'm not ever going to let someone define me."

With Loquesha in mind, I posed one final thought provoking question: who is Danesha? Her answer was very simple, "I am still trying to figure that out." She continued on by reflecting on how she has learned so much in her first year as a college student. In retrospect, GTW for her was much more than a training camp for Black girls – it was a crash course on life. "…I learned a lot about the real world, not what I thought it was… I am still growing up…the stuff we learned in your group you take it with you for the rest of your life."

Having always been a Midwesterner, Danesha plans to live somewhere in Texas upon graduating. "I wouldn't mind going there because I love the environment. There is always something to do…and it's a better opportunity for my career. Danesha is an elementary education major and would like to teach third grade. I am still trying to figure out what my purpose is…I'm just scared…scared of losing people…scared to get close to people…scared of heartbreak." This admission was a definite result of the unexpected loss of her mother. It, however, was an interesting contrast to the many conversations that Danesha and I have had about being the strong one, the backbone. "I am supposed to be tough, strong…but somebody needs to be strong for me." She openly admits that this

self-discovery is a journey. "I can't tell you who I am yet but I can tell you… I'm getting there."

<p style="text-align:center">Miss Keisha</p>

Keisha is very athletic in build with smooth dark brown skin. She casually strolled out of the house to my vehicle in a summer printed skirt, sandals, and a satchel. In scheduling our time together I was very hard pressed to pull her away from her daily obligation of babysitting her little sister. Her mom taught summer school and her brother was home from college, but working. After I had a late night conversation with mom, she agreed to let her spend a couple of hours with me. She chose a chain bar and grill and seemed relieved to just get away for a moment.

Earlier that year, Keisha sent me a text message with a picture of her and her homecoming date. The caption read, "Mom, we miss you!" My first question in return was, "What are his grades like?" With a reply text "LOL," I immediately responded, "You look beautiful." Although Keisha was teasing me, I knew there was something behind her reference. As GTW moved along, some of the girls had begun calling me mom. At the time, I often felt uncomfortable with this, wondering if it signified a lack of professionalism or perhaps professional distance from the girls. But, I was and am familiar with the research around the role of women in the lives of Black girls and how my work with GTW seemed to fit.

The truth of the matter was for some of the young ladies in the group, I was a mother figure. We settled on Ms. or Dr. Boyd, as some of the other girls chose to call me in school and Mom outside of the school walls for a few others. Keisha was one of these.

I made no secret of my personal goal of earning a doctorate and discussed this at great length with the girls often, hoping that it would encourage them to create and work towards their own personal goals.

We began our conversation much like the others with just catching up. It had been a year since I had seen her. We talked boys, home life, work, plans for next year, and sports. Keisha had been playing varsity basketball since her freshman year in high school and was now a senior. She was no stranger to the court as she had played on a number of community teams and city leagues since age seven. "I love it, it's my getaway. I play because it's something that I enjoy…when I am down or have a lot on my mind I pick up a ball. It is my stress reliever." Keisha looked like an athlete. She stood a solid 5'10" and played post. On the court she transformed into a confident, vigorous player. In most situations, she was more reserved.

We ordered our food and she began reflecting on her experiences growing up. In Keisha's house there was Mom, one older brother, David, and a little sister named Destiny who was now five years old. Growing up "was a field day…me and my brother would be bored and just make up games." Keisha was a very active, healthy kid. Her admiration for sports was imbedded in the childhood games that she and her brother played often.

Considering the difference in how she was treated from her brother, Keisha stated that she felt that he got the opportunity to do more of the things that he wanted to do, partly because he was older but she felt it was mostly because he was a boy. This included going out with friends, staying out later, and the frequency in which he hung out

with his friends. "I didn't think it mattered but it do. [My mom would say] You just can't go sit at somebody house and just be chillin' over there because you are a girl. Some stuff you just can't do."

She did feel, however, as if she was able to do more since she acquired her first job. "I pay for my own stuff that I do now, so she [Mom] is more lenient." Keisha admitted that she did not want to get a job but stated,

> My mom begged me all the time. You need to get a job and at one point she said I'm done giving you money. You to the point where you should have a job. And then she will bring up, I done had a job since I was 14 so I just finally got one. Wasn't where I wanted to work at but it is somewhere.

Keisha had found a job at a fast food restaurant located close to Winston City High. Since being hired, Keisha has been given a little more freedom but at the cost of more financial responsibility.

As she continued to reflect, she recalled how delighted she was when Destiny was born, five years ago. "At first I was super happy but then she came…. But I love her…she smart, she just hyper and bad sometimes."

Destiny's birth complicated the family dynamic as Keisha was forced to balance her new work schedule, school activities, and sports with sharing the responsibility for looking after her little sister – especially in the summer months while Mom taught summer school. It was intriguing for Keisha see how much her younger sister learned from just watching her. She talked about how Destiny looked up to her. "She do what I do, see what I do, then she do it. I know I gotta set a good example cuz she gon do what I

do." This was motivation for Keisha to make a conscious effort to be mindful of the choices that she made in front of her little sister and her behavior overall.

As the conversation progressed, Keisha's attention turned toward her parents. Keisha's mother is a second grade teacher at an elementary school in Winston. She praised her mother for her strength and the struggle that she saw her go through in order to achieve her goals. "She did it on her own. She had a kid at a young age, still went to college, still graduated…even with road bumps and everything she made it." As a result of being an educator, Keisha's mother sets high expectations for her.

Keisha sarcastically rolled her eyes as she explained what it is like being the daughter of a teacher. "That's the bad thing. Teachers be like, your mom is a teacher, how aren't you getting your stuff done?" She dreaded the fact that the administrators also knew her mom quite well and used her accessibility as a means of correction when needed for Keisha.

As for her father, Keisha went on to explain that she knew very little about him even though he too resides in Winston. The very little she did know came from her grandmother who had a very candid, but soft natured approach of sharing information about her father when Keisha asked about him. Keisha speaks of her father, a man she calls Carl Brown.

> I tried to look for him this past summer, me and Dee [friend] together (nervous laugh)…I probably seen him before and didn't even know it. But I don't think about it no more…It used to bother me… when my brother dad [and little sister] always be here visiting…now I'm getting older and I just don't care anymore…

It appeared that Keisha had convinced herself that caring about her father's whereabouts would not yield favorable results and thus was pointless. This tough girl

persona was contradicted as she went on to discuss her desire to talk to Mom and

Grandma to learn more about her father. Although Keisha seemed curious about him, she

admitted that she really did not have enough nerve to ask her mom about it for fear of

upsetting her. One of her hesitations was that it seemed that the topic was off limits. She

was torn.

> …like one day I just want to see what happened. Why don't yall talk no more?
> Why ain't he in my life? You know but I just ain't had the guts to talk about it
> yet… She ain't never brung it up ever so…I kind of think she just don't want me
> to know…I think it would be hard for her to explain to me the situation.

As a result, Keisha has chosen to live her life by stifling her curiosity regarding

the lack of involvement of Carl Brown. "My granny said he ain't want me so… she was

being real...I just don't care anymore." She seemed resigned to her father remaining

shrouded in mystery.

Keisha's maternal grandmother, as blunt as she has a tendency to be, is a

permanent and respected figure in Keisha's life. "I love my granny… She is always

telling me, you don't need to be doing this; you need to be doing this… or if I'm doing

something wrong…" Keisha expressed that she felt her grandmother filled the void

absent her father. "She has been my backbone. She's filled in the space of not having him

[father] around. She has been a confidant and has also taught me to have faith in the

Lord." Keisha and her grandmother spend Sundays together to attend church. "I love

going to church with her every Sunday. That's kind of our thing."

As the conversation shifted to Keisha's school experience, she recalled taking

notice of her Blackness as early as elementary school. "I went to Polk Elementary and it

wasn't too many Black people. I wasn't the same color as them and didn't act like them… so I had to fit in with everybody else." In Keisha's attempt to conform, she lost herself in doing so. "It caused me not to act like myself. Like I was doing what everyone else was doing just to fit in." She attributed this to her misbehavior that continued into middle school and eventually high school. "I think that's the reason I was acting out so much and getting myself in trouble, trying to be like others."

Keisha made frequent trips to see her administrator for infractions such as being told repeatedly to stop talking in class, refusing to work when told, and goofing off with friends in the classroom. I recalled one incident in which Keisha was brought to my office by a co teacher in her geometry class. She stated that Keisha had refused to complete her homework in the class time allotted. She instead chose to goof off with friends in the class. I thanked Ms. Kemp for involving me and told her that I would problem solve with Keisha. We immediately bypassed the "What did you do, what could have done better" spill that any other student would have received that day. I posed one question, "Is this the behavior that you are choosing?" Her response was "I know Ms. Boyd." I bluntly told her to pull it together immediately and told her that she could not learn sitting in my office. She returned to class incident free.

This incident was a typical occurrence. The infractions were not major, but disruptive nonetheless. As a result, Keisha described her school experience as a rollercoaster. She explained that she always received good grades and was one of the smartest kids in the class, but her mouth, attitude, and the perceived need to conform kept her in a lot of trouble.

I had a lot of friends…I used to get in trouble a lot. I grew up to know… it's not what you are supposed to do. You are supposed to come here to learn like the teacher is still getting paid and I'm acting up for no reason…My grades don't show that I am smart….I am way smarter than I present myself to be in classes.

Keisha acknowledged that there are a number of reasons for her lack of concern with doing well in school.

I be worried about the wrong thing all the time. Who is in my classes, the teacher don't like me, or you know just slacking off and not doing homework…stuff…I know I shouldn't be doing.

She admitted that her rebellious behavior in school had been a source of contention between her and her mother at that time in her life. "She used to be so disappointed," she said, referring to her mother's reaction to Keisha's tumultuous life at school. She thinks it must have been especially hard for her mother to take, given that she was a teacher in the Winston School District. She did, however, note a transformation that had recently taken place that could be credited to both Mom's persistence and her involvement in GTW. Keisha began to realize that behavior that she was choosing was not at all yielding positive results. It, in fact was the adverse. She stated that when people began to seeing and liking the real Keisha, those behaviors that got her in trouble began to diminish. She was maturing.

That has all changed [now] because I realized that my actions were getting me nowhere. I had to learn that everything is not about me. How I used to act was a bad example of me…Plus I got tired of being grounded and not getting to do what I wanted.

This new learning was refreshing to hear. My mind retreated to our numerous conversations and those multiple trips Mom made to the school, leaving her own

classroom, to redirect and issue consequences for the behavior that Keisha chose to display in school. Keisha and her mother's relationship improved dramatically after this noted transformation.

> We've talked about things and I how I act towards her…it opened my eyes that I was only hurting myself and most of all hurting her and that didn't feel good when she told me that. I couldn't continue to put her through that amount of pain, anger, and sadness.

Keisha admits, however, that she still struggles sometime and that there is definitely room for continued improvement.

During Keisha's school career, she has had a total of two Black teachers named Mr. Burns and Mrs. Akar. She noted a difference in the teaching style of both of them as compared to the other White teachers that she has had. "They expected more of me. They pushed me hard…they want me to strive to be the best."

Mrs. Akar was the only Black female teacher that she has had. Keisha states, "She just told me how it was all the time. Like I wouldn't do something right… you slacking and you need to get it together. You are smarter than what you are doing…" Keisha said that Mr. Burns would preach a similar message. "Because I am a young African American lady, he wanted me to strive to be the best. He was a good teacher…he was always getting on me…I really like him…Other teachers just didn't care."

Keisha stated, on more than one occasion, that she felt that her White teachers didn't care about her. As a result, she began not caring about them. Keisha's relationship with her teachers was a reciprocal in nature. "I treated them like they treated me. Like if you was rude to me I was going to be rude back." She admitted that this approach was

not the most proactive or even effective; however, this became her rule of thumb. "If you were nice to me and you loved me, I loved you and you were my favorite teacher."

Keisha's issue was the lack of concern she felt her White teachers showed. One had to wonder however, if a Black teacher had also not seemed to care would she have challenged them? Or was it that the Black teacher automatically had a certain amount of credibility because of their cultural insider status? Keisha felt that she was just another kid in every other White teacher's class that she had been in. There was one exception: Ms. McGowan's class. "She pushed me like she knew my potential. She knew I loved to write, she was always like – write what you feel…" She felt that Ms. McGowan had taken enough time to notice that she enjoyed writing. She had taken enough time to care.

When asked if she could give one piece of advice to all of her teachers, Keisha quickly replied when the old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover." This response was followed by an explanation. "Just cuz I am Black I may have an attitude sometimes. It doesn't mean I'm going to be like that all the time."

Preconceived notions and confirming stereotypes were the primary foci of GTW. Keisha was a member of the group during both the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. She agreed to join, after a teacher recommended her during her freshman year. She stated that her initial objective for joining the group was to meet new people that looked like her. She accomplished this and actually became close with a number of the other girls involved. Keisha felt that the group taught her about life situations, boys, how to deal with family and friends, and how to prepare for college. She said academically the study groups helped her and the motivation to attend them was heightened when I decided to

link field trip attendance to academic achievement in the classrooms. "Our couple little

study groups…helped… cuz you used to be like, yall ain't going on these field trips if

yall grades ain't right.... And I really liked going on those college trips a lot."

Keisha talked about what she felt the purpose of GTW was in depth. She

explained,

> Basically to show people we not how they think we is. Like how they think we
> are attitude problems, ghetto, always getting smart with a teacher… Really in
> reality most of us wasn't like that. We really just needed somebody to lead us the
> way and show people differently than what they think and we did.

Even though Keisha was spot on and confident in the group's objective and

purpose, she expressed her frustration when teachers would sometimes question her

involvement in the group.

> Sometimes teacher would be like why you in this group? Why is it just Black
> people and why can't other people be in it. They would talk about it but they
> didn't know the real purpose; but we knew why we was in it.

Keisha stated that her expectations for herself had been raised since her

involvement in GTW. The group definitely was an integral part of the maturation process

that caused to not get in trouble as much in school. "Like I know I could do better. I

could reach for the stars. I feel more confident…"

Keisha's future plans include attending a private Lutheran college located twenty

miles from home, the same one that her mother attended. She would like to become a

teacher or a counselor, own her own practice, and eventually start a family. Her ideal

family began with a husband, a good paying job, and children that stay the course of their

goals and ambitions. One cannot help but wonder if Keisha longs for some of the things that she could not have growing up. Ending our time together, when asked how she wanted people to remember her she stated,

> I want people to remember me as a loving person who is there for others when they needed it. I would also like to be remembered as a beautiful, intelligent young lady that had struggles at first but learned the value of life; and to appreciate everything that comes your way because the same stuff we take for granted is the same stuff someone else is praying for.

