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This dissertation, YOUR TRACKS ARE SHOWING: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL WITH RACIALIZED TRACKING, by KAMARIA R. SHAURI-WEBB, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

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YOUR TRACKS ARE SHOWING: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL WITH RACIALIZED TRACKING

by

KAMARIA REHEMA SHAURI-WEBB

Under the Direction of Dr. Michelle Zoss

ABSTRACT

Despite overwhelming research about the negative effects of tracking on minority students, tracking is used to group students in more than 80% of middle schools in the United States. In racially diverse schools, school officials disproportionately place students of color in lower tracks and place an unjustifiable number of White students in the higher tracks, resulting in segregated classrooms. Using tracking to create segregated classes within racially diverse schools is called racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). In this qualitative study, I explored the educational experiences of six Black girls who attended a middle school with racialized tracking. This study was grounded in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) to acknowledge the distinct social positioning of Black girls and the importance of their lived experiences. I drew upon Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to understand how racialized tracking preserved educational inequalities in the girls' school. I analyzed the data using Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013), using the conceptual framework of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016) to understand how girls' experiences were shaped by domains of power. Findings showed that all six girls 1) viewed tracking as an unfair hierarchy, 2) experienced othering and marginalization, 3) valued safe spaces and community, and 4) shaped their identities in resistance to negative stereotypes. The implications of this study call for schools and school districts to end tracking systems and create spaces that promote community and belonging for Black girls. Additionally, this study indicates the need for more diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive instruction of Black history and culture in middle schools. An important implication for all stakeholders is the need for antiracist training to adequately address the systemic and individual racism that Black girls face in school.

INDEX WORDS: Black girls, racialized tracking, middle school, phenomenology, Black Feminist Thought, experiences, Critical Race Theory, tracking, intersectionality, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, qualitative research

YOUR TRACKS ARE SHOWING: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK GIRLS IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL WITH RACIALIZED TRACKING

by

KAMARIA R. SHAURI-WEBB

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Degree of

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in

Curriculum and Instruction

in

the Department of Middle and Secondary Education

in

the College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2019

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Hazel Copeland, who was not able to get her college degree, but raised my mother to value teaching and learning, a gift passed down to me. Every class, every paper, every hour studying, every page of this dissertation is in honor of your unseen sacrifices. From the Mississippi Delta to #puffyhatgoals, your legacy continues.

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I've lived my entire life in classrooms. From my mom's classroom as a guest, then as a student, and now as a teacher. Every year since I can remember has been marked with a first day and a last day of school, As I write this, I am facing my last, last day as a student. Juggling the role of expert in my classroom, and the role of novice in the classrooms at Georgia State has taught me more about education, teaching, and learning than I could have imagined.

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are the best mother I ever had, and Maya is so incredibly blessed to have you as her grandmother.

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To my babygirl, you are already everything I've ever hoped for, and my dream come true. When you are finally able to read this, I hope that you know that you are #blackgirlmagic, that you can do anything, that nobody else's labels define you, and no boxes can contain you because you are your ancestors' wildest dreams. I love you, my little phenomenal woman in the making.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"*Where academic excellence is the standard"* is the motto of Whitney Young Academic Center, the school that I attended from seventh through twelfth grade. Whitney Young's standard of excellence built upon the foundation of the gifted education that prepared me for the entrance test I took along with hundreds of other students from all over the city of Chicago to fill just 105 seats. When my mother handed me the acceptance letter, I was keenly aware of what being a Whitney Young dolphin meant. It meant more work, more projects, different friends, and it meant waking up at 6:15am to catch a bus to the best school in Chicago, long before the other kids in my neighborhood woke up to walk to their school three blocks away.

I knew going to Whitney Young meant going to a better school than theirs, but I couldn't have imagined how vastly different our educations would be. When I met with my counselor each year to choose which honors and AP classes I should take, or when my mom signed me up for ACT prep classes after school, I assumed other kids had those opportunities too; they just didn't take advantage of them. I knew I had veteran teachers, many who began teaching before I was born, who expected hard work from us every single class, every single day. I did not know that students just like me at schools quite unlike mine, sat in classes that sometimes never even had permanent teachers, just a revolving door of substitutes. I had no idea. I didn't know because I am a product of school tracking, just as my mother was before me.

Thirty years before my mother gave me that acceptance letter, she was a seventh-grader whose IQ scores placed her in advanced classes for eighth grade, to ensure she would be prepared for the college preparatory track in high school. Those scores separated her classmates into one group of kids who should be prepared for college, and another group who should receive vocational training, and they were all keenly aware. A decade later, my mom graduated

from college and became a teacher, who taught in the elementary school in our neighborhood. The school that my siblings and I walked to each morning and waited at the corner for our bus to pick us up and take us to our gifted school 10 miles across the city.

The most noticeable difference between those two schools was that we'd leave all Black kids in our neighborhood to sit in classrooms with our predominantly White classmates at our gifted schools. But even as a kindergartner, I knew that the differences extended beyond race because even though my mom taught there, and she loved her school and her students, she had us tested because she did not think that her school could meet our educational needs.

The same way you don't think about the losing team when you are winning. The same way we yelled, "You shoulda been a dolphin" to opposing teams at games even when we were losing because we thought we were #1 in other, more important ways. I was myopic, and the only thing I could see was how attending Whitney Young benefited me. Like so many people who receive the privileges of a system, I had no room, or reason, for critique. I thought that if other kids just worked harder, then they could excel in school like I did, and for those who didn't have the same opportunities, it was probably because they couldn't handle it anyway. I recognized that there were differences between our schools, but I didn't realize how those differences were a product of a historical system that perpetuates inequitable education, a system known as tracking.

It wasn't until I began teaching that I realized how deeply problematic tracking systems are for students. Unlike the working class, Black neighborhood I grew up in, I teach in an affluent suburb at a well-respected, racially diverse middle school with a wealth of resources. Despite the racially diverse student population, the classes are largely racially and ethnically segregated due to tracking. Students are placed into three tracks—general, High Achiever, and

gifted, with general being the lowest academic track, and gifted the highest. The racial segregation caused by tracking is so blatant that I can tell the track of any given classroom by the racial demographics of the students in it. The gifted classes are predominantly White, with only a few students of color in the classes, High Achiever classes are more racially diverse, but students in general classes are predominantly students of color, with only a few White children, if any.

I have taught general and High Achiever classes for most of my career and I understand how those labels also contribute to the way my students view themselves. Students in general classes say they are not as smart as those in gifted or High Achiever classes. As much as I try to reassure them that placement in gifted or High Achiever courses is not a valid indicator of ability or intellect, those labels serve as their confirmation that they are not as smart as other students.

Though there are written guidelines for the track placement of students, I know students of color with scores that would qualify them for gifted or High Achiever placement, who have been overlooked and placed in general courses, and White students without the stated academic requirements who have been placed into higher tracks because teachers, counselors, or parents feel it would be a "better environment." I have challenged those practices and beliefs within my school more fervently as I realized how unjust tracking practices are for all students.

Still, I am always aware that my mother took advantage of tracking to provide me with an education in a "better environment." My entire K-12 education took place in classrooms that were carefully curated using applications and test scores to only include the students who performed highest on those measures. And still, as I began applying for colleges, I was full of doubt. Even within an environment "Where Academic Excellence is the Standard," where I had access to a variety of AP classes and the option to graduate a year early, I still had limiting beliefs. Though I didn't doubt whether I belonged at WY, when mail from schools like Harvard

and Yale began arriving junior year, I couldn't fathom why they sent it to me. I had internalized messages that my academic excellence still had a limit. Black girls like me, from the Southside of Chicago, did not attend schools like that. If, as a Black girl with the best public education Chicago could offer, I still doubted whether I belonged in certain educational spaces, what messages are Black girls in different tracks receiving as they attempt to understand themselves as students? My first-hand experiences with tracking as both a teacher and a student made me interested in understanding how Black girls in other tracks make sense of their educational experiences and themselves within the context of *racialized tracking* (Tyson, 2011).

Research Questions

My research was guided by the following questions

1. What are the experiences of Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking?
2. How do Black girls' experiences and ideas about tracking affect their identities?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how six Black girls understand their identities and educational experiences in a middle school with racialized tracking. Racialized tracking is the separation of students into tracks for academic instruction resulting in segregated classrooms with higher-level tracks disproportionately filled with White students, and lower tracks disproportionately filled with Black and other minority students (Tyson, 2011). Understanding the experiences of Black girls who are educated within the context of racialized tracking offers important insights about how this separation of students affects their educational experiences, and how these labels affect student perceptions of themselves and others.

Why Study Black Girls?

This study focused on understanding the experiences of Black girls because they are marginalized in schools by their positioning as both racial and gender minorities (Campbell, 2012; Morris, 2016b). Public schools replicate the institutional racism that exists in American society, which negatively affects Black students. Tracking, which exists in most secondary schools, is one way that societal inequalities are reproduced in schools. While all students who attend schools with tracking are affected by the system, Black students are affected disproportionately. Kalogrides and Loeb (2013) found that Black students are more likely than other students to be in racially segregated classes with novice teachers, with the likelihood increasing as they enter middle school. Black girls are among the students who suffer inordinately due to tracking; however, a century of educational research has focused on Black students as a whole without considering gender as a salient factor in student experiences or outcomes. When gender has been considered, researchers shifted their focus to the state of Black boys, investigating how schools fail to meet their academic and social needs, and how implicit bias leads to disparate disciplinary practices that lead them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Brown, 2015; Dancy, 2014; Noguera, 2008). This body of research steered the development of programs and initiatives to address the urgent needs of Black boys in schools. The narrative of Black boys in crisis positioned Black girls as success stories in comparison, further ignoring their marginalization.

Black girls' success often focuses on how resilience and inner strength help them to navigate schooling and overcome obstacles and achieve academically (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2014). Additionally, media outlets highlighting Black women as the most educated demographic in the country contributes to the

idea of Black women and girls as exceptional. While it is essential to understand the factors that contribute to positive academic outcomes of Black girls, focusing on their success obscures the fact that Black girls have varied educational experiences and ignores the ways schools fail Black girls, too.

Conducting research that intentionally centers the voices of Black girls is necessary for schools to meet the needs of Black girls, whose identities are shaped by both race and gender. Understanding the intersectional realities of Black girls is a necessary step for schools to able to meet their needs. With this in mind, I designed my study to project the voices of Black girls as experts on themselves and their experiences with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). By understanding how racialized tracking shapes Black girls' experiences and influences how they view themselves, educators may be better able to understand how tracking contributes to inequitable educational experiences among students. My research extends scholarship aimed to understand how schools can best meet the needs of Black girls by providing a space for them to tell their stories, challenging the dominant narratives written about them, and amplifying their voices. The next section provides an overview of tracking to explain the educational context of the girls in this study.

Tracking

Tracking is a method of grouping students by their demonstrated or perceived academic ability or achievement, which determines student access to classes, course levels, curricula, and learning opportunities (Burris, 2014). It is a practice common to public schools in the United States that dates back more than a century. Tracking operates on prevalent assumptions that all students learn better in academically homogeneous environments, that students who learn slower develop positive attitudes about both themselves and their academic abilities when grouped

separately, that homogeneous grouping makes it easier for teachers to meet the individual needs of students, and that all placement decisions and criteria are fair, accurate, and provide equitable educational opportunities for all students (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 2005). Despite overwhelming research that disputes these assumptions (Ansalone, 2006; Chambers & Spikes, 2016; Cipriano-Walter, 2015; George, 1993; Hallinan, 1994; "Teaching inequality: The problem of public school tracking," 1989; Werblow, Urick, & Duesbery, 2013; Worthy, 2010), many public schools have preserved tracking policies, ensuring the continuation of educational inequalities that have historically marginalized Black students. I provide a more detailed overview of the history of educational policies and practices that were designed to marginalize Black people in the United States in Chapter 2. The next sections explain the problematic aspects of tracking in schools.

Negative Effects of Tracking

While tracking systems affect all students, these policies exacerbate the negative experiences of Black girls, who as racial and gender minorities already face disproportionate discipline, negative stereotyping by school faculty, and lower teacher expectations (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Morris, 2007; Morris & Perry, 2017; Morris, 2016b; Oakes, 2005; Ricks, 2014). Students in the lower tracks face similar stigma, which compounds the issue for Black girls in lower track as they contend with both track stigma and historical stereotypes. The negative effects of tracking affect Black girls because they must navigate their racial and gendered identities within an educational context that is more likely to place them in classes that do not prepare them academically.

In schools with racialized tracking, Black girls must navigate different racial dynamics, which vary based on track and class (Tyson, 2011). Black girls in the highest tracks navigate predominantly White classrooms, where they may face isolation. For Black girls in the lowest

tracks, their track assignment alone shapes their educational experiences due to the stigma of students in lower tracks, and the stereotypes teachers have about racial minorities, which are amplified when teachers directly compare them to their predominantly White classes in different tracks. Black girls in the lowest tracks understand that teachers require less of them academically, have lower expectations of them intellectually, and stereotype them negatively based on their placement (Stanley & Venzant, 2018; Tyson, 2011).

Given the complex interplay of race, gender, and track placement, this study explores how Black girls understand their experiences with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) because they have important insights to help create shows that provide all students with an equitable education. While the inequalities of Black girls in lower tracks may be more glaring, examining the experiences of Black girls in the higher tracks is equally important. Some positive outcomes have been found among students in the higher tracks, and while Black girls in higher tracks do have higher test scores (Loveless, 2009), standardized test scores are not adequate indicators for how well their academic needs are met. Using these quantitative measures of success obscures other possible academic needs and obstacles that might hinder Black girls from realizing their potential (Neal-Jackson, 2018).

To remedy the negative effects of tracking, many researchers have suggested detracking, which dismantles tracking by ending practices that group students based on perceived ability. (Burris, 2014; LaPrade, 2011; Rubin, 2006). Detracking efforts have taken place in some school districts, but given the vested interests of privileged stakeholders who benefit from racialized tracking, many schools still use tracking to group students. Therefore, the permanence of tracking in schools requires continued research about the experiences of students educated in these groups. By focusing on the experiences of Black girls, this study demonstrated how Black

girls were marginalized in racially diverse schools and the continued need for efforts toward educational equity in experiences, access, and opportunities.

Research about Black girls and how they experience racialized tracking provides further insight into the effects of tracking, which can be used to inform the practices used to group students in schools. Because tracking affects all students regardless of track, this study included Black girls assigned to three different curricular tracks to understand how placement affected how they view themselves, their track, and students in other tracks. I explored how the experiences of Black girls are essential to creating equitable education, but the problematic nature of tracking is rooted in its origins when schools created tracks to address the changing demographics of schools as they became more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse, which I explain in the next section.

History and Origins of Tracking

At the beginning of the twentieth century, secondary schools were attended predominantly by students from middle- and upper-class Anglo-Saxon families to prepare them for liberal arts education (Oakes, 2005). Then, as the populations of cities exploded in the early 1900s, immigrants from Europe, African-Americans from the South, and Americans from rural areas packed public schools (Donelan, Neal, & Jones, 1994). This population shift led to changes in the structure of schools, a move advocated by the government. The *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (National Education Association of the United States, 1918) advocated for the creation of curricular tracks, which separated European immigrants, Black students, and students from low-income families into a vocational track to train them to meet society's growing labor needs, while students from elite, Anglo-Saxon American families continued taking college preparatory courses. By separating students for their core courses according to

track, this system allowed students from all groups to attend the same school, which was intended to promote cultural assimilation and foster democracy, while teaching the new arrivals universal American values (Oakes, 2005). During tracking's prejudicial origins, schools openly used race, ethnicity, and economic background to sort students into separate programs, which preserved the access to advanced classes and a college preparatory curriculum for upper- and middle-class Anglo-Saxon students. This method of tracking reinforced the societal notion that White students are intellectually superior and need to be prepared for college, and created the foundation for modern school structures that segregate students of color into lower track classes to prepare them for future roles as laborers (Tyson, 2011).

Bias in Tracking Ideology

These historical justifications of tracking were rooted in social Darwinism, which argued that some groups innately lacked social and moral development and therefore needed different curricula (Oakes, 2005). This way of thinking required school and government officials to create a track for racial and ethnic minorities as well as poor White students, which focused on moral development, rather than academics. G. Stanley Hall (1904), a psychologist who studied child development, argued that only adolescents from homes that valued intelligence and hard work could avoid a life of crime and that families who did not meet these criteria could not raise socially productive children. These students' perceived inferiority provided additional rationale for lower tracks to provide the moral education that they would be unable to receive from home (Oakes, 2005). Like social Darwinism, policymakers accepted Hall's problematic assertions and used these ideas to validate organizing schools to exclude socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic minorities from the same educational experiences as their privileged White counterparts.

Since the introduction of tracking, placement decisions have been based on a variety of measures—race, ethnicity, parents' occupation, social class, hygiene, immigrant status, aptitude, and achievement test scores (Ansalone, 2006; Oakes, 2005; Rist, 1970). These prejudicial origins of tracking endure in its current iterations. Despite shifts in the stated criteria and rationale for tracking, the same groups of students remain in the lower tracks denied access to the educational opportunities of others (Donelan et al., 1994).

More than a century after schools introduced curricular tracks, Black girls remain in the group without equal access to educational opportunities (Modica, 2015). Furthermore, Black girls are taught by teachers who have negative attitudes towards them, viewing them as aggressive, loud, and less academically capable (Ricks, 2014; Watson, 2016). Because Black girls are disproportionately placed in lower tracks, they also are affected by teachers' negative perceptions and lower expectations for students in lower tracks as less capable academically. Importantly, despite the perceived academic inferiority of Black girls, their teachers are more likely to correct their behavior or comportment rather than provide academic support (Morris, 2007). Understanding how systems of tracking affect the experiences of Black girls in schools is an important aspect of understanding how they navigate the labels assigned to them by tracking and their teachers' expectations based on racial and gendered stereotypes.

Expanding the Research about Tracking

Research on tracking in the United States has primarily focused on the academic outcomes of students and the perceptions of teachers, with few studies that explore student experiences. An even smaller body of research dedicates attention to racialized tracking, a term coined by Karolyn Tyson (2011). Racialized tracking and its effects on students are important to understand because it facilitates school segregation and reinforces persistent educational

inequalities in schools due to the racialized disparities between the tracks. This type of tracking also requires attention because Tyson found that the most important factor for high school students who chose their track placement was feeling confident, they could be academically successful. Their confidence level was largely correlated to the track of their current classes, and students with less confidence were more likely to choose lower tracks. Therefore, middle school track placement sets the trajectory for students' high school education. Students who are placed in lower tracks in middle school are likely to remain in lower-level classes throughout high school because their course selections continue to match their initial track placement, and further, they feel unprepared for advanced classes because of the more rigorous coursework.

Focusing on the experiences of Black girls is intentional because their voices are not only missing in tracking research, but they are often ignored in educational research overall (Morris, 2012; Ricks, 2014). Additionally, middle school tracking is often overlooked, despite most students being assigned to tracks for at least some academic classes when they begin middle school (Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1996; Loveless, 2009). Tracking in middle school often sets the course for students' high school course selections, which negatively affects students in the lower tracks because they do not have access to the prerequisite courses or knowledge necessary for advanced courses in high school. Furthermore, racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) marginalizes minority students because they exist to maintain societal power, which I explain more thoroughly in Chapter 2. The next section explains how Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) provides a theoretical framework to understand the societal context in which tracking was created and continues. Then, I provide an overview of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2015) as a framework to understand how the Black girls involved with my research create knowledge and understand the world.

Theoretical Frameworks

Schools in the United States are more segregated now than after desegregation efforts following the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Rosiek and Kinslow (2016) argued that current

> school resegregation along race and class lines...has a variety of negative effects on students of color in racially isolated schools—effects such as lower test scores, higher dropout rates, lower levels of college attendance, lower health outcomes, and lower levels of lifetime wealth accumulation just to name a few. (p. xvi)

These negative outcomes not only hinder their educational experiences, leading to lower academic performance and less educational attainment, but racial segregation, whether between schools or within a school, which leads to disproportionate life outcomes regarding health and wealth (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2005).

The documented effects of segregated educational spaces on students of color are important to the context of my research because racially diverse schools commonly use racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) to create segregated classes. The existence of racialized tracking in racially diverse schools creates an educational context where Black girls' experiences are shaped by race, gender, and track placement. Understanding how race shapes the experiences of Black students in the United States is important to my study's underlying assumptions that current policies that intentionally create and maintain racially segregated classrooms are inherently problematic because they are designed to uphold the societal power of privileged groups. This study used the framework of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to understand how racialized tracking functions in schools to preserve power imbalances and educational inequalities that negatively affect Black girls.

Critical Race Theory

In the current era of school resegregation (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016), Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) provides an important lens to understand racialized tracking and its effects on students of color. CRT is a framework developed in the 1970s by legal scholars who felt the progress of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was stagnant or being reversed. A group of lawyers, scholars, and activists from racially diverse backgrounds created this theory by borrowing ideas from Critical Legal Studies (CLS) (Unger, 1983), which asserts that many legal theories and court decisions are intended to maintain the status quo of society's power structures in favor of historically privileged groups. CRT also grew from feminism, a theory that explained the relationship between power and social roles in the maintenance of dominance in society. CRT is a progressive legal movement that seeks to transform race relations, racism, and power dynamics in society. I outline the four tenets and how they can be used to understand racialized tracking in the next sections.

Racism is normal. The first tenet of CRT recognizes that racism is a normal element of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This tenet acknowledges the historical existence of racism as a normal feature that shapes the everyday experiences of racial minorities in the United States. Racialized tracking in schools illustrates how racism maintains White supremacy by assuming the existence of a colorblind system of equality, where students are fairly grouped into different tracks based on achievement measured by test scores and prior academic performance (Cipriano-Walter, 2015; Oakes, 2005). However, this method of grouping students ignores the complex realities of how schooling is influenced by the permanence of racism. If tracking practices were not influenced by racialized practices, there would not be an overrepresentation of Black students in the lower tracks. Furthermore, the current iteration of tracking as a tool to create and maintain

racially segregated educational spaces accentuates the prejudicial origins of the practice by White communities to create separate educational environments based on race, national origin, and class (Oakes, 2005).

Interest convergence. The second tenet of CRT states that civil rights legislation and any real changes in the United States with regard to race are the result of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980). Interest convergence argues that majority groups will tolerate racial advancement only when those changes benefit them, not from altruism or a genuine desire to improve the lives of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Derrick Bell (1980) argued that the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the efforts towards school desegregation in districts around the United States, happened only due to interest convergence, not in the interest of equal education for Black students. Interest convergence exists through the creation of higher level tracks and advanced programs in schools with large White populations, because these classes maintain largely segregated educational spaces where White students have access to veteran teachers, a more challenging curriculum, and varied instructional practices (Oakes, 2005; Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016).

Race as a social construction. The third tenet is the notion that race is a social construction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which recognizes that differences used to define race are created by humans with no basis in biological differences. The social construction of race allows it to be used to shift racial categories and their meanings to maintain the social power and dominance of White people. The shifting definitions of socially constructed racial groupings can be seen throughout the history of tracking, which initially only favored elite, Anglo-Saxon families, but this privileged group expanded as socially constructed notions of Whiteness shifted (Oakes, 2005). The acknowledgment that race is a social construction also recognizes the notion

of Whiteness as property, and that being White has power and value of its own (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings argued, “in a racialized society where Whiteness is positioned as normative *everyone* is ranked and categorized in relation” to them (p. 9). The position of White students in higher tracks of racially diverse schools, with students of color ranked and categorized beneath them, demonstrates the power of Whiteness in the structure of schools, and how tracking maintains society’s racist norms within schools. This study interrogated how the girls in my study understand the value of Whiteness and the tracks White students occupy as they make meaning of their social positioning within their assigned track.

Creating counterstories. The final element of CRT focuses on honoring the experiential knowledge and voices of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The stories of people of color are important because they provide a counternarrative to the stories told for them and about them by the dominant society. The rationale for tracking is based on a dominant narrative that justifies its existence and continuation using quantitative research: differences in test scores and the existence of an achievement gap demonstrates the need for separate groupings of students (Archbald, Glutting, & Qian, 2009; Chang, 2015; Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman, & Crain, 2005). However, CRT is based on highlighting the multitude of experiences of people of color. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) proposed using counterstories of students of color as a “tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). In fact, critical race theorists argue that when looking for remedies for societal problems, society must “look to the bottom” in judging new laws and policies, and if the remedy does not ameliorate the oppression of those who are affected by the existing injustice, or worse, if the injury is compounded by the proposed remedy, those policies and practices must be rejected (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). My study builds on this concept by privileging the experiences of Black girls,

who have been historically denied educational opportunities due to race and gender. This research invited them to contribute their narratives to the counterstories that challenge ideas about them created by others. CRT's focus on narrative as a critique of structures that maintain societal inequality aligns with the next element of my theoretical framework, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2015). BFT regards stories as central to knowledge creation and understanding human experiences, making it well-suited as a foundation for research exploring the experiences of Black girls within a system as complex as racialized tracking.

Black Feminist Thought

While Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) allows for the critique of the context of my research, racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011), I use Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) to understand the nuanced social positioning of Black girls. Collins defined BFT as the types of knowledge Black girls and women bring to the world through their lived experiences. BFT was developed as a theory to understand the distinct positioning of Black women who live at the intersections of race and gender. Their experiences as racial and gender minorities position them differently from those who only experience the world through a single racial or gender minority lens.

Research about Black girls in educational spaces must consider how Black women create knowledge, which is a core tenet of BFT (Collins, 2015). "As a critical social theory, Black Feminist Thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (pp. 25-26). Racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) is an unjust context that informs Black girls' educational experiences throughout their schooling. BFT recognizes the significance of honoring the knowledge they create within this oppressive social context, recognizing that their intersectional identities shape their experiences in schools

and their views of themselves. Many researchers who work with Black girls use BFT to undergird their research because it centers Black girls, positioning them as experts of their own experiences within a given cultural context (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Taylor, 1998). Collins (2015) explained this cultural context for the knowledge creation of BFT in the four dimensions of the framework that I describe next.

Lived experiences as essential to meaning. For Black women and girls to navigate their intersecting oppressions, they must have two types of knowing—knowledge and wisdom (Collins, 2015). Their knowledge is based on creating meaning from their lived experiences to provide wisdom that is essential to survival. Black women assess knowledge claims using this wisdom, which often differs from abstract societal ideals and the experiences of other groups, particularly those with power and privilege. For Black girls in schools with racialized tracking, their lived experiences within tracks may differ from the colorblind meritocracy promoted by school officials and school policies. My study is designed to amplify Black girls' voices to understand the wisdom and knowledge they have created to navigate racialized tracking. My research acknowledges and celebrates their roles as experts with insights to help educators understand how Black girls' experiences are shaped by racism, sexism, and other inequalities in schools that are intensified through tracking.

Dialogue as necessary to assess knowledge claims. As a Black woman working with Black girls, I understand the importance of dialogue in expressing, supporting, and assessing knowledge claims. Black women develop knowledge claims through dialogue with other members of their community, rarely in isolation (Collins, 2015). Collins used hooks's (1989) definition to explain dialogue in this specific context. Rather than a debate or an argument, dialogue in this context is conversation between two people that recognizes the humanity within

both people as subjects, and resists and challenges notions of domination, where one person talks to or at something, rather than connecting with them. This dialogue is focused on connectedness with roots in African practices like oral tradition and call and response. Through this dialogue Black women assess and validate knowledge claims related to one's self-determination and the larger community. Dialogue also provides space for and recognition of the multiple experiences of Black women and how they understand oppression through stereotypes, historical subordination, and notions of inferiority. BFT recognizes that women come to understand their world and their experiences through dialogue. Collins (2015) argues that dialogue is necessary for methodological adequacy in understanding the experiences of Black women. For this reason, dialogue with and among participants is a centerpiece of my methods, through interviews and a focus group. I explain these methods in more detail in Chapter 3.

Ethics of caring. The ethic of care acknowledges the importance of individual uniqueness, expressiveness, and the capacity for empathy in knowledge creation (Collins, 2015). Individual uniqueness describes the multiple ways Black women express themselves within their communities and recognizes that Black women are not a monolithic group. Another element of this ethic is the importance of emotion in dialogue as an indicator of belief in knowledge claims, making emotion essential to credibility. Black women's ways of knowing recognize that emotion and intellect do not exist as a binary, and the two do not have to be separated for knowledge claims to be regarded as wisdom.

The third element of the ethic of care describes how Black women develop empathy as they make sense of their experiences and understand the experiences of others (Collins, 2015). This empathy leads Black women to understand the commonalities among marginalized groups. The ethic of care is important because it recognizes that the Black girls in my study have

individual ways of expressing themselves, using a variety of emotions to assert their knowledge claims to establish their credibility in dialogue with me and with each other during the focus group. Additionally, the girls had space to find common ground to understand each other. Those commonalities do not contradict or negate the knowledge and meaning created by their own experiences.

The interconnected nature of these three elements demonstrates the importance of an individual's personality to the veracity of their knowledge claims. Collins (2015) argued, "Emotions indicate that the speaker believes in the argument" (p. 282). The centrality of emotion to the creation of knowledge by Black women is essential. As Black girls navigate school, their individual expressions and displays of emotion often lead to admonishment and discipline by teachers, who spend more time correcting the behavior of Black girls than on their academic progress (Morris, 2007). Each Black girls' individual expressions were vital to my research because, while they shared their experiences, I provided space for their emotions without expecting that tracking affected their experiences, their ideas, or their view of themselves in the same way. Additionally, as the participants shared their experiences, they found common ground with each other in ways unrelated to their track or their grade but based on empathy and caring that was innate in their ways of knowing the world. Furthermore, I developed my methodology and protocols with opportunities and space for the girls to express themselves and use emotion to convey their experiences.

Ethic of personal accountability. According to BFT, personal accountability holds Black women and girls responsible for supporting their knowledge claims with personal examples based on their lived experiences (Collins, 2015). This tenet underscores the importance of lived experiences as an essential source of knowledge and dialogue as essential to knowledge

creation because credibility is established through sharing personal experiences. Moreover, this element guided my research methodology and analysis by focusing on stories and personal examples as important to the credibility of both knowledge about tracking and the wisdom they have created to help navigate within that context.

Collins's (2015) conception of Black feminism asserts, "There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (p. 32). This assertion is critical when listening to the experiences of Black girls in school. "An essentialist understanding of a Black woman's standpoint suppresses differences among Black women in search of an elusive group unity" (p. 32). The same statement holds true for the experiences of Black girls, and my research, which acknowledges the diversity of experiences and standpoints of Black girls and commonalities in the way they understand themselves. I understand the importance of not looking for generalizations within my findings that paint the experiences of the Black girls with a single, broad brush. For this reason, Black Feminist Thought provides a framework to ground my understandings of Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking that continues the thematic consistency of Black women's intellectual tradition that is built upon "a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society" (p. 5). As a Black woman, listening to their experiences, how the girls view themselves, their school, and their education helped me understand myself and the context of racialized tracking that shaped my educational experiences as a student, and the experiences of the students at the school where I teach.

Definitions

This study explored the experiences of Black girls, which I defined as girls of African descent, who self-identify as Black or African American. I used this definition based on my own

understanding of myself as a Black woman and a Black girl. Additionally, because self-definition is central to Black Feminist Thought, it is important that the girls in this study define themselves as Black girls (Collins, 2015).

Tracking is also essential to this project, and I defined tracking as the method of grouping students by their demonstrated or perceived academic ability or achievement, which determines student access to classes, course levels, curricula, and learning opportunities by separating students into homogeneous classes (Burris, 2014). While tracking exists in many schools with varying racial demographics, the research site for this study is a racially diverse, yet racially segregated, school due to racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). I used Tyson's definition of racialized tracking as the separation of students for instruction resulting in segregated classrooms with higher-level classes disproportionately filled with White students, and lower-level classes disproportionately filled with Black and other minority students.

Delimitations

This study focused on the experiences of six Black girls who attended a racially diverse middle school with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). The findings of this study do not represent the totality of the experiences of Black girls, in acknowledgment of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and BFT (Collins, 2015), which both recognize the multitude of experiences of people of color. Furthermore, I understand that the results of this research contribute to the body of research about Black girls' experiences in school and the effects of racialized tracking in middle schools, but do not, and cannot, represent the whole of the experiences of Black girls in middle schools with racialized tracking.

Summary

This study is a qualitative case study developed to understand how Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) make meaning of their educational experiences using the framework of Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to understand the racialized power dynamics of tracking, and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) to understand the girls' experiences. The study included interviews and a focus group to understand the views and experiences of six Black girls, assigned to three different tracks, who attended a middle school with racialized tracking.

Next Chapters

This introductory chapter provides the context of this research and the significance and purpose of my study. I provided background information about racialized tracking, Black girls, and the theoretical frameworks. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review, including an overview of historical policies, procedures, and laws that have limited or denied Black people's access to educational opportunities. This historical context illuminates how the current practices of racialized tracking maintain educational inequalities, specifically for Black girls. Then, I include an overview of the prejudiced origins of tracking in the United States, continuing with a summary of current research on the structure of tracking and its effects on students. Chapter 2 ends with a review of the current research about Black girls in schools, including how they describe their experiences, how their teachers perceive them, and how their experiences are shaped by disproportionate discipline.

In Chapter 3, I explain my methodology, beginning with an explanation of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989), which I used as the conceptual framework. Then, I explain why I chose qualitative case study methodology to collect data,

followed by an explanation of how I used the steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013) to do a thorough analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed overview of the study's findings, beginning with introductions of the girls, followed by the prominent themes that describe salient aspects of the girls' experiences, including interview excerpts that center the girls' voices as experts. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings. In the final chapter, I discuss the meaning of the findings in Chapter 4, synthesizing the data using the theoretical and conceptual frameworks to explain the importance of the findings. Chapter 5 ends with implications for schools, teachers, and parents, as well as suggestions for further research and my final thoughts.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I present an overview of the research that provides the context for my study on the experiences of Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). One goal of this literature review is to explain how the history of the education of Black people in the United States is rooted in practices, policies, and legislation implemented to guarantee educational inequalities throughout slavery, Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, school desegregation, and currently, racialized tracking. Because of the large scope of this topic, I have narrowed my focus to only a few examples of policies, laws, and studies that highlight the systemic inequalities that have purposefully limited or denied Black students access to the same resources, rigor, and educational opportunities as their White counterparts.

The section that follows provides a more detailed overview of tracking, beginning with the prejudicial origins of the practice. Then, I explain the surge of tracking in schools in response to *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court order that declared school segregation unconstitutional. I highlight this decision because, while the Court judged racially segregated schools "inherently unequal," the current demographics of public schools in the United States reveal they are more segregated now than they were in 1954, and within racially diverse schools, racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) has created racially segregated educational spaces that emulate the historical educational inequalities and disparate educational experiences for Black students. This section ends with a review of racialized tracking as it is used in schools today.

Following my explanation of how racialized tracking is a tool used to segregate schools and disenfranchise Black students (Tyson, 2011), I provide a synthesis of research examining the effects of tracking on students to understand how track placement leads to negative outcomes for students in the lower tracks, without producing significant benefit for students in higher tracks

(Loveless, 1994; Oakes, 2005). Within this section, I also include an overview of how the use of tracking to group students in middle schools affects their educational experiences. This practice also contradicts the stated goals of middle school to meet the developmental needs of all students in this age group to prepare them academically for the rigor of high school curriculum. Throughout each section in this literature review, I give specific focus to the experiences of Black girls. This chapter ends with a review of current research about the experiences of Black girls in school, highlighting Black girls' perceptions of their school experiences, teachers' perceptions of Black girls, and the disproportionate discipline of Black girls in schools. To understand the current experiences of Black girls in public schools, it is important to understand the historical context of the education of Black people, which I explore in the next section.

Historical Overview of Racist Educational Policies

This section begins with an overview of how policies and in the United States have created and maintained racial inequalities in education. The following sections provide the context necessary to understand the current educational setting of Black girls in schools. This context is important because it demonstrates how the educational inequities that exist today are a continuation of the obstacles Black people have faced since the founding of the United States. From everchanging laws that denied Black people access to literacy and criminalized education during slavery, to racially segregated schools without adequate resources, continuing with the resistance by White communities to school integration during and after Jim Crow, these practices laid the foundation for current tracking policies that disproportionately place Black students in the lowest academic tracks without equal access to educational opportunities.

The racial inequalities in public education in the United States exist in contrast with Black communities' emphasis on education and their commitment to universal schooling, which

sought to provide education to all (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). This section provides an overview of how policies, practices, and laws have systematically denied Black people equal access to education beginning during slavery and Reconstruction as Whites opposed universal schooling. I explain how segregated schools during the Jim Crow era affected Black students, giving specific focus to Du Bois and Dill's (1911) study of segregated schools in the Jim Crow, a system which did not begin to be dismantled until *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). This section ends with an abbreviated history of educating Black women and girls to provide context for the current experiences of the girls interviewed in my study.

Legal Opposition to Black Education during Slavery

Since before the birth of the United States, race has determined which groups of people were granted access to education. During slavery, literacy was forbidden for enslaved Black people, enforced through laws that explicitly tied access to reading and writing with racial classification (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2015). The timing of the passage of many laws prohibiting literacy for enslaved, and sometimes free, Black people, shows that Whites understood how educating Black people posed a serious threat to the institution of slavery and the oppression of Black communities.

Many jurisdictions passed literacy laws in direct response to acts of resistance in opposition to the institution of slavery, either through slave rebellions or literature supporting abolition (Williams, 2005). One of the earliest laws was written after the Stono Rebellion of 1739 when enslaved people in South Carolina killed more than a dozen White people during their attempt to escape to Florida (Span, 2015; Williams, 2005). In 1740, South Carolina responded with legislation that outlawed teaching any enslaved person to read or write, levying fines against those anyone who participated in such activities. States designed these literacy laws

to prevent enslaved people and abolitionists from communicating through the written word to plan insurrections.

Like southern Whites who passed literacy laws, Black communities understood the power of literacy and did not allow these laws to deter their desire for education (Williams, 2005). Enslaved people defied literacy laws by holding clandestine school meetings. These meetings took place after sundown and on the Sabbath, times when slaveowners tended to focus on their own leisure or worship rather than the activities of the people they enslaved. Clandestine schools and all other forms of education for Black people proved a continual threat to White society, triggering stricter laws with harsher punishments in southern states. For example, South Carolina made it illegal for any group of "slaves, free negroes, mulattoes, and mestizoes" to gather for "mental instruction." (p. 13) The 1800 law expanded criminal activity beyond the 1740 statute to forbid math, memorization, and any other form of educational instruction.

Additionally, the new statute barred education for all Black people, both enslaved and free (Williams, 2005). Enforcement required police to use force, if necessary, to enter any confined spaces to prevent Black people from gathering privately. Similar laws existed in Virginia, Mississippi, Missouri, and North Carolina with punishments ranging from fines, jail time, or corporal punishment (Span, 2015; Williams, 2005). When caught, Black people received harsher punishments than Whites, and after *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Walker, 1829/2011) made it to the South, literacy laws became more restrictive and punishable by death.

Walker's (1829/2011) pamphlet urged armed resistance against slavery and argued that White people were the enemy of Black people in the United States. The *Appeal* enraged White southerners, confirming their fears that education incited resistance against slavery among Black

people. Walker urged every Black person to read or have the pamphlet read to them, and it spread quickly through the South. When police in Savannah, Georgia seized 60 copies of the *Appeal*, the legislature responded 10 days later with laws making it illegal to teach any Black person to read or write, along with the creation or distribution of any written material that might incite resistance among Black people (Fisher, 2009; Williams, 2005). Anyone who broke these laws would be punished by death or a life of hard labor.

Despite these laws, a small percentage of enslaved people learned to read and write, using those skills to write freedom papers, read the Bible, and understand abolitionist activities; all actions literacy laws sought to prevent (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). The actions of both Black and White people underscore the knowledge among both groups that literacy and education in Black communities would lead to liberation, agency, and empowerment. The veracity of the legislatures to deny Black people access to education, whether enslaved or free, shaped the foundation of our current educational system, which limits the opportunities of Black students based on their perceived inferiority. These notions of Black inferiority worked to consign Black people in subservient roles, believing that any access to educational opportunities should be controlled and determined by privileged Whites. White opposition to educating Black people existed through harsh and restricted laws in the South, while the North used different methods of disenfranchisement.

