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Narratives of Black Female Elementary School Teachers: Navigating the Normative Discourse of Whiteness

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NARRATIVES OF BLACK FEMALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS:
NAVIGATING THE NORMATIVE DISCOURSE OF WHITENESS

Thera Tilmon

Curriculum, Advocacy, and Policy (CAP) Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

Teaching and Learning

National College of Education

National Louis University

June 2022



NATIONAL
LOUIS
UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This narrative research study illuminates the experiences of Black elementary school teachers as they navigate through whiteness on their identity journey. The purpose of this study was to examine the counter-narratives of identity by Black female elementary school teachers within the discourse of Whiteness that remains dominant in the U.S. culture and public school system. This study included semi-structured interviews with six participating teachers from several school districts in a large Midwestern metropolitan city. critical race theory, Black feminist theory, intersectionality, and transcendental theories comprised the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Narrative research design was employed for data analysis resulting in the identification of the following themes; (a) Identifying Blackness: Self, Community, and Safe Spaces; (b) Uprooted or Connected? Generational Trauma, Spirituality, and Black Power; (c) “A Calling I Could not Ignore:” Empowering and Connecting with Black Students;” and (d) At the Intersection of Race and Gender: Dilemmas and Empowerment. This study contributes to the current research by providing an insight into how Black teachers develop their identity, respond to the calling to teach, cope with trauma, and provide advocacy and activism. This study also provides a road map for how the participants navigated whiteness with supportive communities, spiritual connections, and affirming friendships. Among the recommendations was support for Black teachers, Black students, and Black schools and providing identity-driven support for prospective Black teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first want to honor all the amazing Black teachers in America. Teachers like my grandmother, Manila Tilmon, who carried herself with a grace and patience I have never witnessed from anyone else. As a child, I cannot remember a single time she raised her voice, even when my cousins, brothers, and I were tearing up her basement. Manila had a way of showing disappointment with just a shake of her index finger and a quiet “tsk”. My brothers and I thought she was an angel straight from heaven and I am sure her students felt the same way. Whenever I feel stuck or frustrated with teaching, I ask myself what would Manila do? The answer is always the same – Carry on with love, grace, and dignity. I also honor Manila’s sister, Thera Ramos. I am her namesake, and I will be forever humbled to share her name. She also was an amazing teacher that believed in the brilliance of all Black children. It is in her memory that I teach every day. And I honor all the other teachers that bring their authentic selves to work every day to inspire, uplift, and empower black children.

I also want to give thanks to my dissertation chair Dr. Antonina Lukenchuk who inspired, guided, and encouraged me every step through this process. Her feedback and suggestions proved invaluable, and I will be forever grateful. I was first inspired by you, Dr. Lukenchuk when I took your class on qualitative research. That was the first time I understood the power of narrative storytelling. You opened my mind to possibilities I hadn’t considered or even knew were possible. You encouraged me to speak my truth and not be afraid to put my voice on the page. I apologize for all the times I mispronounced your name and want you to know how much I value your mentorship.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my brilliant daughter, Dezerene Hope Tilmon. I can never express how much your support means to me, Dez. You have always been there, cheering me on, and encouraging me to persevere throughout all the crazy times. From financial stress, family loss, and a deadly pandemic, you always believed I could do this. Your words “You got this” is imprinted in my soul and I am forever grateful to you for repeating them. You also impress and teach me every day. Watching you grow into an amazing Black woman, strong in your identity, makes me proud. I will always be your biggest cheerleader just as I know you will always be mine. Love you, always.

Abrubuo a ɔbɔɔna suo no da asu kakyɛ.

The dove who created its own pond now lingers at the margin

(When embarking on a project think beyond individual gains to society's advantage)

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Before the written word was developed and long afterward, our ancestors told stories. They used stories to inform, teach, inspire, and motivate. Stories came in many forms including orature, songs, chants, proverbs, and body language. The stories we tell also provide insights into social phenomena and the human condition. This is a small part of my story.

1966

I am sitting at the back of the classroom. My white patent leather shoes are tight on my feet, but my crisp white tights are smooth against my toes creating the ability to still wiggle them slightly. I thought about my mom ironing every pleat with care and hanging my new blue and yellow skirt on the doorknob of my bedroom the night before. I made sure to preserve the creases in my skirt before I sat down. She would be upset if I came home wrinkled. I recalled how my mother demonstrated how I should sit, protecting the creases with my hands as I slipped into the seat. I practiced a couple of times that morning before breakfast.

I got to school early and found my classroom and my seat, which was marked with my name on a small pink note. I had laid my white sweater neatly over the back of my chair, sat up straight in my chair as my mother taught me, and made sure that my yellow tulip collar lay perfectly on my shoulders. I glanced down to make sure everything was perfect. I slipped one ankle over the other, linked my hands together, sat up straight in my chair, and looked around the room.

Three boys were standing around a desk, laughing loudly and occasionally banging the desk with joy. Their shirts were loosely tucked in and created a round soft cloud on their backs. The girls all sat at their desks, legs hanging free. Some slipped out of their shoes, letting them

fall loudly on the floor. Some tucked a leg under their bottom. Some sat with their legs spread wide ("sitting all wide-legged" my mother would say in disgust if she saw me sitting that way). One girl leaned over her chair to talk to the girl next to her. Her long ponytail flipped over her shoulder, and she let out a shriek as she laughed, looking at me. She had on gym shoes and no socks. Another girl laid on her back over the chair with her feet on the floor on one side and her hands over her head touching the floor on the other. Her wrinkled blouse slipped up her chest and you could see her belly button. Her socks slipped down her calves, one landing in a pool around her ankle.

I sat still and silent, taking in the scene before me. No one shared my skin color; no one sat up straight; no one talked to me.

Throughout my life, this same story unfolds as a part of the social programming I experienced throughout my life. My examples were my grandfather who wore a tie every day of his life, my grandmother who always matched her purse to her shoes with gloves of the same color draped neatly over the straps, and my mother who started straightening her hair as a young girl, and my father who thought jeans were for "common" people. I was programmed to always wear my finest: "dress to impress"; "dress the part"; "always show your best." Also, dress appropriately; do not show too much skin or look like a "loose girl." Those were the messages I got from my parents and grandparents, the words that continue to ring in my head.

Years after my first day at school, I still find myself always arriving early, always taking in the scene, almost always noticing that no one shared my skin color, and no one talked to me. Me, alone in white space. Me, the "other," the "token." Perhaps, however uncomfortable, there is something familiar about this experience. Perhaps there is some freedom from this viewpoint, allowing me the distance from the group to observe and listen. As a child, I observed the White

students and White teachers in my school. I looked at how they dressed and listened to the way they conversed. Did that teacher just say “ain’t”? My parents never allowed us to say that word. My father told me, “Ain’t isn’t a word.” As an adult, the distance my color afforded me allowed me to ease into group discussions and events. Again, I was afforded the space to watch and listen.

2019

Did I just hear a colleague say, “those kids”? Who is she talking about?

I arrived early, on my first day in a new school, prepared to teach fifth grade. A few teachers were there mingling around the coffee containers. I surveyed the room and found the table marked with a piece of cardboard folded in half and the words fifth grade written with a purple marker. I slipped my hands under my skirt to make sure not to expose myself by showing too much skin and slid into a seat at the table. Two members of my learning team arrived one at a time. They smiled at me or said hello and took their seats. The fourth member of our team who appeared to be about my age rushed to the table, glanced at me, and then took her seat, her back turned from me. She began to engage in conversation with the other much younger teacher. I listened to the older White teacher repeat over and over again how she had taught in that school for 22 years. I listened as she complained with others about how low the students (mainly Black and Hispanic) are and how ridiculous this curriculum meeting was. I observed the casualness of the other teachers who shared my profession and wondered what their cultural programming was. Perhaps their Whiteness allowed them the luxury to dress any way they wanted. Perhaps my programming was faulty.

The distance my color afforded me allowed me to size up the group before engaging with it, like testing the water before jumping in, and no one noticing. My color allowed me to be at

times invisible and ignored. Maybe there is something about that experience that I enjoy because I continue to find myself in white space. I almost feel comfortable there.

Throughout my life there was also this feeling, a nameless feeling that I now know is “cultural alienation.” I learned much about the culture and history of the people I shared white space with, but I had a “limited knowledge base of [my own] cultural history” (Shujaa, 2003, p. 182). The difference that I felt in white space surpassed skin color and eased into culture.


1966

I was so excited to finally be in full-day school. I knew that I would finally get all my questions answered and I would finally be learning. At home, my parents were always too busy, and my brothers were occupied playing war games or truck destroyer, or in my view, some nonsense game. And when I started asking questions about the world, about myself, about everything, I was silenced. I went to school believing in my heart that it was a place to learn, a place to get an education. So, I sat in the class listening to the teacher and raising my hand after every question she asked. She did not call on me. I tried to stretch higher; perhaps she did not see me, even if I was the tallest in the class. I stretched as high as I could, placing one hand on the desk to provide leverage. Still, she called on Susan and then Brian. Brian did not get the answer correct and I knew I had the answer, so I got up on my toes and stretched higher. My thighs hit the bottom of the desk, which was attached to the chair, and as I was almost in a standing position at the back of the room, I lost my balance. My chest hit the top of the desk as my legs betrayed me and slipped out of control. The desk, with me attached, collided with the floor in a loud explosive crash. The teacher looked over her glasses at me with a disgusted look on her face, and a roar of laughter swept the room. Even though my knees hurt, and my elbow started bleeding, I wrestled my body free of the chair, stood up, smoothed out my skirt, and said

“I know the answer.” The teacher shushed the class and told me to go to the bathroom and clean myself up. A few kids chuckled and then turned back to hear the teacher read the next passage and ask the next question. I spent over 20 minutes in the bathroom, drying my tears, rinsing off my elbow, and trying to figure out where I went wrong. No one seemed to notice how long I was gone.

After several years of elementary school in an affluent white neighborhood, I was still the only Black girl in my classes. I soon realized that I was not going to get my questions answered there. I stopped raising and waving my hand, and I faded into the background. I learned that enthusiasm was annoying, that always having the answer was rude, and that speaking up was something I should never do. My invisibility and silence led to an unstable recognition of my Black identity and a decline in my self-esteem. In my child mind, I learned to be silent, invisible, and as white as possible. The underlying message that was received by my child-self was that the classroom reflected White, middle-class, mainstream values and that Whiteness was central (Kohli et al., 2017). What I was receiving was not an education, it was simply the act of schooling.

The questions I had about the world, myself, and my history would not be answered at this elementary school, not at the middle school I later attended, or even at the elite private high school I graduated from. What I learned about was their world, their history, and them—the dominant creators and oppressive regulators of everything. It did not take me long to realize that the knowledge I was seeking at a young age would have to be self-taught. I would have to find the books, the resources, and the people who could answer my questions.



White privilege is maintained through invisible, insidious operations of power that foster whiteness and racism. This power is no longer enacted primarily through physical violence but is mostly achieved through more symbolic power. (Kohli et al., 2017, p. 187)

What I did not know was how long that search would take and how my sense of self and cultural identity would become casualties along the way.

I sat at my desk throughout elementary school, and more than 50 years later, at the table during curriculum planning, feeling a sense of separateness, pondering my identity, and contemplating how much I would endure, identify, and accept the dominant culture around me (Shujaa, 2003). I asked myself, subconsciously, how much I would take and how long this would last. In my home as well, I learned to be respectful, invisible, and quiet. I learned not to stick my neck out or ask too many questions. Between the education I experienced at school and the conditioning I experienced at home, I wondered if I would ever find my voice.

As a teacher in white space, I am also struggling, as I did in first grade, to speak my truth and find my voice. I find myself to be “the defender of race talk.”

“Do we always have to talk about race?”

“I don’t see color; I am color-blind.”

“I am not racist; I have bi-racial children [or Black friends].”

These discussions skirt over the true issues of race in the world and in the education institution we work in. Some teachers believe that because they work with racially discriminated kids, or have a Black child, they are somehow immune to their ignorance when it comes to race.

Leonardo (2013) terms this as “dysconscious racism” which is at the heart of deficit thinking—the children and their families are to blame for inadequacies in education, not the institution or the teachers themselves. With the

White subjects fail to learn how race relations work despite the fact that they daily experience it. They experience racialization daily, but it washes over them.

(Leonardo, 2013, p. 601)

shortage of Black teachers in America, Black students like me do not have that cultural and racial connection or understanding. I often consider how my identity development, self-esteem, and overall education would have been different if I had a teacher who looked like me. These thoughts and discussions stir up deep emotion. I find it hard to defend race talk without getting angry and having tears form in my eyes. But alas, I am meant to be the expert; it is expected and assumed that I will speak up in White education spaces. As a result, some teachers walk on tiptoes around me, biased in their view of Black women being angry and aggressive, afraid that I might explode.

We never get to the real issues; we just circle the surface. I remember one staff meeting in which one of my previous principals started a discussion about why there was such a high incident of office referrals of Black boys versus White boys in our school. The energy in the room immediately turned negative and angry. The White teachers got defensive and upset. The few Black teachers responded with frustration and angst. The fire was lit, but the principal put it out and closed the discussion, explaining later that those feelings were getting too hot. I felt then, as I do now, that the fire must burn, and all emotions must be recognized and dealt with before we can ever have real conversations about race—no pain, no gain. Once we survive the flame and come out the other side, we can start to listen to each other. However, all too often, the flame is extinguished too soon. The other solution is to recruit more Black teachers who can not only support the Black children in their classrooms but also provide more support for anti-racist conversations.

1968

“They were supposed to get a good education.”

I don’t think they even like our son!”

My parents argued in the kitchen, thinking I was asleep. Their voices twisted through the air vents on the floor from the kitchen to my bedroom around the corner. Earlier that day I had waited outside the school, my books tucked into my chest, my arms crossed over them. One of my few friends and fellow outcast, a girl of Japanese descent, stood next to me as she waited for her mom, and I waited for my brother. "See you tomorrow," she said softly as she walked briskly to her car, her long black hair and long skirt swishing back and forth in perfect synchronization. I waited, trying hard to keep the teardrops in my head. I closed my eyes and shook my head, forcing them back. I started to get nervous, where was he? I looked back toward the school, and it was an empty dark hole. My brother's teacher approached me after what seemed like hours. Most of the kids had been picked up and a few walkers meandered onto the playground before going home.

"Are you waiting for your brother?" The teacher asked this in a tone that sounded more accusatory than inquisitive. I looked up at her and shook my head indicating yes.

"He was sent home," she said in a matter-of-fact way that I did not recognize. I was confused. "Your brother is very naughty and could not remain at school." I looked at her, fighting harder to keep the tears from falling to no avail. "Now get along home," she said, sweeping me away with her open palm.

I turned and started running. I ran all the way home, traveling alone for the first time. I had to pass the "crazy White people" yard a few blocks from our house, and I picked up my speed. They were always shouting mean things at us. My Dad said they were just "ignorant fools," but they scared me. I could not stop the tears as they flew from my eyes and over my shoulder like rain in a storm. Two blocks from my home I dropped my books at the curb; my brother usually carried them. I momentarily froze. I did not know what to do. Cars were coming


and my books and papers were spilling into the street. I quickly realized that I had better collect them. I scrambled into the street and snatched my papers from the cement. A car started honking and I heard someone yell: “Get out of the street . . .” After the word “street,” the person had said something else, a word I did not recognize, but it made me nervous. I finished my mission and sprinted to the other side, just ahead of another honking car. Where was the crossing guard I wondered?

When I reached my house, I bolted through the back door and dropped my books in the cubby next to the door. I sprang through the kitchen, dining room, living room, and then up the stairs to my brother’s room. There he was sitting on the edge of his bed. My little brother was playing with trucks on the floor and looked up at me momentarily. My older brother did not look up. He did not yell: “Get out! Boys only!” as he usually did when I ran into his room. He just sat there, his feet dangling off the end of his bed, his head bent down looking at the floor. I walked over, stepped over trucks, and sat next to him. “I touched his shoulder and asked, “What happened?”

“I was suspended,” he said softly. “I hate that stupid school.”

I sat still for a moment, not sure what suspended meant, but before I could ask, he looked at me with swollen eyes and softly said: “Get out. Boys only.”

My brother would be suspended many more times throughout his school days. Eventually, my parents elected to send him to a boarding school. I would not see him for a long time. I learned how to carry my books and my mother bought me a new shiny pink backpack to carry them in. My younger brother would soon be joining me



It takes significant time and coping experience for children and adolescents to develop responsive and effective coping skills to handle dissonance-producing environments. Evocative responses frequently result in a diminished level of youth’s own sense of agency and efficacy.

(Spencer et al., 2001, p. 24)

at my elementary school, and I always made sure to wait for him after school. He too would experience suspensions and detentions, but by the grace of God and my tears, my parents did not send him away. They eventually sent both of us to a private school in another town. And eventually, my brothers gained the skills to balance their genius with the hidden curriculum and handle the racist environment we found ourselves in with grace and patience. They found their niche in sports, an acceptable place for Black boys to excel, and made it through school.

The thoughts of my brothers' suspensions and detentions affect me as a teacher today. As my students soon learn, suspensions are a rare occurrence in my classroom. They realize early on that nothing they could do would force me to send them out, or worse, have them carried out. We deal with our challenges because they are 10 and 11 years old and they naturally have challenges. My students learn that when I walk over, slowly close the door, and stand silently with my arms crossed, someone is in trouble. They learn that when I call their name and indicate that they should get up and come talk to me in private, they are the ones in trouble. And I talk, and talk, and talk some more, until even the toughest boy in my class wilts and says, "I'm sorry Miss Tilmon." What I learned as a child stayed with me as an adult. What my brother and I needed was love, not abuse. We needed trust and so do my students. I never write referrals, and I know these families do not have the option of sending their kids to a private school in another town.

I also recognize that many of my students do not have a strong "Afrocentric" identity and are victims of multiple assaults on their culture, race, intelligence, and character. It is evident from the findings of several studies that Black students who do not have a high Eurocentric association achieve more and have higher self-esteem. The students who are high-achieving and competent are many times "not only failing to identify with acting White values but more than

likely, have a better understanding of the irrelevance of the comparison” (Spencer et al., 2001, p. 29).

As a child, I experienced microaggressions that I did not recognize and, therefore, internalized. Microaggressions are the everyday racist events that occur throughout the lived experiences of many African American people (Doharty, 2018). Microaggressions are subtle, preconscious, or unconscious degradations and putdowns that quietly denigrate people of color (Allen, 2010; Doharty, 2018). I received confusing messages about how a woman should act and feel from my parents, the predominantly White community I grew up in, the media, and many other factors. In my teen years, I felt confused about my Blackness and felt I did not experience that typical “Black experience” that was depicted on television and in movies. I struggled to understand what it all meant and whether I was truly “Black enough.” My parents, who I would now describe as “assimilators,” did not help with that clarification. Instead, they transmitted conflicting models. My mother modeled strength, intelligence, and a sort of formality I did not understand. My father modeled a sensual, provocative nature and refined sophistication that was sometimes inappropriate and harmful. My White teachers sent messages that were a blend of racism, adultification, and sexualization that compounded my confusion. I had no Black teachers to counterbalance the narrative. My friends, mainly White, also had ideas about my Blackness that were based on stereotypes and prejudices. My search for my identity cost me academically as I tried to assimilate as much as possible, only to realize that my skin color could not be changed. In other cases, I rebelled and “tried on” other identities like “justice queen” and “Afro-punk.” Most of the time, I conformed and acculturated into Whiteness, creating safe spaces for my White friends and associates, spaces that made them feel comfortable with me, ignoring my own needs for comfort and belonging. This process of acculturation allowed me to live and work

in White spaces and become “non-threatening and racially innocuous” (Liu et al., 2019, p. 143). This process may have protected my relationships and encounters with White people, but it damaged my emotional and physical health.

As I look at the girls in my fifth-grade classroom and throughout my school and neighborhood, I wonder if they are happy. Are they comfortable with their bodies, their hair, their minds? Are they silenced, or are they free? Are they hiding deep dark secrets, or are they living happy, fulfilled, joyful childhoods? Most of all, I think about their identities, my fifth-grade Black girls and boys. I wonder if I am creating an environment where they can question and not be silenced, explore their histories, learn about their people, think critically about the world around them, and be prepared to take a stand. The pressures of school accountability force us to school instead of educate; prepare them for the standardized testing instead of preparing them for life and worry about scores instead of souls. I sneak in our Black history and our culture whenever I can, spending hours trying to find text resources that align with standards while appealing to my student’s thirst for the truth. I reflect on what Shujaa wrote about the game we teach our children to play. Shujaa (2003) wondered “whether the people we are concerned with catching up to know where they are being led” and “whether it is in our interest to go where they are going” (p. 187). In my soul, I know our paths should not be parallel, but I work in a system designed not for freedom of thought, for truth, and a love and respect for Africa, but instead a system of allegiance to a nation of White supremacy. As I engage in a “cultural combat to take back [my] mind” (Shujaa, 2003, p. 182), I also worry about the mind of my students. What if they could discover their greatness now, transform their worldviews to include the knowledge of their ancestors now, and go off to middle school armed with developing knowledge of their culture? Perhaps they could avoid a lifetime of assimilation and silence.

As an educator, I see some of the same messages coming from in and outside of the Black community. I have noticed a blend of identities that children seem to try on, and I hear the messages being transmitted from their parents, teachers, and communities. I see the continued conflict caused by messages of the angry Black woman, the jezebel, or the Aunt Jemimah—identities that communicate to Black girls who they should be, how they should act, and how they should feel. I have also studied and practiced teaching practices designed for educating Black children, but question whether Black girls are getting what they need to thrive in and out of academia. I realize that my Black girl experience is unique to me. To truly understand Black girls' identity and its connection to success in school, I would need to hear the stories of other Black women and girls. I need to unleash my army, many of whom are still spiritually connected to me, to answer this question and empower Black girls to realize their true potential and greatness. I need to turn my flight into fight and face the trauma I experienced to assist others in their awakening.

I also wonder about my Blackness and how our shared racial experiences benefit my student's growth. I wonder about whether other Black teachers connect with their students the way that I hope I do. I wonder how they navigate the systems they work under and how they find the balance between the standardization movement rooted in the White narrative and the needs of their students.

Statement of the Problem

Although there has been some research on the effect of negative stereotypes on Black women, the link between identity and academic success has not been isolated. For instance, a report on Black women and mental health describes how Black women are “typically ascribed as aggressive, unfeminine, undesirable, overbearing, attitudinal, bitter, mean, and hell-raising”

(Ashley, 2014, p. 28). In the media, Black women are portrayed as “tart-tongued, neck rolling, and loud-mouthed” (Ashley, 2014, p. 29). Minimal research has been directed toward the individual experiences of Black students and Black teachers and how each group defines and claims their identities. This study allowed me to explore the extent of literature centered on the experiences of Black women in the mainstream American culture and the issues surrounding Black students and teachers. In addition, the study helped me to understand the experiences and identity development of Black girls and Black women, the importance of the intersectionality of race and gender, and the connection between Black teachers and students.

Sitting at the intersection of race and gender, Black girls have unique experiences that are not shared with Black boys or White girls. In a recent study, the results showed that adults “perceive Black girls as less innocent than white girls as young as 5–9 years old” (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 2). The misconception continues throughout childhood. This adultification bias, along with racism and sexism, is experienced by many Black girls and linked to harsher treatment and higher standards for Black girls in school. According to the same study, negative stereotypes of Black women are mapped onto Black girls (Epstein et al., 2017). Images of the aggressive Black woman (*sapphire*) and the hypersexualized Black woman (*Jezebel*) are projected onto Black girls. Another study showed that “black girls are disproportionately penalized for arbitrary infractions like having a bad attitude” (Morris, 2017, p. 1). This indicates the link between stereotypes of Black women and the treatment of Black girls. There has been some research on the effects of stereotypes (conflicting messages) on Black children, but little has been done isolating the experiences of Black girls. Research by Steele (1997) links concerns such as the stereotype threat on Black children’s identities and success in school. Steele (1997) defines the stereotype threat as

The event of a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs becomes self-relevant, usually as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one's self-definition. (p. 616)

Other research has evaluated how much Black children develop an academic identity by accepting the stereotypes and hidden messages that are transmitted in school. Studies reveal that it takes “significant time and coping experience for children and adolescents to develop responsive and effective coping skills to handle dissonance-producing environments” (Spencer et al., 2001, p. 24).

For Black girls, the challenges are even more complex as they sit at the intersection between race and gender. Beyond the racism and discrimination that Blackness brings, Black girls, are often “treated as an outsider within black spaces” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 64), making the experiences of Black girls separate from Black boys. These girls grow up to be women. In that process of maturing into women, Black women continue to grapple with the position between race and gender. Looking at either race or gender independently provides some information, but this does not fully explain identity development entirely. It is the combination of the two factors intersecting with all the other identity markers, such as sexual orientation or economic status, that define a person. “In order to understand the experience and identity development of African American girls and women, it is important to understand the intersection of racial and gender identity” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 531). When looking at the intersection, new perspectives and a holistic view of the identity process are gained. Many have theorized that to maintain mental, physical, and spiritual health, Black women and girls must recognize the existence of racism and sexism and their impact on their lives. They must recognize the “double jeopardy” element and

understand that their identities are developed with racism and sexism in play (Thomas et al., 2011).

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the counter-narratives of identity by Black female elementary school teachers within the discourse of Whiteness that remains dominant in the U.S. culture in general and the U.S. public school system (Lawrence & Tatum, 1999; Matias & Newlove, 2017). Specifically, I explored the stories of six Black female teachers that illuminate the experiences of success and discrimination, achievement and oppression, and the building of supportive connections with their Black students.

The following overarching research question guided this study: What are the counter-narratives of identity voiced by Black female elementary school teachers within the dominant narrative of Whiteness in U.S. elementary public schools?

Additional secondary questions were:

- How do these teachers navigate the dominant narrative of Whiteness when serving Black students?
- How do these teachers connect with and support their Black students?

Methodological Approaches

My research is centered on telling the stories of Black women. Black women sit in the intersection of Blackness and femaleness, a position that “others” Black women in multiple ways. Although I recognize that each person’s story is different, telling each different story is important. The counter-narrative is as it implies—the other narrative, or perhaps we could say, the narrative of the other. The counter-narrative challenges the dominant discourse and narrative. However, the counter-narrative is more than that. It is not simply a response to the narrative. To

simply respond to the narrative keeps the common narrative at the center. In this research, I examined not only the stories of Black women as they have experienced racism and sexism, navigated through Whiteness, and realized their own identity, but I also included my counter-narrative. By telling the stories of the experiences of others, I analyzed those experiences in relation to the education institution. By including my own story, I provided an autobiographical account and reflection through a critical-race lens (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009).

Definitions of Key Concepts

Providing definitions of key concepts will help to ensure a common understanding of the terminology used throughout the study.

- *Microaggressions*: Microaggressions are the passive and commonplace abusive behaviors that marginalize groups, usually groups that are outside the dominant normative group. They can be verbal, physical, nonverbal, inferred, or explicit.
- *Whiteness*: In the broader sense, Whiteness is part of the racialization of humans that defines human beings by their skin color. In the United States, Whiteness takes on another dimension and continues to construct new definitions centered on dominance. For example, many European immigrants from countries such as Ireland were originally viewed as outsiders. Dominant Whites oppressed and marginalized these groups. Over time, however, European immigrants acculturated into White America, many times setting aside their language, customs, religions, and traditions. They realized the benefits of membership in White America and bought into the idea that Blacks and other people of color were the real outsiders (Bohonos, 2019). Whiteness includes the process of naturalization, which defines White as the norm from which all other races are defined and even ranked. “One of the most powerful

and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction” (Gillborn, 2009, p. 55). In America, Whiteness transcends racial identity and has evolved into notions of supremacy.

- *Blackness*: Blackness is the state of belonging to a group defined by the color of their skin, usually a darker shade with components of melanin. In the United States, there is a dominant narrative that places constraints on Blackness, defining, creating, and re-creating Blackness (Acuff, 2018). Blackness is not necessarily a choice, but instead an “externally imposed context” (Zuberi & Bonila-Silva, 2008, p. 7). In the United States, Blackness is the identity of being Black within a White dominant society. When discussing Blackness, I refer to someone who is considered as or identifies with being Black. The question and focus are more about society. “Racial identity is about shared social status, not shared individual characteristics” (Zuberi & Bonila-Silva, 2008, p. 7). Blackness is not biological. Race is a social construct. In this study, I use the term Black people or Black. I also refer to individuals of African ancestry.
- *Black Woman*: When I refer to Black women, I refer to women who are perceived by others as nonwhite and/or individuals who identify themselves as nonwhite. The focus is on women who identify as Black, African American, Caribbean, African, or of African descent. This group also includes women who identify as bi-racial or mixed with the Black or African race. Black women also refer to individuals who identify themselves as women, which would include transgender and queer women (Romm, 2010). Because race is a social construct, we must recognize that it is the

experiences of identifying with Blackness that are involved in this study, not the presence of melanin.