Keisha confessed that she had become closer to the person she should have been all along. Her transformation continues.

Miss Jada

Jada was visiting Winston over the holiday weekend after having moved away to what she called the "White" part of a major Midwestern city. She had been gone a year and although her new home was 350 miles from Winston, we had kept in occasional contact. Mom had decided to move Jada and her brother Ramon, who was three years younger, away with the idea that there were better opportunities for jobs and schooling in a bigger city. They moved in with cousins, out to the "burbs" of the new city until Mom could get on her feet.

Dressed in sweats and flip-flops, she had pulled her hair back in a ponytail. She chose a locally owned bar and grill where she could get some "real Black food." It was one of Winston's best kept secrets located on the "Black side of town." Complaining that she had not had "*our* kind of food" in over a year, she ordered the catfish and fries for lunch. The locals trickled in to be present for the Happy Hour roll call as we began our conversation.

We laughed as I shared with her the scare she caused me a couple of months earlier. My phone rang around midnight one night– it was Jada. Noting the time, I immediately feared the worst. I answered the phone to hear a very excited Jada shriek, "Ms. Boyd! I got a 24 on the ACT!" Jada had just returned home late from work and opened her test results. "My mom begged me not to call you until tomorrow, but I couldn't wait!" My first reaction was relief, my second was sheer excitement. I ended our phone conversation that night by telling her how proud I was of her for working so hard and thanked her for sharing her good news.

After she apologized for giving me such a scare, I asked Jada to tell me what she liked most about herself. She said that she liked that other people's approval was not important to her. "I don't try to be something that I'm not…I like everything about me!" This was the carefree Jada that I had come to know very well.

Had it not been for the mandatory dress code policy that was in place at City High when she was a student there, the Jada I knew would have worn sweats and a t-shirt every day. She was happy to report that even though her new high school did not have a dress code, she was starting to put a little time and effort into her appearance. She was even more excited to report that she had worn a dress to her high school homecoming.

> I had my junior homecoming and I had to dress up and I was like, this is so weird… I never had to put that much time and effort into getting ready and I was just like, this is crazy--all this money people spending to get ready, get their hair done, makeup, all of that; It was nice…so I ….started dressing up a little bit more and doing makeup and all of that and I am fixing myself up a little bit.

The athletic, tomboyish Jada that I knew was a first round draft pick when the neighborhood football or basketball game was starting. Now the new Jada has a picture

of herself in a Varsity Cheerleading uniform posted on Facebook page. Jada said she noticed that when she began putting a little bit of time and effort into her appearance, other people started to take notice. "…Boys started liking me…I like being called pretty and all that so I was like, I'll start dressing up a little more and doing makeup…"

All of these new changes had come about a result of her new move. We both laughed as I reintroduced myself and told her it was nice to meet the new Jada. "I still wear sweatpants and a plain shirt with my Nike sandals. Only now sometimes I'll get dressy."

As we finished joking around, Jada turned her attention towards her experiences growing up. She described her childhood as "good" and stated she had great parents. Jada had always been close to her mother. "She is pretty much like my best friend… I honestly tell her everything…both my parents are cool."

Growing up, her parents included her mother and stepdad, Chris who was actually mom's long-term boyfriend. They had been together off and on since Jada was six and since Jada had no relationship with her biological father, she knew only Chris in that role. "They kept us busy, helped us with whatever…they wanted us to be successful."

Her biological father was shot and killed when she was four years old. She said that there is not a lot that she remembers about him or the sketchy details surrounding his death. "I do know that he was a funny man and he was really overprotective of us."

Jada stated that even though Chris is a wonderful man, the death of her biological father still affects her.

> Even though I have a stepdad, it's like I don't have my *blood dad* like everybody else…It's hard but at the same time my stepdad's here so he's helping me by

being there like a dad should….I believe that he [real dad] is still here. I just won't see him for a while.

Both immediate and extended family were an important part of Jada's life growing up. Jada appreciated Chris filling the role absent her father and although Chris's biological children did not grow up in her home, both she and Ramon considered them siblings as well. "[My] stepbrothers and sisters…they were always around (our house in Winston)...they were like my real brothers and sisters."

Jada discussed how she valued the relationship with her own little brother, Ramon. She felt obligated to supersede the role of big sister by filling whatever capacity needed in her brother's life, even with Chris close. Naming him the most important person in her life, she commented that she has to be a good role model for him.

Everything I do, he looks at…He keeps me on my toes because if it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't care, I would just be doing whatever…I look at him like he was my son…so I would make sure that he's doing what he's supposed to do. He didn't have his dad in his life at all, so it's always been me and my mom taking care of him.

As the conversation shifted, we began talking about her ethnicity. She said she began paying attention to color around sixth grade. Both Jada's mom and biological father were biracial. Having a White grandparent on each side she stated, "I used to always think I was a White girl because I was always with my White family."

Despite this, she says that in about sixth grade, she began noticing that others identified her as a Black girl; this caught her off balance and was something that Jada struggled with. She explained,

You know how yo mom get mad and be like get your Black a-- over here… I'm just like 'Mom, I'm not Black' [laughs] and she's like, what do you mean you're

not Black… you're Blacker than me' and I'd just be like no I'm not, I'm not Black or I tell everybody I'm mixed. I'm not all the way Black. I'm not African-American. You can't compare me to them. Then growing up afterwards, I figured out that actually I was African-American…

Jada used to take issue with people identifying her as just Black because she felt as if "everybody put Black people in one category…I don't like…being categorized." She felt being categorized was unfair judgment and stated in a very irritated tone that people would automatically assume she was like all other Black people. "You like fried chicken because *all Black people* like fried chicken….I don't even *like* fried chicken."

Despite her irritation, Jada learned very quickly that society considered her to be Black even though she had "*good* hair" (as opposed to kinky hair associated with people who are Black) and White grandparents. When she discovered that society labeled her as Black she states, "I wasn't sad about it at all…it wasn't that I was ashamed of it…I just didn't like people categorizing and putting me in the same place as somebody else." Jada said even though she used to have a hard time solely designating African American as her ethnicity, she is more comfortable with it now. "I have a bunch of races in me…Whenever I had to write paperwork, I [used to] always put *other*." Jada felt that society "still looks at you as a Black girl so I was like, alright let them think whatever... Yep, I'm African American; I just leave it like that…as long as *I know* who I am, that's all that matters…"

The issue of the stereotypical Black girl was a point of contention for Jada. She did not want to be identified as the loud and crazy girl acting out on television, as

Loquesha. "People are always expecting a Black person to act a certain way. She

explained further,

> So, when they see me I already know what they're thinking, they're probably like
> this hoodrat … I treat everybody with respect because I don't want them to look
> at me how they look at other Black people and just be like, oh she's just like all
> the rest of them, she's always fighting and always doing this and that…Most
> people that look at me just probably think that I'm probably…a bad person, I'm
> always in trouble, or something like that when it's just like I'm a total opposite. I
> don't really care either what they think or how they look at me.

Jada expended a lot of energy convincing others that she did not care what people

thought of her. I began to wonder if the sweats and ponytail was merely a façade and

ultimately she did care how she was perceived. People's perception of "us" is a topic that

we devoted a significant amount of time to in GTW. Jada was a member of GTW her

freshman and sophomore year. She was one who asked to be a part of the group, rather

than being referred by a teacher.

Jada did not necessarily fit some of the criteria that I gave in my initial screening

for participants. She was not outspoken, nor did she cause disruptions in the classroom.

She tended to fly under the radar at school. Not a standout in terms of discipline,

activities or academics, she was easy to miss. When asked why she sought to join GTW,

she stated that an older member of the group encouraged her to check it out. "She kept

talking about it and how fun it so I'm like alright cool I guess I will check it out. I guess I

just wanted to see how it would be."

Jada decided to check out the group, but not without some reservation. She had a

few preconceived notions of her own that she needed to address. Her exposure to Black

culture and interaction with Black students, girls in particular was very limited.

> To be honest I didn't know how I was going to feel because I'm just like all these Black girls in one group like nobody really likes each other, this would just be crazy. I didn't think it would turn as well as it did. I really didn't go into it open-minded because I'm just thinking the worst because all the girls that were in it I'm just like… is going to be trouble? But after a while it was just like everybody got along, everybody was more like sisters. I thought it was like a really good experience for everybody. Like a lot of people, I actually grew up while being in there. I think like a lot of schools should have it because it's really good…

Jada was thankful that she decided to join. "After that [checking it out] I just stayed in and loved being in the group. I just loved it!"

After joining, she became a very active participant. Jada attended study tables, participated in conferences, volunteered for community service trips, and was the first in line for the college tours. She believed that the purpose of GTW was show young ladies like her that color should never be a barrier to success even in a society that does not value them.

Before joining the group, Jada stated that she really did not consider college as a viable option for herself. "I really wasn't thinking about what I wanted to do or what I had to do to get where I wanted to be….there were a whole bunch of opportunities that opened after that [GTW]."

She felt that the study tables were one of the most valuable components because it provided a safe space in which to ask questions about concepts or skills that she did not grasp during direct instruction in the classroom. She preferred to risk misunderstanding as opposed to being perceived as inept among her classmates. "I felt like I really couldn't go to them [teachers]. I didn't want to look like the dumb one in class because they would always respond in front of everybody and I didn't like that."

During the study tables, she felt comfortable admitting that she needed help among people who looked like her. "Whenever things would get hard then you'd be with people that actually knew what you're going through. So you could get help from other people and then go into the classroom and *actually understand* what you were getting taught."

In addition to the academic support GTW offered, she said her involvement was beneficial personally as well. She credited the group for her attitude adjustment and she said she learned how to trust.

> …before I was in the group I had a big attitude problem. I really didn't want to listen to nobody because I didn't really think nobody had my best interest at heart…I always look at it as like 'Can't anybody help me'…and then afterwards I found out not everybody is out to hurt you…Most people are there to actually help you. So, I opened up a lot more. My attitude changed for the better.

Jada recognized the significant impact the group had on her. However, she questioned if others, specifically teachers, saw the value in it at all. She felt some teachers chose not to acknowledge the group's value or even its existence. Jada, along with the other young ladies, struggled with bearing witness to the positive opportunities that the group exposed them to while convincing their teachers that it was beneficial and worth the sacrifice of classroom seat time.

> Some teachers knew that I was a part of it, but I don't think… a lot of the teachers really cared for the group because they'd be like, 'Oh yeah *that group you're in*' or their like nobody really acknowledges it. There are probably a couple of teachers that acknowledged it, but I don't think people really made it out to be like it was a real learning opportunity, so just like most didn't care about it. Or they'd be like 'Oh you're leaving school to go with that group when *this* (class lesson or activity) is more important' even though the field trips and everything we went on helped us more than being in class sometimes. I don't really think our teachers understood. They just thought it was a way to get out of class…

I identified with the frustration that some of the young ladies felt. It was a very unwelcomed, but familiar feeling to me as the group's sponsor. I would find it increasingly harder to justify pulling the girls out of school for a day for a conference on Empowering Black Women when there was a geometry test during third period. I began to reflect on my feelings when I initially agreed to take on this project. My questions caused me to wonder if I had been hired to keep the lid on this place. Was I hired to keep those girls under control and out of the office? Maybe the girls were just supposed to be seen and not heard.

When GTW began venturing out of the building to explore opportunities designed to empower and encourage, I felt indirect but palpable resistance and eye rolling from administration and teachers. Though I tried to keep a strictly professional approach with the girls, administration and teachers, I too felt that many in the building did not see the importance of the opportunity that the young ladies were being exposed to. Jada commented on this as well. "They're like, 'Oh you're leaving school to go with that group when this is more important' – even though the field trips and everything we did helped us more than just being in class."

This atmosphere of uncertainty was an ongoing struggle and the feeling of teacher resentment and administrative resistance became more concrete, as administration began placing new stipulations on girls' eligibility to attend GTW field trips. These would include no detentions, no tardies to class, no dress code infractions, only As and Bs, etc. Although those were areas that we emphasized in group, the problem was that the girls who struggled with those issues were the young ladies who needed exposure to those

opportunities the most. I was obligated to be obedient to my superior and as a result

encouraged the young ladies to work even harder to meet those goal areas.

Jada was one of the young ladies who worked to attend the opportunities outside

of the school building because she had decent grades and was generally compliant. She

was never a disruptive student and her trips to the principal's office were few and far

between. Even though she was not a student that spent time in the principal's hot seat, she

perceived a certain air coming from the principal. "She made some students feel like they

were better than others… she made it seem like just because you're Black you're going to

act a certain [negative] way or she would treat you differently. She didn't really give you

a chance…" Jada went on to reflect on her interactions with the leader of the building.

> [The principal] never really gave any of us a chance. It was like he/she knew who
> the rich White kids were [like the Johnsons] so they were automatically on her/his
> good side. ..She/he never asked me how *my parents* were or how things were
> going…It didn't matter if we were like some of the smartest kids in the school,
> she/he wouldn't know because I feel like she just thought we were nothing from
> the beginning.

Jada's perception was that the White administrators that she had, like the

principal, were uncaring. Although she admitted that she had seen very few Black

administrators, Jada felt they were different than the White ones that she was accustomed

to. "I think they [Black administrators] try to help you more than White administrators

do…Black administrators want to see you more successful, like being where they are or

even get above them. I just think that they would want to help you more."

As Jada couldn't identify a teacher or administrator that stood out in a positive

way during her school career, I asked if she could identify another high impact person in

her life. I was surprised and humbled when she identified me. Although I recognize that I

have been blessed with the opportunity to plant some seeds in the lives of these young

ladies, it is always amazing to see when the seeds take root and they actually listen.

> You're the only one that who really cared, the one that really helped us like if we needed help with something. You wouldn't see any other teachers taking a time out of their day for us to go and get help with school work or anything like that… You wanted us to be successful and go above and beyond. You're more like a mom than you are like a teacher. You didn't, like sugar coat things… you actually *tell us how it is…*

As a beneficiary of the opportunities GTW provided, Jada thought that "every

school should have a Ms. Boyd and a Girls to Women group because… some girls don't

think they're going to make it life, they think they're going to be a statistic."

Jada wanted other girls to know that they did not have to live in fear of becoming

a statistic. "African American girls need to go through it [GTW] just to see their worth

because not a lot of them think they're worth anything." The group, to her, provided the

support and encouragement that she needed to see past what society defined her as.

 GTW for Jada was an opportunity to discover her worth as an African American

young lady. For her, the group served as an opportunity to repurpose, redefine, and

embrace who she truly was. She does admit that finding out who Jada really is, is an

ongoing process. "I'm just now finding out a little bit about myself every day."

