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Franchesca Ocasio

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In their own words: an exploration of the educational experiences of Black, Indigenous girls and  
gender expansive youth of color in foster care  
Franchesca Ocasio

Claremont Graduate University  
2022

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

**Approval of the Dissertation Committee**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Franchesca Ocasio as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

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**Abstract**

In their own words: an exploration of the educational experiences of Black, Indigenous girls and gender expansive youth of color in foster care

By  
Franchesca Ocasio

Claremont Graduate University: 2022

Research on Black, Indigenous, and girls and gender expansive youth of color in foster care is extremely limited. Though, existing research in education, sociology, and psychology suggests that these individuals enter foster care at higher rates than their counterparts due to interpersonal and structural violence. In the system, racialized and gendered stereotypes influence how they are perceived by educators and lead to increased discipline in schools. Given this landscape, this work seeks to understand the educational experiences of BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care and the ways that they navigate mistreatment by educators. In the tradition of Critical Race Theorists, and indigenous, Black, and Chicana feminist researchers, this study utilizes counter-storytelling to challenge the dominant narrative surrounding these populations, obtained through ethnographic and qualitative research methods. Data from field observations and qualitative interviews lead to three key conclusions: 1) Community Experts illustrate that: 1) As systems-impacted youth, they faced unique systemic barriers to academic success, 2) Systemic barriers in education impacted Experts' feelings of school connectedness, giving rise to complex behaviors, 3) Despite the barriers placed in front of them, Experts survived education and the family regulation system with community support. While further research is needed, these findings shed light on the challenges to academic success facing BIPOC girls and gender-expansive youth in foster care. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that these challenges require unique and creative solutions, ranging from changes in educational practice to systemic changes, such as the abolition of the family regulation system.

### **Acknowledgements**

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I am also grateful to my partners, closest friends, and family who made sure I was fed, cheered me on, checked in on me, held me accountable to my work timelines, read my writing, validated me when imposter syndrome snuck in and listened to me talk about this topic, at length, for years. I would not have finished this dissertation without your love and care.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Scholars of school discipline agree that girls and gender expansive youth, such as transgender and non-binary individuals, are largely excluded from research and literature and consequently excluded from resources aimed at supporting youth who are frequently targeted for exclusionary school discipline. This is a theme I have become all too familiar with in my nine years working with youth in foster care in various public school districts. Increased research on the effects of school discipline on Black, Indigenous boys of color (BIPOC) has resulted in increased programs and resources supporting boys' education. While this is an important topic, and far more resources are necessary, few resources exist for girls and gender expansive youth in the same racial and ethnic demographics. The scarcity in literature and resources becomes even more dire when taking into account the experiences of youth in foster care, who are perceived to be problematic due to cultural stereotypes and misinterpretations of their behavior, and therefore disciplined harshly through suspension and expulsion. These disciplinary actions frequently alienate and isolate youth from the school community and create barriers to their academic success. The gaps in literature and my professional background have inspired me to produce more scholarship in collaboration with this community to better understand the ways in which BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care assert their humanity in the face of surveillance and punishment on school campuses, which lead to pushout. This assertion of humanity by BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in this specific context is the investigative focus of this study. As a scholar, educator, and organizer, this study is both informed by, and contributes to academic and community work calling for abolition of carceral systems, including the family regulation system. Ultimately, I intend for the data and findings derived from this study to serve individuals and organizations working toward this end in academic, educational,

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and political spaces. I believe this work is an important addition to the current academic landscape, which largely ignores the experiences of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, both in and out of foster care; furthermore, this study opens the door to further research concerning these communities. I hope to share insights into the educational experiences of youth in foster care, as attained in this study, with teachers, with the goal of shifting the ways they understand their role in the school-to-prison pipeline and opportunities to disrupt it. Finally, I intend for this study to support the labor of activists working toward education and carceral policy reform.

### **Background**

BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are highly impacted by educators' implicit bias, zero-tolerance discipline practices, and school collaboration with the criminal justice system. Statistics show that Black girls have experienced a considerable rise in suspension rates in recent years. The Department of Education found that, for the 2011-12 school year, while Black boys were suspended four times more often than white boys, Black girls were suspended six times as often as their counterparts and only two percent of white girls faced suspension, compared to 12 percent of Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Meanwhile, very few studies have focused exclusively on disciplinary experiences of trans and non-binary youth, as most do not disaggregate by specific LGBTQ identities despite their unique experiences. Even so, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health found that LGBTQIA youth are one and a half to three times more likely to experience expulsion, interactions with police, and conviction in court (Palmer & Greytak, 2017). A 2013 Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey found that 46 percent of Black LGBTQ youth, 44 percent of Latinx LGBTQ youth, and 47 percent of multiracial LGBTQ youth

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experienced exclusionary school discipline, compared to 36 percent of white LGBTQ youth (Palmer et al., 2016). Moreover, trans and gender non-conforming youth and LGBTQ youth with disabilities experienced higher rates of school discipline than their cisgender counterparts (Palmer et al., 2016). Reports demonstrate that incidents of exclusionary discipline push students out of school and into the criminal justice system (Morris, 2012). The situation is even more complex for BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth involved in the family regulation system, as intersecting systems of oppression funnel them from foster care into juvenile detention.

BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care are among the most heavily surveilled and neglected populations in American public schools. Research shows that youth in foster care and BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are judged as deviant, troubled, and aggressive, especially when responding to injustices (Blake et al., 2010; Romano et al., 2015; Snapp et al., 2015). Intersecting systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy impose these characterizations on these youth and manifest in very real challenges in family regulation, criminal and juvenile justice, and public education systems. The family regulation and criminal justice systems have a history of patronizing women of color, as they are often viewed as unfit to care for their families within the norms of white motherhood (Brown & Bloom, 2009). These systems then inflict strict surveillance, control, and punishment over women of color by imprisoning them, and removing their children for the perceived benefit of themselves and their families (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Haney, 2014; Saar et al., 2015). Girls and gender expansive youth, once removed from their families, are consequently funneled back and forth through the family regulation and juvenile justice systems while trying to stay afloat in school. Meanwhile, all three systems utilize similar forms of surveillance and punishment to coerce conformity. BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are frequently penalized, pushed out and isolated for

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what these systems perceive as their own personal failings: their “failed” family lives, their seemingly contentious attitudes, and gaps in education due to the transient nature of juvenile justice and foster care (Carpenter & Clyman via Villegas et al., 2013; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Wun, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

The limited research on BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care suggests that, despite their invisibility in school discipline scholarship, these populations are highly criminalized on school campuses. However, the majority of research on youth in foster care centers youth who are deemed the most successful, those who graduate high school within four years, and subsequently pursue higher education. I would imagine that this is due in large part to focus on this population’s resilience, rather than their struggles. However, often absent are the stories of fortitude of students who are not deemed conventionally successful. Existing literature rarely uplifts stories of youth who drop out of school, do not graduate on time, or who chose non-traditional education paths. Additionally, existing literature rarely advocates for, nor provides the tools needed, to build solidarity with these youth. My research seeks to answer the following research questions to bridge this gap:

- 1) How do experiences with exclusionary discipline affect how BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care view themselves, their abilities, and their future goals?
- 2) How do BIPOC girls and gender youth individuals in foster care resist or confront attempts by school staff to police their behavior?
- 3) What are the ways in which BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care demonstrate resilience in the face of academic barriers?

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- 4) What resources, tools, and/or support might BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care need in order to not only survive, but to excel in school?

### **Methods**

The methods I employ in this study are informed by Black, Indigenous, and Chicana feminist research methods, all of which aim to center the “subject” of a research study as the expert on their experiences, and therefore the highest authority on the conclusions and theories derived from their stories. As such, in this study, I made use of both ethnographic methods, through field observations, and participatory, qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured, and trauma-informed interviews. Field observations are an important asset to this study. Given my timeline for graduation and the Institutional Review Board’s constraints on studying vulnerable populations and children, I was unable to interview my students or any youth under the age of 18. Field observations allowed me to incorporate youth stories, though they lack the nuance that an interview can provide. Additionally, given the wide age range of participants, field observations gave me the opportunity to analyze incidents occurring in the current educational landscape. The use of trauma-informed interviews allowed me to create a brave space to discuss past harms and future hopes (Blanch et al., 2012). This type of interviewing allowed me to build trust with the experts through a pre-talk, interview questions, and a post-talk. Once I collected data in the interview process, I underwent a cyclical process of data analysis and member checking to ensure that the conclusions I was drawing from experts’ experiences felt accurate and relevant to them. I believe this combination of methodological choices enabled me to put into practice the theories outlined by Black, Indigenous, and Chicana feminist research methods and epistemology to disrupt the researcher-subject relationship found in traditional

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western research by ensuring that experts are not only the storytellers, but also have power over the narrative being developed from their experiences.

### **Assumptions**

Underlying assumptions of the study were that the interview questions would be understood by community experts and that they would be able to accurately recall memories from middle and high school to answer interview questions in detail. Due to the impact that trauma has on brain development and memory, and the traumatic nature of the foster care system, I can conclude that some community experts' stories might contain inaccuracies. Regardless, their school experiences and messages they received from school staff based on their interactions still offer valuable insights into the ways BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth resist surveillance and unfair punishment in schools.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations of this study include being California based, its exclusion of boys and men in foster care, and the moment in time at which the study was conducted. As policies and practices of school and family regulation systems vary by state, experiences of individuals outside of California would also vary greatly. Additionally, due to intersecting systems of gender and race within these institutions, experiences of BIPOC boys and men would likely differ greatly from those of girls, women, and gender expansive individuals. Lastly, as our understanding and theorizing around race and gender change constantly, the data gathered in this study, while valuable, may not be transferable to similar populations in years to come.

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### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the COVID-19 pandemic and social barriers to reaching community experts. As an outsider to this community, I anticipated I would face challenges in reaching community experts. Traditional western research has exploited the trauma of vulnerable communities, such as youth currently and formerly in foster care; thus, many individuals are suspicious of researchers attempting to obtain their stories. This challenge was intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the recruitment had to be done by emailing contacts at foster youth support programs at colleges throughout the state, rather than by presenting to these groups or visiting other programs, such as Transitional Age Youth (TAY) resource centers. Additionally, my interviews took place via Zoom. As a result, I could not build rapport with potential community experts, nor could I answer questions or respond to skepticism. Throughout the pandemic, this likely impacted not only how many people I could interview, but who I could interview, as all of the community experts were college students and I was unable to reach individuals who had little or no access to a computer or reliable internet. This may have resulted in misleading data, as the sample favors the perspective of individuals with resources to engage digitally, and the social and cultural resources to attain a college education, which does not represent the population as a whole.

### **Significance**

Despite troubling statistics illustrating barriers to academic success facing BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care, these individuals are frequently excluded from education research, even among scholar activists working to improve conditions for marginalized students. I hope my work will contribute to this population's visibility in academic literature,

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eventually leading to policy changes and increased funding for initiatives and programs and educational practice.

As school-to-prison pipeline scholarship centers experiences of BIPOC boys, policy and funding is disproportionately invested in improving their conditions, with little to no consideration for their female or gender expansive peers. In the last 10 years, over 100 million dollars have gone to achievement, dropout prevention, and mentoring programs for BIPOC boys. Meanwhile, less than one million dollars has been directed for similar programming focusing on girls (African American Policy Forum, 2014). No numbers were reported on similar programs for other gender or sexual minority youth. While programs, policy, and research for BIPOC boys are important, they should not displace and overshadow the need for similar support for youth of other genders (Butler, 2013). My research will begin to fill gaps in education, which is vital to the creation of new policy and increased funding to support their needs.

Additionally, I intend to center experiences of BIPOC girls and gender expansive individual, who are currently or formerly in foster care, by creating space for them to share their stories in their own words, without altering them to fit an academic framework. As such, this work will enable individuals to disrupt and push back on stereotypes that criminalize them, interrogate institutions that contribute to their oppression, and reclaim their voice. In doing so, I aspire for my research to impact educational practice by challenging the existing narrative of BIPOC youth in foster care, using my data to create tools for educators to reframe their approaches to working with this population.

Ultimately, I do not intend for this work to serve simply as a springboard for my career aspirations. Acknowledging my positionality as an outsider to this community requires me to use



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my privilege and resources to contribute to work being done in, and out, of the academy to make material change in the institutions that oppress youth in foster care.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC):* A term attempting to center Black and Indigenous voices when discussing non-white individuals, with the intention of inclusivity and disrupting racial hierarchies (Garcia, 2020). However, many scholars and activists argue that the term blends groups of people with unique histories and experiences with oppression (Garcia, 2020). Consequently, the term's opponents argue that this grouping leads to erasure, and that if one is discussing a specific group's experiences, one should name that specific group (Garcia, 2020). For example, if one means that a Black person has experienced x, y, and z incident, then they should say that, rather than "BIPOC." Throughout this dissertation, I use the term BIPOC because my work focuses on experiences of non-white girls and gender expansive individuals while being cognizant of using specific labels when discussing the specific experiences of individual communities. I understand that this is a temporary and imperfect linguistic solution to the ever-changing challenge of discussing race in America.

*Child welfare system:* A group of services created with the goal of ensuring safety for children and families, which become involved with the child welfare system due to reports of abuse or neglect. Child welfare systems are tasked with investigating reports, providing temporary shelter for children, and returning children to their families upon deeming them safe. The primary responsibility for child welfare rests with states and is supported through funding by the federal government. Thus, each state's system functions differently (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

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*Cis-hetero-patriarchy:* A system of power positioning cis-straight, white maleness as the normative expression of gender and sexuality. This system specifically harms individuals who are BIPOC and gender expansive (Kong, 2022).

*Classism:* The idea that someone's economic status determines their status in society.

*Community expert:* Coined by Jocelyn Mati from the Young Women's Freedom Center, the term refers to people interviewed for this study and is being used to replace terms such as participant, interviewee, or subject. The use of "community expert" or "expert" emphasizes intellectual contributions of people interviewed and seeks to disrupt the researcher-subject dichotomy of traditional western research (Melendrez, 2021).

*Family regulation system:* Reform activists and abolitionists advocate for discontinued use of the state's language in referring to the child welfare system, arguing that it creates a misleading image of policies and practices of this system that ultimately harm children, families, and entire communities (Williams, 2020). The term "child welfare system" situates the institution as benevolent and demonizes families of children involved in this system (Williams, 2020). Instead, many opt to use the term "family regulation system," which was initially offered by Emma Williams and popularized by the Movement for Family Power as a way to center families impacted by this system (Williams, 2020). I follow the lead of reform and abolitionist scholars and activists by using this language to refer to the child welfare system.

*Foster care:* A temporary service for youth who cannot live with their families. Foster care placement can include relatives, non-relative caregivers, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and foster families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

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*Gender expansive youth/individual:* This term refers to individuals previously described as gender non-conforming or gender variant. The use of “gender expansive” is an effort to transition away from deficit-based language centering experiences of individuals whose experiences fall within the gender binary (Mountz et al., 2018).

*LGBTQIA:* An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex and asexual, which are terms used to describe someone’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity (The Center, 2022).

*Mandated reporter:* Individuals and professionals who come in frequent contact with children and are required by law to report suspicions of abuse or neglect. In many states, mandated reporters include professionals such as social workers, school staff, health care workers, mental health professionals, and law enforcement officers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

*Racism:* The idea that racial differences produce a hierarchy of racial superiority (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

*Patriarchy:* A social system where power is held by men through cultural norms that privilege men over other genders (Dictionary.com, 2021).

*School-to-prison pipeline:* The funneling of youth out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system due to extreme discipline policies and practices (Advancement Project, Dignity in Schools, Alliance for Educational Justice & NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., 2018).