- *Othering*: Othering stems from a dichotomous way of thinking, an either/or process that categorizes people and ideas by their difference. Othering is the social construction of the stranger, the outsider, the other. The others in a society or group can never truly belong. Others stand outside the norms and can threaten the moral and social order of the dominant group. In this way, others define the margins of what is normal; they are the boundaries (Collins, 1991, p. 68). Othering provides the justification for racism, the illusion of power, and the normalcy of the dominant group (the opposite of the other). Without an “other”, there can be no dominance (Morrison, 2017). There can be no Whiteness if there is no other.

Tentenbiri to b yawo maa tin a ji
Trading in darkness is not possible
(we must fully understand something before deciding on it)

CHAPTER TWO:

Literature Review

This review of literature follows a thematic organizational framework that is centered around the topic of identity development and maintenance of a strong African-centric identity for Black female teachers. Although this literature review includes historical accounts of Black identity, it also seeks to uncover innovative ideas and thoughts on the topic as well. The research is provocative to provide a further understanding of the identity development of African American(s) women and students and to develop a more complete understanding of what identity is and should be for present and future African American teachers.

This literature review is organized around the following themes: (a) Historical Developments of Black Women's Identity, (b) The Impact of Stereotypes, (c) Trauma and Mental Health, (d) Socialization of Black Women, (e) Developing Black Female Teacher Identity, and (f) Hear Our Voices: Conceptualizing Female Black Identity.

Historical Developments of Black Women's Identity

Once Goddesses

Black women were once revered, honored, and worshipped on a spiritually equal level to men. Looking back at many of the early indigenous African traditions, feminine divinities sat alongside male gods with equal power and significance. Oshun, for instance, was one of the most powerful forces in African religions. To believers, Oshun represented all the good things in life as the goddess of the river, beauty, and love. Aido Wedo, significant in the Haitian Voodoo practice, shares equal power and status with her husband Dambella Wedo, the two of them are

often represented by two snakes that mimic and complement each other. However, “like the history of women themselves, African traditional religions have often been a victim of suppression, persecution, demonization, and misinformation” (Dorsey, 2020, p. 3). With the introduction of organized religions, male domination, and colonization, the presence of female divinities diminished and has almost permanently been erased. In almost all modern religions, women have been denigrated to sit at the feet of male gods and figures, and the role of women has been systematically devalued and denigrated (Lee, 2006). The introduction of organized religion and the process of colonization was the first steps in shifting the perceptions of women and by extension, Black women. Once seen as goddesses and Orishas, Black women received new labels and stereotypes that lessened their importance socially and spiritually. Black women of African ancestry became the other.

The process of othering women began as men seemingly searched for power and status. For men to be first, they needed to see themselves as first, and second, they needed others to see them as superior. For this to happen, they first had to create the inferior. Morrison (2017), in *The Origin of Others*, explains that there is an illusion of power that develops through the process of inventing the *other*. Surely, the male species know that they could not survive or even be born without a female. However, by creating a narrative that normalizes men as the center of religion and society by defining the other status of women, dominance was created. The idea of balance between male and female energies, as seen in the combined energy of gods and goddesses, was replaced with a notion of male dominance. The othering process had laid its roots and the notion of opposites flourished.

Male Versus Female

As the first White men reported on the African women they saw, the misinformation, racism, and negative stereotypes began. Just as males influence othered women, White men began the process of “othering” Africans. There is no White without Black. The concept of race was created, not as a scientific fact of difference, but more as a social need to define oneself. Many times, as evident in history, there is a psychological need to “stranger an other, to define the estranged self” (Morrison, 2017, p. 14). The othering notion of opposites continued with White versus Black.

White Versus Black

One of the distinctions between the way White men othered White women and the methods they used for Black Women was that the process of defining the other included a dehumanizing element. Where White women may have been depicted as less capable or less intelligent, they were not viewed as less human. If anything, White women, through the process of racism, were purified and sanctified, uplifted higher than Black women. This process allowed White women to participate in the othering of Black people, male and female. To justify and romanticize racism and slavery, African people had to be dehumanized as well as othered. Smith (2016) defines this as “the logic of slavery” (p. 67). This logic established a racial hierarchy that explains to White people that “as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape the commoditization of capitalism” (p. 67). At least, if you are not Black, you are not at the bottom of the hierarchy; you still have status. At least, if you are not Black, you are superior.

The stereotypes and othering of Black women were strengthened by literature written by White men. A short story written in 1668 set the stage for the sexually aggressive Black woman because the African woman in the story was depicted as “uniquely sexually aggressive” (Kendi,

2016). This story and many that followed allowed White men to hide their sexual fantasies and desires for African women and justify their cruel prostitution and rape of Black women for the hundreds of years that followed. “Like raped prostitutes, Black women’s credibility had been stolen by racist beliefs in their hypersexuality” (Kendi, 2016, p. 42). White women benefited from this destruction of Black women when White men put them in a place of idolized purity. White women’s sexuality was to be honored and protected, while Black women’s hypersexual nature justified their torture.

The early stereotypes of African people continued to formulate in the workings and supposed discoveries of White men. In the 1800s for instance, a well-known anatomist, George Cuvier, examined, mutilated, and displayed the remains of Sarah Baartman, an enslaved woman from South Africa. This was after more than a decade of parading her around Europe to reveal her remarkably oversized buttocks. After her death, Cuvier used her bones and skull to justify a conclusion that Black people were inferior due to their likeness to apes. Without any legitimate proof, his writings on the matter continued the pursuit to justify slavery and brutalize African women. The othering and dehumanizing had already taken place and now accomplished White men were “creating” scientific notions to further defend these actions. “The purpose of scientific racism is to identify an outsider in order to define oneself” (Morrison, 2017, p. 6). For White people to make themselves seem more human, more humane, and less horrible, Black people had to be dehumanized. No sane or rational person I can imagine would take pleasure in inflicting cruelty on another human person. However, if the subjects of the rage and harm were less than human, the perception would not be as dire. The more that the enslaved could be seen as less than human, the more White people could normalize themselves and their behavior.

The dehumanization of Black women was not the only devastation that contributed to the legacy of slavery. Black people were forced to redefine the concept of family. Black women found themselves in a community that extended beyond their nuclear family with a sense of responsibility for the entire community while also handling the burden of hard work that benefited their captors instead of themselves. For many of these enslaved women, hard work was not the complaint, but instead the “exploitation inherent in the work they performed” (Collins, 1991, p. 50). In addition to othering, dehumanizing, and exploiting, Black women’s reproduction was also controlled and manipulated. Enslaved Black women capable of childbirth were valuable commodities that increased the wealth of their owners. Collins (1991) explains how slave masters set up systems to encourage pregnancy, including lighter workloads and special accommodations for pregnant women. They also created programs that penalized Black women who could not bear children. “Childbearing was a way for Black women to anchor themselves in a given location,” and it also “increased the length and stability of [their] marriages” (Collins, 1991, p. 52). This process “elevated motherhood over marriage” (p. 52). Remnants of this motherhood over marriage phenomena can be seen in some Black cultures today as the groundwork set during slavery continues to haunt Black people.

Some would say that slavery ended almost 150 years ago, so why are we still talking about it? Although the institution of slavery has ended, the practice of dehumanization and othering has continued. Pre-slavery and slavery laid the foundations for White supremacy and Black domination. After emancipation, Black people were forced to enter a wage-earning marketplace that followed the values of the dominant group, White men. A focus on personal success over community support conflicted with the collective group ethic of both African and enslaved cultures. Due to further systems of oppression, Black men were not able to compete and

support their families; therefore, the work of Black women continued. This work was blended between agricultural and domestic work. For domestic workers, sexual harassment by White men continued and “contributed to the images of Black women as fair game for all men” (Collins, 1991, p. 54). Agricultural workers also suffered under harsh conditions and low wages. Agricultural workers may have avoided some of the harassment, but they too led challenging lives. For many Black farm women, their lives consisted of marriage, motherhood, and agricultural labor. For many of these women and their families, the seasons of work dictated every other aspect of their lives. In the cotton belt in Florida, for instance, entire families worked the fields. It is a story that is not often told because the focus was usually on men; however, cotton agriculture would not have prospered without women (Sharpless, 1999).

Urban life provided slightly better opportunities for Black women. At least domestic work, which many Black women were forced to enter, became day work, offering Black women the opportunity to leave at the end of a shift. This period also introduced some of the first micro-aggressive behaviors that influenced Black women’s identity. Employers would refer to their domestic help by their first names, called them “girls,” or they would force them to call their employer “Ma’am.” These examples, along with many others, reinforced the othering process. Simultaneously, “the cooperative networks among African-American women who were created under slavery and sustained in the rural South endured” (Collins, 1991, p. 58). As a White supremacist society continued to find new ways to suppress and oppress Black people, Black women continued to find innovative ways to support each other and hold communities together.

Post-World War II elevated an increasing number of Black families into the middle class, making life for many Black women a bit easier. However, racism and discrimination persisted. “All African-American women encounter the common theme of having our work and family

experiences shaped by the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression” (Collins, 1991, p. 66). Regardless of economic status or position, Black women continue to experience oppressive behavior, which has its roots deeply planted in pre-slavery and slavery. Throughout history, however, Black women continue to find new ways to define themselves and new avenues to escape, at least temporarily, the legacy of slavery that lingers under the surface of all areas of life. Healing comes, many times, from experiencing Sankofa, retrieving from our past that which will enable us to move forward. When Black women can look back and uncover the truth, and develop a collective understanding of the systems of oppression that have been firmly planted, it becomes easier to move forward, having obtained a holistic truth. It is nearly impossible to fight an enemy in the dark. Sankofa sheds light on the nature of oppression and the racist systems that surround Black women, empowering them with the knowledge to actively resist.

The Impact of Stereotypes

In the American culture, “racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable” (Collins, 2015, p. 7). The objective of stereotyping others is to redefine or disguise the truth. Stereotypes are the engines of racism and sexism and perpetuate the lie defined as White supremacy. “As the others of society, you can never really belong . . . but they are essential for its survival” (Collins, 1991, p. 68). The others “stand at the margins of society and clarify its boundaries” (p. 68). Battling the narrative of White supremacy and centuries of lies and oppression has required Black women to exhaustingly fight against stereotypes. One of the most pervasive stereotypes of Black women is the “angry Black woman” myth, also known as the “sapphire,” a woman who is angry, loud-talking, and emasculating (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 14).

Angry Black women are typically described as aggressive, unfeminine, undesirable, overbearing, attitudinal, bitter, mean, and hellraising (Ashley, 2014, Collins, 1991; Harris-Perry, 2011). With anger being a fight response to trauma, many Black women fall into this stereotype trap. When faced with social, economic, and political oppression along with racism and injustice, psychologists explain that these experiences can create a constant feeling of danger or threat. These feelings can lead to low self-esteem and perpetuate the sapphire stereotype with a flight reaction (Ashley, 2014). Former First Lady Michelle Obama presents a glaring example of this stereotype. Although women in politics have experienced gender-based stereotypes, Obama experienced gendered racial stereotypes that portrayed the image of an angry Black woman. In numerous cases, Obama was cast as unpatriotic, angry, and dangerous. Her struggle to distance herself from that stereotype is shared by many professional Black women (Durr & Harvey Wingfield, 2011). This stereotype also serves as a deterrent to speaking up and acting out against injustice. When Black women express their thoughts or demonstrate justified anger or frustration, the angry Black woman stereotype works to silence or dismiss them.

Other Black women stereotypes that have lingered in American society include the *mammy* and the *jezebel*. The mammy stereotype reflects Black women who are “self-sacrificing, devoted, and competent” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 14). The mammy puts all her needs and desires aside and works in the service of others. This stereotype came out of the romanticism of slavery and post-slavery to keep Black women in their place, servicing White families (Harris-Perry, 2011). In addition, as discussed previously, the mammy stereotype highlighted Black mothers as valuable to the wealth of the slave owner. This portrayal was an attempt to justify the hardships of slavery because Black women enjoyed the mothering. This stereotype puts Black women in a subservient and obedient place as well. “Loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children,”

she symbolizes “the dominant group’s perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male powers” (Collins, 1991, p. 71). Whether she was taking care of a White family’s home and family or working in the cotton fields to support the landowner’s interests, Black women were seen as joyfully complying.

The jezebel depicts Black women as hypersexual and promiscuous. The jezebel stereotype came out of slavery as well to justify the rape of Black women and to further demoralize and dehumanize them. (Eck, 2018). The rape of a Black woman during slavery was not seen as rape because Black women were excluded from rape laws. White men were blameless and Black women were responsible for their own experiences due to their “immorality in doing what nature prompts” (Bishop, 2018, para. 5). It was not until 1861 that a Black woman could file charges against a White man for rape (Bishop, 2018). The jezebel or sexually denigrated Black woman also provides a cover story for racial and gender oppression as well as the economic exploitation of Black women. This stereotype continues to be reflected in American society today where Black women are often portrayed in music and movies, as the “hoe” or “gold digger.” Black women’s sexuality continues to be overpoliced as well, given the “inability to see a situation in which the black female body is not one ‘at work’ is a learned habit, played out and cemented over hundreds of years, and incredibly hard to budge” (Adewunmi, 2014, para. 2) Black women in close proximity to White men must indicate a sex worker arrangement.

Mental Health and Trauma

The othering narrative of Black people in general, and Black women specifically, places Black women in the position of either slipping into the stereotype trap (becoming the stereotype) or working tirelessly to combat it and prove it wrong. “This constant negotiation of identity

directly influences the development of an affliction called racial battle fatigue [RBF]” (Acuff, 2018, p. 175). RBF can manifest itself with symptoms such as suppressed immunity, tension headaches, trembling, elevated blood pressure, and a pounding heartbeat (Acuff, 2018.). According to the annual American Psychological Association (APA) Stress in America™ survey, even the “anticipation of discrimination is sufficient to cause stress” (Canady, 2016, p. 7). In my experiences, I can recall almost every time I have ventured into a new space, I have faced an increased level of stress and anxiety. Whether it was a job interview in a new company, a restaurant I had never been to before, or a leasing office at an apartment building, there was at least a moment when the thought crossed my mind “I hope they are not racist.” Accompanying that thought was a range of emotions and fear.

Other triggers for stress and health concerns are the daily microaggressions that many Black women experience regularly. Microaggressions are “brief messages (i.e., verbal, nonverbal, and visual) that denigrate people of color because they belong to a racial group that is historically oppressed” (Davis, 2019, p. 134). This type of discrimination is many times a manifestation of deeply-rooted biases and perpetrators are many times unaware of their intent. The harm inflicted, however, can cause psychological harm to the well-being of the victim. Many Black women report that they feel powerless and struggle to speak up or call people out when they experience microaggressions. In my personal experience, the argument is usually that I am being too sensitive or taking what a person said or did out of context. I must admit that I rarely speak up out of fear of retaliation or humiliation.

According to Grier and Cobbs (1992), “along with their scars, black people have a secret. Their genius is that they have survived. It has touched religion, music, and the broad canvas of creativity. The psyche of Black men (and women) has been distorted. But out of that deformity

has risen a majesty” (p. 108). Coping with issues such as discrimination, stereotypes, and microaggressions is a major part of navigating Whiteness for Black people. Coping is defined as “the process through which the individual manages the demand of the person-environment relationship and the ensuing emotions generated from the situation” (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009, p. 470). Black women use several coping strategies, including seeking support from other Black women, reliance on their community, or support from their religious institution. Black women seek out other Black women to gain supportive resources, share common experiences, and gain spiritual guidance. Black women also offer other Black women an opportunity to “convey their true, racialized selves, and receive validation for doing so” (Davis, 2019, p. 135). These conversations with one or more Black women provide a safe space that builds self-esteem, protects psychological health, and builds identity. Black women many times lean on faith, prayer, and spirituality as coping strategies.

Other coping strategies would include altering their behavior to lessen incidences of microaggression or discrimination and avoiding contact with certain people and situations. Occasionally, many Black women resort to directly challenging the source (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009). Seeking professional help for mental health needs is a challenge for Black women. Many Black women are socialized to minimize the seriousness of their problems. They believe that depression is a necessary condition of life. There is also the stigma of seeking mental health assistance as being an indicator of weakness. In my experience, although I recognized my need for mental health assistance, I had trouble finding a Black therapist or a White therapist who understood the intersectionality of gender and race. I developed a coping strategy that included venting with other Black women and adopting metaphysical spiritual practices that got me in tune with ancestral knowledge and strength.

Generational Trauma

People can suffer from the effects of trauma from past or present lives as well as the lives and experiences of their ancestors. For descendants of the diaspora, intergenerational trauma spurred by a legacy of slavery, racism, discrimination, and oppression, can have negative effects. Doucet and Rovers (2010) define intergenerational trauma as a “secondary form of trauma that results from the transfer of traumatic experiences” through generations (p. 94). There has been extensive research on the effects of intergenerational trauma on the descendants of the Holocaust and Native Americans; however, the amount of research on African Americans has been limited. Unlike the experiences of other groups, African Americans continue to suffer from the remnants of racism and oppression that linger in American culture. Rinker and Lawler (2018) describe this phenomenon as “collective trauma,” which includes both intergenerational trauma and social trauma as “commonly experienced reaction to oppression” (p. 153). Societal trauma, these authors explain, can be transmitted by the silence and shame of parents or elder family members. To cope, those who had direct experience with slavery and extreme violence many times remained silent about the horrors of their experiences (Rinker & Lawler, 2018, p. 156).

African American trauma is further explained by Williams-Washington and Mills (2018) who define African American historical trauma as “the collective spiritual, psychological, emotional, and cognitive distress perpetuated intergenerationally deriving from multiple denigrating experiences originating with slavery and continuing with pattern forms of racism and discrimination to the present day” (p. 247). The reaction to this type of trauma, as with all types of traumas, manifests itself in different ways with different people. Williams-Washington and Mills (2018) explain that the depth of the symptoms depends on individuals’ sense of identity, their current experiences with racism, and their historical knowledge (p. 249). Wilkins et al.

(2013) describe the symptoms as the residual effects of slavery (RES), and symptoms can include low self-esteem, bursts of anger, and feelings of inferiority.

Trauma and the Body

In normal circumstances, the prefrontal cortex moderates the influence of danger or threats. The prefrontal cortex determines the context and reality of the threat. Both the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems in the brain work together as a balance between fight or flight reactions in which the body prepares for defensive action and freezes when the body goes into a passive defense, feeling nothing. If this automatic system becomes confused, it may interpret danger where there is none. At this point, the fight or flight response is triggered, and all available energy prepares for survival. Trauma creates emotional memory that is incomplete or fragmented. “Past threats are perceived to be present threats, suggested by intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and hypervigilance” (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2006, p. 83). When triggered, a person feels threats from all directions. In a sense, trauma can affect a person’s ability to cope with everyday annoyances or triggers.

Coping through trauma and issues of mental health is key to survival and healthy identity development for Black women. Part of the roadmap for navigating through White supremacy and White spaces must include a survival plan. For many Black women, surviving through trauma and mental health leads them to a spiritual place, a place that transcends their everyday lives and provides security and solace. That spiritual place could be within a formal religion such as Christianity or Muslim religions, or it could be located on a metaphysical plane involving universal spirituality. Regardless of the vehicle, many Black women find peace within faith in something higher than themselves, something or someone that offers hope for a brighter future, something that will at least mask the trauma long enough for them to get through the day.

Leaning on faith, networking with other Black women, and employing other coping strategies are some of the ways Black women navigate Whiteness. Many of these avenues are learned and mastered during the socialization process.

Socialization of Black Women

The socialization process for Black women in America begins in childhood. It extends from within and without the Black community, from homes to schools to communities to workplaces. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2021), socialization is “the process whereby an individual learns to adjust to a group (or society) and behave in a manner approved by the group (or society)” (para. 1). Racial socialization refers to the process in which individuals are taught certain cultural values and beliefs that pertain to their racial group membership” (Lee & Ahn, 2013, p. 1). The socialization process for Black women is a series of “sexuality and self-worth, caretaker, and breadwinner. Much of this confusion can be traced back to the days of enslavement when Black families were separated, and Black women took on the dual roles of caring for the children and working through torture. Black men were reduced to biological-only-fatherhood as Black women took care of not only their own families but White families as well. Black women “had to take care of everyone: their masters, their husbands, their mistresses, and the mistresses’ children” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 123). This is part of the dehumanization process that continues today. On one hand, there is the perception that Black women are resilient and can endure anything; on the other hand, however, that also implies that Black women do not experience pain or suffer from human weaknesses.

The experiences of Black women necessitated a need to be independent and to maintain personal rights—all a part of the skills needed to cope with inequality and the intersectionality of Black women’s oppression (Hurt et al., 2014). Black girls are socialized by their immediate and

extended families to be simultaneously strong and respectable to prepare them for race-based social and political obstacles, respond to stereotypes, and assume family responsibilities (Jones & Day, 2018). This conflict with contradictory socialization plays into the hands of the normative white culture. They “silence and devalue black women’s gender-based experiences and maintain normative value systems that assess Black women against dominant femininity standards and interracial expectations for femininity” (Johnson, 2013, p. 891). In addition, Black women are not taught or socialized to believe that society would nurture them or protect them. Therefore, Black women do not have the choice but to hide weaknesses, failures, and disappointments (Jenkins, 2018).

Invisibility and Hypervisibility

Black women are both invisible and extremely visible. According to Jenkins (2018), young Black women, for instance, face the dilemma of always being “watched, always on stage with an anticipation that eventually they will mess up. No matter how educated or acculturated, the probing eyes are waiting for Black women to show their true colors” (p. 143). Also, young Black girls “do not have the space to be reckless and carefree and then healed” like White girls (p. 143). For professional Black women, this stigma and focus continue. Many professional Black women have stated that feel they can never make a mistake. To make a mistake in the workplace would fulfill the White expectation of Black failure.

The socialization of Black women also includes conflicting messages about intimate relationships. Because of the need to be both the breadwinner and the family caretaker, Black men sometimes feel that Black women are blocking their social mobility. Some attribute the ambitions of Black women as stemming from their low regard for Black men or their male partners. This dynamic can cause strained relationships and misunderstandings. This strain also

had its foundation laid during enslavement. This strain in turn manifests into “generalized distrust, an inability to effectively communicate with one another, and navigating uncomplimentary gender roles (Hurt et al., 2014). Black women struggle with the expectation that they provide for their families and communities and are then judged as being less feminine or motherly.

Legacy of Struggle

Black women are many times socialized to be survivors, living through a legacy of struggle and triumph. The socialization process includes an indoctrination that struggle is a way of life, a necessary condition for a Black woman. Black women are expected to be strong, which can lead to a denial of mental health challenges and reluctance to seek help. Black women tend to “value relational supports rather than mental health services” (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009, p. 466). In addition, Black women are often taught to develop resilience and resistance strategies when dealing with the impact of racism and sexism. For instance, many Black women learn to rely on their faith or spirituality. To be a Black woman, as many Black women learn, is to develop a series of coping skills and mastery over coping. Many Black women are socialized to accept this legacy and they spend a lot of time and energy “watching every step they take, managing an array of feelings, and altering their behavior to cope with it all” (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009, p. 470). Black women are both victims and victors of the legacy of struggle. On the one hand, the legacy of struggle places Black women in a position of false strength and denial of their full humanity. On the other hand, the legacy of struggle can be a source of pride as Black women develop their identities.

Developing Black Female Teacher Identity

Teacher Identity Development

Some experts believe that a teacher's professional identity is shaped by their personal identity. Personal identities are shaped by family history, life experiences, socialization, and many other factors. As hard as some teachers may try, it is nearly impossible to separate their professional and personal identities. Beyond personal identities, teacher identities are also shaped by expectations and conceptions of teaching by others outside of education (Al-Khatib & Lash, 2017). Teacher identity is also affected by the ways that an individual navigates their participation in various communities. Teachers are members of many communities, such as racial and religious communities. These communities can sometimes have competing ideas of what goals, values, and beliefs should be a part of the school community (Hodges & Cady, 2012). Some would argue that identity is fixed and unchanging; however, for others, identity is an "ongoing process of identification" (Watson, 2006, p. 510). The factors that contribute to teacher identity are not fixed. Therefore, a teacher's identity must be fluid and constantly be adjusted, re-adjusted, and reflected upon.

Part of teacher identity fluidity is further generated by conflicting messages from administrators, the federal government, and the various school initiatives that are in vogue. The reform initiatives, standards-based accountability, and social pressures can lead to a demanding environment where many teachers find themselves redefining who they are as teachers. Many of these demands "run counter to the experiences teachers had as students" (Hodges & Cady, 2012, p. 112). These demands may also challenge what many teachers feel is in the best interest of their students. Teacher identity involves a "complex and vulnerable process of identity formation, an experience which is often unsettling and conflictive, as well as subjective and

incomplete” (Britzman, 2003 as cited in Ó Gallchóir et al., 2018, p. 138). The strength of a teacher’s self-worth impacts this delicate and difficult task of developing a teacher’s identity. Furthermore, a teacher’s identity matters. Teachers stand in the center of the learning process as they navigate relationships and take responsibility for a classroom of students. It matters how they see themselves as well as their students. “Teaching is not a ‘neutral’ endeavor. It implies value-laden choices and moral considerations” (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 262). Therefore, who a teacher is, or believes themselves to be, contributes to how and what they teach.

Black teachers are not one-dimensional or monolithic. It would be an error to see Black teacher identity as anything but multi-positional. From the first Black schools, which date back to the 1820s, Black teachers have participated in the education of Black children. In those early schools, and many others, “teachers and their students, the educators, and the parents struggled to plot a course for educational attainment (Lewis, 2008, p. 343). And yet, many of these early teachers faced critique, misrepresentations, and various professional identities. Some Black teachers embraced the identity of racial advocates, working to challenge the status quo and create change. Other Black teachers took on an identity of uplifters, working to prepare Black students for new jobs and seeing themselves as symbols of progress (Lewis, 2008). Many of these identity types exist today.

Importance of Black Teachers

Black teachers are important for Black students because of several factors, including their shared cultural identity with these students and their higher level of commitment to teaching them. Black teachers can bridge the gap between cultural and academic identity (Farinde et al., 2016). It is also essential that Black students see themselves reflected not only in the literacy but at the front of the classroom. “Students cannot imagine future educational and career

opportunities if they've never seen them firsthand" (Preston, 2017, para. 18). Before desegregation, Black teachers entered the educator force for the most part due to an interest in the collective success of the Black community. This focus leads back to the socialization of Black women and their commitment to their communities.

Another thing that is often not considered or discussed is the factor that Black teachers many times can relate to Black students in their navigation in White dominant spaces. For many Black teachers, becoming a teacher reveals similar patterns and provides new perspectives regarding their own school experiences. The labels, perspectives, racism, and microaggressions that Black teachers experienced in their childhoods become even more glaring as they witness the same treatment of their students. Students of all races benefit from Black teachers in the classroom. Research has revealed that students of all races report "overall better school experiences and have more favorable impressions" of Black teachers (Pitts, 2019, para. 7).

The challenge for many Black teachers, however, is staying in the field. Although they may come in highly motivated to serve their communities and educate future adults, many factors force Black teachers out of the profession. Black teachers who leave the profession complain about many factors, including being skipped over for promotions, excluded from conversations about school culture, and silenced from speaking about the needs of Black students (Pitts, 2019).

Hear Our Voices: Conceptualizing Female Black Identity

The definition of identity, according to some social scientists, is "a phenomenological experience of coming to understand oneself; identity is lived discourse" (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 530). Identity development involves values, beliefs, behaviors, and lifestyles. Many of the factors previously reviewed contribute to that development. For instance, the effect of trauma,

both current and intergenerational, can take a toll on Black women and their feelings about themselves. Stereotypes from pre-and post-slavery continue to affect how Black women are seen and how Black women see themselves. Dodson (2012) explains that “the indelible, distorted images constrict and shape how Black women act or fail to act, . . . as Black women constantly battle to be recognized as a fully human, authentic individual” (p. 14). Authentic humans, for instance, occasionally lose their tempers or experience pain.

Jones and Day (2018) interviewed and surveyed Black women to measure their racial and gender centrality and attempted to assign meaning to their identity as Black women. Four identity themes emerged from the research: intersectional engaged, race progressive, intersectional aware, and gender expressive. Jones and Day defined intersectional engaged as individuals who put equal significance and importance on both their race and gender. Women who fell under this category focused on their resilience and strength—their ability to overcome racism and oppression. One participant assigned this identity responded: “Black women over the years have had to endure so much, but . . . I am thankful for the women before me that fought many battles to ensure one day, I would be able to achieve and goals I set for myself” (Jones & Day, 2018, p. 8).