<u>Miss Serenity</u>

Sheltered is an apposite adjective Serenity uses to describe her experience

growing up and it fits for much of the two years that I have known her. Having grown up

with a strict mother in a low income, single parent home, she would joke frequently about how she could not wait to "break out of jail." Fortunately, in her words, she did just that.

Serenity had just successfully completed her first year in college at a HBCU seven hours from Winston. She had chosen to make the best of her first year away, busying herself with classes, study groups, and Royal Court. Her classmates nominated her to represent one of the Black fraternities on campus as she would wear the black and silver crown for the Homecoming celebrations in the upcoming fall. Home for the summer and working frantically to save for a car, Serenity was her usual bubbly, quick-witted self.

We both had to laugh as we remembered the very first day that we met. I was standing in the hallway my first year in an administrative position at City High. I happened to think that I was looking pretty official with my name badge visible and my two way radio hooked to my Louis Vuitton belt. I had worn my khaki jacket with my snake skinned heels to work that day. Serenity skipped up to me with a big smile and said, "You dress really nice for a hall monitor."

At the time I was a bit offended by our initial interaction and her assumption that I was the hall monitor. I smiled and introduced myself as an administrator new to the building. A bit taken aback by her moxie, I told her it was nice to meet her nonetheless.

We both laugh about it now; however the reality is that many African American girls' background knowledge is very limited in terms of seeing African American women in leadership positions in school, or larger society, for that matter. We discussed this implication, along with her first official heartbreak this past year, the sweet taste of

freedom, and anything else we could squeeze into a ten minute car ride. We arrived to the chain bar and grill that she had chosen to have lunch at that day. Upon arriving, we ordered lunch as she began recalling both fond and repressed memories of her school experiences and home life growing up.

In asking Serenity to reflect on what it was like growing up in her home, she immediately blurted out, "My mom couldn't stand me for the life of her." This revelation stemmed from the fact that Serenity did not have a lot freedom. She said that the same outspoken, witty nature that resulted in her welcoming me as a hall monitor strained her relationship with her mom at home. Her mom ran a tight ship. "I didn't get to do a lot of things at all." She accused her mother of being excessively strict.

> I didn't get to hang out at my friends', go to the movies, attend parties, do sleep overs, none of that... I thought when I turned eighteen she was finna loosen up. No! It was like she got tighter. It was like the more I tried to leave… the tighter she got.

Serenity thought that her coming of age would loosen the tight grip that her mother had on her. On the contrary, her mother began shortening her leash even more. "She thought I wouldn't listen to her anymore." Because Serenity knew that it would not gain her anymore independence and freedom, she ceased pushing back against her mother's tightening. She had come to learn what buttons to push and what buttons to avoid all together from past experiences. Her response was to look forward to the future as she began counting down the days to college move in day.

Serenity bottled up the frustration of being sheltered much like the other emotions that she learned to keep hidden. Dealing with any emotions that reflected conflict in her

life was foreign to her. "I keep everything bottled in like every emotion that I have [I keep] to myself." This was a behavior that Serenity learned from her mother. Growing up in her home, there was very little public display of emotion outside of anger shown in the home. There were not a lot of "I love yous said" or "I am proud of yous" expressed. She explained,

> There wasn't like a lot of emotion shown in the house… [my mom showed] only anger...it's just her angry way…That's why I don't come to my mom about anything if I'm going through something, I don't talk to my mom...even to this day, I still don't.

As we continued talking about anger and other repressed emotions she was experiencing at that time in her life, the conversation made a seamless shift to her strained relationship with her father. "My dad wasn't around. He just started coming around when I was getting ready to go to college…" She continued,

> Like he would make little appearances in like fifth and sixth grade…something like that…For the longest I did not think I had a dad. I thought it was just mom, that's how life is, it's just my mom…I feel like he did so much for all his other kids and when I came along, it's just like a disconnect.…All them other kids he got by whoever, they were…taken care of. They got the good life. They had *their* daddy. I didn't have *my dad*!

Our conversation was interrupted by a barrage of feelings. Some of those repressed emotions unexpectedly began to surface. Apologizing for her unintended display of emotion, I handed her a napkin. Serenity's façade was hard and callous. She, like Mom, had learned to stifle her emotions and internalize them. This was unchartered territory for her. There was a long pause before she continued to express the hurt she felt due to the absence of her father. "Okay so yeah. I didn't have my dad, so I was never a

daddy's girl like everybody else. I felt like…when I see [him], I see [him]. If I don't, I don't."

Serenity was the last of nine kids by her father. Growing up it in her home there was only her, her sister who was 15 years older, and her mother. She and her sister had the same mother and father. "I don't know all those other family members like that," she said referring to all of her father's other kids. Living less than a mile away just on the other side of the railroad tracks, her father chose to be absent from her life. As a result, Serenity and her father's relationship had been virtually nonexistent in the past. She was born outside of his marriage to his current wife. Consequently, Serenity also has a tumultuous relationship with her father's wife, Carrie. Serenity felt that Carrie blamed her for her father's infidelity. For her, Serenity served as a constant reminder of his indiscretion. "I guess the whole time like they were married…and I came along and she didn't like me for. It's not my fault."

Serenity's father attempts to make an effort to stay in touch with her now that she is away for college. After 18 years, he decided that he did not care what his wife had to say. The past was exactly that, the past. It took some prodding from her older sister but Serenity asked her dad if she could drive her to college seven hours away, as a last ditch effort to bum a ride to school; after all, he was trying now. In an attempt to begin a connection, dad consented. He now drives back and forth during breaks to bring her home. "I don't know if I necessarily feel like I'm using him…but I'm like, hey, it's the least you could do." Despite the circumstance is which she was born into and the

situation in which she was raised, Serenity ultimately desired a relationship with her father. Notwithstanding, she still harbors resentment.

> He tried to do something right before I left for school like they tried to get everybody to come together… I could care less about that. I don't give a rat's tail what yall doing because I feel like don't wait until now to do something… I feel like yall had all this time, all the way up to eighteen years to try to reach out and make yourself known. You didn't do it until like now. By this time I don't care about yall [Dad and rest of his family] no more. If I know you, I know you. If I don't, I don't. It's not going to hurt my feelings. I grew up without you. I can still remain without you. That's how I feel about it.

After talking about her father, Serenity began talking about how she experienced school. Serenity remembered being accused of talking and acting White by a Black classmate. "I remember Larry Harris; he was like 'I've never met a Black girl that sounds so White. He made me so mad and I responded, 'I've never met a Black boy that looked like a fatty!"

Serenity resented being called White. For her it was the all too familiar feeling of being misplaced and not being wanted that her father had made standard operating procedure. "It's like you're trying to make me feel like I didn't belong... I didn't jap out like I should've …I didn't hang around all [Black kids]… I always knew I was Black, but I was more like a Black/White child." Serenity did not typically hang around kids who looked like her because she was sheltered.

It wasn't until Serenity started "acting Black" that she was finally accepted among her Black peers. "You have to start going off on them and then all of a sudden you're accepted now." Serenity felt pulled in multiple directions. She danced on the line of being White enough for her friends and Black enough for her peers. She expressed her

concern with being considered too White or an Uncle Tom. She admitted that she began

missing out on opportunities because she busied herself with trying to fit in by acting

Black.

> I didn't want to be part of… you know, Uncle Tom… I didn't want to do that so I just changed it up really quick…I feel like I had …to change it to like the bad kid to try to fit in. I think overall my problem was I was trying to fit in too much because I was missing out so much because my mom kept me in the house….at the same time, I'm not going to be the one that you'll talk about…like you have to switch up your ways a little bit…

In addition to being too White for Black kids, one of the most pressing memories

that she had in school was being bullied in sixth grade. Serenity said that she was bullied

because she was sheltered and thought to be stuck up as a result. "My mom used to keep

me in the house so I could never go out and be with them so they used to think I was

stuck up for that." While mom thought sheltering her would protect Serenity from the

difficulties of peer relationships, Serenity said that it had the opposite effect. She felt that

as result of an overprotective mother, she was considered naïve and an easy target for

bullying. "Like you know when you are little and you believe everything that comes out

of your parent's mouth, like you hang on to every word, that's what I used to do." To add

insult to injury Serenity's mother always suggested that she tell the teacher if she had

problems with another student. Serenity felt that "telling the teacher made you look like a

punk…I was not…" In opposition in seventh grade, Serenity began fighting back. "That's

why seventh grade led to the fights."

Being bullied in sixth grade caused a massive paradigm shift in her behavior in

middle school. "I was fine before seventh grade… I was a good little kid." Seventh grade

seemed to be a pivotal year for Serenity. In considering what had the greatest effect on her at that point in her life, in addition to being bullied, coping with the nonexistent relationship with her father, and a strained home life, the most salient would be the death of her maternal grandmother during Serenity's seventh grade year.

> My granny was like my heart….I felt like I fell apart… I remember like for that whole seventh grade and eighth grade year I used to cry all the time. I'm like I don't understand…I remember like I pray. I was like please help me God. I'll never do anything bad again… and He still took her from me.

Serenity identified the death of her grandmother as a definite low point in her life. While there had always been tension between Serenity and her mother, things changed. This time, it became physical. "Around that time…my mom and I…got into our first fist fight…after that it was a done deal…we was all messed up."

Serenity and her mother's relationship continued on a downward descent. The weight of her grandmother's death, her resentment of the absence of her father, the mistreatment by her peers, and resistance to feeling sheltered all manifested in her behavior at school. "I think that's why seventh grade it led to fights…seventh grade I went through a lot…that's when I started getting bad…when my mom couldn't tell me nothing no more…I thought I was grown back then."

Serenity was involved in a number of fights as a seventh grader. "I got in three fights in my whole life…and all of them were in seventh grade." Seventh grade was a tough year for Serenity. The school year was so rocky, she wondered if she would be promoted to eighth grade. "Honestly I think they passed me because they didn't want to be bothered with me no more."

Eighth grade was a much better year for Serenity. She says eighth grade was nearly as smooth as seventh had been rough. This was in part because she was able to establish a relationship with a couple of her teachers that she felt like cared about her and her well-being. The presence of those teachers was vital to her success during her eighth grade year. She identified two White male teachers as her favorite teachers in middle school. Mr. Rich, the first of two, was identified as a good teacher because "he cared about our education." Then there was Mr. Ken. He "would always be like "hey …all right now. He can play with us at the same time he knows how to put his foot down. It's time to learn." Serenity was drawn to teachers who could balance showing they cared about her but also required order and discipline in the learning environment.

When Serenity arrived at high school, she felt that her relationship with her teachers was dramatically different. While she connected with a couple key teachers in eighth grade, she felt more ostracized, singled out and alone as a freshman. She felt that she was targeted by teachers because she tended to be louder and more outspoken than the other students. This, however, was consistent with her witty, forthright nature. This reversion was a familiar feeling. She explained,

> Sometimes I would feel like they always single me out. Maybe because I had the loudest voice in the class like overall my voice would echo, would overpower everybody. That's probably why they singled me out. It'll make me mad because it'd be like -- the girl right next to me would be talking and you won't say it to her. You'll say something to me when I just started talking but she had been talking the whole class period. I didn't like to be singled out. Really that kind of irked me …

Serenity was a member of GTW both her junior and senior year in high school. She chose to participate after being nominated by at least one of her teachers. She felt

that her association with the group made her more of a target for teachers to single out. "They'll be so quick to come back to tell you [Ms. Boyd] the littlest thing. Like say we sneezed wrong…they were so quick to go back and try to tell you something... A little situation that they made something out of nothing."

One class felt like an exception to being singled out. Mr. Thomas was the only Black teacher she would have in her entire K-12 school career. "He saw my potential and he pushed me…he got on my nerves, but I love Mr. Thomas." Serenity remembers one conversation in particular in which Mr. Thomas pulled her out in the hallway to scold her for not giving 100% that particular day.

> You're smart enough to get all As, you should be going to Central Community College now [in high school] and you should getting ready to go to a university [next year]. He was just telling me like everybody basically at school were spoon-feeding us. Basically, they were just preparing us for community college and that was it - not for *real college*.

Serenity also identified another Black teacher in the building that she connected with although she was never assigned to her class. She stated that even though she was not a student in her classroom, Mrs. Adams did not hesitate to correct Serenity's behavior if she saw her acting out. "I love Mrs. Adams to death because she always be like, I know you are smarter than this…" Serenity was drawn to Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Adams because of their candor. "It was like they were there for more than the paycheck."

She was amazed and encouraged at the same time by their passion. "They are more passionate about it than you. It's like wow; if you got all these passion…It makes you want to better yourself a little bit." The Black School Resource Officer and the other Black administrator in the building were also adults that Serenity mentioned were

positive influences in her life. She stated that they were not afraid to remind her that she was not living up to her fullest potential when need be.

Serenity recognized that her involvement in GTW, along with the encouragement of the aforementioned teachers and other key adults in her life, helped her to raise her expectations for herself. I started to witness a gradual change in Serenity. She unexpectedly named me as one of those key adults. I guess I did not realize that I had that type of influence on her. I did not always think she was listening. She explained,

> I always wanted to go away for college, but that was just a dream. I never was shooting for that goal until…you came along and were like…this is what you need to do…You're always telling us what's right. You're always preparing us for the future...think about college, think about scholarships, think about everything…[I] look back now and you feel like…yeah, she did say that. I feel like we hold ourselves higher now because of that….Like I said it weren't for you, I would not be at Carver University.

Serenity credited a number of the components of GTW to her success as a high school student and now second year college student. She recalled celebrating our growing moments in group, the way in which we opened each of our meetings. They were moments or opportunities that the young ladies would take to share and celebrate positive decision-making. "You be like, Ms. Boyd I had a growing moment! Girl let me tell you! You made us think about our actions before we just did them."

She felt that prior to the group, this self-reflective process was nonexistent. "Before you had the group, everybody used to fight and argue and we be quick to cuss out a teacher." Serenity felt that she and other girls who participated gained access to tools that they could use to be reflective of their actions and behavior.

Serenity went on to discuss that she felt the purpose of the group was to open the eyes of the girls who were involved to ensure that they would not become a part of the negative statistics that haunt conversations about Black girls. "I think the purpose was like to just better ourselves and to educate us more and to stop being so much of a statistic." Personally this resonated with Serenity because was, at one point, she was the loud stereotypical Loquesha that the girls identified.