The northern states did not pass harsh and restrictive laws like those in the South, but White northerners used different methods to deny Black people access to education (Span, 2015). In the South, the few public schools that existed did not allow Black students to enroll, and private schools that admitted Black students faced criticism by Whites in their communities. In the North, most free Blacks attended segregated schools, even in states where segregation was

not legally enforced. These segregated schools, which had fewer resources for Black students, molded a dual educational system that disadvantages Black children.

Just as in the South, Black people in the North resisted these racist practices in search of equal access to education. In 1847, Benjamin Roberts challenged Boston's dual educational system after five elementary schools refused to enroll his daughter because she was Black (Roberts v. City of Boston, 1849). As a result, Sarah had to walk past those five White elementary schools to attend the only Black elementary school in the city Roberts sued the city on behalf of his daughter and argued that racially segregated schools violated the Massachusetts constitution, which stated that all people were equal regardless of race. The court ruled against Roberts, declaring it best to maintain separate schools for Black and White students. This decision had long-lasting effects and served as precedent for numerous cases that upheld segregated schools and public accommodations throughout the United States, including the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized racial segregation in every Southern state through the "separate but equal" doctrine, which was not overturned until 1954 with the *Brown* decision (Span, 2015). Because legislative and judicial systems in both the North and the South upheld not only the need for, but also the legality of, segregated schools, these decisions reinforced the racist notions that segregated spaces are both necessary and essential to education in the United States. These decisions, however, did not thwart the ideals of Black communities regarding the importance of equal education for all.

When White communities limited access and opportunities for Black people, any opposition was met by the desire of Black people, both enslaved and free, to develop literacy skills (Williams, 2005). Some enslaved people were educated by their master's wives or White children too young to understand the laws; others traded food and money to learn how to read

and write. Some people carried books underneath their hats to take advantage of any opportunity when a lesson presented itself. Free Blacks in the North traveled to the South to share their knowledge with Black communities. Despite all efforts to criminalize efforts by Blacks to become educated, Black people understood the importance of education. Neither broad laws that carried harsh punishments for educating Black people, nor Supreme Court decisions would dissuade Black people's quest for education. However, these laws and practices molded a foundation for public education in the United States to provide unequal educational access and expectations for Black and White students. The actions of White governments to thwart efforts to educate Black people was rooted in the desire to retain Black people in the subordinate roles of society. These actions continued during Reconstruction with the creation of dual educational systems for Black and White students despite how Black communities embraced universal schooling after emancipation.

Black Schools during Reconstruction

The abolition of slavery also meant the end to laws that criminalized literacy and education in Black communities. Without legal prohibitions, Black people created schools that transformed education throughout the South (Williams, 2005). W. E. B. DuBois said, "Public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea" (Provenzo, 2002, p. 158). The Freedmen's Bureau, created by the federal government to assist the newly freed slaves, also pushed for universal schooling for students in the South (Anderson, 1988). While states in the North and Midwest passed laws to expand education by using tax dollars to fund schools, the South rejected this legislation because any expansion of schools also threatened the racial caste system that slavery built, which relied on denying education to Black people (Span, 2015). Despite southern resistance, Freedmen Schools opened throughout the South, and White

missionaries from the North and Whites in the South used policies, practices, and legislation to maintain educational inequalities through curricula, funding, and resources.

Freedom Schools and the Promise of Universal Education

Through education, Black people in the South saw the opportunity for economic stability, to become involved politically, and to cultivate leaders in their communities despite continued racial oppression and legalized inequalities (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). In response to being historically denied education during slavery, Black people committed to high-quality schooling to everyone who wanted to learn. The Freedmen Schools were among the first dedicated to universal education, regardless of age, and thousands of Freedpeople attended them following slavery (Anderson, 1988). The enthusiasm and commitment to education demonstrated by high attendance rates of Freedpeople compelled many White planters to build schools on their property to recruit and retain Black workers, many of whom demanded education for their children. The Freedmen Schools are one of the first examples of public education for Black people in the United States, and while Black communities attended and supported them because of their determination to attain the education they had been denied, the curriculum in these schools belied the promise of equal education, which I explain in the next section.

Curriculum in Black Schools during Reconstruction

With the hope that education would lead to full participation in society, leaders of Black schools sought to implement curriculum based on the classical liberal arts curriculum used in college preparatory schools in New England (Anderson, 1988). However, most of the books used in Freedmen schools came from White schools and White missionary organizations in the North (Brosnan, 2016). Brosnan's content analysis of the textbooks used in Freedmen Schools found that most textbooks reinforced racist notions of Black people in subservient roles. The American

Tract Association (ATA), an evangelical missionary organization in the North, developed most books published specifically for Freedmen. Based on the religious mission of ATA, these books included explicit moral instruction on the importance of chastity and temperance for Freedmen, who many White northerners viewed as morally deficient (Span, 2015). Furthermore, these books also warned newly freed Blacks of the dangers of upward mobility, emphasizing to newly emancipated children that hardships, poverty, and physical suffering were important aspects of religious devotion. These problematic messages demonstrate how White people used education as a tool to maintain racial hierarchies by reinforcing the subordination of Black people in larger society.

Freedmen School textbooks also encouraged the newly free to continue working as field hands or domestic workers, the same roles many held during slavery (Anderson, 1988). Through stories and reading passages, books perpetuated societal stereotypes and portrayed Black characters as lazy and shiftless, while White characters were hardworking and pious, emphasizing racist ideas of White racial and moral superiority (Brosnan, 2016). These books purposefully subverted the efforts of Black schools to develop Black leaders, and they represent early examples of using curricula to the detriment of Black students (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005). Furthermore, these actions reveal how the involvement of White missionary societies in Freedmen Schools is an example of interest convergence because White efforts in Black schools were accompanied by White self-interest (Bell, 1980). White missionaries worked with Black schools during Reconstruction, not out of altruism or a sense of social justice, but to control the education of Black people to sustain the South's racial hierarchy. Some may argue that the racist curriculum implemented after emancipation should be attributed to the societal norms of the era, but the racist notions of Black people as lazy and inferior persist today in schools with racialized

tracking. Students in the lower tracks, who are disproportionately Black, are given less rigorous work than students in the higher tracks, which are designed to suit the academic needs and expectations of White students (Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011). The oppressive curriculum developed by White missionaries in the North replicated the racial hierarchy the South sought to maintain, but the continued investment in Black schools by White missionaries fueled the opposition of Whites in the South, who resisted all education as a way of dismantling Black schools.

White Opposition to Universal Schooling

As Freedmen Schools thrived, resentment grew in White communities. Many White southerners openly opposed universal schooling because they understood that educated Black people threatened the existing racial caste system (Anderson, 1988). Their opposition was based on the long-held belief that once educated, Black people would use their knowledge and agency to abandon their jobs in the field. White communities feared losing Black fieldworkers, who were necessary to maintain both the agricultural economy of the South and the economic status of landowners (Williams, 2005). Additionally, as northern researchers, missionaries, and journalists traveled to the South, they began to associate education with Black communities in the South because rural Whites had yet to seek education. White opposition to Black education strengthened because they feared education would raise the status of Black people above Whites. In response, rather than accept educated Black children, White communities fought to eliminate public schooling for children of all races.

Demand for White Only Schools in the South

When opposition to Black schools failed to thwart Black commitment to education or decrease attendance at Freedmen schools, White people demanded racially segregated schools

for their children (Williams, 2005). Even though Freedmen schools openly enrolled all students, only a small number of White students attended them because most Whites preferred their children not receive any education rather than attend school with Black children. Fueled by poor Whites' desires for their children to get an education and elite Whites' worries about disruptions to the social order if Black people were educated, both groups appealed to the northern missionaries who developed the Freedmen schools to create segregated schools for White children (Anderson, 1988; Span, 2015; Williams, 2005). Despite most missionaries' moral opposition to racial segregation, they built segregated schools in the South for White students.

The willingness of White missionaries to open segregated schools at the racist demand of White communities added to the historical educational practices that privilege the demands of White communities, even those that disregard the needs of Black communities (Span, 2015). White missionaries created schools for Whites only, sent White teachers to staff them, and barred Black students from attending (Anderson, 1988). Black communities, whose schools welcomed White children, decried the existence of segregated schools because they reinforced notions of Black inferiority. Additionally, funds originally allocated for Freedpeople and Freedmen's Schools were diverted to fund and staff White schools that prohibited freedpeople from enrolling. These schools reinforced the societal priority to educate White children, even at the expense of Black students (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000).

The unequal systems that developed during Reconstruction continue today in different forms. Schools institute pervasive systems of tracking and disproportionately assign Black students to the lowest tracks without access to the same education and curriculum as White students. The historical prioritization of the demands of White communities above the educational needs of Black students normalizes the disparities in schools with racialized

tracking, which are the continuation of discriminatory practices and historical inequalities that position White students above others. Racism in public schools is not an aberration. Unfortunately, racism is, and always has been, the norm (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Disparities in Schools during the Jim Crow Era

After Reconstruction White legislators resumed control of state governments and codified racially segregated schools through legislation that extended to most public accommodations, marking the beginning of the Jim Crow Era (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Legally segregated schools expanded the resource disparity between White and Black schools because White legislatures diverted public funding to White schools, causing many Black schools to close (Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Williams, 2005). This institutionalized segregation legalized inequalities between Black and White schools that extended beyond funding. Legislatures stripped Black leaders of all authority to guide the educational policies of Black schools, adjusted the school year in Black schools to be shorter than that of White schools, and lowered salaries of Black teachers below their White counterparts (Williams, 2005). With control of the legislature following the brief period of Reconstruction, White lawmakers deliberately passed these laws to limit the education of Black students.

Du Bois and Dill (1911) documented the effects of Jim Crow laws on Black schools at the beginning of the 20th century using a team of researchers to travel to the states that enforce legal segregation of schools. The team studied schools in each state to understand the realities of Black students, teachers, and schools. This study used reports from several states, the Freedman's Bureau, and the United States Bureau of Education, along with survey results from superintendents and principals to understand how Jim Crow laws affected public education. The research team found that Jim Crow laws created a dual system of education— one system for

White students and another inferior system for Black students. This dual system created several disparities that negatively affected the education of Black students during this time.

Du Bois and Dill (1911) found funding disparities between Black and White schools similar to differences in schools during Reconstruction. Despite Black communities paying taxes to support school improvement, their funds were diverted for the maintenance and improvement of White schools. Meanwhile, the schools that Black children attended remained underfunded and under-resourced. While the researchers documented many educational advancements in White schools, they found the withdrawal of money and resources from Black schools prevented similar advancements. Legal segregation, adopted and enforced by all White legislatures, allowed education officials to openly neglect Black schools and maintain historically unequal societal positions between the races.

Additionally, because the White legislatures controlled Black schools without input from Black leaders, they implemented policies meant to purposefully disadvantage Black schools and Black students (Du Bois & Dill, 1911). In this segregated educational system, superintendents, school boards, and committees were all positions held by White people, with only a few states providing any opportunity for Black input. The researchers found many official reports did not discuss or consider the current state or future fate of Black schools at all. Education officials did not monitor the academic progress of students in Black schools because without educational advancements, Black students could still play their prescribed roles as laborers. When surveyed by the researchers, most superintendents argued that Black schools should focus on industrial tasks and domestic skills because students would need those skills in the labor market. At the same time, superintendents complained that the teachers of those industrial classes were inadequate because they lacked knowledge outside of those areas. School officials often

contradicted themselves by hiring teachers based on their ability to teach sewing and cooking, and frequently rejecting applicants with a broader liberal arts education. This denial of teachers with broader liberal arts educations, while complaining that teachers were not highly educated, is an example of how stated desires of White school officials did not align with their beliefs and actions regarding hiring, course offerings, or course placement to the disadvantage of both Black teachers and students.

The dual system of education described in this report written more than a century ago has many similarities with the current structure of public education, where disparities in access, resources, curricula, and instruction still exist. These disparities exist today because they are rooted in discriminatory perceptions of the roles that groups of students should play in society as adults. The previous sections provide an overview of practices that have affected the education of all Black people historically. The next section narrows its focus to the education of Black women and girls, and how their racial and gendered identities played a role in their fight for equal education.

Educating Black Women and Girls for Racial Uplift

In this section, I provide historical context for the education of Black girls, highlighting Black women who advocated for education and understood their experiences through both racial and gendered lenses. I focus on Anna Julia Cooper because of her resistance to the racial and gendered expectations of her time as well as her contributions to origins of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the frameworks I used to understand the experiences of the girls in my study.

Commitment to Educating Black Women

The earliest group of formally educated Black women spoke openly about issues related to women's rights, but they also spoke about race, feeling they could not detach race from gender because their experiences were shaped by both factors (Perkins, 1993). Historically, Black communities supported educating Black women and girls, believing it was essential to the uplift of the race. Before emancipation, when literacy was controlled through the laws mentioned earlier in this chapter, many free Black families moved to areas where both their sons and daughters could be educated. Communities showed enthusiasm for Black women's higher education through financial support for tuition from churches and other organizations. Education was important and the support of education was considered a communal effort towards the liberation and racial uplift of all Black people (Fisher, 2009).

Black women sought education because they wanted to become leaders in the community, and they used their education to speak for both their gender and race. Early notions of Black feminism understood that Black women's identities were shaped by both race and gender. Maria Stewart used her platform to counter dominant narratives of Black people as lazy and idle, describing the ingenuity and ambition of Black people given the reality of enslavement (Stewart, 1832). She believed educating Black women was central to racial progress, while also recognizing Black women's need to define themselves as self-reliant and independent in the face of oppression.

This independence and self-reliance were apparent through the tenacity of Black women to become educated after emancipation. Anna Julia Cooper, the child of an enslaved woman, was a leader in advocating for the education of Black women and girls (Johnson, 2009). She attended St. Augustine Normal School and Collegiate Institute (now College), which was founded during

Reconstruction to prepare the newly Freedpeople for leadership roles in their community as ministers and teachers. She continued her education at Oberlin College, demanding access to the four-year course of study designed for men, rather than the two-year course for women. Throughout her work as an educator at Black schools, she was vocal that Black women could follow intellectual pursuits despite societal constraints based on race and gender, and she insisted that expectations of academic excellence should be the same for Black and White students and educational opportunities should be equal between women and men (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

Cooper believed that Black women and girls should have access to the same educational opportunities as others regardless of gender and race (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). In her collection, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper (1892/1988) argued that racial and gender equality were human rights, and both must exist to uplift the Black community. She understood her social positioning and identified inequalities in society that exist for Black women because of race, gender, and class. Her ideas were integral to the education of Black women and provided the theoretical foundations for BFT and intersectionality. Her example of resistance to both racial and gender oppression, provides important context for my study of Black girls in racialized tracking. Cooper's fight for equal access to the curriculum designed for men at Oberlin and her advocacy for Black girls to reach their potential despite obstacles are essential to the story of Black women in education in the United States, a story that continues through the experiences my participants shared in this study.

Schools for Black Girls, Created by Black Women

Cooper's (1892/1988) advocacy for equal education for Black women did not exist in a vacuum. In the early 1900s, schools focused on educating Black women and girls began to realize this promise (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Advocates for educating Black girls believed

that improving the status of Black women in society would help the entire race. Though White missionary societies established most schools in the South after Reconstruction, Black women created schools devoted specifically to educating Black women and girls. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Black women founders like Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown believed that Black women needed to take the initiative to educate themselves, though their educational approaches and philosophies differed. The schools they created focused on educating Black girls to be leaders in their community, providing both vocational training and classical liberal arts education. They received funding from a variety of sources, but they all maintained the historical commitment to educating all students regardless of their ability to pay.

Black women developed these schools partially in response to their difficulty obtaining positions as teachers in the Freedmen schools started by White missionary organizations (Perkins, 1993). Missionary organizations made "culture and refinement" a requirement for teachers to limit the number of Black women who sought or were granted employment. Though Black women continually applied for teaching positions, many were rejected because they had children or financially supported other family members. However, missionary societies frequently hired White women in similar situations by finding other roles for them within mission houses. The preference for White women, many of whom desired only to escape the monotony of middle-class life until marriage, over Black women whose motivation stemmed from their commitment to teach Black children and promote racial uplift, is another example of how racist decisions negatively affect the educational experiences of Black children (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This practice exemplifies interest convergence because missionaries used the development of Black schools to provide White women from the North with employment, at the

expense of Black women and Black children. Furthermore, stereotypical views of Black women as unrefined or uncultured remain prevalent in the experiences of Black girls and how they are viewed in schools (Morris, 2007). I provide a more detailed explanation of these historical stereotypes and how they affect Black girls' experiences in school today, but the next section explains how the images and societal roles were shaped.

Conflicting Messages of Black Women

At the end of the 19th century, the Fourteenth Amendment granted Black men the right to vote, marking the first difference regarding rights of citizenship for Black men and women (Perkins, 1993). The enfranchisement of Black men led to the election of Black men to a few local and state offices, which shifted ideas about the role of Black women. Previously, Black men advocated and supported educating Black women to become leaders to uplift the race, but articles in the Black press began to promote a more conservative role for Black women as a subordinate, asserting that their place was in the home, and that Black women's education should focus on morals to prepare them for motherhood and marriage, emulating the prominent views of the role of White women in the North.

Despite messages in the press promoting a vision of Black and White women in similar roles, racial and economic barriers led to 10 times more married Black women working outside of the home (Perkins, 1993). Additionally, among women who worked outside the home, White women worked in dozens of industries, while Black women worked primarily in domestic and agricultural jobs, the same roles they held during slavery. Limitations to employment mirrored educational barriers, as Black women found it more difficult to enroll in colleges for White women than Black men who sought enrollment in colleges for White men. These disparities

highlight the historical oppression of Black women due to both race and gender that continues today.

The contrast between media representations of Black women and their roles in the labor market during this period is similar to the contrast between current media representations of Black girls and the reality of their experiences in school. During the early 20th century, the Black press advocated that Black women take the role of homemaker, ignoring that economic necessity demanded most Black women work outside the home (Perkins, 1993). Similarly, in schools today, Black girls' behavior and academic achievement are compared to groups used to represent the norm. Black girls are disproportionately disciplined for the same behaviors that are allowed among other girls, highlighting stereotypes about Black girls' comportment (Morris & Perry, 2017). Simultaneously, Black girls are positioned as academically successful because their graduation rates, in both high school and college, are higher when compared to Black male students (Brown, 2015). These comparisons do not serve Black girls because they position them against other groups of students perceived as the norm. My study focuses on Black girls because their experiences and their academic needs are important on their own, and they deserve research that does not focus on their behavior or experiences by comparing them to other groups of students that some deem normative.

From Access to Equity

The educational concerns of Black girls have shifted since the late 19th century and early 20th century, especially in elementary and secondary schools. Thomas and Jackson (2007) argued that while issues of that era focused primarily on access, contemporary issues have shifted to "educational equity, diversity, tracking, standardized testing and underachievement, student dropout rates, and school and teacher quality" (p. 365). Legal segregation no longer creates a

barrier for Black girls to access educational opportunities, but current schools still fail to provide Black girls with an equitable education. Current data shows that Black girls are at risk for underachievement based on drop-out rates, grade retention, and standardized test scores (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; O'Connor, 1997). In addition to these academic measures, Black girls feel unsafe at school, face violence on school property, and contend with negative stereotypes of being loud, promiscuous, and inappropriately dressed (Ricks, 2014). These experiences demonstrate how public education for Black girls no longer upholds the historical beliefs of Black communities that all students have the right to high-quality education and that Black women and girls have specific needs given their social position as race and gender minorities in the United States.

These outcomes paint a dire picture of the state of education for Black girls and highlight how schools have not met their needs. Tracking is one example of school practices that disregard the needs of Black girls. Tracking systems, which separate students based on perceived differences (Oakes, 2005), contradict the values of Black communities that supported universal schooling, quality curriculum, and high-quality teachers for all students (Williams, 2005). Tracking systems make predictions about the perceived abilities of students, and track placement decisions place Black girls disproportionately in the lowest tracks. These decisions, and the perceptions of those who make them, are based on the historical ideas of racial and gendered inferiority used for centuries to separate minority students from their White, elite counterparts (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

Loveless (2014), an ardent proponent of tracking, found that students from wealthy homes and those whose parents have higher educational attainment are more likely to attend schools with tracking than other groups. His findings underscore how schools use tracking to

maintain educational inequalities, by creating separate educational spaces for students from privileged groups. He also reports that White students are more likely than Black students to attend schools with tracking, though Black students are more likely than White students to attend racially segregated schools. The fact that White students are more likely to attend schools with tracking highlights the role of tracking in creating segregated classrooms within racially diverse schools. This form of tracking is known as racialized tracking, and it contributes to the disparities that exist for Black girls, who are more likely to be placed in lower tracks in racially diverse schools (Tyson, 2011). For this reason, it is important to explore how Black girls understand their educational experiences within the context of racialized tracking.

The next section outlines the history of tracking, how racialized tracking creates racially segregated classrooms within schools, and the effects of tracking on students. This overview builds upon the history of systemic inequalities in public education that contradict the historical values and ideals fostered within Black communities about the education of Black students.

Tracking in the United States

Tracking is “the sorting of students within a school or district that results in different access to academic curriculum and the opportunity to learn” (Burris, 2014, p. 3), creating homogenous grouping from heterogeneous student populations. The persistence of tracking systems is based on long-standing assumptions—1) all students learn better in academically homogeneous environments, 2) slower students have a more positive attitude about themselves and their abilities in academically homogeneous environments, 3) placement decisions are fair, accurate, and provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, and 4) homogenous grouping through tracking makes it easier for teachers to meet the individual needs of students (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 2005).

Currently, educators and researchers disagree about the use of tracking to group students, but the practice of tracking has a long history in public education in the United States. I use Critical Race Theory to examine both the inequalities maintained through tracking and the assumptions used to create tracking systems. This section begins with the problematic and biased origins of tracking in public schools, then explains the rise of racialized tracking during mandated efforts to desegregate schools, and it ends with an explanation of the effects of tracking on students.

Origins of Tracking

While educational experiences, resources, and curricula have varied from school to school throughout the history of the United States, at the beginning of the 20th century, secondary schools introduced tracking, which created varied student experiences, resources, and curricula within a single school depending on their track assignment. When schools began tracking students, race was not the primary factor used for tracking decisions because few students of color attended schools with White students in either the North or the South (Tyson, 2011). In the South, due to legally mandated segregation, most Black students either attended segregated schools or were prevented from attending school altogether. In the North, though school segregation was not legally mandated, most Black and White students attended separate schools because they lived in segregated neighborhoods. These racially segregated schools created unequal educational experiences for students living in different areas, but tracking based on ethnicity and immigrant status created differences within schools due to the differentiated curricula in each track (Oakes, 2005). Tracking reinforced prejudiced beliefs that racial and ethnic minorities belonged in industrial jobs, while elite Anglo-Saxon students should be prepared for college to enter professional careers.

In practice, European immigrants and students from low-income families were assigned to the vocational track, which had a curriculum designed to prepare them as laborers, while students from elite Anglo-Saxon families continued in an academic track that prepared them for college (NEA, 1918). Education leaders argued that separating students into these tracks would provide all students with the appropriate education, while also promoting assimilation. Though students were separated for their core content classes of English, math, social studies and science, students in the vocational track attended the same elective classes as those in the academic track, because officials believed intermingling would teach them universal American values and foster democratic ideals. The rationale for separate classes with different curricula was based on prejudiced attitudes about the intellectual inferiority of immigrants and poor students. These biased attitudes and prejudices continue to rationalize tracking in schools today, rooted in underlying assumptions about the roles each group should play in American society.

The creation of lower tracks is rooted in social Darwinism, which argued that some groups of people innately lacked social and moral development (Oakes, 2005). Educators' perception of these students' inferiority facilitated grouping students that excluded socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic minorities from the same educational experiences as their White, middle-class counterparts. Public schools upheld these exclusionary practices by adopting widespread tracking in schools as a response to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which led to the racial integration of public schools (Donelan et al., 1994). The current method of tracking, intend to uphold racial segregation within diverse schools, exists in schools across the United States and is known as racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011).

Racialized Tracking

Though the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional in 1954, many school districts did not implement desegregation plans until decades later through mandatory busing to integrate schools (Tyson, 2011). Faced with racially diverse student populations, more schools and school districts adopted the long-standing practice of tracking, previously used to separate students by ethnicity and class, to separate students by race. Communities that resisted desegregation orders to avoid integration implemented racialized tracking as a legally permissible method of separating students by race (Tyson, 2011). Racialized tracking, which results in the overrepresentation of White students in higher tracks and Black students disproportionately placed in lower tracks resulting in segregated classrooms, allowed schools to abide by orders for desegregation while maintaining systems of inequality in schools. The result of these practices still exists today in racially diverse schools with racially segregated classes, with advanced and gifted classes populated by predominantly White students, and general, low, or remedial level classes disproportionately comprised of students who are Black, Hispanic, and those from low socioeconomic status households.

Racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011) continues to a large degree today, generally justified by the difference in achievement scores between White and Black students (Loveless, 2009; Tyson, 2011). School officials use the higher achievement scores of White students to justify the need for separate tracks regardless of the racial disparity created by this method of grouping students. However, studies have found that even after controlling for standardized test scores, prior grades, and socioeconomic status, Black students are more likely to be placed in lower tracks than their White counterparts (Ansalone, 2006; Oakes, 2005). In other words, even when Black students meet the stated academic or achievement criteria for placement in higher tracks,

school officials are still more likely to place Black students in the lower tracks. The disproportionately high percentage of Black students in lower tracks is significant because of tracking's negative effects on students in lower tracks. The problematic placement of Black students into the lower tracks is further exacerbated because it begins so early in their academic career—middle school.

Tracking in Middle Schools

As the needs of public schools shifted with the influx of students in the 1920s, districts responded with the creation of junior high schools to serve students in grades 7 through 9. The role of junior high schools was to determine and implement curricular placement for students before entering high school, thus preparing them for high school curricula (Loveless, 1994; Oakes, 2005). They were designed to provide students with a comprehensive education, giving them a variety of experiences related to vocations and careers, which would guide their high school courses. However, because junior high schools developed during the same period as tracking, students from minority groups were placed into the lower tracks learning only basic academic skills necessary for vocational careers, while elite White students entered tracks that prepared them for the rigor of college preparatory courses in high school.

During the 1960s, reformers argued that young adolescents had different developmental needs than older students and the "middle school movement" pushed for the creation of middle schools to serve students in grades 6 through 8 (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016). The middle school concept shifted the purpose of schools from focusing solely on preparing students for the academic requirements of high school to also considering the specific needs and developmental stages of students between the ages of 11-13 as they transition from childhood to adolescence (Bandlow, 2001; Tamer, 2012). Reformers believed that middle schools should consider student

identity, self-concept, personal responsibility, happiness, and attitudes about school while fostering independence in students in this age group (Gatewood, 1975). Many middle schools adopted the same tracking structures of existing junior high and high schools (Loveless, 1994, 2009), and despite a large body of research documenting how tracking negatively affects students, tracking still exists in the majority of middle schools today.

More than 80% of middle schools have some form of tracking, which mostly takes place in math and English language arts (ELA) classes (Loveless, 2009). For many ELA classes, there are two or three tracks: offering a general, or on-level class as the lowest track, a higher track of "honors" or "advanced" classes designed to meet the intellectual needs of high achieving students, and then the highest track, gifted, which is reserved for those students who meet federal and state criteria. Math classes are often tracked similarly with many schools also offering high school algebra for high achieving eighth graders to prepare them for advanced math classes in high school.

Tracking can begin as early as elementary school when students are identified as gifted and assigned to separate classes for gifted instruction (Mickelson & Greene, 2006), but it becomes more visible during middle school because all students are placed in tracks for their academic classes. Upon enrollment, some schools assign students to a single track, either gifted, High Achiever, or general, and students have all academic classes on their assigned track. Other schools assign students to a track for each course. Most middle school students are tracked using one of these methods, and while schools contend that tracks are created based on academic needs, most researchers have found that track placement is often subjective and biased.

Criteria for Track Placement

Many opponents argue that tracking is a discriminatory practice due to the subjectivity of the placement decisions, which show bias against racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities (Ansalone, 2006; Oakes, 2005). Although school staff assert that they base placement decisions on student achievement, most schools do not have documentation or formal guidelines for tracking decisions (Oakes, 2005; Slavin, 1993; Worthy, 2010). Worthy's research in a tracked middle school examined the factors used to determine track placement, and her findings echo the results of other studies about track placement criteria (Ansalone, 2006; Mickelson, 2001; Oakes, 2005; Rist, 1970).

School faculty used a variety of methods to place students into tracks (Worthy, 2010). Fifth-grade teachers often recommended sixth-grade track placement for students who attended elementary school in the district, while middle school counselors made the decisions for new sixth graders. Middle school teachers made most of the decisions for students in seventh or eighth grade, though most students ended middle school in the track they were assigned to when they began, regardless of academic growth or decline. Track placement has significant effects on students' middle school experiences because mobility between tracks is rare (Hallinan, 1996; Oakes, 2005; Pinkney, 2016; Worthy, 2010).

The various subjective methods of middle school tracking affect Black girls in important ways, because these track assignments affect students through high school, even among students who choose their track placement. Darity et al. (2001) conducted a study of tracking in more than 30 elementary, middle, and high schools, and they found that students in lower tracks often did not choose higher track classes for high school based on what their teachers and counselors said about the rigor and amount of work in the advanced classes. Students relied on the input of

school staff and often rejected honors classes because of warnings from their teachers that they would struggle academically in higher tracks. Students avoided higher classes because they did not believe they could succeed.

Campbell (2012) researched how high school teachers' judgments and perceptions of students hinders Black girls' access to advanced science and math courses in a high school. She found that teachers' expectations of Black girls contributed significantly to their recommendation decisions, even after controlling for prior academic achievement. Teacher recommendations for Black girls to higher tracks were related to their predictions of Black girls' educational trajectory. Teachers who expected Black girls to complete graduate school were most likely to recommend them for advanced courses, while teachers who expected only high school graduation were least likely to make advanced course recommendations. Due to these findings, tracking as it exists today is largely reflective of the origins of tracking, which based student placement on predictions of their roles in society, rather than their demonstrated academic ability. Teachers' lower expectations of students in the lower tracks are important because Black girls are more likely to be placed in the lower tracks, making them less likely to have rigorous coursework in middle school to prepare them for advanced classes in high school. These initial placement decisions prevent Black girls from maximizing their intellectual potential.

Though teachers and other school officials have a role in track placement, parents often have the most control in their child's placement in a given track because parental requests are almost always granted (Loveless, 2009; Oakes, 2005). Oakes's study of the tracking practices in 25 schools found that schools with larger middle and upper-class populations made more parental requests to move students into higher tracks, which led to the creation of additional

honors classes to fulfill their requests. Creating additional honors classes for students who did not meet the stated requirements for placement in the higher tracks undermines the existence of the track, which is to separate academically exceptional students to meet their academic needs. Placing students in a higher track based on parental request, without adhering to stated criteria, undermines the assumptions upon which tracking was built.

Darity et al. (2001) found that parents with more education were more knowledgeable about advanced programs and courses and were more persistent in advocating for their children to have access to those opportunities. Schools and school districts often create and maintain advanced programs to prevent White parents from transferring their children to other schools through White flight. The social and cultural capital of educated, well-resourced White parents provides options regarding their children's education, while parents of students from racial and ethnic minority groups, and those with lower socioeconomic status, often do not have enough capital to transfer their children at will, demand structural changes, or give their children access to advanced tracks.

Purported Benefits of Tracking

Despite proponent arguments that tracking individualizes learning for students by acknowledging their differences using objective criteria like learning rates and student aptitude (Loveless, 2009), the large body of research on K-12 tracking reveals that school officials use subjective criteria for student placement, which undermines this argument and underscores how tracking is antithetical to public education's democratic promise of equal education for all students (Ansalone, 2006; Biafora & Ansalone, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Rist, 1970). Proponents also argue that tracking is necessary to meet the needs of gifted students (Fitzgerald, 2016), but gifted students, by definition, make up a small percentage of the population (McClain & Pfeiffer,

2012). However, many of the highest tracks include the children of parents with enough social capital and power to influence their child's placement ensuring access to veteran teachers and rigorous curricula, rather than placement criteria based on academic ability or achievement data (Stark, 2014). All students enrolled in the highest tracks show academic benefits, regardless of their prior test scores and grades, and because higher track classes are academically heterogeneous due to parents ensuring the enrollment of students who do not meet the academic criteria (Roda & Wells, 2013; Welton, 2013). The fact that all students placed in the higher tracks, regardless of demonstrated academic ability, still demonstrate academic benefit, shows the fallacy that tracking is necessary to meet the individualized educational needs of students.

Most proponents base arguments in support of tracking on research that students in higher tracks have higher standardized test scores and higher rates of college enrollment than students in lower tracks (Loveless, 2009). However, since all students, regardless of whether they meet the stated criteria of the higher track, improve in this educational environment, it is clear that homogeneous grouping is not necessary to meet the needs of students in public schools. Any benefits for students exist only for those in higher tracks because they have more experienced teachers, varied instructional practices, and more rigorous curriculum. These outcomes demonstrate how tracking does not exist for the benefit of all students, rather its purpose is to stratify students based on those with racial or economic privilege at the demand of elite White parents (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005).

Advocates argue that tracking is necessary to individualize the learning experiences of students who are culturally, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse, which has positive effects on student achievement (Loveless, 1994). Additionally, supporters assert that students' differences in knowledge, skills, developmental stages, and learning rates (Slavin, 1988) make

educational tracking more academically effective and instructionally efficient than teaching heterogeneous groups of students (Ansalone, 2006; Slavin, 1988). Moreover, placing students with lower test scores in separate classrooms provides teachers with opportunities for individual assistance and skill remediation that would be too difficult with heterogeneous grouping (Ansalone, 2006). Furthermore, proponents argue that gifted and talented students are entitled to a specialized track as a function of their legally-mandated free and appropriate education (Losen, 1999). Gifted education is considered an aspect of exceptional education, which includes students with disabilities (SWD), identifications based on specific requirements with educational programs determined by federal law (McClain & Pfeiffer, 2012). My study includes gifted identified students but does not include students with disabilities due to the wide scope of abilities and needs of that population. More research is needed to understand their experiences within the context of tracking, but to maintain focus, this study is limited in scope to general education students in gifted, High Achiever, and general level classes.

The few benefits of tracking are found in the higher tracks, which include gifted programs and classes (Loveless, 2009; Mulkey et al., 2005). Hornby and Witte (2014) found short-term academic benefits for gifted students in tracked classes, but none for students in the middle or lowest tracks. In his study of high achieving middle school students, Loveless (2009) found academic benefits for tracked students in math but none in language arts. One long-term benefit for students in higher tracks is that they are more likely to enroll in and complete college (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). Even these positive effects found among students in the higher tracks do not justify tracking, given the negative effects of tracking on students placed in the lower tracks.

Effects on Students in Lower Tracks

The extensive research on the academic benefits of tracking has found students in the highest track in a school show academic benefits from separate classes (Loveless, 2009), while students in the middle tracks do not show any benefit when compared to those in heterogeneous classes. However, students in lower tracks are affected negatively (Ansalone, 2010; Burris, 2014; Cipriano-Walter, 2015; Donelan et al., 1994). This section provides an in-depth review of the research that placement in the lowest track negatively affects students' academic outcomes, teacher perceptions, and academic expectations.

Negative academic outcomes. Research shows negative effects on the academic achievement of students in lower tracks that are disproportionately filled with racial and ethnic minorities (Ansalone, 2006; Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Slavin, 1988). Not only do students in the lowest tracks not receive the academic benefits of students in the highest tracks, but their placement in lower tracks is also correlated with other negative outcomes. Students in lower tracks are 60% more likely to drop out of high school (Werblow et al., 2013). Students who begin middle or high school in the lowest track are less likely to have the prerequisite courses or knowledge necessary for advanced courses that prepare them for college (Oakes, 2005). Unsurprisingly, these students are also less likely to enroll in and attend college. Proponents of tracking argue that these negative outcomes are due to the lower intellectual and academic ability of students in lower tracks. However, most research on tracking attributes these negative outcomes not on the students in the classes, but on the differences in instructional quality found in the lower tracks.

Instructional quality. Students in lower tracks receive lower quality instruction than students in the higher tracks, which negatively affects their education. In an analysis of variation

in instruction in high school tracks across multiple districts, Donaldson, LeChasseur, and Mayer (2017) found that emotional, organizational, and instructional support differed significantly between low track classes and high track classes, with students in the lower track receiving less support in all three areas. A quantitative study of teacher's classrooms by Schmidt (2013) found significant differences between the instructional quality and academic achievement of lower track and higher track classes within the same school. Teachers were more likely to implement academically rigorous tasks in higher track classes than in lower tracked classes. Students are placed in tracks ostensibly to meet their academic potential, but instruction in lower tracks is more likely to include rote memorization and worksheets, while higher tracks focus on conceptual and analytical thinking. The inadequate education that students in lower tracks receive does not prepare them adequately for their future, and many students are condemned to a predetermined path with limited options for the future, if they are not driven out of school first (Joseph, 1998).

In her study of a racially diverse, suburban high school, Modica (2015) found that racialized tracking negatively affected the educational experiences of all Black students regardless of the track. She found that students in the lower tracks did not have the same educational experiences as those in the honors classes, not simply based on lower instructional quality, but due to the way school administrators perceived their parents. When an English teacher planned to teach *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1994), administrators would not allow her to read it with her lower classes because they believed parents of the predominantly Black students could not understand the rationale for reading a book dealing with issues of race and racism. The low expectations of administrators about the parents of students in the lower track highlight their

negative perceptions of students in these classes. The students also felt the administrators were biased and blocked some of them from enrolling in honors classes based on their race.

In the higher tracks to read the book, Black students reported feeling like outsiders burdened by having to represent their race due to the small number of Black students in class (Modica, 2015). During class discussions about race and racism, they felt that White students dominated the conversation denying the existence of racism, causing the few Black students to become more silent about their experiences. They also felt antagonism from their White classmates when discussing racial issues, causing them to withdraw, limiting their engagement in academic discussion. Despite other findings that tracking has academic benefits for students in honors tracks, Modica's findings show how racialized tracking negatively affects Black students regardless of their track placement. My research included students from all three tracks to explore these themes in the middle school setting.

Negative teacher perceptions. Students in the lower tracks in middle schools face inequitable educational experiences, which include ways that teachers perceive them. Middle school teachers who taught multiple tracks had lower expectations of students in lower tracks and considered it a better assignment to teach honors classes (Worthy, 2010). Teachers defined their students based on their track, with students in the lower track more likely to be described using negative characteristics. When teachers ascribe characteristics to students in lower tracks, students begin to internalize these labels and ascribe those negative values to themselves and their academic abilities (Oakes, 2005). Because students may internalize these negative labels, the negative effects of tracking for students in the lower track extends past the curriculum and instructional quality. When proponents argue the benefits of tracking, they disregard how the mere creation of a lower track stigmatizes entire groups of students, segregating them from

others while denying them access to opportunities that other students have to learn, achieve, and thrive in school.

Worthy (2010) found that teachers provided justifications for tracking, saying that students in general classes needed differences in instructional strategies to provide more structure that could prevent them from getting in trouble. In honors classes, in addition to having less structure, teachers guided students in sustained reading of higher-level texts, promoted critical thinking, and used group work to analyze larger themes. In general classes, students worked in lower level novels, completed worksheets, and focused on test preparation strategies. Worthy's analysis of the differences between the tracks in middle school mirrors Oakes's (2005) analysis of tracked English classes in junior high and high schools.