Race Progressive women put more significance on their race over gender. Women who fell into this category identified their identity based on the perception of others. One participant in the category shared “I am seen as Black first, women second, and sometimes we are not viewed as women because we are Black and Black supersedes the existence of gender” (Jones & Day, 2018, p. 8). For Race progressive Black women, Black womanhood meant being supportive and encouraging to other Black people. Black women who saw their identity in the intersectional aware category put a great deal of focus on the marginalization of Black women. These women

focus on social injustice and see themselves as “the backbone of the Black community” (Jones & Day, 2018, p. 10). One intersectional aware woman articulated that “to be a black woman means to be aware of the ways in which my identities as a woman and Black intersect to influence my life experiences” (p. 10). Black women who fell into the gender expressive category described their identity using words like strong, powerful, beautiful, and independent. One gender expressive participant remarked, “I do not associate Blackness with being a woman. I am a woman” (p. 10). Jones and Day’s (2018) study indicates that Black women define their identity in diverse ways.

In another study that looked at racial identity development, four stages were identified: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, and internalization. William Cross, a predominant leader of the Black racial identity models, recognized that these stages are not absolutes and should be seen as generalizations. The models do offer a framework for understanding the varying degrees of racial identity (Cross, 1971 as cited in Kniffley, 2012).

The pre-encounter stage, as defined by William Cross, identifies individuals who do not recognize their Blackness and prefer to first identify as women or teachers or some other variable. This is like Black women in Jones and Day’s (2018) gender expressive category. These pre-encounter stage women believe that enculturation is the way to gain acceptance and remove the “othering” label. I lived in this stage for most of my childhood. Although I felt different and recognized the difference between my skin color and my hair texture, I passionately believed that if I worked hard to be “like” White people and to adapt to White culture, alongside my Black culture, White people would accept me.

In the encounter stage, individuals begin to develop an understanding that the dominant culture is not supportive of their Blackness. People in this stage first experience depression and

anger. I recall feeling this way as I began to recognize the microaggressions around me. My rosy view of race relations slowly faded as the subtleness of racism crept in. Somewhere around middle school or high school, I started to enter the race progressive stage where I saw my race as the most significant identifier of who I was.

The immersion/emersion stage begins when people begin to understand the depth of oppression and racism that Black people have historically and currently experience. I reached this stage sometime in my late teenage years when I and my brother were pulled over by policemen, pulled out of our car, handcuffed, and forced to lay face down in the snow. That event shook me awake to the realization that it did not matter what I did—attending a White prep school, straightening my hair, and listening to White music—I would always be Black, and they would always hate me. My identity changed that night. The immersion stage is a dangerous place to be for too long. It is a necessary and inevitable part of identity development, but it is not good to “get stuck into a never-ending militancy and hatred” (McAllister, 2002, p. 21). In many cases, people move quickly from immersion to emersion. During the emersion stage, individuals begin to see the Black culture as multidimensional and complex.

The final stage of Black identity development, according to William Cross, is the internalization stage. It is at this point, a place it took a long time for me to arrive at, that Black people develop a positive Black self-image, seeing themselves as Black first, and then a multitude of other roles after. A person at this stage develops a sense of Black pride and a recognition that oppression, microaggressions, and racism exist in the world. Many times, they also become activists, like race progressive persons (Cross, 1971 as cited in Kniffley, 2012).

Both models, and others, provide examples of how Black women develop their identities, each beginning with a stage of enculturation or negative self-image and ending with a positive,

self-actualized, racial pride and advocacy. These studies also point out that everyone does not progress through the stages at the same point, if at all. This leads to the concept that Black women are not monolithic or share the same view of their own identity.

Due to my focus on the link between trauma and identity, my research incorporates critical and transcendental theories. A theory accounts for social realities grounded in data and perspectives about the data (Leavy, 2017). Critical race theory considers the consciousness of both the researcher and the reader to gain understanding and advocacy for underrepresented members of society. The theory is to promote social justice and equity through the interpretations of the meaning of Black lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcendental theories are transformative from a spiritual, metaphysical approach because they seek to explain current symptoms of trauma and subconscious influences. The approach is to link the spiritual influences unique to a group of people with advocacy to interpret power imbalances. I explain in this study how spiritual, social, trauma, and life experiences motivate and influence the actions of Black women and thereby give meaning and understanding to the Black experience.

Critical Theory

Critical theories look at the “subjectivity of individuals and their experiences in the world complicated by capital, reproduction, and irrationality that cannot be wholly represented in numbers or pure logic” (Foley et al., 2015, p. 113). They challenge the power systems and the social norms within a society. They challenge or critique the techno-industrial-bureaucratic society as well as dominant epistemologies (Kesson, 2011). Critical theories in a sense are social critiques of power and politics that seek to emancipate and/or empower from a variety of perspectives. For instance, critical theories include queer, feminist, indigenous, and critical race theories.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) derives from critical paradigms that are ‘forged in critique’ (Leavy, 2017, p. 130). CRT critiques those power systems in terms of inequality, justice, and oppression. CRT follows a poststructuralism focus on “breaking down unified narratives to see how dominant ideology works” (p. 131). CRT was first introduced in the study of law known as critical legal studies (CLS) wherein scholars examined the intersection between race, law, and power. CLS scholars critiqued legal doctrine to expose not only the inconsistencies but also how legal ideology helped to create and support the dominant narratives and the status quo (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CLS grew into CRT which expanded the conversation to include all elements of the civil rights movements that sought justice, equality, and an end to oppression for all groups defined by race (Lukenchuk, 2013).

CRT in education is a segment of that broader scope. Some of the same disappointments that grew from the failures of the judicial system also festered in education. The civil rights era promised, among other things, equal treatment for all students, a sort of colorblind society that would not place judgment based on skin color. Those promises were never realized, and we continue to see inequality and a lack of equity in education. CRT uses a “racial analysis” to “deepen understanding of the educational barriers for people of color, as well as exploring how those barriers are resisted and overcome” (Taylor, 2009, p. 9). CRT is a critique of a social reality centered on race. That reality can exist in the legal system or the education system, and CRT unpacks and reveals systematic racism, marginalization, and oppression. CRT scholars believe that racism is normal in our society, “a permanent fixture of American life” (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The theory works to unmask and expose that normalcy.

Feminist Theory

Like critical race theory, feminist theories focus on “issues of equality, inequality, hierarchy, justice, power, and oppression” (Leavy, 2017, p. 131). Feminist theories consider these issues from a woman’s perspective, critiquing injustice and inequity in society based on gender differences or sexism. They challenge the masculine narrative and social hierarchal construct of what it means to be a woman. Feminist theories also critique and challenge how power and influence are distributed. The feminist movement in the United States leans heavily toward the experiences and ideas of White middle-class women.

Black Feminist Theories

Black feminist theories consider the “interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression” (Gines, 2010, p. 36). Not only are Black women faced with double jeopardy, but they are also confronted with dual systems of oppression. A Black feminist theory looks at the sexism of both Black and White men and the racism delivered by both White men and White women. Black feminism puts Black women at the center and empowers them to critically analyze and think about how racism and sexism are interlocking systems of oppression (Gines, 2010). Black feminists work towards combating misogynoir. Misogynoir refers to “the hatred towards Black women manifested through American and popular culture” (Jenkins, 2018, p. 92). One example of misogynoir can be found on search engines such as Google. For instance, if you search the words “unprofessional hairstyles” using Google, most images that come up are natural Black hairstyles. Noble (2018) wrote in *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*: “All advertising in relationship to Black girls for many years has been hyper-sexualized and pornographic” (p. 68). These are just a few examples of how racism and sexism, exposed by Black feminism theories, are uniquely harmful to Black women.

Part of the challenge of talking about or fighting for equality for Black women through the feminist movement is the presumption that oppressed groups, such as white women, Black women, and Hispanic men, have been impacted by male White supremacy in the same way or that we share the same methodologies for liberation. In fact, “white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics” (Smith, 2016, p. 67). White women, for example, are not subject to the logic of slavery that is defined by White supremacy. This logic equates Black people with slavery, deeming them slave-able. The concept of Blackness equaling slavery has followed all Black people into our status in American society. The prison industrial complex is a perfect example of that. The imprisonment of Black people is an extension of slavery, viewing Black people as a commodity. Once Black people were enslaved through the system of slavery and now, we are enslaved through the prison system (Smith, 2016). Another example is that throughout the history of White feminism, scholars have failed to fully examine and recognize how “Black women experience sexual oppression differently because of the added burden of racism” (Gines, 2010, p. 36). Feminist theories, many times, focus on women’s experiences without regard to race. In other words, feminist theories deal with White women’s experiences.

Black feminism seeks to “empower Black women by recognizing how gender, race, and class intersect and are socially constructed” (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009, p. 468). Although Black women are not all the same, they do share the common experience of being Black in a society that has denigrated and “othered” Black women. They grapple every day with a conscious and unconscious awareness of being both African-centered and feminist. Black feminism places Black women at the center and examines how they cope with the double jeopardy or intersectionality of their lived experiences (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009).

This point of the distinction between Black feminism and feminism is further illustrated in the non-gender-neutral professional world. White men, who have controlled the organizational culture, created a system in which certain behaviors are deemed acceptable, including the style of dress, hairstyles, and even makeup. These systems also keep women in dead-end positions. Race, however, adds another layer to this system. For many Black women, me included, entering a new business situation involves changing their look, controlling their conversation, and changing their hairstyles to fit in. A phenomenon called performance weariness sets in. Performance weariness involves the constant feelings of being judged based on your appearance, personal decorum, communication skills, and emotional management. This is layered on top of the normal expectations of work productivity. Many Black women have stated, “the work is too much. I get tired of being on for White colleagues who scrutinize every behavior. So, every now and then, I lose it” (Durr & Harvey Wingfield, 2011, p. 558). Losing it is dangerous territory because Black women carry with them into the workplace the same stereotypes that follow them everywhere—the depiction of “domineering, unaccomplished breeders, whores, welfare queens, as confrontational” (p. 559). I have personally experienced the fear of losing it in public many times. I am usually concerned that I will not be heard, and my message or concern will be silenced—explained by the nature of a Black woman.

One of the earliest, if not the first Black feminist, was the women’s rights advocate Sojourner Truth (1797–1883). She was the first to publicly challenge both the racism and sexism faced by Black women. Other early Black feminists, such as Julia Cooper (1858–1964) and Ida B. Wells (1862–1931), continued to lay the foundation for looking at social justice beyond just the marginalization imposed by White people (men and women), but also the sexism from Black men and the disenfranchisement of White male privilege. For many of the early Black feminists,

it was more than fighting oppression on two fronts; it was looking at oppression from a wide lens that addressed the totality of oppression. These early Black feminists spoke of the impact of both racism and sexism. To see them as separate categories or struggles is obvious; however, what was not as obvious was how these systems (racism and sexism) worked together and mutually reinforced each other (Collins, 2015, p. 16). Black feminism has similarities to White women's liberation; however, for Black feminists, the struggle is against both capitalism and racism (Crenshaw, 1991). The suppression of Black women's ideas has also highlighted a need for a movement and theories separate from White feminism. Many U.S. feminist scholars, for instance, have resisted the presence of Black colleagues. The theories and universal understanding of women as a group are limited to White middle-class and Western thought. The generic woman, according to White feminists, is White and middle class (Gines, 2010).

More recent Black feminists who have made an impact on Black feminist theory are Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and bell hooks (Brown, 2016). Patricia Hill Collins illustrated how, while the feminist and the anti-racist movements are meant to liberate women and people of color, these movements are primarily dominated by White women and Black men respectively, so Black women's voices are lost in both movements (Nain, 2020). Collins discusses how her Black feminist works place African American women and their ideas at the center. Collins (2015) wrote: "I not only privilege those ideas but encourage White feminists, African-American men, and all others to investigate the similarities and differences among their own standpoints and those of African American women" (p. ix). Kimberlé Crenshaw (2020) was one of the first to coin the phrase intersectionality as she explained that "systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories" (para. 3). Crenshaw (1991) recognized that one cannot talk about Black women with either a racism or

sexism lens because the oppression of Black women encompasses both. Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (p. 1243).

Bell Hooks is an accomplished feminist writer and a trailblazer for intersectional feminism. Hooks has been “trying to figure out how the feminist movement, feminist politics, can be articulated from her perspective as a Black woman” (Goodman, 2019, para. 7). All these Black feminists and others would agree that Black feminism is about centering the Black women's experience and the systems of oppression that shape them. Black feminism is rooted in the Black community, gives agency to Black women, and provides a way of analyzing and understanding the world. These Black feminist trailblazers offer insights into the process of identity development for Black women. They understand and articulate the complexities and intersectionality of oppression that continue to perpetuate the notion of supremacy and dominance. By looking through their lens, one can better develop a holistic view of Black women's identity.

Intersectionality

My research is rooted in the triangulation of race, gender, and the socioeconomic experiences of Black women. Black women sit in a unique situation, being neither prototypically Black nor prototypically women. Some refer to this dilemma as “intersectional invisibility,” meaning that Black women are “neither the default when people imagine women nor the default when people imagine Black people” (Cooley et al., 2018, p. 43). To Black women, the intersection of two categories of identity (“race” and “gender”) presupposes that one is oppressed

as a “Black person” to the extent that one is not oppressed as a “woman,” and vice versa. Therefore, conjoining the categories of “racial oppression” and “gender oppression”—to the extent that these are defined in terms of masculinity and Whiteness—means that their intersection reveals the non-representation of Black women’s identity (Collins, 2015, p. 67). This position calls for Black women to be centered in research so their unique perspectives and circumstances can be examined.

Transcendental Theory

Transcendental refers to beliefs that relate to a spiritual or nonphysical realm. Alongside critical paradigms, transcendental theories include spirituality in the critique of social realities. This approach is looking at phenomena holistically, including all segments of humanity—physical and spiritual. In the process of finding meaning, transcendental theories go beyond cultural and political influences to include the spiritual nature of life experiences. Transcendental thinking presents spirituality as a “place from which to launch a critique of the status quo” (Dillard, 2012, p. 61). Transcendental theories are sometimes credited to the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who developed an approach that was “rooted in the philosophical notion of consciousness and how one comes to know the world” (Valentine et al., 2018, p. 463). The spiritual understanding was represented by the consciousness or essence of something. This consciousness can only be revealed by the direct experience of participants. However, I believe that this notion of consciousness predates Husserl and Western epistemologies that separated the mind and the spirit. Indigenous methodologies existed long before because indigenous ways of knowing recognized the connection and relationship between the mind, body, spirit, and community (Haozous et al., 2016). Ancient indigenous practices embedded spirituality in all aspects of life. Transcendental theories embed spirituality into aspects of research.

Summary

Úut çtrç ñue wotrÇa ýeóuóu óo.

You change your steps according to the rhythm of the drum.

Researching the life and experiences of Black women, the commonalities of their lives, and the complexity of their position in a dominant White male society is a personally challenging task for me. As a Black woman living in the same society and facing the same racism, stereotypes, and microaggressions discovered in the research is painful for me. However, aside from the pain, which I have been socialized to accept and transcend, there is a new depth of understanding. As a child, I often wondered what all the fuss was about. What was it about me, my family, and my skin color that both fascinated and enraged White people? I could not figure out why it all mattered to them so much.

What I have learned through this research and other readings and discussions is that much of the seemingly constant focus on the lives of Black people has more to do with White people than Black people. Without Blackness, it is difficult to describe or identify with Whiteness. The definition of race only exists within a hierarchy and a system of lies and manipulations. It was to the advantage of those who put themselves on the top of the hierarchy that the ladder even exists. White supremacy and racism against the other are about power and control. These things are not about inferiority, intelligence, beauty, ingenuity, or abilities. Those falsehoods were just created to support the underline need to dominate others and to justify lust and greed. Although that may be comforting on some level to know that it is not something I did or that my ancestors did to deserve the rough treatment, it is also maddening.

The flip side of the intersectional coin of Black women is the othering aspect of being a woman. Black women share many of the same challenges as White women, although for Black women there is another layer of dehumanization and demoralization on top of the gender effect. For Black women, there are two sides to this proverbial coin. Either way, it lands on oppression. Analyzing the life of a Black woman includes both sides of that coin as each element works together.

There is, however, good news. Black women have also been gifted a legacy of resilience. For generations, Black women have passed down the mantle of survivor, head of household, community leader, and fighter. Black women are also amazingly adaptive, changing with the rhythm of the drum. Black women also come from a legacy of regality and divinity—once worshipped, now hated and betrayed.

For many Black women, including myself, developing an identity and sense of self is a long and winding road. In my previous life as a warrior, I was a fighter. I sense that for me to develop a strong will and resistance, I must have developed a strong identity. I knew who I was, and I knew who I was not. I was not a slave. In my present life, however, I find myself traveling a much longer and more complicated road, weaving in between the phases of Black women's identity, sometimes confused, sometimes clear. I have found, through this research, that to understand yourself, you must look back. You must experience Sankofa. Tracing that twisted road through history and learning about the attempted destruction of Black people and Black women offers a depth of understanding, like peeling back the layers of an onion to get to the truth. Learning how other Black women cope and develop their identity given the historical, ancestral, and current situation offers clarity.

For many Black women, finding identity is about the journey through the phases as previously outlined, from identifying as a woman first to identifying as a Black person first, to understanding that you are simultaneously both. It is a journey from complacency to activism, from assimilation to freedom. The stronger and more positive the identity, the more successful and fulfilled the woman who possesses it. It is about protecting your mind from the invasion of racism, sexism, and misogynoir. It is about knowing who you truly are separate from how the dominant culture has crafted you to be.

A major part of this journey is navigating through Whiteness. The navigation skills Black women need are many times learned through socialization, which can be helpful in terms of coping skills and mechanisms for survival. At other times, the socialization process can be harmful in terms of demanding a sort of self-sacrifice and a failure to be seen as fully human with all the emotions and frailty that requires. A wall is socially constructed around many Black women, and this wall of strength and resilience can deny Black women having true human emotions, showing weakness, or feeling pain. The wall can also protect Black women from the harshness around them. It can protect her sense of self, her mental health, and her identity.

Spirituality also plays an important part in defining Black identity. Regardless of what religion Black women adhere to, there is a spiritual bind that holds them together. Faith and spirituality replace other mental health services for many Black women who were socialized to be “stronger than that.” Our churches, mosques, and spiritual centers nourish Black women’s souls, reunite them with their ancestral greatness, and remind them that they were once goddesses and queens. These institutions or spiritual centers serve as powerful “mentor places” for many Black women.

Understanding the journey of identity development for Black women can only be seen under the lens of Black feminism, intersectionality, and critical race theory. Black feminist approaches center on Black women with all their conflicting and interwoven parts and experiences. Intersectionality acknowledges and examines those parts, not as separate entities but as ingredients blended into one. Critical race theory also positions the Black woman at the center of the discussion, offering an opportunity to reveal a holistic truth about Black women and their identities.

Kifantan e naa kilgi keyia
What started as a leaf becomes a tree
(Value of hard work and determination)

CHAPTER THREE:

Methodology

I determined that a qualitative research approach would be the best methodology to use for this study. Defining how the “Black experience” contributes to or detracts from the teaching experience, particularly with Black students, required revealing patterns and understanding and interpreting the lived experiences of the teacher participants. These lived experiences provided a complex web of intersecting identities and experiences that qualitative research addressed in a dynamic process. The analysis of these stories allowed me to understand how all those factors collectively affect not only participants but students as well. The research was about exploring the emotional side of the issues in question. These are emotions that are not easily quantified or revealed through quantitative measurements. As a participant researcher, the process of fieldwork or naturally engaging in the process also lent itself to qualitative research. My experiences are a part of the data collection process, combined with the experiences of the participants. Qualitative researchers are interested in “people’s subjective interpretations of their experiences, events, and other inquiry domains” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 10). My research centered on those experiences, and the stories told by participants were woven with my own story.

Identity and intersectionality are also key components in my research and my quest for a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black teachers of Black children. Qualitative research positions the investigations squarely in the lived experiences of the participants, bringing this understanding into the light. Qualitative research contributed to the goals of my

research to “develop counternarratives to dominant cultural knowledge and normative narratives that circulate in everyday life” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 12). The methods I used to tell those counter-stories revolved around critical theories. The power of storytelling was the main data-gathering tool.

The purpose of this study was to examine the counter-narratives of identity shared by Black female elementary school teachers within the discourse of Whiteness that remains dominant in the U.S. culture in general and the U.S. public school system (Lawrence & Tatum, 1999; Matias & Newlove, 2017). Specifically, I explored these teachers’ stories that illuminated the experiences of success and discrimination, achievement and oppression, and the building of supportive connections with their Black students.

The following overarching research question guided this study: What are the counter-narratives of identity shared by Black female elementary school teachers within the dominant narrative of Whiteness in U.S. elementary public schools?

Additional secondary research questions were:

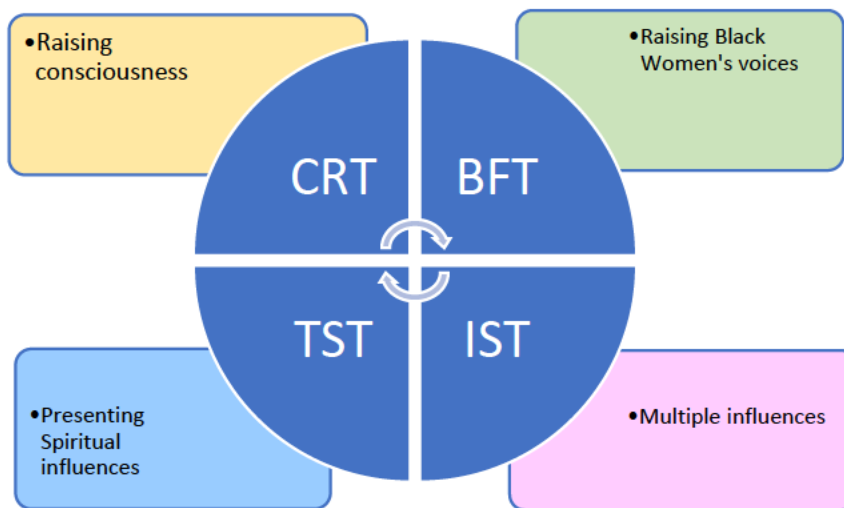
- How do these teachers navigate the dominant narrative of Whiteness when serving Black students?
- How do these teachers connect with and support their Black students?

Theoretical Lens

This study is positioned within the overarching interpretive and critical paradigms of research. An interpretive paradigm seeks to understand, interpret, describe, or make meaning. It seeks to understand how people engage in meaning-making throughout their daily lives and it draws on the patterns and processes that individuals use to assign meaning (Leavy, 2017). The critical paradigm falls under this category; however, a critical paradigm takes interpretation to

the level of “emancipation with knowledge now understood as power” (Lukenchuk, 2013, p. 70). A critical paradigm critiques the power dynamics in society and how that power contributes to the lived experiences of individuals within that society, specifically the interactions between the privileged and the nonprivileged. A critical framework renders that “our lives are mediated by systems of inequity, such as classism, racism, and sexism” (Shields, 2012, p. 4). In addition, the goal is to raise awareness, urge reflection, and lift some of the unheard voices. The intent is to provide and explore multiple perspectives to “identify underrepresented voices and challenge commonly accepted truths” (Shields, 2012, p. 6). A critical lens examines, interrogates, and re-imagines. As depicted in Figure 1, this qualitative study was informed by critical race theory (CRT), Black Feminist Theories (BFT), Theories of intersectionality (IST), and transcendental theories. (TST).

Figure 1: Theories that informed this study



CRT raises the consciousness of both the researcher and the reader to gain understanding and advocacy for underrepresented members of society. The theory aims to promote social justice and equity through the interpretations of the meaning of Black lives (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Following the branches of CRT, it is important to note that my research is not intended for the “consumption and self-understanding” of the dominant culture. In contrast, my research, using the methodology of storytelling, gives voice to Black teachers and is, therefore, intended for Black teachers. CRT “questions long-held beliefs in Western methodologies and research that has long disparaged Black people as a ‘problem’” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 63). In that sense, I hope that my research is a celebration more than an indictment. By recording the first-hand narratives of Black teachers, a marginalized group in our society, a different voice can be seen as privileged, and perhaps a new light on the standing and status of these teachers and the lives they touch is revealed and felt by other teachers like them. (Leonardo, 2013, p. 604). Leonardo explains that “subjects live race reality as a relation between their objective and subjective world” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 600). As participants told their stories through narrative inquiry, they did so with their interpretation and perspectives of the world. Through the process of narrative inquiry, stories were revealed. Those stories allowed the voices of Black teachers to be heard and in the spirit of critical race theory, a different voice is assumed as privileged. No longer, at least not in my research, will the voices of Black women be considered the “other.” These voices are crucial to our understanding of the Black teacher to Black student dynamic. Critical Race theory also examines the social constructs of what knowledge is important, what interests are being served, how power is distributed, and what voices are revealed.

This research followed a Black feminist approach. “Black women bring forth critical perspectives about vulnerability and struggle, resilience and resistance, and love and justice” (Evans-Winters, 2015, p. 129). True to a critical race approach, my research revolved around the Black feminist theory. This allowed the insights and experiences of Black women to provide the data for the research. A Black feminist approach was the lens from which all the research was

being viewed. A lens that “provides a conceptual model for understanding how racism, sexism, and classism intersect to constrain women’s bodies and psyches” (Evans-Winter, 2015, p. 133). The experiences, knowledge, and meaning that the participants provided gave voice to Black women to claim and define their realities. According to Evans-Winter (2015), this approach “fosters dialogue for understanding power and privilege” (p. 134) and an understanding of how Black women teachers navigate White supremacy in our school systems and their classrooms.

Part of the Black feminist approach involved the inclusion of my own story as I reflect on my experiences and bring my insights into the research process. Black feminist theory questions the thinking that research should be objective. “Black feminism maintains that research with women and racial/ethnic minorities at the center of the analysis is necessarily subjective, with the intent of promoting social change, self-knowledge and empowerment, or community uplift” (Evans-Winter, 2015, p. 135). Although every Black woman has a different story to tell, they all share “experiences and some form of oppression characterized and related by their class, race, or gender, by their existence as women” (Dillard, 2012, p. 60). With this understanding, my research uncovered many of those experiences and revealed the processes by which Black women navigate through them.

An intersectionality framework includes consideration of multiple influences in an individual’s life. Numerous social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect. “Intersectionality refers to the fluid process inherent in holding two or more social identities that are situated within a historical context” (Jackson et al., 2012, p. 14). The combined experiences provide context for different understandings and meanings for different people. The lived experiences of Black women involve “converging systems of race, class, and gender oppression” (Romm, 2010, p. 220). When investigating the lives and experiences of Black women, it is

impossible and impractical to try to separate these converging factors. Black women approach racism and discrimination in their lives differently and many times according to their class, status, and other factors. This called for an intersectional analysis of the participants' experiences as they worked through "intersecting discrimination" (Romm, 2010). The perspectives gained through participants' stories centered on the multiple social identities that intersect their lives. It was important to consider and understand how these multiple identities defined the cultural context of the research.

The transcendental theories are transformative from a spiritual, metaphysical approach as they seek to explain current symptoms of trauma and subconscious influences. The approach is to link the spiritual influences, unique to a group of people, with advocacy to interpret power imbalances. It is about making space for the mind, body, and spirit in the work. Both the researcher and the participants brought their whole selves to the work, recognizing that the "mind, body, and spirit are intertwined in their functions of maintaining the wellbeing of the individual and community" (Dillard, 2012, p. 81). I conscientiously sought to understand how the spiritual, social, traumatic, and life experiences motivated and influenced the actions of Black women, giving meaning and understanding to the Black experience. Using transcendental theories is about looking beyond the everyday experiences to what lies beneath those experiences. The theory involves not just explaining what is happening, but why it is happening. What are the influences that create that action, emotion, and reaction? A transcendental approach also puts aside any preconceived notions "allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity" (Sheehan, 2014, p. 10). The challenge for me, a participant in the research, was to put aside any notions of reality that I experience, allowing for new insights and new understandings. There was an act of reciprocity that happened in this

research—understanding that “the researcher and the researched are changed in the process of mutual teaching and learning” (Dillard, 2012, p. 81).

Narrative Research Design

Qualitative research design is an ongoing, fluid process. As Ravitch and Mittenfelner (2021) explain, in qualitative research, the “data collection processes are not linear, but rather recursive, iterative, and inductive—with processes that build on and influence each other” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 106). Therefore, the design process cannot be dictated or pre-determined. Qualitative researchers provide an interpretation of a participant’s interpretation of their lived experiences.

Counter-Narrative

The counter-narrative challenges the dominant discourse and the majoritarian narrative. A majoritarian narrative “privileges Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 28). Instead of simply responding to the common narrative, I used counter-narratives to challenge the notions that the views, preferences, and experiences of Black people are not normal or acceptable. The counter-narratives challenged and shifted the White privileged perspective on its head and lifted the voices of historically misrepresented and silenced voices. (Milner, 2007) The counter-narrative focused on “disrupting and extending what it means to be normal” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). Instead of maintaining the common narrative about what is normal and whose voices are important, the counter-narrative allowed the participants to name their reality. It made the experiences of the oppressed visible and centered, thus normalizing their experiences and their voices.