In conducting this study, Serenity had the opportunity to select her own pseudonym, as did the other young ladies. I find it ironic that she selected a name that by definition means calm, peaceful, and untroubled. Noting the irony, Serenity was anything but. When asked who Serenity is, she smiled and explained,

> Well, she's loud. She's outgoing and she likes to talk a lot. But overall she just like …she's just a person trying to find herself. Trying to find exactly her and not what …everybody wants her to be. She wants to be who she wants to be and who she's trying to find. She wants to go through life and learn the lessons like everybody did, but also wants to be successful at the same time.

Serenity is enjoying her newly found freedom and self-discovery. She is tasked with defining herself absent the opinions of her mother, family members, peers, and naysayers who have had control in the past. As a Social Work major Serenity would like to work with children in some capacity. I received a text message from her the other day and it said that she had just watched a video in her social science class on children and poverty. Serenity had an epiphany and discovered at that moment that the child on the screen was her. "It was so close to my story and I'm like dang, but I still made it!"

<u>Miss Lovely</u>

Lovely selected an Italian dine-in chain restaurant with her favorite soup and salad option for our conversation. Her name fit her as if she was predestined to be a fashionista. Her complexion is a butter pecan sundae color, hair in a perfect wrap, with flawless makeup and freshly waxed eyebrows. Always clad in the latest fashion, she presented an interesting contrast to the success stories of the former because of her choice to leave school. We began our conversation with a seemingly simple request, tell me about Lovely.

She began with a nervous giggle, which contradicted her reticent disposition. Referring to herself in third person she stated, "Lovely can be selfish at times…very high maintenance…I want everything to myself. I can be mean at times. I have my mood swings but I'm friendly most of the time." This was the Lovely that was familiar to most. I had the distinct pleasure of knowing all the different sides of the real Lovely, who is softhearted, genuine, and guarded.

Lovely had grown up way before her time. She had quite a bit of freedom growing up. Mom was relatively lenient in Lovely's comings and goings. Her freedom could very easily be attributed to the fact mom was preoccupied by the challenge of raising six kids in a single parent home. Lovely was second to the youngest. "I'm happy she was [lenient] cause if she wasn't I think I would be a mess…she gave me freedom but not too much. She went on to reflect,

> Like in middle school when me and Teresa would go to parties, the parties was over like 12, 12:30, 1:00 something like that…My mom would pick us up… and… sometimes we would even stay inside the apartment complex… talking to

the boys. We all go up in my house with the boys laughing, talking, and sometimes we would have movie night with guys and stuff.

Lovely stated that although she had more freedom than other girls her age, she knew what she could do and could not do. Her mother's expectations were that she was honest and careful not to violate the trust that they had established as mother and daughter.

She went on to reflect that despite her current appearance and known affinity for fashion, she had not always been what she described as a "girly girl." Lovely chuckled, remembering that she had to be tough with three brothers in the home.

> I was a tough girl…in fact I thought I was a boy cuz I used to like playing basketball, wrestle with them [brothers]…I wore sweats baggy and girl boxers. Probably up to…my sixth grade year , I was a boy. But I wasn't liking no girls…I was a tomboy, I was tough.

Lovely had no qualms fitting right in with her three brothers. "I had a pretty good childhood growing up."

As Lovely continued describing growing up in Winston, the Midwestern city she calls home, she began talking about her father. She had a different father than her siblings. She referred to him as Clyde. When asked why she did not call him dad, her response reflected that he had never been a dad to her, so why call him dad. "I didn't know who my dad was until I was about nine but at that point I didn't care to know him or go around him." Clyde lived in Winston but was not involved in Lovely's life for many years.

> When I was fourteen I started going around him a little bit but I didn't want to anymore so I stopped…I didn't know him like that so I didn't want to go around. My mom tried making me but I still wouldn't go…As I got older I started going to see him more.

Clyde turned out to be cool "as a dad and a friend." Although he had not been a father to Lovely until she was 14, they both now make a good faith effort to stay in touch. "I can talk to him about whatever now."

As for her mother, Lovely stated that they have always had a good relationship. "I can talk to her about everything, no matter what it I tell her…she is my best friend….I'm lucky to have her." She stated that growing up and not having Clyde around didn't bother her too much because her mother essentially filled the hole in her life that was left vacant by him. "I was always a momma's girl anyway." Mom also filled the roll in the absence of the fathers of her siblings as they all chose to be uninvolved as well – even more so than Clyde.

Interspersed with frequent movement across country as a result of Mom's search for a better life, Lovely spent a good deal of school age traveling between Winston and Jackston City, a major city in the South. Even though there was no family in Jackston City, mom wanted to seek better opportunities for her and her children. She wanted to be self-sufficient as she had been receiving federal assistance to make ends meet in Winston.

Lovely painted a picture of just how frequently they moved: they lived in Winston from kindergarten to the end of sixth grade. They resided in Jackston City her seventh grade year, back to Winston for eighth, back to Jackston City mid-eighth grade year into her ninth grade year and back to the Winston for the rest of ninth grade.

Lovely's family returned to Winston her ninth grade year because of two life altering occurrences: Lovely's oldest brother was sentenced to two years in prison for possession of drugs and a gun and her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. They returned to Winston so that Lovely's mother could support her own mother and to be closer to her son in his time of need. This took an emotional toll on Lovely and the rest of her family. She was back in Winston to stay.

"I wish I never moved back… I like it down there… … there are better people down there…Black people… I can relate to Black people…" Lovely felt at home around people that looked like her. The feeling of being able to relate contributed to her comfort in knowing that she belonged somewhere. This would prove problematic as she began discussing how she experienced schooling.

Lovely was identified for special education services in Winston during third grade for reading. "I think the teachers was just lazy." This declaration stemmed from her classification as a student with special needs in Winston. Her frustration lay in the negative connation associated with "those" classes and "those" students especially in middle and high school. She ardently expressed her annoyance.

> [In Winston] they don't work with you – you don't get something, they be like oh you don't need to be in this class, you need to be with such and such people. But there [Jackston City] they break it down to you. You with everybody…they didn't just think, oh you need to be in special ed. It was like they *sat and worked with you*… Then they put you where you needed to be… they don't just put you in a special ed class…. I think you learn more there [Jackston City]…it took me a while to catch on to the math there but the lady that helped me, she wasn't like you need to go special ed class. She sat there and helped me…

Lovely expressed her aggravation in regard to being identified for services in Winston but not in Jackston City. "When [in Jackston City] I was in no special education, no nothing. I was normal."

Being identified for services, returning to high school in Winston presented a problem for Lovely. She was identified for special education services. Sitting in a reentry Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting, Lovely openly refused special education services. "They asked me if I wanted to be up in it and I was like, naw I don't want to be there. Why do I need it?"

The compromise, which eventually backfired, was to place her in online learning. Initially, Lovely only had a few classes that were online. She stated that being easily distracted in regular classes was one of the reasons that she was not successful in the traditional classroom. "I get bored and I get sidetracked real fast." This was her argument for wanting to be placed in the online learning classes. She struggled with reading. Lovely was convinced that it was better for her. "I get to listen to my music and I'm cool."

During her 10th grade year, she made the switch to online classes exclusively. This was an area of concern for her IEP team because online learning was a skill based assessment of reading comprehension in every content area. Lovely did not complete her fourth year in high school. She, instead, chose to work to begin supporting herself. The concerns of the IEP team proved to be valid. Lovely needed direct instruction and the attention of teachers that could work one on one with her to ensure that she was retaining the information needed to be successful in class. Based on her past school experiences,

attitude towards school, they had to know that she was at risk for not finishing. Lovely essentially refused the supports and resources that she needed to flourish.

As Lovely continued to reflect on her school experiences, she highlighted the difference in experiences in Midwestern Winston versus Southern Jackston City. She discussed how fun high school was in Jackston City because there were so many Black people. "All my teachers were Black." She went on to discuss the difference between the Black teachers in Jackston City and the White teachers in Winston,

> I think the Black teacher can relate to the Black student more and 9 times out of 10 a Black person been through the same thing as another Black person. And a White person is just for themselves, if you ask me that's how I look at it. And when I was down there I didn't get in much trouble. Like you could do something so little [here] and you would get in trouble. But [there] it would be like you know they would talk to you and stuff like that. Teachers were cool. They wasn't like here …always on the Black students…

The administration in the building was another contentious topic for Lovely. She had a couple of incidents in the two years that she attended Winston City High; all of which resulted in a suspension for rule violations. One of those incidents resulted in an administrator physically restraining her. Lovely refused to calm down and refused to stop yelling after a verbal altercation in the cafeteria with a male student. "Parker didn't have to do all of that." She now joked that "if I had known karate, I would've really went to jail that day." Lovely spent five days out of school as a result.

Another incident resulted in the principal physically grabbing Lovely after questioning her about having her hood tucked in the back of her shirt. Wearing hoodies was a violation of City High's mandatory dress code policy. When that did not yield favorable results, the principal snatched Lovely's purse refusing to give it back until she

came to her office. "I told her/him don't grab me…then they gon threaten to call my grandmother… I don't even talk to that woman [dad's side]…if she had a problem she could talk to my mom…" That incident also landed Lovely a three day suspension.

Lovely felt that she was picked on and isolated by the administration at City High. " [the principal] was always picking with me…" She felt that the administration, in general was unapproachable but specifically the principal of the building. "If you call her Mrs. Kyzinski, I mean I understand correcting people but you don't have to write them up or kick them out for calling you Mrs. Kyzinski instead of *Dr. Kyzinski*." The frequency in which the incidents occurred and the harsh consequences for her actions contributed to Lovely's feeling of being singled out.

Although Lovely uses the fact that she chose to work as opposed to complete high school, there were a number of other factors that made this decision easy. Feeling isolated, pick on, unsupported, ignored were all tally marks in the con column. The system had failed another.

Even though Lovely's general consensus was that she was not wanted, valued, or respected by her teachers, she identified two teachers that she felt cared about her success as a student and her as an individual. These teachers were the White teachers who cared; who didn't "blame everything on Black girls." Characteristically she stated that the teachers like Mr. Bowser and Mr. Washington were the ones who you could sit and have a conversation with because they were cool and sometimes joked with you. "Mr. Bowser, like when I used to come in with my Jordan's on he would be like, oh you got the cool greys on today? I believe he and Mr. Washington wanted to see me graduate."

Lovely was drawn to the teachers that showed an interest in her well-being regardless of color. She wanted her teachers to care about her and to listen to her. When asked if she could give one piece of advice to her teachers, she responded simply with "just chill." Her desire was for her teachers to be "more laid back" and at least act interested in what was going on in the lives of their students. "Let us talk to you." Contributing to the cause of Lovely's departure from school, one can only wonder whether or not there were enough cool teachers to keep her afloat. Enough cool teachers that listened.

Lovely generally felt unwanted at Winston City High. There were few exceptions, one of them being the two "cool" teachers and the GTW group. Lovely was a member of GTW during her sophomore and junior years. In group we had conversations about the need to persevere in spite of perceived or tangible obstacles including uncaring teachers, administrators, or society as a whole. I allowed the young ladies to vent encouraging them to be able to process and determine an alternative to a choice they may have made. I would tell them that we can only control our own actions.

Lovely stated that the purpose for agreeing to join the group after a teacher recommended her was because it was a group exclusively for Black girls.

> I wanted to be around all Black people because you can act yourself and you do have to act all sidity [stuck up]…You don't have to act a different kind of way…I wanted to be with everybody else[the Black people]…I could be myself around them… When I used to sit around and talk with them [White girls] they used to always talk about shopping and stuff like that…So it's like the Black girls, we didn't talk about that up in group - always going shopping and stuff like that.

Lovely wanted to be around other students who looked like her and shared similar experiences. She felt that the purpose of the group was to examine people's perception of Black women and countering those stereotypes. "I think a lot of girls looked forward to the going to the group because it was fun. It wasn't just boring and we learned about ourselves and how some people look at us. [We learned] how it is and how it *should be*."

 "Learning how it is" was one of many references to the honest conversations about how Black women were portrayed in our society. In GTW, the young ladies and I worked hard to identify those stereotypes so as not to perpetuate them; by engaging in activities that put Black faces to stories of success and discussing them not as anomalies, but as standards.

> I think cuz like the White teachers blamed everything on the Black girls… like we just did everything like we was disrespectful, we wasn't ladies and stuff like that. And basically I just think you did the group just to prove that they was wrong, that you know we was ladies and stuff. ..

Although Lovely felt the group was beneficial in this regard, she commented that she did not believe the group helped her academically. "It didn't help me with grades really because that was my choice…The group didn't have nothing to do with it, it was just me being lazy." Acknowledging that the structures were in place, Lovely made a clear separation from the group's intentions and the choices that she made. Instead of graduating, "I chose to work because I needed the money." Despite her choice to not return to school, Lovely felt as if the group helped her to raise her expectations for herself. "At first I did not want to go to college. I would be like, when I get out of high school I am going to get me a job…But like a woman with a degree, she is the stuff!"

Lovely identified that a woman with a degree is the definition of accomplished and successful, thus "being the stuff." This revelation came after the Black College tour, one of her favorite trips in the group. She got the opportunity to see other young Black ladies, who looked like her, walking to class, books in hand, attending and participating in their classes. While on the tour, she got the chance to talk to Black college students who were successful and active on their campuses. She stated that the tour gave her a new vision of what potential success could look like in a Black woman.

There were few positives that Lovely associated with her school experiences. The group, the two cool teachers, the tour, the conversations were just not enough counter the harsh feelings of being "a problem." It was not enough to push her to the end. She saw what success could potentially look like, firsthand, but still chose not to finish school. Lovely is a work in progress. As she continues to evolve, she states that she would like to return to school to get her diploma or an equivalent. It is my hope that she abandons the societal pull to be another Loquesha by returning to some of those life lessons we learned in GTW; how it "*should be.*"

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Dubois, 2005, p.7).

In his essay entitled "Of our Spiritual Strivings," Dubois discusses his theory on double consciousness (2005). In the quote above, he describes the feeling of being cognizant of what he terms his twoness. In this regard, twoness means seeing one's self through society's lens while using a measuring stick that was essentially created for and by the majoritarian race. In "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness" people of color are required to function based on society's definition while simultaneously attempting to give meaning to their own life (p.7). Dubois ends his thought speaking to the resiliency and sheer strength that people of color possess. While for people of color, the idea of two selves is commonplace, we look to CRT as a theoretical framework to make sense of it all.

In this work, I employ CRT as a theoretical framework because it forces the issue of race inherent in the majoritarian storyline to the forefront of the conversation much like Dubois did in his work. Doing so challenges the dominant discourse on race as it relates to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Delgado Bernal, 2002). This framework challenges dominant liberal and neutral ideologies such as colorblindness and

meritocracy in disadvantaging students of color while simultaneously advantaging

Whites (Delgado Bernal, 2002 & Parsons, 1951).