*Systems-impacted individual:* Individuals whose lives have been touched and/or controlled by government institutions such as the juvenile justice system, the criminal justice system, the

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family regulation system, mental health institutions, and addiction treatment centers (Melendrez, 2021).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

School discipline research largely focuses on boys of color as a heavily surveilled and marginalized population. While this population requires a great deal of attention, other marginalized youth, including girls, gender expansive youth, and youth in foster care, experience a similar degree of criminalization and are often left out of academic conversations. Many leading educational scholars in the country, including Dr. Russell Skiba and Dr. Pedro Noguera, focus almost exclusively on BIPOC boys' experiences. Additionally, seminal literature on the school-to prison pipeline and discipline center male experiences as the default, citing statistics on male achievement and disciplinary action, or providing anecdotes of male students, even when claiming to investigate disparities between entire racial groups (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory et al., 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2010). When experiences of girls and gender expansive youth are broached in literature, they are quickly forgotten. For example, Skiba et al. (2014) recognized that marginalized populations, including students with disabilities, girls, and non-heterosexual youth, are at highest risk for exclusionary discipline. However, when investigating factors impacting dropout and incarceration rates, such as school engagement, achievement, and behavior, the focus is exclusively on males. In another instance, Skiba et al. (2002) compared disciplinary rates of Black boys to those of white girls. While this comparison leads to shocking disparities, Black girls and gender expansive youth are left out of the conversation completely. Like Butler (2013), I believe that education research often operates in an oppression hierarchy, framing BIPOC boys and men as experiencing exceptional levels of harm, more severe and more worthy of attention than that of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth.

Moreover, experiences of the most marginalized youth -- Black girls, trans, non-binary and other gender expansive youth -- are frequently conflated with other minority groups.

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The term “girls of color” is often used as shorthand in literature for issues that affect Black girls most directly and severely but affect girls of other minoritized racial groups as well (Adams, 2018). The idea here is that for an issue to matter to dominant society, scholars cannot talk about issues that affect solely Black communities, and that we must use people of color (POC) or Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) as a euphemism for Black (Adams, 2018). Similarly, experiences of gender expansive youth are typically consolidated with those of other LGBTQ youth, despite the fact that youth who identify with minoritized sexualities and those who identify with minoritized genders have very distinct needs and face distinct challenges (Mountz et al., 2018). Additionally, much of the literature discusses experiences of youth of color and LGBTQ youth as distinct groups, ignoring intersectional aspects of both populations. This consolidation of racial and gender experiences works to further marginalize and erase experiences of youth who are most vulnerable to mistreatment.

Given disparities in scholarship and my personal background working with youth in foster care, I intend to contribute to the literature centering BIPOC girls, specifically Black girls, and gender expansive youth in foster care, and their experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline. Given the scarcity in literature, I find that in exploring the current academic landscape surrounding these populations, I am limited in my ability to examine distinct circumstances of Black girls and gender expansive youth, and consequences of overlapping gender and racial identities in education, family regulation, and juvenile justice systems. As such, in the literature review, I will explore literature that contextualizes the criminalization of marginalized students on school campuses. I will then investigate impacts of trauma resulting from maltreatment and involvement in the family regulation system on the development and academic achievement of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth. Lastly, I will consider how these factors converge on

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school campuses in the form of discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. Given the previously outlined constraints when discussing race and gender, I aim to elucidate the experiences of Black girls and gender expansive youth. I recognize that, though problematic, this may not always be possible given the current state of scholarship.

### **Setting the Stage: Contextualizing School Push-Out**

Schools have always been sites of tension for marginalized students. From Indian boarding schools to banning Spanish in the classroom, to *de facto* segregation in urban school districts, historically, the priority of U.S. public schools has been to prepare marginalized students to inhabit subordinate positions in American society (Duncan, 2000). In recent years, as state governments prefer to fund prisons over all levels of education, schools have done well to ensure that those prisons are filled with individuals from which to profit (Duncan, 2000). The process of filling prisons begins at school, with zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies.

Zero tolerance discipline gained popularity in the 1990s as a component of the war on drugs. Urban police got tough on crime through broken windows policing, suggesting that small criminal acts are antecedents of more serious, violent behavior; this, in turn, led to an uptick in incarceration of BIPOC communities (Morris, 2016). As law enforcement took on a hyper-punitive approach to policing communities of color, schools mirrored this approach in enacting zero tolerance responses to drugs, gangs, and weapons on school campuses (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Zero tolerance entered the national stage when a string of school shootings influenced President Clinton to pass the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994, requiring schools to expel students found in possession of a weapon on school grounds and refer the student to law enforcement (Morris, 2016; Skiba & Knesting, 2001). Shortly after its passage, the GFSA was

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expanded to include any device that could be used as a weapon, while state governments and local districts went further, to include drugs, alcohol, fighting, and making threats (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). While many policies and practices fall under the umbrella of zero tolerance, the predetermined punishments of removal and exclusion from the school setting for engaging in both serious, and not so serious offenses, are intended to deter unwelcome behavior (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). However, the evidence suggesting that these practices inflict more harm to students who need the most support far outweighs the evidence suggesting that exclusionary punishment promotes better school conduct or climate (Skiba et al., 2003). While exclusionary policies are intended to be equal opportunity, the complex processes of suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement are facilitated by individual school staff whose perspectives of students are steeped in, and informed by, oppressive systems of capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. As such, it is no surprise that zero-tolerance policies and practices disproportionately impact the educational and life outcomes of youth of color.

The rhetoric surrounding zero tolerance approaches to law enforcement and school discipline, from their inception, codes Black and brown youth as inherently violent and dangerous. This sentiment was epitomized in former First Lady Hillary Clinton's speech characterizing gang members as "super-predators," rather than adolescents (C-SPAN, 2016). This imagery strengthened the public's fear of Black and brown youth and reinforced racial inequalities already embedded in the public education system. The first national figures to be collected on expulsion rates, in 1998, demonstrated that Black youth comprised 31 percent of students expelled but only 17 percent of the student population (Giroux, 2003). Since then, the problem has intensified for all Black and brown students, but particularly for girls of color. While as a group, Black students experience larger achievement gaps and harsher discipline than



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their peers, much of the literature on school punishment centers the experiences of boys, as they are the most visible targets of zero tolerance discipline (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the criminalization of girls of color, particularly Black girls, though omnipresent in schools, and society in general, has largely flown under the research radar for decades.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a concept used to illustrate discipline policies and practices in schools and the juvenile justice system that decreases the probability of academic success and increases the possibility of contact with the juvenile justice system (Skiba et al., 2014). An influx of zero tolerance discipline measures, school policing, surveillance, and information sharing between schools and law enforcement, has created a fast track from school campuses to detention, which can result in bleak life outcomes, such as incarceration. Studies show that being suspended increases the probability of school dropout by 77.5 percent and students who drop out are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than students who graduate (Skiba et al., 2014).

Unfortunately for BIPOC women, girls, and LGBTQ individuals, detention in the juvenile and criminal justice systems has long been used as a tool to force obedience and social control, particularly through the criminalization of status offenses, which are non-violent offenses only illegal for individuals under 18. Such offenses include truancy, running away, breaking curfew, and underage drinking (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013; Davis & Shaylor, 2001; Snapp et al., 2015). Involvement in the juvenile justice system is, more often than not, a precursor to incarceration as an adult. When youth are released from juvenile detention and put on probation, expectations, such as mandated anger management, counseling, and curfew, are difficult to complete while attending school and/or working regularly, and often lead to cycles of re-incarceration that follow them into adulthood (Melendrez, 2021).

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Studies of incarcerated women and girls demonstrate that 71 percent of participants experienced some kind of educational disruption, including truancy, suspensions, and excessive absenteeism (Simkins et al., 2004). As such, it is evident that disciplinary policies targeting girls of color and LGBTQ youth, especially trans youth, have played a role in African-American, Latinx, and Native American women and trans people of color becoming the fastest growing prison population (Davis & Shaylor, 2001; Jones, 2021). Youth encounter a number of touch points where a court case can be averted, from school staff choosing whether to call law enforcement for incidents on campus, to arresting officers, district attorneys, probation officers, and judges choosing to change the direction of a case (Melendrez, 2021). Consequently, interrogation and disruption of mechanisms that contribute to excessive disciplining of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth is vital to ensuring not only academic success, but positive life outcomes for these youth.

### *School Collaboration with the Criminal Justice System*

In dominant society, schools are intended to be safe places for children to become well-rounded contributors to society. However, for poor youth of color, schools are what Wacquant (2001) describes as “institutions of confinement” (p.108), preparing poor, Black youth for inevitable incarceration, as they are built and function like prisons, with the primary purpose of imposing control. Morris (2016) further illustrates these conditions, describing schools with little access to recess, sports, or extracurricular activities, which facilitate irritability, disruption, and aggression, as intentionally preparing students for “a lifetime of institutionalization” (p. 83). As students’ cognitive, physical, and emotional development are harmed by these conditions, school administrators then go on to implement mechanisms of control to neutralize disruptions, rather than address root causes. Consequently, schools come to resemble prisons, complete with locked

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fences, barricades and walls, metal detectors, cameras, searches, and armed guards in the form of school resource officers (Wacquant, 2001). Therefore, the transition from school to prison becomes seamless, as students acclimate to the highly controlled confinement of prison, creating highly restrictive learning spaces.

Following Wacquant's (2001) assertions about the connection between schools and prisons, studies show that the manufactured sense of safety and control facilitated by zero tolerance practices leads to increased surveillance mechanisms, at the expense of investments in school facilities and students. For example, in the late 1990s, administrators at Fremont High School in Oakland, California opted to build a \$5,000,000 security fence rather than repair a broken heating system (Piana, 2000 via Giroux, 2003). While research illustrates that white male adolescents are more likely to initiate school-wide acts of violence, schools with large populations of students of color are more likely to utilize student surveillance technology (Morris, 2016). This technology creates an atmosphere akin to prisons, and scholars of school discipline indicate that school resource officers facilitate a direct link between schools and law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

School resource officers are typically employees of local police departments and are authorized to carry weapons on school campuses unless prohibited by local law (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2019). The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) stipulates that the role of an SRO is to provide mentorship and education above their role as law enforcement officers and contends that SROs' presence does not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (NASRO, 2019). While NASRO claims to have no way of knowing exactly how many SROs patrol school campuses nationally, Morris (2016) cites that in the 2013-14 school year, 42 percent of high schools nationwide utilized SROs. Moreover,

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Morris, Epstein, and Yusuf (2016) cite that Black and Latinx students are approximately 10 percent more likely than white students to have an SRO at their school. Hirschfield (2008) states that police force units of hyper-segregated urban schools are growing exponentially, citing New York City's school police force as an example, which is larger than that of the entire Boston Police Department. While the goal of SROs may be to support students, studies prove that their presence causes more harm than good. Between 2009 and 2011, studies show that the Los Angeles School Police Department issued 37,500 tickets and arrests for incidents such as truancy, disruptive behavior, vandalism, and petty theft (Advancement Project, 2018). Additionally, a 2013 study found that 77 percent of SROs surveyed reported that they have arrested students to calm them down, while 68 percent of SROs reported having arrested students for the sole purpose of teaching them a lesson (Morris et al., 2016). Furthermore, studies show that schools with SROs report five times the amount of on-campus arrests and refer more students to law enforcement for minor, non-serious offenses than schools without SROs (Advancement Project, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Arrests on campus have serious implications for students' education outcomes. An American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) study indicates that students who have been arrested at school are three times more likely to drop out than their peers (Dahlber, 2012 via Morris et al., 2016). Black and Latina girls are particularly affected by the presence of SROs in their schools; they are four and three times more likely, respectively, to be arrested in school than white girls (Inniss-Thompson, 2017 via Morris et al., 2016). The deeply ingrained systems of oppression embedded in school systems cause girls of color and LGBTQ youth to be characterized as troublemakers by school staff, and the presence of SROs provides schools with the means to remove these students from the school community. The juvenile justice system, as an extension

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of the school, then has the responsibility of rectifying any wrongdoing, while administrators can avoid doing the hard work of addressing root causes of problematic behavior and providing resources.

A 2021 San Francisco study of girls and gender expansive systems-impacted youth found that 20 percent of participants were charged with their first criminal case when school staff called in police to manage an incident that could have been dealt with by school personnel (Melendrez, 2021). Once youth are tracked into the juvenile justice system, they experience racialized and gendered expectations and consequences. While white girls in detention are thought to be the product of naïveté and low self-esteem, Black girls are thought to be a product of poor upbringing and deficit communities (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013). These perceptions result in inconsistent consequences for youth of different backgrounds. White girls in custody of the juvenile justice system are more often recommended for mental health treatment, while Latina and Black girls are more likely to be recommended for placement in juvenile detention centers (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2013). Additionally, stigma and discrimination of gender expansive youth and LGBTQ youth in general, result in high rates of isolation, inappropriate gendered placement, and violence in youth detention facilities with very little oversight (Center for American Progress, 2017).

Detention has proven to be mentally and emotionally harmful for youth, making reintegration into society challenging. These youth often encounter challenges of further behavioral and academic difficulty post-detention, frequently resulting in successive instances of detention that can result in imprisonment as adults.

### **Structural and Interpersonal Violence and the Family Regulation System**

Systems of classism, racism, and hetero-patriarchy present in dominant society cause BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth to be vulnerable to interpersonal and structural violence, including maltreatment and intervention from the family regulation system. Consequences typically include academic and behavior challenges as well as contact with the juvenile justice system.

BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are frequently overburdened by gender and sexuality-based violence. For example, 50 percent of Native American and Alaskan Native women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime; one in three Latinas experiences sexual violence before the age of 18; and 18 percent of Black women will experience sexual violence in their lifetimes (Indian Law Resource Center, 2019; National Organization of Women, 2018; Ulibarri et al., 2009). Moreover, gender expansive youth, in particular, are four times more likely to experience abuse and LGBTQ youth in general are more likely to experience conflict with their parents and be survivors of abuse, harassment, and discrimination (Irvine & Canfield, 2016; Mountz et al., 2020).

Vulnerability to interpersonal and systemic violence results in BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth being overrepresented in foster care placement (Mountz et al., 2020; Patrick & Chaudhry, 2017). Studies illustrate that Black and Indigenous girls, who constitute 15 percent and one percent of the population, respectively, constitute 23 percent and two percent of girls in foster care, respectively (Patrick & Chaudhry, 2017). Additionally, as stated previously, LGBTQ youth constitute 19 percent of youth in foster care, while transgender youth represent 5.6 percent (LA County, 2018). Despite the jarring statistics on violence experienced by girls and gender expansive youth, there is no evidence that BIPOC families are inherently more abusive than their

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white counterparts. Overrepresentation of BIPOC families in the family regulation system is intrinsically linked to structural inequalities and the carceral roots of foster care (Cloud, 2019).

While BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth experience a disproportionate amount of gender-based violence and overrepresentation in the family regulation system, reasons for placement in foster care are very unique. Studies demonstrate that the majority of LGBTQ youth in foster care are BIPOC, and a large number of these youth also identify as trans or gender non-conforming (Wilson et al., 2014). Research also reflects that LGBTQ youth frequently enter the system because of family rejection and abuse. A study of homeless youth found that 20 percent of sexual minority youth reported having been verbally and physically abused at home because of their sexual orientation. While very little research exists on this population, these numbers point to a possible cause for the overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in foster care. According to studies, 13.6 percent of foster youth identify as LGBTQ compared to 7.2 percent of the general population; 5.6 percent of trans youth in foster care compared to 2.25 percent in the general population; and LGBTQ youth and gender expansive youth are three times more likely to be removed from their home by the family regulation system than their non-LGBTQ and gender-conforming peers (Irvine & Canfield, 2016). Once in the system, LGBTQ youth report experiencing discrimination from foster families and social service workers, which seriously impacts their stability and well-being.