My research uncovered and centered the stories of Black women, with an understanding that Black women sit in the intersection of Blackness and femaleness, a position that others Black women in multiple ways. Although I recognize that each person's story is different, telling their stories is important. The counter-narrative is as it implies—the other narrative—or perhaps we could say the narrative of the other. In my research, I examined not only the stories of Black women as they have experienced racism and sexism, navigated through Whiteness, and realized their own identity, but I also included my counter-narrative. By telling the stories of the experiences of others, I was able to analyze those experiences in relation to the education institution. By including my own story, I provided an autobiographical account and reflection through a critical-race lens (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009).

Participants

This study uplifted the voices of Black elementary school teachers. The criterion for participants was that they are elementary public-school teachers who self-identified as Black, African American, or of African Ancestry. These teachers also needed to teach in a school where their classrooms are populated by more than 30% Black students. Additionally, I included participants having various levels of teaching experience from several different public s-elementary schools to gain multiple perspectives and understandings. I invited 10 teachers to participate in the study. Six participants accepted the invitation. I began the process of selecting participants using a purposeful and convenient sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling “provides context-rich and detailed accounts of specific populations and locations” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 83), which was essential for answering my research questions. The sampling was purposeful because I wanted to deliberately identify the best candidates for my research. The sampling was convenient sampling because it identified participants that I had

access. Some were fellow teachers in my school district. This factor is important because my research calls for in-depth, personal interviews. Trusting relationships needed to be established to provide the data required by the research questions. I required time to develop a rapport with participants; therefore, they needed to be accessible. A snowball sampling strategy was employed as I looked to identify new participants from conversations with already identified participants (Leavy, 2017). In my experience, I have noticed that there are few Black teachers in the district compared to White teachers. Black teachers many times form strong bonds with other Black teachers, providing a safe place for solidarity and friendship. Therefore, using a snowball strategy introduced me to Black teachers in the area doing amazing work that I was not currently aware of. One of those teachers agreed to participate in the study.

Once potential participants were identified, I began an informal email correspondence to develop a rapport. Rapport is important in the narrative inquiry process because it is through relationships that the participants will “relate and live through stories that speak of their experience” (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577). These experiences could be painful or traumatic, leaving the participant vulnerable and possibly apprehensive. The more trust we had before the interview, the more in-depth the interview could be and the more valuable the data. Once participants informally agreed to participate in the study, I emailed a formal letter of invitation and a consent form.

Sources of Data and Data Collection Strategies

In this study, I utilized two sources of data: interviews and observations of the interview. Documents. Interviews constituted the main source of data for analysis. In narrative inquiry, there could also be *nonstoried materials* that can add to the richness of the data and support interpretations and analysis. Nonstoried materials could include photographs, artwork, and

other artifacts. There were nonstoried materials beyond what I noticed in the background during the conversations.

Interviews

Narrative interviews are well suited for my research into Black lives and the Black lives of teachers who teach Black students. These interviews provided the bulk of the data for this research and the substance for the interpretative narratives. With the information that was shared, I was able to craft the stories of these teachers' lives as well as my own life experiences in a rich and important tradition that traces back to our ancestors. For many of us, as was revealed in the stories participants told, storytelling proved to be their first language, an ancestral language and methodology passed down from generation to generation and revived often in their daily lives and teaching experiences. This legacy of Black feminism has allowed us to "survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, and our humanity" (Edwards, 2018, p. 86). Sharing our stories helped us to share our survival.

The ability to tell our stories is at the heart of narrative inquiry because it "makes visible alternative knowledge often silenced and/or contested" (Grady et al., 2018, p. 153). In many ways, sharing our stories is an act of resistance against the dominant narrative. Dillard (2012) describes it as an act of (re)membering that "is a response to the false divisions created between mind, body, and spirit . . . a response to our ongoing experiences and understanding of difference and identity" (p. 17). The key was to discover and uncover the stories of Black teachers. "Studying persons is to study beings existing in narrative and socially constituted by stories" (Leavy, 2014, p. 197). Stories, however, do not happen in isolation and by combining the stories of the Black teachers in my research, I gained a better understanding of the connections between experiences, emotions, and instruction. Narrative inquiry also presents reflective, creative, and

emancipatory possibilities as well as the production of knowledge (Grady et al., 2018). The goal of the narrative inquiries was to provide multiple experiences outside of my own experience as I sought new understandings. This goal committed me to know other stories to hear and record conditions that may not mirror my own (Dillard, 2010). By asking the correct open-ended questions, rich authentic stories of the lived experiences of the participants were told. I conducted one in-depth interview with each participant that lasted at least 2 hours per participant. I followed up with a couple of short questions via email for a few gaps I found in the research. In all cases, the participants provided a wealth of data and insights. No follow-up interviews were necessary.

The interviews I conducted and the stories I retold required an intensive interview approach. Romm (2010) describes an intensive interview as “a way of generating in-depth talk in relation to experiences/cognitions relevant to discussions around racism” (p. 215). The methodology of this type of interview can be regarded as a mutual effort between the researcher and the participant, much like a conversation as previously referenced. To begin this conversation, I asked the participants to share stories of their lives, from childhood to adulthood; describe how race and gender have affected or have not affected their lives and careers; and reflect on how factors such as spirituality, microaggressions, and racism have impacted their identity development.

This methodology honored and recognized multiple experiences outside of my own experience. In the intensive interviews, the participant and the researcher engage “in a mutually humbling experience, where each understands our limitations in speaking for the other” (Dillard, 2012, p. 80). The experiences of the participants revealed troubling, painful, and sometimes repressive experiences. The interviewee’s experiences and the retelling of those experiences

were also triggering for me, the interviewer. In this sense, we were both vulnerable. To handle this, we both needed to be introspective, open, and willing to re-live those experiences. As the participants did relive and retell their stories, a wide range of responses happened. For some participants, the retelling promoted healing as they gained mastery of their experience and were unburdened. For others, the retelling process was perhaps triggering. These variables can very well dictate the flow of the interview and the questions asked. This required an active-interview approach rather than a passive approach.

The interviews were semi-structured because the goal of the research was to understand the lives of the participants from their perspectives. The goal was to elicit the story (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The sequence of questions enumerated in the interview guide (see Appendix A) was loosely followed based on where the conversation took us in the research.

Memoing and Journaling

After each interview, I wrote a quick memo that included some observational notes and reflections. Direct observation of the interview video provided further context and understanding of the stories told. In many cases, the stories participants told can be lived in what they say as well as what they do not say (Caine et al., 2013). This process involved observation of body language, facial expressions, and other meaningful cues to generate my understanding. I also journaled my thoughts, reflections, and observations throughout the research process. This journal was included in the data as a representation of the personal side of the data collection process. A journal is an “introspective record of the fieldwork” (Spradley, 1979, p. 93) that provided me a tool with which to consider my own biases, feelings, and spiritual connections.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Critical qualitative data analysis includes analysis and interpretation in a process of finding meaning. The analysis comes into play as the qualitative researcher summarizes and organizes the data. Interpretation comes into play as the researcher finds or makes meaning. This recursive process blends the two, as the researcher flows back and forth between analysis and interpretation (Leavy, 2017). The process of data analysis begins with the coding process. I began by highlighting the data—after multiple readings, selecting which segments should gain more importance than other segments, and determining which stories, plots, story elements, or characters assist in describing the environment and experiences of the Black teachers. I scanned for and highlighted the nuggets of information that helped me explain the way things are and the way they got that way, moving beyond descriptions to deeper understanding (Wolcott, 1929). Using a sort of values coding, I coded the text with the drivers, stresses, supports, and influences in the participants' lives based on the interview questions. I asked what the drivers are that motivated the teacher participants. I looked at what the stresses were that got in the interviewee's way, redirected them, or re-established their purpose. I also looked at what supports helped build the interviewee up, what kept them going, and what protected them in their careers. I looked at what were the influences that contributed to the interviewee's way of thinking, doing, and knowing? I wondered if there was a climactic event that shifted their thinking, their approach, or their choice in where to teach? I highlighted the facts and the transcripts that provided clues to the mystery of Black teachers.

After each interview was highlighted and key story elements were identified, I combined the interviews with observations, memos, and other data to create a more complete narrative based on the participants' experiences (Allaire, 2018). Additional coding on the narratives

involved identifying themes and subthemes. In vivo coding “prioritizes and maintains participant’s language” which allows “codes to develop organically” (Leavy, 2017, p. 151). In vivo coding added another crucial element of the thematic analysis.

The highlights, themes, and transcripts were then organized by the participant and sorted by the initial emerging themes. This allowed for additional themes to emerge, initial themes to change, and sub-themes to be identified. This third phase of coding resulted in a type of “findings display” that was graphic in nature. It made the overlapping ideas as well as the gaps visual. This type of graphic composition could also be useful in highlighting aspects of the study (Wolcott, 1929). Visualizing the data in new ways provided new insights and revealed new themes and subthemes.

The highlights and graphic compositions from interviews were then compared to the highlights from the memos and journal entries to find additional patterns or counter-patterns. I asked myself the main question of what do the stories and facts have in common and where is that one story that takes a different path or against the noticeable grain? I looked for the “broader framework of interpretative and evaluative processes” as a sort of shared interpretation (Romm, 2010, p. 225). For instance, most of the teachers were grounded in the established Christian religion and discussed how their faith allows them to persevere, however, there was one teacher that leaned more towards atheism and was guided by a set of moral principles. My questions then were - is this teacher somehow less Black, or is the mystery of the Black teacher separate from the mystery of faith? Is there a common thread between the religious faithful and the atheist that I had previously overlooked?

The analysis of the data included a process of “looking across data sources” and finding meaning in the complexity of the sources. This looking across data sources began as the first

sources of data were gathered and continued throughout the research process. Moving in cycles between storying, re-storying, interpretation, analysis, interpretation, re-storying, and so on. Each part of the process informed the others as data was gathered, interpreted, and analyzed. The analysis involved finding or interpreting the connections between the sources of data in a search for meaning. Leavy (2017) explains that qualitative research analysis includes “the systematic reduction of content, analyzed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data” (Leavy, 2017, p. 146). In narrative research, most of the data are generated from the interviews conducted with participants. This “text” is investigated to uncover the meanings embedded in the text.

Qualitative analysis can be formative, offering flexibility in the research, such as reflections on the research questions. The analysis can also be summative as the researcher combines multiple theories, perspectives, and stories into new learning or understanding. The goal is to look for “different relationships and frames for data” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 244). For example, by interpreting and analyzing each narrative interview as I traveled through the process, I reflected on the environment, the research questions, and the responses of the participant at that moment. To arrive at the meaning, to solve the mystery, involves “surrendering to the data” and allowing the data to reach their optimum depth to find meaning (Wolcott, 1929, p. 28) By going with the flow of data, alternative research questions were identified, and some questions were omitted on the spot as they had already been answered through conversation. Each interpretation of the interviews and the participants stories were then combined in a more summative way to share perspectives and come to a more holistic understanding.

Interpretation is an ongoing process with qualitative research, particularly with narrative inquiry. Although much of the data gathered in narrative research are descriptive, there is still an interpretative element that exists throughout the process of inquiry. As the researcher, I offered an interpretation of the stories related to me and told by me. My observations and memos also lent themselves to an interpretive quality. Despite all efforts to relay the lived experiences of my participant honestly and accurately, everything was presented through my interpretive lens.

Stories Told to Me

The narrative stories that were shared with me took on an interpretive lens from the participants' points of view before they were transcribed or put to pen. As they expressed their thoughts and narrated their stories, or in other words 're-story,' they reflected on and interpreted their own stories. I, as the researcher, in turn, reflected on the stories they told me and reflected on and interpreted the retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). In the reconstruction of the telling of their stories, the interpretations were refined between me and the participants. These stories also provided themes related to how the participants navigated Whiteness or perceived racism and Blackness.

My Story Told

My story was also a part of the research, interpretation, and analysis process. My narratives were lived, told, and retold in the research. "Thus, the narratives of participant and researcher become . . . a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 11). My re-story was an interpretation of my past, present, and future experiences. In the analysis phase, however, I supported those interpretations with triangulation, discussions with critical friends, and other analytic means.

Interpretation also came into play as the data was gathered and analyzed. Interpretation helped to answer the question: “What does it all mean?” Interpretation looked for patterns, links, concepts, and themes. This process included triangulation, which involved multiple data sources (Leavy, 2017). Combining all the data gathered in this triangulation provided a holistic view of the research questions.

Validation Criteria

Validation in qualitative research is a process that attempts to provide a level of accuracy to the findings, or as Shields (2012) refers to it, “goodness.” This goodness in this study was strengthened by using multiple sources of data, maintaining authenticity, and including reflexivity in the process. Part of this process included the thick descriptions of the participants’ narratives and my detailed field notes from observations, memos, and journal entries. These multiple sources of data were used to support my interpretations, thereby producing a “confluence of evidence that breeds credibility” (Eisner, 1991 as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 336). This credibility is found in the authenticity of the data as well. Throughout the storytelling or narratives, it was important to write from a viewpoint of uncovering the complex layers of the participants’ lives and actively collaborating with them. In areas where interpretation did occur, validation occurred by supporting research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as well as identifying my ideologies and biases that contributed to the shaping of the findings (Shields, 2012). My reflections, which come from my personal lens, were explicitly explained to add to the validation of the “re-story.”

It is also important to consider that the focus of my research was on the stories that my participants told and authentically presenting their voices. The validation process allowed me to keep an open mind as I wrote about what I may not have completely understood (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). I sought to provide the understanding and allow others to understand. New understandings give voice and power to Black women teachers—their experiences, their sources of knowledge, and their capacity as teachers. The validation that took happened was an effort to write about those new understandings.

Maintaining the authenticity of the participants' stories speaks to the importance of relationships. Communication and collaboration within the participant-researcher relationship is one way that my study is ethical. In addition, a level of mutual respect was key to maintaining that relationship. I showed respect for my participants by agreeing on interview time requirements beforehand and by being respectful if we exceeded the previously agreed-upon length of time. I also maintained respect by making it clear, during the informed consent process, that participants could leave the study at any time, and I kept any agreements open for reconsideration. Qualitative research is fluid and alive; therefore, participant consent was also ongoing.

Reflexivity is another safeguard against potential biases in qualitative research. Reflexivity is a belief that the cultural identity competence of a Black teacher impacts the outcome of the learning experiences for students. As a Black woman, educator, and researcher, I realize that my life experiences, just like with any teacher, cannot be separated from my professional experiences. In addition, I recognize that my identity is “rooted in a genealogical and cultural way of knowing, and being, and dreaming that is shaped by the crucible of Black Enslavement and its continually relevant aftermath” (Edwards, 2018, p. 85). My evolution into Black womanhood is intertwined with my evolution as a Black teacher and that intersection, I believe, impacts my Black students.

In qualitative research, memos, journal writing, and researcher interviews are sources of data that can be included in the research. As a researcher and a participant, my interpretations are valuable. My research was, in many ways, self-reflexive because I aimed to describe authentic models or knowledge (Kaul et al., 2016). In fact, all the interpretations that were presented to me were filtered to different degrees through my lens, and through my own experiences of being a Black woman, a Black student, a Black teacher, and a Black researcher. My identity intersections, personal struggles with Blackness, and experiences teaching in an African-centered curriculum (ACC) program had an impact on how I made my interpretations of my participants' interpretations. This is one reason why reflexivity was crucial to my research.

To be reflexive in my research, I needed to engage in dialogic engagement, memoing and journaling to document my thinking, shifts in my thinking and understanding, and explaining emerging themes. The shift of ideas, for instance, become part of the research as I interpreted the reasons why. At heart, I am a storyteller, perhaps stemming from my ancestral memories of storytelling or my childhood love of narrative writing; therefore, reviewing and analyzing my stories and the stories of others added valuable data to the research, although I struggle with the word data. I considered the stories that were told to be informal, non-method-related sharing of lived experiences that found themselves in my memos and journals.

Ethical Considerations

For this study, the ethical considerations included the six Black female schoolteachers, the authenticity of the re-telling, ownership of the narratives, trust and respect for participants, as well as consideration of working with human subjects. One concern I had was the small number of Black teachers in my school and district. Therefore, I decided to open my research to teachers

from other public schools in the area. Including additional participants makes it more difficult to identify any one teacher.

Story Ownership

Whether my approach is transparent and accurate or metaphorical and fictionalized, collaboration with the participants had to be considered. The stories belong to the participants; therefore, it should be a joint decision how to provide authenticity, avoid stereotyping or bias, and protect anonymity. “It is important to consider thoughtful, ongoing, authentic, and respectful engagement and relationship cultivation with research participants before, during, and after the research takes place” (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2021, p. 199). The participants telling their stories is an act of memory or remembering. It can be thought of as “a thing, person, event that brings to mind and heart a past experience with it, not only the ability to (re)member but to also put back together” (Dillard, 2012, p. 3). This research is, in other words, highly personal for the participant. In the process of conducting this research, respect for the participants and protection of a shared Black woman sisterhood, all these factors were considered.

Respect extends to the use of the participants’ social media and personal blog accounts. My research focused on the stories my participants told; therefore, it was not necessary or appropriate to seek out additional facts through social media. Trust is also a component of successful and meaningful relationships. An honest representation of where I am coming from with the research, my goals, and methodologies, was a part of the authentic engagement of trust and honesty. Currently, my participants and I are colleagues, at equal standing within the program. Breach of confidentiality was addressed in the consent agreement (see Appendix B).

Qualitative research involving human subjects presents some potential risks to participants. It was important to restrict or limit the amount of harm as much as possible. Black

women are often silenced, and many are fearful or at least apprehensive about sharing their experiences that some would consider controversial. On the flip side, although the storytelling is a part of the Black culture at large, the openness and intimacy of sharing their stories with me, could be seductive and lead to participants sharing more than they may have intended. There was also the risk of creating a “quasi-therapeutic relationship” because an interview on a personal topic can lead to this (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

It was important to recognize and plan for the challenges of reliving discriminatory incidents, especially when there are conflicted emotions such as fear, shame, anger, confusion, or irritation (Romm, 2010). I recognized that as the participants were reliving and telling these subjective stories, they may experience a range of emotions and physical reactions. I have relived many traumatic emotions myself, as I have shared or written my personal stories regarding race, racism, stereotypes, and discrimination. This range of risks was considered before, during, and after the interviews. My race and ethnicity were a benefit to the study participants. Some research has shown that Black participants typically reflect a sense of shared understanding that can bolster their resilience and coping responses to traumatic racism (Mizock et al., 2011)

Participant Consent

Considering the aforementioned risks as well as other risks, protecting the rights of human subjects is of high importance. All the participants in my study were informed of the purpose of the research, the types of questions and the structure of the interviews, and the option to leave the research at any time. They knew in advance how long the interviews would last and any procedures like the choice between remote meetings through Zoom or in-person interviews. Any risks that would be possible, such as discomfort with retelling their stories, were addressed as well as any benefits. Before agreeing to be interviewed, participants were informed that their

stories would be kept confidential with proper names changed to pseudonyms. They were given the contact information needed to ask any questions before the interview (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix B.

Nwura deda mu ahorow nanso ne nyinaa ye nwura

Grasses are of different types, but they are all grasses
(Respect individual experiences)

CHAPTER FOUR:

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Stories Told, Lives Lived: Introducing the Participants

At the time of this research, we were entering our second year battling the COVID pandemic. With variants appearing around us and mask mandates persisting everywhere we go, my quest for the stories of Black women teachers took me to the Zoom experience. Zoom is the name of a website application that allows people to meet in a virtual arrangement of square video screens, shared screens, and controlled backgrounds. Although meeting with these women in person would have been ideal, the Zoom experience was the safest and next best option. It is in this environment that my research begins.

This chapter explores the lived experiences and storylines of six Black women teachers in my quest to understand better how Black women teachers navigate through whiteness. Their voices tell the stories of their lives, from childhood to the present, their entrance into teaching, their experience, and their understanding of who they were and who they are today. The stories presented are the counter-narratives this research sought to uncover, answering the overarching research question: what are the counter-narratives of identity voiced by Black female elementary school teachers within the dominant narrative of Whiteness in U.S. Elementary public schools. These stories are those narratives. The stories also reveal responses to the secondary questions in this research: how these teachers navigate the dominant narrative of

Whiteness when serving Black Students and how they connect with and support their Black Students.

I began the work with a biographical sketch of each participant, a chronological birds-eye view of their lives. The stories are then analyzed, revealing themes and sub-themes that help answer the research questions.

The participants that were chosen and agreed to participate in this study are all dedicated, hardworking Black female teachers. All but one are currently teaching in schools with a high percentage of Black students. One participant is retired after teaching for more than 30 years in a predominantly Black and Latinx school district. These educators are what I would consider solid and resilient. They are compassionate, warm, funny, and a joy to interview. These ladies opened their lives and hearts to me in all the interviews. They shared information that surprised me, enlightened me, and inspired me. I found myself in their stories, sharing their joy and trauma.

Figure 2 presents an overview of the participants with demographical information such as their age, education, years of teaching, and career path. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Figure 1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age Range	Years Teaching	Highest level of Education	1st or 2nd career
Ala	50s	14	Master's	2nd career
Beatrice	50s	23	Doctorate	2nd career
Candace	60 or above	retired after 30	Master's	2nd career
Donna	50s	33	Master's	1st career
Ella	30s	6 (12 years in education)	Master's (pursuing Doctorate)	2nd career
Faye	50s	28 years	Doctorate	2nd career

Ala

I met Ala on a professional development zoom call near the beginning of the pandemic when all professional development was delivered via zoom meetings. It was a teacher's choice professional development (PD) day, and I chose to attend a PD on equity and anti-racist teaching. The facilitator of the meeting was Ala. Her strength, personality, and passion were evident as she led the group through several challenging discussions about race and gender bias. I felt instantly connected and reached out to her several more times just to talk about our lives and experiences in our district. When it came time to choose participants for my research, her name came immediately to mind. I knew her to be a passionate Black female teacher.

As my first interview, I was excited and nervous. I opened my zoom application and waited for the doorbell sound that would ring to indicate her arrival at the meeting. I had my questions printed out and a small notepad just in case I had to jot something down quickly. I wanted to give her my full attention and not take any notes since the meeting was recorded anyway. I was so nervous that I checked my phone to see if I could also record from there as backup. What if something went wrong with the zoom recording? What if we had a great discussion, and it was later lost- and I had no notes. I wasn't sure what to expect. I waited for about 20 minutes past our scheduled time and didn't hear the chime. I finally emailed her to see if something had messed up with the link attached to my calendar invite. I didn't hear anything back right away. I waited another 20 minutes and gave up. Later that day, I received a reply email filled with apologies. She had completely forgotten about the meeting, and we rescheduled for the following day. I was so relieved- worried that my first interview was a no-show. I had another call scheduled for later the next day, but our new time, 10 am, was early enough to squeeze in.

The following morning, I was much more comfortable signing into zoom. The day before, I had tested the recording part and practiced using both my phone and the computer. On that day, I was ready. The chime rang just a few minutes past our scheduled time. A window opened at the top of the screen, and it said, “Ala has joined the meeting.” My heart skipped a beat, and I took a deep breath. Ala was full of energy, just as I remembered from the PD a year or so earlier. Her long-twisted braids laid neatly over her shoulders kept together by a bandana. Her rimless glasses and t-shirt completed her Sunday afternoon look. Ala was sitting in what appeared to be a small office. A pad of chart paper hung on the back of the door, and a bookcase filled with books sat along a wall behind her. A framed picture of President Barack Obama posing next to an American flag hung on the wall between the bookcase and the door. Her smile was warm and genuine. She apologized several times- stating, “I don’t want to be that person,” and I assured her it was o.k. I appreciated her willingness to tell her story. Ala adjusted herself in her gray fabric-covered chair, took a deep breath, and started her story.

Ala’s story begins in a large Midwestern city in the 1970s. She is the youngest of four children, born to African American parents from the south. Her beginnings were humble but comfortable and safe. She was surrounded by Black people, people that looked like her. The only White people they saw were people that serviced their neighborhood, teachers, police officers, and doctors. In their eyes, they wanted for nothing. The idea of poverty was not one she understood or thought about. Her first thought about poverty was when she was in high school when she said to herself, “Oh, I think we might be poor.”

For Ala, seeing beyond her neighborhood would become a theme in her life, seeking not necessarily more, but different and new. One such opportunity came when Ala was offered a scholarship at an Art Institute in her city. This provided a pathway to the downtown area, far

from her neighborhood. This was one of her first glimpses at the big world outside and an excellent opportunity to express herself. She said, “I was so happy (be)cause I got to express myself.” She attended that institute for three years. Ala smiled as she continued her story, seemingly relishing in the memory.

Outside of her art institute education, Ala’s K-12 education was entirely in public schools, and she was a good student, earning a full scholarship to engineering school. However, it would be several years before she earned that first degree. Once she got to college, she realized that she was “totally unhappy and unprepared. Being number two in my (her) high school did not equate to being ready at an engineering school.” After dropping out of college, she entered “corporate America,” working as a systems analyst at a large company downtown. She started making considerable money in her mind, yet her life was unfilled. She explained, “I was miserable, and I was watching people with lots of money destroy themselves.” After a few years of this misery, she decided to leave her high-paying job and pursue a master’s degree in education.

This desire for education and success that Ala had during her early life can be attributed to her desire for access, for something better. As a child, her mother worked as a housekeeper, cleaning White people’s homes in the nearby suburbs. At one point, her mother arranged for Ala to come with her so she could use the family’s computer for schoolwork. “I think that was the moment that I realized that these white individuals had things that we didn’t have” Ala looked at the ceiling as she spoke, “And I’m like ‘oh, so that’s what make me Black.” That experience fueled her desire to “get out there” and gain access. She wanted that access. She explained, “It looks a lot more comfortable than all the folks on my block have,” Ala thought.

Ala acknowledged that the neighborhood that may not have been as comfortable provided her with a safe cocoon to grow up in. However, Ala wanted to spread her wings; she wanted more; she knew she had to leave that cocoon to become a butterfly. Again, the art institute was the first avenue for that journey into access. Another sub-story of the access narrative was Ala's experiences growing up and spending time at a historically Black College and University HBCU. Every year her family spent the summers in the South near the HBCU, and it was clear that college was in her future. "You finish High school; you go to college. People who are educated have it easier. I want that." With education came access to a life that Ala wanted. She recognized that.

Ala's family also puts a lot of value on education and always striving for the best. Her parents had high expectations for her, and she interpreted those expectations as her own. One early memory of the manifestation of this expectation was during her time at the Art Institute. She had brought home a piece of art that she was proud and excited about. Her mother, however, was not impressed. She said, "They are giving you all this money you can do better than this." This desire to always do better and obtain perfection stayed with Ala for many years. Her focus on access included perfection. She had to be perfect to have those things she wanted and gain the access she thirsted for.

Another element of Ala's multi-dimension identity is her realization that she is gay. Although she didn't "come out" as a lesbian until she was in her 20s, she had an experience in high school that opened her eyes to how people categorize and label people. A boy that she didn't know and was not her friend came up to her in the hallway one day and boldly exclaimed, "Aren't you on the girls' basketball team?" After Ala replied yes, he said, "yeah, you look like it" Ala looked directly into the camera lens as she spoke. She explained,

That was the moment – I look a little bit differently. That one moment of someone saying yeah, you look like some category.

That was Ala's first experience with feeling labeled or even othered. She didn't know what she felt, but she knew it was different.

Ala has a lot of pride in identifying as a woman. This distinction to Ala is even more important or a close first to her identity as a person of color. "I think Women first because there's a choice in identity regarding gender that I don't think comes with color." She reflected on how the new trend to add your pronouns to your email signature is significant, yet she would never consider writing Black. For Ala, Blackness is something you are born into, but your gender identification is a choice. You can't choose to be Black, but you can choose to be a woman. For Ala, however, her choice fits the gender assigned to her at birth. Ala's "identity fits," her "body fits," and her tone fits.

Ala identifies strongly with her race and gender. However, her spiritual identity is not as strong. Her parents both had negative experiences in the Church and never took the children. Ala, however, was curious. She believed in a higher power and a universal connection but wasn't sure about organized religions. When she was 20 years old, she decided to get baptized. She explained,

I thought the sky was going to open, and someone was going to start talking to me. And when that didn't happen, I gave it up.

That was the end of her Church experiences. However, Aligned with Ala's need to seek access to things outside her neighborhood and her experience, she dabbled in Buddhism and Hinduism. She did everything from Tai Chi to yoga, trying to find that spiritual center. Her mind was open to alternative ways of knowing and again from a place outside her neighborhood. Her one familial connection to spirituality came from her aunt, who spoke of having visions. This

was something Ala valued and accepted as she had similar experiences. So, for Ala, her identity narrative includes a spiritual awareness, but not rituals or religious affiliations.