Critical Race methodologies echo the call to challenge racial neutrality and

subordination stridently. Situated in CRT, the following five tenets form the perspectives,

pedagogy, and methodology according to Solorzano and Yosso (2007):

1. *Intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.*
   CRT begins from the premise that race and racism are endemic,
   permanent, and normal (Closson, 2010). Russell (1991) describes it has
   "a central rather marginal factor in defining and explaining individual
   experiences…" (p.762-763). In considering the intercentricity of race
   and racism, they can also be viewed at the intersection at which other
   forms of subordination such as class and gender meet.

2. *The challenge to dominant ideology.* CRT challenges the traditional
   assertions that education makes toward objectivity, meritocracy,
   colorblindness, and race neutrality.

3. *The commitment to social justice.* What separates CRT from other
   theories is its call to action and overall commitment to social justice and
   the eradication of racism (Solorzano, 1997).

4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* Critical race theory recognizes
   that experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical
   to the understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination.
   Delgado and Stefancic (2001) speak to the unique voice of color thesis.

From this premise, the voice of color thesis holds that because of the unique histories and experiences with oppression, people of color may be able to communicate matters to their white counterparts that whites are unlikely to know (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

5. *The transdisciplinary perspective.* CRT challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts. Although the way in which CRT is received varies by discipline*,* today CRT can claim a presence in education, psychology, cultural studies, political science, and even philosophy (Crenshaw, 2011).

The tenets above are not new in isolation; however, they combine to challenge existing modes of scholarship. CRT serves notice to those neutral and normative educational policies and practices that fail to name racist injuries and identify their origins in relation to racism. Solorzano and Yosso (2007) argue that when we examine the ideology of race and racist injuries are named, victims of racism have the opportunity to find their voice thereby becoming empowered participants. Delgado Bernal (1998) supports the argument for race based methodologies "as they speak to the failure of traditional patriarchal and liberal educational scholarship by examining the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 556).

CRT allows for the recognition of students of color as holders and creators of their own knowledge. "For too long, the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal

educational settings" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 105). CRT recognizes that students of color are required to but struggle with working against the hegemonic worldview.CRT becomes a useful approach because it contends that racism is ordinary, not aberrational (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; & Ng, 1993).

<div align="center">Counterstories</div>

In this work I have co-created a counternarrative to the traditional dominant discourse on race. In this chapter, I will continue to show the many complexities that the young ladies faced working in a system that did not work for them. One of the tenets of CRT that is especially relevant in this work is the use of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling is a tool that CRT scholars employ to contradict race neutral discourse by revealing how white privilege operates within an ideological framework that reinforces and supports unequal societal relations between Whites and people of color (Merriweather, Guy, & Manglitz, 2006).

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counterstorytelling as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told including people of color, women, gay, and the poor. In contrast, majoritarian stories privilege Whites by considering their locations normative points of reference. Dialogues about race are more often than not constrained by the emergence of a dominant hegemonic discourse that seeks to reframe and rearticulate the experiences of people of color (Merriweather et al, 2006). Literary and narrative theory holds that we occupy a normative universe and the hope is that counterstories describing the lives of people of color can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Counterstorytelling is an apposite tool in which to contradict racist characterizations of people of colors' life.

Critical race theorists name three types of counterstories: personal stories that recount an individual's experiences with various forms of racism and are often autobiographical; other people's stories or narratives that tell another person's story in third person; and composite stories that draw on various forms of data to recount the experiences of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In this work, I have examined other people's stories.

Chapter 5 was a compilation of the counterstories of the five young ladies who were members of GTW. In this chapter, I will contextualize the themes that emerged from their stories in respect to relevant literature within the framework of CRT. Utilizing a tenet of CRT, I will employ an intersectional approach by discussing how race and gender combine to shape the experiences of the girls; along with the obstacles created by these social and biological constructs (Davis, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 2011). I will then discuss a suggested direction for future research and study based on the themes that emerge. I will continue by outlining implications for teachers, administrators, and teacher education programming arguing for the need of critical race methodologies in education to address the needs of marginalized students of color within the institution of education.

<u>Themes</u>

In this counternarrative, I have attempted to shed light on the lived experiences of the young ladies who were members of the GTW group during the 2010-2011/2011-2012

school years. In attempting to interpret the themes that emerged from the counterstories, one question that CRT poses resonated with me: Who is privileged to speak for whom? With what Delgado Bernal (1998) calls cultural intuition, the researcher's ability to use personal experience, literature and professional experience, I will attempt to provide a forum for their voices.

Each of the young ladies in the study experienced schooling differently. Jada has never had a Black teacher, while Lovely named two white men as her favorite teachers. Serenity named a Black woman who was actually never her teacher, while Danesha praised her Black teachers for their ability to relate to her on a personal level. Their experiences growing up differed as well. Danesha had a relationship with her father while Lovely and Serenity were just getting to know theirs. Jada barely remembered her father, while Keisha has never met hers. Although there are many differences in their counterstories, the narratives of the young ladies reveal very clear overarching themes: they all desired to belong in one form or another; they all felt that they were under the microscope or specifically targeted; they all discussed being a Black girl in our society; and they all were influenced by their family dynamic.

Of the Matter of Belonging: Black Teachers, School Connectedness, Racial Identity, and GTW

Belonging or the need to be accepted was one of four salient themes that linked all of the counterstories. Maslow (2012) posited in his effort to discover what motivates people, that all humans have a desire to belong and ultimately be accepted or loved. Even though the theme of belonging linked all of the girls, this looked very differently for each of them. It did, however, drive their thoughts, actions, and attitudes.

Danesha found solace within the walls of her Black teacher, Mrs. Coldman's classroom. She felt a "personal connection" and noted that she was "more passionate than all of [her] other teachers. She was drawn to the passion that Mrs. Coldman exhibited and perceived it as an expression of her desire to have Danesha in class. She essentially felt that she belonged in Mrs. Coldman's classroom.

Another reason for her sense of connectedness was how much Mrs. Coldman's teaching style resembled her experiences growing up. "She [Mrs. Coldman] was tough and growing up at home, you show tough love…you know when she serious." Mrs. Coldman's assertive, direct, tough love approach was familiar to Danesha.

Serenity felt a similar draw to Mr. Thomas, the only Black teacher that she would have her entire K-12 school career. She stated that "He saw my potential and he pushed me…he got on my nerves, but I love Mr. Thomas." Speaking to Mr. Thomas's forthright nature, Serenity perceived his pushing as an expression of caring. "He told it like it really was."

Keisha identified two Black teachers who also "told her like it was." Both Mr. Burns and Ms. Akar encouraged her to strive to be her absolute best. She felt this level of acceptance from her two Black teachers juxtaposed the "other white teachers [that] just didn't care."

In their search to be accepted during their school experiences, the young ladies identified Black teachers as one of the primary connections to school. Danesha "felt more comfortable" with Mrs. Coldman, while Lovely spoke to the ability of Black teachers to relate better to Black students than White teachers. "I think the Black teacher can relate to

the Black student more and nine times out of ten a Black person been through the same thing as another Black person."

The connection that the girls felt to their Black teachers is supported in the literature. There are some studies that support the assignment of same race teachers (Dee, 2004; Douglas, Lewis, Douglas, Scott, Garrison-Wade, 2008; Kunjufu, 2002; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Dee (2004) recommended an aggressive plan to recruit teachers of color based on role-model effects for students of color as well as evidence of racial biases among White teachers. He found that assignment to a same race teacher significantly increased the math and reading achievement of both Black and white students in his study. Kunjufu (2002) contends that African American students, who have a Black teacher for one year, improve 4 percentage points in reading and math thereby supporting the need for Black students to have Black teachers.

It is no mystery that the young ladies felt accepted by their Black teachers and were attracted to them. The teachers created an environment in which they felt wanted and cared for as was often communicated in a very authoritarian manner. In *Other People's Children,* Delpit (2006) referenced a study that examined the teaching styles of Black versus white teachers. She noted that Black students were drawn to their Black teachers because they received very clear directives. "Black children expect an authority to act with authority" in contrast to the white teachers who used more suggestive, indirect language (Delpit, 2006, p.35). In addition to the research that differentiates teaching styles and behaviors of Black and white teachers (Delpit, 2006; Howard; 2006; Kunjufu, 2002), there is substantial scholarship that evidences white teachers who evaluate Black

students' behavior and academic potential more negatively than white students (Blake et al., 2010; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; & Skiba et al., 2000). This implication is of particular importance to teachers because sociocultural perspectives of the educational process contend that students need a sense of connection to others in order to maximize student learning and to develop a sense of school belonging (Booker, 2006). Some researchers identify school belongingness as perception of teacher support, encouragement, and warmth (Booker, 2006; Fine, 1991). The girls felt supported by their Black teachers.

During high school, students of color place a major emphasis on positive and encouraging interpersonal interactions with peers and teachers (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000; Tatum, 2007). For African Americans, in particular, positive interactions with teachers are critical to their success regardless of color (Booker, 2006). Both Serenity and Lovely found their support and encouragement in two of their white male teachers. Their desire to connect superseded the race of the teachers they sought acceptance from. In their mind the fact that "they cared about [their] education" and "helped [them] out whenever needed" established the sense of being accepted and wanted in their classrooms.

Past relational experiences of students of color, including their familial and social histories, contribute to the interpersonal environments of schools (Artz & Nicholson, 2010). Booker (2006) argues that by nature of their secondary status, African American students are more sensitive to environmental incongruence such as impersonal and uncaring schools. She contends that even though students of color educated in majority

contexts may value their education, negative interactions and experiences with members of the majority group hinder genuine connections or belonging to the school (Booker, 2006).

Administration: "Always had something to say!"

This was evidenced when some of the girls reflected on their dealings with the administration. The young ladies in the study had various levels of interaction with the administration at City High. Lovely's run-ins landed her a number of suspensions. She stated, "I hated when Dr. Kyzinski came in cuz (s/he) always had something negative to say."

Perhaps as a result of her negative perception of administrators, Lovely was always defensive around administration. Her relationship with administration was by far the most contentious. The sense of belonging that she felt with her white male teachers, Mr. Washington and Mr. Bowser, paled in comparison to the combative rapport that she had with the administrators in the building. Although not as turbulent, Danesha's perception was that the administrators forced efforts to appear concerned. "I feel like it was fake…I know you be talking stuff."

The girls' perception of the administration's insincerity and a perceived lack of trust caused division in the building between the students of color and the administrators. For Jada, one administrator seemed to make a stark divide between the haves and have nots. Unfortunately for her, she knew that she was perceived to be a have not. "(The administrator) made some students feel like they were better than others… S/he didn't really give you a chance…"

Administration is critical to the discussion of belonging for a number of reasons. The administration's role is to create an atmosphere that facilitates the emotional, physical and over all well-being of the students (Sindhi, 2013). Administrators are tasked with creating and maintaining a positive school climate that is conducive to learning. The literature on school climate shows that students who feel a sense of belonging at school are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors. In a school building where the administration-student interactions are respectful and caring and employ positive disciplinary methods, as opposed to exclusionary measures such as school suspensions, tend to have lower dropout rates (Artz & Nicholson, 2010).

Douglas et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative study of the impact of White teachers and administrators on the academic achievement of Black students. One of the themes that emerged from the data entitled "The Administrators Need to Check Themselves." The students, much like the young ladies in this study, felt that the administrators were completely out of touch and uninterested in establishing any type of relationship with the students of color as they were constantly at odds with the administration. When students feel unwelcomed or ignored, much like the counterstories demonstrate, the authors argue, administration has failed to meet a very essential need.

Social Construction of Race-Contested Space

In pursuit of belonging, each of the girls' behavior and actions looked differently. Jada, because of her desire to identify as biracial, for instance, sought to belong to a particular racial group and thereby struggled with race identity as she did not solely identify as African American initially. Her issue with that designation stemmed from the

negative connotation associated with the stereotypical Black girl. Admitting that she did

not have much exposure to the Black people growing up, she expressed her frustration.

> "When they see me…they're probably like this hoodrat … I don't want them to look at me how they look at other Black people… she's just like all the rest of them, she's always fighting …Most people that look at me just probably think that I'm…a bad person, I'm always in trouble… when… I'm a total opposite.

Her concerns of the negative association are validated in the literature. Francis

(2011) found that Black girls are viewed less favorably than girls from other racial and

ethnic backgrounds with regards to disruptive behavior. Black girls, who do not want to

be categorized as "those loud Black girls"   are frequently confronted with dissociating

themselves to meet the standard of femaleness as measured by White middle class

womanhood; much like Jada felt compelled to do (Fordham, 1993).

Early on, Jada "thought she was white" because she spent a lot of time with the

white side of her family. Both of her parents were biracial, having at least one white

parent, and because of her limited exposure to Black people, this designation seemed to

be a natural fit. Notwithstanding, Jada learned very quickly that society decided for her

that she was Black. "I wasn't sad about it at all…it wasn't that I was ashamed of it…I

just didn't like people categorizing and putting me in the same place as somebody else."

The social construction of race theory suggests that, in an effort to maintain

privilege and power in our society, artificial but very real, designations were assigned to

race by the dominant hegemonic race. It became an idea ascribed to biology. What we

know to be true is that there are no biological attributes that differentiate between races,

only physical traits (Smith, 2003). This becomes a relevant dialogue in examining racial

identity and assignments because Jada was essentially handed her ethnicity and assigned to a category.   As a result of her angst against being assigned to one category, Jada became overtly concerned with her racial identity.

According to Tatum (1997), the concept of identity, as complex as it may be, "is shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (p. 18). Identity, in large part, is determined by what the world around you says you are. As cited by Tatum (1997), social scientist Charles Cooley pointed out, "other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves" (p. 18). Not entirely sure, Jada opted for "other" as a designation, initially choosing to be considered biracial. Her path toward belonging was especially challenging.

The categorization of mixed or biracial children as Black creates unique identity issues for biracial children (Butler-Sweet, 2011). Particularly because biracial people tend to look Black, they are pressured to accept Black as a designation despite their association with the white race. Some research supports that despite their ancestral ties to both Black and White groups, mixed race individuals may be viewed as neither Black nor White (Butler-Sweet, 2011; Gillem, Cohn, Throne, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Being seen as both and neither could account for Jada's desire to belong somewhere, to some group. Her decision to "check out" and connect with GTW, in spite of her preconceived notions about Black girls, demonstrated her attempt to satisfy this desire.

Researchers Oyserson and Gant (1995) contend that adolescence is a time of unfettered identity negotiation in which adolescents are said to "try on" various identities.