Life outcomes. Research on the long-term life outcomes of students who were tracked reveals how tracking continues to affect students after they finish high school. Faitar and Faitar (2012) conducted a survey asking college students about their K-12 track placements. The study found that the rigor of their classes and the likelihood that they pursued a career in science depended significantly on the level of both their high school and middle school classes. Students attributed their confidence to enroll in advanced classes in high school to their experiences in higher tracks in middle school because they felt prepared for the rigor and academic expectations.

In another study, Beattie (2014) used longitudinal survey data to understand the racial and ethnic variation in the negative adolescent and young adult outcomes of dropping out, teen motherhood, and early poverty among students in tracked high schools. She found that placement in the highest, college prep track was associated with a lower likelihood of dropping out of high school, teenage motherhood, and poverty during early adulthood. Understanding that

placement in the lower track correlates with a higher likelihood of these long-term outcomes for high school girls provides important insights into how track placement not only affects the education of students while they are enrolled in a class but also has implications for major life outcomes. These negative outcomes for students in the lower tracks highlight the damage of tracking for Black girls, who are disproportionately placed in the lower tracks, and who suffer more from racialized tracking as well.

Joseph (1998) conducted a quantitative study about the long-term outcomes of tracked students once they have left school. His study found that students in the lower tracks were less likely to enroll in college, had lower annual income, and had less access to high-status jobs than students in the higher tracks. Students in the lower tracks were twice as likely to have jobs in the service industry than those in the highest track. His study also found that tracking practices are not a meritocracy, rather tracking exists to maintain the disparities in society and is used by schools to mask educational inequities. In addition to research that shows negative life outcomes for students who are in the lower tracks, research findings about the student experiences of tracking have also shown negative effects.

Student Experiences and Perceptions of Tracking

While there are documented inequalities for students among tracks, research on tracking focuses primarily on teacher perceptions, instructional practices, and academic outcomes, with much less research about how students experience and perceive tracking. Oakes (2005) interviewed students in tracked middle schools about their experiences and found that regardless of track placement, all students expressed the desire to learn. Students reported wanting interesting and engaging instruction, hands-on learning, and strategies that provided choice (Booth, 2011). Despite these reports from students, teachers of lower tracked classes are less

likely to use these instructional strategies, meaning that students placed in those tracks are less likely to benefit from them (Booth, 2011; Oakes, 2005; Worthy, 2010).

Track stigma. Students also recognized the existence of tracks and disliked the stratification, which shows they understand the value of heterogeneous grouping, and saw the harm of homogeneous classes created by tracking systems (Oakes, 2005; Stanley & Venzant, 2018). Stanley and Venzant (2018) interviewed Black high school students about their experiences and students in the lower tracks reported feeling isolated and marginalized, while students in the higher tracks felt that their classes did not allow them to have a voice. When asked about their opinions of tracks, they expressed concern with assigning students to tracks in elementary and middle school. Students in the lower track felt that being classified so early set them up to feel inferior, particularly to White students in their school, who were predominantly placed in the higher tracks. They felt that track placements reflected judgments of their ability and intellect and they made students in the lower tracks feel inferior as students before they had a chance to understand the system or demonstrate their academic abilities. Throughout their interviews, all students identified that tracking creates a stigma that positions those in the lower tracks as inferior to other students.

Racial stigma. In her interviews with Black students, Modica (2015) also found that her participants recognized the racialized stigma attached to tracking. The students in her study associated academic achievement with Whiteness, because they noticed the scarcity of Black students in honors classes. Her interviews revealed that students enrolled in honors classes expressed hyperawareness of their minority status, which silenced them during discussions of race and racism to avoid becoming visibly angry, and to avoid hurting the feelings of their White friends and classmates.

Modica's (2015) findings that Black students, regardless of their track, associated academic achievement with Whiteness, reveals another damaging effect of tracking. Black students associating education with Whiteness illustrates how historical inequalities in schools have created an ahistorical narrative about Black students and academic achievement. While Black communities and families fought for universal schooling, White communities fought to end all public education, at the expense of their own children, because of their deep fear of educated Black people. For racialized tracking systems to have created an educational landscape where Black students associate education and intelligence with White students undermines the commitment of Black communities to academic excellence, a commitment that continues to be undermined by in racially diverse schools as well.

Tracking and Race

Research about Black students in schools often uses a deficit perspective to explain disparities in achievement, similar to the narratives used when tracking began in the early 1900s (Chambers & Spikes, 2016). This deficit perspective exists within schools where Black students are viewed as less academically capable. As a result, tracking has become one of the most significant educational hurdles Black students face throughout their education (Mickelson & Greene, 2006). Historically, academic tracking maintained racial inequalities among students, and this separation influences how students view the connection between race, academic achievement, and success (Modica, 2015). Decades of tracking research has explored many of its effects, and there is a growing body of research that considers the racialized experiences of Black students, leading to more research focused on the experiences of Black girls (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Chavous et al., 2008; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Greene, 2016; Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Morris, 2016b; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Despite the

pervasiveness of tracking in public schools and its integral role in the maintenance of educational inequality, there is still little research that focuses on the experiences of Black girls in tracked schools.

Furthermore, thought research on tracking has not yet adequately examined how tracking affects female students, there is some research in this area. For example, Lucas and Gamoran (1993) found that gender did not affect track placement. However, Gamoran and Mare (1989) found that female students were more likely to be placed in college preparatory tracks in high school than male students. Overall, gender differences in educational achievement and outcomes that have historically favored male students have disappeared except for in doctoral education and in science and math fields (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007). While these findings demonstrate gender equity in education, it underscores the importance of focusing on Black girls, because their experiences are obscured within these statistics.

It is important to note that within research about tracking, the focus is often on binaries, comparing the experiences of Black students and White students, or girls and boys. These binaries position one group as the norm to which other groups should be compared, and the consistent use of these comparisons contribute to the deficit perspective of students. These comparisons affect the experiences of marginalized groups because educators focus on what is wrong with those students, instead of considering what is wrong with the schools that are responsible for educating them. Southworth and Mickelson (2007) found that White female students were more likely to be enrolled in college prep tracks than White male students. However, both Black girls and Black males were significantly less likely than White males to be in college preparatory tracks. Overall, Black girls were less likely than other students with comparable family backgrounds, friend groups, and academic records to be enrolled in college

prep tracks in high school. The authors argue that these comparisons highlight the ways that schools replicate racial and gendered inequalities. These disparate outcomes based on race and gender, and the convergence of both, emphasize the importance of understanding the distinct experiences of Black girls because their experiences of tracking cannot be understood through research performed only through the lens of race or gender. An intersectional approach allows for the appreciation of the specific social location of Black girls educated in a system as complex as tracking.

Educational Research about Black Girls

Educational research about Black girls is often framed by comparing Black girls to students in other racial or gender demographics, primarily White girls, and Black boys. While most of the research with Black girls focuses on a comparison to either Black boys or White girls, the focus of this review of the literature, like the focus of my research, is to understand Black girls' experiences as they are, without the need to compare them to a perceived racial or gendered norm. My review of the literature about Black girls in schools identified a few areas of interest— Black girls' perceptions of their school experiences, teachers' perceptions of Black girls, and disproportionate discipline.

Black Girls' Perceptions of their School Experiences

As research delves into the experiences of Black girls, studies have focused on the more nuanced understandings of their intersectional identities. Letendre and Rozas (2015) used focus groups to understand how middle school girls are affected by and cope with stereotypical language and attitudes in their school. This middle school was racially diverse with 52% students of color. The girls said they felt that teachers responded to them differently than their White classmates, but their responses differed by grade. The seventh-graders were angered by their

teachers' responses, without considering their own behavior. The eighth-grade girls had similar experiences, but they challenged their teachers' perceptions of them as ghetto and unintelligent, understanding that those ideas reflected stereotypes. The authors spoke to the complexity of this process, "It is during adolescence that gender identity is further consolidated, and for girls of color this complex developmental process is complicated by the simultaneous process of racial and ethnic identity formation in a society where they often feel devalued" (p. 51). Their findings underscore the importance of research about Black girls that considers their intersectional identities, which I explore in more depth at the end of this chapter.

Koonce (2012) used phenomenology to explore the intersectional lived experiences of Black girls who use the speech practice of "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA). Koonce defines TWA as "African American women's speech practice that is used to show confidence or resistance in oppressive situations" (p. 28). Through interviews with Black girls in middle school, she found that Black girls used TWA only when a teacher began the verbal confrontation. The girls viewed themselves as powerless in these situations and only engaged in TWA to regain their power, even though their teachers viewed the behavior as disrespectful. According to Koonce's findings, the girls in the study used TWA as a way of resisting the oppression they felt, and as a means of asserting their individual identities. Through interviews, the girls shared their beliefs that school should feel both physically and mentally safe, but teachers' negative attitudes with students made the school feel hostile. They explained using TWA in response to teachers who spoke to them in loud, disrespectful, condescending, or sarcastic ways, which they felt were not appropriate for a teacher. They would respond to the teachers in ways that they knew were disrespectful, but often felt pushed by the teacher who at times ignored their questions or needs in the interaction. Using TWA helped the girls assert

themselves in situations where they felt powerless and needed a way to assert themselves in an environment they perceived as hostile.

While some research with Black girls focuses on a single aspect of their school experiences, Watson's (2016) study sed Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework to understand the experiences and perceptions of Black girls at one inner-city high school. The broad scope of her study highlighted the multiplicity of experiences among Black girls in the same social context. She found that the girls' experiences focused on safety, well-being and the amount of support and guidance they received. While all participants felt physically safe in the school, some felt their well-being was at risk due to negative interactions with security guards during transitions between classes. Other participants expressed concerns about their mental well-being because they did not feel supported by school officials during long periods dealing with depression and significant stress. When the participants faced challenges where they needed guidance and support, only a few of them found school staff to be helpful, while others relied on friends.

The girls identified areas where the school did not meet their needs (Watson, 2016). They felt the school needed more caring teachers, involved administrators, concern for the financial situation of students, classes that mattered, and student activities where all students felt comfortable and could bring students together. Watson did not include any tracking data in her study, so it is unclear if tracking played a role in the girls' experiences. However, the girls' recommendations are important to educate all high school students effectively, and their absence highlights the inadequacy of some schools to meet the needs of Black girls. Additionally, these findings show the importance of educational research that centers the voices of Black girls as experts of their experiences.

Like Watson (2016), Joseph et al. (2016) positioned Black girls as experts, using interviews to understand the experiences of Black girls in two high schools. Most of the participants attended Summit, one of the lowest performing high schools in the state, which served predominantly Black and Latinx students. The other girls attended Ridge, a racially diverse school with equal percentages of White, Black, and Latinx students. Despite the overall diversity, Ridge had an International Baccalaureate (IB) program that segregates the school, with most of the White students enrolled in this high track, and most of the students of color enrolled in the low track, or traditional program. Because this study includes participants from two schools, it provides insight into how racialized tracking affects Black girls' understanding of and experiences with racism.

Unsurprisingly, the racialized tracking at Ridge played a large role in the experiences of the girls enrolled there influencing the frequency of racism, track enrollment decisions, and teacher perceptions (Joseph et al., 2016). Black girls at Ridge experienced racism at higher rates than those at Summit. One participant felt that racism increased in high school, explaining that in middle school, racism involved teachers, but in high school, she dealt with racism from both teachers and students. Another girl chose to leave the IB track at Ridge because she felt her teachers did not believe she could succeed in the program and, as a result, did not help her as much as other students. Another participant reported that she deliberately chose not to enroll in the IB program because of the overrepresentation of White students. She also felt that students in the IB program were racist and felt superior to students in the lower tracks. Most of their experiences with racism involved teachers treating them differently due to stereotypical beliefs. The girls said that teachers would look at the way they dressed or spoke and immediately assume the girls were disrespectful and did not care about their education.

Black girls at Summit also had experiences with racism, though their experiences were largely related to discipline and behavior (Joseph et al., 2016). One girl said that Black girls would get dress code violations for wearing the same thing that Latinx girls wore. Her example is consistent with disciplinary practices that disproportionally target Black girls, which are discussed in the next section. The girls at Summit also described more explicit forms of racism from their teachers, recounting comments from teachers that compared Black students to criminals along with direct accusations that they had stolen from class. Most of their racist experiences involved interactions with their teachers, whether through low academic expectations of Black girls, or through explicit comments or accusations. Their experiences show the role that teachers play in their educational experiences. The next section provides a review of research with teachers sharing their perceptions of Black girls in schools.

Teacher Perceptions of Black Girls

Teachers' perceptions of Black girls are important because they influence not only their interactions with students but also are central to track placement decisions. Using data from surveys of high school teachers, Campbell (2012) found that teachers' post-secondary school expectations for Black girls played a stronger role in course recommendations than academic achievement. Teachers who only believed Black girls would finish high school were less likely to recommend them for honors or advanced classes, with the likelihood of recommending Black girls to higher tracks increasing with teachers' expectations for the highest academic achievement of their Black female students. More troubling is the gap between the educational expectations that Black girls had for themselves and those of their teacher. Though only 5% of teachers felt that Black girls would attend graduate or professional school after college, 48% of Black girls had that expectation for themselves. Teachers' low academic expectations of Black

girls prevent them from access to advanced courses that prepare them to reach their academic aspirations.

In Morris's (2007) study of teachers' perceptions of Black girls in a middle school with a predominantly racial and ethnic minority student population, he found that teachers viewed Black girls as outspoken and assertive, but perceived Black girls' expression of these traits in different ways. While teachers valued their classroom participation and their self-reliance as a way of getting positive attention in academic settings, Morris found that teachers focused less of their attention on the academic progress of Black girls, focusing more on their behavior and demeanor, which they judged as loud, challenging to authority, and unladylike. His study found that Black women teachers appeared to discipline girls more than other race-gender groups. Additionally, Black women teachers paid more attention to the behaviors of Black girls and took an active role to prevent behaviors they felt reflected dominant stereotypes of aggression or hypersexuality (Collins, 2015). The teachers' perceptions of Black girls as loud and aggressive, led to teachers spending more time focusing on and disciplining their behavior to try and mold them into more acceptable expressions of femininity and become "ladies."

Morris (2007) found that the assertiveness, self-reliance, and independence, that teachers corrected for being unladylike when the girls expressed them were the same traits that helped them succeed academically. Because this hindrance for Black girls existed in a school with a predominantly minority student population, I believe it is important to understand how Black girls in schools with racialized tracking experience teachers' attempts to change their behavior within a context where racialized comparisons and stigmas exist due to tracking. Because school officials perceive Black girls as not fitting into the normative expectations of femininity defined by White womanhood, they are often punished when they fall short (Morris, 2016b). As a result,

Black girls face suspension and expulsion for behaviors related to their nonconformity, including dress code, profane language, or displaying anger in the classroom (Morris, 2012). When the behaviors of Black girls deviate from the White middle-class norms, Black girls are punished leading to disproportionate rates of discipline.

Disproportionate Discipline of Black Girls

There is a large body of research about the disproportionate discipline of Black students compared to their White counterparts, often referred to as the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Morris, 2012). The school-to-prison pipeline refers to "the school based policies, practices, conditions, and prevailing consciousness that facilitate criminalization within educational environments and the processes by which this criminalization results in the incarceration of youth and young adults" (p. 2). The bulk of this research is focused on the suspensions and expulsions of Black boys, while hiding the experiences of Black girls. The same discriminatory practices push African American girls out of schools and into the juvenile justice system, which contributes to academic disengagement, high dropout rates, criminal activity, and economic disparities due to unemployment and reduced lifetime earnings (Morris, 2016b; Smith-Evans & George, 2014).

In particular, Black girls are victims of disproportionate criminalization and punishment through overly punitive disciplinary sanctions (George, 2015). For example, in 2009-10, Black girls represented less than 17% of all female students, but they comprised 31% of all girls referred to law enforcement and approximately 43% of girls who had experienced a school-related arrest (Smith-Evans & George, 2014). These higher rates of discipline are not attributed to higher rates of misbehavior. Instead, African American students are punished more severely for less serious and more subjective infractions than other students (Skiba, Eckes, & Brown, 2009/10). Implicit racial bias is a primary influence in discretionary discipline decisions that

create disparities for African American students, particularly Black girls (Morris, 2007; Rudd, 2014).

Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools (Morris, 2016b) argued that Black girls are punished in schools, and subsequently criminalized through the school-to-prison pipeline, due to practices, beliefs, and policies that damage their humanity and education, further marginalizing them in school and society. Morris explored how negative stereotypes about Black femininity have shaped the experiences of Black girls in schools since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and are still prevalent in the lives of Black girls attending school today.

The biases of teachers and administrators are demonstrated in the code words associated with Black girls "assertive American," "loud," "aggressive," and "confrontational, all of which are all incongruent with the passive and compliant nature that is perceived positive and acceptable feminine behavior (George, 2015). Black girls face punishment in schools for exhibiting the same characteristics they must display in the world to survive as someone who is Black and female. Morris (2016b) explained for Black women defiance is not inherently bad, pointing to Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth as examples of the women who were defiant in a rejection of oppression. Black girls learn to be "loud" as a demand to be heard, and as a response to being historically oppressed and ignored, and having "attitude" is the rejection of invisibility and mistreatment by teachers and peers (Koonce, 2012; Letendre & Rozas, 2015; Morris, 2007).

Morris (2016b) found that Black girls were often punished for having an "attitude" based on behaviors related to who they are as Black girls. They were more likely to be disciplined for talking back, being loud, or cursing in class. They are also more likely to received punishments for violating arbitrary dress codes that criminalize natural hairstyles or clothes "too distracting"

for boys. Dress codes are another tool used to punish Black girls, rather than to maintain standards for student presentation. The participants stated they were routinely sent home from school because they did not adhere to a dress code that prescribed the appropriate type of shoes, belt, or hair. School officials place more importance on the appearance of Black girls than on their academic progress demonstrating their priority is controlling Black girls rather than educating them. Focusing on the discipline of Black girls occurs at all educational levels but ignoring their academic progress in middle school has long-term effects on their academic trajectory, which makes understanding their experiences during this time necessary to ensure they receive an equitable education.

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Understanding Middle School

Research about Black girls and research about tracking ignore the middle school context. The focus for tracking has been on elementary and high school, and even within these spaces, research on the experiences of Black girls is still limited. Middle schools are important spaces to research because of their stated purpose as a bridge between elementary school and high school, designed to meet the specific developmental needs of students ages 11-13 (Bandlow, 2001; Tamer, 2012). Students' experiences in middle school have important implications for student's academic trajectories, and equitable, high-quality educational experiences are essential for all adolescents to reach their academic potential during this transition before the pressure of high

school, where students often face additional responsibilities like jobs or serious relationships (Mickelson, 2015).

Understanding the effects of tracking in middle school is key to understanding the significance of tracking on a student's educational experience because tracking begins for most students during this time. Researchers have identified that racial disparities in educational outcomes begin as early as elementary school where students with higher Black populations are less likely to be placed in the college preparatory track in middle school (Mickelson, 2015). The prevalent use of tracking in middle schools exacerbates differences between students by placing them into separate educational settings, influenced largely by race and socioeconomic status (Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011). This segregation is influenced by criticism that middle school is too "child-centered" and does not provide enough rigor for students to be academically successful.

Critics of middle school argue that focusing on developmental needs fails to prepare students for the structure and academic rigor of college preparatory high school (Beane, 1999). One step towards addressing this inequity is to understand the experiences of students who are marginalized in middle school by racialized tracking, and this study explores the experiences of Black girls, a group whose experiences are shaped by their identities as both racial and gender minorities. The intersection of gender and race shape both the identities and experiences of Black girls in tracked middle schools because it influences how they view themselves and how others perceive them (Letendre & Rozas, 2015). The transition to middle school can be difficult for Black girls because peer groups are important to developing Black girls' emerging racial and gender identities, and middle school often separates them from elementary school friends. The academic demands of middle school make it more difficult for students to develop relationships with teachers, another factor that contributes to positive academic outcomes for Black girls.

By understanding how Black girls experience racialized tracking in a middle school setting, this research project provided important insights into how Black girls navigated middle school. Additionally, most research on Black girls focused on their experiences in predominantly Black schools, and this study explored how Black girls' experiences in different tracks vary in a racially and ethnically diverse school. To fully explore the experiences of Black girls, I used intersectionality as a conceptual framework, which I explain along with the study's methodology in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents an overview of the methods and procedures that I used in this study. To provide an in-depth explanation of this study, this chapter begins with an explanation of the conceptual framework, then continues with an overview of the research site, the participants, research methods, data sources, data analysis techniques, and ending with the researcher's subjectivity and positionality. I designed this study to explore how Black girls in middle schools with racialized tracking practices understand themselves and their educational experiences. Understanding the experiences of Black girls who are educated within the context of racialized tracking provides important insights about how the labels assigned through tracking affect student perceptions of how tracking is used to group students, and how they view themselves. The research questions that I used to guide my study are

1. What are the experiences of Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking?
2. How do Black girls' experiences and ideas about tracking affect their identities?

Conceptual Framework

In Chapter 1, I described how this study is grounded in Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2015) to honor and acknowledge the ways that Black girls create knowledge and wisdom through their lived experiences. Because Black girls' lives are shaped through their positioning with respect to race, gender, and track placement, I used intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and its four domains of power to examine the experiences of the girls in this study. Intersectionality helped me describe the overlapping social identities and related systems of oppression that affect Black girls in a school with racialized tracking. The next section explains intersectionality in more detail, outlining the four domains of power that affect the racialized and gendered lived experiences of Black women and girls.

Intersectionality

Schooling is a formative experience; therefore, how Black girls experience schools must be interrogated through a lens that identifies, considers, and critiques systems while acknowledging the intersectionality of Black girls in the United States (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality provided a useful framework to analyze the experiences of Black girls in schools because it addresses structural, political, and representational elements to understand the intersections of race, class, and gender in the context of school. Intersectionality also provided the tools to understand how other factors like social class or academic track contribute to the experiences of Black girls, along with the interplay of race and gender. Intersectionality includes four domains of power, which I describe in the next sections.

Domains of power. Collins and Bilge (2016) define intersectionality as "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences… Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (p. 2). For the purposes of this study, intersectionality provided a lens to explore the experiences of the participants whose lived experiences are shaped by the complexity of their identities within social contexts. The framework contextualizes Black girls' racial and gender identities, as well as the complex ways that power shapes and influences their experiences given their unique positioning. Intersectionality demands that these elements are considered by identifying four types of power relationships that are useful in understanding Black girls' schooling experiences. Power relationships shape people's everyday lives because power affects how people relate to each other, and those power dynamics determine who has power in a situation and who does not. The four domains of power of intersectionality are

interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural. I explain each of these domains in the following sections.

Interpersonal domain. The interpersonal domain refers to the relationships people have with one another, particularly the communication between dominant and non-dominant groups. In school, this domain includes Black girls' communication with teachers and other school staff, and in a tracked school, it also encompasses communication with their peers in different tracks as well, due to the privilege and power held by those in the upper tracks. Tyson (2011) wrote, "racialized tracking reinforces a pecking order that leads to animosity and resentment between the students at the top and those at the bottom" (p. 51). Her research found that students in the lower tracks perceive students in higher tracks as arrogant leading to anger and resentment for those who are assigned to lower track classes. While not all students experience negative interpersonal dynamics with their peers or school officials, this domain is important because relationships between members of a school community are not neutral, and I used the interpersonal domain to consider interactions between the girls in this study and their classmates, students in different tracks, teachers, other school officials and their parents to understand how these interpersonal relationships affected their experiences.

***Disciplinary domain*.** The disciplinary domain refers to how rules and regulations are used to maintain oppression in society and how rules are applied differently for different groups based on their power in a given context (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This domain is exemplified in the disproportionate rates of discipline for Black girls in schools, and the disproportionately harsh punishments they receive compared to other groups of students who engage in similar behaviors (Morris, 2016). This domain examines how schools create rules and policies with the goal of "creating quiet, orderly, docile, and disciplined populations of Black women" (Collins,

2009, p. 299). Teachers focus more attention on the behavior of Black girls based on perceptions of them as loud, unladylike, and as challenging to authority (Morris, 2007). Given the growing body of research that identifies the disproportionate discipline of Black girls, this study considered how they experienced differential treatment within their racially diverse middle school and how their experiences were affected by the disciplinary domain.

Structural domain. The structural domain refers to how institutions are organized to maintain the oppression of Black women (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As a critical praxis, intersectionality explicitly challenges the status quo with the purpose of transforming power dynamics by changing the structure and organization of institutions like schools. Within the context of this study, the structural domain comprises how VMS organized students in academic tracks, leveled classes, and grouped students in teams. The stated criteria for placement into tracks also worked within this domain because these policies shaped the experiences of students by defining who belonged within each track. The structure and organization of the school affected the experiences of the girls in this study by defining their academic and social environment.

Cultural domain. The cultural domain encompasses how institutions, policies, and practices produce and reproduce oppressive ideas that justify inequalities among groups of people (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This domain is centered on the dominant narrative that justifies the oppression of Black women and girls by continuing the historical notions of their inferiority to other racial and gender groups. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) outlines how the controlling images of Black women as mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas have justified unequal treatment in society (Collins, 2015). The stereotypes that emerge from these images are reflected in prior research findings about the perceptions of Black

female students. Black girls are often described with deficit-oriented labels such as “at risk,” “unmotivated,” “underperforming,” “economically disadvantaged,” “struggling,” and “educationally handicapped” (Richardson, 2013). Black feminine expression is often understood and viewed negatively through the lens of stereotypes of Black girls as loud, sassy, hypersexual, aggressive, or combative (Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016a). This domain highlights the importance of amplifying counternarratives that resist and reject attitudes that Black girls are intellectually, academically, and morally inferior to other groups in school. To explore the elements of this domain, I considered the language, images, values, and ideas that were important to my participants as they made meaning of their middle school experiences. Additionally, through this domain, I focused on how the girls understood inequalities at VMS and how their thoughts or actions resisted them. Altogether, as a tool of analysis, intersectionality acknowledges how the interplay of race and gender shapes the experiences of Black girls

Intersectionality as Critical Inquiry and Praxis. Intersectionality as a framework includes both critical inquiry and praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2016). It interrogates the ways people, either as individuals or as a part of groups, produce, draw upon, or use intersectional frameworks in their daily lives. As a critical praxis, it explicitly challenges the status quo to transform oppressive power relations. When intersectionality is used as critical inquiry, it aims to understand the experiences and struggles of people from marginalized groups. The framework uses inquiry to gain knowledge from the experiences of oppressed people to challenge the power systems that oppress them with the explicit purpose of empowering oppressed communities and individuals to create change. Furthermore, intersectionality is linked to the work of scholars from past movements for liberation, equality, and civil rights, and is used to analyze the oppression of marginalized groups. Research on Black girls who attend the same school but are assigned to

different tracks requires a conceptual framework that acknowledges the effects of race, gender, class, track placement, and other factors that shape the participants' identities and experiences. For this reason, I used intersectionality as a framework to understand the experiences of the students in the study, and then wove its foundations throughout the data analysis and the discussion in Chapter 5.

Phenomenology and Black Feminist Thought

This study also draws on aspects of phenomenological research, which is based on theory developed by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Phenomenology moves beyond the existing meaning that phenomena present and invites new meanings to arise immediately and directly in the consciousness of individuals as they describe their experiences (Crotty, 1998). This perspective requires looking past common understandings and bringing a new perspective to human experiences by thinking about them, interpreting them, and making meaning of them. Phenomenology calls into question preconceived notions about the world and focuses on examining all human experiences by bringing intentionality and consciousness to the forefront. van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as the study of examples, using lived experiences to understand the essence of the human experience through examples from individuals.

This study uses a phenomenological approach because it allows me to examine the experiences of Black girls from a first-person perspective (Smith et al., 2013). Phenomenology provides a methodology for social inquiry that requires researchers to both look at the immediate phenomenon and to return to the experiences throughout the analysis (Smith et al., 2013). Because of the continual analysis of human experiences, phenomenological researchers must be aware of their biases and subjectivities. Subjectivities are "the quality of an investigator that affects the results of observational investigation" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). As a Black woman

conducting research with Black girls, my subjectivities are important because our shared identities played a role in how I made meaning of their experiences, and phenomenology embraces a collaborative approach to inquiry with the researcher and participants involved throughout the research process (Orbe, Drummond, & Camara, 2002). Subjectivities exist in all researchers and phenomenology requires constant examination of them without pursuing objectivity; instead, researchers must bracket their biases and maintain their focus on the lived experiences of the participants. Orbe (2000) argued that researchers should be willing to acknowledge and interrogate how their own experiences influence their interpretation of data. Throughout this study, I acknowledged that the choices that I made throughout the research process were shaped by my identity as a Black woman seeking to understand how Black girls make sense of their world.

The fundamental principles of phenomenology are aligned with the tenets of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2015) with both fields recognizing the importance of lived experiences (Orbe et al., 2002). Both phenomenology and Black Feminist Thought acknowledge the individual as the expert of their lived experiences, and each theory understands that people are situated in particular cultural, social, and historical contexts that must be considered in the meaning making process. Similar to BFT, phenomenology argues that emotions and expressiveness are important to knowledge creation, theory, and research. Orbe et al. (2002) argued, “Phenomenological inquiry creates a discursive space where African American women can give voice to the circumstances that are central to the ways in which they experience life” (p. 125). The centrality of emotions and expressiveness was integral to this study because the emotionality the girls used when discussing different topics was significant to understanding which aspects of their lived experiences were significant to their experiences with racialized

tracking. van Manen (2017) is careful to explain that emotions or reactions to an event are not the same as lived experiences. Lived experiences are the data used in phenomenological research and can be collected through anecdotes, stories, narratives, or other concrete accounts of a phenomenon. However, the girls' emotion and expressiveness were also important to understand the meaning that girls made of their school experiences in school.

As a Black woman, my research with Black girls is supported by BFT's assertion that Black women and girls do not create knowledge in isolation, and claims are developed as a community through dialogue (Collins, 2015). Both BFT and phenomenology value the role of research participants as experts of their lived experiences and consider lived experiences as essential to understanding a given phenomenon, and people rely on lived experiences to establish credibility for their interpretation (van Manen, 1990). Therefore, I used a phenomenological approach to invite my participants to share their everyday experiences in a middle school with racialized tracking. To guide my data analysis, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2013), which I describe later in this chapter.

Research Methodology

Crotty (1998) defined methodology as "the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes" (p. 3). The purpose of my research was to understand and illuminate the lived experiences of Black girls who experience racialized tracking in middle school. Qualitative research methodology is suited for this research project because it provides "answers to questions to stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Tracking has been extensively studied as it relates to disparate academic effects and teacher perceptions of students in tracked classes, but research has yet to adequately explore how

students perceive their educational experiences within the context of tracking, particularly the experiences of Black girls and their racial, gendered social positioning. To understand the experiences of Black girls, I used case study methodology because it allowed for deep understanding of their experiences in the specific context of racialized tracking in middle school.

Case Study Research

Case study research involves "in-depth contextual study of a person, people, issue or place, with a predetermined scope of the study" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 26). Case studies provide detailed investigations that lead to in-depth understandings about an issue, and this research can develop an understanding of a case to "take the reader into the case situation, a person's life, a group's life, or a program's life" (Patton, 2002, p. 387). The ability to provide in-depth understandings of people made case study well-suited as a methodology to understand the experiences of Black girls in the educational context of academic tracking.

I chose case study because it focuses on particularization rather than generalization. Stake (1995) said, "There is an emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself" (p. 8). This particularization aligns with BFT's acknowledgment that the experiences of Black girls cannot be essentialized or generalized because of the diversity within this population and the variety of their experiences (Collins, 2015). The focus on particularization required that during interpretation, I preserved "*multiple realities,* the different and even contradictory views of what is happening" (Stake, 1995, p. 12). Case study provided the opportunity to concentrate on a bounded case while focusing on how the interaction of the different aspects of racialized tracking affected the girls' experiences. This study is an intrinsic case study that focused primarily on learning about and understanding the experiences of the Black girls in the case (Stake, 1995). I

investigated the relationships that emerged as each participant shared their experiences with tracking, which allowed me to understand each participant separately, but also afforded me the ability to find commonalities in the data.

The six girls in this case study were bounded by their shared characteristics as Black girls who were placed within racialized tracking at the same middle school. This methodology focused on a deep understanding of each participant to "learn about their self-centering, complexity, and situational uniqueness" (Stake, 2006, p. 6). By framing this case using intersectionality, I centered the voices of my participants, using their lived experiences as the basis of meaning-making and knowledge creation, paying specific attention to how their experiences were shaped within the domains of power (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Case study allowed me to create a nuanced view of the experiences of the girls in my study to understand how they experience tracking. Due to the interacting variables apparent in this educational context, the descriptive nature of case study demanded that I provided rich, "thick" descriptions of their experiences. *Thick description,* a term used by Geertz (1973), who adopted it from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, is the foundation of all qualitative research and provides both a detailed description that brings the reader into the case and an interpretation of the data that considers cultural norms, values, ideals, and attitudes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The inductive nature of the case study allowed for the discovery of new information as I focused on understanding new relationships, concepts, and ideas based on what the girls shared about their experiences. These elements provided an important foundation for the analysis of the data because I made new meaning through inductive reasoning using multiple data sources that I explain later in this chapter. The next section explains my positionality as a researcher to further contextualize my research.

Positionality

My positionality and subjectivities as a researcher are always important to consider, but they were particularly important to pay attention to because of my role as both a researcher and teacher at the research site. "All researchers have great privilege and obligation: the privilege to pay attention and the obligation to make conclusions drawn from those choices meaningful to colleagues and clients" (Stake, 1995, p. 49). I am a Black woman who teaches at Vanderbilt, a school that uses racialized tracking to group students. Throughout my K-12 education, I attended tracked schools and was educated in the highest track. From kindergarten through sixth grade, I attended schools that participated in racialized tracking through selective enrollment programs for gifted students, and I was one of few Black students in my classes. In seventh grade, I tested into an elite, public magnet school that served students from seventh through 12th grades. This education prepared me for acceptance to an Ivy League university, which I graduated from with honors. Simply stated, I reaped the benefits of tracking.

I only began to question the practice when I became a public-school teacher and noticed the disparities between the tracks, from the way teachers spoke about them, the way they talked about themselves, and the experiences that students in the lower track were excluded from because of how others viewed them. Working in a racially diverse school, I realized how racialized tracking upholds the de-facto segregation of a school. When I walk down the hallways, I know which track is in each classroom based on the racial composition of the students. I've been asked to move into teaching gifted classes, which many teachers view as a bonus, or a reward, because they can teach the "better," "smarter" students, but it is my commitment to students who are marginalized within the school's tracking hierarchy that has kept me in my position teaching the lowest tracks for the past 13 years. These experiences have

brought me to this research focus because I wanted to understand how racialized tracking affects Black girls specifically because of the gendered and racial implications that affect their school experiences.

Throughout this study, I considered my positionality, particularly because of my role as a teacher at the school that the participants attend. My role as a member of the school community aligns my study with the theoretical frameworks that focus on the importance of community and dialogue as Black women and girls understand our lived experiences and our collective creation of knowledge (Collins, 2015; van Manen, 1990). I understand the importance of focusing on the experiences of the girls as they shared them, rather than clinging to any notions I may have based on my own experiences. Black women and girls use dialogue to create knowledge and wisdom collectively, but throughout this research aimed to remain conscious of my own understandings, as I made sense of theirs.

Research Design

The study began in the Spring of 2019 following IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval and culminated in July 2019. In this section I describe the research context and the methodological details of my research design including: the research site, description of the participants, data collection, data analysis, and the representation of findings.

Research Site

The research site was a middle school in a suburb of a large city in the Southeast with a student population that was racially and socioeconomically diverse and used scheduling processes that have resulted in racialized tracking. Vanderbilt Middle School (VMS) is a public charter school in a small suburb of a large city. It is part of a large school district that serves over 100,000 students. During the school year of data collection, VMS had a total enrollment of over

1600 students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The student population was diverse in a variety of ways. The racial demographics were 45% White, 30% Hispanic, 16% Black, 6% Asian, and 3% Multiracial. These demographics differed greatly from the demographics of Steele County School District, which were 64% Black, 17% Hispanic, 11% White, 6% Asian, and 2% Multiracial. Vanderbilt's student population differed from the school district in other demographics as well; students with disabilities (SWD) represented 10% of the student population, the largest percentage of any neighborhood school in the district, and 37% of students received Free or Reduced Lunch compared to 72% students in the district. These demographic differences are shown in Figure 1. Vanderbilt's diversity was important to the context of this study because its diversity played an important role in the structure of the school and the policies used to maintain its organization.

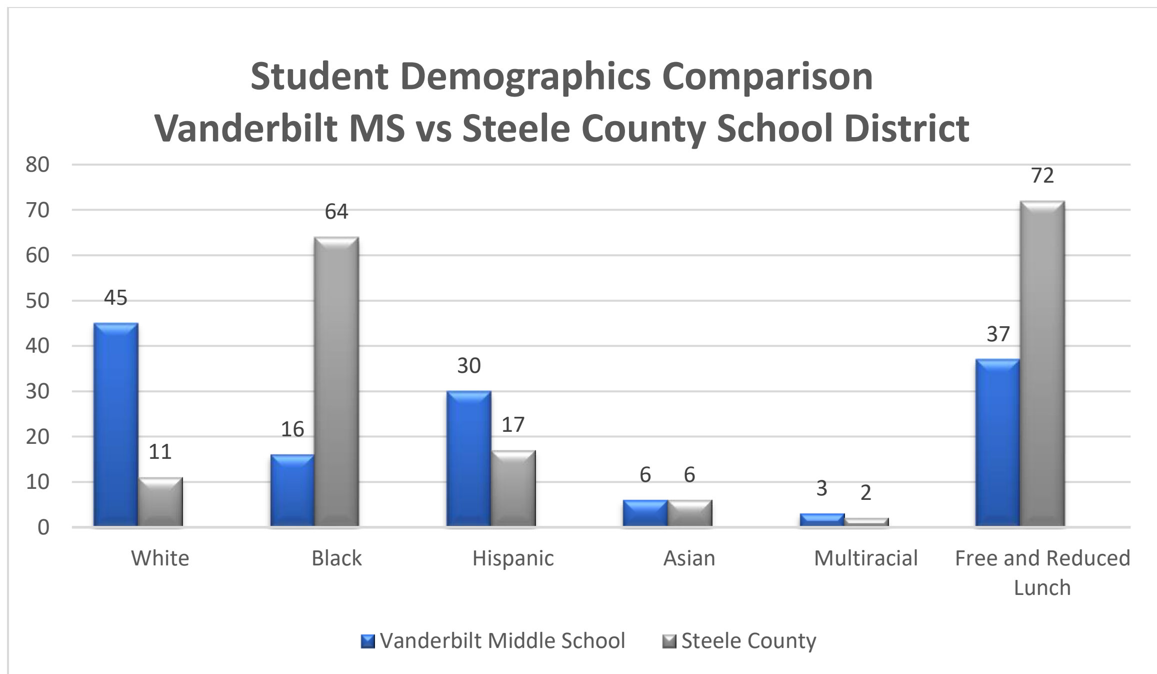

Figure 1. Comparison of the student demographics by race and socioeconomic status between Vanderbilt Middle School and the Steele County School District

Another important aspect of Vanderbilt Middle School (VMS) was the method the school used to schedule students through tracking. VMS scheduled students into three different tracks: general, High Achiever, and gifted. According to school documents, the school placed students in High Achiever classes based on their performance on a nationally normed standardized test all students take each year. Students who did not reach the cut score were placed in general. Students qualify for placement in gifted classes using school district guidelines, which I describe in the next section.

Gifted. Gifted education is a branch of exceptional education with the stated purpose of serving students who excel intellectually or artistically in specific academic fields and require special instruction or additional services to achieve at a level that corresponds with their abilities. According to Steele County School District, gifted classes are designed to provide students who perform at this level with rigorous activities that will help them reach their demonstrated potential. Students go through the gifted qualification process, which followed guidelines established by the school district, before they were placed on the gifted track at VMS.