BIPOC families of youth who do not necessarily identify as gender expansive or LGBTQ experience intervention by the family regulation system as a result of structural violence. Black mothers, in particular, are more likely to experience structural violence, such as poverty, which creates inequitable access to education, health care, childcare, and food, housing, and job security (Minoff, 2018; Warner, 2017). Over policing in BIPOC communities and reliance on

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state assistance result in these families having increased contact with mandated reporters, including police officers and social service workers (Brown & Bloom, 2009). This contact not only increases surveillance of BIPOC families living in poverty but exposes them to systems that are invited to scrutinize and judge their actions against white, middle class family values (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Minoff, 2018). Among Black families in particular, these judgements are informed by stereotypes of Black women as sexually immoral Jezebels<sup>1</sup> and welfare queens<sup>2</sup> (Roberts, 2012).

Studies suggest that substantiation of accusations are influenced by racial, ethnic and class background of the perpetrator and family (Hines et al., 2004). In 2013, Black children and Indigenous children had a maltreatment report rate of 14.6 and 12.5 individuals per thousand, respectively, compared to a rate of 8.1 individuals per thousand for white children (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015 via Meiners & Tolliver). As mothers bear the heaviest burden for their children's welfare, poor BIPOC mothers are heavily scrutinized by mandated reporters and the family regulation system for any perceived inability to provide for their children. Consequently, by 2016, Black families were 6.3 times more likely to be investigated by the family regulation system (Office of Children and Family Services via Cloud, 2019). Once a family's allegations of abuse or neglect are substantiated, the system tracks the family on a state registry, where they can remain listed for up to 30 years (Cloud, 2019). This registry is available to judges and some employers, which can result in being barred from certain careers. Furthermore, if a family court deems a parent unfit, then the court has discretion to remove any child from that parent if it

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<sup>1</sup> The Jezebel controlling image was created under slavery, and illustrates Black women as sexually aggressive, providing white men the rationale to sexually assault enslaved women (Collins, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The welfare queen controlling image was popularized in the 1980s and is used to illustrate Black women as economic drains on American society, due to economic dependency, unemployment, and single motherhood. This image allows Black women to be characterized as materialistic and coercive (Collins, 2000).



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deems necessary during the subsequent five years (Cloud, 2019). Parents with experience in the family regulation system describe this process as feeling as though they have a target on their back; every mandated reporter they come in contact with knows they have been impacted by or surveilled by the system, and they are waiting to report the parent again (McMillan et al., 2021).

### ***Historical Trauma, Implicit Bias, Family Regulation and the Widening of the Carceral System***

Disproportionate involvement of BIPOC families in the family regulation system is largely the result of many structural inequities that dictate whether families can access life sustaining resources. However, much of disproportionate involvement of these families in the family regulation system can also be attributed to controlling images or stereotypes, particularly about BIPOC mothers, which inform how systems actors interact with mothers and what they deem mothers deserve. These stereotypes are largely rooted in legacies of slavery and settler colonialism.

Collins (2000) describes controlling images as mechanisms used to normalize oppression and the othering of particular groups. The controlling image of Black women as mammies arose during slavery and typecast Black women as subservient domestic servants who loved their white “family” more than their own children, dictating expectations for Black women’s behavior (Collins, 2000). Conversely, while the mammy stereotype characterized the role of Black women in white homes, the stereotype of the unfeminine matriarch, developed in the 1960s, symbolized Black women in the Black home, often headed by a single parent. The unfeminine matriarch represented the failed mammy who rejected her traditional feminine roles by working outside the home. As such, Black women in this role were accused of as being too aggressive, irresponsible for leaving their children at home to work and emasculating their male partners who were then driven to leave the family (Collins, 2000). The stereotype of the unfeminine Black matriarch

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allows dominant society to blame Black women for their own oppression, suggesting that the structural barriers Black women face, such as employment and housing discrimination, poor schools, and racist law enforcement, would be alleviated if they would just embody suitable gender behavior (Collins, 2000). Another controlling image of Black women's identity is that of the welfare queen, which is also informed by the legacy of slavery, during which Black women were distinguished as being better suited to reproduce children and thus forced to bear many children for slavers' economic gain (Collins, 2000). As Black communities began to gain access to social welfare programs in the 1980s, the welfare queen stereotype became more prominent, characterizing Black women as having a lot of children and being unwilling to care for them, satisfied with collecting welfare, and passing on bad values to their kids (Collins, 2000). These stereotypes impact the ways that Black women and their families are policed by social service workers and other mandated reporters.

Angela Davis (1998 via Roberts, 2012) describes the stereotypes of reckless Black mothers as being reinforced by the excessive supervision of Black families and sustaining the mass incarceration of Black individuals as the prison industrial complex<sup>3</sup> relies on “radicalized assumptions of criminality— such as images of Black welfare mothers reproducing criminal children” (Davis, 1998 via Roberts, 2012, p. 1492). Moreover, these stereotypes reinforce the idea that Black children live in single parent, female-headed households that are not equipped to control children who are invariably troubled (Roberts, 2012). Because Black mothers are labeled as inherently unable to manage their children, who are inherently unruly, they are better off being placed under state control (Roberts, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> The prison industrial complex refers to the link between prisons and prisoners to greater economic and political structures, such as corporations relying on prisons for profit or labor (Davis & Shaylor, 2001).

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Native youth and families experience similar rates of state involvement, disproportionate to the general population, due to stereotypes rooted in settler colonialism<sup>4</sup>. Native populations have been viewed by dominant society as backward since first contact with European settlers (Jacobs, 2014). By the late 19th century, U.S. authorities justified the effort to remove Native children from their families to assimilate, for fear that without the proper re-education, they would be a burden and constant threat to western civilization (Jacobs, 2014). Initially, Native youth were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools with the purpose of suppressing the growth of Native communities. The inventor of the boarding school, Richard Henry Pratt, believed that cutting children off from their culture and their tribe would assimilate them into dominant, white society, resulting in fewer Native people in the future (Nagel, 2021). Additionally, the removal of Native children became a tool of coercion for Native tribes to give up their lands (Nagel, 2021). Children became bargaining chips, hostages for the good behavior of Native people. While Native people were held captive in boarding schools, the U.S. seized land the size of the state of Montana (Nagel, 2021). However, boarding schools proved to be expensive and, with the advent of the Indian Adoption Project in 1958, the Child Welfare League of America and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs set in motion a campaign for the adoption of Native children by white families (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). However, the discourse around removal largely camouflaged its insidious nature as charity, as a way to save children from their “dangerous” families (Nagel, 2021). Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, with the goal of keeping Native children in foster care within their tribes (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). However, a lack of commitment to the ICWA, including a lack of federal funding, has resulted in decreased compliance with the act and an increase of foster care placements

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<sup>4</sup> Settler colonialism refers to the process of nation building through the domination and oppression of indigenous populations (Crofoot & Harris, 2012).

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(Crofoot & Harris, 2012). The desire to continuously remove Native children from their families exposes deeply ingrained prejudices predicated on racist stereotypes of Native Americans as alcoholics, drug addicts, and gamblers, and therefore unfit to parent (Cooper, 2013; Crofoot & Harris, 2012).

The situation is even more dire for incarcerated mothers in general. Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to be placed in foster care than those of incarcerated fathers (Roberts, 2012). Once in foster care, federal family regulation laws encourage termination of parental rights of incarcerated mothers, as family regulation authorities often impose requirements around case planning, visitation, and involvement in their children's lives that are impossible for incarcerated mothers to comply with while in prison (Roberts, 2012). Additionally, many incarcerated mothers with children in foster care receive little to no information from caseworkers about their child's case (Beckerman, 1994 via Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Even when incarcerated mothers are able to keep legal custody of their children, post-prison sanctions create further barriers to reunification. Various state and federal laws impose obstacles to community reintegration after incarceration, such as denying public benefits, housing, education, and job opportunities, such as childcare and nurse's aide, to drug offenders. To add insult to injury, states have the choice to refuse food stamps to individuals who have been convicted of felony drug offenses (Roberts, 2012).

The family regulation system has a history of masquerading as an institution of care, while truly prioritizing coercion and surveillance of BIPOC families. It is not uncommon for the family regulation system to work in conjunction with the criminal justice system as investigations into child maltreatment allegations frequently require that a social worker brings a police officer into the home without a warrant (Roberts et al., 2021). This serves to widen the net

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of carcerality, as police officers have greater access to criminalize families in their home and drag more and more people into the criminal justice system (Roberts, 2021). This surveillance follows youth into schools, as educators make use of similar stereotypes to navigate interactions with BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth.

### **Structural and Interpersonal Violence at School**

As BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth navigate distressing experiences in their communities, trauma becomes compounded by systems of oppression that impact them on school campuses. The U.S public school system is often viewed as impartial and built for the advancement of all. However, schools, as state institutions, are typically microcosms of dominant society, reproducing ideas of racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Dr. Bettina Love (2019) describes American education as being “anchored in White rage,” (Love, 2019, p. 22), resulting in what she describes as the educational survival complex, where schools are the primary vehicles through which children first learn to navigate marginalization and criminalization. While several laws and policies have been passed to level the educational playing field for marginalized communities, the colonial and capitalistic roots and legacy of the U.S. public education system continues to reveal itself in educational trajectories of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth. Issues of surveillance and gender-based violence, prevalent in greater society, do not stop at the school-house doors, but shadow youth throughout their educational careers. Moreover, these issues often lead to further trauma and victimization, as public schools rely on removal and collaboration with state agencies to institute a semblance of control and stability.

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### *Educator Implicit Bias*

When investigating excessive discipline and surveillance in schools, it is imperative to explore implicit bias. A Department of Justice study found that, nationally, Black and Latino individuals are three times more likely to be searched, arrested, or threatened by law enforcement than white individuals (Meiners, 2007). While research does not suggest that people of color are more likely to engage in criminal behavior than their white peers, the rate at which surveillance is targeted at communities of color gives rise to more people of color being caught for criminal behavior (Meiners, 2007). This system of surveillance and punishment works much the same way in schools. Consequently, Meiners (2007) contends that the work of racial profiling on school campuses is largely delegated to teachers, as teachers are generally the first point of contact in referrals for school discipline.

Ideally, teachers are unbiased facilitators of the classroom community. However, Meiners (2007) problematizes teachers' responsibility to dole out discipline due to the profession's historical context. Meiners (2007) contends that the historic goal of teaching has been to carry out class-based surveillance and the indoctrination of students with the state's ideologies. White women are ideal candidates to administer this task, as they are viewed as cheap, malleable, and unthreatening (Meiners, 2007). Meiners does not accuse every white, female teacher of intentionally criminalizing their students. However, she does argue that the historical roots of the profession and teachers' unconscious biases, a phenomenon in which social judgments operate without conscious awareness, play a role in excessive disciplining of students of color (Meiners, 2007; Tonnesen, 2003).

The modern education system continues to be dominated by white women. A 2005 Education Commission of the States study found that, nationally, 86 percent of teachers are

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white and 79 percent of teachers are female (Meiners, 2007). Moreover, 85 percent of teacher candidates in teacher education programs are white, middle- and upper-class women (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Raible and Irizarry (2010) further implicate teacher partiality in the excessive disciplining of youth of color by indicting teacher education programs in the perpetuation of bias among teachers. Raible and Irizarry (2010) argue teacher education programs do little to challenge problematic, racist, sexist, classist, or homophobic beliefs held by their largely white student bodies. Additionally, these programs often lack a critical view or interrogation of the dominant and oppressive societal norms imposed on students of color. Consequently, white female teachers receive training that reinforces gendered and racialized stereotypes, in which they can see themselves as the norm (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). This allows teachers to mark students who do not fit their standards as deviant and justify their fervid surveillance (Raible & Irizarry, 2010).

The inability or unwillingness to interrogate implicit bias allows educators to rely on stereotypes to navigate their interactions with marginalized youth. This frequently results in dependency on exclusionary disciplinary action when youth behave in ways that oppose teachers' often unconscious standards of conduct according to standards of white-cis-hetero patriarchy.

### *Controlling Images and Stereotypes*

In general, Black youth are typically characterized as less conforming than their peers, while Black girls, in particular, are characterized as loud, hypersexual, confrontational, and manipulative (Morris, 2016). Morris (2016) redefines these attributes as manifestations of resilience and resistance to mistreatment; however, educational spaces do not recognize these traits as such. Instead, when Black girls challenge authority and advocate for themselves, they

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are viewed by educators as wild, threatening, and more aggressive than their peers, marking them as unladylike according to the standards of white femininity, which favors docility and obedience (Blake et al., 2010). Additionally, Black girls are further victimized by adultification, in which they are obligated to assume responsibilities, such as caretaking and wage-earning, and are thus viewed as fully developed adults (Blake et al., 2017). As a result, their punishment is viewed as justified and more easily sustained.

Black girls are commonly treated as if they should behave more maturely than their peers, which results in them being given fewer opportunities to make childlike mistakes (Blake et al., 2017). They are perceived as requiring less protection from adults, who unforgivingly attempt to coerce their conformity to white feminine standards of behavior (Blake et al., 2017). While there is no evidence to show that Black girls are any more aggressive or oppositional than their peers, Morris (2016) contends that dissent is not categorized as an inherently negative trait in the Black community. However, the legacies of slavery and colonization will always delineate Black girls' defiance as a threat to white safety (Morris, 2016). These controlling images of girls of color are used by educators, consciously or subconsciously, to interpret their actions, thus impacting their response and the impulse to exert control (Blake et al., 2010; Collins, 2000). While statistics demonstrate that, in general, girls of color are over-policed on school campuses, it cannot be denied that compared to Latina, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American girls, Black girls face much harsher discipline in schools.

While other demographics of girls experience similar challenges, they are not subject to exclusionary discipline at the same rates as Black girls. Latinas are, similarly, compelled to assume adult-like responsibilities in their families, such as caretaking, in addition to sustaining emotional labor for boys and men in their communities (Hurtado et al., 2015). However,



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researchers differ on the controlling images associated with Latina students. McQueeney and Girgenti-Malone (2018) contend that Latinas are characterized as aggressive, uninterested in education, and hypersexual, and, similar to their Black counterparts, are subject to hyper-surveillance on school campuses and exclusionary discipline practices (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, 2014; McQueeney & Girgenti-Malone, 2018). Conversely, Hurtado et al. (2015) contend that Latinas are conditioned to negotiate with the repressive, prison-like conditions of public schooling by over-complying with authority. These images result in educators' perceptions of Latinas as troublemakers whose only ambition is to get pregnant, despite the fact that Latina students see themselves as proud, confident, and assertive (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, 2014). These stereotypes give educators license to disregard and criminalize Latina students.

Little is written about educators' perceptions of Native youth in general, let alone Native girls, despite the fact that they experience high levels of school push-out. The existing, though limited, research ties Native youth's characterization of deviant to settlers who labeled Native cultures as inherently flawed and in need of state intervention to fix them (Rolnick, 2016). Additionally, Native scholars describe Native women and girls as being stereotyped as exotic, wild, and "crazy," images which are also rooted in settler colonialism (Lajimodiere, 2013). The limited literature on Native youth and Native girls in school is evidence of their neglect and erasure.