They receive moderating feedback based on these conceptions. These years can be a tumultuous time for any teen, more so for those who struggle with race identity. Some of the girls wrestled with finding the balance between being considered too Black or not Black enough in their quest to find their niche. Danesha is one such example.

She was often accused of "talking and acting white," typically from her African American peers. She would often express her frustration with the fact that being articulate and behaving appropriately was considered "talking or acting white…It makes me so mad…"

The power of this phenomenon can also be seen in that Danesha indicated that this is not only an experience she had in high school but one that continues in college, particularly among African Americans females.

> So they say, you want me to act white?!...Ugh it makes me so mad that you gotta break it down to them…and I hate it. It's teaching me to be patient because I want to be a teacher. I just can't deal with grown folks not knowing that's why I'm teaching kids.

This stereotype transcends age.

Serenity's experience is another such example. She recalls an occurrence in which she is accused of talking and acting white by a Black classmate. "Larry Harris was like 'I've never met a Black girl that sounds so white. He made me so mad."

Serenity resented being called White but admits she "was more like a Black/White child." Being called White was the all too familiar feeling of being misplaced and not being wanted. "It's like you're trying to make me feel like I didn't belong..."

Serenity was not quite Black enough because she did not typically hang around Black kids growing up. It wasn't until Serenity started "acting Black" that she was finally accepted among her Black peers. She was then Black enough. "You have to start going off on them and then all of a sudden you're accepted now."

This social construction of race creates a cultural expectation of being loud, aggressive, and tough that gains credibility within Black peer groups, particularly among girls. Morris (2007) contends that as a result of historical exclusion from white people, in this system, the ideal model of femininity and the requirement to be independent from men has forged outspokenness for many Black women and Black girls.

In an attempt to find balance, Serenity felt pulled in multiple directions in her quest to find a group to belong to. Serenity expressed her concern with being labeled as an Uncle Tom and she defends, "I always knew I was Black." Serenity's quest to be "Black enough" manifested in her behavior at school much like Keisha's longing to fit in did. Both were a result of their desire and perceived need to belong and be accepted. Keisha, as a student of color attending a predominately white elementary school, desired to fit in with the white kids. "I went to Polk Elementary and it wasn't too many Black people. I wasn't the same color as them and didn't act like them… so I had to fit in with everybody else…"Keisha was not herself. "It caused me not to act like myself. Like I was doing what everyone else was doing just to fit in."

Keisha's perceived need to conform was the reason that she attributed to her acting out. This behavior continued into middle and high school. "I think that's the reason I was acting out so much and getting myself in trouble, trying to be like others."

Both Keisha and the other young ladies were active agents in their quest to belong but were often confronted with hegemony of the dominant group. Overall, the counterstories illuminate the girls' longing to be understood, valued, to ultimately belong. Each of the girls expressed a desire to belong or be accepted by someone or something. The differing expressions were manifested in their relationships with both Black and White teachers, identity crises, and acting out in school (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). There was, however, one sphere in which they all felt like they belonged: the Girls to Women group.

Each of the young ladies in the study were members of GTW for two consecutive years. They were either recommended by a teacher or volunteered to be a part of the group. Regardless of the ways they came to initially connect with the group, they all ultimately made a choice to participate and remain involved. Each of them, in their counterstories, discussed why they wanted to belong to a group exclusively for Black girls.

Danesha described her excitement in belonging to a group of "all of her homies." Her connection to something that was set apart and reserved only for girls who looked like her was an exclusive opportunity in her mind. She explains, "Heck yeah I was excited….I think everyone was because we didn't want to go to class (laughter). But why would I want to go to class when I can go be a part of this [group]?"

Serenity admitted initially joining for the wrong reasons. "We heard about field trips and getting out of school…and I was excited about being with my friends." She

went on to reflect that she had never had an opportunity to be with all Black students. "Man, we ain't never been in a class *like this* together. We're so happy together."

Danesha and Serenity both talked about wanting to belong to the group for what they thought were all of the wrong reasons. They ultimately wanted to belong because all of their "homies" were in the group. While not an answer an educator might first want to hear, it is not only a common student desire but also a constant human desire (Maslow, 2012). There was no other class that they were able to see that many of their Black peers concentrated in one area free from judgment.

Keisha stated that she joined the group because she wanted to meet new people, "meet people that were actually my color." Having gone to predominately white schools prior to high school, she felt that the group was an opportunity to interact with students that looked like her.

For Lovely, GTW was a place to belong where she could be herself without fear of being judged or singled out. Lovely reflected on her reason for belonging to GTW. "Cuz it was all Black and I wanted to be around Black people because you can act yourself and you don't have to act all sidity (stuck up). You don't have to act a different kind of way."

The girls valued the group because it was something that was created specifically for them, that they belonged to. They desired the sense of belonging because each of the girls spoke to experiences, at some point in their life, in which they were excluded based on gender, age, and for some race. Keisha could not stay out as late as her brother because she was a girl. Lovely was excluded from regular education because of her

designation as a student with special needs. Serenity was seen by Black peers as not

Black enough because she hung around White people and Jada was displaced because of

her biracial designation. GTW very easily became the designated safe space in which

Black girls with their bad attitudes, quick tongues, behavior problems, or none of the

above were all welcome.

Growing Moments

GTW sought to capitalize on every opportunity to celebrate the girls' small

successes and our growing moments, such as the A on the Biology test or choosing to

walk away instead of engaging in a verbal altercation. We made conscious efforts to

ensure that they were welcome and that they felt safe to be open, honest, and exposed.

For some of the girls, as Lovely described, "it was the only time we could let it all hang

out."

The group was aimed at facilitating conversation about their issues in their

language. Sometimes it was the only language that the girls wanted to hear and were

receptive to. The cultural capital of speaking their language and being able to relate to

their experiences, that I had inherited by sheer nature of my own ethnicity, paved the way

for the honest conversations that we could have.

Belonging or the need to be accepted was the most prevalent of all the themes that

linked the counterstories. Even though the need to belong linked them, the capacity to

fulfill this need looked very differently for each of them. Notwithstanding, it drove their

girls' thoughts, actions, and attitudes as they found solace in their teachers, in their

identity, and in the group. GTW desired and sought after them as they were. It provided

the girls with a big tent under which they had a chance of finding what, for most of them,

had been a complicated and elusive need—to belong.

Of Being Singled Out

Each of the young ladies in the study described being singled out by nature of

their gender and ethnicity. Situating this study within the framework of CRT allows for

the examination of these issues from an intersectional perspective. According to Delgado

and Stefancic (2001), intersectionality is the examination of race, sex, class, national

origin, and sexual orientation. This becomes relevant to the conversation because the girls

cannot experience being Black, female, or economically disadvantaged independently

(Wallace et al., 2011)

Jada recounted being singled out by nature of her ethnicity in her history class.

She found herself being the spokesperson for an entire race of people and being held

responsible for the entire chronology of African American history.

> I was the only Black person in my class…teachers would be like, yeah does your
> family remember anything like that and I'm just like I don't know. We don't sit
> around and talk about how our family was enslaved and all of that. I feel like they
> made us seem like we didn't know as much as some students did…

Jada resented being singled out in class when discussing topics that resembled

Black history. Moreover, she resented that she was made to feel that she *should* know

every about "her" people. Ridley and Terzigni (2012) conducted a qualitative study in

which a second grader reflects similarly, "I hate it when we talk about Martin Luther

King and everybody stares at me" (p.39).

The young ladies in the study spoke at great length about being singled out and

being targeted by both teachers and administration. Serenity explained,

Sometimes I would feel like they always single me out. Maybe because I had the loudest voice in the class like overall my voice would echo, would overpower everybody. That's probably why they singled me out. It'll make me mad because it'd be like -- the girl right next to me would be talking and you won't say it to her. You'll say something to me when I just started talking but she had been talking the whole class period. I didn't like to be singled out. Really that kind of irked me …

Serenity felt that she was singled out *because* of her association with GTW. She, and the other girls, were essentially condemned to double jeopardy. On one hand they wanted to be with a group created specifically for them, but it essentially became the means in which they were singled out. "They'll be so quick to come back to tell you [Ms. Boyd] the littlest thing. Like say we sneezed wrong…they were so quick to go back and try to tell you something... A little situation that they made something out of nothing."

Lovely reflected on her feeling regarding being singled out. She expressed her desire to understand why "white teachers blamed everything on the Black girls."

The girls' feeling of being targeted by teachers is consistent with research suggests. Raffaele and Howard (2003) conducted a study in which results indicated that Black females were suspended at a much higher rate than White and Hispanic females at all three school levels. Other researchers have found that African American girls are sent to the office for less serious and more subjective reasons as well (Blake et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2000).

Additionally, others have argued that Black girls' violations of traditional standards of femininity may influence their involvement in the school discipline system. Black girls encounter unique obstacles in school because teachers continuously stereotyped as loud and aggressive (Fordham, 1993; Francis, 2011; Morris, 2007). The

loudness is contrasted with the normalized definition of femaleness within the dominant

hegemonic culture.

Tatum (1997) discussed the issue of being singled out as she refers to students of

color as "others." In doing so, she communicates the feelings that are elicited by being

singled out within the confines of the school building. A common response to this feeling

is not-learning by targeted students who are too often seen by their teachers as others.

Tatum (1997) cites Herbert Kohl in his essay entitled, "I Won't Learn from You" (p. 26).

> Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable
> challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In
> such situations, there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree
> to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of
> self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject their world.

Not learning is especially costly to those considered to be "others." The reality is

that not learning may mean that there are essential skills that those considered to be

"others" are not acquiring thus continuing to perpetuate a dominant racist hegemonic

system.

Each of the young ladies, through their counterstories talked about being singled

out by nature of their gender and ethnicity. Situating this study within the framework of

CRT allows for the examination of these issues from an intersectional perspective.

Acknowledging the social construction of race, this argument becomes plausible in that

this system was designed by the dominant hegemonic group to exclude people of color

from all realms of society. Through a historical context, this is even more evident today.

One only has to look to our judicial system, the discrepancy between Blacks and Whites

economically, and the monstrous achievement gap in education.

The girls were asked to work in a flawed system that did not work for them, that singled them out and excluded them in one manner or another. Through this counternarrative I hope to, in the very least, name the segregation that the girls felt in the hallways and classrooms of City High. Once named, we can begin combating them and pray that doing so will render these counterstories capable of deconstructing pernicious beliefs one counterstory at a time.

<div align="center">Of Being Black and Other Thoughts</div>

"One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body…" (Dubois, 2005, p.7). This very familiar concept that Dubois speaks of is one that the girls were constantly aware.

For Serenity, it was a Black peer named Larry Harris who pointed out to her, in an uncaring manner that "she talked too white" to be Black. For Jada, being Black was an issue that she struggled with until she became a member of GTW and began to embrace being Black. For Keisha, she discovered just how Black she was at Polk Elementary when none the kids looked like her. Her response was to act out in an attempt to fit in. Lovely knew very early on that she was Black while Danesha began paying attention to color in middle school when she began to notice that that some students were afforded different opportunities than she received. "I could see the looks and people judging and I didn't realize, oh it's because I'm Black…She just got to this and I didn't? That's when it snapped."

Tatum (1997) discusses how she conducted an experiment with her college classes. She asks them to think of their earliest race-related memory. Almost always hesitant to speak of it, her students' reactions generally resemble hushed curiosity, fear, or avoidance. In total contrast of people of color who are always aware of their Blackness, white people have internalized their race as the norm and as a result are very rarely forced to consider it. "The element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture" (Tatum, 1997, p.21). McIntosh (1988) would consider this white privilege at its very root. She defines white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned asset which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious" (p.165).

Discovering Blackness for people of color is a process that is a part of solidifying one's racial identity and marks the very beginnings of a lifetime of awareness. Some research suggests that this transition may happen as early as middle school (Tatum, 1997; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). For Black girls, as race becomes an increasingly prominent part of their identity, there are certain questions that arise such as, "What does it mean to be Black in this society? Considering the mix messages that I receive, how am I supposed to act? How should I behave? What should I do? How should I talk?" Black girls contend with these devaluing mixed responses to these questions determining who they are and who they will become particularly when race, gender, and class are a part of the consideration.

Discovering what it meant to be Black came naturally for some of the girls and for others it was a struggle. Part of this discovery, in addition to deciphering mixed messages about who they were, came the question of how to talk: whether to sound too Black, not Black at all, or just Black enough was an internal conflict for some.

Talking Black

In talking Black, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that the girls often used, is typically discussed juxtapose White Standard English as the only "correct" manner in which to speak (Hobbs, 2004). McNulty argues, however, that White Standard English is in flux and becoming more of a moving target that has been artificially framed by the dominant group (personal communication, October 17, 2013). Nonetheless it is perceived as the norm. Popular culture, in contrast, promotes, accepts, and encourages AAVE while it is frowned upon in the school environment. The girls' ability to move between White Standard English and AAVE is called codeswitching.

According to Hobbs (2004), codeswitching is the ability to use more than one language, dialect, or style of the same language in the course of a single communicative episode that typically relies on situational factors. It allows expression of identities that are not normally acknowledged in the school environment (Ellwood, 2008). Ellwood contends that identities are performed and negotiated through language in a highly contingent process and at any particular time, an individual's linguistic repertoire works to negotiate towards or away from particular identities in which individuals are expected to behave. Society identifies categories which individuals, in an effort to be able to identify with a certain group, seek to align or misalign.

Some of the young ladies figured out how to codeswitch whether or not they named it as such, while some of the girls thought that the ability to situationally switch or alter the dialect from Standard English was "acting white" and thus refuted codeswitching altogether. Jada, however, figured out how "acting white" kept her out of the principal's office, while Serenity resented being called white or any association thereof and resigned to "japing out" (cursing people out) to defend her Blackness or membership to the Black group. Codeswitching, in this case was an attempt to not align with a particular identity but to reject an imposed identity (Ellwood, 2008).

Teachers should provide nonthreatening spaces for the negotiation and application of both nonstandard and Standard English by recognizing that home language is directly tied to a student's identity (Hill, 2009). One teacher in a study by Hill (2009) used his classroom to create an equitable space to teach his students that everyone speaks a variation of the Standard English. He allowed his students to use their own voice in their writing, using their home language as a scaffold to standard school literacy. Carter (1998) committed to empowering her students to code switch when necessary but to value both languages. She cautions that failing to do so makes speakers of Black dialect feel less intelligent or less competent (Carter, 1998).