The gifted qualification process has multiple steps, and can take an entire school year for a student to complete. Testing begins at the beginning of each school year when all students in grades K-10 are tested using a nationally normed achievement test as a universal screener to determine gifted eligibility. To qualify as gifted, students must meet three of the following criteria: 1) score in the 90th percentile or higher on the total reading, math, or composite score of a nationally normed achievement test, 2) score in the 96th percentile or higher in at least one sub-test area of a nationally normed achievement test, 3) score in the 90th percentile or higher on a creativity assessment, 4) score at the 90th percentile or higher on an assessment for motivation.

The percentage of gifted identified students is higher than the percentages at both the state and the nation, with 33% of VMS's students identified as gifted, while the percentage of students identified as gifted in public schools in the state was 12.9% and 6.7% nationally during the 2013-2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Proponents of tracking for the benefit of gifted students estimate that gifted students are those who perform at the top ten percent on a norm-referenced test (Steenbergen-Hu & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). Estimates on the percent of people in a given population that are gifted historically range widely from 1% to 20% (Belanger & Gagne, 2006). The small number of Black students in gifted classes at a school where one-third of the students were gifted identified further exacerbates the racial segregation of classes at VMS, and the racialized inequality that negatively affects Black students at the school.

Students who meet three of the four criteria above are enrolled in gifted classes once both student and parent have signed the gifted continuation policy, which at VMS stated that students must maintain an 80% or above in each gifted class. Students who received below 80% were placed on gifted probation for one semester. At the end of that semester, students were taken off of probation if they scored 80% or above in their gifted class, or they were moved to High Achiever classes if they scored below an 80%.

VMS's gifted policy differed in some significant ways from SCSD. Steele County's policy stated that students must maintain an 80% or above in all classes, both gifted and regular education. In contrast, the continuation policy at VMS stated that students need to maintain 80% in only their gifted classes before being placed going on probation. If a student earned below 80% at the end of the probationary semester, the student was removed from the gifted course and placed in a High Achiever class. Once the student received above 80% in a High Achiever class,

they returned to a gifted class. This policy differed from the district policy in that continuation and probation at VMS were determined class by class. Additionally, when students were removed from a gifted class, they were placed in a High Achiever class, SCSD's policy states that students are placed in regular classes if they leave gifted classes. The difference in the VMS policy demonstrated that High Achiever classes were considered above regular classes, which they referred to as general.

This distinction between the school and district policy was essential to understanding how tracking operated at VMS because it was the only middle school in the county that continued to use the High Achiever designation to track students, whereas the district abandoned this distinction in neighborhood schools four years before this study began. The next section explains the label of High Achiever as it is described by VMS and how the label functions at the school and within the district. Two of the girls in the study, Maya and Alexis, qualified for gifted classes, however, only Maya was enrolled in gifted classes at the time of the study. Alexis completed gifted testing during the school year when the study took place, and she found out she qualified shortly before data collection began and was scheduled for gifted classes the next school year.

High Achiever. High Achiever was a label used by both the school district and VMS to classify students and courses. During the time of the study, the district used High Achiever to describe the students in their academic magnet programs, which bring together students from different neighborhoods to attend school together, instead of enrolling at their neighborhood school. To enroll in academic magnet programs, students must score at the 75th percentile or above on both the math and reading sections of a nationally normed achievement test, submit an application to each school, and then get selected in a school choice lottery. District High

Achiever programs have strict probation and continuation policies, which require that students maintain an 80 average in all core classes, and students must maintain a 71 or above in each core class individually. They must also meet all grade promotion criteria established by the district or school. If students do not meet these requirements, they are placed on probation for one semester. During that semester, parents must attend conferences, and teachers must develop support plans for each student placed on probation. After two consecutive semesters, a student who does not meet the academic criteria must exit the school and attend their home school.

At VMS, High Achiever courses are stated to provide students with rigor through a variety of assignments and projects that require and reveal higher-order thinking skills. VMS's stated policy for placement in High Achiever classes is scoring at or above the 55th percentile on the Reading or Math portion of a norm-referenced, standardized test. Students who score at the 55th percentile or above in Reading are placed in High Achiever for Language Arts and Social Studies classes, and students who score at that level on the Math test are placed in High Achiever for Math and Science. If a student meets the criteria in both sections, they are placed in High Achiever classes for all four core subjects.

Despite these stated school guidelines, placement decisions are also made based on teacher and counselor recommendations, and parental requests, which contributes to the racial disparity between the tracks. VMS is the only middle school in the district that preserved the High Achiever track after the district began using High Achiever only in reference to their selective enrollment magnet programs and no longer provided guidelines for High Achiever programs in neighborhood schools. At VMS, High Achiever probation and continuation follows the same guidelines as the gifted program. If students do not maintain an 80 or above in any High Achiever class, they are placed on probation for one semester. After two semesters with

grades below 80%, students are moved from the High Achiever class to a general class. Once they receive an 80 in their general level class, they are moved back to a High Achiever class. Five of the participants in this study had at least one High Achiever level course during the school year when the study took place.

General. Students who do not qualify for gifted classes, and who are not placed in High Achiever classes, are assigned to general classes. General classes do not have any specific criteria or guidelines, learning expectations, or requirements for students or teachers. These classes use the state standards to guide instruction. This study included girls who were educated in all three tracks at VMS.

Participants

This study focused on how Black girls who attended Vanderbilt Middle School understood tracking and how tracking affected their schooling and identities. Because my goal was to understand the multitude of experiences of Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking, I chose purposeful sampling to identify girls assigned to the three different tracks: general, High Achiever, and gifted. Using maximum variation sampling, I recruited six girls, including participants who were assigned to a single track for all four core academic classes: Math, Language Arts, Social Studies and Science. Of the six participants, three girls, Alexis, Leah, and Denise were on the High Achiever track for all core classes and one participant, Jada, was on the general track for all core classes. A fourth girl, Maya, was in three High Achiever classes and one gifted class in the Fall and moved to gifted classes for all core subjects in the Spring. Lastly, Nia, was assigned to High Achiever for Language Arts and Social Studies, and general classes for Math and Science.

Each student's track assignment for their core academic classes was essential to my research because their placement on different tracks allowed me to explore the varied lived experiences of Black girls who were positioned differently within this context. Furthermore, their track placement was important because tracking creates different learning contexts, and I sought to understand how their experiences differed depending on the track level. In the next sections, I explain participant recruitment, sampling processes, and participant criteria.

Participant Selection Criteria

I used purposeful sampling techniques to determine my study participants. (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007). Purposeful sampling is a term used specifically in qualitative research because researchers choose participants that provide information-rich cases to answer the research questions (Patton, 2002). Information-rich cases are those from whom the researcher can learn about the issues central to the purpose of the research. Purposeful sampling is used in case study because of the anticipated relevance and depth of information related to the research questions. Because my study focused on a specific population, I also used criterion-based selection (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). I chose criterion-based sampling because my study operated under research-supported assumptions that race, gender, and track placement affect the way students make meaning of their school experience (Joseph et al., 2016; Modica, 2015; Tyson, 2011; Worthy, 2010).

For selection in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1) identify as Black,

2) identify as a girl,

3) attend Vanderbilt Middle School, and

4) attend VMS from the beginning of the school year when research was collected

I chose to conduct my research at a single school because it allowed me to use my knowledge of the school demographics, environment, and climate to inform and frame my analysis of racialized tracking. By choosing girls who met these criteria, I was able to focus on their experiences at this school within the context of racialized tracking, rather than their adjustment to a new school.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Upon IRB approval, I began participant recruitment in the Spring of 2019. I used an IRB approved flier to recruit participants. The flier briefly described the study and listed the study criteria as well as my contact information. I posted the flier in clubhouses of the subdivisions and apartment complexes in the research site attendance area. By posting the flier in this area, I targeted girls who attended VMS. The parents of interested participants contacted me via email or phone using the information listed on the flier. After recruiting my first participant, other students heard about the study through the participant and her parents, and I was able to recruit five more participants. Eight girls initially showed interest, but after speaking with each girl and her parents to discuss participation criteria and details of the study, I successfully recruited six of the eight girls who showed initial interest. One of the participants decided not to participate due to time constraints, and another girl's parent was uncomfortable with the focus group aspect of the study. I met with the six participants and their parents, and they signed the assent and consent forms during our meeting. Participation in the study was voluntary.

To find participants with a variety of experiences and who spanned all three tracks, I used maximum variation as my method of purposeful sampling. Maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling is a method of purposeful sampling that has the goal of identifying and describing major themes that emerge among the variation of a specific population (Patton, 2002). Because

the research site is a large, racially diverse middle school that tracks students, the population for this research is all Black girls who attend the school. This population is too large to study as a whole; however, through maximum variation sampling, I recruited six Black girls with collective experiences in all three tracks as my sample. This sample allowed me to understand their commonalities and how the phenomenon of racialized tracking influenced the experiences of Black girls with different track placements. I chose this sample size because it provided a variety of experiences, while allowing me to go in-depth with each participant's experiences. Table 1 outlines the heterogeneity of experiences the girls had across tracks and grade levels.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	**Age**	**Grade**	**Track Placement(s)**
Nia	11	6	High Achiever General
Alexis	12	6	High Achiever
Leah	12	6	High Achiever
Denise	13	7	High Achiever
Maya	13	7	High Achiever Gifted
Jada	13	8	General

Data Collection

Data collection took place during the spring and summer of 2019. Based on the tradition of qualitative research (Patton, 2002), I used multiple sources of data, which I organized into different sets. The data came from the following sources: 1) individual interviews and a focus group, 2) researcher reflective journal and memos, and 3) official district and school documents regarding tracking criteria and guidelines.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data to understand the girls' experiences. The questions in the interview protocol focused on the following categories: track placement, race, identity, academic expectations, and experiences with teachers. Because I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2013), the interview questions focused on topics relevant to the participants' experiences within the context of the research questions. The interviews included questions about their experiences as Black girls at VMS, the curriculum, their interactions with teachers and students, their friends, their perspectives on the ways students were grouped into classes and teams, and the way students were treated at the school. I used the protocol as a guide for the conversation, but I used the flexibility of a semi-structured interview to ask additional or different questions based on the interview and the participant. This flexibility also allowed me to ask for clarification or additional information about a given topic based on their responses and the experiences most important to them.

Interviews are a method of exploring the multiple realities of the case (Stake, 1995). The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed me to change and adjust questions based on student response, and the opportunity to seek elaboration and clarification, but given my role as both a researcher and teacher at VMS, I was careful about how much I shared in the dialogue during the interview. Because children are a vulnerable population, I kept the power dynamic at the center of my work as a researcher. I was careful to allow them to speak from their experiences, and I was careful with my responses because I did not want them to shift their responses based on what they thought I might want them to say in the interview. Given phenomenology's focus on the lived experience, interviews allowed me to use dialogue to elicit the experiences of the participants, and the flexibility to ask for more detail or for examples to

fully capture how they make meaning of their experiences at VMS. These interviews took place in a clubhouse near the school and at a local library. The initial interviews for five of the participants occurred in May, and the interview of the sixth participant took place in June.

I used a digital audio recorder to record each interview. During each interview, I reviewed the information in the assent form, reviewed the purpose of the study, the topics of the interview questions, that participation was voluntary, and that the girls could withdraw from the study at any time. Throughout the interviews, I listened to each girls' responses and encouraged them to expand on their answers to questions when they had particularly emotional or expressive responses. I did not take notes during the interview because I felt that given my role as a teacher, writing notes in front of them might feel evaluative. At the end of the interviews, I confirmed the date and location of the upcoming focus group and thanked each girl for sharing their experiences with me. Following the interviews, I uploaded each audio recording onto my personal computer as a password-protected file. While the file uploaded, I wrote observational notes and reflections in my researcher's journal to capture and bracket my initial thoughts and ideas about the interview (Patton, 2002). These journal reflections and notes provided invaluable data for this study, because I was able to track my thinking from the initial interview through the steps of data analysis. I also used my reflections from my initial interviews to write and revise questions for the focus group.

The second interviews took place in August 2019 at a clubhouse near the school and a local library. These interviews were also semi-structured, but the interview protocol varied for each participant because while some questions were the same, I wrote questions based on each participants' contributions in the first interview and the focus group. This interview allowed me to ask more specific questions about the girls' experiences and the themes that emerged in the

interviews and the focus group. During this interview, I also completed the final member check, a process that I explain in more detail later in the chapter.

Focus Group

After the initial round of interviews, I conducted a focus group at a clubhouse near the school in May 2019. Focus group interviews are group discussions organized around a single theme (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). This focus group included five of the six girls in the study and provided them with space and opportunity to discuss their experiences with each other. During their group discussion, I played the role of a facilitator of conversation, focusing questions on the topics they discussed in their individual interviews and letting them lead the discussion, sharing knowledge and creating wisdom through dialogue and making new meaning of their experiences as a community (Collins, 2015). They discussed their experiences as Black girls, shared their views and experiences in tracked classes, and they talked about coping with racism and navigating negative stereotypes.

Focus groups allow for multiple voices to be heard in a single setting, and as a result, I was able to understand their experiences in more depth, but I was also able to identify group dynamics based on how the girls spoke about their experiences and responded to one another (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010; Vaughn et al., 1996). That depth is important because the experiences of these Black girls, the way they understood their world, and how they created knowledge as a community were equally as important as their individual experiences. The focus group format also diminished the desire for the girls to respond based on what they thought I wanted them to say, because in the group format they had peer support. My role as a facilitator also included creating space for more introverted girls to speak within the group.

The focus group also fostered personal accountability among the girls. As they explained their experiences with girls who were educated in the same space, they learned from the experiences of one another, but also had to back up their own knowledge claims with examples from their lived experiences (Collins, 2015). These practices honored the way Black girls create meaning and understand themselves, their community, and their society. Fostering this dialogue was vital to my study because Black women create knowledge through dialogue and collective understandings. I recorded the focus group with a digital recorder, and after the focus group, I uploaded the audio to my computer and saved it as a password-protected file. After the focus group, I wrote notes in my researcher's journal to capture my thoughts and opinions about the experience and the information the girls shared. These notes helped me bracket my individual thoughts from the data, which was an important step in a phenomenological study (Patton, 2002)

School and District Tracking Documents

Through interviews and the focus group, I collected data directly from the participants, but this project also required using documents as data sources. To fully understand the structure, organization, and implications of racialized tracking at Vanderbilt, I used official school and district documentation regarding tracks, tracking criteria, and tracking practices. Documents are an important data source because they provide information about things that cannot be observed, and things that have taken place before the research begins (Patton, 2002). The documents that I used for this study were found on the official school website, teachers' websites, and other documents about the school that were available online. These documents provided information that helped me shape and modify questions in my second interview with the participants. Lastly, these documents were important because teachers and other school officials used them to make

tracking decisions for students, and they played an important role in how the girls in the study understood tracking and how they viewed each track (Oakes, 2005).

Researcher Journal

Throughout the research, I used a journal to keep my notes and thoughts about each aspect of data collection. This journal helped to track my thoughts and assumptions and allowed me to focus on the participant's experiences, rather than my own biases and ideas (Smith et al., 2013). The observational notes and reflections I wrote in this journal were important because they helped capture my understanding of the girls' lived experiences as they told them. These notes included the nonverbal messages shown through body language and facial expressions, which the audio file could not capture. Each memo captured details necessary to create rich descriptions of their experiences, but also gave a record of the emotions they used to express claims. Additionally, my reflections throughout the study were important because knowledge creation is continuous, and this ongoing record of my understanding of how the girls made meaning of their experiences helped to track how I understood their claims along with my experiences within the research context. The notes in the notebook were important because they provided a space for bracketing my thoughts, an essential part of phenomenological research, which I explain in more detail in the data analysis section (Orbe et al., 2002). While my experiences and ideas contributed to the research process and my presentation of the data, by using my journal to track my thoughts throughout the study, I was able to delineate between the way I perceived their experiences and the way the participants expressed them. The next section provides information about how I analyzed this data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2013).

Data Analysis

For my data analysis, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2013). IPA focuses on how humans explore their experiences in their own terms, and it allows researchers to explore what happens when people's lived experiences have significance for them, looking in detail at how people make sense of the transitions in their lives. These purposes made IPA especially suited for my study, given my goal to understand how Black girls understand their experiences in a tracked middle school. Throughout the steps of IPA, I used intersectionality's four domains of power as a lens for making meaning of the girls' experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a relatively new method of analysis developed by Jonathan Smith (1996), who argued for methods that could use qualitative research to capture the human experience. This approach originated in psychology but is used in different disciplines, including education. The goal of IPA is to understand the experiences of the participant and convey those experiences. Some consider this process a double hermeneutic, or dual interpretation process, because through the interviews, the participants are making meaning of their experiences, and the researcher uses that data to make sense of the meaning-making of the participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Smith et al. (2013) outline six recursive steps of analysis that occur throughout IPA, which I review in this section. I used my larger research questions, and intersectionality's four domains of power to guide my thinking throughout each step of data analysis.

Step one—the close read. After each interview, I carefully transcribed the audio data, ensuring that the transcription matches the exact words in each interview. For my analysis, I began with one case, meaning one girl's interview, and read each transcript at least once while

listening to the audio. Then I re-read each transcript again to familiarize myself with the structure and content of each interview. During this step, I printed a copy of the transcript and made notes on the transcript with this commentary focused on the narrative structure of each girls' stories, identifying broad ideas, more specific details, and any conclusions from each interview. This step ensured that my analysis of the data focused on each participant and their experiences that they shared. I took notes in my researcher's journal after each reading of the transcript. These notes included my initial thoughts, observations, and questions about the interview, allowing me to bracket my initial impressions and reflections in order to maintain focus on the lived experiences that each participant shared. This step also included noting any contradictions or paradoxes in the interview. After familiarizing myself with the interview through multiple readings, I moved to Step 2, focused on making detailed notes about each interview.

Step two-detailed notes. During this step, I examined the language of the participant and I began to identify specific ways each girl talked about themselves, other students, tracking at their school, focusing on the specific words used to describe their experiences. This step ensured that my findings come from the experiences of the girls, rather than my preconceived notions or expectations about their experiences. This step also includes interpretative noting, which "involves looking at the language that they use, thinking about the context of their concerns (their lived world), and identifying more abstract concepts which can help…make sense of the patterns of meaning in their account" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 83). I completed this step by identifying the different contexts of their experiences, whether at school or home, in class, or outside of class, etc. This process allowed me to focus on the contexts the girls discussed to see if patterns emerged based on the social context where events took place.

Because the second step focuses on making detailed notes based on the specific words of the participant, I created a three-column chart template to organize my analysis. I put the transcript in the middle column, and I used the column on the right to take my initial notes for Step 2. I made my initial notes in pencil, marking words and phrases on the transcript, and writing notes in the right column. I took descriptive, exploratory, and conceptual comments in this column of the chart (Smith et al., 2013). Descriptive comments focus on the content of the interview, identifying the subjects that arise in the transcript. Linguistic comments include how the participants use language to discuss their ideas, making a note of repetition, tone of voice, word choice, and changes in speech patterns about the topic. Conceptual comments are more interpretative, questioning the transcript by reflecting on the words of the interview and identifying larger ideas related to the research questions and theoretical frameworks. Figure 2 shows the data analysis chart with an excerpt from an interview and examples of each type of comment. After this step, I made additional notes in my researcher's journal in order to bracket my own thoughts and interpretation, particularly when the girls' experiences reminded me of my own.

Emergent Themes: Step 3	Interview Transcription Participant 1- Nia	Initial Notes-Step 2 Example Comments:
	SHAURI: What is it like being a Black girl at this school? NIA: It's… um… It's kind of hard to explain 'cause it's a little bit of Black girls in this school, and you know, we're friends and stuff. But, like, other groups of people at our school, they are kinda nice too, but they don't know stuff about us so they, kinda, they be asking us *weird questions* they don't know about, like… "*Oh is that your real hair?" You know… "Can I touch it?" and stuff like that, and it's really weird.* Like, "Why is your face so dark?" or "Are you from Africa?" and stuff like that.	**Descriptive Comments:** Small population of Black girls-→ friends with each other. "other groups"→ other racial groups ***Linguistic comments:*** "*Weird* questions" -→ "Oh is that your hair, you know… can I touch it? and stuff like that" -Her use of weird to describe questions about racialized appearance (hair) shows that these things are new to her, and that she doesn't have precise language. "us" → Black girls- that's her community **Conceptual comments:** Classmates questioning her hair as "real" and asking why her face is so dark and if she is from Africa are ways of othering her based on her appearance—faced with being compared to the White standard of beauty.

Figure 2: Data analysis chart showing the different types of comments made during Step 2 of IPA

Step three—identifying themes.

This step focused on developing emergent themes, which are defined as phrases that speak to the essence of a part of the interview and describe the data or explain its importance (Smith & Osborn, 2008). I wrote these thematic notes in the left column of the chart I used for Step 2. I used a colored pen during Step 3, both for marking the transcript and for writing emergent themes. This helped me to remain focused on this step of analysis. Throughout this step, I focused on the notes I made during Step 2 and the excerpts of the transcript related to each note, which reduced the volume of data during this round of analysis.

As I reviewed the detailed notes from Step 2, I developed emergent themes and wrote them in the third column of the chart. As I revisited the notes from Step 2, I simultaneously focused on discrete parts of the interview, while also keeping in mind the totality of each girl's

shared experiences to identify patterns, connections, and interrelatedness of ideas. This step is related to the hermeneutic circle, "where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 92). During Step 3, I developed themes by identifying short statements or phrases that captured what was important from Step 2 (Smith et al., 2013). These themes reflected both the words the girls said during the interviews and my interpretation of their experiences. I developed themes to capture their concrete experiences along with more broad abstract understandings, particularly those related to power dynamics as outlined in intersectionality. Figure 3 shows the emergent themes of Step 3 using the same excerpt shown in Figure 2 to show how I used my initial notes to develop themes from the data. When I finished analyzing the transcript for each girl, I wrote another entry in my researcher's journal.

Emergent Themes: Step 3	**Interview Transcription Participant 1- Nia**	**Initial Notes-Step 2 Example Comments:**
Black girls are othered by classmates. *Focus on appearance* *Black girls as community*	SHAURI: What is it like being a Black girl at this school? NIA: It's… um… It's kind of hard to explain 'cause it's a little bit of Black girls in this school, and you know, we're friends and stuff. But, like, other groups of people at our school, they are kinda nice too, but they don't know stuff about us so they, kinda, they be asking us *weird questions* they don't know about, like… "*Oh is that your real hair?" You know… "Can I touch it?" and stuff like that, and it's really weird.* Like, "Why is your face so dark?" or "Are you from Africa?" and stuff like that.	**Descriptive Comments:** Small population of Black girls-→ friends with each other. "other groups"→ other racial groups ***Linguistic comments:*** "*Weird* questions" -→ "Oh is that your hair, you know… can I touch it? and stuff like that" -Her use of weird to describe questions about racialized appearance (hair) shows that these things are new to her, and that she doesn't have precise language. "us" → Black girls- that's her community **Conceptual comments:** Classmates questioning her hair as "real" and asking why her face is so dark and if she is from Africa are ways of othering her based on her appearance—faced with being compared to the White standard of beauty.

Figure 3- Data analysis chart that shows the emergent themes developed during Step 3 of IPA.

Step four—connecting themes. The purpose of Step 4 is to review all emergent themes from Step 3 and find connections and organize these themes in ways that capture all of the important aspects of each girl's interview. To begin this step, I revisited each transcript and made a list in my researcher's journal of all emergent themes (Table 2) in the order they occurred in the interview (Smith et al., 2013). Then, beginning with the first theme, I wrote each theme in my researcher's journal one at a time. After writing the theme, I reviewed the entire interview transcript and made notes of all the participant's words related to that theme. This step in the analysis required that I review the themes from Step 3, the notes from Step 2, and the original transcript to make a comprehensive set of notes on the emergent themes shown in Table 2.

During this detailed review and analysis of the data, which included the words in the transcript and my notes, I made connections between emergent themes, combining those that were similar or redundant. As I worked through the list of themes, I discarded any themes that did not relate to the research questions, those that were combined with others, and those that no longer seemed significant. I also wrote my thinking process for keeping, discarding, and combining themes in my researcher's journal. At the end of this step, I went through my notes from Step 4 and made another list in the margin of my researcher's notebook of the larger themes from each girl's interview. After developing the prominent themes, I wrote another entry to reflect on the process and wrote down any other ideas I had during this step of data analysis.

Table 2

Comprehensive List of Emergent Themes from Step 3 for Participant 1

Participant 1- Emergent Themes from Step 3
Black girls as others
Focus on appearance
Black girls as community
She did not identify with HA because they are White
Good vs Bad based on Behavior
Awareness of the negative perception of others
Resistant to racial stereotypes
Success rooted in academics
Race talk based on resistance to the racism of others
Families prepared her for racism
Racism framed as ignorance (they don't know any better)
Black school provided protection
Black curricula reinforced othering
Students discussed race directly
Teachers used indirect methods to address racial issues
Belonging based on friends
Teachers knowledge of Black people is "suspicious"
Disconnect between teachers and Black students
Teachers value students based on behavior
Students in general don't want to learn
Track placement based on meritocracy
HA classes were White and better
Track placement based on race and parental involvement
Racial and ethnic diversity has value for all students
HA helped you learn due to more challenging work
Dress code enforced based on body type and race
Policing of Black girls' bodies using dress code
Black girls had to find their niche
Students group by race
Black friend groups protect each other against racism in school

Table 3
List of Prominent Themes from Step 4 for Participant 1

Number	**Participant 1- Prominent Themes from Step 4**
One	Track placement is explained as a meritocracy
Two	High Achiever is associated with Whiteness
Three	High Achiever has value for students individually and collectively
Four	Conversations about race are centered around racism.
Five	Black people in the curriculum are slaves. Black students are othered during these lessons.
Six	Black girls are disciplined differently due to stereotypes
Seven	Black girls need each other as a protective factor to resist stereotypes and cope with racism

After combining the themes, I revisited the chart with the comprehensive list of emergent themes shown in Table 2, matching each emergent theme with the prominent themes shown in Table 3. Then, I focused specifically on the conceptual framework and the domains of power defined by intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016), matching each emergent theme with the domain(s) of power in the final column based on the notes I took during Steps 2 and 3. During this step, I discarded any emergent themes that did not align with the prominent themes, and those emergent themes that did not align are marked with N/A in column 2 of Table 4. Table 4 shows this step in data analysis, showing the emergent themes from Step 3 and the number of the corresponding prominent theme(s) from Step 4 (Table 3) and the domain(s) of power to ensure the alignment of the girls' experiences as told in the interviews with the content of my data analysis, and the conceptual framework chosen for this study.

Table 4
Emergent Themes Aligned to Domains of Power and Prominent Themes

Participant 1- Emergent Themes from Step 3	Prominent Theme(s)	Domains of Power
Black girls as others	7	Cultural
Focus on appearance	4	Cultural
Black girls as community	7	Interpersonal
She did not identify with HA because they are White	2/3	Cultural/Structural
Good vs Bad based on Behavior	N/A	Disciplinary
Awareness of the negative perception of others	7	Cultural
Resistant to racial stereotypes	7	Cultural
Success rooted in academics	N/A	Cultural
Race talk based on resistance to the racism of others	4	Interpersonal
Families prepared her for racism	4	Interpersonal
Racism framed as ignorance (they don't know any better)	4	Interpersonal
Black school provided protection	7	Cultural/Structural
Black curricula reinforced othering	5	Cultural
Students discussed race directly	4	Interpersonal
Teachers used indirect methods to address racial issues	4	Interpersonal
Belonging based on friends	7	Interpersonal
Teachers knowledge of Black people is "suspicious"	5	Cultural
Disconnect between teachers and Black students	5	Cultural/Interpersonal
Teachers value students based on behavior	3	Disciplinary/Cultural
Students in general don't want to learn	3	Cultural
Track placement based on meritocracy	1	Structural
HA classes were White and better	2	Cultural
Track placement based on race and parental involvement	2	Structural
Racial and ethnic diversity has value for all students	N/A	Cultural
HA helped you learn due to more challenging work	1	Cultural
Dress code enforced based on body type and race	6	Disciplinary
Policing of Black girls' bodies using dress code	6	Disciplinary
Black girls had to find their niche	7	Structural
Students group by race	7	Structural
Black friend groups protect each other against racism in school	7	Structural

Step five—the next case. Because the steps of IPA are iterative, I used the fifth step as a time to pause. During this step, when I moved from one participant's data to the next, I intentionally focused on the process of bracketing. During this step, bracketing was essential. Kleiman (2004) highlighted its importance stating,

> the purpose of bracketing is to try to assume an attentive and naïve openness to descriptions of phenomena, an uncertainty about what is to come and a willingness to wonder about the experiences being brought to presence in the descriptions of the participants. (p. 12)

I bracketed the ideas from the previous case(s) so that I could analyze each case individually. This step also ensured that the notes, ideas, or themes from Steps 1-4 came from each girl's interview, rather than from the analysis of transcripts from another case. This step was essential so that my research honored each girls' experiences and saw them as valuable because Black girls are not a monolith. Even within the same social context, Black girls do not have the same experiences, nor do they understand their experiences in the same way (Collins, 2015). Step 5 moves to the next case, and after I completed Steps 1-4 for each girl's interview, I completed Steps 1-4 with the focus group transcript as its own case.

Step six—synthesis of the data. During the sixth, and final step, I looked for patterns across cases, highlighting the most prominent themes based on both prevalence and richness of the data, along with identifying data that diverged from those themes creating a contradiction or paradox. During this process, I renamed some themes to capture larger understandings about the cases. As I renamed and synthesized themes, I identified quotes from the interviews and focus group transcripts to make sure my synthesis was supported by the lived experiences of the

participants as expressed by them. While this process was similar to the analysis of data in Step 4, Step 6 focused on synthesizing the themes and finding patterns across cases to develop superordinate themes. In this step I looked at how the data from one case informed experiences of another, seeking to find how common themes existed across participants, while also identifying how each individual represented each theme differently. This step was particularly important because of the ethic of care, which honors the importance of Black girls' individual expression, their use of emotion, and their empathy for others (Collins, 2015). While these elements emerged in Step 4, they were essential to synthesizing the interview and focus group data across and among cases because individual expression, use of emotions, and empathy provide insights into how they understood their experiences within the phenomenon of tracking. After synthesizing the data, I developed four superordinate themes that capture the essence of the experiences of the girls in the study. For each superordinate themes, I identified subordinate themes that show the different elements of the girls' experiences. I use the superordinate and subordinate themes to organize my explanation of the findings in Chapter 4 and the discussion and implications of the study in Chapter 5.

Member checks. I conducted member checks throughout each step of data collection and analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the importance of member checking as a process by which "data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected" (p. 314). During this study, member checking was continual and took place through formal and informal methods. During the individual interviews and the focus group, I asked clarifying questions to make sure that I understood the girls correctly. This type of member checking helped me to ask relevant follow-up questions to understand their experiences fully. I conducted member checking during

data analysis as well. After coding the interviews and focus group transcripts, I crafted follow-up questions to make sure that the themes that arose represented their thoughts and experiences appropriately. During this process, the girls corrected errors and clarified and challenged my interpretations of their words. To do this checking, I explained the larger themes that emerged from their interviews and the focus group, then discussed my interpretation with them. During this process, I honored their role as experts of their experiences and gave them ownership over this project that includes their voices.

I based this analysis on the domains of power outlined as tenets of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016), focusing on the knowledge claims the girls made about racialized tracking, the experiences they shared to support those claims, and the emotions they used to express them (Collins, 2015). IPA data analysis is both an inductive and an iterative process that requires repeated reading and notetaking to analyze the data. Throughout this process, I returned to the actual words of the girls to honor their voices and experiences in my research, a move that served as a continual check and reminder to keep their voices centered in my study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is built into the process of qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four criteria for the trustworthiness of research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility assures that findings and interpretations accurately represent each participant's experiences. Transferability refers to how widely the findings might be utilized. Dependability means that findings are consistent with the data collected throughout the study. Confirmability refers to the extent that methods and findings can be linked to the data, and whether the researcher has acknowledged bias.

I established credibility in my research through triangulating sources and member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, "Triangulation is a process carried out with respect to *data*- a datum or item of information derived from one source (or by one method or by one investigator) should be checked against other sources (or by other methods or investigators)" (p. 315). Triangulating the data from interviews, the focus group, and district and school documents allowed me to look at the participants' experiences with racialized tracking through multiple sources, strengthening the trustworthiness and credibility of my findings (Patton, 2002). The triangulation of data sources allowed me to compare and cross-check the consistency of the data I gathered from interviews, district and school documents, and focus groups. Member checking is another part of triangulation because that process positioned my participants as experts and allowed them to confirm or challenge my interpretations of their experiences and perceptions.

Another element of credibility is based on my ethics as a researcher. Patton (2002) argued, "The principle is to report any personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation- either negatively or positively—in the minds of the users of the findings" (p. 566). Throughout the research, I was transparent regarding my subjectivities as a teacher at the school that the girls attend, and I explain my subjectivities as someone who is a product of tracked schools, and the biases that those bring to this body of research. I based the methods of this study on the tenets of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) that recognizes dialogue and lived experiences as essential to the credibility of knowledge claims. Through interviews and focus groups, the girls discussed their experienced, using their lived experiences to support their claims. In the next chapter, I support each finding with an excerpt from the transcript to include their lived experiences in their own words. These practices establish creditability for the study.

Transferability refers to the reader's ability to make judgments about whether the study's findings can be used in a different context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through thick description (Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 2002) I provided readers with detailed descriptions of the context and experiences that allow them to understand where and how the findings can be used in similar contexts. The details I've provided about my research context help readers to make such a decision. The dependability of my research comes, in part, from the audit trail, which is a detailed record of how the data from participants connect to the findings from my analysis. Finally, I establish confirmability through the audit trail that traces my findings from the data using the notes from the transcript to develop themes from each interview, and then matching each theme to specific excerpts from the transcript. Trustworthiness is a process that is continually built into the process of qualitative research. This process begins with an explicit acknowledgment of my subjectivities and positionality as a researcher.

Representation of the Findings

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2013) to make meaning from the experiences the girls shared throughout the study. I explain the findings in the next chapter, organizing the data by superordinate themes and use excerpts from the interview and focus group transcripts, along with my interpretation of the girls' experiences. These themes capture the salient aspects of the girls' experiences at VMS. For each superordinate theme, I explain the girls' experiences, connecting the commonalities of their experiences and describing differences where their experiences diverge. By pairing transcript excerpts with my analysis, I show my interpretation of the girls' experiences, while allowing the reader to consider my conclusions.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological investigation was to highlight the voices of Black girls by sharing their lived experiences in a racially diverse middle school with racialized tracking. Through interviews and a focus group, I learned about the girls' experiences in middle school and how those educational experiences were affected by the racialized tracking at Vanderbilt Middle School. During the interviews, the girls shared their lived experiences in the classroom, their interactions with teachers and students, their perspectives on tracking, curriculum, school rules, their support systems, and lastly, the effects their experiences had on the ways they see themselves.

This chapter begins with an introduction of the girls to contextualize each participant's perspective and to highlight their lived experiences as essential to the broader wisdom developed in this study. Following their introductions, I list the superordinate themes that arose from my analysis of the data, using excerpts from the interviews and focus group to highlight the common and varied perspectives of the girls. Black girls share racial and gendered identities that influence their educational experiences, but they are not a monolith.

Participants

This study included six Black girls who attended Vanderbilt Middle School during the school year that I conducted the research. This sample size of six fits the protocol of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which says the ideal sample size is between three and six participants to chapter the essence of the lived experience. The girls spanned all three grade levels, and all three tracks at VMS (see Table 1). To protect their privacy, I replaced the girls' names with pseudonyms throughout the study.

Nia

Nia had deep brown skin with a round face framed by her short locs that she started during the Fall of sixth grade. She moved from a predominantly Black elementary school to Vanderbilt for middle school, and many of her experiences at VMS related to how different her experiences were with the different racial demographics. Throughout the interview, Nia showed that she was attuned to her identity as a Black girl and how making friends with other Black girls was an essential part of her negotiating her experiences as a sixth-grader at a racially diverse school. She sat comfortably in the interview, listening carefully to each question, then speaking with a soft, confident voice as she answered. She was the only student in the study in two different tracks at the same time.

Alexis

Alexis was a thin, brown-skinned girl who wore square-framed glasses. She had long, flat-ironed hair that she wore in ponytails, one hanging over each shoulder. She talked a mile a minute, stuttering slightly when she got excited. She was a sixth-grader, who transferred from another school district where she attended a predominantly Black elementary school. She was in High Achiever classes in sixth grade, but recently qualified for gifted classes, and will take two gifted classes in seventh grade. Alexis completed gifted testing during sixth grade and would begin gifted classes in Language Arts and Social Studies the following school year. Alexis, who had a diverse group of friends, spoke mostly about the differences between boys and girls in her class, and how the boys acted differently.

Leah

Leah was a slender sixth grader with brown skin. She was 12 years old and in all High Achiever classes. She had long straight hair, with half of it hanging down because her ponytail

holder broke right before our interview. She was talkative and opinionated about every aspect of the questions I asked her. She was animated when she talked, moving her hands and head to emphasize her ideas. She showed the most emotion and was most expressive when she discussed the differences she saw between Black girls and White girls at VMS and the differences in the ways they were treated.

Denise

Denise came down the hall chewing gum with a big smile. She had a caramel complexion with her natural hair braided into an afro puff at the top of her head. She had an infectious smile and a bubbly, animated personality, but when she spoke, she paused and took her time to think about the question, carefully consider her choice of words, and thoughtfully give her responses. She was cool—she wore a bright yellow shirt to our interview, the color complimenting her fun personality. She was insightful, curious, emotional, outspoken, kind, and authentic. She was also a paradox, feeling confident about who she was as a Black girl, as a daughter and as a friend, but feeling insecure about herself as a student. She was a seventh-grader and was in High Achiever classes for her second year of middle school, but this year was on a team comprised mostly of gifted students.

Maya

Maya walked in wearing an HBCU t-shirt, jeans, and Birkenstocks. She had straightened hair that was curled at the end. She spoke quietly, but bubbly as she spoke. She was in seventh grade and had spent time in High Achiever and gifted classes in her two years at VMS. She qualified for gifted classes in elementary school. Maya went through gifted testing in kindergarten, began gifted classes in 1st grade and identified as gifted for most of her schooling.

Jada

Jada was an eighth-grader at Vanderbilt, who was in general level classes since sixth grade. She was petite with bright, brown eyes and box braids in a high ponytail that hung to her elbows. Her brown skin glowed and the white cord of her headphones hung from one ear leading to the phone she kept in her hand during the entire interview. She had a white t-shirt and denim overall shorts that reached her thighs, with gym shoes and white ankle socks. The necklace hanging around her neck rested gently on her collarbone. She had a relaxed demeanor that matched the way she moved in the halls with her friends on the way to class. She maintained eye contact with me throughout the interview and her voice was as calm and relaxed as her loose posture. As the only eighth grade participant, she drew from all three years to discuss her varied experiences as a Black girl at Vanderbilt.

While each of the girls expressed individual experiences, I organized the findings using the four superordinate themes developed during Step 6 of IPA. Themes that capture the essence of the girls' lived experiences as students at VMS. These superordinate themes are the most salient aspects that shape participants' experiences as Black girls in a middle school with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). The four themes are 1) tracking as a hierarchy, 2) othering and marginalization, 3) safe spaces and community, 4) identity through resistance and self-definition. Each superordinate theme is organized by subordinate themes, and then subtopics if necessary. Table 5 includes a comprehensive list.