Youth who identify as LGBTQ, particularly gender expansive youth, experience similar tropes as those applied to BIPOC girls, which impact their ability to thrive in school. LGBTQ youth are frequently labeled as deviant and their behavior is often policed in ways that their cis and/or heterosexual counterparts are not. LGBTQ youth, like BIPOC girls, are frequently punished for dress code violations. However, while BIPOC girls are often disciplined in an effort

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to police their sexuality, gender expansive youth are more likely to be punished for wearing clothes that are not deemed appropriate based on their sex assigned at birth in a conscious or unconscious effort to police non-normative sexual and gender expression (Palmer & Greytak, 2017; Palmer et al., 2016). Additionally, educators often determine displays of LGBTQ identity to be disruptive, policing the use of rainbow themed clothing and public displays of affection between students who are not cis and straight (Palmer & Greytak, 2017).

The ways in which stereotypes and controlling images color educators' interactions with BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth result in increased victimization of these youth on school campuses. As these youth are seen as abnormal, antagonistic to their peers and educators, and apathetic to their education, adults and students alike are given a free pass to victimize them. Meanwhile, these stereotypes simultaneously rob them of their access to victimhood and allow for the criminalization of any attempt to protect themselves, putting them in often impossible situations.

### *Victimization in Schools*

Implicit racial and gender bias in schools, perpetrated by both educators and students, produces spaces that are sites of unmitigated violence against, and disregard for, Black girls and gender expansive youth, in particular. On school campuses, Black girls are more likely to experience sexual harassment and abuse, while LGBTQ and gender expansive youth are more likely to experience physical and verbal harassment. Both groups are more often punished as aggressors than as victims in these incidents.

The sexual harassment of Black girls is typically more violent and more public, taking place in hallways or classrooms, than the harassment of other populations. These experiences have long lasting effects on school performance, peer acceptance, and self-confidence

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(Tonnesen, 2003). When Black girls attempt to protect themselves, verbally or physically, racialized implicit bias causes school staff to perceive them as aggressors and punish them, even though Title IX laws are supposed to protect all students from these interactions. Title IX requires schools to proactively ensure that their campuses are free of sexual discrimination, harassment, and violence, and have established procedures to manage violations; however, Tonnesen (2003) observes major problems in compliance and enforcement (Know Your IX, 2019). Any schools that receive federal funding must comply with Title IX regulations; schools that fail to do so are at risk of losing their federal funding, though to date, this sanction has never been applied (Tonnesen, 2003). Furthermore, studies show that schools with a strong law enforcement presence and reliance on zero tolerance policies are more likely to resort to their own exclusionary forms of discipline than to follow Title IX regulations when cases of sexual harassment arise (Tonnesen, 2003). Even though exclusionary zero tolerance practices fail to address sexual harassment's root causes, a school is considered to have fulfilled its Title IX responsibility to intervene in a substantiated sexual harassment claim by suspending a student without following a specific Title IX procedure (Tonnesen, 2003).

Title IX and zero tolerance discipline work in conjunction to criminalize youth of color, as Black and Latinx students are disproportionately suspended and expelled concerning claims of sexual harassment and abuse. In cases where boys are found culpable perpetrators of harassment or abuse, the impulse to utilize exclusionary discipline to manage the situation further criminalizes an already heavily surveilled and disciplined population. However, as implicit bias masculinizes and dehumanizes Black girls, violence against them is often condoned. School staff may even perceive Black girls as willing participants in the harassment or abuse, as able to mediate the abuse themselves, or even as perpetrators when they react to abuse. As a result,

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Black girls are either left unprotected against harassment and abuse or subject to exclusionary discipline themselves.

Similarly, gender expansive youth, and LGBTQ youth in general, are more likely to experience harassment and bullying from their peers and even school staff. A national study demonstrated that in 2011, 51 percent of LGBTQ youth had been verbally harassed and 17 percent had been physically assaulted at school, rates twice those of their non-LGBTQ peers (Human Rights Campaign, 2011 via Palmer & Greytak, 2017). The same study showed that 60 percent of youth had been bullied because of their gender expression (Greytak et al., 2016, via Palmer & Greytak, 2017). This is especially poignant as many gender expansive youth report school as the location of their first experience with physical violence (Toomey, Card, Russel, Ryan, & Diaz, 2010). Additionally, studies show that students are frequently barred from creating Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs and are prevented from using their preferred names or using appropriate restrooms and locker rooms by school staff (Palmer et al., 2016). Consistent victimization leads many students to retaliate against their harassers. When educators intervene, LGBTQ students are often blamed for their own maltreatment and punished for the altercation, while their perpetrator is not held accountable (Palmer & Greytak, 2017; Snapp et al., 2015). Consequently, LGBTQ youth are more likely to face isolation from their school community due to either avoiding unsafe school environments by skipping class or dropping out altogether, or to exclusionary discipline, as they are more likely to be referred to the principal's office, receive detention, and be suspended (Palmer & Greytak, 2017).

The unfortunate consequence is that Black girls and gender expansive youth are left with very few spaces that are safe from violence. While policies and practices such as Title IX and zero tolerance discipline policies purport to create safer schools, these youth rarely reap the

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benefits. As schools increase collaboration with the criminal justice system through zero tolerance policies and practices, implicit bias on the part of school staff and SROs further facilitates isolation, exclusion, and contact with the juvenile justice system among girls and gender expansive youth of color. Simultaneously, school staff's implicit bias also facilitates contact with the family regulation system, which further entrenches these youth in systems built to inhibit their success.

### ***School Collaboration with the Family Regulation System***

While BIPOC families experience a sense of being surveilled by mandated reporters in their daily interactions with those in helping professions, youth are similarly surveilled at school. School staff and educators are often left with too few tools to properly understand and address challenges that follow youth from home to school, such as poverty, homelessness, and food and job insecurity, and they frequently rely on mandated reporting as an intervention. Mandated reporting laws require that teachers engage surveillance and regulation of families and place educators in a “soft” extension of the carceral system (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). While school staff might make reports with best intentions, studies show that reports are often made through the lens of their implicit race and class biases, reporting low-income, Black and Indigenous families at higher rates than their white, middle- and upper-class counterparts (Hines et al., 2004; Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Consequently, the net of the carceral system widens as education continues to be a profession dominated by white women, and implicit bias continues to impact the ways in which teachers interpret “good” parenting.

### ***The Impact of Foster Care on Academic Achievement.***

Once families have experienced intervention from the family regulation system, regardless of what led to the imposition, they tend to experience more stress and trauma than

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harm reduction. This is especially true for BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth who experience the most challenges as a result of foster care placement. These barriers include mental health and development challenges which, in turn, impact their ability to relate to peers and adults and reach milestones schools expect of them. Consequently, these struggles lead to even more experiences with school discipline and increase the likelihood that youth will come into contact with the criminal justice system.

It cannot be denied that some youth who enter the foster care system do experience trauma due to abuse or neglect. However, the process of being removed from one's family and placed in a new setting, often with little control over the situation, is its own trauma, producing substantial impacts on young people's development (Bruskas, 2008). Experiences of adversity and maltreatment lead to toxic stress, which the Harvard Center on the Developing Child (2020) defines as "the strong, unrelieved activation of the body's stress management system in the absence of protective adult support." Consistent activation of the brain systems that respond to stress can lead to learning challenges, such as difficulty with communication, focus, memorization, and processing information, which can result in lower grades, higher retention rates (Day et al.; Romano et al., 2015). Additionally, toxic stress can lead to mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders, and a higher likelihood of engaging in so-called, delinquent behavior (Krinsky, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014; Wun, 2018). Child abuse research illustrates that children experiencing sexual abuse often exhibit other problematic behaviors, such as running away and school truancy (Saar et al., 2015). These factors are especially salient among BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, who suffer higher rates of depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and externalized behaviors as a result of trauma than boys (Toomey et al., 2010; Warner, 2017).

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Consequently, not only does exposure to trauma prevent children from keeping pace with their peers academically and fitting in socially, but it leads to exclusion from the school community.

Studies demonstrate that nurturing and stable relationships with adults is important to child development. These relationships assist in the development of self-concept, social skills and complex understandings of human relationships which will serve individuals from childhood into adulthood (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). However, children who grow up with turbulent, inconsistent or unpredictable home lives are more likely to develop behavior and mental health disorders, and struggle with their sense of agency, establishing personal boundaries, controlling their impulses, forming peer relationships and coping with stress (Baynes-Dunning & Worthington, 2013; Bruskas, 2008; Day et. al., 2015; Leve et al., 2007; Romano et al., 2015). BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care are more likely to experience these obstacles, as they are more likely to be placed in foster care and are more likely to experience housing placement disruptions.

A large part of the inherent trauma of foster care placement stems from the removal of stability from a young person's life. Black girls make up 35.6 percent of girls who experience 10 or more housing placement changes while in foster care (Patrick & Chaudhry, 2017). Changes in placement can occur for several reasons, ranging from behavior issues, mismatch in youth and caregiver characteristics, or unrealistic expectations (James, 2004). Changing placements can impact typical youth development by disrupting connections with peers and trusted adults, impacting a youth's sense of self, and imposing a fear of loss and separation (Boyle-Duke, 2015). LGBTQ youth in foster care, in general, experience challenges with housing permanency as they typically have a high number of placement changes, and are twice as likely to be placed in a group home (Mountz et al., 2020). Youth experience an average of six years in foster care,

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approximately seven placement changes, and about eight school changes prior to a group home placement (Sullivan et al., 2009).

Group homes are known to be unsafe, punitive settings where youth have increased access to drugs and alcohol and are less likely to maintain connections with their biological families (Ryan et al., 2008). Youth who reside in group homes are reported to have lower academic achievement due to limited access to academic support and to extracurricular activities, which support well-being, confidence, and school connectedness (Ryan et al., 2008). Additionally, youth who reside in group homes are more likely to be impacted by the juvenile justice system, as staff often relies on police to mediate issues arising in the home (Melendrez, 2021).

Placement changes among gender expansive youth typically occur due to hostility and ignorance about their gender expression from stakeholders such as social workers and caregivers (Mountz et al., 2020; Wilson & Kastanis, 2015). As such, they often experience misgendering<sup>5</sup>, dead naming<sup>6</sup>, and being forced to live in congregate living institutions that do not align with their gender (Mountz et al., 2020). Studies demonstrate that 78 percent of LGBTQ youth report that they were removed from or ran from their placement due to caregiver hostility, and 56 percent of LGBTQ youth in foster spend time on the street due to unsafe living conditions (Human Rights Campaign, 2011). Homelessness puts LGBTQ youth at increased risk of violence, such as sexual assault or robbery, and pushes many toward involvement in underground economies for survival, such as selling drugs, theft, or survival sex (Irvine & Canfield, 2016). Regardless of the reason for a placement disruption, placement instability can

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<sup>5</sup> Misgendering refers to the use of the wrong pronouns when mentioning an individual (Sherm, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Deadnaming refers to the use of a name that a transgender person no longer uses. It is typically the name given at birth (Sherm, 2021).



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be attributed to behavior challenges, insecurity, and overall negative feelings about foster care (Ryan et al., 2008).

Frequent home and school placement changes force youth to adapt to new communities, new house and school rules, new social environments, and new teachers. This instability affects not only development, but has also been found to delay permanency through adoption, guardianship, or reunification with the birth family (Casey Family Programs, 2018). An Illinois study of children in foster care found that children have a five percent chance of reunification with their families after the third change in home placement (Casey Family Programs, 2018). As foster care placement has such a high impact on youth's sense of self and ability to interact with peers and adults, it can be expected that these changes will also affect their academic experiences.

The trauma and instability associated with entering foster care have immense impacts on young people's ability to access education in the same ways as their peers. Youth in foster care often trail their peers in academic achievement and are often funneled into receiving special education services. Both factors frequently result in higher rates of school discipline.

Schools have the power to be a stabilizing force in young people's lives, as they provide youth with much-needed consistency and structure. This is especially salient for youth in foster care, who experience numerous transitions over which they have no control. Frequent changes in housing placement are often accompanied by school changes. Studies demonstrate that youth in foster care with unstable home placements will attend an average of 3.6 schools in two years, forcing them to adapt to new communities, homes, school rules, social environments, and teachers (Patrick & Chaudhry, 2017). Consequently, students who frequently change schools lose up to four to six months of academic progress with every move (Lahey, 2014). These

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disruptions result in a number of less-than-ideal academic outcomes such as high levels of grade retention and chronic truancy (Zetlin et al., 2004). Additionally, multiple school changes are often accompanied by low graduation and high dropout rates as a result of inconsistent graduation requirements across districts, delays in schools receiving transcripts, and even missing school credits (Sullivan et al., 2009).

Given all the potential developmental challenges facing youth in foster care, and the lack of supplemental educational support in general education, youth in foster care are simultaneously over- and under- identified for special education services (Zetlin, 2006). Studies show that between 40 and 47 percent of youth in foster care receive special education services (Greenen & Powers, 2006). While some youth need extra support and services in school, historically, special education has also been used to segregate youth of color to self-contained classrooms or specialized schools (Annamma et al., 2013; Greenen & Powers, 2006). As a result, youth in foster care are often stigmatized with diagnoses like emotional disturbance or behavior disorders, which are highly subjective labels most frequently given to youth who are deemed in some way non-normative (Annamma et al., 2013; Zetlin, 2006). When youth require special education services, there is often oversight regarding youth's progress, whether they are being placed in the correct classes or whether they are receiving appropriate services at all (Zetlin, 2006).

There is an intersection of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth placed in special education, and labeled as disabled in some way, and who are in foster care. Both classifications come loaded with their own stereotypes. In literature that centers youth in foster care, it is common to come across characterizations of this population as attention-seeking, aggressive, demanding, and anxious (Zetlin et al., 2004). Much of the literature identifies these characterizations as stemming from externalized behaviors due to experiencing trauma and

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instability. However, a great deal of this literature uses these labels with little contextualization as to why youth may exhibit these traits. Youth placed in special education are typically characterized as deviant, unintelligent, and pathologically abnormal (Annamma et al., 2013). This is especially true of BIPOC youth, for whom the intersection of race and ability is highly stigmatizing (Annamma et al., 2013). Youth, particularly Black youth, who exist at the intersections of these labels experience higher levels of exclusionary discipline for exhibiting behavior outside the strict standards of conduct established by school sites, informed by standards of white, dominant society (Erevelles, 2014). These youth are perceived as intentionally acting out; their behavior is not understood in the context of neurodiversity and the structural barriers acting on them (Erevelles, 2014). As such, they are seen as requiring punishment to force conformity.

### *Discipline to Detention.*

Schools have the power to provide youth with much needed security and community. However, because schools are steeped in systems of oppression, educators often project deficit thinking, informed by their own biases, onto their students, causing them to blame students and their families for poor performance or criminalize students for age-appropriate boundary pushing (Melendrez, 2021; Yosso, 2005). As we have seen, stereotypes, controlling images, and interpersonal and systemic violence make BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth and their families targets for surveillance by the criminal justice and family regulation systems. Once involved in these systems, they become hyper visible to educators as potential threats to the campus climate. By extension, these youth experience higher rates of exclusionary, zero tolerance discipline in schools in an effort to remove undesirable students and behavior from the school community. This, in turn, facilitates involvement in the juvenile justice system.