Ala's identity narrative includes a journey of seeing new opportunities, access to a more comfortable life, and revelations about her sexuality. She was 20 years old when she first came out as a Lesbian, but it took her 20 more years to come out on her job. As much as Ala loves the skin she's in and is proud of her heritage; she has one regret that she says causes her a bit of shame. It's about Africa and how it doesn't call her. Ala explains:

Back then (in my 20s), when we all got creative and read poetry, I remember working with a group, and I wanted to write an article entitled *Africa doesn't call me*. The Guy who was working with me just made me like, "how dare you say that." But it was the truth. I wanted to go to Japan. I wanted to go to France. I wanted to go all of these places, but Africa was not calling me.

Ala explains how saying it aloud caused her a little shame, and even today, she feels the same way. She states that she loves the skin she's in, and she recognized the continent of Africa is where we all come from, but for her, honestly, Africa still doesn't call her.

As far as Ala's career path, she had a successful career in corporate America. She was making money, enough to buy her own home and live comfortably, enough to gain access to the things she wanted, living a seemingly assimilative theme- the job, the house, the family. However, her life in that world was unsatisfying and, in some ways, miserable.

I did not feel like I was contributing in the way I wanted to when working in the business world.

She entered education to connect with children and to be a part of preparing them for the future.

As she explains to her students every year

You're going to be the lawyers, "you're going to be the doctors. I need you to know what you're doing." She tells them, "I need you guys to have your game right."

Ala expressed how the access she was seeking should not have been so hard to gain. She explained:

When I look back at the horrible segregation, I look back at the fact that they had somebody in their community who looked like them and that had to show some pride...it must have felt great (be)cause someone felt that they needed to burn it down.

Ala felt that if not for the destruction of Black-owned businesses and wealth, like what happened in the Tulsa massacre, Black neighborhoods like hers would have had that same access.

As Ala navigates the dominant narratives in schools, she recognizes how the color of her skin and her sexuality impacts students.

I honor the fact that there are children who look at me in a different way, and I see that as that role itself changes depending on their perspective. Children of color express their connection with statements like 'you look like my grandma' and white children communicate 'I'm down with you.'

Ala recognizes and embraces her role in those relationships. Ala believes that:

Anyone should be able to look and identify with the people of authority around them. It's not used in schools. When you call someone to assist you at your home, you should be able to point to see someone that looks like you.

Ala sees her role as more than just teaching students art as an educator.

Why I show up for a lot of different things is I have a role in my community as a Black person as well as an educator, and I also have an experience and a perspective that's different than more educators we have. Most educators are not black. If I don't (step up), then who will?

Ala believes that her authenticity is what helps her connect to students. Regardless of students' race, gender preference, or sexual orientation, she believes in "just being myself knowing that everyone should feel value." This openness and vulnerability with her coworkers and students allow students struggling with their identity for space to do so and for students who are not going through similar struggles to understand those who are.

That kid in the hallway was like; you look the basketball player. I had not worked it out. I was just knowing I did look a little different. Yeah, I loved high tops back before it was the thing, but I didn't feel comfortable, you know, so in allowing kids who are going through that to feel comfortable or the kid who's not going through that to witness, hey, this is how you should treat people.... I am going to feel really good that I did that for whatever years I give.

As a child, she was quiet and shy. She was often teased "because I (she) was not feminine and a bit goofy." However, during her first year in high school, Ala was being bullied nonstop by a group of girls. They were walking to her and hitting her in the back of the head for no reason. It was at this point that Ala had enough.

So, I just kind of lost my whatever on them and was like I am going to kick your whatever, and once they realized, oh, you're that person – that stopped. I was like, there's power in this, and I became more confident.

A couple more times in Ala's life, this confidence has been challenged, and each time she stands up for herself or others, she finds that renewed power. She says, "I'm now outspoken." This confidence and outspoken nature have blossomed even more over the years as Ala reached tenure in her school district. Before going tenure status, she kept things to herself many times.

We need to understand the system of being tenured, people who are not tenured deal with so much crap and saying nothing, the fear of not being able to continue.

But the day that Ala got tenure.

All of a sudden, that box came out, and I stood upon it. Ala explains how "there is a battle of just trying to make sure that you are taken care of, and you're safe and for us African Americans there's so many levels and I'm still learning those.... African Americans, we statistically are shown that we are an imbalance of power in so many situations that causes you not to speak up. I came out in my 20s (however). I wasn't feeling comfortable to come out until my 40s at my place of business. So, there's so many levels of silencing that are happening for people of color, for marginalized groups in general, and yes, in classrooms. The staff, as well as probably the babies, are having moments of feeling I can't talk.

Ala may have been challenged with speaking up in the past, but those challenges no longer exist, or at least if they do, they don't stop her. She has dedicated her teaching career to making a difference and speaking up for all marginalized people.

Beatrice

My zoom meeting with Beatrice was set for a Sunday afternoon around noon. It was the first time we would meet face-to-face. I learned about Beatrice and her years of service as a Black teacher from another participant, Donna. Donna felt that I would benefit from Dr. Beatrice's story and find similarities in our childhood experiences. Donna was correct. When the zoom screen opened, I noticed that Beatrice wore a comfortable blue sweatshirt with a scalloped edge framing her neck and face. Her medium brown curly hair was shaped into an angled bob that complemented her brown oval glasses. It appeared that she was sitting in her open-concept kitchen. A modern shiny silver exhaust hood sat over her right shoulder, and three large living room-type windows shone over her left shoulder. Rays of sunlight blasted through the windows and set a wonderful glow in the room behind her. I recall thinking that her home seemed modern and updated, and her appearance was cute and approachable.

As Beatrice told her story, I found many familiar themes that mirrored my life differently. This interview solidified my belief that the Black experience is different for everyone. Beatrice grew up in a garden floor apartment in a diverse city. It was interesting how she described her apartment, indicating that she had humble beginnings. However, her mother worked as a city attorney, and her father was an affluent dean of the college they lived across the street from. They lived in this garden apartment in the "ritzier part of town." Her parents were a "power couple." Mom has raised in an upper-class white suburb with one of the only Black families there. In school, she learned about some Black heroes, the typical ones like Martin Luther King.

She was fair-skinned and sometimes “passes as white.” Her Mom grew up attending an African Methodist Church AMI, however.

In contrast, Beatrice’s father grew up in a more diverse, segregated suburb not too far away. He understood more about segregation and discrimination than his wife did. He witnessed first-hand how cities and school districts manipulated school zones and practiced racist housing practices like redlining. Dad was darker-skinned and from a well-known family in the same suburb he grew up in and the same suburb the couple decided to raise Beatrice in. Everyone knew the family.

Beatrice spent her early elementary years in an elite private school. Her mother was a firm believer in education and believed that this private school would be the best thing for her daughter. Like in her mother’s childhood, Beatrice experienced the Black community through the same AMI church. It was there that Beatrice made Black friends and where she “got her Blackness from.”

However, the private school did not work as her mother had intended. By the beginning of third grade, Beatrice’s mother noticed a difference in her daughter, who she called her African princess. She was “just being too white.” The solution was to transfer her to a public school. The public school in their neighborhood was just as white as the private school, so they used her grandmother’s (on her father’s side) address so she could go to the new laboratory public school near her grandmother’s house. This school had a lot more Black kids. Things were going well at this new school until she was about to reach middle school age. Beatrice’s mother again started to notice a difference in her daughter. At this point, she was acting “just a little bit too urban.” The solution, transfer her to a Catholic Private school. Again, the church was the link that provided Beatrice with continuing ties to the Black community. By middle school, with good

grades and a solid academic foundation, she returned to public schools for High school and graduated from there.

During Beatrice's time in the public schools, she realized that many of her new friends attended a Baptist Church in town. The same Church, her father's family, attended. She persuaded her aunt to take her. Beatrice found the Baptist church "a little bit more upbeat and more enjoyable for children with choirs, children's choirs, and a few more programs." She started attending the Baptist Church every Sunday after that. Soon, her parents joined her and converted to the Baptist faith. She follows that same Church today, although she attends virtually now with the pandemic. Her belief is still strong, as she prays regularly, knows the bible, and tries to live her life the best way she can.

Beatrice originally went to college with plans to enter the hotel business. However, after graduation, her uncle asked her a question that changed that trajectory. He asked, "have you ever thought about becoming a teacher?" Her uncle was the superintendent at a nearby district and suggested she try it. Beatrice recalled how she used to like playing teacher as a child and started substitute teaching to see if she liked it. That led to working as a paraprofessional in her uncle's district. Shortly after that, Beatrice was married to a military man and began to travel around the world with him. They had a son. Several years later, the marriage dissolved, and Beatrice returned to her hometown. She decided to take the teaching idea full circle and get her master's degree in teaching. She taught for many years at the kindergarten level and is currently teaching 4th and 5th grade Art. Beatrice describes herself as

I describe myself as a little bit more charismatic, a little bit more, sometimes, unorthodox. I pull things out of kids that they had no idea what kind of artistic talent they had until I said, 'look at this. You did this, and they're like, Yea, I kind of did.

Beatrice's Black identity grew out of her experiences with the Black church and similar experiences in White spaces where she was one of a few Black spaces. She became proficient at code-switching between areas- from the all-White summer camp, her mother endorsed as a "good idea" to all Black spaces like her Baptist church. Spirituality and religion are essential parts of her identity as well. She spoke about the roots of her faith:

I am rooted, and I do have faith. You know, I'm imperfect, and I openly admit that. So, I'm not really ashamed of it because it is what it is. I try to live my life as best I can."

Beatrice joked about mentioning her faith, I don't pray every day, and I also have a potty mouth, being married to a sailor. Faith and family are essential aspects of Beatrice's life as she stays connected and grounded.

Candace

I worked with Candace during my first-year teaching in an elementary school. She was one of 5 Black teachers in a small elementary school where we also benefited from a Black principal. Our principal worked in the district, primarily with Black and Brown students, for more than 25 years. Those were the good old days. Candace, Donna, and I worked together, vented, shared, and motivated each other. Candace was one of those teachers that came in early and stayed late. She was devoted to her job and her students. She was known for providing tough love to her 4th-grade students. I was excited to have caught up with her again, so many years later, as she was beginning her retirement. I knew she had seen and experienced a lot in her thirty-plus years in education. But there was a lot I did not know as well.

Candace also agreed to meet on a Zoom link. When she dialed in, I noticed she was wearing a lovely red sweater and chimed in precisely on time. She was wearing her hair in a short natural cut with short soft curls framing her face. She was settled in for the interview in her home with a large ironwork art piece behind her. The art piece depicted an intricate floral

arrangement. A side or back door was next to the art piece with a blue roman shade pulled up, revealing a glass panel. The sun was shining through the window, and you could see a rear patio with a wooden railing and large trees dotting the skyline. After catching up on our lives, Candace smiled, settled in her chair, and told her story.

Candace's story began in the same town where she taught for over 30 years. She grew up in a household with "old-fashioned" parents who were "set it their ways." Her parents had their children later in life. Her Dad, for instance, was significantly older than them and was about 40 when Candace was born. Her parents were loving and nurturing, raising children according to tradition. They sat down at the dinner table together every night at a set time. The children were required to do chores following a schedule and follow strict rules about what they could and could not do. Candace attributed a big part of who she is today to her structured and loving parents.

Candace understood that her parents had come from hard times and were living a hard life at an early age, especially compared to how Candace was able to live her life today. Her parents met while working on farms in the south- chopping tobacco and cotton. Her grandfather on her father's side died when her father was only six years old. That meant that her father had to take on a lot of extra responsibilities. Candace remarked that she listened to her parents' stories and the stories of Black people's struggles just to keep food on the table as a child.

Candace's mother also had a tough childhood. She was frequently pulled out of school because she could "tap the cotton" better than anyone else, and they needed her labor and the money. Her mother was the youngest sibling but could work as hard as a man. Candace's Aunt told her one day.

Your mom could chop that cotton. I never could work as her or drive that tractor like her. I remember when my father decided he was going to teach her to drive. Before he could,

he looked up, and she had gotten on that track and was going across the field. He had to run after her.

Candace realized later that as fascinating as those stories about her mother were, her mother had some hard feelings. Her mother had dropped out of school by the 10th grade because she felt she couldn't do the work after being pulled out so many times for so many years.

On Candace's mother's side, there was a direct link to slavery. Candace recalls overhearing a conversation between the adults. Her grandfather spoke about a relative that was a "slave boy." She was interested in the topic and wanted to ask more, but the traditional nature of her family prohibited that interaction. "You just didn't get into adult conversations and start asking a bunch of questions," Candace remarked. Slavery and much of her parent's upbringing were not a discussion that her parents had very often. Candace was in Highschool, for instance, before she realized that her father served in World War II in Hawaii, Germany, and France.

When Candace entered first grade, the family moved to a nearby suburb, just about 15 minutes away. Both cities were predominantly Black at the time and still are. The town she grew up in is still "near and dear to her heart because of the ties she has there."

All these experiences that Candace learned about in her childhood helped shape the person Candace is today. She knew that she did not want to work as hard as her parents had to work. She wanted a different path- hard brain work, not hard physical work. This desire provided her a drive to go to college, even though she knew "it would be a long shot with my parent's backgrounds." She was determined to do well in school and eventually headed to college. Her motive was to help her parents someday. This drive also extended to a desire to take care of herself and not ever be dependent on anybody else. "What my parents lived through is what shaped me," she explained.

Candace and her family went to church every Sunday in her father's absence. She explained, "Mama got us dressed, and you went (to church) whether you wanted to or not." Her father, however, never went. As they grew older, the rules lessened, and Church was considered optional. Candace always exercised that option. Today, Candace considers herself "a student of the bible, not the bible scholar, not necessarily able to recite scripture," but a spiritually faithful woman. She continues to go to the same Church she was forced to go to as a child. For her, church, especially that church, is her safe space. "I feel comfort there, but I just feel like I'm forever learning." For Candace, the church is a significant part of her coping strategies, mainly because of her known people. She turns to those with the most religious knowledge when in stress. She knows they will have the knowledge to help her and the ability to call on prayer, "or bring me down if I need to be brought down."

Candace started her working life in business. She planned to make a lot of money. But, like others, she hated every minute of her time there. She went back to school, got her teaching certification, and has loved teaching. She taught in the same school district for 30 years. Candace is an example of a Black teacher that stays. She talked about how many White teachers come and go. They come in and cannot relate to the students or make any type of connection with them. The Black teachers are there consistently. "We're still here," which provides a layer of security for students. She talks about how many young white teachers have no idea what the students need- discipline, learning, and someone to care about them. These white teachers just haven't figured it out.

Candace also explained that Black children need Black teachers.

I believe that they have to have somebody they can see successful. That has made it personally, someone that truly cares about them, (be)cause you know like I tell these white teachers "not every one of our students are poor. "Please don't come in with these

preconceived notions cause kids to pick up on it, and they will eat you alive. They don't need a savior."

Referring to a White principal, she once told the story of being called into his office with several other Black female teachers.

He doesn't like our style of dealing with our children because he thinks his Stanford degree knows more than we do about our black and brown children. And especially a person like me. I was born in that community myself. I know a lot of these families.

Candace does worry about the children. She is concerned about what she sees as escalating lousy behavior. She thought, "they gotta change, or I don't know how they're going to be successful cause the world won't accept what the school accepts." Candace's life service to teaching and her commitment to the community she loves is admirable and inspiring.

Donna

Donna and I worked together along with Candace many years ago. She was a self-appointed mentor. The district failed to assign me one, so I told her she was it. I always enjoyed her positive energy, and she was full of advice and inspiration. I was excited to be meeting with her and reconnecting. Donna was the only participant that agreed to meet in person. Since we were both vaccinated to prevent serious illness from the COVID virus, we decided that it would be safe to meet in person. Donna suggested we meet at my house. We arranged to meet on a Friday evening. After many years, I was excited to see her and anxiously gazed out the window waiting for her arrival. I also considered my dog's reaction to a visitor and whether I would need to restrain him or put him in another room. As she got out of her car, I thought she looked the same as I remembered her, except seemingly slimmer. It was clear that she had lost some weight. She looked healthy and happy. She yelled out a warm "hey girl" as she approached my front steps. "Your house is so cute," she exclaimed. As Donna came on my front steps, my dog started barking hysterically, and I was forced to put him in my bedroom behind closed doors. Once it

was clear, Candace entered. I noticed immediately how she had lost a significant amount of weight since I had last seen her. Her face and smile were the same, however. She wore her hair in long thick braids. Her outfit was just as colorful as I remembered her wearing in the past. She came in, got a quick tour of my home, and settled in. We tested my phone quickly for recording, and after a short chat to catch up on each other's lives, she started to tell me her story.

Donna's story begins in a middle-class- neighborhood in California. Her parents had divorced when she was five years old, and she and her brothers lived with their single Dad. This was the early 1970s, and single Dads were rare. He did the best he could. Donna explained how her dad cooked dinner every night. He shopped with a small refrigerator every day on his way home. She recalls their favorite meal- round steak, rice, gravy, salad, and cornbread. Her Dad bought everything they needed, outside of food, at the same store, and in the same department. Donna wore jeans and t-shirts from the boy's section for much of her childhood.

Donna spoke lovingly about her father as she recalled and retold her story.

My dad made me like tough. So, in some ways, I feel like he thought he had three boys. And he raised me as such. He was like, "if you fall, brush it off." I wasn't like daddy's little girl like- "oh she hurt her knee, oh come here." He was like- "you will be all right. Go rinse it off and go back outside and play." So, I feel like in some ways he tried not to make me girlish, but kind of – it was safe to keep me from being girlish.

Donna explained how her father reacted when he realized she needed a bra.

I remember him taking me to the women's section and telling the woman – you know, he pated his chest. The woman figured it out and said – "come on, baby." She took me to the area and helped me try on bras. I remember him not being able to say, "my daughter needs a bra," ...So he left it to a stranger at that moment. That beautiful moment. He allowed some stranger to have that moment with me.

This discussion seemed to affect Donna emotionally as she looked up at the ceiling when she spoke. It was almost like that thought of the stranger had never occurred to her before. Donna later talked about the pride her father instilled in her.

I remember he was arguing with my brother for something, and he said – you are a Willis, and we don't do that. I remember thinking (are) we like some kind of tribe? Like I was thinking, are we some kind of native American? I remember him saying, "You're a Willis," and I remember thinking – I'm a Willis. I remember him putting that in me like, "I'm a Willis, I have to represent." He put it in us that you're great because you're a Willis."

Donna went on to say:

What my dad didn't lack in was instilling pride in us. All of my brothers are big-headed. We're big-headed people, and we got big heads. But he put that in us because I think he knew the world's gonna chop some of that away. I gotta leave you with enough that when they chop away some, you still great. You got to see yourself as great. So, he did that. "

When Donna was 11 years old, her father remarried. He married a White French-Canadian woman who Donna described as evil. She has one stepsister the same age as her and two baby sisters that came shortly after the new marriage. Donna describes her family as "we weren't the Brady bunch, and we weren't the Partridge family." They were a multicultural family with white, Filipino, Japanese, and Black representation between her stepmother's family and her own family. Donna describes how her life in this diverse family was isolating, lonely, and challenging. Her Stepmother showed a lot of favoritism towards her children and was mean and evil to her stepchildren. Donna had no contact with her birth mother; she had not seen her since she was five years old and had no idea where she was. She describes her childhood as

I grew up alone. So, my dad had my brothers. And my stepmom had her daughter, and then the baby went with Mom. And then there was Donna...So even still, I'm the outlier. I'm the outlier in the family. I'm the oldest girl, but I'm the outlier. So, yeah, life was hard.

As things got worse for Donna at home, she created an adopted family. A good friend would invite her over, and Donna fell in "mother love" with her friend's mother. She states, "I was like the Potsie from Happy Days at their house." She was always there because she did not want to be at her own house. Her friend's mother was kind and became a surrogate mother-

always making sure there was food for her and a place for her to feel wanted. Her friend's mother created a safe space for her.

After a physical altercation with her Stepmom, when Donna turned fourteen, she decided she had enough and was determined to find her birth mother. As it turns out, Donna reached out to her aunt (father's sister) for help. Before her parents got married, they had been friends, so she was the perfect person to help find her. It took two years of searching. Donna was 16 the next time she saw her mother. A routine began: Donna would take the school bus to school, and then instead of walking into school, she would walk to the corner and take the city bus into the city to spend time with her mom. She traveled as often as she could, but not too much for her grades to suffer. Time with her mother was fun. Donna's mother had her challenges, one being alcoholism, but she was funny and loving. She always had food for her when she visited, and they loved watching the Price is Right together, bidding on the showcases, singing songs, talking, and laughing.

Donna looks back at her childhood and realizes that she had to do a lot for herself. She learned, "you made your situation for you... you knew to seek help. "Donna continued:

I'm not sure how I knew that I needed a support group. And either I saw it, or I saw, I mean, I even look at reaching out for my mom. I didn't know what was going on. My mind said I needed to find this lady because enough is enough. Like, I need my mom. I need to find my mom.

Donna also found church to be a special place for her throughout her life. As a child, she would go to church by herself every Sunday. Sundays were all about football and shopping. Her father and her brothers would watch football, and her stepmom and her daughters would go shopping. Donna found her joy and comfort by going to church. Her attendance in church and participation in the church choir provided an identity for Donna. "The children's choir was

something that was mine.” Today Donna continues to attend church regularly. However, her new church is smaller, with only about ten members.

When Donna turned eighteen, she knew she would leave her home and never return. She knew this because her stepmother told her:

When you leave out of this door at 18, you got to make it there’s no coming back. You’re gonna leave your key, which she asked for, and you’re going to leave the safety net. You got to make it. So, I credit her for that. She did that.

This was another moment when Donna looked up at the ceiling as if having an epiphany; I wondered again if this was the first time she thought of her stepmother in this way. In a roundabout way, Donna also credits her stepmom for her love of language, and again, I felt like this was the first time she made the connection. She recalled that although her mother did not speak the language, she was French Canadian. Donna later majored in French.

Donna’s love for language took her to college with a degree in the language. Donna recalls how when she was 16; she decided she wanted to be an international spy. She recalls telling her father that she would “die on foreign soil.” She explained:

I remember thinking I have to learn a language on the way because I gotta be able to communicate because I’m going to be a spy – give intel – I don’t have a story. I got to blend in.

Donna eventually went to an HBCU with a degree in language- French and Spanish. The school had to design a program for her once she progressed to higher-level French. In her junior year, Donna was an exchange student in Belgium. This fantastic experience introduced her to a group of Nigerians that lived in Belgium. One of them became her boyfriend, and she became immersed in their culture:

I didn’t miss enough (class) to be kicked out or dropped out, but I got really taken in by the Nigerians. The music, the whole foods, and stuff. That was cool to me.

However, Donna returned home at the end of the semester and graduated. After graduation, Donna found it hard to find a job as a language major. She found herself fluent in French but barely able to speak Spanish. After working temp jobs for a summer, she decided to lean on her church and announced in choir practice one evening that she was looking for a job. One of the members referred her to a Christian Day school looking for teachers. Qualifications were not necessary, so she decided to take the opportunity. Again, she depended on her church. She knew that many of the members were current and retired teachers. She met with them and kept a notebook to collect all the advice they gave her. Two years later, she decided to make the formal switch to education and get her master's degree.

In her college path, Donna got news of a teaching opportunity in Puerto Rico. After filling out the extensive paperwork, having a background check, and interviewing with the Secretary of Education for Puerto Rico, she found herself on her way there to teach English. After two years that she thoroughly enjoyed, she made it back to the States to pursue more teaching opportunities. At this point, she "saw her career as a teacher." Donna commented:

And I think after about a year, I began to like, wow, I can see myself doing this. I like teaching; I like kids. I like mind molding and thought-provoking stuff. So, I kind of went the back way into teaching, but that was my first year- teaching, and it has been 33 years.

Donna spent most of those 33 years teaching fifth grade in a predominantly Black and Hispanic school district in her town. Most recently, however, she has returned to her language roots and is working as an ESL support teacher. Donna explained how that transition happened.

I saw a shift in my purpose when the demographic started changing, and I saw I had more Spanish kids than Black kids. I realized what was happening. So as my love of teaching continued to develop, I noticed that I could not break away from the fact that I still love language. It was still there. I kind of put it in the bag. And I've gotten it out every now and then. But I was like, "No, you need to do what your love is."

Donna's decision to work in an ESL position instead of as a classroom teacher was difficult. In some ways, she felt like she was abandoning her Black students. She eventually rationalized that the community changes dictated her teacher career change, and she had done great work for many years.

Ella

Ella popped into my zoom screen at precisely 9 am. I could see she was sitting on her comfy living room couch with her dog and her cup of coffee. She wore a snugly DePaul sweatshirt that looked like the perfect attire for a Saturday morning. After a few moments of chit-chat and thank-you, Ella told me her story.

Ella was born in Florida and was raised in South Carolina and Florida. She was consistently questioned about her parents. She did not resemble them at all. Her mother was from Thailand, and her father was from Spain. Yet Ella had soft curly hair and brown skin. Ella explains:

People would show up at my house, or we would go to events, and they'd be like – those are your parents? Are you sure you're not adopted? Like my whole life. And I was like no – they're allegedly my mom and dad...so that was awkward.

There has been speculation that perhaps Ella's mother had an affair with a mixed-race man (Thai and Black) who was a family friend. Ella asked her mother repeatedly but was permanently shut down. However, Ella has "reconciled" with it at this point in her life. She loves the man who raised her and considered him her dad, no matter what. In addition, Ella's dad knew nothing about his dad. Ella's grandfather left the family when her dad was just a little kid, so his father's racial identity is unknown. "So, even though we didn't look alike...it doesn't really matter. Because the guy who raised me is my dad. "Ella explained

Ella was the youngest of five girls, although her four older sisters did not grow up in the same household. They were half-sisters that were more than 18 years apart. Her sisters ranged from full Thai to half Thai and half Black. Again, Ella was unique. Her childhood was a mixture of culture and abuse. The food she ate mainly was Thai cooking that her mother did. Her dad's culture was lost in the mix. Ella's mother was also very abusive- mentally, physically, and emotionally. Because of this, she has no relationship with her mother. "I don't talk to her at all." Ella was much closer to her father. She never learned her parent's native languages, which at first seemed surprising to me.

I don't speak Spanish or Thai, actually because I have such a negative relationship. Like growing up, I had a really distant relationship with my parents. I didn't want to learn either of their languages, or I didn't want to be a part of their culture. So, I didn't learn it. Didn't make an effort.

These factors, combined with many of the attitudes in the south, made for a challenging racial question for Ella. She always felt othered and always felt like she didn't belong.

I was never like physically Asian or like Asian enough to be Asian. Definitely not Black enough to be black, and then I was also awkward.

She went on to explain that:

I always was on the fringes of racial groups, however, I'm very outgoing and very sociable, so I felt like I always had friends and stuff, and I always had friends in different areas. So even though I did internally feel ostracized by these communities that I looked like, 'cause there were not a lot of like biracial kids either at that time, there were never kids that look like me. There were never people on TV that looked like me. There was never representation.

This lack of representation not only intensified Ella's cultural confusion. She explained that she wanted to be white- to be one of them. She explained:

I remember I used to always wanna be white because I was like 'well I'm half white I wanna be white.' So, I would straighten my hair and do all these things that just- It's like trying to be this person that wasn't me, and you know I feel like my body shape; I'm built

like a woman of color. I have curves, so I would try to be this very nimble white girl. I'm like, girl, that's not who you are- but we try to assimilate. You survive.

Ella's struggle with her identity continued throughout elementary school to high school, and she even struggled during her college years. It was not until she was in her mid to late 20s that she identified her racial identity.

When I started doing work on race. On racial equity, I began to like unpack who I was, who I racially identified (with) because I didn't think about it on a subconscious level; it was just like this is who I am. I'm like mixed-race whatever. It's not a big deal, but then when I began to like do work on myself and do some racial unpacking, I realized throughout life how I had been trying to mixed-race assimilate how I had been marginalized because of the color of my skin. Just like now fully embracing who I am as a mixed-race individual and being conscious of how I show up in the world. I just refuse to apologize for who I am; I fully embrace my color of my skin, but I also think that culture has shifted, and there is a lot of representation for people who look like me. There is a lot of appreciation of a woman of color, body type 2, where that wasn't the case, you know, 20 years ago. I don't wanna assimilate to this, or I don't want to feed into this. I am OK as who I am. I was made this way. It wasn't a mistake.

Along the way, a friend once told Ella that as she walked through the world, people would assume she was a Black woman. It used to make her angry until Ellie realized that what she was feeling was anti-Black. That fact frustrated her even more as she grappled with her racial identity. "I didn't know at the time, and I didn't have the language or any of the tools. I didn't realize that it was just like me being anti-black and not understanding my racial identity.

After a childhood of abuse and identity crisis, Ellie found herself in a situation where she created her new family and her safe space.

I live, and I work, and I socialize in a bubble that supports that, so I never feel othered anymore. I kind of made that community for me. Whenever I go to Florida, I always get anxious.

Ella feels that anxiety in Florida because she is outside her safety bubble. Ella never thought she would go into education, often noting that she didn't even like kids. However, without much

effort, she found herself working with them. From tutoring peers as a child to working as a swim co-discovered she found that kids were always around and that she worked well with them. It was a calling she couldn't ignore.