Table 5:
IPA Superordinate Themes and Corresponding Subordinate Themes and Subtopics

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Subtopics
Tracking as a Hierarchy	Varied tracking criteria	Test scores Behavior Gifted criteria
	Stereotypes and stigma	The bad team The bad students The dumb team Gifted challenged me more A little more fun Young, gifted, and arrogant
	Questioning the criteria Track mobility Teachers' biased messages	
Othering and Marginalization	The value of diversity	Diverse friends Diverse teams Segregated teams
	Interpersonal prejudice	Questions and comments Racism as the norm
	Othered and absent in the curriculum	
	Disproportionate enforcement of rules	Getting dresscoded Other offenses
Safe Spaces and Community	Teachers Parents Friends	
Identity through Resistance and Self-Definition	Denise Leah Maya	

Tracking as a Hierarchy

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the girls discussed their experiences, observations, and ideas about the tracks at VMS. Each of the girls discussed the racial segregation they saw between the tracks, regardless of their track assignment. Their opinions that tracking was not an equitable system emerged, despite expressing their beliefs that tracking was the result of academic meritocracy. As middle school students, their journey into tracks began during registration when they received their schedules. Each schedule listed the student's classes, with different codes marking the classes as general, High Achiever, or gifted. Those labels placed students within the academic and intellectual hierarchy created and reified by tracking at Vanderbilt Middle School. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the structure of tracking at VMS, and this section explains how the girls understood tracking placement criteria, the structure of tracking, and concludes with the stereotypes and bias inherent in racialized tracking.

Varied tracking criteria. As a teacher at VMS, I understand the structure of tracking as stated in official school documents as well as the unwritten rules used by students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents to influence track assignment. As I asked the girls about their educational experiences, I also asked them how they believed students were assigned to tracks. Most of them said that placement decisions were made primarily using academic measures, specifically the norm-referenced test all students took three times a year. They also mentioned other academic criteria like end-of-grade standardized tests and class grades.

Test scores. Nia said track placement was based on "How your [norm-referenced] testing looks, and your test scores in the 5th grade," and if there aren't any test scores, "I think they just put you in like any class that needs a student." Alexis responded similarly, citing the same

criteria, then going in further detail to explain why the norm-referenced test is used to place students:

> I think it goes by how you were then, and then, see how much you have learned. Then, they place by how much they think you know, and then what your grade is, and how far you've excelled since the beginning of the school year.

Alexis's understanding that placement is based on how much a student knows, how well they are currently performing academically, and the academic growth they have shown throughout the year echoes the rationale of many of tracking's proponents that these academic measures are accurate determinates of student intellect, achievement, and potential (Fitzgerald, 2016; Losen, 1999; Loveless, 1994; Slavin, 1988).

Behavior. Denise mentioned the use of more subjective criteria for track placement. "I think like, I really don't know. I really don't know. I think it's partially, like looking at [end-of-grade tests] and all of that, but then also like seeing your grades, and behavior last year kinda determines it." She could not explain specifically how teachers used behavior, but with further probing I realized that she believed behavior was a factor because of the behavioral stereotypes about the students in each track, and the types of tracks on each team.

I asked her about how her placement would change if she had behavior issues in school. She responded, "Well. I don't know. Some of the kids are bad. Some kids are good and quiet […] But, I honestly. I don't know that…I definitely know I wouldn't be put on Team Jones. I know that for certain, but I mean our class is bad, but it's not like super bad, you know I've seen worse." Team Jones, which she associated with bad behavior, consisted of predominantly Black and Hispanic students with two High Achiever classes and two general classes.

Denise's comments explain how team structure and team assignments also played an important role in the girls' experiences. Each team of teachers at VMS teaches four or five classes of students. Teams teach students of different tracks, and the teachers on Team Jones taught two general classes and two High Achiever classes. However, Denise was assigned to the one High Achiever class on her team. The other four classes were gifted. She attributed her placement in a High Achiever class on a team with gifted students to having better behavior than the students on the other teams. Despite thinking her good behavior played a role in being placed in a High Achiever rotation on a team with gifted students, she described her High Achiever class as "bad," when compared to the gifted classes on her team, but not "super bad" like High Achiever classes on other teams that have students in general classes. In other words, Denise classified the students in general classes as having the worst behavior and the gifted classes as having the best behavior, or the most desirable behavior needed in this school context. Denise was the only participant who mentioned behavior playing a role in track placement, but most of the discussed the behavior of other students in the various tracks, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Gifted criteria. Unlike general and High Achiever, gifted placement was based on specific criteria defined by federal, state, and county guidelines. Due to these specific guidelines, gifted qualification was influenced less by the subjectivities of adults than placement into general or High Achiever tracks. Students played an active role in gifted placement, taking a variety of tests before they qualified for gifted classes. Maya and Alexis, the two students identified as gifted, explained the steps to get into gifted classes.

Maya, the only student enrolled in gifted classes during the school year the study took place, explained how students qualify for gifted classes. "When they test you, they use that. And

also, like, your creativity. Like how you respond to certain things…They want to see more, I guess, of you thinking outside the box." Maya referred to the multi-step process for gifted qualification, which begins with the norm-referenced test that all students took and continued with creativity test, among other tests, to determine whether a student qualified for gifted services.

Alexis, who qualified for gifted services just before the study began, explained the process she went through during the focus group.

> I did (*counting in her head*) five tests. In elementary school, I was tested for gifted, but I never got in. So, now, I'm just happy I finally got in because it took a lot of tests. So, then, now I'm just happy I finally got in because it took a lot of tests. And I'm also happy that some of my friends got in.

After scoring in the 90th percentile or above in reading on a norm-referenced test, she completed an intellectual ability test, and creativity and motivation scales. Despite the earlier testing that Alexis completed in elementary school, the process still took seven months from her initial test to notification that she qualified for gifted classes at VMS. Further complicating this situation for all students who could be placed in the gifted track were the changing criteria for gifted identification: The criteria for gifted eligibility and placement at VMS have changed three times since the girls in this study began elementary school. This process took months for each student to be fully tested and qualified, and despite using various tests designed to increase the representation of minority students in gifted classes, the gifted population, which makes up 33% of the students VMS, remains largely White. Some gifted classes do not have any Black students, and others only one or two, a factor that affects the experiences of the Black girls like Maya and Alexis.

Stereotypes and stigma. The labels placed on students through racialized tracking led to stigma among the tracks, with students in the lower tracks being judged as inferior to others. Denise described how students with bad behavior were placed on general teams, and Nia explained that students with more involved parents were placed on better teams because they learned more than students on other teams. Track placement and criteria created separate educational environments for students, and at VMS the students in different tracks were stereotyped based on those labels. The girls described stereotypes related to intelligence, behavior, instructional environment, and student work ethic. This section begins with the girls' descriptions of the tracks.

Leah's answers about the criteria used to group students focused on the academic characteristics of students who belonged in each track.

> Gifted are, like, people who, um, are able to do more academic classes and more able to understand it than umm, like High Achievers and general. 'Cause High Achievers, like, from the name you just know you're like, you're in a high class with people who understand the same thing you do. But to get into gifted, you have to be more able to understand it. 'Cause sometimes we don't understand the topic, especially in Math, if it's new. I know, like, general you need more help in some things. So, I feel like if you're in a general class, they're trying to help you to be a High Achiever class.

Leah's description of the students in each track also outlined the academic hierarchy among students based on track placement. Leah's explanation that general classes were remedial classes for students who need help, so they could be in High Achiever provided some rationale for the stigma of the track. In other words, the stigma was in the general track because the students

needed additional supports to get to a more desirable track, which in this case, was the High Achiever track.

The bad team. Nia described the negative reputation of her team, which had two general and two High Achiever classes.

> [The gifted teams] kind of act like, you know, a little bit better than us, but we're kind of like the bad team that like has a lot of drama going on. We are the team with the most drama going on, and we always have like fights going on or fights about to happen, and we do get into fights with other teams too.

Nia described her team as "the bad team," which was a common descriptor used for teams at VMS. The "bad teams" had general students and larger minority populations than the "good teams," which had gifted students who were predominantly White. Nia's team had High Achiever and general classes, which included the majority of the sixth grade ELL students. Nia explained that her team was "bad" because they had drama and fights. Denise, who was on the same team as a sixth-grader, made similar connections between behavior and student placement, when she identified behavior was one of the criteria used when sorting students.

The bad students. Denise used similar language to describe her High Achiever class in comparison to gifted classes on her team. Her response came out slowly, punctuated with long pauses as she chose each phrase.

> Ummm... It's...it's a good team, you know. The classes that I'm in, most of them are like bad students, but the majority of the kids on my team are like...you know....um... (laughing). They're of a different race than I am, and there's not that many, you know, like, Black kids on my team because… I don't know why, but it's just not... But I mean it's a good team.

She described the students she had classes with as “bad,” in contrast to the students of “a different race” in the gifted classes. The kids of a different race on her team were White. Her comparison of bad kids vs White kids to explain the difference between the High Achiever students and the gifted students on her team showed the damaging messages that students take in when they are educated in stigmatized, segregated spaces within their schools. Denise’s placement in the one High Achiever rotation of a predominantly White gifted team affected how she viewed herself, which I discuss later in the chapter.

Although Denise described her team as a “good team,” when describing the classes that she was in she referred to her classmates as “bad students.” This description aligned with the stigma reinforced by the tracking hierarchy, because four out of five of the classes on her team were gifted, she was on a good team. However, the one class she was in, which was High Achiever, was full of bad students. She continued to tie this “bad” and “good” notion with race, explaining that she is a different race than most of the students, with very few Black students on her team overall. Considering Nia’s and Denise’s comments about bad teams and bad students, the label “bad” is used subjectively at VMS, with general students making Nia’s team the bad team in sixth grade but shifting to High Achiever students when they are compared to the gifted students in seventh grade.

The dumb team. For Jada, the label she resented the most was not related to being bad, rather it was the idea of being on a “dumb team.”

> Some kids that'll be considered on the dumb team are actually pretty smart, and, like, most people wouldn’t even guess that they're smart because they're Black or Hispanic. Like, say someone was like… “Oh they don't know the answer to that one!” When they really do, they are just judging them because of what they look like.

Jada described the racial stereotyping that went along with tracking in the most explicit terms, clearly stating that students at VMS were judged by how they looked, particularly when they are on the "dumb team." I asked her which teams were called the dumb team and she replied with one word: "General." Jada explained that she was aware of the dumb team, and that the idea of the dumb team affected individual students because they were cast with that label regardless of their intellect or ability.

She also tied the idea of the "dumb team" and the label to broader racial and ethnic stereotypes that position Black and Hispanic people as intellectually inferior to White students. As the only participant in all general classes, I asked Jada how she felt about general classes being labeled the dumb team when she's in general classes. Jada rejected the stereotypes placed upon her as a student in general, as a Black student, and as a girl. Her response: "Yes, but I know I'm not stupid," eschewed any identification with those negative stereotypes and track stigma. Our conversation continued:

Shauri: So why do you think people think would call it a "dumb team?" I mean if you're not stupid and you get good grades.

Jada: Probably what I look like and the fact that they feel above me for some reason 'cause they learn differently.

Shauri: What do you mean "learn differently"?

Jada: Like the kids on other teams like gifted or advanced or high achievers. I don't really think of them as smarter than me I just think they learn different. Like, we all learn the same stuff... We all have the same standards.

Jada explained that despite the different tracks and the stigma attached to general classes, she did not view herself that way. She agreed with Nia that students in the higher tracks viewed themselves as better than she was, but despite the hierarchy created with tracking, she did not believe that she was less than anyone else. She explained the difference between the tracks as people who learned differently, rather than how Alexis and Leah described the students in the higher tracks as learning more. Jada pointed to the fact that they all learned the same standards, and learned the same information, rather than gifted and High Achiever tracks learning more than she did.

Gifted challenged me more. Maya, who spent time in both gifted and High Achiever classes during her seventh-grade year, described the differences between the tracks on the same team. "High Achievers was like pretty easy. For me it was a lot easier in those classes and gifted challenged me more." In addition to the work being easier, she also said that gifted was the place where she felt like she belonged. When I asked if she felt like she did not belong when she was in High Achiever, she said, "No I still felt, like, good there. I just didn't feel like... I just felt like the work was really easy. Most of the time."

A little more fun. In addition to feeling more challenged the work in her gifted classes, Maya described other differences between her gifted classmates and students on the other teams.

> They [students in general and High Achiever classes] seem more, like, it is a little more fun to be on their teams because, like, I don't know. Sometimes we'll be all walking down the hallways, and they'll be like laughing, and, like, we'll be in a straight line or something.

Maya had more fun with the students in her High Achiever classes than with her gifted classmates. "Not that it's a bad thing to be really focused, but I feel like they don't really know

when to play around too, sometimes." Maya's description of the other teams is not the same as the way the participants on those teams describe them. While they used words like "the bad team" and the "dumb team" to describe teams with general students, Maya said that she thought they had more fun, and that they knew how to relax in ways her gifted classmates did not. However, she felt that the academic challenge of gifted was more important than the fun she had during her semester in High Achiever.

Denise, who was on the same team as Maya, had similar opinions of gifted students. Even though Denise did not spend as much time in both tracks as Maya, she shared an experience she had visiting a gifted class that led her to similar judgments

> When I was taking my test, and I went to a different classroom, a lot of the students are so quiet…and they're like teacher pets, so they knew every answer to every question, and I was just like. "Wow!" You know. It was fifth period, and they were gifted, and you know. They were really quiet. And they seem socially awkward for some reason. None of them talk, like, at all. And just like doing their work... There was one kid that was like playing video games. But that was it.

Denise's description as an outsider entering the gifted class as a visitor was similar to Maya's inside perspective. While Maya refers to her gifted classmates as "focused," Denise called them "teacher pets" and "really quiet." Denise's description of the differences between her High Achiever class and the gifted class was similar to how her teachers compared them. She described the gifted class as quiet, doing all of their work, and knowing the answer to every question. However, she also referred to them as "teacher's pets," and "socially awkward," terms that have a negative connotation, indicating that even though she may describe her classmates as

"bad" because they talk too much, her judgments of the two groups did not privilege gifted students completely.

Considering her judgments about both groups of students, I asked her which environment she preferred.

> I liked my environment, like regular [High Achiever] classes, 'cause when I went to... When I went to that classroom, I felt like an outcast because I was totally different than the rest of those students. And like, you know, they're quiet, and I'm the opposite...I'm...I'm loud, and I'm energetic.

Denise "felt like an outcast" because she believed she was totally different from the students in the gifted classes on her team. Her view of herself and the things she likes about herself were at odds with the behavioral norms and expectations of students in the gifted class. She contrasted how she saw herself with how she viewed those students, embracing who she was: loud and energetic. I explain how Denise and the other girls describe themselves and the role track placement play in their identities at the end of the chapter. Denise's experience as an outsider is important because she was a member of the team, but still an outsider among the gifted students. Here, Denise's experiences contrasted with Maya's view of the same students as a gifted student. While Maya agreed with Denise about the rigid, quiet nature of students in gifted classes, she viewed other students as "more fun," whereas Denise viewed those same students, also her peers, as "bad."

Young, gifted, and arrogant. While the girls described the negative opinions about general students and the teams they were assigned to, they had strong opinions about gifted students as well. During the focus group, which Maya was unable to attend, the girls discussed their opinions of gifted students.

Leah: I don't think they're that much different than High Achievers. Actually, I really don't. You just get. People say you get more work...

Nia: Oh yeah, you get a lot of work, but it's like different stuff.

Alexis: I think, they do it like, by how much you will comprehend, more skills than most people can. The understanding of it.

Denise: I feel like there is a level of stereotypes and kind of "arrogance" as people in gifted might say. I've heard this...and on my team. Sometimes they're like, "Oh yeah, but we're not bad like them general kids" or dadadaduh. But it's kind of like a stereotype that's being played like general kids are bad and this and that?

The girls' comments about the difference in work matched Maya's explanation of her experiences in High Achiever and gifted classes. While the girls agreed that gifted students got more work, Alexis echoed Leah's comments from the individual interviews that gifted students had a different understanding of concepts and skills than other students. Nia was certain that gifted students not only got more work, but it was also different work than other students did. The three sixth-graders discussed their understanding of gifted and Denise, who was on a team with gifted students, focused on the attitudes of kids in the gifted track. She said they were arrogant because they said they were better than general students. She characterized the gifted students as arrogant because they stereotype general students as "bad," which was interesting because she also used the same words to describe students in her class and general students on other teams.

Similarly, Nia also felt that students in other tracks looked down on students in general classes and the use of tests to apply tracking labels was unfair.

Nia: It's, like, what she said, like people that are in High Achievers, they look down on people that are in general classes. They think like, "Oh like the people that are in general classes are dumb, and they don't know stuff, and people in High Achiever classes are smarter, but that's just about the [end of course test], like you coulda had a bad day or something like that?

Leah: Yeah like general kids, they might not catch on as quick as things as other kids do, and they [the students in other tracks] judge people. They judge...they judge general because of that.

The girls held both the beliefs that students in general were not as smart as students in other tracks, and the use of test scores for track placement were both unfair. Both Leah and Nia had High Achiever classes, and even though Leah thought general classes might not learn as quickly as others, she was still critical of the view that they were not smart.

Questioning the criteria. While the girls understood the stated criteria for track placement were test scores, they also questioned their use because they saw the resulting segregation within the school, which resulted in stigma. Jada, the only student in all general classes, provided a more nuanced view of tracking based on her experiences in general classes.

Shauri: How are kids assigned to different teams or level classes?

Jada: They claim it's like by [test] scores and stuff like that.

Shauri: You said, “claim.” So what do you think?

Jada: They *claim* it's like by [test] scores and stuff like that. I think it can be that like…Sometimes I feel like they should have a different way of doing it. ‘Cause I remember last year they called my team “South America.” There was a whole bunch of Hispanics on my team. And then on the other teams

> it was like a whole bunch of Black people on that team and like a whole bunch of White people on that team. They were just diverse on this one team.

Jada used the word "claim" to show that she was wary of the methods used to group students. When I asked her to explain, she criticized the methods directly because of her experiences on a racially segregated team. Jada's description of her team, which included a large English Language Learner (ELL) population, and the use of "South America" by other students to refer to it, highlighted the existence of racialized tracking at VMS, as well as the negative effects on all students when learning spaces are segregated within a diverse school. Her explanation mentioned race as a factor in track placement, which kept students of color in the lower tracks.

When Nia initially explained the criteria used for track placement, she described an academic meritocracy, where academic measures determined track placement. She criticized the process when asked her opinion about the tracks at VMS, focusing on race in her response.

> Well, I think most of the students who have all High Achiever classes are White, and I am Black, and I have two High Achiever classes, which is, you know, pretty good, and most of the Black students are in general classes. Most of the Black and Hispanics are in general classes.

Nia's description of the racial demographics of the tracks matched how the other girls described the tracks as well. I asked her why she thought some tracks had predominantly White students, and she said, "I think because…I heard that Team Johnson is a High Achiever team, and I think that they probably did good on their tests, and their parents want them to be on the team based on what they are learning." She used Team Johnson as an example, describing it as a High Achiever

team because it had predominantly White students. Though this team was predominantly White, the team had four gifted classes and only one High Achiever class, emphasizing how the academic hierarchy created and upheld by tracking mirrors the racial hierarchy in society. The influence of parents in track placement was important to consider, because Nia said that her friends explained the racial demographics of the tracks and of the teams more explicitly.

> I'll say, "They're on that team because you know uh… what they learned." And they'll be like, "No, it's because they're White, and they get whatever they want because they are on a High Achiever's teams. And Black people aren't there."

The beliefs that students were placed on certain teams, due to race, parental influence, and entitlement undermined the education of students who were not privileged in these areas. Additionally, the last part of her statement, "And the Black people aren't there" revealed the insidious nature of tracking because it separated students in ways that were significant to Nia and her friends who discussed the racial differences, causing them to believe there were spaces where they did not belong. These comments revealed how the girls understood the connection of race, track placement, and educational equality within their diverse school.

As early as sixth grade, Black students understood the role of Whiteness in track placement, and how parents influenced the process to get their children assigned to tracks where the White students were and where Black students were not. These students understood how tracking operated as a tool of segregation. Although Nia did not agree with her friends' understanding of how these factors influenced track placement, the fact that they were having these conversations affected their academic experiences because they faced these structures. Although I did not interview Nia's friends, their perspectives of their racialized experiences at

VMS are important to include because they contribute to the dialogue that Black girls are having as they navigate the racialized tracking within their middle school.

During the focus group, the girls criticized how students were placed into courses for many reasons.

Denise: And I feel like the, um, system where we get tested and stuff might not be the best ‘cause some people might be able to comprehend in class rather than taking tests ‘cause some, some people crack under pressure. Their mind starts wandering when taking tests ‘cause some people's like, um level of, kind of...

Jada: Their attention?

Denise: Yeah, their attention span is very poor. While others are better at, you know.

Shauri: Jada, I saw you shaking your head. Did you want to add anything?

Jada: Um, yeah, I feel like their testing or like that. I think they should like change it like what she said. I'm a person like I'll do so well in class. But when it comes to a test, I'll just be like …oooooooooo.

Alexis: **‘**Cause it's like, ‘cause it's like, ok... they say like tests make up, like, this percent of your grade...is like you have to do good to keep that. Like if you have an A, to keep an A in that class, so sometimes you can't, like, get nervous and mess up.

The girls critiqued the system of placement into gifted and High Achiever and understood students learn differently and some do not fit into the norm, which affects test performance, which in turn influences track placement. In addition to learning differences, Alexis explained

how students faced pressure to perform well, not only on standardized tests but on class tests as well, which did not leave room for students to get nervous and mess up. Because the girls believed that track placement decisions were made mostly based on standardized test scores and class grades, the girls knew that messing up had important consequences on their educational experiences at VMS.

Even though Maya was not in the focus group, during our interview she echoed similar sentiments about the use of testing to make placement decisions. “Sometimes I feel like it's not as fair because, like, there might be a language barrier. So, they could know this stuff, but it may not seem like they know it because of their language.” Maya’s critique of the use of testing focused on the inequity of using tests to place students who may not be fluent English speakers, which was the case for many students at VMS. When I asked her how she viewed students in general classes, she said, “I just think that, I mean, some people are really smart, but they’re not good on, like, taking tests. I know, like, some of my friends are like that.” Maya viewed test scores as an incomplete measure of intelligence, acknowledging that one aspect of doing well on tests was the ability to take tests well. Throughout the study, the girls expressed a broader, flexible view of ability and intelligence than was allowed in the stated tracking policies at VMS.

Track mobility. Track mobility was rare at VMS, and of the six girls in the study, three had attended VMS for more than one school year, and Maya was the only one who moved tracks. She moved from gifted to High Achiever classes at the end of sixth grade because she did not meet the requirements of the gifted continuation policy. Maya explained, “Uh, ‘cause in sixth grade. I didn't, like, get an 80 or above, so I got dropped to High Achievers.” Students qualified for gifted based on their performance on a series of tests, but the gifted continuation policy was

based on class grades. After earning an 80 or above in her High Achiever classes during the Fall of seventh grade, she was placed back into gifted classes on the same team for Spring semester.

Within tracking structures, movement between tracks and how students understood track mobility was important because the way the girls understood track movement could reveal the underlying assumptions they had about tracks. During the focus group, the girls discussed how mobility between tracks was the responsibility of both students and teachers.

Leah: Yeah, but like there's this class on our team. Like, most of the Black kids on this team, and we know that, like, they're not in High Achiever […] They're in general, and they're all Black kids. And I just always wonder, like, why is it always them that always had to do that. Like why don't you help 'em, instead of just puttin' 'em in classes where they're like slower at something? Why don't you just help bring 'em back up? 'Cause I know my friends, they're in general, and they brought theyselves up to High Achievers. When others, they just in a general class, like not trying to, not trying to help themselves.

Alexis: I don't understand why... Why do you want something, but you don't help yourself? Try to achieve it. Why you wait for somebody to have to tell you something to achieve it?

Nia: Yeah.

Leah recognized the racial disparity on her team, explaining that most of the Black students were in the general classes. In her initial comments, she placed the responsibility with the teachers to help students in general classes improve, so they could be placed in High Achiever classes, instead of letting them stay in a class with students who learned slower. She said teachers of

general students should help “bring ‘em back up,” which reinforced the stigma that students in the general track were less capable than other students, and general classes operated as remedial classes for students who were academically behind. Given this notion, Leah argued that teachers had an obligation to help students raise their scores and leave general students who were “slower.”

However, she also mentioned that she had friends who were in general, but they brought themselves up to High Achiever, thus the idea that through hard work, they were able to get out of general classes. Leah’s comments reinforced the academic hierarchy that existed within VMS’s tracking, and predicated placement in higher tracks on the hard work of students, with an additional responsibility on the teachers to help them.

Alexis’s ideas placed the responsibility for track mobility mostly on the students who should want more for themselves and should work to achieve it. She felt that students should not wait for teachers or anyone else to help them improve, and they needed to work hard to move from general to High Achiever to better themselves. During her interview, Nia had the same questions about students on her team; however, she did not mention students in a given track. Instead, her comments focused on Black students.

Nia: Well, most of them are White that they [teachers] listen to, and like the Black students don’t really ask questions.

Shauri: Why do you think that is?

Nia: Because... (exasperated) I think they don’t wanna learn, like, because… in my Social Studies class, there are only like four of us in there and I’m basically the only one who really asks questions, and listens and writes

stuff down, and when I ask her these questions, she just like. I don't know. And I'm just like… (*rolling her eyes and throwing up her hands*)

Shauri: You said that you don't think the Black students want to learn… the other Black students want to learn? Is that something you see in all of your classes?

Nia: Mmmm, kind of, because it's like they'll ask a question but then afterwards they won't take note of it and if the teacher says she doesn't know... like, she won't, the students won't do anything about it. They'll just be like, "Okay" and just go on with their day.

Nia's observations that her Black classmates did not engage in the lessons the way she did, by raising her hand and taking notes when the teacher answered questions, led her to believe that they did not want to learn. She felt that they should push the teacher when she did not know the answers to their questions, and the Black students' lack of engagement was one of the reasons why teachers listened more to the White students. Nia's perception that this behavior meant that the Black students did not want to learn is important to consider because she made those judgments by assessing her classmates' behavior based on the behavioral norms and expectations of gifted students, which Denise and Maya described. Because teachers at Vanderbilt had the ability to make tracking decisions, if teachers used this normative behavior of gifted students to identify students who belonged in higher tracks, this could affect the track mobility of students who do not meet these expectations, which Nia identified as the other Black students in her classes. The girls described the way teachers perceived and discussed the different tracks, which reified negative perceptions about students in lower tracks.

Teachers' biased messages. Teachers at VMS also reinforced the idea that students in lower tracks were worse than students in higher tracks. The girls discussed this phenomenon in the focus group.

Denise: They [teachers] don't really expect a lot out of general and High Achievers…more than, well, gifted is kinda… well our teachers say, (*imitating*) "Well, yeah, those are good kids..."

Nia: Exactly!!!

Jada: High Achievers and general is just seen as (*imitating teachers*) "They always talk, they always dadadadaduh…They never turn in their work on time."

Leah: I mean, like, God gave us mouths for a reason, we gotta use 'em, ya know!

Shauri: And do you think do you think that any of those judgments or those expectations are true?

Nia: Noooo!!! (*with an exasperated sigh*)

Leah: No, I don't... no.

Denise: No. I don't think it should be based off of their level of understanding to put them in a certain category that they're bad because of where they are placed.

Nia: Yes. Sometimes, like, some students feel like because they're in general in classes they feel like that they're not as smart enough to comprehend like the things they've been taught. Like the things that High Achiever students are being taught.

Denise: It’s like they're placed in a box where their overall perspective on how they should be or how they should act. And some people tend to kinda stay...in that box. Because...

Shauri: Do any of you stay in that box that they put you in?

Denise: Oh no, I do me. I do me.

The girls recognized that teachers judged students based on their placement. Not only do teachers have judgments about students based on their class placement, but they also spoke to students about those judgments and compared the tracks to one another, reinforcing the value of the gifted and High Achiever, and the persistent stigma of being in general. The girls’ comments described the overall sentiment of their teachers without any distinction based on the racial or ethnic backgrounds of the teachers. Despite the racial diversity of the teachers at VMS, the girls in the study reported that most of their teachers were White, except for Jada, who is also the only student in all general classes.

Denise used the image of a box to describe how the labels assigned by tracking placed students in a box based on perceptions of how students should both be and act depending on their track. She said that she does not fit into the box created by tracking at VMS, and she provided a useful metaphor to understand the girls’ descriptions of tracking in this section. Their explanations of the inadequacy of track criteria, the stereotypes and stigmas of each track, and how teachers reinforce those judgments provided an important context for their individual experiences within the racialized hierarchy with gifted students at the top, general students at the bottom, and High Achiever in the middle with regards to intelligence, ability, behavior, and work ethic. The next section explains how the hierarchy created by racialized tracking affects their

experiences at VMS, focusing on how this structure contributed to their othering and marginalization.

Othering and Marginalization

Throughout the interviews, the girls brought up different experiences that left them feeling othered or marginalized within their school community. The girls, who all spoke about how much they valued the diversity of the school, also mentioned the small number of Black girls at VMS, which influenced their educational experiences. This section explores experiences when the girls felt that they were treated differently because of their race, both in classroom settings and in individual interactions with peers. I begin with a description of the racial and ethnic diversity at VMS, which provides an important context for how the girls experienced racially segregated teams and classes, and the last section explains the girls' racist interactions with peers and classmates.

The value of diversity. All of the girls believed the racial diversity of VMS was a valuable part of their middle school experience. Maya, Denise, and Jada all went to feeder elementary schools, while Alexis, Leah, and Nia transferred to Vanderbilt from predominantly Black elementary schools in other areas, which made the diversity a new experience for them. While they all valued diversity, racial diversity influenced their experiences differently. This section explains how diversity affects their experiences in the context of diverse friends, diverse teams, and segregated teams.

Diverse friends. Alexis mentioned how diversity added value to her school experiences, particularly as a counterbalance to the small population of Black girls at the school.

> Well, knowing that there's not a lot of Black girls at this school doesn't really hurt me 'cause since there's a lot of diverse, um, races at this school, we get to meet different

people from, like, around the world. Like, some of my friends are Mexican, others are Latino, and some are Indian, and some are White. So, it doesn't really hurt me, 'cause I get to meet new people and learn about their culture and religions,

In addition to having a racially diverse group of friends, she valued their diverse backgrounds and viewed their friendships as opportunities to learn from one another, which was apparent from how she described her group of friends.

> They're White, but then my other friend, she's Black, she's cool to hang out with and my two friends, I'm pretty sure they're Mexican, and they're nice to hang out with, and I like seeing them talk, like, in Spanish, because it's really cool like how they do it. I like that there's no one watching them, seeing how it's normal. They start talking outta nowhere in Spanish, and I just watch them interact with each other. So, that's why I'ma take a Spanish course next year, 'cause it's always really cool, like, watching them talk in Spanish. But I think most of my friends are really cool, and it's cool learning their different religions. My friend Rachel, she's Jewish, and so on her holidays she doesn't come to school, so like we text her and we're like "Why didn't you come to school?" and She'll be like, "Oh, its soandso holiday." And I'll ask, "What's that?" And she'll like explain what it is, and I'm like, "Oooh okay." Like we celebrate Christmas, and they celebrate something different.

Alexis's diverse friend group of students in different racial and ethnic groups and religions taught her about different people and provided her the opportunity to learn about different practices and inspired her to learn different languages. Alexis's appreciation of diversity was different from the experiences described by the other girls in the study, but it was also the reason why all the participants said that they valued diversity. They considered diversity an important

educational benefit for all students at VMS because learning in a diverse environment provided the opportunity to share their experiences with different groups of people.

Diverse teams. Jada described her eighth-grade team as "Diverse. It's like, every race in every class. It's not just, like, Black people, or just Hispanics, or just White people. It's like a good mix of all of them." She used the word "good," signaling how she valued the diversity of her team in eighth grade. Additionally, she explained that in sixth grade the racial diversity of her classes and her team was a major factor in her feeling like she belonged at Vanderbilt during her transition to middle school.

> 'Cause in sixth grade it was like my first year there, so I didn't really know the school like that. And in sixth grade, it was like diverse like how my team is now. It was like that in sixth grade. Like, I had like my team wasn't just general it was like High Achievers and general, like on my team now, it's not just general, I just have the general classes. So, it's just, yeah.

Jada's response is important in understanding how racialized tracking works within schools. Here she attributed her feeling of belonging not only to the racial diversity, but to the fact that her team included both general and High Achiever classes. Because the tracks at VMS were segregated, the only way she was able to have a racially diverse experience in general education was because her team included High Achiever classes as well.

Segregated teams. Jada's experiences on racially diverse teams with both High Achiever and general classes in sixth and eighth grade differed from her experience in seventh grade, a year when she felt isolated and felt like she did not belong.

> It was like last year, ‘cause I was on the team with, like, a whole bunch of Hispanics. I had NO friends on my team, like, AT ALL. Like, I had to make. I had to make a friend, and that friend I didn't even have any classes with them. Well, no actually, I made…I made three friends that I had classes with, but it was just three out the whole entire year and two of them…One of 'em was Black. One of 'em was like Black and Colombian, and the other one is White and Colombian. So, it's just like I had to make those friends just kind of like...I won't say survive, but like...you know.

Despite Jada shying away from the word “survive,” her description underscored the negative effect of racial segregation in schools because it can lead to isolation. As one of the few Black girls on the predominantly Hispanic team, Jada found herself isolated from her friends who were assigned to other teams, and as a result, she was separated from the close-knit friendships she developed in elementary school. Jada realized that she had to commit to forming friendships to make it through the year, which was not an easy task on a racially segregated team, even as a minority.

> It was like most kids on that team really just hung out…Like, most Hispanic kids on that team just hung out with the Hispanics, and I feel like all the other Black kids were on another team and stuff, or I just wouldn't have classes with them.

Because Vanderbilt separated students through tracking, and then also through special populations, Jada’s team included most of the seventh-grade ELL students, which in addition to being separated from her group of friends, she was separated from other Black students. Another important finding in Jada’s story was the link between student demographics and track assignments. Her seventh-grade team, which served the majority of the seventh-grade ELL population, also only had general level classes, meaning that there was an assumption that ELL

students could not also be High Achievers. This relegation of Jada's team to all general level classes fortified the stigma about students in general classes, ELL students, and students from racial and ethnic minority groups. Grouping all ELL students on a single team created both ethnic and language barriers, which made Jada feel like an outsider, who did not belong and needed to develop some close relationships to survive. For middle school students, survival is tied closely to their ability to create relationships with their peers where they feel they belong. This consequence of segregated classrooms is often overlooked, and I discuss the necessity of close relationships and their importance given the developmental needs of middle schoolers in greater detail in Chapter 5.

When I asked Denise what it was like to be a Black girl at VMS, she described similar feelings.

> OK... Some areas I can fit into, but other, like, on my team, there's, like, a lot of people who aren't Black and it's kind of, it's kinda… you feel lonely by yourself most of the time. But in the classes I have, it's more diverse. But if I go into another gifted classroom, it's a lot of Caucasian people, and it's like... it's like...I'm not like you, and I feel like I don't deserve to be on this team. But the experience...the experience is good. It just depends on your environment, and the people you surround yourself with 'cause, you know, I like being in a mixture of people, because when I'm just in a group of just one race, and I'm a different race it kinda makes me feel like....eeeeeeeeh...(twisting her face to show discomfort) this doesn't feel right, so I like being in a mixture of different people 'cause we could share our experiences.

Denise's level of comfort changed depending on the classroom environment. She explained that she preferred a diverse classroom setting, where she could share experiences with other students

but felt out of place and isolated in classes with predominantly White students. Her need for diversity was like Jada's, and it was clear from their responses that diversity meant a mixture of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, without a large majority from any single group. Denise valued this diversity, not only for her comfort but for similar reasons as Alexis, because she felt that they could connect and share their experiences with each other.

Maya, who was in the same High Achiever class with Denise during the Fall, spoke about the racial dynamics similarly. Maya explained that the Black girl experience "depends on, like, what team you're on because…Well, I think for my team, there's not a lot of Black girls in my classes, so you just have, like, different friends from, like, other races too." Maya described her friend group as racially diverse with friends from both elementary and middle school, but she also said there was a cost to having predominantly White classmates. She spoke about relating to her current classmates:

> Like some things, like, if it's basic that everyone can relate to you. Like, maybe a certain food you like or like an opinion on work that we get, but other things like in Social Studies, every time they bring up slavery or something like that, they will be looking at you in the classroom.

Despite those uncomfortable moments, Maya felt that she belonged more in her gifted classes because she believed her gifted classes were more rigorous, a factor more important to her than racial diversity. Because Maya qualified for gifted classes in 1st grade, she had lifelong friendships with some students in her gifted class, which was an important factor to consider. She was accustomed to being one of the few Black students in her classes, so while these experiences were still uncomfortable for her, she accepted them as a normal part of her education.

Likewise, even though Nia's classes were not predominantly White, she described similar experiences with her classmates.

> It's, like… So, we were on Latin America in Social Studies, and we were talking about slavery, and it was just weird because all the kids were just looking at all the Black kids, and it's like, why are you looking at us?? We don't know!!

These experiences were not unique to Nia and Maya. As they described these instances, I remembered times in school when we read poetry written by Black authors, or plays with Black characters, and both students and teachers looked at me as an expert, because I was Black. The othering of Black girls during instruction about Black topics can also be connected to the othering of Black people in the middle school curriculum, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter. In addition to these instances in class, the girls described overt racist interactions with both students and teachers.

Interpersonal prejudice. Throughout the interviews, the girls described their thoughts and experiences about racialized tracking at VMS, but what startled me the most was the prejudice they faced at VMS from teachers and students alike. This section describes the girls' experiences with racism and bias on a personal level.

Questions and comments. Throughout the study, the girls were most emotional when they described the racist questions and comments from other students, which were often related to their hair and skin. When I asked Nia what it was like to be a Black girl at VMS, she described the positive relationships she had with other Black girls and the negative interactions she had with other students because she was a Black girl.

> It's… um… It's kind of hard to explain 'cause it's a little bit of Black girls in this school, and you know, we're friends and stuff. But, like, other groups of people at our school, they are kinda nice too, but they don't know stuff about us so they, kinda, they be asking us weird questions they don't know about, like… "Oh is that your real hair?" You know… "Can I touch it?" and stuff like that, and it's really weird. Like, "Why is your face so dark?" or "Are you from Africa?" and stuff like that.

Nia mentioned the small number of Black girls at VMS and explained how her experience as a Black girl was shaped by that number. She was friends with the few Black girls in her classes and on her team, but she noticed that students from other racial groups were ignorant to world of Black girls. Nia's relationships with White students were marked by ignorant and insensitive questions that emphasized her race and othered her by focusing on the differences in her hair, her complexion, and her ancestry. Nia found these questions "weird" because having attended a Black elementary school before VMS, she did not have classmates who would ask these types of questions about her Blackness.

Jada also dealt with offensive questions about her Blackness disguised as compliments. She shared them when I asked her what it was like to be a Black girl at VMS.

> A lot of people find, like, dark skins… They be like, "Oh you're so pretty, but look at this dark skin, look at that one…They're so ugly, but how are you so pretty?" Like I find that offensive, 'cause it's like, I think everyone's, like, everyone is beautiful in their own way. So, it's just, like, it's kind of offensive…Like that's how it's interesting.

As Jada described her experiences as a Black girl, her use of the word "interesting" functioned similarly to Nia's description of the racist questions of her classmates as "weird." When the girls were confronted with these offensive comments, they struggled to find precise words to describe

their experiences with their classmates, but they understood that the questions were inappropriate and should not be said.

Jada shared the experience of one of her friends whose blackness was questioned based on her appearance.

> She had pretty, long hair so whenever she would straighten her hair people would just assume it was a weave. When it was, like, her real hair, and like she'd tell people it's her real hair and like nobody would believe her.

Jada shared the experience of her friend to highlight how students at VMS criticized and questioned Black girls that do not fit their stereotypes of how Black girls should look. In her own experiences, students expressed their expectations that Black girls with dark skin were not pretty, and her friend's experience highlights other students' stereotype that Black girls do not have long hair.

During the focus group, Denise discussed how stereotypes about Black people's appearance exist outside of VMS as well. She expressed her frustration with the persistent stereotypes about all aspects of the lives of Black people and explained the ignorance of those judgments.