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BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are most commonly disciplined in schools for nonviolent, subjective offenses that educators find disruptive to the learning environment, such as defiance, profanity, and dress code violations (Wun, 2014). Regulating students in this way is intrinsically tied to systems of oppression, which allows educators to utilize punishment as a means of forcing conformity to dominant society's standards of respectability, including norms dictated by white femininity and/or the gender binary. As a result, Black and brown students lose up to 65 and 45 days, respectively, of instructional time due to exclusionary discipline over so-called disruptive behavior (Losen & Whitaker, 2017). With increasing reliance on zero tolerance disciplinary measures, surveillance mechanisms, and school police officers to maintain a semblance of control over marginalized students, comes an increase in on-campus arrests for incidents that could often be dealt with by school staff. This is especially true, and frequently overlooked, for Black girls. In New York City, Black girls are 53 times more likely to be expelled than white girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015). While Black girls represented 15 percent of girls enrolled in school nationally, they constituted 37 percent of girls arrested at school in the 2013-2014 school year (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). Latinas represented 25 percent of girls enrolled in school, but 24 percent of girls arrested at school, while Asian Pacific Islander and Native Americans collectively represented less than two percent of girls enrolled in school and arrest rates were more than double their population size (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). As a result, BIPOC girls are confined at alarming rates: Native American girls are sent to residential placements at a rate of 179, Black girls at a rate of 123, and Latinas at a rate of 47 per 100,000, respectively, compared to white girls who are confined at a rate of 37 per 100,000 (Saar et al., 2015). Involvement in the juvenile justice system is even more prevalent among girls who have been in foster care, as one study of youth in juvenile detention found that 33-50 percent of

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detained girls had previous involvement in the family regulation system, compared with 20-25 percent of boys (Irvine & Canfield, 2016). While statistics demonstrate that BIPOC girls overall are over-policed, it cannot be denied that compared to Latina, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American girls, Black girls face much harsher discipline in and out of schools.

Gender expansive youth, and LGBTQ youth in general, also experience high rates of on-campus criminalization. LGBTQ youth are two times more likely than their cis and/or heterosexual counterparts to be subject to suspension, and nine times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system (Poteat et al., 2016). Meanwhile, girls who present as gender non-conforming are three times as likely to experience exclusionary discipline than their gender conforming peers (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). Additionally, 2.2 percent of LGBTQ students report that school discipline directly resulted in their involvement in the juvenile justice system (Mountz et al., 2020). The situation is even more dire for transgender youth, 45.2 percent of whom report experiencing at least once incident of exclusionary discipline and 3.5 percent report involvement in the juvenile justice system as a result (Mountz et al., 2020). Furthermore, while trans youth constitute only seven percent of the nation's youth population, they make up 15 percent of incarcerated youth (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). Moreover, studies of youth in juvenile detention show that 15 percent of incarcerated youth identify as LGBT, including gender expansive, and 85 percent of those youth also identify as BIPOC (Irvine & Canfield, 2016).

Experiences of excessive exclusionary discipline and on-campus arrest breed resentment and mistrust among youth, especially those who already have limited access to supportive adults (Advancement Project, 2018). Arrests on campus have implications for students' education outcomes, as an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) study indicates that students who have

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been arrested at school are nine times more likely to drop out than their peers (Advancement Project, 2018). Regardless of whether youth respond to forced obedience from school staff with compliance or resistance, statistics demonstrate that they are still at risk for school exclusion as their positionality places them at odds with the education system, which attempts to erase their existence. As educators' controlling images and perceptions of these students as troubled, hostile, and careless cause them to be more harshly judged and punished, they tend to experience more exclusionary, zero tolerance discipline in schools, and increased contact with the family regulation and juvenile justice systems. Whereas schools are meant to be safe spaces for all youth, many fail to meet the basic needs of these students, much less to address root causes of their criminalization. In turn, students are made to feel unwelcome and are even actively discouraged from pursuing their education by school staff (Simkins et al., 2004). These youth often encounter further behavioral and academic challenges while in detention, which has lasting impacts on future life outcomes.

### **Life on Lockdown**

Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2013) contend that the juvenile justice system should be understood as a mechanism to enforce youth obedience to socially prescribed gender roles. Consequently, in attempting to exert control over girls and gender expansive youth, detention facilities systematically re-traumatize an already highly vulnerable population. These youth typically have few resources available to them to cope with these experiences.

While in detention, girls are likely to encounter violence, as girls' detention facilities routinely use mechanical restraints, strip searches in the presence of male guards, and isolation to punish and control their occupants (U.S Department of Justice, 2006). Additionally, girls are

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three times more likely to experience sexual abuse and harassment at the hands of staff while in detention than their male counterparts (U.S Department of Justice, 2006). These experiences have severe consequences on the mental health and life outcomes of girls. Despite the fact that studies illustrate that girls who receive mental health services in detention are 37 percent less likely to re-offend, they rarely receive mental health screenings; when they do, treatment is often inadequate (Saar et al., 2015).

Prior to being housed in detention facilities, LGBTQ youth are more likely to be held in pre-trial detention than their peers, based on the assumption that they are predatory (Dank, Yu, Yahner, Pelletier, Mora, & Conner, 2015). Once in detention, trans youth report being housed in facilities that do not correspond with their gender identity, and even being placed in isolation from their peers, supposedly for their protection (Dank et al., 2015). LGTBQ youth also report higher rates of sexual assault and harassment, inappropriate medical care, and exposure to conversion therapy, intended to change their sexuality or gender identity (Dank et al., 2015). As training is limited for stakeholders with respect to the needs of LGBTQ youth, juvenile justice workers are often ill equipped to address this population's needs, particularly for gender expansive youth and LGBTQ youth involved in survival sex. This impacts youth's ability to access appropriate resources to cope with their past experiences and prepare for their futures (Dank et al., 2015). Davis and Shaylor (2001) suggest that the conditions of detention inflict both physical and psychological violence on incarcerated individuals, particularly girls and women, as a means of punishment and control through physical violence, isolation, and severing of familial and community ties. Common reactions and coping mechanisms in response to trauma are often judged as problematic and heavily criminalized; thus, the conditions in detention often trap youth

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in a cycle of victimization, arrest, and detention (Saar et al, 2015). These challenges are further aggravated when attempting to transition to traditional school settings.

The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice (2014) recently released a report of guiding principles for providing high-quality education to youth in juvenile detention, including safe learning and inclusive learning environments, appropriate funding, qualified teachers, rigorous curricula, and a process for re-entry to community schools. However, due to a lack of consistency and accountability, detained youth experience very poor education in detention facilities. Depending on the facility, education can be the responsibility of a state juvenile justice agency, a state education agency, local education agency, or different public or private providers (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). As such, educational programs in detention have little parity with the quality and variety of services provided in traditional schools, and little accountability to maintain high standards. Only 13 states provide detained youth with access to a quality of educational services on par with those offered in their community, such as credit recovery programs and college-level courses (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2015). Additionally, most states do not collect education outcome data for youth in detention facilities, meaning that they are not using data on graduation rates, credits earned, or academic assessments to hold facility schools accountable for academic achievement or improvement (CSG Justice Center, 2015). These factors produce even more obstacles to academic success after a youth's release from detention as a U.S. Department of Education study discovered that 42 percent of incarcerated youth who received remedial education services did not return to school after being released (Morris, 2016).

While youth detention facilities have the responsibility to rehabilitate young people so that they may return to their communities and thrive, existing research demonstrates that these



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facilities only create new challenges for youth who already face numerous barriers. Past research indicates that the prevalence of violence in juvenile detention and lack of mental health resources re-traumatizes youth and does little to prepare them for a life outside detention. Additionally, juvenile court schools, with poor curricula and organization, do not repair the already problematic relationships that many youth in detention have with schooling. These obstacles trap the most vulnerable youth in a cycle of detention and abuse that often leads to adult incarceration.

### **Conclusion**

While education is supposed to provide a level playing field for marginalized communities, the colonial and capitalistic legacy of the U.S. public education system continues to reveal itself in the trajectories of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth. Interpersonal and structural violence, informed by racism, classism, and sexism, are prevalent in society and do not stop at the schoolhouse doors. Educators' implicit bias, informed by controlling images, causes them to perceive BIPOC gender minority youth as aggressive and defiant, making them vulnerable to excessive exclusionary discipline. Under-resourced schools rely heavily on collaboration with state agencies to institute a semblance of control and stability, which reinforces perceptions of criminality and provides schools with the means to remove students from the school community. Girls and gender expansive youth of color, especially those in foster care, often become stuck in a cycle of detention, impeding their ability to develop into self-sufficient adults outside of these systems of control and dependence.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

My research topic and methodology are framed by resistance theory and the umbrella of critical race theory, and its many branches, including critical race feminism, disability critical race theory (DisCrit), and Latino critical race theory (LatCrit). These theories inform my exploration of the educational experiences of youth in foster care and provide a lens through which I analyze my data.

Critical race theory (CRT) began with the work of progressive legal scholars, Bell and Freeman, to account for the role that racism plays in the American legal system (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Solorzano, 1998). Critical race theory has five themes that inform its perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy, including: 1) centering race and racism; 2) embodying and affirming a commitment to social justice; 3) challenging the dominant narrative; 4) centering experiential knowledge; and 5) operating from a transdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano, 1998). In education, CRT serves as a critique of the structural and interpersonal features of schooling that oppress students of color (Solorzano, 1998). Early education CRT scholars, Ladson and Tate (1995), argue that Black and Latino students, in particular, are subject to institutional and structural racism that places them in substandard and segregated schools, resulting in poor academic performance and push-out. Critical race theory in education provides a framework for understanding the ways that various systems of oppression manifest in schools.

Many subfields have branched out from CRT to speak to the experiences of specific communities. As youth in foster care are a highly intersectional population, three sub-fields -- disability critical race theory (DisCrit), critical race feminism (CRF), and Latino critical race

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theory (LatCrit), are necessary to understand how race and other marginalized identities converge to impact educational experiences.

Disability critical race scholar Annamma (2013; 2019) and her colleagues argue that educators' beliefs about race and ability, and consequent labeling, surveillance, and punishment of marginalized students, are informed by legacies of slavery, colonization, and white supremacy. As a result, ethnically, racially, and linguistically marginalized students are disproportionately placed in special education with highly subjective diagnoses, such as emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, or behavior disorders (Annama et al., 2013). These students are more likely to be relegated to segregated classrooms and overrepresented in exclusionary discipline and the juvenile justice system (Annama, 2019). To challenge disabled stereotypes, Annamma et al. (2013) advocate for interrogating intersections of race and ability and the binaries of normal/abnormal and abled/disabled. Finally, DisCrit calls for solidarity with student resistance, recognizing resistant behaviors as strengths rather than deficits. This framework provides a critical means of understanding how racism and ableism manifest for youth in foster care and the ways in which community experts choose to push back against mistreatment in schools (Annama, 2019).

Latinx critical race (LatCrit) theory in education and critical race feminism (CFR) provide anti-subordination and anti-essentialist frameworks, which make space for racial perspectives in feminist discourse (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Wing, 2003). Latinx critical race theory relies heavily on counter-storytelling to challenge dominant society's stereotypes of Latinx students, primarily women (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Critical race feminism rejects the mainstream feminist assumption that white women's experiences represent a baseline of all women's experiences, and draws on Black feminist tradition to interrogate intersections of

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patriarchy and white supremacy in Black women's oppression (Wing, 2003). In my research, LatCrit and CRF provide frameworks for interrogating racism and sexism in educational spaces and give value to explicit and subtle ways that women resist and reclaim their power (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

These theories are significant to my research as the umbrella of CRT provides a means of understanding ways that BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care experience schooling. CRT also offers a lens through which to analyze stories shared by community experts. Critical race feminism implores researchers to move beyond deficit-oriented research, to celebrate Black girls' resistance and resilience, to see their complex identities holistically, and to understand the ways that structural oppression influences their behavior without sacrificing their agency (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Additionally, youth resistance theory and DisCrit urge scholars and educators to reframe perceptions of why student behaviors transpire and how we respond to them (Annamma, 2019; Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2014). My research seeks to challenge controlling images and stereotypes imposed on BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth that leads to their criminalization in schools by attempting to understand the reasons and ways in which BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth resist marginalization. Employing these frameworks, I intend to reframe resistant behavior as acts of strength and resilience, and reexamine traditionally stigmatized behaviors as natural responses to oppressive education systems.

### **Epistemological Framework**

The epistemological assumptions underlying this study are rooted in Black, Indigenous, and Chicana feminist epistemology and ethnographic research methods, all with the goal of confronting the epistemic oppression inherent in education research and learning spaces. These

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approaches provide a theoretical foundation for the ways in which community experts' voices and contributions are situated in the study and inform my methodology.

Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) contends that Western research is primarily concerned with classifying and categorizing societies and communities, to judge them against the norms of Western culture. Moreover, Chicana scholars Saavedra and Nymark (2014) contend that borderland mestizaje feminism (BMF), as an epistemology, sees Western research as a tool to validate and reinforce colonial practices, such as surveillance and policing. They implore researchers to de-center Western modes of understanding the world by theorizing from the bottom, from places deemed untraditional by academia, including the lived experiences of Black and brown individuals (Saavedra & Nymark, 2014). In practice, Chicana and Black feminist epistemologies encourage scholars to resist the devaluation and erasure of women's experiences in the construction of knowledge in academic spaces (Bernal, 1998; Collins, 2000). Both epistemologies require us to build theory from the everyday experiences of Black and brown women, who are specialists and agents of knowledge, capable of creating new means of self-definition (Bernal, 1998; Collins, 2000). Ethnographic research, on the other hand, involves the immersion of a researcher into the social world of the individuals from whom they are learning, participating in daily routines and developing ongoing relationships in order to make a written account of their observations (Emerson et al., 1995). Ethnographic research requires the researcher to cross boundaries of traditional research by engaging and participating in the lives and concerns of those being observed with the goal of unveiling what they understand to be meaningful and important (Emerson et al., 1995). Ethnographic research requires academics to expose themselves to the social situations of the community experts in question, rather than watching objectively from afar (Emerson et al., 1995).

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These theories impacted the methodological choices I made in carrying out my research. Youth, in general, and youth in foster care, specifically, are considered vulnerable populations in academic research and their participation in a research study requires the approval of various stakeholders, including a judge. Conducting interviews with individuals under the age of 18, while ideal given the proximity to their time in secondary school, would have required an unrealistic amount of time and energy. Given the constraints, I chose to only interview individuals, currently or formerly in foster care, over the age of 18. However, working at a school district, exclusively with youth in foster care, afforded me the opportunity to position myself as an ethnographic researcher and to conduct field observations. In my position at the district, I was responsible for advocating for youth's educational needs among student stakeholders such as school staff, caregivers, and social workers, as well as facilitating support groups for youth in foster care. This allowed me to experience life events alongside youth and involve myself in their lives. I shared the excitement and joy of new relationships, A's on report cards, and sports victories. I shared their anger and outrage at being treated unfairly and their disappointment and frustration after fights with teachers and peers. Most importantly, I occupied the unique position to step in on their behalf when they needed the support of an adult.

My methodological choice to include expert interviews is informed by Black feminist epistemologies, which urge scholars to build theory from the lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 2000). While field observations provided me with indispensable data, my interpretation of the incidents I observed is filtered through my perspective and colored by my past experiences of privilege and oppression. In gathering the testimonies of community experts, I was able to develop conclusions directly from their narratives and use their stories as evidence of their validity. Drawing on Chicana feminist epistemology (CFE), I chose to position the individual

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being interviewed as the expert and include them in the analytical process (Saavedra & Nymark, 2014). Guided by Bernal's (1998) concept of cultural intuition, I invited experts to act as co-researchers and key producers of knowledge through various cycles of member checking. In this process, experts had the ability to read through transcripts of their interviews to redact, clarify, and/or add information, and to give feedback on key steps of finding development.

The combination of field observations of youth and interviews with adults ultimately allowed for a more thorough and intergenerational understanding of the educational experiences of individuals in foster care. While observations allowed me to gain insight into the lives of youth who are navigating and confronting oppressive systems in the present, observations often lack the nuance and reflection that interviews allow. Conversely, the depth of adult experts' narratives relies on the amount of information the expert is willing to divulge and their memories are filtered through time and experiences they have had between their adolescence and the present. The methods that I wove together present a more comprehensive peek into the lives of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care than currently exists in academic literature.