Ella began her teaching career working in a for-profit reading clinic right out of college. She taught children and adults what is known as the science of reading. She worked there for almost five years before she grew annoyed over the “for-profit model that only catered to the 1%. It just didn't fit who she was as a person.” So, just like many of the participants, Ella returned to school and got her teaching degree. She planned to work in the public sector of education for 5-10 years to “get a view of the other side of the table.” After that, she has her eyes on policy work as she is also pursuing a doctorate in education policy.

Faye

When Faye came into view on the zoom screen, I could notice that she was sitting in a small office in her home. There were glass doors to her left and a row of bookcases behind her. I imagined that she was sitting in front of a desk of some type with a computer and monitor, a camera mounted on top. After a few moments of casual conversation, Faye settled into her chair and told her story.

Faye's story begins in a southern city. Faye has four sisters and one brother in a family she describes as loving and supportive. Her mother was a strong, hardworking Black woman. As a seamstress, her mother sewed all her children's clothes and provided for her children the best she could as a single mom. Faye describes her mom as:

My mom worked hard. She took what she did seriously. She was a professional. And she provided for us kids. I mean, we didn't know we were poor. Everything that we needed she provided. With emphasis on needed not wanted.

Faye's mother was also a devoted Baptist who stressed faith and education. She taught her children that "things can get tough, things happen, but you continue to carry on and move on." Early in her childhood, around six years old, Faye's family moved to the Midwest, and she spent the remainder of her childhood in a tight-knit Black community. The city they moved to was where her father grew up. His family had been there for almost 150 years. It was a neighborhood in which "everybody covered for each other." She recalled how she was always protected as a child, although she didn't know it. Reflecting, she understands that she lived in a secure and safe neighborhood. A neighborhood she is still attached to. She still has warm memories whenever she enters her old community and stays connected with the friends she grew up with there.

Faye recalls how in her elementary school, there was a Black principal. She remembers her school being a loving space and her principal "expecting the best out of all his students; he expected more of his Black students." She remembers her teachers fondly. However, Faye also recognized that the American history they learned did not include people like her, even with a Black principal. She remarks how she learned very little about African American or African history." That is, she didn't learn about those things in school. Beautiful, wonderful memories are spending time with a woman in the neighborhood's basement. This woman would invite children into her home and teach them the counter-narratives – Black and indigenous history. She would show them artifacts and tell historical stories. Faye remarked:

Everybody knew it was a safe house. She had all these artifacts in her basement. And she told the story so that everybody looked out for each other; everybody supported each other.

Faye grew up in this supportive Black community which helps to explain her love for Blackness today. Faye states, "I knew I was Black, embraced my Blackness, loved my Blackness, loved my Black people." When Faye graduated from Highschool, she ventured off to

a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) back in the south. HBCUs are wholly embraced by Faye's family- another sign of the deep respect and love for Black people and culture. Faye's passion for HBCUs extends to her commitment to giving back. After retiring from elementary school teaching, her goal is to teach at an HBCU.

Faye's grandmother was another inspiring person in Faye's life. Her grandmother, a "prayerful woman," was one of the nicest people. Faye often believes and repeats that she is "living off her (my) grandmother's blessings." Her mother and grandmother "shaped who she (I) was." Another person who inspired Faye and helped her embrace her people, even more, was Muhammad Ali. Faye first heard of him when she was a young child. Because of childhood asthma, Faye spent a lot of time indoors, reading and watching Tv. She recalls the first time she saw Muhammad Ali on TV:

[We] watched the black and white TV. And I remember this man could come on TV. I mean Muhammad Ali; he is my hero. So, the fights would be on, and they would be talking about him. He was just braggadocios and competent and good-looking. And so, I was 'Like Wow, who is this? 'And he's a fighter and Black. And I'm like he is something else, you know, he's funny.

She went on to describe what he meant in her life:

He (Muhammad Ali) was just my inspiration. He was just a man who stood up for himself for his people. He loved Black people. He was asked all the time to his people. He loved just being Black...He was just someone who further shaped who I was being comfortable being a Black person, knowing that I can make a difference.

Faye remains a huge fan and admirer of Muhammad Ali to this day. His inspiration also drew her to understand the power and importance of autobiographies. She explains to her students, "Autobiographies are so important because studying someone's life can just set a spot. And that person can be part of your soul." For Faye, Ali was that person. "So, he really shaped who I am. And I think because he was so outspoken. And that's why I'm outspoken."

Faye also places a lot of value on authenticity. She explains that she doesn't put up facades, something else she gleaned from Muhammad Ali and how he took up space. Faye values her faith and religion as well. She still has "vivid memories of being baptized." Faye links spirituality with many aspects of Blackness, from the strength given to the enslaved ancestors that endured all the 'horrible, horrific things done to them' to the act of giving back to your community. Faye says:

So that's spirituality, you know, the spirit of giving back, knowing your roots, knowing who you are and where you came from, is just really important.

When Faye graduated college, she started working in corporate America. Until one day, a White woman stole her idea, pitched it to the boss, and got all the credit. On that day, she first faced this sort of racist discrimination. Interestingly, Faye did not turn to her mentors, mother, grandmother, or Muhammad Ali. When faced with this sort of aggression in the workplace, she called on her father. Faye's father was in the military and served as military police, entering the army as many Black men did in the late 50s. Her father had been in her life, although this is the first time she mentioned him in her story. Faye leaned on him when faced with the decision to quit her corporate job. Her father told her, "Child, they've been doing that all their lives. Don't just trust." When he asked her what she would do about it, Faye responded, "I think I am going into teaching." So, Faye went to school to get her master's in education and started her teaching career in 1993. She talks about her early years in education:

So, I taught in the rural south. And I taught for several years. And after five and a half years, I landed a job at the State Department of Education. And I did that for a while, and you talk about politics. Politics and white folk....

After leaving the state job, Faye got the job of her dreams in her lap. She got a job teaching at the same elementary school she had graduated from. At her proud elementary school,

she was able to soar to new heights, teaching with a style that could be considered culturally responsive.

I knew about culturally responsive teaching, I was doing it, I have the name didn't coin it didn't, you know, didn't label it, and every year has always been different. Even though I like to use that stuff for next year. And it's always creating new things. And just involved in the school community, just both feet. Just being on every committee and doing things and making it happen and having that voice; just using my voice and my experience and my wherewithal, my frame, and just putting it out there.

Faye's entry into teaching is similar to many other participants, starting in a high-paying job and landing in education. For Faye, her landing was smooth and clear of obstacles as she conquered teaching in her old school.

Fabulous Black Women: The Researcher's Reflections

The participants' life stories helped shape my understanding of the variety of factors that contribute to the identity development of Black women. Each participant shared their own unique experiences navigating through their childhoods and into adulthood. Many of them grew up in predominantly Black neighborhoods with strong and loving parents. As they spoke about their experiences, I couldn't help but be envious, almost jealous. At the same time, I felt joy for them and happy to hear about such loving communities and support. That was not my experience, growing up in a predominately white neighborhood, so their experiences delighted and fascinated me. Many of them started their work lives in different sectors other than education. I could relate to this part of their lives as well. I started majoring in education and then got re-directed along a different path. At one point, I majored in journalism, somewhat following in my father's path. At another point, I entered the airline business, then the hospitality industry, and finally retail. I soon realized that I was searching for something I would never find in these fields. Like Ala, I realized that my career path made me miserable and unfulfilled. I soon realized I needed to return to my original dream and become a teacher.

As I reflect on the narratives, it was clear that although the pathways these teachers traveled on their way to the classroom differed, it was evident that a passion was driving them with a commitment to Black children coupled with high expectations. The connection each of these teachers had with Black children was noticeable. I also found it interesting how none of the participants, especially those teaching for over 20 years, like Candace and Donna, ever considered leaving the profession. They indeed found their calling and never wavered.

Restorying Counter-Narratives of Black Female Elementary School Teachers and Their Identities: Thematic Analysis

I have found that Black teachers have the reputation, or stereotype, of being strong, dedicated, driven, and strict teachers. Looking back through history, I reflect on legendary Black teachers like Mary Mcleod Bethune (1875-1955), educators, and community activists, who demonstrated a passionate dedication to the education and advancement of Black people. I also reflect on my family roots and generations of Black teachers that sprouted from our family tree. My grandmother Manila Tilmon once taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Guthrie, Oklahoma. She had students from kindergarten to eighth grade, all in the same classroom learning and growing together. She was a kind and compassionate woman who led her classroom with loving sternness. Everyone knew never to touch her dress, especially with dirty hands, or raise their voice indoors. Manila Tilmon gained such popularity that white families would drive their children into the Black neighborhood to be tutored by her. I also reflect on my Aunt Thera Ramos. She was my grandmother's sister and the woman I was named after. She was one of the first Head start directors in the Chicago area. She also had an excellent way of teaching and leading students. Her preschool students modeled excellence when I visited her center, especially her presence. They knew her expectations, and they often rose to the occasion. Through the

thematic analysis phase of this research, I found myself remembering these women and many other historical Black teachers. It became evident that the six participants in this study shared many of the characteristics, attitudes, and teaching approaches that my grandmother, my great-aunt, and many other historical Black teachers possessed. The road they traveled to develop those traits, however, varied. The one constant that I found was a commitment to give back to the Black community and to do it with authenticity and passion.

After each of the narrative interviews was transcribed and organized, several cycles of coding occurred. The cycles were as follows:

1. Cycle 1: The first cycle involved highlighting keywords and phrases from the participant's stories. I relived each conversation as I read the transcripts repeatedly to gain an essence of the stories. On the second and third read, I used different color highlighters to color code keywords and phrases that stood out as important or significant to answering the research questions. This was a sort of inductive coding based on codes I established.

Figure 2 Coding Identifiers

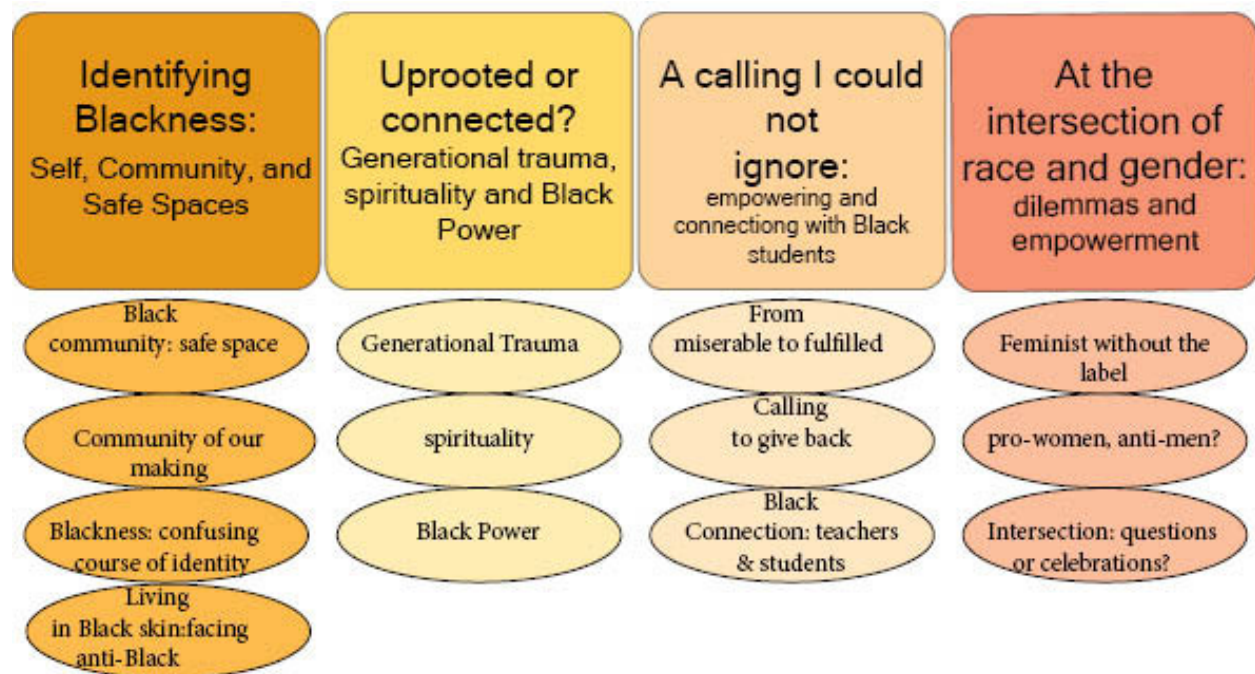


2. The next round of coding involved sorting the transcripts into tables and analyzing the data for emerging themes. Major sections of each transcript were copied into a three-column chart that sorted out the in vivo codes participants' own words", transcript, and emerging themes.
3. The final cycle of coding combined all the data from the participant's tables into several additional tables, sorted by emerging themes.

Resulting from the analysis of the interview transcripts and additional sources of data are the following four main themes: “Identifying Blackness: Self, Community, and Safe Spaces”; “Uprooted or Connected? Generational Trauma, Spirituality, and Black Power”; “A Calling I Could not Ignore: Empowering and Connecting with Black Students”; and “At the Intersection of Race and Gender: Dilemmas and Empowerment.”

Figure 4 below represents major themes and their corresponding subthemes.

Figure 3 Major Themes and Subthemes



Identifying Blackness: Self, Community, and Safe Spaces

For several participants, Blackness is loving, supportive, safe space. There is a recognition that being Black is beyond hardship and racism. It’s about community and love. At

the same time, many of the participants who did not grow up in Black neighborhoods found community in another way, a community of their making.

Black Community: Safe Space

The narrative of the Black community is many times cast as a poor neighborhood riddled with crime, violence, and lawlessness. The counter-narratives that live in the participants' stories paint a different picture—a picture filled with color, joy, and security. Candace, for instance, has always lived and worked in a predominantly Black and brown neighborhood. She teaches in the same city she was born and holds these experiences near her heart. She attends the same church she has attended since childhood as well. Her friends, her family, and her coworkers come in the safety and security of Blackness. Growing up with “old-fashioned” Black parents from the south, she recalls dinner at set times, strict rules, chores, and love and compassion. Faye also describes a beautiful childhood in a black neighborhood. She recalls growing up in a “loving home with a supportive, hardworking Mom.” During her interview, she referenced the “strength of a strong, loving household and a safe and nurturing all Black neighborhood.” Her memories include learning about Black history from a woman who lived in the neighborhood. Her home was a “safe house” where everyone felt comfortable sending their children. Even the elementary school that Faye attended is mentioned as a “loving space” with its Black principal. Faye remembers:

We thank God every day. I always talk about us growing up and how we grew up, and how fortunate we were to not just have everything that we needed.

She recalls a time when the Black community was strong and connected. Her childhood taught her that “knowing that things can get tough, things happen, but you continue to carry on and move on. “In her neighborhood, “everybody covered for each other.”

Community of Our Making

Not all the participants grew up in Black communities. Their experiences are drastically different. Many of these Black women have created their sense of community. Ella created a family because of all the trauma she went through in her childhood: The disconnect from her birth family and the questions about her race prompted Ella to create her bubble of protection. She also recognizes that if she was someplace else teaching in a different school district, for instance, she might not have the autonomy and the voice that she has today. Therefore, she created her safety net or community and family.

Beatrice has lived and worked for the most part in the same community, even leaving for a while with her husband in the Navy and then returning to where she felt safe, and so in many ways, she has a bubble or community around her. Her bubble protects her from many microaggressions or racist instances. Not until recently has she experienced these things that have invaded her Black safe neighborhood. So, in some ways, some of the participants have stayed in that bubble or returned to the bubble where they felt the safest, where they felt the most sense of community, and others created their community created their own safe space. This notion of community is one of the ways that many of these Black women navigate whiteness. They navigate whiteness together in the sense of community, avoiding the mess outside their community. One of the reasons why I took the position as an African-Centered Curriculum (ACC) teacher was because a friend and colleague said if you come here, you don't have to fight anymore. She said I wouldn't have to work so hard to convince people that racism exists or that the curriculum is wrong or harmful. I recognize, like Ella, that if I taught somewhere else or left my security bubble, things would be different.

Blackness: Confusing Course of Identity

Almost all the participants spoke about their warm and loving families. Although they talked about how they wanted for nothing, there was also a sense that the Black neighborhoods were safe but not necessarily equitable. Ana recalls the moment that her feelings of lacking came into play. It happened while she was working on a computer at a White woman's house that her mother was cleaning. The moment I realized that white individuals had things we didn't have. That's what makes me black." For Beatrice, Blackness represented a sub-par education. Her mother put her in a private school that was almost entirely white because she felt it meant a better education. Beatrice soon learned how to dance between the two worlds, code-switching as she went, juggling a concept of not being "too White" or "too Black."

Donna had the opposite experience with her skin color. Donna "wanted to be darker." She said, "I didn't feel like I was dark enough." She recalled a humorous story involving Crisco oil and lying in the backyard- to find that self-love and acceptance she longed for. Perhaps this difference from her experience of not feeling Black enough had to do with her experiences growing up in a bi-racial family. She recalls feeling, "I couldn't call it self-hate, but I couldn't call it self-identity. I would call it confusion. I wanted to be darker. I didn't feel like I was dark enough. I wasn't Black enough."

I share many of Donna's sentiments, a tremendous Black pride but the notion that I may not be Black enough. I also did not grow up surrounded by Blackness. Quite the opposite, I grew up in an area where we were one of the only Black families. Growing up in whiteness, I, too, looked for ways to be blacker. My efforts didn't include Crisco, but I did try laying in the sun or trying to get my straightened hair into braids. Donna's search for identity eventually morphed into a quest for a hidden identity- something about her that was special and unique. People

wouldn't automatically know by looking at her. I can relate to this sentiment as well, as I have struggled through my life looking for validation, secret or otherwise.

Ella also grew up in a racially diverse area, both in her family and neighborhood. She grew up with a “confusing course of identity” that doubted her skin color and worth. She did not grow up in the home that Beatrice described, loving and supportive. For Ella, Donna, and me, it was quite the opposite. The three of us, living in neighborhoods, or families, that were diverse, experienced struggling identities. Ella remarked how she felt:

I always felt othered. I never felt like I racially belonged, and that was really hard. I was never like physically Asian and definitely not Black enough...I was always on the fringes of racial groups.

The factors that influenced and shaped the participants' understanding of their blackness ranged from church to family, and from parents to role models. Ala was heavily influenced by the family's trip to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) every summer. This influence of family and education provided her a pathway to get the things she wanted, or at least thought she wanted. Her parents had high expectations that drove her success, although it took her years to understand that she didn't have to be perfect. She remembers:

I had a scholarship to an Art institute starting at seven years old. It was the moment that I did some art and brought it home and was so happy 'cause I got to express myself and my Mom pulled me to the side and said, 'they are giving you all this money. You can do better than this.

That was the moment for Ala when she included perfection and excellence in her definition of Black.

For Beatrice, identity is more about positionality or comfort level. Her Blackness is about where you fit in your placement in society. She said, “Feeling out of place even though I shouldn't.” Donna explained how she was influenced by the lack of contact with her Black mother and some negative contact with her white stepmother. The lack of contact with her

mother led her to a “chosen Mom,” her good friend’s mother. As Donna reflected on those events during our interview, she realized that those experiences gave her strength. She learned how to do what she had to do to survive, to make things work. She knew, somehow, that she needed help, just as she knew, somehow, at 14, that she needed her birth mother. Even at a young age, she knew she needed a support group, and she found them. These experiences and later experiences with her birth mother helped define her identity.

Faye had a lot of positive influences in her life. Because of these strong role models, she “embrace(s) her blackness” and loves her people. Faye contributed much of her strong identity to her strong mother and grandmother. These “giants all around me” were raised in the south and brought those southern roots. Faye considered her life “living off her grandmother’s blessing.” In addition, Faye always knew and embraced her Blackness. She states:

We had the jet magazine, the Ebony Magazine. And when Roots came on TV, we sat in front of the TV watching roots all the way through...I knew I was black, embraced my blackness, loved my blackness, loved my Black people.

In addition to her parents and community, Faye also attributes much of who she is today to Muhammad Ali. She described how he helped shape how comfortable she feels about being a Black person.

A powerful influence in Candace’s life was the hard work that her parents had to endure, both as children and adults. Candace’s mother dropped out of school in the tenth grade after missing a lot of school because of being called to the fields to work. She was pulled from school because she was a hard worker on their farm. Candace felt that her mom resented that fact. For Candace, she used it as a marker. She recognized that she didn’t want to work as hard as her parents- at least not physically. She always had this drive to go to college and succeed at work.

On the one hand, she wanted to guarantee herself a better life than they had, and on the other hand, she tried to take care of them. She stated:

I just had this drive to be able to take care of myself. I don't want to be dependent on anybody else, and I think my parents' lived experiences are what shaped me.

Living in This Black Skin: Facing Anti-Black

Most of the participants remember a time when they first encountered racism- or an understanding of what it means to be Black in America. As Faye put it, "to walk, to work, to shop, to whatever in this Black skin. It can be stressful." For Beatrice, an incident in her childhood provided that experience. Her major incident happened during the summer of 1974 at a summer camp. Beatrice was six years old. Her mother decided to send her to a summer camp that was predominantly, if not entirely, white. Her father had his reservations. However, her mother insisted that it would be alright. Her mother realized that she would probably be the only Black child there and still insisted that things work out. Even when they found out that the camp did not allow Beatrice to ride the bus there, her mother continued to press. Beatrice was driven to camp each day by a kind-hearted camp counselor.

Beatrice had one friend at the camp, a white girl about the same age. Almost every day at the camp, Beatrice was called the "n-word" (nigger) and many times by the same little boy. Young, six-year-old Beatrice got to where she couldn't take it anymore. While playing in the swimming pool with her one friend, the boy repeatedly called her the name. His words were hurtful, and she snapped. The next thing she knew, she was getting pulled from the pool and reprimanded for trying to drown the little boy. The boy, however, suffered no consequences for his hateful and hurtful name-calling. To make the situation worse, later that day, her friend handed Beatrice some white paint during arts and crafts. She then suggested, "What if we paint you? And you can be white like us?" Beatrice knew enough to disagree with this plan. She

thought, “I’m just gonna look like a black kid with white paint on my face.” Although her friend was trying to find a way to make Beatrice fit in, her words also stung. It was as simple as changing her skin color, but that was not only impossible but unnecessary in Beatrice’s eyes. Why should she feel uncomfortable in this space? She loved her skin color and struggled with the pain of understanding this explicit racism. That was Beatrice’s last day at the camp and her first day with understanding racism.

Candace was in elementary school when the first glimpse of anti-Black sentiment hit her life. She describes the event as follows:

One day I could see a glow in the picture window at home. We opened the curtains to peek out to look, and someone had attached a cross to our hedges and set it on fire. During that period in this area, they were having problems with the Klu Klux Klan.... I have a vivid memory of it, and it was really the first time I really thought about it- being Black-white differences- things of that nature ‘cause you know you’re (a) sweet little innocent kid. Just playing and having fun.

As Candace told her story, I couldn’t help but relate to her experiences. I grew up just down the road from her, only about a 25-minute drive, but in different circumstances. Candace and I experienced this depth of hatred when we were around nine years old. That was when my brothers and I were dealing with constant racism and microaggressions. This was about the same time I experienced my first anti-black event and about the same time; I also realized this black-white thing that neither of us had the vocabulary to explain. I was horrified to hear about the burning cross, however. I experienced daily taunting by students and invisibility by teachers. I had never experienced the terror of a burning cross.

Ella experienced anti-blackness from herself, not necessarily those around her. She explained:

A friend once told me, “When you walk through the world, people think you are a Black woman.” That’s something that I used to get really mad about like a kid from

kindergarten through 8th grade. I would be like, I'm not black. That was me being anti-black and also not understanding my racial identity.

Embracing her skin color helped her see herself differently and accept herself.

Donna recounted some of her anti-Black events with a sense of “you will never guess what I am thinking.” She likes challenging the expectations that racist people have of her. For instance, she commented on how at times when people try to silence her or make her feel invisible, she speaks louder and stands out more. Also, she feels like when people are triggering her to be hyper-visible, she shrinks.

When she visited a large southern city, Faye described one of her earliest memories with Anti-Blackness. She was waiting for a ride while standing across the street from a shopping mall. A couple of White boys in a pick-up truck slowly drove past her. They called her a nigger and kept on moving. She was distraught but didn't let the situation go without using some profanity against them. She thought about it later and realized that she wasn't genuinely thinking through the problem. She never considered what would happen if they turned around. Her only thought was, “They are not gonna get away with that.”

All these experiences described in this central theme contribute to the participants' understanding of Blackness. They speak to the question of how these women navigate through their experiences. The community was a significant sub-theme as the participants explained how they either treasured their Black neighborhood or created their own safe and secure area. In both cases, their communities gave them their strength. For some, the journey into a Black self-identity was confusing; for others, it was solid and never wavering. In either case, the women I spoke with during this research were firm in their Black self-love, regardless of how they reached that point. Another element of navigation came from living through anti-Blackness. Most of the participants could recall a specific moment when they first experienced anti-Black

sentiments; whether those feelings were projected by others or carried by themselves, most participants had a story to tell.

Uprooted or connected? Generational Trauma, Spirituality, and Black Power

I wondered in my research whether my participants had a connection to the African continent, how they experienced generational trauma, and what some of their coping mechanisms were.

Generational Trauma: The Load We Carry

The phenomena of generational trauma with the participants took many shapes and forms. Some didn't recognize it and couldn't describe it. Some felt that the trauma of our ancestors was our motivation to succeed today. And others felt like generational trauma is a part of the Black experience, and in some ways, Black people are still enslaved in their minds. Ala views generational trauma as pinned-up anger that peaks out when you least expect it, and it's about carrying things. She explained:

It's about the anger that you have in front of you. Might not be about that person in front of you. It might be what you've learned from the person behind you, which was dealing with the one behind them. That's the generations of, particularly for black women, of carrying things, you know.

Ala spoke about her mother's trauma that happened when she was young and cost her a college degree. It was a trauma that her mother carried with her the rest of her life, affecting how she raised her children to be successful. Ala also spoke about the trauma that may lay beneath her student's families, understanding that we all carry things that are not always visible- the trauma of living Black in America, The trauma of past horrors. Ala explained:

The horrors of the past still show generation by generation. It was not erased by a Black president. It was not erased with I don't know how long the list is. We still have things that we're carrying.

Candace also spoke to the notions of the burdens of trauma we carry. She talked about her parents' sacrifices and the lack of generational wealth. Candace watched her parents and worked hard to create a different life version for herself:

I think about my parents didn't get to experience a lot of things that I do, like with my mom, I traveled the world. Mama didn't get that. Daddy got it, but he was fighting the white people wars. I also think we still suffer as far as generational wealth is concerned. (Again), I think about my parents and ask, "how did they take care of five kids on this little."

Candace also observed how her mother carried heavy burdens and anger from childhood. Her mother, who left school in the 10th grade, brought her anger that stemmed from being asked to work in the fields so often as a child. She finally got to the 10th grade and realized that she didn't know anything. She dropped out and never looked back. Candace's father also left school at a young age to work to help the family. His father had died when he was six. Both Candace's parents worked hard, however. Those experiences fueled Candace in her work life:

My dad taught himself how to work on cars. He was a mechanic, but you know back then, you didn't have no license for it like you do today, and I remember his mechanic books. I used to read them to him when he was trying to figure out how to do something. It was one of my goals to become a teacher and be able to teach Daddy how to read, but he died when I was 19 years old.

Donna also felt a similar obligation to succeed because of her parents' sacrifices and generations before her. She always felt responsible for being "great" because of what generations before her went through. Donna's father was part of that driving force. He would, for instance, insist that she and her brothers voted at any election, no matter how big or small. He explained that so many people had fought and died for the right to vote that they were obligated to do so. Donna spoke more about that obligation:

I feel obligated. So, if I if anything after that trauma, and I'm trying to make it great. In reverse, versus the trauma that way? Yeah. I have ambition that I must know.

Faye recognized that generational trauma is just a part of the Black experience. If not for her ancestors' strength, tenacity, and perseverance, she realized that she and others wouldn't be here.

Faye noted:

Just being black and walking Black. You're traumatized because it doesn't have to be an afflicted kind of thing. It can just mean your black skin is allowing someone else, an ignorant person, to act the way they do. Generational trauma is part of who we are, how we deal with it, how we handle it.

Faye also recognized that much of the trauma extends to our way of thinking and that many Black people are not enslaved but instead incarcerated in their thinking and the way they try to assimilate into White society. Therefore, the participants felt that trauma is both generational and current. The trauma is relived through the burdens our parents carry and the impact on our own lives as we navigate through as Black women. It harms us and fuels us at the same time.

Spirituality

As I listened to my participants talk about their spirituality, the conversation went to discussions of the church. Their descriptions of the Church left me wondering if the Black Church was about spirituality or familiarity? Were the participants attending church because of their devotion to the principles of Christianity, devotion to a higher power, or for a different reason, like community or fellowship?