> There's a stereotype on what we eat, what we do, how we dress, this
> and that. And then there is also a stereotype on how we're supposed to look, which kinda gets on my nerves because some of my relatives don't fully, necessarily, "look Black" probably because, like, some past, like, mixtures and stuff, but both of their parents are Black and…It's just the stereotype that "Oh you must be mix with something 'cause, you don't look fully Black." Like, you CAN be light-skinned and be Black!

Denise demonstrated her awareness of how the experiences at VMS connected to societal stereotypes about Black people. She used her knowledge of the history of Black people to explain why people said her relatives do not “look Black,” alluding to the unknown ancestral history of Black people in the United States, a factor in the range of skin tones of people who identify as Black.

Instead of fielding questions about her Blackness, Maya dealt with her White classmates using stereotypes to question her Blackness. “Sometimes they say, like, ‘Oh, you're White.’ Or sometimes they're like, ‘Oh I'm more Black than you.’” I asked her to explain why she thinks they say that. She replied slowly,

Maya: Cause… I don't know. They think… they stereotype, basically, and they think if you're not like (air quotes) “ghetto,” I guess, you're White. If you’re not like what people stereotype Black people to be, then you're not Black. Like everybody isn’t the same, and if you aren't acting that way, then you're not Black.

Shauri: So, they have these expectations of what a Black girl should be like?

Maya: (nodding her head)

Shauri: And if you aren't acting that way, then you're not Black. What do you say when someone says that?

Maya: Usually I'll say it's not true, ‘cause… And I say the same thing. I say, “Just because I'm not... I don't act this way doesn't mean I'm not Black. Like, if I were White, you wouldn't say this to me.”

Maya’s response to her classmates was an example of how Black girls rejected the stereotypes that were consistently presented to them in their daily experiences. Her response showed her

understanding of who she was and her ability to reject her classmates' notions of who she was or their assessment of her Blackness.

Racism as the norm. In addition to facing comments and questions about their Blackness, the girls also described instances when they were faced with overt racism including the use of the N-word, racist jokes, and racist videos. As they told these stories, the girls also explained that their reactions do not matter, because whether they reacted with logic or emotion, White students responded that it was just a joke, minimizing the girls' feelings. This section provides a few instances as examples of how prevalent racist interactions were at VMS.

Maya's conversations with her White classmates extended past them questioning her Blackness to their attempts to normalize racist language.

> I remember one conversation I had about, like, the N-word. Like, I was saying that they shouldn't say it. At first, they thought that I was saying like, only White people shouldn't say the N-word. Like, that I'd still be allowed to say it, but then I explained that I don't think that really anybody should say it because it's still not a good word to use…They said, "If we made the word, we can say the word."

I had never heard this justification for the word, and I was equally as shocked that White students used it with their Black classmates, so I asked her if students said the N-word frequently.

Maya: Mmmhmm Yes. And they'll say, oh I have a pass. But then like, if they see that then I will say, "OK, well someone gave you a pass. I can take it back." I don't think they should say it at all, but they use it pretty regularly.

Shauri: Why?

Maya: Because they feel like they're better than everyone else, and they feel like just because one person told them not to do it, they still feel like they can 'cause it's another kid telling them.

The conversation, the justification, and the frequent use of the N-word in Maya's school experience were shocking to me, but here Maya described the arrogance and entitlement that the other girls also described when discussing White, gifted students. The entitlement of the students to use the word, and their impudence to argue with Maya about the use of a racial slur shed light on the danger for Black girls in a predominantly White environment. School and district policies considered racial slurs a form of harassment, however, disciplinary action had not deterred students from using the word even though they understood its racist historical roots.

During the focus group, the girls discussed the experiences they had with racism in schools. The conversation began with Denise discussing how the White students' arrogance showed up at school.

Denise: Arrogance looks like you're full of yourself, and you're like, "yeah I can do all that...dadadadaduh" And then do it. And then they are like, "I bet Denise can dance 'cause she's....Bl..." They don't say 'cause I'm Black, but...They're probably thinking that..."oh yeah, I expect you to dance, Hey can you do this, wait, I don't know why I'm asking you 'cause..."

Leah: Yeah that's the thing, like sometimes on our team, they be like, um... Sometimes they make racist jokes like…

Alexis: They do make racist jokes.

Nia: Yeah!! They do make racist jokes!

Shauri: What sort of racist jokes?

Nia: So, one time I was in my class, and I was cleaning and like... Our teacher told us to like clean off the walls, like the little pencil marks, and then my (*with sarcasm and emphasis*) "FRIEND," my "WHITE FRIEND" Was like um, oh you need to scrub your hands, so you can be White, 'cause you're dirty… I was like (*with wide eyes*) "Ooh okaaaay…"

Shauri: So, what did you do? How did you respond?

Jada: They woulda got hit.

Leah: See my pain tolerance is like...

Nia: I was like.. I didn't even know what to say... I was shook.

Alexis: Oh, I know

Shauri: Did you tell anybody?

Nia: When they say those jokes to us, we can't really do anything about it 'cause like...

Leah: They say, "It's just a joke." They say, "It's just a joke. Calm down!" It's not just joke, 'cause when we say like… when somebody says something to them like about their skin color. They get OFFENDED!!

Denise: And then, that's a thing they do, they kind of…they kind of… Like with police brutality. It's kinda...If you fight back, you know there's going to be extreme consequences, and it's… it's... There's white privilege...it's... (*shaking her head as she trails off*)

Nia: Yeah.

Alexis: They made a Black people song… They made a Black people song... it's on YouTube.

Denise: They just don't… they made a Black people song, a White people song, a Hispanic song…

Leah: They made a Black people song, but a lot of people saw it was like, and it's all just…

Denise: STER-E-O-TYPES!! Cherry Kool-Aid, Watermelon..

Leah: The Black people song is more racist than the other songs!!

Alexis: 'Cause a White person made the song, I bet!

Nia: No, they were Black.

Alexis: Oh, okay.

Leah: But the Black person song was more racist.

Denise: And they was talking about monkeys and the KKK.

Jada: Whoa! Wait a minute!!

Leah: They put a racist name on it, they put Sharkisha, and I was the only Black person watchin' it because they put it on FOR ME!!! And I was like, I don't want to see it! And everybody had their laptops…and every time they said somethin' in the song, they just looked at me, and I'm like, "Don't look at me!!" Like, don't do that and I just like… I was mad at them, 'cause they were like... They just all started laughin' and stuff. And then they're lookin' at me like, "It's just a joke! It's just a joke!" But they laugh, and they lookin' at me and laughin' and they're like, "Oh yeah, you hear that?" and I'm like, "Yeah, I hear that…I'm not… (sigh)."

The girls discussed their experiences with racist jokes, and I also heard the pain in their feelings of powerlessness to address them. They actively rejected notions of intellectual inferiority through academic excellence, but they were still subjected to racist acts at school that White students excused away as just jokes, simple fun and games. In the moment, Nia "was shook," so she was unable to respond to the comment of her peers, but she also said that she did not tell anyone about the comment. None of the girls told any adults at school about the offensive comments from other students because they did not believe it would make a difference, and that nothing would happen because the White students would get away with the "joke."

Leah explained how her White friends made her watch a video full of racist stereotypes, and even as she tried to get out of it, she did not have the power to, and she had nowhere to go. Additionally, they laughed at her like it was not a big deal and she had no reason to be upset. Her exasperated tone showed the fatigue the girls described. Her peers called her over to watch the video because they wanted to see how she responded to the racist stereotypes. When she responded with anger, they laughed and responded by downplaying their insensitivity by calling it a joke.

This conversation also shows that the girls understand that the rules operate differently for Black girls. Denise compared their powerlessness to Black people who are faced with police brutality. They do not respond because if they did, they would face harsh consequences for their reaction, while the behavior of the students who made the comments would be ignored because adults would let them get away with the joke. Additionally, this comparison explains how Black girls know that the authority in schools, just like the police in society, are not there to protect them or keep them safe, rather they feel their role is to control them in ways other groups of students are not. I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter.

As a teacher, a researcher, and a Black woman, another disheartening facet of these experiences is that throughout these experiences, none of the girls told adults at VMS. When these events occurred, they discussed them with their friends and their parents, and even though they talked about how teachers influenced their experiences, they did not go to them when these events occurred. To know that Black girls routinely face this kind of treatment in a racially diverse school, regardless of track, shows how school, just like society, does not meet the needs of Black girls, and does not provide them with the safe learning environment that every student deserves.

Othered and absent in the curriculum. Another theme that resonated as the girls described their experiences at VMS was their feeling that people who look like them were largely absent from their curriculum, in fact, the only lessons that they could recount were in Social Studies, and those were largely in the context of slavery. When I asked the participants, most of them could not think of an activity. However, Leah described one activity in school where her group chose to present a project on Venus and Serena Williams in Language Arts. Nia described some activities in Social Studies that focused on people of the African diaspora within the curriculum. The class focused on Latin America, Europe, and Asia, and her descriptions of the lessons highlight the importance of culturally relevant instructions and teachers.

Nia had the most to say about the inadequacy of the curriculum, questioning information she got from her teacher, and wanting to learn more about the topics that did include members of the African diaspora.

Shauri: Tell me about an activity or lesson in class where you learned about people who look like you.

Nia: Ummm, when we were in Social Studies class, we were doing this, like, game.. we were playing basketball, and we were answering questions about Latin America and they were mostly talking about African people and how they got to the Americas and stuff like that.

Shauri: So, in the context of slavery?

Nia: Well, ummm yes. Well. I don't know if it's true, because it's a lot of things that my teachers says that are really… *suspicious*… 'cause I be asking her, and she just be like… I don't know.

Shauri: What sort of questions do you ask her?

Nia: So, we were talking about slavery, and she was like okay, so the European people were marrying African people, and I was like, "That's not true." And we had already seen in a video that Europeans called us the inferior people. So I raised my hand, and I was like… so why would they marry someone who is inferior, and she was like… I don't know.

Shauri: Are there other things that you feel like your teachers say that are "suspicious" when it comes to Black people?

Nia: Yes… so today, we were talking about Aborigines… So, she was like Aborigines were from Asia, and I looked up Aborigines, and they were super dark-skinned, and you know had Black hair, and so I asked my dad, "Are Aborigines Black? and he was like, "yes…" and I was like… "Well my teacher said that they were from Asia"….and so I was getting suspicious (*said slowly as her went up an octave*)

Shauri: Is that something you would bring up in class?

Nia: Yes.

Shauri: And how do you think she would respond?

Nia: Probably say, “I don’t know.”

Shauri: How does that make you feel that she doesn’t know the answers to the questions that you’re asking?

Nia: I want a teacher that can answer MY questions, and I think that if a student has a question then you should answer it, or you should look it up and tell me, or I should look it up and tell her about it.

Shauri: Do you feel like she would listen to you if you looked it up and told her?

Nia: No.

Shauri: Why not?

Nia: Because some teachers... like these teachers at this school.… or in the sixth grade on my team, they don’t listen to us most of the time, and if we do tell them something... they just gon’ forget.

Shauri: Do you think that they don’t listen to any of the students?

Nia: Well, some students they do; some students they don’t

Shauri: Is there any difference between the students they listen to and the students that they don’t?

Nia: Well, most of them are White that they listen to, and like the Black students don’t really ask questions.

Social Studies was the only class where she remembered learning about people who looked like her, and that was only done in the context of slavery. In addition to sitting through these lessons with students looking at her and her other Black classmates, she also felt that her

teacher told her information that was inadequate and inaccurate. Her use of the word "suspicious" to describe her teacher's knowledge of people in the African diaspora is telling. Nia does not trust her teacher to give her accurate information or respond to her questions. Her suspicion of her teacher affects her educational experience because she does not trust the information that her teacher tells her about Black people, and she also feels that her teacher does not care about her desire to learn.

Nia's feeling that the teachers on her team listen to the White students, but do not listen to her when she asks questions about the classroom content, may also explain why the other Black students in the class rarely ask questions. They may realize that their queries fall on deaf ears in that classroom, and they may already be conditioned to not engage with teachers whom they cannot trust. These interactions took place in a High Achiever Social Studies class. High Achiever classes are designed to provide students with a rigorous education that promotes critical thinking and questioning. However, Nia does not trust her teacher, nor does her teacher provide her with answers to her questions about the content. Furthermore, Nia does not even feel that her teacher will allow her to present the answers to her questions. Nia knows that her contributions are not taken seriously, and her inquiries are ignored.

When I asked Maya the same question, she answered with what she thought was missing from the curriculum.

> This year I kind of noticed, and also last year, they didn't really do too much for, like, Black History Month. Like in elementary school, we did a lot to decorate our doors and do activities on them. But in middle school, it's kind of like, I don't know. They didn't even say, "Oh today is the first day of Black History Month." You kind of would have to like bring it up to them. We didn't really do anything for it…I've brought it up to my

Social Studies teacher, and she said that she's going to try to, like, give us like activities on it and stuff. Except for the morning announcements, they did stuff on there.

During the focus group, the girls expressed the same sentiments regarding Black History Month.

Nia: My dad says [Black History Month is] like fading away every year because people stop caring.

Leah: It's true. They don't care.

Nia: Yeah. When we was in elementary school we used to watch videos and stuff on BrainPop, but like now. Oh, just another month.

Leah: Like in February, Black History Month. I don't remember them doing nothing.

Alexis: We did a project.

Leah: We did projects, we talked about people, and they inspire people to do great things, but now they're just like, we already know the month. We already know. Let’s go on with our day.

Jada: (*imitating teachers*) We all know what MLK is... let’s get it over with.

Denise: But there's so many like Black people that get unrecognized for what they do. And probably because for one, some White people take the credit for certain things, and…or… no one really knows who invented the...this and that...and you know, it's still important!

The girls’ conversation about Black History Month revealed how even the most perfunctory inclusions of Black people are absent from their middle school experiences. They noticed that neither the school, nor their teachers, regardless of race, showed that the contributions of Black people to society are valued in school. In addition to noticing the absence of Black History

Month at VMS, Denise made a cogent argument for its importance and the need to recognize the contributions of Black people in history and society. Ignoring the positive contributions of Black people in society, when paired with experiences when their classmates look at them during lessons about enslaved Black people, shapes their view of themselves in the curriculum as othered or absent.

Given the absence of the positive representations of Black people presented in elementary school, Maya discussed why she felt that Black people were absent from the curriculum, and the dangers this absence has for Black students.

Maya: I feel like for Social Studies. I know the school can't really help with the standards in our, for people in Georgia, but we learn about, like, a lot of other places and like a lot of other countries, and my teacher she mentioned, she said, "Africa is one of the most important things that you're going to be learning about like out of all your time at school." And I said, "If it's the most important thing, why is this the first time we're learning about it because we didn't learn about it in elementary school or like sixth grade even. We just learned about Africa in seventh grade." And she said, "That was a good question," and she couldn't really answer it. She said that it's because of the standards. But I feel like the standards aren't really that fair because they focus on some groups and not others. Yeah, on more like the majority of one group of people.

Shauri: How much do you feel like you've learned about just like African-Americans?

Maya: I don't really feel like I've learned as much as I could have learned. It's definitely not the same amount that I learned about Europeans or White people in America.

Shauri: Why do I think that is?

Maya: Because, I mean, I feel like they sometimes make it seem like we aren't as, or we can't be as, successful, very successful as White people because they really only teach us about slavery, and besides Black History Month, we don't really learn anything good about ourselves.

Shauri: And what effect do you think that has?

Maya: It doesn't have a good effect on people because it makes our, like, standards seem lower. Like, it might make some people think that they can't be or do something because of that.

Shauri: Has it ever made you doubt yourself?

Maya: Not really.

Shauri: Why not?

Maya: 'Cause I know, like, at home I learned a lot about our history and the good things, so I know that if other people are able to, then I also am able to.

Shauri: So you got those things that are missing from school…What happens for students who don't have parents who can teach them about those sorts of things?

Maya: Then, I feel like they might not feel the same way that I do. They probably think that Black people didn't do as much good things as White people or something like that.

Shauri: So why is this? Why is it like that, if we know it's not true?

Maya: Cause, I mean, we're still…it's like…Well, slavery lasted for, like, a really, really long time. And that also put us, like, that was a big like obstacle because we didn't have. We weren't learning when they were learning, so they also…I feel like they had more of an advantage because they were able to read and write, and we weren't allowed to. But I feel like in the very beginning, when we had libraries and things like that, they burned them down, and every time you would try to start like building ourselves back up, they would start there early. They'd find a way to put it down.

Shauri: And so that just continues and…

Maya: Still has a big effect on, like, now.

In this conversation, Maya explained the value of learning about Black history and Black culture for Black students. She described the positive effect of having Black role models from history in shaping how she viewed herself and her abilities. She also explained that she learned those things at home. Also, she recognized the possible negative effects for Black students who do not understand the contributions of Black people because they may doubt themselves. For Black students at VMS, knowledge of the contributions of Black people may serve as an important counterbalance to the stereotypes they face, the interpersonal racism they endure, and the disproportionate enforcement of the rules, which I explain in the next section.

Disproportionate enforcement of the rules. Another topic that dominated our conversations was how rules operate differently for Black girls. None of the girls in the study had a discipline record, but they were all familiar with disproportionate attention Black girls received from teachers and administrators regarding their behavior, and the differences in discipline Black girls faced as a result. The disparity constrained the actions and responses of Black girls because they feared further disciplinary action, while they watched White girls break the same rules without being penalized to the same degree, if at all. The most prominent example that the girls discussed was the enforcement of the schoolwide dress code.

Getting dresscoded. In the interviews and the focus group, the girls discussed how White girls wore clothes that violated the school dress code, without enforcement, while teachers and administrators policed how the Black girls dressed daily. The girls refer to the enforcement of the dress code as "getting dresscoded." Getting dresscoded was the first thing that Nia mentioned when I asked her if Black girls were treated differently than other groups of students regarding school rules.

> Yes.. yes… Yes!! Well, like, a White girl could wear shorts that are, like, up waaaay too far, and if a Black girl wanted to do that, she would get dresscoded immediately. And like we could wear… like a bigger Black girl could wear some leggings and would get dresscoded and that's crazy. Because some of these girls out here be wearing crop tops and super short shorts, and if we wear one thing that isn't what they would want us to wear then we get dresscoded.

Nia's explanation of the differences between dress code enforcement for White girls and Black girls highlighted some important differences in how the two groups were treated. Nia explained that the dress code is enforced differently based on race and body type, pointing out

specifically that Black girls with larger bodies were punished for wearing the same clothes other girls wore freely to school. Although she had never been dresscoded, she explained how girls got dresscoded based on when she saw it happen to her friends.

Nia: So, the girl. Like, if we were caught, like, wearing a crop top or something, a teacher would catch you, and pull you to the side, and tell you to put your hands up, and if it was higher than your belly button or something, then they would call your parents and dresscode you, but if it was just a White girl with super short shorts walking, a teacher wouldn't say anything to them.

Shauri: Why do you think they say something to the Black girls and not the White girls?

Nia: Because they think that that is not something that we were made to wear or that we should wear, just in general, not even at this school.

Nia said that Black girls were dresscoded, not because they broke the rules as listed in the dress code policy, but because adults felt that Black girls should not dress a certain way in general. She said, "just in general, not even at this school" because she knew that getting dresscoded was not just an experience for Black girls at Vanderbilt. She understood that enforcing the dress code more rigidly and frequently for Black girls at VMS was a part of a larger set of expectations about how Black girls should look and what they should and should not wear.

Dress code was a common conversation among Denise and her friends because they noted the blatant subjectivity of dress code enforcement.

They [Denise's friends] are always talkin' bout how... They call, they call, the uh Caucasian girls at our school, they call them "The Basics" 'cause they ALL got Air Force Ones. They ALL wear long shirts and extremely short shorts. And they always complain about, (*imitating her friends*) "How come she can wear these booty shorts, but every time I walk in with shorts that are a little bit above my knee. I get dresscoded?" I'm like... (*sucks air in her teeth)* I don't know.... (*shaking head)* And my dad said, "It might be White privilege, but you… Hey, you never know, you never know," and I'm like, "Hmmmmm."

Denise and her friends saw that White girls were allowed to wear things that they were not, and they knew that the rule is unfair. "The Basics" was a term used throughout the school by students of all races to describe the girls who dressed in the style that Denise described. These girls, who were predominantly White, conformed to a specific style of dress, wearing specific styles and brands of clothes, including wearing short shorts, as Denise described. The school's dress code prohibited short shorts, crop tops, and any other shirts that show a bare midriff. Denise's friends noticed that although that group of girls was allowed to wear short shorts, they were dresscoded whenever they wore any kind of shorts. Denise had been dresscoded by a teacher for wearing shorts, and she described her response.

Denise: I'm the type of person that's like giving you examples. Like "OK wait a minute wait a minute, you didn't, you didn't just see that girl walk past? SHE was wearing shorts THIS high! But y'all have a problem with me. Wh-Wh- Why can't..."

Shauri: So, what did the teacher say?

Denise: She's just like, (*imitating teacher*) "Heey, don't talk back, don't talk back." I was like, I was just like... (*takes a deep breath*)... Okay, okay, but I'm just like... you know, (*talking to herself*) I will not get suspended for this... for talking back... So I'm going to respectfully say, "Yes ma'am" and go about my day.

Denise’s experience with dress code enforcement showed the subjective nature of the process and how school officials used it to discipline Black girls even when they were presented with examples of subjective enforcement. Additionally, Denise showed caution when she defended herself because she understood that if she disregarded the teacher’s instructions and continued to talk back, she might face the more severe consequence of in-school suspension (ISS). Denise talked herself through the entire scenario, calculating the known risks as she decided her response. In the end, she was dresscoded for wearing the same clothes that White girls wore, and she was silenced by her teacher when she attempted to point out the inequality.

During the focus group, the girls’ continued the conversation about how the dress code operated differently for Black girls.

Leah: My friend. She was wearing this big sweatshirt, and I was like wonderin’ why? ‘cause it was hot, and then she pulled up her sweatshirt and she said, “I'm gonna break the dress code ‘cause I'm wearing these really short shorts”…Like, she hasn't been dresscoded...and she has PE for seventh period…so I wanna know if she got dresscoded ‘cause we don’t gotta dress out.

Jada: And the White girls can get away with it because most of them don't have hips.

Denise: (*laughter*) Yeah. That's basically what we say it is. It's like okay…Now, watch one of us pull up in one of these shorts, you know they gonna say something immediately, and then my friends are like, (*imitating*) "Well, I mean they don't really got body..."

Jada: (*wearing shorts that stop mid-thigh*) I got so many stares today, but they'll be a White girl next to me wearing a big t-shirt and some shorts that are even more shorter.

Denise: Really!! 'Cause they, I mean they're...they don't...

Jada: And they don't even look at them, they'll just look at me.

Nia: 'Cause it's like they expect them to wear that.

Leah: 'Cause we special.

Denise: 'Cause they be wearing these long t-shirts that look like dresses and these shorts... It look like they don't got any bottoms on.

Nia: Exactly!

Shauri: Have you all tried to wear that?

Group: No!!! NO!!!!

Jada: That's ugly to me.

Shauri: Would you want to wear...

Group: No, no, no!!!!!!!!

Jada: That's something I'd wear around the house.

Denise: Nah…My dad see me dressed like that he would be like "Where do you think you going?" I'm like, "Oh no, just school…" No. No. Nope.

Leah: I haven't seen a White girl that's on our team to wear jeans. I have never seen it.

Denise: Prime example... Leggings.

Leah: Leggings! They will wear leggings, but they won't wear jeans.

Denise: My dad will not let me walk out the house in leggings!

Alexis: We have a rule…We have a rule in our house that says, if you're going to wear leggings out, it has to cover your butt. Look at the girls in our school and be like...

Leah: But they wear crop tops and leggings and they don't get dresscoded!

Jada: I can't wear leggings...My teacher will tell me to change. But this other White girl be wearing leggings and act like it's perfectly fine.

Their discussion of how White girls wore clothes that Black girls could not, led into a discussion about how White girls generally dressed the same way, usually in leggings or short shorts with a long t-shirt, while the girls in the study did not dress to conform. Instead, they said they dressed to express their individual identities and only worried about pleasing themselves. Even though they felt it was unfair for the White girls to be allowed to break the dress code, they thought the enforcement was unfair, not the dress code, and had no desire to wear the clothes the White girls did.

Maya also mentioned the dress code as an example of how rules were enforced differently for Black and White girls, but she also saw a disparity where she believed race and socioeconomic class were factors.

Maya: They [White girls] usually get away with wearing the short shorts. And like if they wore something, then, they don't really get in trouble for it, but

other people do. Also, like these shoes like Birkenstocks. Slides weren't allowed, but not really a lot of White people wear slides, I feel like. Yeah and Birkenstocks they do, and Birkenstocks are allowed, and slides aren't but they're basically the same thing.

Shauri: Why do you think they are disciplined differently? Why do some people get in trouble and others don't?

Maya: I feel like they think maybe because these shoes cost more or something that it could make you seem more. Not classy, but like more… I don't know like put together... Maybe more put together or something.

Shauri: How do other students respond when they see things like that happen?

Maya: They say it's not fair and I agree.

Shauri: And when they say it’s not fair how do the teachers respond?

Maya: They don't really do anything. Yeah. They don't really do anything about it. And they used to say slides and flip flops or not allowed because they didn't have a back to them. But neither do Birkenstocks. That didn't really make sense.

Shauri: Yeah.

Maya: And I asked [my teacher] about it because one time I wore slides on purpose to see the difference. But I also brought a pair of Birkenstocks with me to change into because I knew I'd get dresscoded for it. And he asked the assistant principal, and the assistant principal said that Birkenstocks were completely allowed, and slides weren't. And [my

> teacher] said he didn't really understand either what the logic behind that was.

While Maya noticed that White girls were able to wear things against dress code without getting in trouble, she also recognized how Birkenstocks were allowed because they cost more than slides (athletic sandals with a rubber bottom and one large strap that fits across the top of the foot). Black students, and Black boys specifically, were most likely to wear slides, and they were routinely told to take them off and put on other shoes. The school's rationale was that slides, like flip flops, were a safety hazard because without a back, they could easily come off causing someone to trip. However, like Maya pointed out, school administrators made it clear that this policy did not include Birkenstocks, despite their construction presenting the safety concerns. Maya's actions were a part of a larger student protest, which began as Birkenstocks became more popular and more girls began wearing them to VMS.

Maya's thought that Birkenstocks were allowed because they cost more and conveyed more status is important because it highlights the intersection of class and race in rule enforcement at VMS. In addition to class, Leah mentioned another reason why White girls did not get dresscoded.

> Because I think the teachers are just so used to it now, because I feel like the teachers are just used to it because such a majority wear the same thing that you can't tell all of them to get dresscoded...you can't tell them to do the same thing. 'Cause they gon' do the same thing together like they do everything.

Leah explained that the White girls not only avoid getting dresscoded, because large groups of them wore the same clothes, they, essentially, make VMS's dress code. She believed it would be

futile for teachers to try to enforce the dress code for so many students, and as a result, White girls' clothing choices determined how the dress code was enforced.

While White girls at VMS were free to choose how they dressed at school without consequence, Jada explained how teachers used the dress code to reinforce negative stereotypes about Black kids.

> Some teachers have like...I had an experience where like...I like to wear bandanas when I wear my natural hair. I used to like to wear bandanas 'cause it's just like a headband, so it's like why not? But, like I'll see someone else wear a headband, and they won't be Black, and they won't dresscode them, but they'll dresscode me just 'cause I'm a Black girl, and they must think I'm in a gang or something. Or one of my guy friends will like have a bandana, just like a bandana with them, and they'll just like think the worst basically, like stereotyping, and we're not even like in a gang or nothing.

Teachers did not allow Jada to wear a bandana because they believed it was gang-related. Jada and her friends had no association with gangs, gang members, or gang activity; Jada did not have any disciplinary infractions. However, Jada understood that her teachers were using stereotypes that connect Black people to gangs. The girls explained these experiences getting dresscoded in detail because of their prevalence at VMS, and even though they do not have discipline records, they shared the experiences that their friends had with disproportionate discipline regarding serious offenses.

Other offenses. During discussions about how Black girls were treated differently at Vanderbilt, the girls shared experiences of other students to highlight how Black girls were likely to receive more severe consequences when they got in trouble.

Denise: OK. This girl was had four days OSS and five days of ISS because she reportedly kinda...wrote lists of people she would kill and this and that. And so my friends was like.. Bro, if that was any of us...we woulda been expelled and dadadadadadaduh. We woulda been…yeah, but…

But they [White students] say certain things, 'cause they know like... Well, we [Black students] can't really...Well we can... But we just choose not to because, we know what will happen if...They [school officials] don't care who said what. dadadadadaduh…We still gon' get punished because we end up fighting back.

Denise's description of the punishment that a White student received after making lists of people to kill was shocking, but the conversation she had with her friends about it revealed the effects of disproportionate discipline. Denise and her friends discussed how they would have faced expulsion had they done the same thing, but they also recognized that the same options were not available to them.

Her comment shifted from the punishment of the White student, to the fact that Black students understood that the rules are different for them. Denise knew that White students were allowed to say certain things to and about Black students at VMS, but Black students understood that if they reacted, they would be the ones punished for fighting back. The experiences of the girls were shaped by the knowledge that they could not assert or defend themselves, because if they responded, they would be punished. The rules used to silence Black girls contributed to the climate that emboldened students to make the racist comments described earlier in this chapter.

Nia described an experience when she felt one of her friends was unfairly punished after she was in a conflict with a Hispanic girl.

> And we do get in trouble more, because I know someone that got in trouble for, um… Well, she was quote unquote telling a Hispanic girl to kill herself, and then the Hispanic girl told the counselor, and then my friend already showed her all the messages that the Hispanic girl said, and she didn't care, and then my friend got ISS for three days.

Nia used her friend's experience to describe how Black girls are unfairly punished more than other girls. Her friend received three days ISS for her actions, while the other girl was not punished. This anecdote was not the perfect example of unjust disciplinary policies that target Black girls, but Nia felt that her friend was treated differently because she was a Black girl, which communicated to Nia that the adults who enforced the rules were unfair.

Jada recounted another event when a friend was initially punished harshly because administrators assumed that she was the aggressor.

> I remember this one time my friend got in this fight with this other girl that I used to be friends with, but we are no longer friends. So, my friend didn't even start the fight. Really. It was the other girl because the other girl was like putting her hands in like my friend's face and stuff. And my friend just had to retaliate because that's just who she is. So... they just... At first, they gave my friend, the... My Black friend the bigger consequence just 'cause they assumed that she had like she hit her first l like she had a bigger temper. I felt like that was just because she was Black because the other girl wasn't Black.

The automatic assumption that Jada's friend was the aggressor almost led to her being punished unfairly. Jada rejects that the assumption was based on her friend having a bigger temper, instead

plainly stating that she believed she initially got the more severe punishment because she was Black. Even though her friend's punishment was eventually changed, Jada's story underscored Denise's assertion that Black girls cannot react because they will always be punished if they do.

Another example that Jada shared explained how teachers privileged the safety and comfort of White girls over other students. She told the story to illustrate how she'd like teachers to change the way they treat students at VMS.

Shauri: If you could change one thing about your school what would you change?

Jada: How students handle, I mean not how students... how teachers handle children.

Shauri: What do you mean?

Jada: Like some teachers just do unnecessary stuff… um, like…

Shauri: Like what?

Jada: It's mainly, like, been like… that in middle school, like, some stuff is just so unnecessary. Like I remember...I remember there was this fight that happened right…It was in the locker room and just 'cause the fight happened like weeks after the fight happened. They decided to put new rule... new rules in the locker room just for the girls' locker room though... So basically, there's like... There's like two sections... there's like three sections of the locker room right, but the eighth graders can go like all the way in the back. So there's two sections in the back section. So basically, at first everybody would be ummm in the back two sections, but after that fight happened.

> After the fight happened and people were reported that their food was still out of their lunch boxes and stuff. So, some of the coaches pulled like specific people from...well they claim specific people from other classes that they thought would be getting their food stolen. And like put them all the way in the front, but for some reason all of those people just happened to be White girls and it was just like mostly Black people and Hispanics in the back. I felt it was unnecessary. If they felt like they were getting their food stolen, they can just put them outside in the bleachers when we're playing, 'cause most of time we're outside. Who's gon' steal your food when it's out in the open and teachers are watching?

Jada felt that the coaches' decision to segregate the locker room was an unnecessary response to a fight and allegations of stolen food. Coaches selected White girls to use a separate part of the locker room to protect them from the fight and to protect their food. Jada though the response was unnecessary because she felt the girls could have moved their food elsewhere, instead of separating the locker room by race. This final example highlighted another facet of inequitable treatment, showing that when Black girls were viewed aggressors, who need to be controlled by the rules, alternately, White girls were treated as victims, for whom rules were created to protect.

The girls described the varied ways they felt othered and marginalized through individual interactions, the curriculum, and disciplinary practices. In response to these oppressive experiences, the girls described how they coped by finding safe spaces and creating community at their school.

Safe Spaces and Community

Another salient theme for the girls was how vital their relationships were in helping them navigate their experiences within the context of racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). As they shared their school experiences, they explained how their relationships with teachers, parents, and friends were instrumental in creating safe space and a sense of community and belonging as they coped with othering and marginalization at VMS.

Teachers. Maya, Denise, and Jada said they developed positive relationships with their teachers that were important to their experiences. Denise realized the importance of supportive teachers during sixth grade when she faced some difficult issues at home.

> Last year my teachers were very understanding. You know...They were very understanding, and they understood what was going on. I felt open to talk to them. And that's a good thing, you know. It's really hard to get through something when you don't have anyone to talk to. But I had, you know, I was surrounded with teachers that were very helpful.

Denise's explained how helpful her teachers were during such a difficult year, and she described how important it was for her to have someone who understood what she was going through. In this context, her teachers understood that she was going through issues and made themselves available to help her through, which was important. For Black girls it is also important for them to have teachers who understand their racial and gendered identities.

During their individual interviews, Maya and Denise described how they connected most with the same Black woman teacher.

Denise: I like...My favorite teacher is [Ms. Jemison…She's just, she's, she's...chill, and she doesn't get on my nerves… but you know, we cool...Sometimes I feel like I could talk to her and stuff more so than my other teachers.

Shauri: Is there a reason why you feel more comfortable talking to her than other teachers?

Denise: I don't know... I just feel like she's just very open. you know...

Maya described her similarly. "I feel like with Ms. Jemison I can kind of joke with her like, and like she'll tell me things like I don't know." They both valued the connection they had with the Black woman teacher on their team and appreciated her openness to talk with them and to listen to them. Having someone who they felt listened to them was important to their feeling of belonging, particularly given their experiences being silenced by other teachers at VMS.

Jada felt having Black teachers also had the benefit of protecting her from some of the racism that the other girls described. She felt that having three Black teachers prevented anything "racially crucial" from happening on her team, and during the focus group, Jada went on to explain the benefit of Black girls having Black women teachers.

Jada: My teachers last year… like I had a Hispanic teacher, and then I had a Black teacher, and I had two White teachers. So, it wasn't really nothing bad last year, and it wasn't really nothing bad this year, 'cause I have three Black women teachers, and one of them was like African.

Nia: That's great… She's sooo lucky.

Shauri: So having Black teachers, you think it's important?

Jada: Yeah. And they just happen to be women so. Well like the other. The other one is a man, but it's also a good thing if you're a woman too.

Shauri: So, why is it a good thing if it's a woman too?

Jada: Cause like, I feel like some Black girls have different issues than Black men. Like it's just different issues with both of them. 'Cause like, we all kind of have, like, the same issues, but like different ones with each gender.

Jada's explanation showed her understanding of her own intersectional identity and how race and gender connect to shape her experiences. She valued having Black women teachers because they understood her issues and provided her with reflections of herself and were adults she could turn to when she needed them. Jada had the largest number of Black teachers at VMS due to both her grade and track placement, and she explained how Black teachers helped both with coping and belonging at VMS. The next section explains how the girls' parents helped them.

Parents. Although the girls did not tell adults at VMS when they faced prejudice, they did share these events with their parents. Jada went to her mother after the coaches segregated the locker room in PE, prompting her mother to meet with the principal, which led to the reversal of the locker room policy. Jada's mother advocated for her wellness and comfort at school and she set an important example for Jada, who credited her mother with making her the strong person she is.

Because the girls do not go to teachers for help, I asked during the focus group who they turn to when they face difficult situations at school. Denise described her father's support during their conversations about school issues.

Denise: Oh, yeah. I go on a rant. I, like, come home pace back and forth and like… (*imitating a rant*)

Shauri: You tell your parents?

Denise: Yeah. And my dad is like (*imitating her father*) "Well..." And I'm like, "So I said all that and all you got to say is well?" He's like, "Well you already know Deedee."

Nia: (*nodding her head*) My dad, he's like sympathetic.

Denise: (*continuing to imitate her father*) This gon' happen, the day and age you live in dadadadadaduh" And I'm like.. "Well, I don't like it." and he's like, "I know you don't."

Nia nodded her head from the other side of the focus group as Denise talked about her father's reaction to her rants, adding that her father was also sympathetic to her concerns. Both Denise and Nia said they've told their fathers about their experiences at school. During those conversations, their fathers have listened to them and provided support and comfort, but their fathers did not take direct action, instead they offered advice to help their daughters cope with these situations. Denise spoke the most candidly about the ways her father has supported her.

> 'Cause sometimes my dad will always tell me that it takes us, as Black people, extra effort to just get to the same level. Because there is, he explains a pyramid. How Black people and other races are at the bottom, while White people tend to be at the top, so it's going to take us double the amount of energy to get to the top. And just like um the "Pride of the Panther" by Tupac, his poem, it expresses, you know, how a mother has to take care of her young, and it takes um.... It's, it's, uh it's, it's really hard to grow a flower from like rock or something. It said...you know...explaining how it's really hard for Black people and stuff and it's really hard for a Black woman. But yeah, my dad tells me to be strong.

Denise described her father as a daily source of support to help her navigate her experiences at school, whether related to teachers, students or academics, but also understanding how to deal with life's difficulties. His support offered encouragement to prepare her to survive in the world as a Black girl who will grow up to be a Black woman.

Nia explained how her father talked to her before she started at VMS, because he anticipated some of the issues she would face with White students and how she should respond.

> When I first came here, my dad already told me that people are going to ask you some stuff and you just gotta tell 'em… you know… this is not right. You not supposed to do that and stuff, because they are going to ask you those questions. 'Cause they don't know.

Nia's dad prepared her that students would ask her insensitive questions, and he explained that students ask those questions because they don't know the answers. When she said this, I wondered if he explained their questions as the result of ignorance was another way of protecting his daughter because it would be more difficult for her to cope if she thought their comments were rooted in racism.

Maya's father prepared her by instilling racial pride and teacher her Black history, and they also have conversations focused on her future.

Maya: We talk a lot about like HBCUs and we say how like people make it look like other schools that aren't HBCUs are a lot better like. But HBCUs are also really good and they like a lot of them are better than other schools and like you can help you be successful.

Shauri: Do you want to go to an HBCU?

Maya: Yes.

Shauri: Why?

Maya: Because I feel like it'll give me a different experience. Like I won't get the same experience at a school that isn't an HBCU because there won't be as many people that I can relate to.

Maya said that her father, a graduate of an all-male HBCU, discussed future plans with her and her older brother, who also planned to attend an HBCU. During the summer, they visited several HBCUs as a part of his college search, and she felt that having an HBCU experience would provide her with a sense of community, supportive faculty, and people who she could relate to in ways that she could relate to her current classmates on her predominantly White team.

Friends. Like most middle school students, friends are an important aspect of their lives and particularly their school community. Throughout the interviews, the girls described the pivotal role their friendships and friend group played in their educational experiences. These groups provided the dual function of a place to belong and outlets to help them cope when they faced difficult situations at school.

Nia referred to making friends when she began sixth grade as an important part of her feeling that she belonged at VMS.