I chose to root my research in these frameworks with the intention of confronting epistemic oppression inherent in education research and practice, which is informed by racism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ableism, and classism, and denies marginalized individuals the ability to testify to experiences of harm (Teichman & Dotson, 2016). The erasure of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in school-to-prison pipeline research, despite high rates of school discipline, and juvenile justice involvement, leads us to believe that they do not experience a comparable level of marginalization as their male or white counterparts. Epistemic oppression allows for the creation of false understandings of the educational landscape for these

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communities, in which, despite these facts, girls are seen as needing less support than boys. As such, BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are denied the ability to speak about their experiences, let alone be the experts on them (Teichman & Dotson, 2016).

### **Positionality Statement**

Before I present my findings, I am going to situate myself and the context in which I came to this work. I have been working with youth in foster care since 2013, in various capacities. One of the most challenging experiences was the role of Foster Youth Liaison for a school district in Pasadena. In 2013, the California governor signed into law a new funding formula, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which dictated that California school districts develop a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to prioritize the success of certain minoritized student populations, including youth in foster care. Requirements included hiring a foster youth liaison in each school district. In this role, I did everything under the sun regarding youth in foster care. One day I would be coordinating trainings for district staff on trauma informed practices specific to this population; the next, I would be following a third grader who refused to go to class and kept finding ways to get onto the roof of his school. In many ways, this work was immensely rewarding; in others, it was incredibly draining. I enjoyed building relationships with young people and seeing them thrive, but the constant systems of oppression, which manifested in interpersonal and systemic levels, became too much to bear. For better or worse, these experiences ultimately led me to this research project.

Most of my career and academic work centers youth in foster care, but I have never been involved in the system myself. In fact, being a person of many privileges (ie: cis, class, race, citizenship, and ability privilege), it would be easy to ignore injustices around me. However,



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learned values and past experiences put me on a path to working with systems-impacted youth and to approach this work with a radical, social justice lens.

My family history is heavily marked by migration, struggle, and resilience. My paternal grandparents, Mary Louise Woods and Antipatro Ocasio, navigated Operation Bootstrap<sup>7</sup>, the Great Migration<sup>8</sup>, and northern anti-Black racism while living in Chicago. My maternal grandmother Ofelia Palos, navigated Operation Wetback<sup>9</sup>, the Bracero program<sup>10</sup>, and raised nine immigrant children alone in San Diego. Despite having little formal education, Ofelia fought for bilingual education at a time when her children were being corporally punished in school for speaking Spanish. The generational trauma and resilience born out of traversing interpersonal and systemic racism and finding a way to thrive despite it, has had profound impacts on the way I maneuver the world. As a non-Black presenting bi-racial person, I believe I have a duty to be an accomplice to Black people in dismantling anti-Blackness and a duty to be in solidarity with oppressed people in my community and around the world. My family ingrained these values in me as a child and my community gave me the tools to act on them.

I cut my teeth organizing as a student at UC Irvine (UCI) with Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlán (M.E.Ch.A). Through the informal education I received in M.E.Ch.A, I became more aware of injustices around me and involved myself in youth programs in

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<sup>7</sup> A series of government sponsored programs, launched from the 1940s-50s, to industrialize the Puerto Rican economy by creating U.S. company jobs. This encouraged many Puerto Ricans to migrate to the mainland U.S. for employment in various industries (Gibson, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> The migration of more than six million Black Americans from the rural south to northern cities from 1916 to 1970 in search of economic opportunities and freedom from Jim Crow (Wilkerson, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Initiated in 1955, Operation Wetback designated the deportation and repatriation of as many as 1.3 million Mexicans from the United States (Blakemore, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> A bilateral agreement between Mexico and the U.S., signed in 1942, used Mexican agricultural labor on American farms to mediate an expected labor shortage due to World War II (Bracero History Archive, 2021).

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neighboring communities. Upon leaving UCI, I continued to put work into my community, becoming part of various organizing collectives and community spaces in east and northeast Los Angeles rooted in Zapatista<sup>11</sup> and indigenous anarchist principles. These spaces and experiences taught me the value of restorative justice, all forms of resistance, and, above all, community autonomy. My formative years at UCI also piqued my interest in working with youth, and after college I fell into working with youth in foster care by chance. Before long, I became passionate about advocating for my students' educational needs. I came to find that despite the immense challenges facing these students and the subsequent resilience they demonstrate, their experiences remain invisible, both in mainstream and social justice education spaces. As I transitioned to graduate studies, using my platform to share my students' stories, with the goal of illuminating their struggles, ingenuity, and strength, seemed like an important use of my privileged position.

Despite my good intentions, having never been in foster care limits my ability to relate to individuals with lived experience and can present barriers to trust. This reality forces me to constantly reflect on my positionality, the biases I carry with me, and the privilege I bring to this work. Coming from a mixed race and ethnicity family required me to navigate relationships with people from backgrounds and experiences different from my own. My history with community organizing instilled in me a commitment to collective liberation. In my time as a graduate student, Black feminist theory and decolonial research encouraged me to be unapologetic in discussions of race, sex, gender, ability, and class, and to value counter-storytelling, experiential knowledge, and autonomy (Collins, 1997; Smith, 2010). This work gave me models to conduct

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<sup>11</sup> The Zapatista movement is an indigenous movement for land rights, justice, and democracy in Chiapas, Mexico. This movement has influenced activist movements all over the world to fight for self-determination (Klein, 2019).

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research using collaborative processes that can disrupt the dominant narrative of marginalized communities, amplify the voices of those who are tokenized or absent from academia, and use this work as a tool for material change. The ideological foundations built by my family history, and experiences in work, community organizing, and academia I brought to this work push me to develop meaningful research and grow as an accomplice to systems-impacted individuals in the disruption of systems that continue to oppress them, and in the creation of resources to support future youth in foster care.

## **Chapter 4: Research Design**

My research seeks accountability to BIPOC, female and gender expansive individuals, with the intention of centralizing their experiences and voices, and giving them agency over their stories and the theories and conclusions drawn from them. As an aspiring decolonial, feminist researcher, I utilized grounded theory methods to conduct emergent qualitative research through an ethnographic and Chicana feminist epistemological lens. I conducted field observations with youth in foster care and semi-structured and trauma-informed interviews with adults who are currently or formerly in foster care. I conducted this study with the intention of providing a space for community experts to share their unique identities and experiences, and to problematize existing controlling images.

### **Population and Sampling**

This study was conducted in two parts, over many years of work. The first phase of this study consisted of field observations, conducted with youth ages 12 to 20, in a Los Angeles County school district. The second phase consisted of interviews conducted with nine individuals over the age of 18, with experience in the foster care system during secondary school, between sixth and twelfth grade. Only individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color, and as female or non-binary were included in the study. White and male current or former foster youth, and individuals who have never been in foster care, were excluded. A purposive sample was developed, as this is a very specific and often difficult to reach population. Community experts were recruited by reaching out to a) previous students, b) foster youth student support organizations at community colleges and universities across California, c) foster youth advocacy organizations, and d) snowball sampling to reach networks of community experts. Due to the

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pandemic, interviews were conducted over Zoom. As such, there were no geographic restrictions for participation.

### **Procedures**

#### ***Field Observation Procedures.***

As a foster youth liaison for a small school district with a significant number of youth in foster care, I interacted daily with youth and their stakeholders. I took notes of significant incidents, describing in detail the individuals involved, the context leading to the incident, and the events that occurred. I then noted my interpretation of the incident, including why I thought the events occurred, literature that I connected to the incidents, and the personal feelings that came up for me during the incident.

#### ***Interview Procedure.***

Considering the tenets of critical race theory, my interviews center the experiential knowledge of my research community experts. The purpose of the interview is to allow community experts to share their stories, essentially sharing a piece of themselves. In line with trauma-informed interviewing methods, the instrument consists of a pre-talk, a short activity, eight open-ended interview questions, and a post-talk. Upon developing the instrument, I piloted it with two community experts and asked for feedback and recommendations. Once I incorporated their suggestions into my research instrument, I proceeded to interview the remaining seven experts. After transcribing and doing initial data review, I decided to reach out to all of the experts for follow-up and clarification, based on their responses to the interview. Only three of the nine community experts were available for follow-up interviews.

**Pre-Talk.** Prior to the interview, I conducted a pre-talk to orient the community experts to the purpose of the study and prepare them for the interview. First, I shared my position as an

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outsider to the foster care community, despite having worked with this population for seven years. I also shared my personal motivations for conducting the research: to utilize my privileged position to increase scholarship on youth in foster care from the perspective of individuals in the community. Then, as I am primarily concerned with community experts' well-being and agency over their stories, I provided a warning for possible triggers during the interview, invited community experts to review the interview questions, ask any questions prior to the interview, and sign the appropriate documents for consent.

**Interview.** The interview process consisted of two steps. First, I asked community experts to complete an identity chart, wherein they reflected on key aspects of their identity that they present to the world and how they believe they were perceived by K-12 educators. They were given the option to complete this activity in writing, such as a stream of consciousness narrative or poetry, or with a drawing. The purpose of the activity was to get community experts in the mindset to share anecdotes from that period of their lives. Then, I asked community experts eight open-ended questions, which were directly related to my research questions. I asked the following:

1. What was your overall experience of school?
2. What was your relationship like with teachers and school staff?
  1. Teachers that you liked, and why?
  2. Teachers that you didn't like, and why?
3. Did you ever feel like you needed to resist or confront educators about how they were treating you?
  1. or advocate for yourself to get the support you needed?

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4. Did you experience exclusionary disciplinary action (ie: suspension, expulsion) in middle or high school? What events lead up to the action?
  1. What kind of messages did the incident send you about how you were expected to be or behave?
5. What would you have wanted teachers to know about you and your experiences?
6. What could you share with me now that would have helped past teachers to support you to not only survive, but thrive in school?
7. How do you think your gender identity impacted your experience
  1. In school?
  2. In foster care?
8. Tell me about yourself as a teenager outside of the context of foster care. Who were you? What do you like to do with your spare time?

As the literature on BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster is very limited, the identity chart and interview questions are important to illustrate a holistic view of the community experts, beyond the controlling images often used to describe them.

**Post-Talk.** At the end of the interview, once recording equipment had been turned off, I then conducted a post-talk. This provided the opportunity for closure, to address any concerns with the interview, and to provide resources to the community experts if the interview triggered unpleasant emotions. Lastly, during this time, I asked community experts if there was anything that they would like me to omit from the interview and I informed them I planned to ask for their cooperation in member-checking the data and analysis.

## Chapter 5: Findings

The minimal research relating to girls and gender expansive youth, in general, indicates that these youth are highly criminalized on school campuses and that youth in foster care experience even higher levels of stigmatization and punishment. Most of the limited research focuses on experiences of youth who are conventionally academically successful (ie: high achieving, college-bound) or on the negative life outcomes associated with school discipline (ie: homelessness, unemployment, etc.). Missing from this literature are the nuanced stories that complicate both narratives, directly from the mouths of those who have lived them. Throughout my data collection process, to reconcile this gap, it was my goal to understand how BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care demonstrate resilience in the face of academic barriers, attempts to police their behavior, and experiences with school discipline. In addition, I wanted to better understand how these factors impacted their perception of themselves, and their goals and messages they had for their past educators. With the subsequent findings, it is my intention that this work disrupts the stereotypes that criminalize these populations, and interrogate the institutions that contribute to their oppression.

In the following section, I will introduce the community experts involved in this study, using pseudonyms, to refer to each expert to maintain their confidentiality. I will then discuss my process for analyzing the data I derived from field observations and interviews. Lastly, I will discuss my conclusions, wherein I use coding families to thread together the commonalities in each narrative through expert quotes and anecdotes. However, the way that I present the ethnographic data, derived from field observations, is relatively unconventional, and therefore requires additional clarification. From the ethnographic data, I produced a story in the form of a thematic narrative, weaving together pieces of my field notes with text to depict and contextualize the world in which experts are living (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In this way,



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my fieldnote data is used somewhat unconventionally. Rather than using data to corroborate predetermined assumptions, thematic narratives utilize fieldnotes as essential ingredients to tell the story to begin with (Emerson et al., 1995). While prominent ethnographers encourage researchers to use multiple voices in one story, I opted to focus on specific incidents revolving around one expert at a time. As BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are accustomed to having to share the spotlight with others, I feel that it is important to give each story the space and energy it deserves.

### **Participant Profiles**

The community experts whose inform this research include twelve individuals. Of these individuals, experts include nine cisgender women and girls, two transgender women and girls, and one non-binary individual. Four of the experts identify as Black or African-American, five as Latino or Hispanic, one as Asian, one as American Indian and one as multi-racial. Their ages ranged from 13 to 50, and all had an open case with child welfare during secondary school. Of the adult experts, all had some experience with post- secondary education, ranging from four year university to community college, to graduate school.

Of the numerous youth I was able to observe in my field work, I focus on the narratives of three students: 1) Hannah, a trans Latina, who was a sixteen-year-old sophomore in high school at the time I conducted my observations; 2) Briana, a thirteen-year-old Black girl in eighth grade; and 3) María, a thirteen-year-old Latina, also in eighth grade. Unfortunately, without having the ability to interview these youth, I was unable to determine how long they had been in foster care or at what age they entered the system. The remaining nine experts participated in the interview process: 1) Monet, a 54-year-old Black woman, who entered foster care at 13 years old and holds a Master's degree; 2) Nadine, a Black woman in her late 40's, who

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entered foster care at 13 years old and has obtained a Bachelor's degree; 3) Ivonne, a 36-year-old Black woman, who entered foster care the summer before her sophomore year of high school and holds a Master's degree; 4) Marissa, a 21-year-old Latina who entered foster care at 13 years and has completed some college; 5) DS, a 32-year-old Latina, who entered foster care around the age of eight and is currently working towards her Bachelor's degree in communication; 6) Chrissy, a 33-year-old Latina who entered foster care at three years old and has completed some college; 7) CQ, a trans Latina, who entered foster care in high school and is working toward completing her Bachelor's degree; 8) Ellie, a 20-year-old, queer Latina, who entered foster care at five years old, and was placed in legal guardianship with her grandparents. Ellie is currently working toward her Bachelor's degree; 9) Claudia is a 20-year-old, non-binary Latine person who entered foster care at 16 years old and has completed some college.

### **Data Analysis**

After completing interviews and field notes, I analyzed the data in several steps, drawing from Saldana (2011; 2013) and Erickson (1986) to develop a coding process that would fit my specific needs and work style. This process included:

#### ***Transcript Member-Checking***

In this step, I shared the interview transcripts with the respective community experts, allowing them to edit out responses they do not wish to share with the public, thereby allowing them to have agency over their own stories.

#### ***Pre-Coding***

Once the transcripts were finalized, I identified notable sections in the transcripts and field notes to be analyzed later, and reflected on why each highlighted section felt important.

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### *In Vivo Coding*

In this step, I identified scanned the field notes and transcripts for phrases and notes that appeared significant. These codes were then combined into similar categories.

### *Developing Low-Level Inferences*

From the categories that evolved in the in vivo coding process, I developed low-level inferences, which summarized what is happening in the data.

### *Low-Level Inference Member-Checking*

Before developing my final assertions, I wanted to make sure I was on the right track. Thus, I paused to member-check my low-level inferences with the community experts. I disseminated a Google form, outlining each inference and asking whether it resonated with the experts and requesting feedback. This step could only be carried out with the nine experts who were interviewed. Out of the nine, four participated in this round of the member-checking process, providing thoughtful feedback that reflected upon the relevance of these inferences to their life experiences.

### *Elaborative Coding*

In this step, I began to link the data to my theoretical framework and identified how my initial concepts relate to the literature by analyzing the data through a critical race theory lens.