I wonder about the familiarity of the Church and if that is what the draw is for some Black women. Several of the participants, Candace, and Beatrice, are attending the same church today as they attended as a child. They shared about the comfort and familiarity they felt there. Candace recalled how "Mama (would) get us dressed, and you went (to church) whether you wanted to or not." For Candace, the church was where she took her challenges, questions, and frustrations. At Church, she found the people who knew her best and could give her the best

advice. She explained: “I have been in this church my whole life. I feel comfort there, but I feel like I am forever learning.”

Since she was age ten, Beatrice has also attended the same church and explained how she saw something in her Baptist Church. Before that, her family attended an African Methodist Church. Although Beatrice has fond memories of her early church experience, she noticed that some of her Black friends and her father’s side of the family attended a Baptist church. After convincing her parents to let her attend, she felt a new experience at the Baptist church:

Baptist was a little bit more upbeat and clap, and you know, enjoyment to a kid more a little more enjoyment. Choirs, children, choirs, a few more programs and things like that.

Beatrice mentioned how her church was where she found her Black friends and her family. For her church was her “Black experience.” The joy she felt in the Baptist church led her parents to join her.

I decided to do something that my parents didn't really instruct me to do. I saw something on my own, and my mother, she followed me, and she converted, and she's Baptist.

Donna’s early church experiences involved a place for refuge and escape. Her church was something that she felt belonged to her and only to her. It was her escape from the chaos and alienation she felt in her family. She remembered:

I used to love to go to church on Sundays. That would be my out because I was in a children's choir, so I had other kids. My stepmom. I remember that when I would get in trouble. That would be my punishment. You can't go to church this Sunday because she knew that hurt worse than anything. That was the one thing (that would hurt me) because she knew I loved (church) and to get out of the house. Because Sunday was football. My brothers’ games come at nine in the morning. And they (stepmom) would go shopping or whatever, come back and do the girl thing. And I will be at church. I had some identity because I was part of the children's choir. I was in something that was mine.

Donna found her career at church, understanding at a young age that her church was filled with successful Black people that could help her. Currently, Donna regularly attends a small intimate church. She explains:

I am both religious and spiritual. You almost have to be spiritual and religious at my church because we're only like a handful of people. It's so small, you almost have to be spiritual.

Faye is another participant who grew up going to church and continues to attend every Sunday.

She spoke about her early experiences in church:

I still have vivid memories of me being baptized in (one of) those old churches, they had the little opening. The pulpit right in front of and that's where they dip you down, and you get baptized and, and so I got baptized at an early age at my grandmother's church. And we were there every Sunday. We could not do most things on Sundays. The only thing that we could do was eat, watch TV, and talk to each other, sit on a porch, or whatever. We couldn't wash clothes. We couldn't iron clothes. We couldn't do anything. It was a day for the Lord, but it was also a day for us to just gather, think you know, for black folks.

For Faye, church was about religious practice, but it was also about fellowship. It was “time to reflect and build.” In addition, Sundays in Faye’s childhood were a day to tap into Black power.

Part of the reflection piece reflected on the past and the sacrifices our ancestors made. She spoke:

You think about slavery and all the horrific things that they did to our people, and but we're still here. You see what I'm saying, we still walk and livin' and breath'n and, doing all those things, because had they given up here, we wouldn't be existing. Had they decided to okay, you know what, this slavery is just too much, but they saw, you know, a better life, not for them, possibly life, but for the other ones to come. And we're still, and we're so amazing too when you think about during that home survival.

According to Faye, Sundays or church days were also a time for “knowing your roots, knowing who you are and where you come from, is just really important.” It was about connecting with the Black community and tapping into the reservoir of Black power. Church represents a place to love your Blackness and to be Pro black. It's a place to thank God:

I thank God I have the strength and the tenacity, and the perseverance of our forefathers, our ancestors. For surviving the most horrific and atrocious and egregious act. We're not enslaved, but we are incarcerated, sometimes in our thinking and the way that we've assimilated ourselves into White society.

Not all the participants connected to a church; for some, it was more a spiritual understanding. Ala, for example, started attending a Black Christian Church in her 20s. Even though her grandfather on her father's side was a pastor, Ala's parents never brought her and her siblings to church, citing bad experiences. However, Ala was always curious and wanted to see what it was all about. Ala initially thought that the Black Church would provide a powerful metaphysical change. She was let down when her life didn't change as promised by her version of religion or faith. She recalled:

I got baptized in my 20s 'cause I thought the sky was gonna open and someone was going to start talking to me. And when it didn't happen, I gave it up. but I am a very spiritual person. I'm not a religious person, and I do truly believe that we are all connected. There's a universal force that connects us.

After leaving the church, Ala went on to study Buddhism and Hinduism and even dabbled in yoga and Thai 'chai, all to discover this faith that everyone talked about. The spirituality element stayed with her. She spoke about her cultural awareness of a higher power:

I have to give credit to my family on my mom's side, and I think a lot of African Americans, particularly older ones, have that thing of like you know, Auntie such and such. She had those visions, and like all but you know I have had those experiences as well. We are all connected.

I think about my own story and how I also wanted this transformative experience to come from church. I was envious of people who said that they "got the Holy Ghost," and I felt like maybe I don't believe; perhaps I don't have whatever it takes; maybe I don't have true spirituality. I also wondered- am I just not Black enough? I also tried different faiths, ideas, and rituals like Ala. I landed on what I believe or what I've researched about the indigenous African

people and what they thought. I have asked myself this question, what would I think if my ancestors were not enslaved? Also, I wondered, “what if I didn’t have the ingrained experience of Christianity that my parents attempted to instill?”

Religion and spirituality play different roles in the lives and identities of the participants. For some, Church is a place of worship and bible study; for some, Church, is a place of familiarity and fellowship; and for some, Church is a haven and refuge, for many spiritual and religious practices, are woven into their identity, their memories, and their present experiences. They provide an escape as well as comfort. Other participants, like me, struggled with understanding the religious part of the Church but recognized the existence of a higher power. These practices also provide a sense of Black pride and self-identification.

A Calling I Couldn’t Ignore: Empowering and Connecting with Black Students

All the participants indicated that their desire to teach stemmed from a calling of some sort. For some, the calling was in response to wanting a more purposeful life after gaining success in other industries left them void of purpose. For some, the calling was in response to an appeal to empower or give back to the communities that served them well. And for still others, the calling was in response to aspiring connection with young Black people in a meaningful and authentic way. Whether each participant made a conscious choice or stumbled into the education field by accident, they all discovered their passion and their life mission.

From Miserable to Fulfilled

All but one of the participants started their professional lives doing something other than education. Many of them didn’t receive a bachelor’s degree in education, opting for careers in business or finance and returning to school for teaching certification later. Their stories mirror

mine in several ways as I started my work life in customer service, hospitality, and retail. For example, Candace majored in business when she first went to college. She tells the story:

I'm going into business because I'm gonna make a lot of money. But my God, I hated it every moment that I tried it, and so I decided I was just going to go back and get my teaching certification, and I loved everything about teaching.

Ala said, "I was miserable, and watching people with lots of money destroy themselves."

In addition, Ella had no intention of becoming a teacher either. She explained how she "slid into teaching":

I kind of always said I didn't like kids, and I didn't want to work with them. But no matter what I did, I was always around them, and I worked really well with them. So then, in the beginning of my career, like after college, I started working at this clinic. This for-profit reading clinic where we taught kids and adults alike how to read how to understand language. So that was the science of reading and things like that. And after working there for five years and kind of being disgusted with this for-profit model that only catered to the 1%. I was like, this is not me - who I am as a person. So, I was like, let me go back to school and put this experience to work. And so, from there, I went back to grad school. I went to grad school, and I got my teaching degree, and so that's kind of how I slid into teaching.

Ella later realized that working with kids with disabilities was her wheelhouse and decided that this was her calling for now beyond classroom teaching.

In my case, I always wanted to be a teacher. However, as I headed off to college, I was encouraged to do something more. Since more doors were opening for Black women, I was convinced that I should be seeking something more. I should be looking for money especially coming from a family of people who love money and love the idea of money. So, I struggled with myself. I thought maybe I shouldn't be a teacher. However, I also experienced what Candice experienced. Eventually, I found myself with a renewed calling that I could no longer ignore.

Faye is another example. After a White girl in her corporate job took her idea and took credit for the concept, Faye called her dad, crying and upset. Her dad responded:

Child, they've been doing that all their lives... So, what are you going to do about it? Her response "I went into business thinking I was gonna make all this money and be a shaker, and that didn't happen. I always wanted to be a teacher. I think I'm going back to school."

Donna also spoke about how entering teaching was not her initial choice:

Becoming a teacher was by accident. I did not go to school to become a teacher. I was a language major. I was a French and Spanish major. I wanted to become an international spy. I was that kid that read Harriet the Spy in fourth grade, and I decided I want to be a spy.

Fast forward to graduation:

I remember not being able to find a job upon graduating, and I remember getting sad because, in school, they teach you – go to college, you get a degree, and life is whatever the hell you want. All the doors are open. I remember not having one door open.

After reaching out to her choir members, she landed herself a job in a Christian Charter school.

Two years later, she decided to go to school and get her master's degree in education. After finishing her master's and teaching in Puerto Rico for a few years, Donna realized:

I can see myself doing this. I like teaching kids. I like mind molding and thought-provoking stuff. I saw my career as a teacher.

Donna taught in a predominantly Black school district, the same district that she has taught in for over 32 years. It was a calling she couldn't and wouldn't ignore.

Calling to Give Back

For some, like Faye, teaching is a way to give back to the community that supported her and loved them her whole life. Ala also remarked how she got into teaching because "she did not feel like she was contributing in the way she wanted to when I (she) was in the business world. Donna also had this love for language over just about all other things until she began teaching, and she felt a tug at her heartstrings for Black kids. Even though she loved language, she had to put it on the shelf until she felt like she had done what she needed to do.

Candace started teaching in her hometown and never left. She taught there for more than 30 years up until her retirement. For her, it was all about giving back to the community she loved:

I really didn't want to be in an all-white district or where you only have one or two Black or brown kids...I really wanted to stay where I started and finished my work there. And I guess that was God's perfect plan or me, 'cause he didn't allow me to go.

Faye would probably relate to Candace's sentiment towards her school district. She is currently teaching in the neighborhood where she grew up and lives today. She said, "I did not want to put all of me in a community that I don't live in." Reaching back is also essential to Beatrice. She said, "I always want to reach back; that's why I'm in the predominantly Black district."

For Ala, it's about showing up and accepting the responsibility of being a Black teacher in the community:

I show up for a lot of different things. I have a role in my community as a Black person as well as an educator, and I also have an experience and a perspective that's different than most educators that we have. Most educators are not Black. So, I know that if I don't, then who will. Who will show up?

All the participants spoke to elements of giving back and making a difference in the lives of young Black people. It was one of the many commonalities between all participants.

The Black Connection: Black Teachers, Black Students

Most of the participants set high expectations for their Black students, understanding their brilliance on the one hand and the reality of racism. Faye explained, "I'm harder on them because I expect more out of them because the society will expect more out of them." Speaking from her own experiences, she reflects on a part of herself to her students.

When I look at them, I see myself, I don't think kids see their future. Maybe they do. But I know what obstacles they're going to have because of their blackness. Yeah, like skin. So, it's always been a sense of urgency.

Like all the participants, Faye also feels that her Blackness or skin color connects her to students.

Her Black experience is the frame that she teaches under. She noted:

I'm Black, and so my blackness comes out. The language, my southern training, comes out sometimes. And it's just; it's there. When I speak of my experience, I am talking about my Black experience. When I teach, I teach my own frame; that's the only frame I know.

As with all the participants, Ala views the importance of Black students having Black teachers.

Anyone should be able to look and identify with the people of authority around them... When I look back at segregation, which was horrible, but I look back at the fact that they had somebody in their community who looked like them and that had to show pride.

She went on to say:

I honor the fact that there's children who look at me in a different way, and I say that role itself changes depending on their perspective and I'm o.k with that...when I taught first-grade children of color would say things like "you look like my grandma." I know I have a role in that, and I really love that.

This idea of children seeing themselves in their teachers resonated with Candace as well:

I really believe that they gotta have somebody that they can see, successful that is. That has made it personal. Somebody that truly cares about them 'cause you know like I tell some of these White teachers every one of our students ain't poor.

Candace speaks about white teachers and how they don't have that same level of connection:

Please don't come in with these preconceived notions cause kids pick up on it, and they will eat you alive. You're hiring these teachers that can't relate to our students. They cannot relate at all, and they're not making any type of connection with them... I watch some of the younger white teachers. Yeah, they're not really teaching our kids anything, and they think that's what the kids want, but the kids really want discipline, and they want to learn. They want somebody to care enough about them as Black and brown children and who can take the lead and do it. ...I was born in that community myself. I know a lot of these families... we show pure love, and they can feel it.

Ella sees the Black teacher connection as an exercise in bringing your true self to the classroom:

It's about authenticity; I just feel like I show up as I am.... it's just building relationships with kids, just showing up as you are unapologetically and loving them for who they are unapologetic.

Ella also sees her connection with Black students as a type of empathy that someone who hasn't been othered can't relate to.

Definitely, my racial identity because I've been othered, and I feel like it really helps me connect with kids. I mean, I work with predominantly kids with disability, so they're already othered, and then we compound race on it, and the way I navigate life is I'm very open and accepting and just of everyone in every type of race, gender identity. It's just like our friend used the phrase "lead with love" like ten years ago or whatever, and that's what I always think about is like leading with love like I don't care how you show up as long as you showed up. You know I'm going to love you no matter what, and I'm going to take care of you. If you've never been othered, you don't have to think about what it was like to have that little tick mark on your heart, of what it felt like to navigate the world at that time.

Ala also agrees that authenticity is what makes all the difference—for her, speaking out more like a gay teacher as well as a Black teacher. She's all about being authentic. "I feel like my authenticity helped them (students) feel comfortable when they were with me." I would agree with Ala and the other participants. I have found that the more I understand who I am, and the more I present myself to students in an authentic way, the stronger my connections with them.

For the participants in this study, there was and continues to be a strong pull to teach. This calling includes the desire to give back to their communities and inspire Black children to live up to their full potential. They all agreed that setting high expectations and showing loving but firm discipline was vital. A consensus was that Black children need authentic teachers who prepare them for life's harsh realities outside of the school building.

At the Intersection of Race and Gender: Dilemmas and Empowerment

Black women sit in a unique position between race and gender. For some participants, this presents some unique difficulties as they question or embrace feminism and wrestle with the concept of Blackness and Womanhood. There is also a recognition of the strength of that position, empowerment to success advantage that is gained from that intersection.

A Feminist without Labels

Ella said it best when she said feminism means different things to different people. She spoke about a former friend who judged and criticized her for not being the kind of feminist that she thought she should be. Ella felt “there’s no way to define what a feminist looks like.” For Ella, feminism is about advocacy- showing up and supporting women:

Women who were born a traditional woman and trans women.” She believes “in supporting women and when they’re like being abused and stuff like that. All of those things come with being a woman or someone who identifies as a woman. I support those things.

In my definition of a feminist, Ella is probably one of the most suitable to the definition of all the participants. I also felt that way when talking with Donna. Donna said that she was not a feminist, although people might mistake her for one. Donna described herself as a proud member of her family, believing in the strength and excellence of her family but not a feminist. However, I continued to think she was a great example of a feminist. She described her childhood and how her father raised her and her brothers the same way. She did not describe her father as a chauvinist. He never made her feel less capable because she was a girl. She was, however, raised to be a proud Wilson (pseudonym).

Faye, who repeatedly mentioned that she does not like labels, felt like feminism is a white thing for white people, and it doesn’t serve Black women. I imagine that fact may portray her as a Black feminist, however. As Faye and I talked, it became apparent that Faye does not “do well with labels,” She stated:

I’m just a woman, a proud black woman, a brown educated Black woman, who centers herself in what’s right and what’s just, loves her blackness, her black skin, her black people, her black history.

In addition, Faye mentioned that she doesn't like the trend of adding your pronouns after every greeting. For her, it is just one more thing to put people in a box. "When all these little things come up, I don't get on the boat. I just don't jump on the bus." Assigning a pronoun to your identity statement seems unnecessary and invasive to Faye:

Who I am is who I am. I don't have to share that with you.... It's just another thing to label people. I know who I am. I'm straight. I'm headstrong. I don't have to broadcast that. And because I don't define it, and it makes you uneasy. This is where I am, so you know, live with it.

Beatrice is another example of someone I would consider a feminist without her assigning herself the label. She stated, "you can say I'm a feminist because there's so many gray areas now, so I'm just calling myself "into understanding what inclusion is." She continued, "I'm afraid if I go this way, I'm too extreme, so I just mean – "I'm a teacher."

Pro-Women, Anti-Men

Candace was also negative about being a feminist, even though she thought others would disagree about her being a feminist. She explained how she grew up around brothers and had several sons so that she couldn't call herself a feminist. It seemed that she was equating feminism with anti-men, and she is not that. She recalled how her preference was always to interact with the boys growing up. So much so that her mother was called up to the school because they were concerned about her lack of female friends.

Donna laughed about the concepts as well, explaining that she was raised by her dad and her two brothers. She explained:

So, because I was raised with my dad and two brothers, my dad shopped in one department. He shopped for jeans and T-shirts. So, I wore jeans and T-shirts like my brothers, but I wasn't a tomboy, but I dressed like one. I climb(ed) trees with my brothers. I had these football cards. I had more football cards than my brothers. So, I was like this tomboy, but I really wasn't. My dad made me tough. So, in some ways, I feel like he thought he had three boys. And he raised me as such. He gave me the feeling of I can

do any and absolutely anything I want, but not so much as a feminist, but more as a Wilson (pseudonym).

As with most of the participants, both women had different perspectives about feminism, yet in many ways, I found them to be champions for Black women and true to what I think a feminist is.

Questioning or Celebrating the Intersection?

Ala also has a hard time with binary labels like male and female. She is also one of two participants that sees herself as a feminist. She is also one of two participants part of the LGBTQ community. She explained that the binary concept of male superiority doesn't make sense. What is it about the biology that makes them need to separate into categories?" She spoke about how the media and Award shows separate the best actor category from the best actress category as if there is something different about acting based on gender. She also mentioned playing chess and how that has typically been seen as a male activity:

Body mass is going to allow them(men) to do things differently but pushing a piece across a board or standing in front of a camera. Those things don't have logic to me.

In Ala's case, she puts a lot of importance on being a woman or identifying as one, even more so than being Black. "I think women first because there's a choice in identity in regard to gender that I don't think come with color" For Ala, she recognized that for her- her body, her identity, and her skin tone, work for her.

Beatrice considers the intersection of race and gender as an empowering double threat. She remarked how the current racial climate is opening more doors for Black women (double threat) and even more for educated Black women (triple threat):

Now I guess I can call myself a triple threat because I'm highly educated like you will be very soon, right? So educated black and female, right? But now it's more of a positive thing because so many doors are now being open to us, so that's how I view myself now.

This question of race and gender and where the importance lies in each participant's eyes has interesting components. On the one hand, many of the participants struggled with the concept of highlighting their gender first or claiming feminist pro-woman notions. Part of this is due to the misconception that being pro-woman makes you automatically anti-men. The participants' proximity and love for the men in their lives clouded their view of the power of the woman side of them. However, most of the participants did see the power behind the intersection, and it was easier for them to see and embrace their gender when they attached race to it.

Summary of the Findings

The main research question that this study hoped to uncover was the counter-narratives of identity shared by the participants. The findings provide some meaningful and interesting trends in unraveling the lives and experiences of Black women teachers. Examining how these teachers navigate their lives revealed a strong sense of community, the glue that connects them. This community varied between the solid black community they continually inhabited or the equally strong community of their making. Community, as it turns out, is not just a neighborhood. Community is more than even just people. The community provides the participants with a soft place to land after navigating through their day, in and out of the harsh White Supremacist Culture (WSC).

The navigation piece includes the course of identity that I would summarize as Living while Black. Living while Black can be clear and solid for some and confusing for others. Some travel through their lives with a secure sense of who they are, and others question if they are Black enough. Where the participants landed in the living while Black spectrum, they all agreed on a couple of things- one of which is the existence and presence of trauma, generational and current. For most, this trauma condition is simply a reality for living while Black. What is

different is how participants handled that reality. For most, it was tapping into their spirituality, whether from church or a metaphysical sense of the universe and human connections. For some, it was a relishing in the memory and the experiences of Black excellence. The focus was more on generational joy than generational trauma for them.

The participants also provided valuable data on how they connected with Black students. The Black student-to-Black teacher connection is wrapped up in community, expectations, and sacrifice. The participants' experiences exposed the power of their relationship with Black students, empathy and excellence for Black students, and the ability to step up when no one else will. There was a sense of giving back to their communities, a sense of purpose, commitment, and making a difference. These Black teachers illustrated how they brought the energy and thought process that black kids are brilliant. Faye discussed generational trauma as a testament to Black brilliance. She talked about how Black people have survived through all of it. And this is testament or proof that Black people are a solid and capable race because they wouldn't be here otherwise. These teachers' stories helped provide the data needed to answer the research question for how these teachers connected and supported their Black students.

Finally, the participant's stories helped to understand the intersectionality of race and gender, revealing how each participant grappled with the concept of feminism, saw their place in the world, handled anti-men sentiments, and questioned or celebrated their double or triple threat. Some participants related strongly to their blackness over all other aspects of their identity. Others emphasized their womanhood over all else, and others still viewed the concept of Black women as being interchangeable. For all the participants, the triple threat or three-point intersectionality included Blackness, Female, and educated. All the participants hold at least a master's degree and a couple with doctorate degrees. This additional layer of identity, education,

played a significant role in how many participants saw themselves and how they navigated through the WSC world.

Esa ne bee di ebu to, mo ne n pin kakpa ne ku bee dul

He who sleeps in a room learns where it leaks (Those closest to the problem are the ones to provide solutions)

CHAPTER FIVE:

Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions

Before the Brown Versus Board of Education of Topeka (1954) case erased segregation based on race from schools in America, Black teachers taught Black students. Schooling was vastly different for these students when they entered their newly integrated schools. Many of their Black teachers, if any at all, did not follow them to their new schools. History bears this out, as 11 years after the decision, over 38,000 Black teachers and administrators were fired (*Sixty Years After Brown V. Board, Black Teachers Are Disappearing—Again*, 2014). The loss of Black teachers also presented the loss of the cultural and empowering education many of these teachers provided. Many Black students, entered white spaces where white ideas and white supremacist culture, practices, and values were taught and reinforced. Years later, as recent as the 2017-2018 school year, only 7 percent of all teachers were Black and 76 percent of those teachers were women (Tate & Lewis, 2022) This shows that many Black women are not returning to the teaching profession, decades after Brown versus Board.

Many of the Black women that teach in America today choose to teach in neighborhoods where there are Black students and where they can have the most impact. About 75 percent of the Black teachers in America teach in schools with a high percentage of Black students. Only 3 percent of Black teachers teach in a school with zero to 25 percent Black students (Tate & Lewis, 2022). As this study revealed, many of these teachers, influenced by their own school experiences and Black identity, have passed over higher-paying careers, and responded to the

call to teach. The data in this study also shows that many of those Black teachers have advanced degrees and are considered highly qualified, just as many of the predecessors, pre-Brown versus Board, were. In the case of the participants in this study, that calling and drive to make a difference in their communities has never truly wavered. This data is contrary to the national data that shows that Black teachers are more than twice as likely to leave their jobs (Carr, 2022).

Revisiting the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Black Female Elementary teachers as they navigate through whiteness. The focus of those experiences is on how these women came to understand their identity as Black women and as educators of Black children. In addition, exploring the intersection of race and gender and its role in identity and self-awareness. The purpose included an attempt to understand how spiritual, social, traumatic, and life experiences motivate and influence the actions of Black women and thereby give meaning and understanding to the Black experience.

Through a process of coding, recoding, and analysis, this study revealed four major themes and 13 subthemes that highlight the lived experiences of the six participants. The themes that were identified were “Identifying Blackness: self, community, and safe spaces”; “Uprooted or connected: Generational trauma, spirituality, and Black power”; “A Calling I couldn’t ignore; empowering and connecting with Black students; and “At the intersection of race and gender: dilemmas and empowerment.”

The narrative research involved lengthy discussions with the six participants as well as elements of my own personal story. These stories provided the rich and valuable data needed to address the research questions and unravel the lived experiences of these amazing individuals. The transcripts recorded from these discussions were examined, coded, and analyzed under the

lens of critical race, Black feminism, intersectionality, and transcendental theories. These theories provided the lens under which the data was examined. The paradigm under which this research was conducted was interpretive as I sought to understand and interpret how the participants engaged in meaning-making in both their daily lives and in their teaching careers. A critical paradigm was also utilized as I re-storied the participants' lives, identifying and critiquing the power dynamics and systems under which the participants navigated through. This study attempted to demonstrate the link between identity and academic success, addressing the individual experiences of Black teachers in elementary schools as they navigate through their lives and careers. Although there has been some research on the effect of Black teachers on Black students, there has been insufficient research into the connections between the lives of Black teachers outside of school and the education they provide to students inside the school. The insights derived from this study can further inform how the different layers of an individual intersect with the teaching profession. These insights could contribute to the recruitment and retention of Black teachers and show the importance of those endeavors on the academic success of Black students. One could also see how developing a strong authentic self-identity benefits students.

This study used qualitative narrative research to get to the heart of the matter. Narrative research allows for the full story to be told. Black women are often the last to be heard and take the most risk in telling their stories. Telling their stories in a conversational way allowed for their point of view to be seen and heard, unraveling the lived experiences. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) note how “through conversations, we get to know other people, learn about their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and the world they live in” (p. xvii). This was the case in this study as the participants each opened their lives for analysis. They spoke about their childhoods, their

dreams, their careers, and their families. Each participant shared parts of themselves that provided the rich data needed to address the research questions. They also allowed me to develop new friendships and bonds as our back-and-forth conversations took on more of a “sistah-friend” sharing, venting, and learning.

Discussion of the Findings

One of the discoveries that revealed itself in the data was the commitment to teaching that the participants displayed. All are devoted and dedicated to the education of Black students and the elevation of Black people in their communities and beyond. Although the participants were at different levels of their identity journey, they share a common thread in terms of responding to the powerful calling to give back and uplift. Each in their own way they provide advocacy and activism. Their stories provide the counter-narrative to how individual lived experiences, such as those of the participants of this study, can challenge and handle othering, form their own notion of Black skin love, and develop their own unique Black identity.

Counter-Narrative of Identity

The common narrative of Black women is based on a set of stereotypes that were developed specifically to dehumanize Black women. The counter-narratives presented in this study reveal the contradiction. Although none of the participants shared in my exploration of African ancestral narratives of women as part of my identity journey, many of their stories included a thread of reverence and honor to the Black women in their lives and Black people in general. For the participants, research and knowledge of African Ancestry did not ring true for them. As Ala stated in our conversation, “I wanted to go to all these places, but Africa was not calling me.” Beatrice wondered if knowing more about what African tribe her ancestors came

from would make any difference in her life or identity. Threads of Ancestral greatness, however, did peak through their stories and find themselves in different parts of their lives and identities.

The participants recognized the history and legacy of the Diaspora. Many of the participants, for instance, were connected to their ancestry in America. Candace, for instance understood her family's connection to slavery and the hard work that her parents had to put in to survive and take care of their children. Ala relates to her connection to Tuskegee University and the Geechee population in South Carolina. Faye recognized the incredible survival and sacrifice that her ancestors in slavery provided. She remarked:

We're still here. We still walk and live and breathe and all doing all those things because had they given up here, we wouldn't be existing-had they decided to (say) "okay, you know what, this slavery is just too much." But they saw a better life, not for them but for the other ones to come. And we're still here and we're so amazing too, when you think about (what happened) during that time of survival.

Most of the participants also hold their religions and spiritual practices as sacred and although they may not recognize it, the suppressed and demonized elements of African traditional religions are woven into the Black churches that many of them include in their understanding of themselves as black people, Black women. Many of them spoke about the music they enjoy in Church and about the power of the music. The upbeat music and clapping that Beatrice mentioned and the motivating lyrics and soulful beats that Donna spoke about have direct links to African traditions. The participants' sentiments about church and spirituality align with the findings of Hamilton-Mason (2009), when they indicated many Black women rely on their faith or spirituality.

Safe Haven: Response to Othering

Each of the participants included elements of their stories that explained how they responded to the process of othering. Ella spoke to how much feeling othered contributed to her

identity- always wondering if she was Black enough. The same goes for Beatrice and me. In all their stories, there was an element of safe haven. A place where they felt valued, human, seen, and heard. Some found this in the same neighborhoods and churches they attended their entire lives and some created communities of their own. These shelters of love and support provide the tools needed to manage the dehumanization process that exists outside their havens. These havens follow the historical pathways from slavery, in which Black women were aware of the larger community, extending beyond their own nuclear family, to an entire community. These teachers bring their entire community with them as they venture out and navigate through their lives and careers. These experiences provide convincing evidence that many Black teachers continue to enter the teaching profession with the intent to uplift the entire community.