Nia: When I started getting used to this school and started making friends, then that's when I felt like I belonged because the first week of school, I didn't know anybody, nobody talked to me, and I didn't talk to anybody else.

Shauri: And who are your friend groups… how would you describe your group of friends?

Nia: That all of them are Black, or mixed, and they are nice and funny and annoying sometimes.

Like most adolescents, Nia found her sense of belonging once she made friends with the students on her team. She said her entire friend group is Black, or biracial, but identify as a part of the Black community. Her group of friends helped her cope when White students asked her questions about her skin, hair, and heritage.

Shauri: Is there a reason why all of your friends are Black?

Nia: Because the White people really don't want to hang out with us… the Hispanics…we really don't meet eye to eye with each other, we just kinda go back and forth all the time, and Black people just want to kind of stick together.

Shauri: Do you think it's important for Black people to stick together?

Nia: YES!

Shauri: Why?

Nia: Because I think people want to knock other Black girls down, but you know that one group of Black girls is just like really funny and really nice to each other and stuff like that

Shauri: How do people try to knock Black girls down?

Nia: They want to talk, say mean things, say racist things about us…call us cotton pickers and stuff…and that makes us feel bad, but that one group of Black girls or like a couple groups, you know wanna bring you back up and just tell you like, "Okay just don't bother them, leave them alone, and they will leave you alone."

Nia described her friends as a community that served as a safe and supportive space for them as they deal with prejudiced behavior. Her group of friends provided protection for each other against the harmful comments they faced from other students.

Jada also described how important her friends were to her and the specialness of their closeness.

Jada: It's just most of my friends, we've been like close since like elementary school and not half of them, but like a few of them don't even go here anymore, but I'm still close with them. And then it's like, it's like that group of friends that you see on like a movie or something.

Jada's friendships developed in elementary and those bonds lasted through middle school, with bonds that have lasted even after some of them transferred. These friendships have shaped her middle school experience, however, it also made seventh grade difficult because she was separated from her friends and placed on a different team.

Jada said seventh grade was a time she felt like she did not belong at VMS because she had a difficult time making friends after she was placed on a different team than her group of friends.

Shauri: Why did you think it was so difficult making friends?

Jada: Because it was like most kids on that team really just hung out…like most Hispanic kids on that team just hung out with the Hispanics. and I feel like all the other Black kids were on the team and stuff or I just wouldn't have classes with them.

In addition to being separated from her friends, Jada was placed on a predominantly Hispanic team, where it was difficult for her to make friends because students made friends with kids of

their same background, which was a dynamic Nia described on her racially diverse team as well. During this time, Jada said that she had to fight to make friends in order to survive.

Like Jada, Maya also started at VMS with a group of friends from elementary school. She described her friend group as "pretty diverse," including friends she made in both elementary and middle school. I asked her about her experiences making friends in predominantly White classes.

Maya: I don't really find it a struggle because, like I said, I can talk to anybody and feel comfortable. But other times, I feel like there I wish there were more people like me.

Maya's comfort with her long-standing group of friends did not negate her need for other Black girls who related to her experiences, in the same way Nia's friends do.

In addition to discussing the racist experiences they have in school with their friends, Jada and Denise described how they support their friends dealing with other issues as well.

Jada: Yeah. Some of my friends got like a low self-esteem. They'd be like, "oh I'm stupid or I'm or I'm ugly" And stuff like that. And I'm like, "Girl, you know you not ugly"

Denise: There's a point in your life where you kinda just have to accept things for what it is. We might have, like, different opinions that I'm sometimes very biased, if I am very strong about something. But I only really have beef with someone who was like discriminating my friend because she liked... She liked girls, and they were saying this and that about her. And like I don't know. I got really, I got really frustrated 'cause, no, my grandma's lesbian and you know having that kinda just like really messed me...

Especially as my friend. I'm not cool. No. No. Don't, don't talk about my friends. That's just..I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna hit you. I'm just going to sit you down and I'm telling you straight up I do not like what you're doing.

Denise's explained how she was the protector of her friends, standing up for them when they face discrimination. Denise did not allow others to disrespect her friend for her sexual orientation, and she confronted the students who were talking about her friend.

During the focus group, the girls demonstrated how Black girls support and uplift one another, by challenging each other if they spoke negatively about themselves. At the beginning of the following exchange, Denise explained how she felt like an outsider on her team, which caused her to doubt herself. The other girls' responses to Denise showed why Black girls need each other.

Denise: And like, That's that's that's good. I feel like it's good to have a mixture because when there's is too much of a certain population of people. Then it's kind of like OK. So I obviously don't fit into this population, so it kind of puts you down to some degree and then I feel like. Especially in this day and age people have a lot of stereotypes they kinda put on people. It's kinda messed up. And I know a lot of kids are like surprised. I don't know. I just feel like a lot of kids are surprised that I'm as intelligent as I am for some reason.

Leah: Why?

Alexis: The things you say are really smart.

Denise: I don't know. I just.... They kind of see it as. I shouldn't be as smart as I am. It's kind of uh.... I don't know. I question myself. It's like if someone says I'm not supposed to be this... am I really supposed to? It's like I wanna rephrase what they're saying. I want to do.... I go against what people say, basically.

Shauri: You challenge the stereotypes people may have of you.

Denise: So you say I can do this, well I'ma show you that I can!

Leah: Like, try me! Try me.

Denise: Basically.

Shauri: Anybody else do that? Feel that way?

Leah: Yeah I do.

Jada: Yeah... Because like, I'm in, I'm in general classes right? And I remember last year I was in classes like people. Like that didn't really like know how to speak English that well. So, say like we're reading out loud and stuff. So, I remember those a few gifted students I like where in my classroom because they didn't have a teacher or whatever...so. They were... We were reading out loud and stuff, and most of the people that were reading, like kinda like struggled to read. But like I scanned through the page as if it was nothing,'cause like it was nothing to me because I know I'm actually really good at language arts. So, when I just read the page like the gifted students were just like, confused, they were just like. (*astonished/confused face*) and I ain't stumble a word or nothing.

Throughout this interchange, the conversation shifted from Denise doubting herself because of her team placement Jada explaining how she defied the expectations of gifted students who were visiting her class, and the girls were responsible for shifting the tone. Alexis and Leah challenged Denise's doubts about her intelligence, and she encouraged her to embrace the struggle on a team with people unlike her. Denise accepted the challenge to prove wrong those who may doubt her, which she expressed in many ways throughout the study.

This theme explained how the girls' relationships with their teachers, parents, and friends helped them to cope and provided them with spaces where they belonged. These outlets were important because as Black girls in a school with racialized tracking, they were judged by their track placement, they faced stereotypes about their intelligence and appearance, and they contended with disparate enforcement of school rules. The final section explores their identities as Black girls who were educated in this school setting, and how their school experiences and relationships contribute to the way they make meaning of themselves.

Identity through Resistance and Self-Definition

There is a large body of research about Black girls, and I chose to end my explanations of my study's findings by highlighting how the girls describe themselves. Throughout data collection, the girls actively rejected the stereotypes and labels placed on them by students, teachers, and other school officials within the context of racialized tracking. Throughout the interviews and the focus group, the most significant theme was how, despite facing the pressures of labels based on track assignments and stereotypes as Black girls, they continually defined themselves for themselves.

Denise. Throughout the study, Denise struggled with feelings of self-doubt because she was in a High Achiever track on a gifted team, and a Black girl on a team that was

predominantly White. However, she did not let those doubts define her. Despite feeling like an outsider on her seventh-grade team, Denise had no trouble describing who she was and her many roles as a student, a friend, a counselor, a daughter, and an advocate.

> I'm sociable. I can start conversations easily you know. It's not going to be hard for you to become my friend, you know, because I'm very open to different people, regardless of race...uh, what you classify yourself as...sexuality...I don't discriminate anyone. That's just not the type of person I am. I'm kind, and I'm honest, and I wouldn't lie to you. I'm... I just feel like I'm wrong if I lie to you, 'cause it kinda puts a sort of a guilt trait on you when you lie to someone rather than just being honest, and umm I'm always there. I'm kind of like a counselor, you know, you can always be open to tell me something because, like I said, I don't judge, and you know, I just...I try to keep a positive attitude most of the time. You know...
>
> I mean, as a person I'm imperfect, and I might have moments that aren't my best days. And.... But at the same time I try to keep a positive attitude, 'cause a lot of time my dad says that I... people know me as a person, I'm very happy, and they know when something's wrong. Like a mirror... I might not see it on my face I might think that I look normal, but people are like "What's wrong?" you know.... And I'm like, "Everything's fine" but they're like, "No, no. You usually talk way more than this," so you know I've learned that my attitude really affects people. And I try to keep a positive attitude and always be there for my friends, I'm very loyal, and you can trust me. If it's something you don't want me to tell anyone, something personal, something personal I will not tell anyone. That's just you know.

The way Denise described herself was important because her description of herself did not focus on the academic labels that existed or the assumptions that teachers at the school made about them. She focused on how she was there for others, and how she showed up in her relationships with other people, that she was loyal, an advocate, an honest friend, and a counselor who was there. She viewed her strengths as those things that helped her develop and maintain strong friendships. These characteristics defined how she saw herself in the larger world, despite how tracking made her feel like an outsider.

Leah. When I asked Leah to describe herself, she focused on how she was in relationships with people. She said, “I'm a nice person, and I help people. And... Since, like, if somebody is new, I will help them feel comfortable in places that they don't know.” She also described herself as hardworking because she tried to make an A in her classes. She felt successful in school when she got good grades on her report card and she felt like she belonged when her friends would confide in her about a problem and ask her for help. She felt like she had friends who trusted her, which made her feel like she belonged at VMS.

Leah’s description of herself focused on academic success and her relationships with her friends, but she also described herself in relation to the White girls at the school, who were different from her.

Leah: It’s very different because you know a lot of Black girls at this school, and most teams have a lot of White girls at this school that are very different and like different things.

Shauri: What sort of different things do they like?

Leah: Okay, so the clothing that they wear is different because most of them just wear the same fashion brand. They wear the same thing, and they wear

shorts. Like, that's it. That's all I see from them. But for me, I don't wear stuff like that because I like different clothing and being different than other people.

She rejected how the White girls conformed by dressing in the same brands and styles of clothes, preferring to stand out and dress differently, showing her individuality. The other girls expressed similar thoughts during the focus group when they discussed how they were different from the White girls at VMS.

Leah: I don't really try to copy them because, like, I don't like their style of clothing. My style of clothing is completely different than her clothing… It is! It is. It's completely different. She likes simple stuff… I'm completely opposite.

Denise: I just, I just do me.

Leah: Like that shirt that you wearing now. (*pointing to Jada*) I like that shirt. I want that shirt. Where'd you go buy that shirt? That's me.

Jada: Forever 21.

Leah: There, see! That's my favorite store right there. There we go.

Denise: Oh, but um, I kinda just do me, and people be like, who you tryin' to look cute for, I'm like...myself because I really…It came to a point that I can't please everybody. So why even try?

Nia: Exactly!

Denise: As long as I'm happy wit' what I'm wearing I could care less what other people think.

Jada: I don't really dress to please other people... I dress to please myself, mostly.

Denise: Yeah, if I think I look cute then...

Jada: Like, I like the way I dress and if I like the way I dress then I'm just gonna do it.

In addition to rejecting conformity through the clothes that she wears, Jada rejected the stereotypes about general students as being stupid, or that teams with general classes were "the dumb team."

Shauri: How do you deal with that if you hear people say stuff like that about your team or the people on your team?

Jada: I can't really say what they think about other people. Some people I wouldn't even know like that that they would call us stupid. Like I know...I know who I am. I know I'm not stupid, so like they wouldn't really…No one really says stuff to me to my face, so I don't really have a problem. I really can't control what you say to someone else.

Shauri: You just hear about it. So, you know that people are saying it.

Jada: Yeah, I hear about it, but I don't really care like that.

Fully aware of the labels used to describe her track and her team, Jada did not allow that stigma to define how she viewed herself. No one said those things to her face, and just as she could not control what they said about her, she would not let their ideas control how she thought about herself. Furthermore, Jada had a response for the students in higher tracks who looked down on students in general classes. Despite their view, she did not feel that they were smarter than she was, rather, they learned differently than she did. She pointed to the fact that regardless

of track placement, all students learned the same standards. She reframed their labels, refusing to accept that she was inferior to other students at VMS.

When I asked her how she would describe herself, she said, “Just a regular person. Just a regular Black girl, really.” She changed her description from “person” to “Black girl” to highlight how important her race and gender were to how she viewed herself, despite any labels others have tried to impose on her.

Maya. As a gifted student Maya did not face the negative stigma other girls in the study experienced due to their placement in less desirable tracks or teams. Even during her experience in High Achiever classes, she was still on a good team, and protected by her gifted identification, with teachers working with her to move her back into her gifted classes. However, Maya did face racist comments from her friends, and she rejected their attempts to use “the N-word” and to question her Blackness.

Maya said something at the end of the interview that gave me more insight into her experiences as a Black girl in gifted classes at VMS than the stories she told about herself.

Shauri: If you were going to give advice to a Black girl that was starting at VMS this year, what advice would you give her? What do you think she would need to know?

Maya: To be herself and not try to fit in with them.

Shauri: Who is them?

Maya: Like other people on her team that aren't Black like the majority of other people. Because. Yeah that's what I'd say.

Shauri: And why.

Maya: ‘Cause, ‘cause you shouldn't want to change yourself to try and fit in. You should find friends that you like. I mean, if you like them, obviously you can still be friends with them. They've probably been friends since elementary school or a lot longer. Yeah. And they might treat you differently not like badly but maybe just differently than they treat their other friends. And trying to fit in isn't going to fix it. Or make it better.

Shauri: Do you ever? Have you ever felt pressure to try to fit in?

Maya: No, not really. No.

Maya’s advice to other Black girls revealed the lessons that she has learned throughout her middle school experience at VMS. Despite her ability to get along with other people, and her willingness to make new friends, she also understood that even as a Black girl in gifted, there were places where she was not welcome. Despite not being treated poorly, she warned other Black girls against acting a certain way to avoid being treated differently. Maya was aware of the pressures Black girls faced to fit in, and rejected the need, urging others not to change themselves, and to be herself and find a community of friends that she liked.

Conclusion

This chapter explained how Black girls described their experiences in a middle school with racialized tracking. The girls explained how they understood the tracking system at VMS, their othering and marginalization, the importance of relationships to coping and survival, and how they understood themselves. I use the same four themes to organize the discussion in Chapter 5 because these themes capture the essence of the girls’ experiences. In the next chapter, I discuss these themes through the conceptual framework of intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). I also explain how the girls’ experiences connect to Black Feminist Thought (Collins,

2015) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), the theoretical frameworks that ground my research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In Chapter 4, I presented the findings from interviews and focus groups with the six participants of the study to understand their experiences in a middle school with racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). The findings of this study add to the large body of research about tracking by centering the experiences of Black girls in a racially diverse middle school. Intersectionality as critical praxis provided a useful framework to understand the girls' experiences. Their experiences have important implications for schools, teachers, parents, and students, which I explain at the end of the chapter.

Throughout the discussion of the findings, I explain the girls' experiences through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), using the four domains of power to describe their experiences and answer this study's research questions. I also connect the girls' experiences with Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) to illustrate how the structures and policies of Vanderbilt Middle School preserve historical educational inequalities that affect Black girls today. I also use Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015) to explain how the girls created knowledge and wisdom through their lived experiences at VMS. These themes from my findings enabled me to answer the study's research questions:

1. What are the experiences of Black girls in racially diverse middle schools with tracking systems?
2. How do Black girls' experiences and ideas about tracking affect their identities?

The superordinate themes make meaning of the girls' experiences and encompass how the girls 1) viewed tracking as an unfair hierarchy, 2) experienced othering and marginalization, 3) valued safe spaces and community, and 4) shaped their identities in resistance to negative

stereotypes. Because this study draws on phenomenological research, the themes capture my interpretation of their experiences, while positioning the girls as experts of the educational context of tracking. This chapter provides a synthesis of this study's findings and to honor the knowledge of the participants and to capture the shared practice of meaning making, I use their voices throughout this chapter as well, using their words in the discussion of their lived experiences. This chapter ends with the study's implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Tracking as a Hierarchy

Throughout the interviews, the girls explained how tracking at their school created a hierarchy among the students, with certain tracks and teams at the top, and others at the bottom. The placement within this hierarchy also contributed to the labels attached to students, the way teachers viewed them, and the way they were viewed by their peers. Denise described how the hierarchy at VMS mirrored society's racial hierarchy, which had important implications for her.

> **Denise:** Because there is, he explains, a pyramid. How Black people in other races are at the bottom while White people tend to be at the top, so it's going to take us double the amount of energy to get to the top.

Denise's image of a pyramid is useful to describe the hierarchy created by tracking at VMS. The girls described a hierarchy among the students based on the groups created within teams and track assignments. In this hierarchy, gifted students were at the top, High Achiever students were in the middle, and general students were at the bottom.

Within this hierarchy status is conferred based on placement, and this hierarchy is reinforced further through team configuration. For example, Denise, Alexis, and Leah were all enrolled in four High Achiever classes during the year when I collected data. However, because

Denise was in High Achiever classes on a team with gifted students, she had more status at VMS than Leah and Alexis, who were on a team with students in general classes. I begin with this theme because the hierarchy was created through schoolwide policies that organized students at VMS and existed within the structural domain of power, which includes teaming, tracking, and track placement criteria that were used to create racially segregated educational spaces.

The girls described two elements of tracking that contributed to the track hierarchy at VMS. The first aspect was the belief that tracking decisions operated as a meritocracy and status of the tracks was earned and deserved. The second element was the racial demographics of each track, which reproduced the racial hierarchy that has operated in the United States for centuries. The next section explains the meritocracy fallacy that existed in the tracking systems at VMS. Then, I explain how race contributed to a problematic hierarchy that shaped the girls' middle school experiences.

Fallacy of Meritocracy

Meritocracy is the foundation of the American Dream, a dream that societal messaging touts anyone can attain through the power of education. Meritocratic systems reward individuals based on their abilities and efforts, and as a result, people within the system believe that status and power are earned and deserved (Meroe, 2014). Overall, the girls in the study described tracking and track placement as a meritocracy. In the interviews, the girls overwhelmingly believed that tracking was based on an academic or intellectual meritocracy, where students were placed in the higher tracks because they were smarter, had better test scores, and better grades. All the girls said that standardized test scores were used for track placement because these scores measured what students knew, how much they had learned, and determined where a student belonged within the hierarchy.

The girls also described how students could move to a higher track through hard work. Alexis, Leah, and Nia all believed that students in the general track could move to High Achiever classes if they worked hard enough and asked their teachers for help. Their beliefs were bolstered by individual friends they knew who had moved from general to High Achiever classes. In her study of racialized tracking, Tyson (2011) found that students who have some academic success, like the girls in the study, are more likely to believe in the ideal of meritocracy. Their beliefs went along with Tyson's findings that most Black children who are academically successful believe that hard work leads to success. The girls in this study, like the children Tyson interviewed, hold on to these beliefs even when they are critical of rules and policies because they know that their future academic and economic success will be greatly limited if they do not work hard in school.

The idea that tracking is based on a meritocracy was also contradicted by the girls as they thought more about the tracking process and realized that track placement was also based on subjective criteria like parental involvement and student behavior. The girls also critiqued the use of test scores for student placement during the focus group. During their discussion they expressed that testing for placement was unfair to students with disabilities, test anxiety, and poor test-taking skills. Maya added English Language Learners (ELL) to that list during her interview. The girls' views of tracking as a meritocracy validated for most of them their placement in a higher track. However, they did recognize that tracking criteria were unfair to students both individually and collectively. Their critique of the fairness of using test scores for student placement was also a critique that tracking is meritocratic, which was important because their critique disrupted the assumptions used to maintain tracking that rely on messaging that tests are objective measures, test scores are valid indicators of achievement, aptitude, ability, and

future success, and that status is earned (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 2005). These messages function within the cultural domain by justifying the existence of tracking, the policies used to implement tracking, and the status or lack thereof of students in each track (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

The structure of VMS, which separates students into teams and tracks was evidence of how the structural domain affected the educational reality of Black girls at the school (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The ubiquity of tracking in schools and school districts is a continuation of the historical educational inequalities that have disadvantaged Black students and continues in the lived experiences of the Black girls in this study. At VMS, tracking documents used test scores to explain how students were assigned to different tracks. However, school officials maintained racially segregated tracks by placing students into tracks regardless of their test scores. Because students did not have access to the testing data of their classmates, they could not see how the criteria were used to justify the creation of tracks, but they could see the results of exceptions that were routinely made that maintained racialized tracking.

These practices at VMS existed within the structural domain, which refers to how institutions are organized and how that organization maintains the oppression of Black women and girls (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This domain operates to exclude the majority of Black girls from educational opportunities through the continuation of colorblind policies instituted after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). These policies were designed to treat students as individuals, rather than considering the differing needs of Black people based on centuries of discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Schools relented to desegregation efforts only through interest convergence, which led to the creation of advanced programs and gifted classes that then used test scores as placement criteria. While the girls did not mention an explicit

connection between test scores for track placement and the racial segregation they saw between the tracks, they were aware that using test scores as placement criteria was unfair because they believed treating students as individuals requires considering each students' background and situation, not using a single factor to make the educational decisions for all students.

The tracking structure at VMS falls into the structural domain of intersectionality, (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The stated criteria for tracking at VMS were communicated to the students to believe that tracking was based on student scores and grades. However, as a teacher at VMS, I knew that classes were heterogeneous with a wide range of student performance on standardized tests. The girls believed that teams and tracks were organized to group students by both intellect and ability. However, these grouping practices resulted in mostly White students in the gifted track, mostly students of color in the general track, and a more racially diverse population in the High Achiever track, thus creating a racial hierarchy at VMS due to racialized tracking (Tyson, 2011). The next sections discuss how the idea of meritocracy created a hierarchy that ranked tracks and the students in them based on race, intelligence, and behavior.

Race and Ethnicity

All the girls in the study described VMS as racially diverse, but they also explained how the tracks at VMS were segregated by race and ethnicity. As they described each track, I realized they were also describing how these same groups exist within a racial hierarchy that attaches historical ideas of racial inferiority to teams, tracks, classes, and individual students.

Tyson (2011), who coined the term racialized tracking, wrote "Students equate achievement with whiteness because school structures do" (p. 6). Given that the racial segregation at VMS was visible by tracks, it was easy to see that this equation of whiteness equaling achievement existed among the participants. When Jada said that her team was called

“South America,” it underscored the nature of racialized tracking in the school. The school facilitated segregation by placing most of the ELL students on one team, garnering it the moniker “South America.” Because many of the students did not speak fluent English, they were viewed as unintelligent by their peers, which led to the name “the dumb team,” stigma that spread to any student in their classes or on their team.

Jada also explained how the racial segregation was visible for anyone walking down Vanderbilt’s hallways.

> Just from like, just seeing what it like looks like. See you walk down the hallway… really all you see… How it was last year. It was, like, you walk down my hallway…some of them barely spoke English. It was just like "oh they're stupid, and they're on that team. They must be stupid, too."

The replication of racial inequality within schools is explained by CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), which explains that racism is normal. Because racial demographics were closely tied to track placement, stereotypes about each track were layered with racial and ethnic stereotypes as well, and those labels perpetuated track stigma. Jada described how students thought that ELL students were stupid, and because she was on the same team, in the same track, and in the same classes with ELL students, she was considered “stupid by association.”

Intelligence. Throughout the interviews and the focus group, the girls described gifted students as “teacher’s pets” who “knew every answer to every question.” These students who were at the top of the pyramid existed in contrast to the students in general classes who were on “the dumb team.” None of the participants used “the dumb team” to describe students in general classes, but Jada said that students on other teams used that phrase to describe her classmates. Even though they did not use the offensive term, “dumb team,” the girls said that general classes

were for students who needed remediation because they were below grade level. The girls in the study who were in High Achiever and gifted classes thought if the students got extra help, they would be moved to High Achiever. Because the "teacher's pets" were in predominantly White classes, and students of color were the largest population in general classes, these beliefs about intelligence at VMS mirrored decades of research that argued the intellectual superiority of White people (Hall, 1904; Terman, 1922).

These messages about the intellectual superiority of White people operated within the cultural domain of power, which ignored research about the misuse of testing to prove intelligence and continued the narrative that White people were smarter (Hall, 1904). An illustrative example is intelligence tests: they were used by the army for military assignments, by researchers to justify segregated schools for Black students focusing on industrial education, and by schools to create tracks that privileged elite White students with an education that prepared them for college, while providing vocational training for other students (Franklin, 2007). As early as the 1920s, criticism of the tests grew, and many educators complained about the potential for misuse of intelligence tests by schools, and others argued that these tests measured the social environment of those tested, rather than intelligence. Numerous studies have argued that testing used in schools for placement in gifted and other tracks measure students' exposure and access more than innate abilities (Belanger & Gagne, 2006; Franklin, 2007; Jenkins, 1939; Steenbergen-Hu & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016) .

Despite decades of research about the misuse of these tests for the identification of students in gifted classes and the criticism of the use of tests for gifted placement, all the girls believed that gifted students were smarter, could do harder work, and knew more than students in other tracks. Because the gifted tracks were mostly White, there was an association between

Whiteness and intelligence created by the original design of tracks as a tool of segregation. These tracks existed to maintain racial segregation within the racially diverse school so that White students were educated in racially segregated spaces.

The school district that VMS was a part of has adopted universal screeners to increase the population of minority students in gifted classes throughout the district. Universal screeners have been shown to increase minority student populations more than other processes (Lakin, 2016). However, the district gifted identification process also included multiple tests, as explained by Maya and Alexis, who were both tested for gifted.

The large population of White students in gifted classes at VMS reinforced the historical stereotypes that Black people are innately less intelligent. School universal screeners and multiple measures for gifted qualification to address the underrepresentation of students Black and Hispanic students, and students from low-income households in gifted programs. The shift from teacher and parent referrals for gifted identification to universal screeners to identify students for gifted testing also benefitted White students, who also have greater access to gifted programs throughout the process. This example of interest convergence also appears as schools shift from a single aptitude test for gifted qualification to multiple criteria tests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Both reforms improve the representation of Black students in gifted programs, however, they simultaneously increase the number of White students in these programs as well, which has maintained the racial segregation that exists at VMS. These policies reify notions that intelligence is innate and tied to race, reinforcing racist stereotypes about the inferior intelligence of Black people, which in turn affected how the girls in the study saw themselves.

These hierarchies created by tracking systems can negatively affect the way Black girls view themselves, given the racialized hierarchy that establishes where students of each race belong. Denise described how her placement on a predominantly White team led to self-doubt:

> I don't know. I just.... They kind of see it as I shouldn't be as smart as I am. It's kind of uh.... I don't know. I question myself. It's like if someone says I'm not supposed to be this... am I really supposed to? It's like I wanna rephrase what they're saying. I want to do.... I go against what people say, basically.

Denise's self-doubt existed due to the racial hierarchy that persisted at VMS. She explicitly questioned her intelligence as she considered her placement on a team with White, gifted students. Denise questioned her placement because VMS's tracking and teaming equated achievement and intelligence with Whiteness, causing her to struggle with where she fit within this construct as a Black girl. Despite lingering self-doubt, Denise reacted to expectations of her inferiority by working to prove them wrong and going "against what people say." Challenging stereotypes is a core tenet of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2015), which contends that stereotypes function to justify oppression and make it appear like a normal part of everyday life.

The girls in the study pushed against their position as outsiders and the labels that tracking and teaming placed on them, because they understood their experience as Black girls required resistance. As a part of this resistance, they defined their own realities and shaped their own identities. Denise demonstrated this resistance through her insistence on rephrasing any negative expectations of her and any ideas of who she was supposed to be. Even the acknowledgment that those estimations of her intelligence were based on outside beliefs of who she was supposed to be, rather than who she was, showed her self-determination despite her

marginalization. I return to how racialized tracking affects how the girls see themselves later in the chapter.

Behavior. When discussing the tracks at VMS, the girls referred to teams as “bad” and “good” regarding how the students behaved. The bad teams were general teams that got into fights and had a lot of drama, and the good teams had gifted classes. Maya had an interesting view because she felt that the other teams had more fun, and she wished that the students in her gifted classes would learn to relax. The problems that arise when teams are labeled as good and bad contribute to the academic experiences of students.

The girls described how teachers spoke negatively about general classes. The stigma of general level classes was the same that is shown in the research (Oakes, 2005; Worthy, 2010). And the focus on behavior, on talking, turning in work, getting in fights, and being “bad” showed the focus on behavior rather than academics. The girls used these labels to describe themselves. While Maya, who was in gifted classes, described the students in other tracks as fun, but Denise described her classmates as bad, when she compared them to the “teacher’s pets” in gifted classes. These messages were also reinforced by teachers who reified the hierarchy of tracking in their conversations with students. Furthermore, Denise believed that student behavior had a direct effect on student track placement, with students being placed on certain teams due to their behavior, and those teams including general level classes and ELL students primarily. Her belief showed how she internalized the messages and stereotypes attached to the labels used to group students at VMS. These stereotypes are not unique to VMS. These findings are an extension of decades of research about the stigma attached to lower tracks (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 1987, 2005).

The tracking hierarchy was also reinforced by teachers at VMS. This study did not include the perceptions or experiences of the girls’ teachers, but the girls said that their teachers

discussed each track differently, praising the gifted students, and negatively judging those in High Achiever and general classes. Teachers labeled gifted students as good kids who always turned in their work, and they said the students in the lower tracks talked too much and never did their assignments. Teachers also threatened students in High Achiever and gifted classes that they would go to general classes if they did not behave in class. In these cases, just being in the High Achiever and general classes was a potential form of punishment, rather than a space to learn, let alone thrive in the school. Research about teacher's perceptions of tracking and of students in different tracks is consistent with the girls' experiences with VMS teachers (Oakes, 2005; Worthy, 2010). However, hearing the girls say that teachers explicitly stated their biased opinions and different expectations of students based on track was problematic because of how important teacher expectations are to student achievement (Campbell, 2012; Kelly & Carbonaro, 2012; Rist, 1970; Wilcox, 2014).

Instructional environment. The girls also discussed a hierarchy in the instructional environment. They believed that the work in gifted classes was more challenging than the work in High Achiever, and the work students had in general classes was remedial, focused on helping students who were below grade level. Maya, who spent time in High Achiever and gifted classes felt that the High Achiever work "was really easy. Most of the time." Nia, who was in both general and High Achiever classes said that she wished she was in all High Achiever classes because "the teachers that teach those classes… I kinda feel like they give us more challenging work than general classes, which helps you learn." The girls valued education and wanted challenging work so they could learn more.

Because none of the girls in the focus group had experience in gifted classes, the girls' discussion about the gifted track revealed how students outside of the track viewed them. They

agreed that there were differences between gifted classes and the other tracks, but each girl had her own ideas about those differences. While Leah thought that the only real difference was that gifted classes assigned more work, Nia added that she thought they had different work. Alexis, who recently qualified for gifted, said that she thought gifted had more work, and the differences were in the level of work, and gifted work was targeted for students who comprehend more and have more skills. Maya said the main difference is that gifted moved at a faster pace.

The girls' experiences echo previous research that has found that the instructional quality in lower track classes is less challenging than the quality in higher track classes (Modica, 2015; Schmidt, 2013). Without access to challenging curriculum, students are not equipped to meet grade-level standards, particularly for students who are below grade-level. On average, only 26% of classrooms offer grade-appropriate assignments, which does not provide enough practice for students to master grade-level standards. Challenging, grade-appropriate work is important for all students, and the difference in instructional quality is problematic because it denies students in lower tracks access to the necessary rigor to be academically successful and meet their goals. For the girls in the study, issues with the curriculum extended beyond differences between tracks, which I explain in the next section.

Othered and Marginalized

Another salient aspect of their experiences was the many ways the girls described being and feeling othered and marginalized in school. Middle schools were created to meet the developmental needs of early adolescents, focusing on their need for connectedness and belonging (Juvonen, 2007). Given the nature of the middle school student, peer relationships and belonging are essential to their well-being. The middle school concept was developed to focus on the specific needs and developmental stages of students between the ages of 11-13 (Bandlow,

2001; Tamer, 2012), with the purpose of developing egalitarian principles among students, and focusing on identity development while eschewing competition and individual achievement (Yecke, 2006). Yecke argued that while some middle schools have rigorous academic programs, those based on the middle school concept are focused on socialization, which negatively affects the intellectual development of many middle school students.

This study extended the research on tracking by focusing on middle school students, which is important because most students enter tracks during middle school. In elementary school, students were grouped together in homeroom classes, and gifted students were pulled for short segments of time, but once they attended VMS, students were separated into three different tracks, with gifted students in separate classes for all of their core classes. Students who were not identified as gifted were separated into High Achiever and general tracks. This separation occurred when they transitioned to middle school, and the creation of distinct tracks had a variety of consequences for the Black girls in the study, which were compounded by the small population of Black girls at VMS.

Because VMS followed the middle school concept, students were separated into teams to foster a sense of belonging and provide individual attention to support students during their early adolescence. Interdisciplinary teaming was designed to reduce anonymity among students as they move from a smaller school to a much larger environment, and foster a sense of home and family for middle school students (Ellerbrock, Main, Falbe, & Franz, 2018). However, for the girls in the study, their experiences in school depended on both their track and their team, due to the varying racial demographics of each, and the way this school structure fragmented the already small population of Black girls at VMS. The next sections describe the ways the girls felt

othered and marginalized in the school curriculum, in racist interactions with others, and through the inequitable disciplinary practices of school staff.

Othered and Absent in the Curriculum

Throughout the interviews and the focus group, the girls described the inadequacy of their school's curriculum. They reported that they were not represented in the curriculum, except in the context of slavery, or in a one-time project for a class. They focused on the absence of Black History Month in middle school, and I viewed that discussion as a sign that their history was not valued by their teachers or the school. The absence of people who looked like them in the curriculum aligns with CRT's argument that school curriculum is designed to maintain the dominant narrative and silence Black stories of resistance and authority, while reinforcing Eurocentric interpretations of the world (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The girls remembered Black History Month being a celebration during elementary school, and all of them noted its absence in middle school.

Black women and girls create knowledge through lived experiences, and literature by Black women authors is an important source of knowledge created from Black women's lived experiences. Including positive images of Black people in the middle school curriculum is important for Black girls, because Black students who have examples of the academic achievement of Black people and have read about the accomplishments and contributions of Black people woven in the curriculum are less likely to connect school success to Whiteness (Tatum, 2017). Maya understood the power of knowing Black history, not in segmented highlights of a few select heroes, but understanding the history of oppression and struggle, as well as the historical figures who served as role models for her own success. She said, "Like at home I learned a lot about our history and the good things, so I know that if other people are able

to then I also am able to." Her explanation of the power of learning her history and the effect it had on her view of her successes, provides important implications about ways to improve the educational experiences of Black girls.

"Suspicious" teachers. Another important finding that falls under this theme is that teachers did not have a full understanding of Black history, which was apparent to the Black girls who sat in their classes. Nia called the things that her teacher said about Black history, "suspicious." Nia was engaged in the lessons taught in her Social Studies class enough to do her own research about the topics, and when she asked her teacher for clarification or additional information, her teacher could not assist her and simply said, "I don't know." Her teacher's response was insufficient, and it signaled to Nia that her teacher did not care about her education and her history. This lack of knowledge or perhaps willingness to learn more in the moment of a student asking a question in class highlights a specific problem because Black students benefit from learning their history, and they should learn their history in school. Students who learn Black history tend to have a positive racial identity and higher academic achievement (Chavous et al., 2008). The positive effects of including Black culture and history in the curriculum provides important implications for schools and teachers, which I discuss in the last section of this chapter.

Black History is essential. Because of the education Maya received about Black history at home, she explained why it is important for Black people to learn their history in schools, and also showed that the roots of educational inequality contribute to the absence of Black history in the curriculum at VMS.

> Cause, I mean, we're still…it's like…Well, slavery lasted for, like, a really, really long time. And that also put us, like, that was a big like obstacle because we didn't have…We

> weren't learning when they were learning, so they also…I feel like they had more of an advantage because they were able to read and write, and we weren't allowed to. But I feel like in the very beginning, when we had libraries and things like that, they burned them down, and every time you would try to start like building ourselves back up, they would start there early. They'd find a way to put it down.

Schools and teachers ignore this historical inequality and continue to teacher colorblind curriculum that focuses on a Eurocentric perspective, explaining Black history through slavery, and at VMS, ignoring Black History Month altogether. The next section explains how tracking in middle school others Black girls, which goes against the stated purposes of middle school to meet the developmental needs of adolescents.

Racial Demographics and Racialized Experiences

Due to racialized tracking, the racial demographics differed dramatically between the tracks at VMS, which affected the relationships the girls had with their classmates and peers. All the participants reported experiences based on their race, but they reported different types of experiences, which seemed dependent on the racial demographics of their classes and teams. This section explains how the racial demographics of the track influence the interactions girls had with their classmates and affected the experiences of the girls.

Gifted. As one of the few Black girls in gifted, Maya functioned as an "outsider-within" (Collins, 1986). Because she had been in gifted classes since 1st grade, she existed fluidly within these predominantly White spaces at VMS. She had a diverse group of friends that she made during both elementary and middle school. While studies of Black girls in advanced classes report that the girls face social isolation, from both their White classmates and Black girls in other tracks (Eggleston & Halsell, 2009; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; O'Connor, Mueller, Lewis,

Rivas-Drake, & Rosenberg, 2011; Tatum, 2017; Young, Young, & Ford, 2017), Maya felt that she belonged in her gifted classes more than the racially diverse High Achiever classes she took for a semester. Despite preferring her gifted placement, Maya still felt like an outsider, wishing that she had more students who could relate to her racialized experiences at VMS. She explained that when they learned about slavery, her classmates all turned to look at her, and she sat frozen, knowing that within her class she had few people to whom she could turn.

Previous research has reported that many Black girls in advanced classes face judgments from Black girls in other tracks, who ridicule them for "acting white" (Letendre & Rozas, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2011; Tyson, 2011; Welton, 2013). The authenticity of Maya's Blackness was not questioned by Black students; instead White classmates said that they were Blacker than she was, or they called her White. By saying that she was White, they were not aiming for inclusion, they were othering her by focusing on how her behavior did not align with the prevailing stereotypical images of Black girls and women (Collins, 2015). This type of othering focuses on Black and White people as being binaries with norms for how each group should act. They called her White because they had stereotypes that Black people were "ghetto," to use Maya's words, and because she did not fit that stereotype, she therefore must not be Black.

These experiences are common for Black girls who are educated in predominantly White spaces (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Joseph et al., 2016; Tyson, 2011), and they are likely to begin in middle school when students enter rigid, racially segregated tracks (Mickelson & Greene, 2006), and it is important to emphasize that Black students begin to develop their racial identities as their Blackness becomes a more salient aspect of their identities (Tatum, 2017). Maya said her friends did not make racially insensitive comments, but other gifted students on her team did. She explained that they made these comments about her Blackness, and defended their use of

"the N-word" because certain students in her classes felt entitled to do and say whatever they wanted, without any regard for how other people felt. These racial comments highlight how the interpersonal domain operated as a tool for White students to perpetuate social racism and assert their feelings of superiority. For Black girls who exist in White spaces, these stereotypes sometimes function for White people as compliments, however, they also reinforce negative characteristics and notions of inferiority for Black people by positioning them as the opposite of the positive attributes that are ascribed to White people (Collins, 2015).

The casual tone when she described these conversations and their regularity made it easy to believe that she did not report these incidents to her teachers. Instead, she chose to handle these incidents by directly addressing her classmates, explaining why they did not have the right to use "the N-word," whether White people created the word, or a Black person gave them a pass. On this team with predominantly White students, the N-word was regularly said with no teacher intervention because Maya reported that students generally said these things during less structured time during lunch or in the hallway. The way Maya spoke about the incidents let me know that for her this type of racism was normal on her team. The hyper-segregated classes of predominantly White, gifted teams did not exist as just benign vestiges or a simply a continuation of systemic educational inequality. For Black girls they were incubators for racist comments and interactions that they must cope with on any given school day. Due to the small population of Black girls in gifted classes, girls like Maya were often forced to face these conversations alone. In fact, their racial isolation may contribute to the comfort White students felt when making racist remarks.