### *Focused Coding*

In this process, I began to narrow in on the thematic similarities evolving and re-coded my data set to begin developing a story.

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### *High-Level Inferences and Key Finding Development*

In this stage, I began to theorize what the concepts mean, creating linkages and further developing a storyline from the data. I then reorganized my inferences into key assertions, and sub-assertions.

### *Final-Member Checking*

In my final round of member-checking, I once again reached out to the community experts, asking them to reflect on the relevance of key assertions that emerged from the data they provided. Only two of the nine experts participated in this activity.

At the end of the data analysis process, three key findings emerged from the data: 1) Community experts illustrate that, as systems-impacted youth, they faced systemic barriers to academic success, unique to their intersecting identities; 2) Systemic barriers in education impact experts' feelings of school connectedness and give rise to complex behaviors in the effort to protect themselves; 3) In spite of the barriers placed in front of them, experts survived education and the family regulation system with community support.

### **Key Finding 1: Community Experts Illustrate That, as Systems-Impacted Youth, They Faced System Barriers to Academic Success, Unique to Their Intersecting Identities**

The existing school-to-prison pipeline literature largely centers how boys and men of color experience educational inequities. Community experts' narratives, highlighted here, shed light on the unique ways that BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth experience systemic and interpersonal harm while in school. From having little to no access to supportive adults, to trauma imposed by the family regulation system, to microaggressions from educators, these stories demonstrate that the experiences of systems-impacted girls and gender expansive youth cannot be conflated with those of their male counterparts, or non-systems impacted peers.

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### *Lack of Supportive Adults*

For many community experts, the caregivers in their lives -- from foster resource families to families of origin -- were simply unable to provide the support and resources necessary to excel academically, regardless of will or intention. I attribute the inability of stakeholders to support experts' academic pursuits as a manifestation of systemic oppression, which imposes educational inequities on BIPOC communities (Minoff, 2018). The existing literature demonstrates that the family regulation system targets the most systemically vulnerable populations: Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and poor mothers and children (Minoff, 2018). Critical race theory scholars suggest that despite attempts to level the educational playing field and provide equal opportunities to non-white students and their families, these individuals are continuously pushed to the margins through curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school funding, which prioritizes the education of white students over youth of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Given this historical context, it is not surprising that, while experts name family of origin and caregivers as individuals who often provided emotional or financial support to them as youth, they also describe these individuals as unable to support their academic success, especially when considering post-secondary options. Monet described that prior to entering the foster care system, she struggled in school:

This [school] wasn't something that was a priority or, you know, my mother never graduated from high school. And so when I went into foster care though from between seventh and eighth grade. I had more support in eighth grade and more support academically, but I had lost a lot of momentum (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

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After entering foster care, Monet was placed with a family that was supportive of her academic ambitions but did not have the cultural capital to help her navigate the education system. While Monet was identified as a gifted student early in life, the loss of momentum so early in her educational career led to challenges in keeping pace with her peers as a teenager. Similarly, Ellie, who lived with her grandparents, remembers that college became a sore subject at home:

When the conversation of college came up, they didn't really talk about pretty much, because I think the big thing was paying for it. They knew that they couldn't pay for it. They didn't really talk about it too much because they knew that would be the first big kind of issue over that. It's because that's what comes up when you're discussing going to college (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

Conversely, Claudia was placed at a group home while in high school and describes feeling singled out every time they had to explain to a teacher that they did not have anyone at home who could help with homework. Experts' anecdotes illustrate that the same systemic oppression that places youth in the path of the family regulation system, also places them at an academic disadvantage before they even enter a school. Education is often an afterthought, even though youth in foster care are typically surrounded by more stakeholders than their non-systems impacted peers, including families of origin, caregivers, various group home staff, social workers, lawyers, and advocates. Without adults to help experts navigate education, they were forced to fend for themselves.

### ***Trauma Imposed by the Family Regulation System***

In addition to lacking academic support from adults around them, experts demonstrate that the trauma of being involved in the family regulation system, including removal from the

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family of origin and multiple placement changes, informed how they experienced schooling.

Marissa describes having been moved to different homes while in middle and high school:

I definitely feel like now I sometimes catch myself not knowing certain things that I should've learned throughout the time that I was in foster care. There are, I feel like-- not major gaps, but there's definitely gaps in my education.... So, in my math classes when I was in middle school and high school-- that's around the time that I was in foster care and there was a time where I should've learned how to do certain math, for example, simple trigonometry that people should know entering college. I feel like I really don't know things that are foundational, I guess (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

Other experts expressed experiencing challenges with their cognitive functioning, which they attribute to histories of trauma and involvement in the system. In my interview with D.S., she recalled several instances where she would experience what she described as 'sleepy brain':

I remember sitting in this classroom, and like shutting off completely. Like, my whole nervous system was shut off and I would feel.... my, my, the left side of my brain would like fall asleep. And, I remember just feeling.... like it was.... there was no information flowing because I didn't know, and I wasn't accepting to the information that the teachers were attempting to provide (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

Similarly, Nadine reflected on the fact that she did not remember much of her childhood due to experiences with trauma, and instability. When she was placed in a loving, steady situation, with her grandmother, in eighth or ninth grade, she finally felt secure. However, by then, the instability she experienced early in life, coupled with a lack of resources, had already made their mark:

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So, I don't think I learned a lot in high school. And I mean I learned and did enough, I think, to get by. But, but, like, I think had, well, had they known, I probably would have hoped that they would have taken more time with me to make sure that I was learning and getting the information, like for example, and a lot of people don't know this but like I didn't learn phonics. Like, I didn't learn basic things about reading I learned I read by memorization I, and I learned this as an adult (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

The literature suggests that being removed from one's family and placed in a new setting, compounds trauma, whether systemic or interpersonal, that a young person might have experienced to bring them to the attention of the family regulation system to begin with (Bruskas, 2008). Experts' testimonies exemplify the impacts of toxic stress, which occurs when one's activated stress management system goes unaddressed by protective adults (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2020). When the brain experiences reoccurring activation by stress, young people can face difficulty communicating, focusing, and processing information (Romano et al., 2015). These challenges can result in academic and behavioral struggles, such as low grades, anxiety, substance abuse, and "delinquent behavior" (Day, et al., 2015; Krinsky, 2010; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Taking these factors into account, experts' narratives illustrate that youth in foster care and BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, as distinct or intersecting communities, must be given special focus in our understanding of school discipline. As we will see in the coming sections, these elements create very specific and burdensome barriers to academic success.

The overwhelming majority of interviews demonstrate that the family regulation and education systems created unsafe and unsupportive learning environments for experts by actively



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restricting access to resources and support, mistreating experts, and/or neglecting their needs.

Experts' testimonies give rise to the understanding that their negative experiences were informed by both subtle and overt expressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, embedded in both the family regulation and education systems.

Chrissy felt that the barriers placed in front of her were primarily motivated by her gender and ethnic identity. Chrissy, being a survivor of sexual violence, endured a number of alarming incidents at school, including a run-in with a teacher that greatly impacted her education experience:

Being a person that was already a survival of sexual abuse, you know the signs, you understand certain cues such as words or body movement that are red flags. I was sexually abused by men so his comments such as “I love it when you have your hair down,” and eye movements (glancing at my breasts) were alarming to me and made me feel uncomfortable. He would also make sexist comments relating to periods. Again, that I didn't identify those comments as sexist (I didn't understand what that term meant at that age) I just knew for sure it was completely inappropriate (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

When Chrissy attempted to address this behavior with school staff, she was dismissed:

The response was, I was a liar. First and foremost, complete denial by that teacher. Despite the fact that I knew I was not the only female student who had made these accusations, I was still not believed.... Also my placement did not believe my claims of sexual abuse from my birth family and she reinforced the idea I was a problem, you know, I am crazy.

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When reflecting on these incidents, Chrissy recalls feeling that, as a Latina, she was expected to be submissive and accept objectification. These events, where both school staff and her court-appointed guardian ignored a very serious accusation, made school a hostile environment for Chrissy, sending her the message that neither the family regulation nor education systems were truly meant to keep her safe.

### *Microaggressions*

For many experts, the intersection of their varied identities resulted in microaggressions from the adults around them. Microaggressions are defined as seemingly harmless and subtle verbal and/or non-verbal acts of indifference or belittlement (Solorzano, 1998). CQ, Hannah, and Claudia experienced transphobia, which kept them out of the classroom. Claudia and María experienced ableism, which made them feel unsupported on campus. DS, Nadine, and María experienced a combination of racialized and gendered microaggressions that impacted their academic self-esteem. Ultimately, these microaggressions had appalling consequences for all individuals, who recall feeling pushed, mentally and emotionally, to the margins of schooling.

CQ entered foster care and was placed in a group home after being rejected and neglected by her biological mother. CQ recalls that throughout her educational career, she was mistreated and misgendered by school staff, who refused to understand her identity. However, one particular incident at a continuation high school stuck with CQ:

They [caregivers?] didn't tell anyone but the school people that I was trans, so then some of the kids started suspecting things and that just put me into more danger because they [school staff] wouldn't let me go into the bathroom when the girls were going to the bathroom; they waited till the bathroom was cleared. So, then the students started asking, "Hey, why do they make you wait?" And I'm like, at least if they were fucking-- if they

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were smarter, they would have left me in the classroom while you guys had your bathroom break. And then they would kind of tell me, "Do you need some water or something?" Could there be a more discreet way that you could do it? So anyway, they [school staff] didn't do that. So, one day, one of the dudes, he's-- I think the security guard that would kind of pat us down, told the students that there was something about me, kind of thing. So, again, it just put me into more danger. I was threatened that I was going to get beat up after school. So that day I'm like, "Fuck this. I ain't leaving when y'all motherfuckers leave, I'm leaving now." So, I walked out of the school and then they called my probation officer, and automatically is you have to go back to juvenile hall because you're just AWOL (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

CQ reflects that this is the moment that she gave up on school. While her interview demonstrates clearly that CQ loves to learn, this incident sent her the message that school was an unsafe place for her. While Claudia also faced challenges due to her trans identity, they were also classified as needing special education accommodations, which further complicated the discrimination they felt at school. Claudia remembers that they were often misgendered, by both students and teachers:

A lot of people don't understand what non-binary was. So, it was kind of difficult sometimes in classrooms that people would point it out or say that, "you were born a female. You can't change those things" (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

Claudia recalls that school staff rarely corrected their colleagues when they misgendered Claudia or when students made inappropriate comments in class. Claudia was forced to confront these issues on their own.

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While working in the field, I observed, firsthand, the consequences of subtle and overt transphobia. The following narrative, constructed from field notes, illustrates the ways in which transphobia isolates Hanna, a sophomore at Monroe High School, from her peers and inhibits her access to education.

“Hi, Mr. Johnson, I want to talk to you about Hannah; is this a good time?” I say as I already move to sit down across from him at his desk.

“You know that’s a boy, right?”

I take a deep breath, count to 10, and prepare myself to argue. Hannah just transferred to a new high school and is struggling to adjust. She faithfully attends my weekly group meetings for youth in foster care at the school, and while she is quiet, she is always quick to participate. I came to find out that Hannah is failing most of her classes and stopped showing up to P.E.. I ask her to stay after one of our meetings and ask what is going on. Hannah tells me that she hates her classes, they are way too big, and that P.E. is the worst. Even though no one says or does anything to her, and she has been given her own changing room, she is scared someone will bother her for being different. She would rather walk around campus alone than go to class. Hannah tells me that she loves singing, and if her counselor, Mr. Johnson, replaced P.E. with choir, she would definitely attend class. When I suggest that she talk to Mr. Johnson about making the switch, she flat out refuses, but she accepts my offer to meet with him on her behalf.

I reply to Mr. Johnson, “No, *she* is not.”

We go back and forth a few more times and Mr. Johnson is becoming visibly agitated. I decide it’s not worth the argument.

“Well, whatever we think, Hannah uses female pronouns, and she is having some problems with her class.”

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Mr. Johnson concedes but continues to misgender her throughout the conversation. Mr. Johnson brings up Hannah's transcripts, showing a row of F's next to each class.

“Looks like we've done all we can for Hannah. If he doesn't want to go to class, that's on him.”

He goes on to explain that the school has given Hannah all the accommodations they can; they gave Hannah her own special changing area for P.E. and switched her into a small class to help with her anxiety. Mr. Johnson becomes increasingly agitated and resentful of Hannah's unique needs. Finally, he states that he is unwilling to accommodate Hannah's request to move from P.E. to choir, even though this class would fulfill the same requirement, has space for more students, and would ensure that Hannah attends at least one of her seven classes. Days after I give Hannah the bad news, I find her hiding from campus security behind a building on the very edges of campus. She doesn't feel comfortable going to class. Nothing I can say will change her mind.

....

From my observations and interactions with Hannah, it is evident that she could expect nothing more than the lowest, most basic levels of safety and comfort at school. Legally, California Assembly Bill (AB) 1266, passed in 2013, mandates that trans students are allowed to use facilities consistent with their gender identity (Maryam, 2014). In giving Hannah her own changing room, separate than those designated for girls and boys, the school signaled to Hannah, and her peers, that it is acceptable to isolate her and treat her differently than other girls.

Despite the fact that the law entitles youth with disabilities, whether physical or intellectual, to individualized support, Claudia's and María's narratives demonstrate that youth

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are often blamed for their learning differences and criminalized as a result of them. Claudia recalls that they endured hostility due to their academic needs:

They wouldn't help me at all. Only if I try telling them that I didn't understand it, they would tell me, "It's not that you don't understand it, it's that you choose not to understand it." Yeah, they wouldn't help me out, or they'll keep me after class and try explaining it a different way but not me understanding, either way.

Claudia remembers feeling "dumb" because their teacher did not want to help them, or that they were at fault for not understanding. As a result of this treatment, they felt ashamed and stopped asking questions in class.

María, an eighth grader in special education classes at Wilfred Middle School with whom I worked over the course of a school year, was made to feel like a troublemaker by school staff. The following story, composed from field notes, demonstrates how educators can serve as active participants in the criminalization of youth in foster care, especially when they lack adults to advocate on their behalf.

....

María is easily distracted, energetic, charismatic, curious about the world around her, and has experienced home placement changes ranging in the double digits, eventually landing in a group home. Her easily distracted nature often results in challenges completing classwork and homework, and I frequently help her frantically complete mountains of make-up work. Although I find María to be as pleasant as a young person in middle school can be, when I bring her up to Wilfred Middle School staff members, I am regaled with stories of her lack of discipline, and defiant, confrontational temperament. When I visit María at school at the end of the semester, I find her in a highly anxious state. While pacing around our small meeting space, she tells me that

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she lost her district-issued Chromebook, the second one this school year, and now she cannot borrow a new one until she pays the school \$600 to replace the other two. María is close to tears, fixated on coming up with the money. I try to tell her that because she is in foster care, state law absolves her of any financial accountability for lost school property, such as books or computers. But I cannot get her to calm down enough to hear me out. Instead, I go looking for the assistant principal, Ms. Chatsworth.

....

Ms. Chatsworth launches into a tirade the moment I say María's name. She believes that María did not lose the two Chromebooks, but is hiding them, and that María does not deserve a new computer unless she can produce \$600. Despite explaining the rights of youth in foster care to access school materials, Ms. Chatsworth is fixated on her suspicions, and I cannot get her off of this subject. I try a new tactic and ask how María's schoolwork has been adjusted to accommodate the absence of a computer. Ms. Chatsworth says, "Her teachers are supposed to give her everything in paper." When I respond, "María tells me that this has not been happening. She says that she's been sitting in class for two weeks with nothing to do," Ms. Chatsworth concludes, "Well, she wouldn't have that problem if she wasn't hiding that other laptop. We could solve this problem real easy if María wanted to."