Black Skin Love Starts with a Strong Foundation

In all my interviews with participants, there was an overarching sense of Black pride and self-love. For some, that love was always there and for others, it grew over time. The length of the journey to self-Black love was found in the strength of their Black foundation. The participants who had a strong foundation of Blackness struggled less with their identity and found battling racism and stereotypes easier as well. Even the participants that grew up in solid Black communities and experienced poverty still describe a strong connection and love for their Blackness. The women who had those strong Black foundations also seemed to experience less exposure to the stereotype trap. They had less instances of feeling silenced, unable to express their thoughts or stand up to injustice. They had less examples of RBF racial battle fatigue (Acuff, 2018) Although they could site examples of their experiences with the anticipation of discrimination as Canady (2016) explained was a stress-inducing experience, the coping mechanisms they had in place were strong enough to relieve much of that stress. The safe havens

that include the workplace also provide less instances of microaggressions with the participants. The findings from this study are consistent with what Jones and Day (2018) explain as socialization of Black girls in Black communities that prepares them better for race-based social and political obstacles, responding to stereotypes, and even assuming family responsibilities.

The participants of this study who did not grow up in established Black neighborhoods, like Donna who grew up in an interracial family, and me who grew up in a predominately White neighborhood, there was confusion and uncertainty about Blackness. Ella struggled with accepting her skin color. Donna worried that she wasn't Black enough. I struggled to understand what Blackness was and Beatrice struggled to understand what the right balance of Blackness was. Was she too urban or too white?

These experiences were very different from the participants that grew up in solid black neighborhoods who felt validated throughout most of their lives. For them, there was an instant sense of pride that never seemed to waver in their lives. There was no question or confusion about their Black identity. Another finding is that the participants that grew up surrounded by Blackness experienced less childhood racial trauma and microaggressions. Their first encounters with explicit racism were well into their teens or adulthood when they were already armed with a shield of Black love to help them move through those experiences. Beatrice experienced racist terror in the form of constant taunting at a very early age. I also fell victim to this type of racist hatred as early as kindergarten and throughout my primary school education. This speaks to the need to maintain Black neighborhoods, retain more Black teachers in those neighborhood schools, and support Black children in Black skin love. The data supports the need for Black teachers in schools, as researched by Pitts (2019).

The Journey to Strong Identity

Williams-Washington and Mille (2018) explain that the depth of harm from collective trauma depends on the individuals' sense of identity. The data in this study supports that idea as participants with the strongest sense of Black identity showed fewer symptoms of RES (residual effects of slavery), such as low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. Some of the participants spent much of their young lives in the pre-encounter stage of racial identity development. As Cross (2016) explained individuals in this state focus on enculturation to remove the label of other. Beatrice and I fall into this category, trying to find the right balance between Black and White- just the right amount of assimilation to fit in but still maintain a Black identity. Many of the other participants seemed to skip that stage altogether and spent much of their early years in the encounter stage, where they saw glimpses of racism and inequity but understood their Blackness as significant and important.

All the participants show evidence that they eventually evolved into the immersion/emersion stage where they realized the depth of oppression and racism which led them to the final stage of racial identity- internalization. It is at this stage that the participants showed that they developed a strong positive self-image, developing Black pride in the recognition of oppression, microaggressions and racism. Faye probably said it best:

I'm just a woman, a proud black woman, a brown educated Black women, who centers herself in what's right and what's just, loves her blackness, her black skin, her black people, her black history.

It is interesting, however, that all the participants arrived at this place of strength, some taking longer than others. The journey to a strong Black identity in many ways mirrored the journey outlined by Jones and Day (2018). The study showed black women at different phases of the journey from identifying as a woman first, to identifying as a Black person first, to understand

that you are simultaneously both. The participants all fell into different identity types. Beatrice and Donna revealed how they place equal significance on their race and their gender. They saw themselves as Black women and follow the model of intersectional awareness as described by Jones and Day (2018). Beatrice sees all parts of her identity as intertwined and gives equal weight to all aspects of herself. She says of herself- “I am an educated Black Female.” The same goes for Donna who says, “I embrace being a Black woman.”

Candace demonstrated the tenancy of a race progressive Black woman where Blackness supersedes gender. For her, her Black identity was about being supportive and encouraging other Black people. Candace has spent her life surrounded by men, with brothers and sons alike. She sees herself as Black first because she is concerned with all Black people. Ala is one participant that showed a tendency toward being gender expressive, placing emphasis on her Womanhood. Gender expressive individuals are strong, powerful, beautiful, and independent. Ala explained her gender expressive stance:

I have to put gender first. Like I just have a pride in it. I just have a pride in being a woman and as identifying as a woman. There’s a choice in identity in regard to gender that I don’t think comes with color. I would never think to put Black on my signature, but I am very comfortable in putting she, her.

These results validate that Black woman are not a monolith and display varying dimensions or levels of Black identity, as identified by Jones and Day (2018) and Cross (1971)

Navigating the Dominant Narrative of Whiteness

Examining how the participants navigated the dominant narrative was also an attempt to see how Black women come to understand and relate to their common experiences of being Black in a society that denigrates and others Black women. This study looked at how Black women grapple every day with a conscious and unconscious awareness of their race and gender. Coming from a Black feminist theory, the study places Black women at the center and examines

how they cope with the intersectionality of their lived experiences. This navigation includes a survival plan or road map. The road map for many of the participants included a career path that supports collective responsibility, haven communities, spiritual awareness, and sistah-friends.

Survival Plan A: Career Path That Disrupts the Narrative

White supremacist culture (WSC) focuses on personal success rather than community success. The participants present an alternative, leading more towards an African indigenous culture that focuses on collective responsibility and community cohesion. Almost all the participants started their working lives chasing the WSC dream of money and material success. They all realized, after varying degrees of time, that they couldn't ignore the calling forever. They eventually had to find a way to contribute to the community instead of competing within it. The participants that grew up in strong Black communities spoke fondly of the sense of community and the education that they received in these areas. This is an example of what Collins (1991) wrote when she discussed "cooperative networks" that were created for survival under the harsh realities of slavery and endured long after. It is those enduring networks that the participants all sought in their careers.

Survival Plan B: The Safety of Blackness: Validation, not Mitigation

As WSC has continued to find ways to suppress Black people, the participants all spoke to how they found or created communities to support each other and lift all Black people. They each described how they created a sort of insulated bubble that includes community, church, and family. In some cases that community is the community they grew up in and in some cases, it is the community that they created. But in either case, their community is filled with people like them, either people from the same culture or people with the same mindset. So, one of the ways they navigate whiteness is by returning to the safety of blackness. Fueling themselves with that

armor of culture allows them to go out into a WSC culture, experience racism, and microaggression, and know that they have a safe place to land and return to. The safety of Blackness and familiarity also extended to where the participants chose to teach, in Black communities with mostly Black students. The amount of societal pressure, racism, and oppression the participants experienced was lessened because of this cultural safety bubble.

Although each participant had that one unforgettable moment when they first experienced racism or saw the glaring discrepancies between what it means to be White in America opposed to being Black in America, they found healing in the safe Black spaces they created. One of the main things that these communities provide is validation instead of mitigation. In these validating spaces, they are not just tolerated or accepted. Their needs are not just ignored or lessened. Instead, they find validation and peace. Reliance on the community as a coping strategy bares out in the research that Davis (2019) encountered. The community provides Black women with the validation they need and a place to be their true authentic selves.

Survival Plan C: Spiritual Awareness

This study provides evidence to support the research that many Black women's survival plan includes a spiritual place or practice that transcends their everyday lives. It could be an organized religion or a universal spirituality. All but one of the participants showed how they find peace within faith in a realm higher than themselves. Four of the participants state the Black Christian Church is one of their safe places that gives them comfort, rejuvenation, and validation. Candace explained her relationship with her childhood church:

I always like to say I consider myself still a student of the Bible, not a Bible scholar. I don't proclaim to be this. I can't recite all the scripture. I still go to the same church I did as a child. I've been there my whole life. I feel comfort there, but I just like I'm always learning.

Faye even remembers the moment she was baptized:

I still have vivid memories of me being baptized in (one of) those old churches, they had the little opening. The pulpit right in front of (opening) and that's where they dip you down and you get baptized and so I got baptized at an early age at my grandmother's church. And we were there every Sunday. The only thing that we could do is eat, watch TV, and talk to each other sit on a porch or whatever. We couldn't wash clothes; we couldn't iron clothes. We couldn't do anything. I think it was a day of the Lord, but it was also a day for us to just gather, On Sundays, it was just God's time.

This study revealed how, as in Faye's example, the Black Christian Church serves more than just a place to worship. There is evidence that these Churches also provide fellowship, friendship, guidance, and support. It is in the Church registry that Candace finds her most significant friendships and gains perspective and advice. It is in the Church choir that Donna found her love for teaching under the guidance and mentorship of Church members.

Survival Plan D: Sistah Friends

Majority of the participants spoke to how conversations with other Black women provide them a place to cope, heal, protect their mental health, and build identity. Ala provided evidence to the friendship connection as a coping mechanism when she said:

My coping mechanism is having strong friends and teacher-friends to talk through situations. These include black women who have many experiences that I have had. I also have a diverse group that give me various perspectives.

Much of the data collected also shows that these Black women value their friends as protectors of their mental health. They are also selective about who those friends are. Beatrice noted how having a couple of well-chosen girlfriends is the most beneficial:

Those one or two girlfriends. That will just listen. But those are things that they can connect to, and you do have to remember that when you are talking to people- you have your select group of people. You gotta pick and choose your fanbase.

Ella provided more evidence to support the findings that friendships, as part of the communities we create, provide healing and perspectives:

I spend a lot of quality time with my friends who are my family, my best friend and I were talking last night like how I really relate to the queer community in the sense that I have a chosen family. So, I talked to them a lot. I process through a lot with them and come have so many different friends from so many different walks of life that just like have different perspective and energy.

Only two of the participants used professional mental health providers when things got especially difficult for them. These relational supports provided the participants with mental health supports as well as solace. The data provides the evidence to conclude that Black women tend to “value relational supports rather than mental health services” (Hamilton-Mason et al., 2009, p. 466) – this is in response to the stereotypes and legacy of struggle- we are expected to be strong, so Black women deny the existence of mental health challenges and are reluctant to seek professional help.

Connecting and Supporting Black Students

A major revelation in the research demonstrated how the participants were unified in their love and respect for Black students as well as their commitment to high expectations. They all spoke to how they are tougher on the Black students because they know what they will face upon graduation and in the real world. Ala summed it up nicely when she said:

I have a role in my community as a Black person as well as an educator. I also have an experience and perspective that’s different than most educators that we have.

All the participants provided evidence to support the conclusion that Black teachers recognize the advantage of their race and skin color when teaching Black children. They understood how important they are in their role, and they are committed to the work they do.

Teacher Identity: A Benchmark for Effectiveness

Much of the connection between Black teachers and Black students begins with the identity development of the teacher. As we know from the research, teachers’ identity is wrapped up in how they navigate through various racial and religious communities. The data revealed, as

explained above, that the communities that participants navigate through are essential to their identity as Black women. They each, in their own ways, bring those values and beliefs into their school communities (Hodges & Cady, 2012) The depth of these values and beliefs stem from the strength of the teachers' self-worth and how they see themselves as Black women. As Kelchterman (2009) pointed out, teaching is not a neutral endeavor. The data collected in this study supports that concept. As many Black teachers before them, the participants took on different degrees of racial advocacy challenging the status quo. You see examples of this advocacy when you listen to how Ella describes her racial advantage:

Definitely my racial identity (is an advantage) because I've been othered. I feel like it really helps me connect with kids. I work with predominantly kids with disability, so they're already othered and then we compound race on it and the way I navigate life is I'm very open and accepting and just of everyone in every type of race, gender identity. If you've never been othered you don't have to think about what it was like, what to have that little tick mark on your heart of what it felt like to navigate the world.

The participants also saw themselves as uplifters, working to prepare Black students for the future in a WSC world (Lewis, 2008). Faye provides an example of this:

When I look at them, I see myself. I don't think kids see their future. Maybe they do, But I know what obstacles they're going to have because of their Blackness. So, it's always been a sense of urgency because I expect more out of them because society will expect more out of them.

These statements, and others, provide the evidence to the conclusion that Black teachers recognize the significance of their place in the educational lives of Black children. Each participant explained how Black children benefit academically, find love and support, and experience validation from them.

Teacher Efficacy: The importance of Blackness

All the teachers/participants saw value in their Blackness, particularly when teaching Black students. Blackness provides cultural bonds, stronger relationships, and a higher level of

commitment to Black students. This study supports the ideas of Farinde, (2016), who described how Black teachers can bridge the gap between cultural identity and academic identity with Black children. Ala remarked how “anyone should be able to look and identify with the people of authority around them. “And Candace said: “I really believe that they gotta have somebody that they can see, successful that is. That has made it personal. Somebody that truly cares about them.”

The participants also recognized that sharing the same cultural/racial identity allowed for a natural bond between students. Authenticity also proved to be an important ingredient as many of the participants explained how being their authentic self-helped to foster stronger relationships, trust, and respect between themselves and their students. This study also revealed how many Black teachers and black students interact. They push these students harder so they're tougher on their black students because they know that the rest that the world at large will be tougher on them. Because of their experiences they understand the value of education and the value of rising above the norm. Faye mentioned that as a Black woman it is important for her to show up authentically. “When I teach, I teach from own frame. That’s the only frame I know.” And Ella is a major advocate for authenticity.

I mean I just feel like I show up as I am. I’m like – this is me as a person. It’s about building relationships with kids. Just showing like up as you are, unapologetically and loving them for they are unapologetically.

Sharing a cultural identity and presenting yourself in an honest and authentic way provides children a place where they know they fit in, and they trust you. It is a crucial point in establishing relationships with students.

Longevity: Teachers that Stick Around

One interesting and somewhat surprising detail that came from this study is while many Black teachers come in highly motivated and then quickly get discouraged due to the invasion of WSC, the Black teachers in this study revealed a strong commitment to the profession. Even beyond their love of teaching, they each had a strong tie to the district in which they teach and the children they serve. Candace spent over 30 years, prior to her retirement, teaching in the same school district that she grew up in. Although tempted occasionally by higher pay in other districts, she never seriously considered leaving. Candace mentioned:

I really didn't want to be in an all-white district or where you only have one or two Black or brown kids. I really wanted to stay where I started and finish my work there.

Even the youngest teacher in the study was committed to staying in the district in which she started teaching, with already 6 years in. And for Faye teaching in her community is the only way for her:

I did not want to put all of me in a community that I don't live in. I think there's lots of advantages to being in your community working and living in your community.

Another surprising trend that came from the study is that the participants did not have countless stories about racism or microaggressions. This indicates that they are either blind to these occurrences or the insulated bubbles they created work so well that they don't have too many incidents. These results are contrary to some of the research conducted by Rinkler and Lawler (2018) and Williams-Washington and Mills (2018) among others, that show the depths of long-term racial trauma. Although the symptoms do depend on the level of Racial Identity, current experiences and historical knowledge. (Williams-Washington & Mills, 2018.) All the participants in this study enjoy the benefit of all those aspects.

Conclusions

Black women teachers face many obstacles and barriers as they strive to be productive and successful leaders and educators of Black children. Navigating the dominant narrative of Whiteness and WSC while also serving Black students can be a challenging and daunting task. The Black women in this study are showing up every day to do just that- as they prepare to battle their own racist demons and answer their calling to make a difference in the lives of Black children. These women wear invisible armor that is stronger than steel and they carry an invisible shield that protects them and their students from harm. Their armor is their communities, and their shields are their connections. The armor is made of solid, loving, and supportive communities. It is studded with Black church, Black friendships, Black love, and Black power. The shields are made of strong connections – tied to their spiritual selves, tied to their ancestral greatness, and tied to the young lives they teach and inspire.

Armor of Community: Black Teachers, Black Students, Black Schools

One conclusion that is revealed in this study is that Black students thrive when they are in Black schools with Black teachers and Black cultural experiences. The attempt to integrate schools and eliminate Black teachers and culture from the curriculum has harmed our children. The mission was never to leave our communities behind, but rather to have the resources to compete on an even playing field while maintaining the love and support our communities provide our children. The plan was never to assimilate, it was to validate who we are as Black people and ensure that our children feel valued and important. This study revealed a perfect example of how effective Blackness can be to inspire Blackness.

The stories illustrated the strength and power of Black excellence and how much easier it is to reach a high level of Black understanding and Black love when you are surrounded by a

community of Blackness. For Black teachers to be effective and for Black children to thrive, we need to create environments in which Black culture is not simply tolerated or even just accepted. Blackness needs to be validated in the same way that Whiteness is validated, every day and in every way. This process becomes easier and almost automatic when children are surrounded by Blackness in their communities. The question becomes how we create that level of validation with Black children that do not grow up in Black neighborhoods or who go to schools where Black students are mitigated instead of validated, where Black kids are merely tolerated and not honored. How do we make sure that children like me, trying to navigate through a sea of Whiteness as a kindergartner, find that validation?

Answering the Call

One way that Black women can respond to this need is to answer the call to become the educators' Black children need and deserve. That process begins, however, with self-reflection and examination of their individual identity. As Black men and women go about their lives living in their black skin, a certain amount of Black pride and validation must take place first. It is that pride that allows Black teachers to overcome the legacy of slavery, handle generational and societal trauma, and adequately serve Black children. You can't teach what you don't know. So as a Black teacher, you first must know yourself as a Black person, a Black woman. You must answer the call with an authentic, unapologetically Black voice that allows you to bring your full self to the classroom and your full self to the fight for equity and justice. Your students need to see you as the real deal- a fighter for validation, a champion of excellence, and a loyalist that never gives up on them. If you are going to answer the call, you must answer it with passion, enthusiasm and more than anything Black love.

Implications for Practice

As I conclude this study, based on the four themes and 13 subthemes that emerged from qualitative data analysis, I have identified several suggestions that could make an impact on the identity development of Black teachers as well as the quality of education for Black students.

1. **Preparing Black teachers:** When I first started teaching in a public school in North Chicago, Illinois, I didn't truly understand or even embrace my Blackness. I didn't know to ask the right questions, examine the curriculum, or bring my complete self to the classroom. I was what I call a turn-the-page teacher who followed the teacher manual and recited the lessons as scripted. I was also struggling with my Black identity. With independent study and focus, I slowly developed that identity, learning more about myself, my people, my history, and all parts of me (physical, mental, and spiritual.) As I grew in my understanding of who I was, I also grew in my ability to reach and teach my Black students. Within a few years, I had grown additional muscles that flexed and expanded my passion and effectiveness for teaching. One implication I gained from this study was that just hiring a lot of Black teachers is not enough, although it's a great start. We also need to prepare our Black teachers for the road to come and ensure that they can bring their full Black identity to the classroom every day.

Teacher Preparation programs spend a lot of time on preparing teachers to enter classrooms and a little time preparing White teachers to face diversity. What is lacking is preparing Black teachers for their journey into the WSC that exists in our classrooms, especially if that classroom is located outside the comfort of a Black community and has only a handful of Black children. Black teachers need to have the opportunity to fully explore their identity and develop a strong sense of advocacy for the needs of their Black students. They also need to learn more about the

history of the diaspora to better equip them to educate others. They need to know the barriers that are going to be thrown at them and their students. They need to know how to put on the armor and shield they need to protect themselves and their students. Perhaps courses for Teaching while Black would be a safe place for perspective Black teachers to examine and expand where they are on the Black identity scale.

2. **Black teacher cooperative:** Existing Black teachers would benefit from additional support throughout their careers. The data shows that Black women tend to rely on friendships with other Black women for therapy and coping. Teaching is like no other profession and sometimes it is challenging to gain understanding and support from those outside the profession. Therefore, having connections with other Black teachers on a regular basis would be beneficial. Ongoing professional development specifically geared towards Black teachers and affinity networking opportunities for Black teachers to connect and get to know each other would help support them and reduce feelings of isolation. Without the gauze of White coworkers and constantly having to explain racism, a Black teacher cohort or cooperative would provide the haven Black teachers need to discuss the unique intersectionality of their position as Black women teachers.
3. **Invest in Black neighborhood schools.** Black schools in Black neighborhoods have long been neglected. Black parents have long been asking for equitable conditions and resources. It is that thought process that led to desegregation of schools, the idea that the previous focus on separate but equal was not realized. The result of the Brown versus Board of education ruling and subsequent efforts to desegregate, has been newer improved schools for White students and increasingly crumbling and neglected schools for Black children. That situation continues the legacy of White Supremacy by design,

falsely asserting that Black schools are inferior and that students get a better education in White schools. Therefore, the focus in many Black neighborhoods is to make enough money to leave their neighborhoods behind. This study indicates the importance of Black schools with Black teachers and students. Therefore, investing in Black schools in Black neighborhoods is vitally important to the growth and success of Black students. Black families should feel comfortable to stay in their neighborhoods and still send their children to quality schools housed with highly qualified Black teachers. These buildings need to be new and improved, with all the resources available to White neighborhood schools. They need to become validating spaces for all children instead of depressing and demoralizing spaces.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study told the stories, the counter-narratives, of Black female educators. It looked at their lives, experiences, and the pathways into teaching. One of the topics that the research revealed was the connection between Black teachers with strong Black identities and Black students. To further the cause for cultural relevance or for cultural validation for all students, further research into that connection would be interesting and important. Perhaps a quantitative study or a mixed-method study would show the correlation between the variable of the strength of teacher identity and the variable of student success. The hypothesis could be that the stronger the teacher identity the higher student test scores or some other measure of learning. Research on strengthening identity during teacher preparation could also add to that discussion.

It would also be effective to answer the question – what about the Black students in White spaces? A research study could examine the level of validation and Black pride in Black students that are not surrounded by strong Black communities. How do we create validating

spaces for them? How do we provide spaces where they feel safe, valued, and able to grow to their best selves? What other outlets could we provide for Black children in White schools? Here is insufficient research that examines why Black students in White schools are still underperforming in comparison with their White counterparts as it relates to racial validation. Perhaps a program that helps build up students' Black love could be part of an action-research process to examine student performance before and after a Black validating program.

One additional research question would be identifying methods for drawing more Black people from professions other than education. It would be significant to understand how to help Black people answer the call.

Final Reflections and Concluding Thoughts

This study follows the lives of six Black female elementary school teachers through a process of narrative research. It examined their identity development, socialization, and career paths. In addition, the data revealed glimpses into the spiritual, social, and traumatic aspects of teaching while Black as well as the intersection of race and gender.

The participants in this study are all examples of dedicated Black teachers that are committed to Black excellence in their students and communities. The data retrieved contradicts many of the stereotypes that dehumanize Black women. The data showed strong spiritual connections, a powerful link to created and evolved communities as power centers or safe havens, and the benefit of a strong foundation of Blackness to protect you from harm. This study also revealed the tool kit for thriving in education as a Black educator. It showed how creating cooperative networks, living, and working in validating spaces, being spiritually aware, and

having a close set of Black friendships, work together to strengthen a teacher's sense of self and survival in a white supremacist culture.

At the heart of this study was the connection between Black teachers with a strong sense of self and Black children who are developing their own identity. This is the most significant part of the research as it speaks to the so-called achievement gap and how Black teachers make a difference. It illuminates the idea that Black Teachers matter in the lives of Black children. This study does not compare Black teacher effectiveness with white teacher effectiveness, and it isn't an indictment on white teachers. It is more about the brilliance and celebration of Black teachers. It is a testimony to responding to the call for teaching, giving back to their community, and validating Black lives, including their own.

As I reflect on my own teaching journey linked to my own identity journey, I wish I could have experienced the kind of Black teacher I have become. In my lifetime, I have only had one Black teacher, and that was in my doctoral program. I sometimes wonder if my life would have been different if I had felt the love, support, and validation from a Black teacher with a strong Black identity. Perhaps I wouldn't have spent so many years of my life searching for the answer to what is Blackness? And trying to figure out where I fit in, trying to discover my beauty and worth. Maybe I just would have known and maybe I would have loved and believed in myself from the beginning. As I sit here today, I cherish and love the skin I am in. Conversations with the participants in this study and the research that was birthed in this study has strengthened my resolve to explore my identity even further and become even more in-love with Blackness, especially as I seek to continue inspiring and teaching Black children. I understand the power of that connection and the need for validation over mediation.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Exploring Identity

1. Please tell me what it was like to grow up in your family.
2. How early did you develop a sense of identity as a Black person?
3. What influences have helped shape your identity as a Black person? As a woman? As a Black woman?
4. Thus far, what have been your personal and/or social experiences that have been shaping your identity as a Black woman?
5. Have you ever been cultivated a sense of identity rooted in one or more African cultures? If so, by whom and how?
6. Have you ever felt a connection with one or more African cultures? If so, then how?
7. What is your knowledge, if any, about your ancestry? Where did you learn about it?
8. Does spirituality play a role in your life? If so, then how?
9. Are there any particular spiritual traditions that have been shaping your identity?
10. Do you consider yourself a feminist? If so, in what way?
11. Do you place more importance on your race, your gender, or both?

Exploring Teacher Identity

12. How did you decide to become a teacher?
13. How would you describe yourself as a Black teacher?
14. Do you think that your race and gender identities have bearing on the success in your career? If so, then how?

15. Do you think that your race and gender identities have bearing on your relationships with your [Black?] students? If so, then how?
16. How do you establish connections with your Black students?
17. What are the challenges, if any, that you experience in your attempts to build connections with your Black students?
18. Do you think that your Black students need particular support in and outside the classroom? If so, what mechanisms of support can you offer to your Black students?
19. Have you considered leaving the teaching profession? If so, why?

Exploring Challenges: oppression, marginalization, trauma, stereotypes

20. Have you ever been stereotyped as a Black woman? If so, please describe the situations and ways in which you dealt with such situations.
21. Have you ever experienced explicit discrimination or any unfair treatment in your personal and professional life? If so, please describe the situations and ways in which you dealt with such situations.
22. Have your experiences of being stereotyped, discriminated against, or treated unfairly persisted overtime? If so, how have these experiences had effect on your life?
23. Can you relate to any experiences that Black women have with regard to their bodies? If so, what are these experiences?
24. Have you ever felt “invisible” or “visible”? If so, then how?
25. What are your experiences, if any, that might have caused mental or physical challenges?
26. Have you ever experienced a generational trauma? If so, then how?
27. How did you deal with your personal traumas?

Additional explorations

28. If you were to address broad diverse audiences, what would you want them to be especially aware of when it comes to understanding the experiences of Black women in general and Black female teachers in particular?
29. What level of duty or responsibility do you feel towards your community?
30. Is there anything I did not ask, and you would like to share with me?

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Dear participant,

You are invited to be part of a qualitative research project, *Narratives of Black Female Elementary School Teachers: Navigating the Normative Discourse of Whiteness*, conducted by Thera Tilmon, a doctoral student in Curriculum and Policies at National Louis University, for the purposes of dissertation. The purpose of the project is to document the stories of Black women teachers to reveal the counter-narratives of their lived experiences. The study seeks to explore the ways in which Black women teachers develop their identity as they travel through centers of Whiteness. There is a particular focus on how these teachers face oppressive and marginalizing education systems, how they unravel and connect to supportive systems for their Black students and the connection between their lived experiences and what happens in their classrooms.

The following research questions guide this study:

- What are the counter narratives of identity by Black female elementary school teachers within the dominant narrative of Whiteness in U.S. elementary public schools?
- How do these teachers navigate the dominant narrative of Whiteness when serving Black students?
- How do these teachers connect with and support their Black students?

Your participation in this study is strictly confidential and voluntary. You can withdraw from it at any time with no penalty to you. There is no potential risk besides the effect of reliving or uncovering possible oppressive, racist, or traumatic experiences from your childhood. You are invited to participate in a semi-structured qualitative interview that may last approximately 90 minutes or longer. The interview will take place at the location of your choice. A follow-up interview may be requested to obtain additional data. The interview will be audio- and/or video-recorded (pending your consent) and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcript will be sent to you for verification of accuracy.

For confidentiality purposes, the interview transcript and all files pertaining to your participation in this study will be kept on a secure server, which will be password protected. Only I, the principal researcher of the study, will know your actual name because a pseudonym will be assigned to you in order to keep all information fully confidential.

If you have questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]. You can also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Antonina Lukenchuk at: antonina.lukenchuk@nl.edu; or at (630) 310-6382.

This study was approved by National Louis University IRB. If you have any questions, please contact NLU IRB Director, Shaunti Knauth, PhD at shaunti.knauth@nl.edu; or at (312) 261-3526.

Please acknowledge with your signatures below, your consent to participate in this study.

Thank you,

Thera Tilmon

I consent to participate in this study.

[Signature]

[Date]

I give you permission to videotape your interview of me.

[Signature]

[Date]