I recall hearing many of the girls' teachers admonish students regarding their language, emphasizing that there was one "right way" to speak in class—White Standard English, as opposed to valuing the variation of the Standard English language that the girls often brought to the table. I felt compelled to pull one teacher to the side as I heard her question in a very irritated tone, "Do you speak that way at home?" My question to

her was and if she does, then what? I wanted desperately to help the teacher see that

devaluing what is part of a student identity is harmful to students' confidence and can

contribute to their dislike for school. Teaching students how to codeswitch would be a

much more productive and informative approach than discounting and dismissing the

way the talk in the rest of their non-school lives.

In a day of our first Black President who received major news coverage for his

"We straight" response when asked if he wanted change for the $20 bill that he handed

waitress at a Washington, D.C. diner, the ability to codeswitch is invaluable for people of

color. If the Harvard educated president of the United States is walking the tightrope of

codeswitching, we can certainly see how difficult and complex it was for the adolescent

Black girls of City High's GTW group. The reality is that if the girls did not codeswitch

and they sounded "too Black," they would not be successful in today's society.

Codeswitching, in this regard, was the girls' attempt at leveraging language to navigate

structural barriers. It was a tool to maintain the counternarrative voice but in a way it was

playing the game to create access that was detrimental to their survival in the halls of City

High (C. McNulty, personal communication, October 16, 2013). Their language, those

girls with their way of doing, was and still is not socially acceptable.

Safe Space

GTW offered a safe space for the girls in which to grapple with codeswitching

and many of their other questions about what it meant to be Black. For Tatum (1997), her

safe space was identified as the table in the cafeteria. In her book entitled, *Why are all the*

Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?, she succinctly answers the question that

the title of her book demands,

> Racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental
> stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a
> positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are
> operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based
> largely on cultural stereotypes (p.62).

It was increasingly important in GTW to talk about the beauty in Blackness

because there are so many messages that Black girls receive regarding the standard of

beauty in America. We talked oftentimes of embracing what they love about being Black.

The answers would range from, "I like our swag, to I love that my hair can be one way

today and tomorrow, it can be a whole 'nother way. White people ain't got it like that."

Being able to identify oneself as a part of a larger group from which one is able to

draw support from is a very important coping strategy. Individuals who do not have the

opportunity to buffer the stresses of being "them" or "others" are at significant risk for

social isolation (Tatum, 1997). The girls talk about the benefit of having the support of

those who have shared similar experiences.

For Keisha, the group boasted her self-confidence and she was able to raise her

own expectations as a result. Having a safe space to talk about boys and complicated

family dynamics was a coping mechanism in that some of the girls in the group had

similar experiences. She explained,

> It taught me a lot about life situations, boys, family, friends…getting ready for the
> future, college, and all of that….[My expectations] are actually higher now. I
> know I could do better, I could reach for the stars, I feel more confident in my
> school work…

For Lovely, the group was a haven for protection against stereotypes and blame from the adults in the school building. She felt that the group, to a certain extent, armed her with the tools she needed to get through the school day. She stated, "We learned about ourselves and Black people and how some people looked at us and how we should be. I think it was a good thing…[because] the white teachers blamed everything on the Black girls."

Danesha credited the group as the reason she successfully completed her first year at an HBCU. The group taught her lessons that she is able to take with her wherever she goes. She went on to say, "[I learned] what and what not to do. It was helping with high school stuff…but you are able to take it with you the rest of your life. Without the group, I would not be at Washington University."

Both Serenity and Jada credited the group for turning their thoughts towards a postsecondary education and noted that many opportunities opened up because of their active involvement. GTW stood in the gap for the life lessons that they could not learn in the traditional classroom about what it means to be a Black girl in a society that was not designed for them to succeed in. Understanding the unique challenges that girls of color face, makes a group that acknowledges and supports their racial development an absolute essential. These girls need a space in which to achieve and internalized a sense of personal security to buffer the harsh realities of society.

Of the Matter of Family: Fathers and Othermothers

In addition to personal, social, and academic support, GTW was an opportunity for the young ladies to seek refuge from their very oftentimes complicated family

dynamic. With the exception of Danesha's father who raised her, none of the girls grew up with their fathers in the home. Serenity and Lovely had within the past two years developed a relationship with their fathers; Jada's biological father was shot and killed when she was very young; and Keisha has still never met hers. Notwithstanding, each of the girls, in some manner or another, desired a relationship with men they barely knew.

In her counterstory, Keisha talks about actively seeking her father but giving up shortly after she yielded no results. After giving up she stated, "My granny said he ain't want me, so… she was being real...I just don't care anymore."

Keisha had somehow convinced herself that she had no longer an interest in meeting the man that she knew to be her father. She stated in a nonchalant manner, "I probably seen him before and didn't even know it. But I don't think about it no more."

One wonders how much of her perceived lack of caring was a defense mechanism. Did Keisha believe that caring would only yield exposure thus vulnerability? Her shell was very hard and thus her protective barrier was transposed into other parts of her life. This was evident in her defiant behavior in school, the strained relationship that she had with teachers and the refuge that she sought in a basketball jersey (Person, Benson-Quaziena, & Rogers, 2001).

Lovely had only recently confirmed who her actual father was. They are now "cool…good friends" however she has, as a result, lived 18 years shrouded in darkness about her real father's identity. They talk often on the phone and "hang out sometimes" but she found establishing a relationship difficult after so much time had been lost.

Lovely looks to her mother for the support that she needs now, and needed growing up, in the uncertainty of her father.

Serenity, similarly, felt rejected for so many years by her father, who would only occasionally make visits. "He would make little appearances…when I was like in 5ᵗʰ or 6ᵗʰ grade."

The last of nine children, she was the result of an extra-marital affair. Knowing this and being forced to face the fact that she was result of taboo inevitably took an emotional toll. Serenity rebelled against her mother in both passive and aggressive ways. Serenity recognized this and reflected, "For the longest [time] I did not think *I had* a dad. I thought it was just mom….looking back my momma really was there for me…that was my rock."

Reflecting now however, she understands that, even though her mother was very strict, her mother sacrificed a lot to provide for her and protect her in spite of her circumstances.

African American mothers are often characterized as the practitioners of authoritarian methods of direction and communication, especially with their daughters (Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007).Each of the young ladies were able to persevere in spite of the absence of their fathers. By and large this was a result of their mother's persistent, tenacious nature along with the efforts of "othermothers."

According to Collins (1990), in African American communities variant boundaries often distinguish biological mothers from other women who assisted in the upbringing of an African American child, called othermothers. The centrality of women

in the African American extended family culture reflects both a continuation of West African cultural values and functional adaptions to race and gender oppression (Collins, 1990). African American mothers, like most mothers in American society, have traditionally been responsible for the emotional nurturing of their families however, they were also expected to contribute to the economic stability of their family dating back to enslavement (Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007). Othermothers stepped in a filled the role of child care provider, disciplinary, and teacher.

Resilient and organized linkages of mothers and othermothers are key in understanding the lives of African American children (Collins, 1990; Davis-Maye & Perry, 2007). This interdependence on women centered networks is not only acceptable, but it nourished and actively maintained. Othermothers can include aunts (often referred to as Auntie or Tete) older cousins, older sisters, grandmothers, church mothers, god mothers, and any other strong female presence in Black children's' lives. What is important to note is that othermotherness is not predicated on male powerlessness or absence, although within the context that the girls provide - this is the case.

Danesha's othermother is her grandmother or Nanna as she is called. She credits her Nanna for filling the role as her mother when her mother died. "She is my mother…she is always there. She knows everything."

Danesha and her siblings moved in with Nanna and she helped everyone get on their feet during a very dark time. Dad was faced with raising the kids and maintaining his role as provider. Danesha recognized this insurmountable task and essentially stepped into her own othermother role. "I felt like when my mom passed, these are my

kids…these are my responsibility." Stepping into this role forced Danesha to grow up way before her time. Despite this, she always credits her Nanna for being there for her and her family.

Keisha's othermother is also her grandmother. Keisha spoke very highly of her grandmother in regards to filling the role left vacant by her father. She refers to her granny as "her girl" and states, "I love my granny. She always telling me I need to do this or that."

Keisha's grandmother has become the surrogate responsible for her Christian upbringing. They attend church together every Sunday and they enjoy the quality time that that activity allows. "That's sort of our thing," Keisha said.

In addition to the othermothers who are actually kin, even relationships that are not between kin, are cultural norms in the African American community. Mothers allow for others to become othermothers for their children. This was the case for both Jada and Olivia as they explicitly identified me as filling this role in their lives and to varying degrees for the other young ladies in the study.

I remember seeing Jada and her mother at parent teacher conferences and she ran up to me with her mother strolling casually behind. I had not yet had the opportunity to meet her mom. She introduced me as her othermother. Her mom laughed and stated that it was *finally* nice to meet me. She went on to explain how much she had heard about me at home and she thanked me for the help I provided Jada thus far. In our interview together, Jada explained what I meant to her.

You're the only one that who really cared, the one that really helped us like if we needed help with something… You wanted us to be successful and go above and beyond. You're more like a mom than you are like a teacher. You didn't, like sugar coat things… you actually *tell us how it is*…

Serenity shared similar sentiments when asked who had impacted her life the most. "[When I would get in trouble] I be like all right Ms. Boyd finna cuss me out but let me go over here to talk to her….like I said it wasn't for you, I would not have gone to Carver [University]."

Mawhinney (2011) discusses her experience othermothering, student-teacher relationships, and personal expectations that educators impose on themselves teaching at an HBCU. She argues that Black teachers tend to take on othermothering of their Black students blurring the boundaries, set forth by predominately white institutions, of traditional student teacher relationships. She justified this self-sacrificing, emotionally taxing practice on the need to provide educational racial uplift. Mawhinney (2011) would call this care-sickness as she cites Roseboro and Ross (2009). They argue that there is an embedded sense of duty wherein "Black women educators care because they equate work with care believing that work connects them to the larger community and provides the social and political avenues to affect change" (Mawhinney, 2011, p. 223).

The resiliency of women centered family networks illustrates how traditional cultural values can help our girls deal with the harsh realities of a society created for and by white, heterosexual, males. I am often reminded of the old African adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." Every teacher, church mother, neighbor, big sister, 2nd cousin,

great aunt has to have a hand in raising our Black girls. If we fail to do so, if we stand idly by, we have caused a great injustice to our others.

Conclusion

In this counternarrative, I have attempted to shed light on the girls' experiences by discussing their need to belong, by narrating their discovering of who they were in relation to identity, and examining the connections to the people who advocated for their success.

In their need to belong, the girls felt a special connection with both Black and White teachers who were forthright in expressing how invested they were in their success. They were drawn to the teachers who cared for them and held them accountable despite apparent barriers. Students need a sense of connection to others in order to maximize their learning experiences and develop a sense of school belonging. High school is a vital time for students of color because of the emphasis on positive and encouraging interpersonal interactions. This includes peers, teachers, and administration.

The girls' overall perception of the administration at City High was one of insincerity and lack of trust. Administration is critical to the discussion of belonging because they are tasked with creating and maintaining a positive school climate that is conducive to learning. When students feel unwelcomed or ignored, much like the counterstories demonstrate, administration has failed to meet a very essential need.

The themes also revealed that some of the girls struggled with racial identity. Adolescence can be a tumultuous time for any teen; however the young ladies in this study grappled with delineating between acting, sounding, and being Black, when to do

so - if to do it at all, in their quest to find their niche. GTW offered asylum and provided some answers to these pressing, life altering questions.

The group also provided refuge from their very oftentimes complicated family dynamic. In the absence of their father, they all identified a strong Black female presence in their life, or othermother. This othermother provided guidance, encouragement, and support – not in the absence of but in addition to what their biological mothers provided.

Finally, the young ladies discussed feeling singled out by nature of their gender and race. They felt that even though the group was creating to empower and encourage them, it made them an easy target for discipline and ridicule from teachers and administrators.

Based on the themes that emerged from the counterstories, the following section will provide implications for further research, implications for teachers, administrators, and teacher education programming. I support my implications by arguing for the need of critical race methodologies in education to address the needs of marginalized students of color within the institution of education.

<div align="center">Implications</div>

Areas for Further Research: A Critical Approach

Traditional mainstream educational scholarship has failed to provide a useful paradigm to examine the realities of students of color particularly in regards to intersectionality (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Educational preparation programs and classrooms across the nation continue to use theories and practices normed by middle to upper class, Protestant, white males thereby assigning non normative designations to the

"others." As a result, I argue for research that speaks to the resiliency and strength of Black girls as an antidote.

The failure of mainstream educational scholarship also continues to be evident in insurgence of deficit research regarding students of color, particularly Black girls. A quick search in any academic database returns hundreds of articles on dropout rates, teen pregnancy, sexual practices, disadvantaged youth, at risk behaviors, etc. (Payne, 1994). Innumerable racist theories, disciplines, philosophies and society's interpretation of these perceived deficiencies present a threat to Black girls' social and educational development. With the emphasis on the deficient research approach, there is very little attention given to achievement, success, and resiliency of African American girls currently (Evans-Winters, 2005). Gail Wyatt (1997) reminds us in her book entitled, *Stolen Women,* that when there is not a "deafening silence" there is a barrage of "negative messages" about African American women and girls that characterizes current scholarship.

I argue for a resounding call for research that speaks to the resiliency and strength of Black girls as a buffer to the insurgence of deficit research. If one were to look to the research and focus solely on the deficit perspective or rely on the media's interpretation, one could be led to believe that all of our Black girls are out of control, living in projects, pregnant with STDs. The girls from this study are not all high school drop outs and most of them have succeeded after high school despite their circumstances. The problem is that there is not enough research that supports this claim (Evans-Winters, 2005). We have to do more. I charge the educational scholars to avoid "frameworks that depend on the

lenses of deficiency and hopelessness, which are much too prevalent in urban education research" today (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 5).

Finally, as researchers we need to act reflectively and critically. Educational research has traditionally worked to serve the needs of the dominant elite. As a result, the hegemonic group has determined how researchers approach the study of our world. Eliciting critical frameworks forces to the consideration of who can be considered a knower. "The way educational research is conducted contributes significantly to what happens in schools… What is taught, how it is taught, who is taught, and whose fault it is when it is not learned are often manifestations of what is considered the legitimate body of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p.556).

Further research needs to be done that is concerned with the knowledge about African American girls. We have to consider who constructs understanding of their experiences and how this knowledge is validated or not validated (Delgado Bernal, 1998). We also need "epistemologies and methodologies that invoke discourse centered on agency and resiliency while simultaneously enacting critical practice" (Evans-Winter, 2005, p.10). It suffices to reason we need educational philosophies and methodologies that give voice to and empower African American girls.