High Achiever. Though High Achiever teams were more racially diverse with a higher number of Black students than gifted classes, the girls also described racist interactions with their

classmates. The comments were rooted in long-standing, controlling images of Black people, focusing on hair texture, skin tone, and other prevalent stereotypes about Black people. Their classmates also couched these comments as "jokes," in attempts seemingly to disarm the girls of their emotional reactions and responses.

The girls faced comments about their appearance, focusing on skin tone and hair. Nia said White classmates asked her if her hair was real, why her skin was so dark, and said she needed to clean her hands because she was dirty. These comments cannot be dismissed as adolescent teasing that takes place within every school because students who say these comments are replicating the cultural messages that objectify Black women by othering their natural features and appearance, which demonstrates the predominant element of the social construction of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

When White students in High Achiever classes made these comments to Black students in the same track, they perpetuated the objectification of Black girls by targeting their skin tone and hair texture. Because these students are in the same academic track, they could not use racist notions of intellectual superiority, so their negative comments focused on observable differences based on appearance. Black girls grow up in a society that devalues their appearance, and White students in these racially diverse classes showed their dominance through these comments rooted in long-held standards of beauty. The comments further objectified the Black girls by confronting them using racist stereotypes, and then claiming that their comments were "just jokes" if the girls responded.

Because these comments existed in the interpersonal domain, they continually shaped the girls' educational experiences (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Not only did these negative experiences shape the interactions the girls had with their White classmates, but they also shaped the

conversations Black girls had with each other. Nia said that these incidents could dominate her conversations with her friends “because people ask us the weirdest questions and we just like talk about it for like the whole day.” I was shocked by the normalcy and regularity of racist comments. These comments did not have a neutral effect on the girls as they went about their school day. There was nothing about these comments that made them a laughing matter, despite their peers' attempts at framing them as jokes. The fact that the girls discussed them with one another throughout the day, and that White students felt comfortable making comments without the threat of consequence, highlighted the normalcy of these injurious remarks.

Leah described an instance where she was singled out by her White classmates to watch “The Black People Song,” a video on YouTube that included racist stereotypes of Black people. They called her over during unstructured time and told her to watch it with them on one of their school-issued laptops. They looked and laughed at her, the only Black student in the group, as the video sang about Black people stealing, eating fried chicken and watermelon, lynchings, the Ku Klux Klan, monkeys, welfare queens, gang members, and drug use. As she told the story during the focus group, her voice grew louder and more enraged by both the content of the video and her classmates’ insistence that she watch it with them. However, she was most aggravated by their response to her anger as the video played, ignoring her feelings, and instead of laughing as she repeatedly told them to turn it off, all the while insisting that it was just a joke. These instances of everyday racism affect the mental health of students who experience them, and they turn school into a space where Black girls do not feel safe (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017; Masko, 2014). Another important factor is that these incidents occurred during times when the girls were with their White classmates, outside of the company of other Black girls. Within the racialized structure of VMS, the small population of Black girls was fragmented because they

were placed in different teams, tracks, and classes. In that separation, the conditions existed for Black girls to be subject to this type of racism at any time during their school day.

General. For girls in general classes, their experiences with racism were different because, unlike the other two tracks, general classes had few if any White students. Therefore, instead of personal racism, in the form of comments from classmates, the girls in general classes faced discrimination from students in other tracks through negative labels and names. They were called “the dumb team,” “the bad team” or “South America,” with each of these labels reinforcing notions of inferiority that fit within the hierarchy at VMS and explicitly tied to race.

Controlling images of Black girls still operated on teams without White students, and Jada faced colorism from other minority students on her team. Jada’s deep brown skin brought offensive questions rooted in colorism, another hierarchy that values lighter skin as more beautiful than darker skin. Colorism, borne from societal norms that value thin bodies, pale skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair, positioned Jada in opposition to the White ideal. Her classmates asked how she was so pretty when other dark-skinned girls were ugly, asserting that because she had deep brown skin, she should somehow not be beautiful. Jada was rightfully offended by these comments, but she described these experiences as what made being a Black girl at VMS “interesting.” Her use of the word “interesting” to describe these experiences highlighted how the girls in the study found difficulty explaining these sorts of experiences, and their feelings about them, precisely.

In addition to these comments, Jada also described a friend with a cinnamon complexion, who also had curly hair that reached the middle of her back when straightened who faced similar judgments. Students continually asked her if her hair was real and were adamant that if it was, she must be biracial, because Black girls did not have hair like that. Both comments

demonstrated how the cultural messaging about Black women and their beauty affected the experiences of Black girls at VMS. They were faced with these comments and the burden of responding to them, in addition to the other pressures they faced as middle school students. Within the interpersonal domain, these day to day interactions are "systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they often go unnoticed" (Collins, 2015, p. 307). These experiences exist within this domain and must be challenged every day by Black girls and others committed to justice. However, perhaps because the girls experience these incidents with such regularity, they feel familiar and seem normal, which may play a factor in why they do not report them to teachers at VMS.

The wide variety of racialized interactions the participants shared and their unwillingness to tell their teachers forced me to consider how tracks and teams separated the already small populations of Black girls and the effect this separation had on their experiences. Collins (2010) explains the importance of relationships for Black women and girls, and this importance continues through the construct of community. All six girls, regardless of track, lamented the small population of Black girls and expressed a desire for more Black girls at the school and in their classes, along with space and opportunity for Black girls to come together. Collins explains the power of community is that it provides spaces for Black women to come together and organize to resist their oppression. For the girls at VMS, these communities could provide them with space to share their stories and support one another by discussing ways to respond to and resist unfair policies at VMS. The fragmentation of the community of Black girls at VMS by separating them through teaming and tracking stymied their opportunities to come together and enabled others to restrict their voices, which has important implications for schools.

All of the girls in the study dealt with racist stereotypes and comments from students at VMS, regardless of track. The racial demographics and resultant placement on the hierarchy at VMS had some effect on the types of racist instances the girls faced. The girls also described other biased interactions where they are treated differently because they were Black girls. These incidents were based on how they were treated by teachers, who used school rules and district policies to control Black girls' behavior at VMS.

Rules Used for Control

The disparate disciplinary practices that Black girls experienced at VMS existed within the disciplinary domain, which creates rules and regulations that maintain the oppression of Black women and girls because the rules are applied differently for different groups of people (Collins & Bilge, 2016). At VMS, the rules existed to allow teachers to control the behavior, attire, and attitude of Black girls, while providing freedom for White girls. This section describes how teachers at VMS used rules to control the expression and behavior of Black girls.

Getting dresscoded. Getting dresscoded was the biggest example of how the Black girls in the study experienced the pressures of the disciplinary domain. Dress code is a common infraction used to punish Black girls in school (Joseph et al., 2016; Morris, 2012, 2016b). Teachers at VMS enforced the dress code arbitrarily, targeting Black girls for wearing clothes that White girls could wear freely. The girls said one reason they were targeted for dress code violations was body type: Black girls received the warnings for wearing leggings or shorts higher than knee length more than White girls. Jada said, "the White girls get away with it because most of them don't have hips." The girls agreed that the enforcement of the dress code was tied to different expectations of what Black and White girls should wear. Nia explained how these expectations of what Black girls should and should not wear extended outside of VMS, "Because

they think that that is not something that we were made to wear or that we should wear, just in general, not even just at this school…" The girls understood that expectations about how Black girls should and should not dress did not begin or end within school.

The experiences of Black girls getting dresscoded are essential to understanding the intersectional realities of Black girls in school. The dress code was listed in the code of conduct and when Black girls were reprimanded for breaking the dress code, they were told to change their clothes, their parents were called, and they may have been placed in in-school suspension (ISS), causing them to miss classes and instruction. These policies uphold the goal of the disciplinary domain by "creating quiet, orderly, docile, and disciplined populations" of Black girls in racially diverse schools (Collins, 2015, p. 299).

Jada explained during the focus group how the dress code was enforced by teachers through continual surveillance of Black girls. "I got so many stares today, but they'll be a White girl next to me wearing a big t-shirt and some shorts that are even more shorter…And they don't even look at them. They look at me." Despite the population of Black girls at VMS being much smaller than the number of White girls, teachers watched Black girls more closely and addressed their attire more frequently, creating another avenue for othering Black girls in school.

Additionally, the dress code reinforced cultural messages about Black girls that contributed to the way teachers reacted to their attire. Teachers enforced dress code for Black girls based on stereotypes that Black women and girls are hypersexual, citing the reason that the girls could cause a distraction when they wear short shorts or leggings. This rationale was used to justify their constant surveillance and the unfair policing of their bodies, using the dress code as a means of control.

Silenced by the rules. The way the girls responded to getting dresscoded highlights some important aspects of the domains of power that shape their intersectional experiences. Denise explained that in response to a teacher dresscoding her in the hallway, she pointed out White girls who were wearing the same thing. Instead of listening to what she said, the teacher warned her not to talk back. Denise understood that if she talked back, she would face more severe consequences, and she forced herself to be quiet, knowing that the fight was not worth being placed in ISS. In this instance, the dress code rules were enforced to control a Black girl's body, and the teacher used other rules to control her reaction, thus stopping the Black girl from voicing her concerns, pointing out inequities, or showing any emotion for fear of further punishment. White girls did not receive the same treatment, which highlighted how one function of rules at VMS was to control the behavior of Black girls.

Though Denise was silenced when she attempted to protest the unequal enforcement of dress code policies, Maya resisted by directly challenging the policy that banned shoes without a back for safety reasons but allowed Birkenstocks while forbidding athletic slides. She intentionally wore slides, shoes mostly worn by Black boys at VMS, knowing that she would be dresscoded. She used the reprimand as an opportunity to expose the discriminatory policy to her teachers by forcing the administrator to explain the difference. Although he could not explain the difference, he asserted definitively that Birkenstocks were allowed, and slides were definitely not allowed. Maya used her status as a student in gifted to challenge the dress code, knowing that even though she would be reprimanded, she would not receive consequences for her infraction or for questioning authority.

Black girls' experiences with rules and authority made them feel that they could not expect the school officials, including their teachers, to protect them from the racist and

prejudiced comments they faced at school. The rules at VMS constrained Black girls' actions and their responses to injustice and took away their agency. Just like Denise's analogy to police brutality, Black girls knew that they could and did face harsh consequences for their actions, and they were subject to punishment even when the rules and their enforcement were unjust. These policies silenced them, and when teachers did not listen when they tried to speak about injustice, Black girls felt that they could not go to them when they faced discrimination in school.

Getting dresscoded creates a dynamic that illuminates the intersectionality of Black girls' experiences at school. The girls explained that adults dresscoded them more than White girls because of their body types, focusing on feminine features like their hips. Teachers targeted them for dress code violations when they wore clothes like leggings or shorts, within the culture of school, Black girls should not be outwardly feminine, for fear of discipline. Then, when the girls presented examples of White girls who were not disciplined or wearing the same clothes, the Black girls were disciplined for asserting themselves against biased rule enforcement.
"By defining and valuing assertiveness and other 'unfeminine' qualities as necessary and functional attributes for Afro-American womanhood, Black women's self-valuation challenges the content of externally-defined controlling images" (Collins, 2015, p. 18). When Denise's teacher told her not to talk back, warning Denise that there would be further consequences if she did not adopt feminine qualities and be docile and quiet. The next section discusses Black girls' experiences with discipline when they are neither docile, nor quiet.

Serious disciplinary offenses. Although none of the girls had discipline records, they shared the experiences of friends that highlighted how the use of disproportionate disciplinary practices affected Black girls at VMS in ways that perpetuated the school to prison pipeline (Morris, 2016b). In each instance they shared the story of a friend who was involved in an

altercation with another girl who was not Black, and the Black girl was given a harsher punishment than the other girl involved. More frequent and harsher disciplinary actions were taken against Black girls when compared to girls of other races. Even though the participants were not disciplined, their friends' experiences functioned as warnings for them, and act as cautionary tales that stopped Black girls from asserting themselves, even in instances where they were treated unfairly, like Denise's experiences being dresscoded. The previous sections discussed discriminatory treatment by students, then teachers, and the next section discusses the ways the girls cope.

Safe Spaces and Community

The girls discussed the unfair treatment they faced with peers, teachers, and in class, but they also were explicit about the many ways that they responded to and coped with their experiences at VMS. This section explains the different ways the girls responded to racism, then continues to the ways that they coped with inequality. The girls coped in a variety of ways. The final part explores how the girls found safe spaces to resist the oppressive experiences within the context of community, which included parents, teachers, and other Black girls.

Reactions to Racism

The girls had strong reactions and responses to racist experiences as they discussed in interviews throughout the study, but the most common response was stunned silence. Nia described feeling "shook" when those incidents occurred, unable to speak because they happened all of a sudden and were always unexpected. Additionally, when the girls tried to respond to their classmates, White students rushed to explain that they were just joking to play off their behavior as comedic rather than racist. Initially, I wondered why the girls did not directly respond to their classmates, if not in the moment, later. Thinking back to when I was their age, I believed that

would have been the action I would take. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue that even when minorities respond to racially insensitive comments by having a conversation with the person who said it, this response is unlikely to have a substantive effect. The notion that conversation will create change is called the empathic fallacy, which is the belief that conversations will change the dominant narrative and shift stereotypes about Black girls by offering another one. Maya was the only student who responded directly to racial incidents with students and teachers, but she admitted that it had little effect, and students whom she talked to continue to say “the N-word” because another student’s opinion was not significant enough to stop them.

The girls also did not respond to these incidents by telling their teachers or any other adults at VMS because they did not believe it would make a difference. They explained that because the students played it off as jokes, they did not believe the teachers would do much. “Black women who make claims of discrimination and who demand that policies and procedures may not be as fair as they seem can more easily be dismissed as complainers who want special, unearned favors” (Collins, 2015, p. 281). The girls may have sensed the futility of expressing their claims and worried about being dismissed by their teachers, or worried that they would be seen as complainers by their classmates with whom they had to share space every day. Given that these incidents occurred within a school where they experienced segregated classes, faced racist comments from other students, and found themselves othered and absent in the curriculum, I understand why they did not believe that their concerns would be taken seriously.

Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) explains the value of these stories because many members of minority groups are silent about the racism and prejudiced treatment they face. By telling their stories, the girls’ voices highlighted their struggles, and by sharing them in the focus group they realized that they shared similar experiences. During the focus

group and individual interviews, all the girls described negative experiences based on race, and the commonality and regularity of these comments and this treatment within both predominantly White and racially diverse classes at VMS are important to acknowledge, understand, and critical to address. I describe in the next sections the importance of safe spaces and creating community.

Safe Spaces

Collins explains the "realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance (p. 111). These spaces are places where Black women and girls resist objectification and othering. For the Black girls in this study, they found safe spaces with their friends, who were often other Black girls, with their families, and with Black teachers. Black women have found safe spaces for self-definition within family networks and Black communities for decades, and this section explains the safe spaces that exist for the girls in this study.

The one safe space the girls described at VMS was with Black teachers. Although they did not tell the racist events to their teachers, they did explain the important role that Black teachers played in their daily experiences. Jada had more Black teachers, probably because she spent the most time in the lower tracks, which were taught by more Black teachers. She said that having Black teachers protected her from any serious racial incidents.

She also talked about the value of having Black women teachers specifically, expressing her own understanding of how intersectionality works and why intersectional identities matter. Jada said that having three Black women teachers in eighth grade was important because "Black girls have different issues than Black women. Like it's just different issues with both of them. 'Cause like, we all kind of have, like, the same issues, but like different ones with each gender." Her explanation explains that while Black people have the commonality of race, which led to

some of "the same issues," gender was another salient factor that shaped experiences, lending itself to different issues for each group. She was not able to provide examples of the different issues, but her explanation showed that she understood the unique standpoint of Black women related to both their racial and gendered identities.

Denise and Maya also described their close connection to the Black woman teacher they had in seventh grade. They valued her openness and willingness to teach them things that they did not know. This relationship between Black girls and Black women is a cornerstone of knowledge creation and the transmission of knowledge within Black communities.

Throughout the interviews and the focus groups, participants shared things they heard from their parents. These sayings represented knowledge and wisdom, which is based in Black Feminist Thought's dimension that lived experience is the basis of meaning making (Collins, 2015). Black women must have both knowledge of their own experiences, and wisdom from the experiences of others to navigate the intersecting oppressions that affect their lives. These oppressions existed at VMS as the girls navigated tracking, teaming, stereotypes, and surveillance throughout their educational experiences. They relied on wisdom to survive.

Denise mentioned her father's wisdom throughout the interviews and the focus group. Her dad described the pyramid to help Denise understand how to navigate the hierarchy that existed in society and was replicated in the structure of VMS, a hierarchy that her father knew that she must contend with as he prepared her as a Black woman who must put forth double the amount of energy to get to the same level as White people. Her father situated her experience of getting dresscoded, that while she as a Black girl was surveilled and White girls were not, both sets of girls existed within the context of White privilege. Denise relied on her dad to help her navigate her school experiences and used his explanations to help her understand them. Denise

credited her father for her health, achievement, and success. His guidance and support provided her with a safe space where she could express herself fully, which was particularly important because VMS was not a safe space for individual expression

Nia also said that she was able to anticipate the different treatment she would face moving to Vanderbilt from a Black elementary school. Her father told her that people would ask her racist questions and that it was not right for them to do so, but she should anticipate that it would happen because the White students did not know otherwise. When she had questions about the "suspicious" things her teacher told her in class, Nia turned to her father for answers that she knew she would not get in school. During a school year where she faced so many insulting comments about her Black features, Nia told her father she wanted to loc her hair, and he talked her with her about the decision, taking the time to teach her about the origins of the style. This wisdom helped Nia understand the experiences at school, built pride in her racial identity, and helped her make sense of the world.

Maya's father took her to HBCUs and explained the historical importance and cultural benefits of attending a Black college or university. He also taught her Black history to provide her with examples of successful people, providing her with role models for her own success. Her dad also taught her Black history that helped her understand the centuries of obstacles Black people in America faced and the fortitude we used to overcome.

As the only girl in the study with all general classes, Jada expressed the most direct rejection of labels and stereotypes related to track placement or being a Black girl. She attributed her confidence and strong sense of self to her mother. She overtly rejected any notions of inferiority about her because she was on the "dumb team," and she said that she did not listen to what people said because she knew who she was. I asked her how she developed such a strong

sense of self and she credited her mom. "I guess I just get that from her. Like she doesn't really...what people say about her, it doesn't really faze her like that. Like she knows who she is, so..." Jada's mom took action when the coaches segregated the locker room in PE, and Jada was confident when it happened that her mother would take action. Her mother's intervention played a role in changing the discriminatory locker room policy. Her mother was an important role model for her and served as an important safe space where Jada could take her opinions and emotions. Her mother then advocated on Jada's behalf, speaking where Jada would typically be silenced.

Creating Community

Community is important for Black girls because within these communal safe spaces, they are able to express their emotions in ways that are silenced in schools through discipline (Collins, 2015). These spaces are particularly important for Black girls because of the ways they are marginalized in school. Collins (2017) explains,

> People use the idea of community to organize and make sense of both individual and collective experiences they have within hierarchical power arrangements…A community is more than a random collection of individuals. Rather, communities constitute important sites for reproducing intersecting power relations as well as contesting them. (p. 28).

Community is not simply a construct; it is value laden and full of emotion and meaning because membership in a community holds value (Collins, 2015). The value of community for the Black girls in this study cannot be understated. For many of the girls their connection to the community of Black friends, primarily other Black girls, was an important element of how they survived at VMS. Though the girls described different racial demographics of their friend groups, they all

mentioned the lack of Black girls at VMS, and how they were able to be successful despite the small population, which signaled that they valued a community with other Black girls.

Nia was the most vocal about the importance of Black girls, becoming excited and emotional when discussing the importance of having Black girls as friends, and why they needed each other to resist the negative experiences at VMS. She explained how groups of Black girls served an important role in coping with racism because they are there to lift each other up and support one another. The support of other Black girls was particularly important at VMS because the girls did not feel comfortable talking about these instances with other adults.

Jada and Denise also discussed how their friendships were sources of support against the negative thoughts and emotions they faced as Black girls. Jada, who had a strong sense of self and positive self-esteem, said that some of her friends struggled with their self-esteem. As a brown-skinned girl, she dealt with back-handed compliments about her beauty, stating she was not ugly like most girls of her skin tone. She resisted these stereotypes rooted in controlling images of other Black women by considering their skin tone, hair texture, and facial features less attractive, the further away they were from societal White ideal (Collins, 2015). Jada resisted these stereotypes herself, and she described how she rejected them for her friends who struggled with self-esteem, telling them that they were neither dumb nor ugly. Though none of the Black girls in the study described themselves in negative terms with regard to their intelligence or their Blackness, it is important to understand and to hear how Jada's friends struggled with those same issues. Jada's friends were also Black girls at VMS, who also existed within a school structure that reinforced hierarchies with regard to intelligence and race, which also played a role in their struggles with self-esteem.

Jada also discussed how her close-knit group of Black friends helped her through her middle school experience. They supported one another and had bonds that have extended throughout the years. Being separated from them when they were placed on different teams in seventh grade caused her to feel isolated, and it was a time when she felt she didn't have a place where she belonged. To cope with her isolation, she focused on creating friendships with girls on her team who were Black and Hispanic. Having friends at the school at large was not enough, she needed friends in her classes as a means of survival.

While Maya did not talk about the closeness of her friendships with Black girls, she planned to attend an HBCU to have a community of people who can relate to her fully. This idea echoes the historical importance of Black women friendships as safe spaces. "For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman" (Collins, 2015, p. 114). These relationships were what Maya alluded to when her classmates turned to her during discussions of slavery. Because of the racial segregation in the gifted track, Maya did not have another Black girl to be her safe space when these incidents happened, or to support her when classmates argued about "the N-word" and challenged her Blackness.

The focus group also underscored the importance for Black girls to have community and build relationships with one another, particularly given the fragmentation of them as a population throughout the school. During the focus group, the girls listened to each other's ideas and validated one another's experiences. When Denise expressed self-doubt about her intelligence and her place at VMS, the girls challenged her words and uplifted her. They supported one another throughout the conversation, but they also said how cool it was for them to have time to talk together. When the focus group ended, the girls said they felt like they had made new

friends. During the short time they were together, they established a bond because of the commonality of their experiences.

Identity through Resistance and Self-Definition

The ethic of caring emphasizes uniqueness and recognizes the individuality of each person as an expression of a common spirit or energy, coming from the standpoint of Black women (Collins, 2015). Throughout the study, the girls described their varied experiences in a middle school with racialized tracking, but they all explained how they do not let those experiences define them. This section focuses on how the girls express themselves individually from the standpoint of Black girls.

Throughout the interviews, the Black girls discussed how track placement affected the way they viewed themselves. They described how the labels and stereotypes of each track operated, but also explained how they pushed against those stereotypical images and labels. Track placement and team assignment had the most profound effect on Denise, who struggled with being in High Achiever on a predominantly White team. She felt like she did not deserve to be on the team with gifted students. The racial isolation she felt made her feel uncomfortable. Her use of the word "deserve" emphasized the existence and negative effects of the hierarchy created by tracking, and how closely intertwined race and track were as they contributed to Denise's educational experiences. Denise's discomfort was not based on her placement in High Achiever classes; she was in High Achiever classes in sixth grade and described that experience as "fun." Her discomfort and self-doubt came from her placement on a team with predominantly White, gifted students. Being on a team with them made her self-conscious and feel that she did not belong.

> I just I feel like people are like, “OK shouldn't you be happy you're in High Achievers?” .... I'm like “No, no, no.” And then they're like, “No, you guys get to do things ahead of us” and this and that. But, honestly if you're put in an area where there's no one else really like you, it kind of loses its..

Denise trailed off, never finding the words to describe what was lost when she sat in classes with students who were not like her. The status attached to placement in the higher tracks was lost on her during those moments because she valued feeling a part of a community more than the label. Collins (2015) describes this experience,

> Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African American women with our objectification as an other. The struggle of living two lives, one for “them and one for ourselves. (p. 110)

Denise struggled with being a High Achiever on a gifted team because of the way the labels contradicted the way she viewed herself and what she valued. Denise said that she did not deserve to be on her team, but she also explained that she would not fit into a box or adhere to any label that was given to her. While Denise doubted her intelligence in comparison to the gifted students on her team, she also shared the advice she followed from her dad, which revealed how she acted, despite negative thoughts:

> My dad says "Never accept mediocre. Always try to be the best you can be." And if those standards are that lower than your expectations for yourself then try to raise those standards and go past the bar instead of just settling.

Denise, like the other girls in the study, pursued excellence and they confronted the labels and defined themselves.

The findings of this study and the conclusions from this discussion do not speak for all Black girls, but they provide important insight for people who work with Black girls and who value their experiences. As important as this work is for adults, Black girls are the ones who have to cope within the oppressive structure of racialized tracking, so I asked each girl what advice she would give to a Black girl who was coming to VMS. While the next section explains the implications of this study for stakeholders, this section ends with her advice from one Black girl to another.

> **Denise:** It's... It's a long ride. It's a rollercoaster. Don't expect it to just go through smoothly, because that's not going to happen…Ummm But there's a lot to learn, and some people say they wish they didn't do that, they wish they didn't do this. But having the experiences you go through kinda make you stronger as a person. It gives you more sort of wisdom that you might not have for a characteristic trait at the beginning. It's something that… it's learning like my dad says, "every action has a reaction, but it's your choice to learn from it or to continue to do it." And you know they'll come a point where you'll just be like enough is enough. I just want to do the right thing for life.
> So, do the right thing the first time. This will save your life. Because I know, I know for a fact... Doing the wrong thing, just…a;.(deep breath)…And who determines what the right thing is? your parents determine what the right and wrong thing is. Because I mean they're your parents. But then also you kind of, you have a conscience. Well hopefully... it will be bad if you didn't, but I hope you have a conscience that's telling you, "Don't do that, because this is gon' happen." But you know...Listen to your conscience, because if you don't you will get in trouble. I guarantee you, you will get in trouble.

Implications

Using the experiences, thoughts, and ideas of the girls, I identified a variety of implications in this section. I describe implications for schools, teachers, and parents that will take steps towards improving the educational experiences of Black girls. Because these implications focus on ways schools can move towards dismantling the domains of power, these implications can improve the experiences of all members of the school community.

Schools

The most important step that schools can take is to dismantle tracking systems and the social hierarchies they reinforce. Detracking has been effective in schools that have removed academic tracks (Rubin, 2006). Heterogeneous grouping dismantles cultural messages and structural practices that are predicated on the historical grouping of students based on the use of test scores or other unreliable predictors of ability, aptitudes, or achievement. The girls in the study argued that VMS should end tracking, and we must listen to them because they are the ones who exist within the spaces we created. Maya, who started gifted classes in 1st grade, offered this suggestion,

> I feel like instead of like it might be more work, I feel like instead of doing it based on teams they could have kids like from any like from general, High Achievers, and gifted like maybe give them different work or something like that… Because I feel like you could meet new people and have different friends, because if you are in one team then you're most likely not going to know a lot of people from the other teams except for connections [classes] or if you know them before.

As schools work to address educational inequalities, school officials often ignore the opinions of students. Maya's suggestion can improve the educational experiences for all students

and schools should listen to students like Maya, who are directly affected by educational injustices.

We must consider the voices of girls who have spent their entire education faced with culturally biased, high-stakes testing, particularly because most educators who make decisions about school structures graduated high school before they were implemented with No Child Left Behind. Only by listening to their experiences can we create a school where they feel that they belong, and one that can meet their needs. For too long, schools have focused on the racist notion, then the colorblind notion of justice, but now schools should focus on educational policies that include the experiences of Black girls.

Another implication for schools is to provide community spaces for Black girls within the school. Black girls need safe spaces where Black girls and Black women can share ideas and examine issues related to the issues that are important to them (Collins, 2015). Racially diverse schools should accept the challenge to create this space for Black girls, despite the colorblind notion of democracy that current school practices are built upon. In creating these spaces, schools provide an opportunity for Black girls to build community foster a feeling of belonging among a group of students who have been marginalized through grouping, discipline, and interactions with peers and school officials.

Teachers

Teachers have an important role in providing positive academic and educational environments for all students, and this study also has important implications for Black girls. One of the most important things that teachers can do is to include the contributions and accomplishments of Black people throughout the curriculum of their content classes. Black students who have role models of academic success are more likely to achieve academic success

of their own. Unfortunately, many Black students do not learn their own history until they get to college. The girls at VMS make it clear that they not only want to learn more about their cultural history, but they also explain why it is important for them and other students. Fortunately, the girls in the study come from families that taught them about the Black history that was absent from their middle school experiences. Because this is not the case for all students, teachers have the responsibility to include Black culture and history throughout the curriculum. Nia explained during her interview,

> I want a teacher that can answer MY questions, and I think that if a student has a question then you should answer it, or you should look it up and tell me, or I should look it up and tell her about it.

"If children do not feel understood, respected, and protected by their teachers, their learning can be negatively impacted" (Masko, 2005, p. 191). It is critical for teachers to teach and manage classroom behaviors within a culturally responsive framework, which includes both teaching in a manner that builds on students' cultural knowledge, but also responding to racism with empathy, compassion, and seriousness. Teachers and school administrators often discount students' complaints about racism, treating them with far less seriousness than other disciplinary infractions, which results in children feeling unprotected by the adults charged to care for them at school. Teachers need to be trained in how to be culturally responsive, both in how to talk about race within their curriculum, recognizing and honoring everyone's emotions around the topic, as well as how to handle disciplinary actions with seriousness and empathy.

Parents

One implication for parents of White students is to understand that they can't take credit for their child's academic success but eschew responsibility for their child's racist behavior with

their classmates. Parents of White children must actively teach their children to be anti-racist because racism is a feature of American society, not a flaw (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Because racism is normal in our society, the parents of White students can also play an important role in educating their children to exist in diverse spaces by teaching them to be culturally sensitive and antiracist. When adults do not take responsibility for teaching students to reject the racist messaging from the media, from tracking, from family members and friends, it falls upon the children to address these issues, and it should not be a child's responsibility to change the world they were born into.

Another important implication for parents is to reconsider their notions of the purpose of education and the aspects that shape a quality education for their children. This implication is particularly important for White parents, because their students are the primary beneficiaries of tracking policies, and the small academic benefit that exists within tracking systems. While academic success is important, it is essential that parents recognize the value of their children being educated in racially and ethnically diverse classrooms, which are largely eliminated at diverse schools due to racialized tracking. The girls in the study explained the importance of diversity in creating a sense of belonging and comfort within their school, but White students benefit from diversity as well, and it is important that parents acknowledge the importance of diverse learning spaces for all students.

Additionally, parents must understand the value of academically and intellectually heterogeneous learning spaces, because these spaces mirror the world that their children will enter as adults. As someone who was educated in selective enrollment schools, which separated me completely from students who were not gifted identified, it was only after I graduated college that I worked in heterogeneous environments, and I had to adjust my ideas and notions of

success and achievement, and I had to deconstruct my narrow ideas that intellectual ability and academic excellence were indicators of worth. As a beneficiary of tracking, I did not even recognize how shallow, elitist, and ignorant I was until I began working with students of all different abilities, aptitudes, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

Parents of Black children must also reconsider what makes quality education. Though some Black students benefit from tracking systems within their schools, the practice of tracking is not beneficial for most students and is detrimental for Black children overall. Therefore, Black parents also share the same responsibility in advocating for ending tracking because of the homogeneous learning spaces it creates. Black students understand the benefits of diversity, which are uncommon in schools with tracking systems.

Another important implication for the parents of Black girls is to intentional when addressing racism and discrimination that their daughters face in schools. The girls in this study discuss how their parents prepare them for the harsh treatment they will face in school and will continue in society as they become Black women. "Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 51). The stories of the girls' middle school experiences create an opportunity for teachers to understand that the lives of their students are more nuanced than they will tell. Despite facing offensive comments and language from their classmates, they did not tell any of their teachers or other school officials. Parents can inform teachers, school officials, and the parents of other students about these incidents to bring awareness and work towards solutions that protect Black girls from the racism that the participants described throughout the study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research could explore the attitudes of other groups of students within schools with racially segregated tracks to understand their views of the way students are organized. Additionally, research should be done to explore how creating intentional spaces for Black girls to create community affects their experiences in schools with racialized tracking. Longitudinal research that follows Black girls from elementary school through post-secondary education to understand how their school experiences, attitudes, and identities change would also provide important insight for educators. The findings from these studies, and other research that centers the voices of Black girls, must be used to create and reshape school policies and practices.

Final Thoughts

I chose to study the experiences of Black girls in schools with racialized tracking because I wanted to know how they made sense of their experiences at the middle school where I teach. I never anticipated how emotional this process would be. Working with the girls, my heart swelled as they shared with me who they were, as they shared their thoughts, ideas, and themselves with me so openly. As I listened to the girls share their experiences, my heart broke as they described negative experiences that I never faced as a student and did not know were happening with regularity at our school. In my role as a researcher, I was unable to address the issues they described during their interviews the way I would in my role as a teacher. At the same time, I witnessed the power of creating a space where they could talk with each other about their experiences at Vanderbilt and make new friends and create community in the process.

I also underestimated the emotions I'd feel during data analysis. I frequently had to pause my work because their stories resonated with me and tugged at my own experiences of feeling othered and marginalized in and out of school as both a student and a teacher. As I listened to

them during our interviews, it became clear that the girls understood the weight they would carry throughout the world as Black women because they were already shouldering the weight and feeling the heaviness that accompanies being Black girls. They wrestled with issues of stereotype and stigma, of self-doubt and resistance, of finding spaces where they belong in a school that has not prioritized their needs as Black girls. While wrestling with the complexities that inform their realities, their light shined brilliantly through laughter, smiles, jokes, quips, side-eyes, giggles, eye rolls, and the emotion with which they celebrated their individuality and uniqueness.

Throughout the process, my biggest concern was trying to use the right words to highlight their beauty and brilliance for the reader. I want my research to honor their experiences and their stories, and not contribute to research that problematizes Black girls and Black women. I want their experiences to contribute to a narrative that celebrates the beautiful complexity that exists among Black women and girls. I hope I have accomplished that goal.

My greatest goal is that Black women and girls who read this dissertation find community within these pages. I hope that some read these stories and find themselves represented in these pages and connect with the community the girls created throughout this study. I hope that these stories make others think about the beauty within the Black girls in their lives and work towards creating the world Black women and girls deserve. I hope that when my daughter reads this, she feels the #blackgirlmagic she was born into, but that she finds the injustices in these pages as unfamiliar as an abacus and a rotary phone.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Good day! My name is Kamaria Shauri, and I am a graduate student at Georgia State University and I also teach seventh grade Language Arts here. Thank you for being a part of my research project to understand your experiences as a Black girl in a middle school with different level classes. I'll be asking you some questions about yourself and your experiences here. I will also ask questions about how you feel about the way students are grouped into classes and teams. If you feel uncomfortable at any time or if you do not want to answer a question, just say so and we can skip that question or stop. I am recording this interview to make sure that my notes about what you say are correct. I will not share anything you say with anyone else, not your teachers, parents, or friends. The final project will not include your name or the names of others. I will only use what you share for my project. Do you have any questions?

1. What grade are you in, and how old are you?
2. What team are you on?
3. Which level classes are you in for Math? Language Arts? Social Studies? Science?
4. What team were you on last year? Did you have the same level classes?
5. How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you?
6. What is it like being a Black girl at this school?
7. Tell me about the students in your classes/ on your team.
8. How would you describe students on other teams?
9. How would you describe yourself as a student?
10. Describe a time when you felt successful in school.
11. Describe a time when you felt unsuccessful in school.
12. How would your teachers describe you?
13. What would you want your teachers to know about you?
14. Tell me about how your teachers treat you? Administrators? Other students?
15. Do you and your friends or family talk about race? Can you give me an example of a conversation or conversations about race?
16. Tell me about how students talk about race at this school? Do teachers talk about race? When?
17. Tell me about a time when you felt like you belonged at this school… a time when you didn't belong?
18. Describe an adult that you feel most connected with at school.
19. Tell me about an activity or lesson in class where you learned about people who look like you.
20. Can you describe how students are put into different classes/on different teams?
21. What do you think about the way students are grouped here?
22. If you could change one thing about your school what would you change?
23. If you could change one thing about your classes what would you change?
24. What do you think the differences are between grade level, High Achiever, and gifted classes?

25. Are Black girls treated differently than other groups of students when it comes to rules at this school?

Before we end, is there anything else about your experiences at your school as a Black girl that you would like to share?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me. I will let you know about the next time we meet. That meeting will be a focus group with the other girls in the study where you all talk together about your experiences here. Have a great day.

Appendix B

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Hello, my name is Kamaria Shauri and I am a graduate student at Georgia State University, and I also teach seventh grade Language Arts here at Vanderbilt. This focus group is a part of my research project to understand the educational experiences of Black girls like you in a middle school where students are placed into different level classes. This focus group is an opportunity for you to share your experiences and discuss them as a group. I will be making an audio recording of this interview for the accuracy of my study, but you will remain confidential, and I will not share any of the things that you say with anyone else without your knowledge. Also, please do not share the names of students or teachers who are not a part of this study.

My role here is to ask questions of you all as a group and keep the conversation on track. As participants, I'd like you to share your experiences and opinions. Understand that there are no right or wrong answers, and respect one another's ideas. This focus group will last 90 minutes. Are there any questions before we begin?

Introductions: First, I'd like each of you to introduce yourself, telling us your name, grade, and team.

Focus group questions:

1. Can you tell me Vanderbilt? (prompt for classes, peers, teachers, administration)
2. How do your middle school experiences here compare to your experiences in elementary school?
3. How would you describe students in different level classes: grade level, high achiever, gifted?
4. Which level class would you want to be in? Which level is the best level to be in?
5. What is it like to be a Black girl at Vanderbilt?
6. Have you had experiences where you teachers or other students treated you a certain way because you are a Black girl?
7. When you need help in school, who do you ask for help?
8. Are there challenges being a middle schooler here that are more difficult as Black girls?
9. What advice would you give to a Black girl who is new students here that would help them be successful?
10. Is there anything that you would want the adults at Vanderbilt to know, or that they should do that would improve the experiences for you or other Black girls here?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your openness. I will be following up with you soon regarding follow-up interviews, which I will send you a reminder about soon. Have a great day.

Appendix C

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for joining me to participate in this follow-up interview. During this interview, I am going to ask some follow-up questions based on our individual interview and the focus group. I am also going to be checking to see if I captured your feelings accurately. We will be looking at some of the things that you said and talking about what they mean. This will make sure that my final report reflects your feelings and experiences. If you feel uncomfortable at any time or if you do not want to answer a question, just say so and we can skip that question or stop. I am recording this interview to make sure that my notes about what you say are correct. I will not share anything you say with anyone else, not your teachers, parents, or friends. The final project will not include your name or the names of others. I will only use what you share for my project. Do you have any questions?

Questions:

(These questions were based on what the participants shared in the interviews and focus groups and varied for each participant. These sentence stems provided the basic outline I used to write questions for the follow-up interviews.)

1. Given what you said about your experiences as a Black girl, and what you heard about the experiences of others, what are your feelings about the way students are grouped at your school?
2. During the focus group, you mentioned ___________________? Can you tell me more about that?
3. During the first interview, you said _____________ about how you could change the way students are grouped. After what you discussed in the focus group, how do you think that would work for all students?

Now, I'm going to share with you some of the findings that I have based on what we've talked about. We are going to go over them together to make sure that I understand what you're saying correctly. As we go, you can stop me at any time, if there is anything you'd like to change, add, or take out of my notes. Do you have any questions?

(After reviewing the notes)

Is there anything else that you think I should know for my study?

Thank you so much for your participation in the study. I appreciate your time and your willingness to help me with my research.