The next section will outline implications specifically for teachers. These implications will include embracing critical pedagogy, a challenge to deconstruct traditional teacher/student roles, creating inviting safe spaces for learning, legitimizing life experiences of students of color and a charge to be critical and reflective.

Teachers: "Just Chill!"

AB:	"If you could give your teachers one piece of advice, what would it be?"
Keisha:	"Don't judge a book by its cover…Just cuz I am black I may have an attitude sometimes. It doesn't mean I'm going to be like that all the time."
Serenity:	"Try to actually get to know us instead of trying to stereotype us."
Jada:	"If you wouldn't give up on your child don't give up on somebody else's"
Lovely:	"Just chill!"

It is of paramount importance that educators, particularly teachers, are able to take this work and apply it in their classrooms and school buildings. Teachers are especially charged with the great task of teaching students who desire to belong, desire to be wanted, valued, and appreciated. This is typically the part where traditional studies would argue for a multicultural curriculum that embraces and welcomes all students. I would argue the adverse by stating multicultural practice and curriculum are not enough because it is pedagogically and politically too comfortable. Instead teachers have to be reflective and critical in their practice and have to teach in a culturally relevant manner. It cannot only be what they do but it has to become a part of who they are.

African American girls need teachers to embrace a critical pedagogy that answers this dire call. Critical pedagogy requires teacher to "examine how individual and institutional racism, sexism, classism complicates their daily existence, a pedagogy that

extends beyond multicultural education to take into consideration the context in which students live, play, and work (Evans-Winters, 2005, p.155). Critical pedagogy as a frame of reference for teachers recognizes that schools are social institutions that operate within larger historical and cultural contexts.

In utilizing critical pedagogy, one would understand that African American girls are continually targeted for their loud and unfeminine behaviors. For educators who are truly interested in utilizing pedagogy, they should develop and foster positive and genuine relationships with students of color. Get to know the students in your classroom and invite them to truly invest in what is happening in the learning milieu. As a teacher, you must honor everyone's presence in the classroom where there is ongoing recognition that everyone influences the class dynamic, that everyone is valued, and everyone should contribute.

hooks (1994) cautions that before a classroom of this sort can be effectively run, a deconstruction of the traditional notion that the teacher is the sole creator and holder of knowledge, has to happen. As a critically minded teacher, one has to recognize that teaching absolutely cannot mirror the banking system where the teacher deposits ideas into the heads of their students. So often teachers ritualistically recite useless culturally insensitive information and as this narrative sickness perpetuates, we teach as we have been taught. The more the teacher "fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he [thought to be]. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are" (Freire, 1970, p. 58). This banking system is injurious to a student of color's creativity and sense of self, further advantaging hegemonic oppression.

Teachers have to make their classrooms inviting and safe spaces. Seeing the classroom as a communal place enhances the likelihood of a collective effort in creating and sustaining such a learning environment where all are invested. African American girls need a place to belong. GTW was a place in which the girls felt a part of a shared community; this can very easily be mirrored in the classroom. Teachers should use language that reflects the goal of creating a space where they are wanted. They should share success and confess the areas in which more attention is needed, much like our growing moments. To this end, teachers have to be willing to allow their students to know them, to truly see them. "When teachers bring narratives of their experiences into the classroom discussions, it eliminates the possibility that we [teachers] function as all knowing, silent interrogators" (hooks, 1994, p.21)

With the unique histories and cultural knowledge that students bring into the classrooms, teachers should take advantage of the opportunity to legitimize students' of color life experiences consistent with the charge put forth by Critical Race theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teachers have to teach students in a manner that recognizes their experiential knowledge as legitimate and critical to the new learning in the classroom. Ladson-Billings (1994) contends that students are not writing on blank slates and therefore are not using conventional scripts. Teachers should take the opportunity to import culture into the literacy learning. Embrace the different ways of speaking and broadly define what is literarily welcome in the classroom by scaffolding literacy learning.

Most importantly teachers have to teach critically by engaging in a collective struggle against the status quo. Ladson-Billings (2000) explains to teachers preparing to teach African American students how schools and society are both designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview. CRT recognizes that students of color struggle to work against this hegemonic view. Teachers have the unique chance to raise the expectations in their classroom despite society's low expectations for our children of color. As educators, we have an awesome responsibility because the classroom, with all of its limitations, remains a location of possibility (hooks, 1994).

Administration: "Never Really gave us a Chance."

Noting the title of this section, this implication will be framed by first acknowledging that the role of an administrator is generally perceived as the hammer or the enforcer of the school rules and policy. With the job title comes negative connotations that administrators not only have to be cognizant of but make an intentional effort to overcome with students of color. Recognizing that there is an ever increasing diversity of the students who trickle into our school buildings, it is even more detrimental for the administration to be, in the very least, culturally responsive to the needs of these students of color.

I began this section by talking about research implications. The conversation then turned to what teachers should do in their classrooms; however, the truth of the matter is that this has to come from the top down. Teachers can close their classrooms and pretend it to be a far off island, but if being culturally responsive is not only a building wide

initiative but a priority, the only time Keisha will feel welcome is 3rd block on A days with Mrs. Akar.

One approach is to mandate *meaningful* professional development centered on cultural relevant teaching. Part of my frustration, prior to the becoming the administrator in charge of professional development, is the shallow approach most administrators take to "cultural competency" that happens to be during a Wednesday in February, if at all. This food, fun, and festive approach detracts from what could be a very pertinent time focused on how to best teach students of color. Lawrence and Tatum (1998) caution that this approach lacks the ability to influence the prospective of current teachers' views about themselves as racial beings or to alter existing teaching practices.

Administrators have to realize that one in-service can and will not be sufficient. Instead a series of opportunities where both anti-racist and multicultural concepts build upon one another is required (Lawrence & Tatum, 1998). Teachers need more than a one and done approach to cultural responsiveness. Follow up opportunities, such as workshops, conferences, and institutes help continue the momentum and it helps to provide ammunition to confront racist hegemonic practices in education. Administrators, in order to alter the status quo, need to support teachers to discuss and evaluate their continued growth.

Another approach to professional development is to involve students of color in the training process. I have conducted a number of in-services in which the students participate in the development of the professional development. This co-creational method not only gives voice and empowers students, but it allows staff and faculty to

truly hear the students. One of the student run opportunities that I put together was a

student panel. The only instructions that the students were given were to talk about what

is it like being them. At the conclusion of the session, there was not a dry eye in the room

after some of the teachers learned that one student had raised himself since the age of 15,

another had not seen his mother in years, another student made it a weekend practice to

bail Dad out of jail, and yet another is raising her four brothers and sisters. The objective

was not to guilt teachers into lowering expectations; however, it was to shed light on

what some of the students come to school with. Instead of lowering expectations,

teachers should celebrate louder and harder for the students who made it through the

structural barriers.

Administrators also have to be able to provide additional support for new teachers

as well as assisting in the development of the teachers who are already there. The

teachers who are new to the profession are typically placed in high need buildings

because they are the least desirable positions. The future of our students of color lies in

the hands of these teachers who are typically White female teachers. Ninety-three

percent of the American teaching staff is White with 83% of them being White females

elementary teachers (Kunjufu, 2002). Administrators should assume that very little

attention has been given to critical pedagogy and actual reflective teaching practices in

teacher education programs and if any exposure, came in the form of descriptions of

failure rather than models of success. I argue that developing critical consciousness about

racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity should be a major component of any and all teacher

preservice education and in service staff development programs. The experiences

provided should take place within a context of guided practice, authentic examples, and realistic situations (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Critical racial and cultural consciousness should be interwoven with self-reflection, particularly in preservice programs.

Administrators must also support both new and veteran teachers as they begin their quest to uncover answers to issues such as the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the underrepresentation in the gifted program, along with biased testing, and other practices that are haunted by tradition. Providing staff with the time and resources to delve into the process of action research would only benefit the school as a whole. Even teachers who are not deliberately opposed to dealing with racially and culturally diverse issues in education need guidance and support in changing their thoughts, beliefs and behaviors that perpetuate these insidious practices (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Administrators should work to create a learning environment where the expectation is self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness.

Finally, administrators need to support and encourage the creation and maintenance of peer like groups so that students of color have a place to belong. Tatum (1997) contends that when students of color have support from an organized peer group it is a positive coping mechanism because students of color are most often forced to operate with a very limited definition of what it means to be the Black. Typically, it is hugely based on stereotypes.

In supporting the development of such groups, I caution administration to deviate from the mistakes made at City High. Groups like GTW are created to empower and not to silence. There was an attempt by the administration to make the young lady's visible to

the system through their association with GTW, thereby becoming a very easy target for discipline. When I initially agreed to sponsor the group, I was not entirely clear what administration's intentions were for the group as they were not communicated. It was essentially a group with unclear goals. I had reservations that began to develop very early on. Was it to control them and eliminate their "loudness" or was it to empower them? Or did it depend on whom you asked? It did not take long to discover that administration's objective was to control them, to make them behave, to silence them. They failed to accurately account for the inherent treasures in these young ladies. The catalyst for their success was to belong to something that they discovered was much greater than themselves. As Keisha concluded, "We really just needed somebody to lead us and to show people we are different than what they think - and we did."

<u>Final Thoughts</u>

Because of the dearth of research that exists, I felt compelled to engage in this work. Using Critical Race as a theoretical framework was an opportunity to examine how race and gender operate at those various sites of oppression. Refuting the deficit approach, I have attempted to shed light on their experiences by discussing their need to belong, discovering who they were and dealing with identity, and their connections to the people who advocated for their success. In this study I examined how everyday life affects how Black girls learn and navigate school. I attempted to "avoid frameworks that depend on the lenses of deficiency and hopelessness, which are much too prevalent in urban education research" currently (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 5).

What was the most enlightening aspect of this project was the use of critical race methodologies in which I was able to consider all participants in the research process as equals. I learned very early in my research that this work was not about my experiences, it was truly about the girls. So often they are devalued and hushed as statistics permeate conversations about the sad state that Black girls are in. Considering our differences in growing up, even being a person of the culture, I had to make my biases known and reflect on how this colored my perspective. bell hooks (1989), as researchers, asks us to consider the following,

> When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do [or not] belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination (p.43).

I thought long and hard about this very reasonable demand. What was so valuable in this project was recognizing and naming the shared epistemology that the girls and I brought to the research together. I was not aware of how much I would gain from being given the opportunity to not only hear but listen to them. They deserve to be heard, deserve to be acknowledged, and deserve to be learned from. As much as we as educators like to think otherwise, there is so much to be learned from our students, particular students of color. The depth of experiences and cultural knowledge that we can glean is immeasurable. When we begin to see our students of colors as holders and creators of knowledge and we look to them to legitimize our knowing; we become true Critical Race theorists and all benefit tremendously.

This work is both reflective and empirical. As Ladson-Billings (1994) stated, I had the option of writing this in the traditional scholarship of statement of the problem,

review of literature, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and future implications;

however this work is latent with my personal experiences, my cultural emic, and the

disclosure of my inherent biases. These all combine to provide a colorful backdrop for

the challenge put forth by my sister scholars pleading for the need of more scholarship to

attest to the social and political circumstances affecting girls of color in the field of

education (Austin, 1989; Evan-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Evans-Winters, 2005). My

prayer is that this project has answered that call with an unquestionable response.

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APPENDIX

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Title: These, They, Those and other Pronouns Used to Describe Them: A Qualitative study of the lived experiences of the African American girls in the Girls to Women group.

Researcher: Amber N. Boyd

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in a doctoral research study conducted by Amber N. Boyd from the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you made an informed decision whether or not to participate.

Purpose of the Study: This work reflects the goal of shedding light on the lived experiences of the African American girls who were members of the Girls to Women group, during both the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory the researcher (Ms. Boyd) will highlight the experiences, struggles, and successes of the girls in their current reality. The researcher will also examine how race, gender, and class combine to shape the girls' experiences in school.
You have been selected as a participant because you were a participant of the Girls to Women group and can offer insight into your experiences in both the group and your experiences in school.

Explanation of the Procedures: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in two to three interviews that could last anywhere from two to three hours. You will be asked about your past experiences as a participant in the Girls to Women, if you felt the group was beneficial and had any impact on behavioral and academic success, and your current and past experiences as a black female at school. The interviews will be conducted in a place of your own choosing and only by me, the researcher. This interview will be recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed. The audio recordings will be kept for one year until June 30, 2014 or at the conclusion of this study, if prior to that date. You can have access to the transcriptions of your interviews and are invited to participate in the interpretation of the data you present. At any time during the study, you are welcome to review my notes as they relate to our dialogue and may make comments on the transcripts regarding the accuracy and/or intent of the message you were trying to relate.

Discomfort and Risks: The interview does not lead to any specific discomfort or risks, however you may feel uncomfortable expressing your opinion on some issues. You are free to remain silent. To account for any unforeseen risks, consent will be ongoing and verbally negotiated between you and me, rather than a one-time signing of a consent form. I will take the necessary precautions to ensure informed consent to minimize the risk to you by doing a periodic verbal check.

Benefits: Participation is totally voluntary and if you decide to participate your interviews could lead to academic and social achievement for students who have been traditionally marginalized in school. My hope is that this study can be used as a discovery and reflective tool for educators, researchers, and practitioners to begin conversations of how to best educate and meet the needs of the students who have the greatest need.

Confidentiality: This study is completely optional. The protection of your confidentiality will be accounted for by using pseudonyms for you, locations disclosed, and third party names shared during the interviews. Any personal and identifying information collected or any such means of tracing such information will be eliminated.

Please read and sign below if you understand the following statements AND you are willingly choosing to participate in this study.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw: "I understand that my participation is completely voluntary. I have been advised that I am free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and that by doing so I will not be penalized or lose benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Questions: "I understand that Ms. Boyd will answer any questions I have about my participation. She can be contacted at 319-290-5834. I also understand that if I desire information in the future regarding my participation or the study generally, I can contact Dr. Nick Pace at 319-273-3564 at the Department of Educational Leadership, University of Northern Iowa. I can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-2748, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process".

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to participate in this project. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

I am 18 years of age or older.

_____   _____
(Signature of participant)   (Date)

_____
(Printed name of participant)

I am not 18 years of age or older and I am choosing to voluntarily participate in this study. My parent gives me permission to participate in this study as will be noted below.

_____   _____
(Signature of participant)   (Date)

_____
(Printed name of participant)

I acknowledge that I have read the above summary and I give permission for my daughter to participate in this study. I am signing because my daughter is not 18 years of age and we are both signing on a voluntary basis.

_____   _____
(Signature of parent)   (Date)

_____
(Printed name of parent)

_____   _____
(Signature of investigator)   (Date)