After realizing that getting through to Ms. Chatsworth is hopeless, I decide to let my supervisor handle the situation and I return to María. I find her crying in the main office, still obsessing over the money. When she finally decides to go back to class, I tell her that I will take care of everything, and she leaves looking defeated and demoralized.

....

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María's story illustrates the stigmatization of youth in foster care as delinquent, while little is done to consider the circumstances that influence their behavior. Youth placed in group homes, like María, typically experience an average of seven previous housing placement changes and eight school changes, which impact their ability to build connections with peers and trusted adults (Boyle-Duke, 2015; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2009). Examining María's behavior in this context aids in understanding why she might struggle to meet her teachers' behavioral expectations. Additionally, youth who receive special education services are typically perceived as being intentionally defiant, rather than having their conduct understood in the context of their neurodiversity and the structural barriers acting upon them (Erevelles, 2014). In response, punishment is frequently used as a tool to force conformity to normative behavioral standards (Erevelles, 2014).

DS and Nadine both felt as though they were pushed to the margins of their school community, though their challenges with school manifested in very different behaviors. DS, who struggled with her ability to focus in class, and began abusing drugs and alcohol in high school, remembers feeling that her behaviors and challenges were largely ignored by her teachers:

Teachers they just didn't really deal with me like, it was just, you know, I would see, for example, the difference with students that actually did their homework and participated and were, like, really good writers, they probably were praised more and had more attention from the teachers.... It's a terrible thing to be ignored.

DS went on to say that she wished the adults in her life understood how bad things were for her in school, but her behaviors flew under the radar. This was likely because her behaviors were internalized and did not attract positive or negative attention. For her part, Nadine, despite being



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a good student, was denied support from her high school counselor when the time came to consider colleges:

I always knew that I would go to college, but in high school I was told by my high school counselor that I should go to, like, a community college. Even though I had like a 3.3 GPA and didn't quite understand that I was super, super involved in high school with, like, young black scholars, I was the captain of the drill team. And you know just really involved and active.

While it is impossible to know educators were thinking when they interacted with DS and Nadine, it appears, given the testimonies, that both individuals experienced racial and gendered microaggressions as youth, which sowed self-doubt and feelings of being out of place or invisible, and impacted how they viewed themselves as scholars (Solorzano, 1998).

The intersection of diverse identities and involvement in family regulation results in significant disparities in treatment both on school campuses and in foster care placements. In my experience, students in foster care with unique needs are frequently treated like burdens and their behavior is rarely understood within the context of how they navigate the world given their race/ethnicity, ability, gender, or sexuality. Experts' experiences illustrate the ways in which the education, juvenile justice, and family regulation systems rely on systemic oppression to uphold inequities in these systems and control over youth characterized as delinquent. Looking at these narratives through a LatCrit and DisCrit lens, we can see how experts' intersecting identities uniquely influence the ways that they are impacted by and, forced to navigate, these systems in ways that their male and non-systems impacted peers are not.

Similar to Solorzano's (1998) study of microaggressions among Chicana doctoral students, the occurrence of overt discrimination and microaggressions in the narratives of the

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community experts function to maintain the institutional status quo. The educational spaces that experts inhabited in middle and high school may appear to have been wildly different than those of the Chicana graduate students in Solorzano's (1998) research. However, like higher education, the public K-12 education system aims to reproduce and reinforce social inequities. Intentionally, or unintentionally, the use of overt discrimination and microaggressions were used by educators to reinforce experts' status as marginalized individuals (Solorzano, 1998). Unmistakable examples of this objective can be seen in Chrissy's, CQ's, and Hannah's interactions with school staff, which were rooted in racial and cis-heteropatriarchal stereotypes. As Latinas are often characterized as passive and hypersexual, Chrissy's teacher expected to harass her with few repercussions (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, 2014). When Chrissy attempted to stand up to her harasser, the reactions of her other teachers and caregivers, adults whose job it was to provide a safe learning and living environment, served to reinforce Chrissy's docility by silencing and gaslighting her. For CQ and Hannah, the stigma associated with gender expansiveness resulted in being, literally pushed out of the classroom. Abundant in CQ's narrative and my observations of Hannah, are incidents of harassment from teachers and students due to their gender identities. Lacking from the narratives and observations are indications that any adults stepped in to support either individual. These experiences in school sent Chrissy, CQ, and Hannah the message that their safety and education were not as important as maintaining the status quo.

Nadine's and DS's stories illustrate more subtle attempts to derail their academic progress by setting low expectations for what they could achieve. In encouraging Nadine to go to a community college, rather than a four-year university, her counselor, an adult who should have been encouraging student ambitions, revealed that he had little confidence in Nadine's ability to succeed in a university setting. While community college is an excellent choice for many

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students, Nadine was clear about her aspirations and was actively setting herself up for that educational trajectory. In DS's case, she remembered various teachers throughout her high school career who ignored and neglected her, even when she was clearly struggling, resulting in feelings of invisibility. While it may not have been a conscious decision on the educators' part, their actions were meant to instill a sense of doubt in both individuals' intellect.

In Claudia's case, their experiences are colored by layers of gender- and ability-based discrimination. In allowing for Claudia to be misgendered in class, school staff sent Claudia, and their peers, the message that Claudia's gender identity did not deserve to be respected. Additionally, in being blamed for their academic challenges, Claudia's teachers were reproducing old racialized, disability tropes originally used to criminalize freed enslaved peoples for laziness, suggesting that Black Americans did not want to work due to mental illness or disability, rather than unsafe labor conditions (Annamma, 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2012). As a result, Claudia was stigmatized and marginalized for their struggles. Consequently, Claudia was given the message that school was a place that would punish them for learning differently than their peers.

An important principle of DisCrit is the recognition that experiences of stigma vary based on individuals' identity markers, which can intensify or mediate the subjugation a student is made to endure in school. While interference by the family regulation system often results in more adult stakeholders in youth's lives than a youth who is not in foster care, experts' narratives illustrate that this, more often than not, results in more barriers than support. As a consequence of being in foster care, experts experienced increased criminalization, microaggressions, and a dearth of supportive adults to aid them, which has significant implications for their educational careers.

**Key Finding 2: Systemic Barriers in Education Impact Experts' Feelings of School Connectedness and Give Rise to Complex Behaviors in the Effort to Protect Themselves**

As seen in the previous section, experts confronted a number of systemic educational barriers. The most impactful seemed to have manifested through mistreatment from stakeholders who are meant support and protect experts, including teachers and caregivers. Accounts from experts, as well as field observations, demonstrate that these barriers had repercussions on perceptions of themselves as students and the space they occupied in school. Experts report that interpersonal manifestations of systemic oppression at school communicated to them, in both obvious and inconspicuous ways, that they were problematic and undesirable students. This impacted experts' sense of worth as students and forced them to become either outwardly resistant to mistreatment, turn inward, or self-isolate in order to ensure their protection.

***Negative Self-Perception***

Experts' narratives are full of altercations with school staff that made them question their academic abilities and their place in their school communities. These instances had long-lasting impacts on their perceptions of themselves and, for some, their motivations to pursue post-secondary education.

Chrissy remembered that after she reported her teacher for sexual harassment, her caregiver and the school principal's reactions left her with particularly negative feelings:

It felt humiliating because the faculty I reported it to and the foster mother I was placed with at the time didn't believe me. She went as far as telling me not to be saying things like that about teachers. I was expecting, "Hey, what is going on that you really felt that way?" Instead, it was always, "*You're the problem. You're lying. You're a troubled student. And because you're a troubled student, we're not going to figure out why you're*

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*a troubled student, but we know that you're a troubled student, and you can't be trusted.*

*So, I don't know how, but you need to find a way to stick it out in that class...."*

During this incident, the usual principal response and discipline followed: "You know what you did. You're a horrible human being. You're going to have to have a lot of consequences. That isn't lady-like behavior."

While Chrissy expressed that she loved learning as a teenager, school became a dangerous place where she could not expect to be protected from predatory adults.

In CQ's case, because of frequent transitions in foster care placement, she attended a number of high schools where she encountered discrimination from peers and educators alike. When reflecting on how these experiences impacted her confidence as a student, she said:

I think it ingrained into me that, like, I was bad, I am bad, I was undeserving, this isn't a space for you. And I think that's why I was so afraid of going to college afterwards, that I'm like, "No, I don't want to be here," kind of thing.

Even after CQ graduated high school and began community college, she continued to feel out of place. "I'd be like, 'Oh my God, this is like I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here.' And but it is definitely, again, put that burden and fear in me that, like, school wasn't for me." The mistreatment that CQ experienced throughout secondary school was so intense that it impacted how she conceptualized herself as a student for years after.

Claudia also endured a number of housing and school placements in their time in foster care, and shared a number of incidents in which their teachers refused to help when they were struggling academically. At various point in our interview Claudia shared the following sentiments:

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"Well, I mean, it made me feel kinda dumb because my own teacher didn't want to help me, or nobody really wanted to explain it to me, or I thought maybe it was my fault that I couldn't understand it."

....

"I would feel very ashamed, and I would stop asking questions."

"Well, that made me just want to like low-key just give up, not want to do anything because none of the teachers really listen to me. They thought I was just fucking around."

....

"Well, it made me feel like I had to keep my mouth shut, even though I didn't know... if I was lost, like in class or something that I shouldn't even ask for help."

Even though Claudia recalled being very vocal when they needed support, they were shut down and made to feel like a burden for needing more help than their peers. As adolescents, Chrissy, CQ, and Claudia all expressed that they had lofty goals for their future. However, at various points in their interviews, harmful treatment by school staff made them question their academic abilities. Moreover, this treatment made experts believe that school was simply not meant for them. With support, all experts are on the path to reaching their goals, but it is easy to imagine the vast number of individuals in similar situations who do not have the opportunity to do the same.

### *Internalized Responses*

For many experts, mistreatment or neglect from educators and the stigma associated with involvement in the family regulation system resulted in internalized behaviors, such as self-

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isolation from peers, running away, or making complicated decisions in order to protect themselves or gain access to resources they needed to reach their goals.

For Ivonne, resistance to being stigmatized a young person in foster care and not being provided the support she needed, resulted in turning inward. Despite being surrounded by educators who appeared sympathetic, Ivonne expressed that she often felt pitied and patronized while she was in foster care. In response, she felt that she had to become self-sufficient to separate herself from the stereotypes of youth in foster care as "bad" or "problematic":

More people will like you if you are more compliant. You're not as needy. Even when I needed help, I would just not ask for it. I'd just figure it out. So it was that need to push and to still be seen as-- try to differentiate myself from being a foster kid as much as I could, even though it's still wrapped in there, but to be seen as like, "Okay. She's a foster, but she's a good foster" (full text from the interview can be found in Appendix A).

While differentiating herself from her peers did not last long, Ivonne's willingness to do this in the hopes of resisting the stigma associated with her foster care placement illustrates how harmful the stigma can be to young people and demonstrates the need for adults to reckon with the stereotypes that influence how they perceive students.

While Monet had a more positive experience than other experts, she shared that she was on her own when it came to school, needing to find resources to make her academic objectives a reality. As a teenager, she had set her mind on going to USC, and though she was labeled as a gifted student at an early age, she lacked encouragement and direction from the adults around her by the time she got to high school:

And as far as USC, I started off actually applying for an ROTC scholarship. I was going to go into the military just because I wanted to go to USC. So, I was going to go into the

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military and then when I got out, I was going to go to USC on ROTC scholarship, and then would have to go into the military when I came out. Just because that was a conversation I had, the recruiters were there and it was attractive and made sense because I wasn't getting the other conversations.

Monet had no interest in going into the Army, and even reflected on the predatory nature of Army recruiters. However, in the absence of resources, Monet was determined to find a path to make her dreams come true, regardless of the sacrifices they required.

During my work in the field, I observed a number of incidents in which adults made youth feel unwelcome and unwanted at school. These incidents ranged from ignoring students whose behavior they did not like, to actively and shamelessly working to remove a student they labeled as undesirable. One particularly haunting event involved a student named Briana, a Black girl in eighth grade, a commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) survivor, and an expectant parent. The following account, comprised of field notes, details incidents I observed and took part in, in which Briana's school administration attempted to remove her from campus due to the stigma associated with her past traumas.

....

I am sitting in the Hoover Middle School library with Brianna, who looks less than pleased to be meeting with me. This is the first time I am meeting her in person, but I am familiar with her case. This school year, Brianna has had numerous school and housing placements throughout Pasadena and Los Angeles, despite School of Origin Laws, which dictate that youth in foster care have the right to stay enrolled at any school they've attended within the past year, regardless of changing placement, to maintain a semblance of stability ("Foster Youth Education Toolkit," 2016). Weeks earlier, when I was notified by Brianna's social worker that she would be



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coming to live within my district boundaries for the second time that year, I coordinated a meeting with Brianna and her stakeholders to determine if she would stay at her current school or enroll at the school closest to her new home, which she had already attended earlier in the year. Typically, in these meetings, administrators of the schools in question take the time to share any previous experiences with the student and the resources and support they can offer. This case was different. The Hoover Middle School assistant principal, Ms. Charles, was adamant that Brianna should not return to campus, but she had no evidence to support this conclusion aside from a poor attendance record. Brianna decided she wanted to return to Hoover, however, and her stakeholders agreed, so regardless of the administrator's feelings, we had to let her enroll. Once Brianna settled in at Hoover, I stopped by to see how she was acclimating.

When I call Brianna into the main office, she does not want to meet with me. As soon as I introduce myself, she walks out. Her special education case carrier catches her in the hallway, and I watch them from afar, coaxing Brianna to meet with me while I eavesdrop on the front office staff gossiping about Brianna's contentious attitude and altercations she has gotten into in her short time back at the school. Finally, Brianna agrees to meet with me, and though hesitant, she is pleasant. She shares with me that she is having trouble in school but that she is motivated to do well and is excited about participating in eighth grade promotion. We make plans for her to attend tutoring and set a date to check in again later in the month. While walking through the hallway on my way out of the school, Ms. Charles calls out to me, "Hey, Franchesca, thanks for putting an eighth grade prostitute on my campus!" Confused, I turn back her to find out what she means. Ms. Charles goes on:

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“Oh, you didn’t know? Brianna is a prostitute and she’s pregnant. She’s been recruiting other little girls to be prostitutes, too. That’s what you put on my campus. That’s OK though; we’ll find a way to get her out of here.”

I know Ms. Charles fairly well, and this response from her seemed out of character, as she is typically caring and compassionate to her students. I attempt to talk to her further about the matter, but she brushes me off. Unfortunately, as is the case with many youths in Brianna’s situation, she ran away from her foster home days later and never returned.

....

I never found out if any of Ms. Charles’ accusations were true. Regardless, this interaction demonstrates how educators employ stereotypes to criminalize youth who have experienced trauma. The term “child prostitute” has largely fallen out of favor, as children cannot consent to participate in sex work in the same way that adults may be able to (Saar, 2014). Ms. Charles’ use of the phrase ‘eighth-grade prostitute,’ when referring to Brianna demonstrates that she is viewed as an active participant in her abuse, restricted from accessing victimhood. Additionally, the accusation that Brianna was recruiting her peers to participate in commercial human trafficking, as unacceptable as that is, places her in the position of a villain, rather than a child who should have been afforded compassion and space to learn from her experiences. Lastly, Ms. Charles’ attitude toward Brianna’s pregnancy is indicative of dominant viewpoints that characterize teen mothers, particularly Black teens, as careless, irresponsible, and undeserving of protection. This attitude does not consider Brianna’s autonomy and life circumstances that may have led to the decision to have a baby. While I cannot speculate on the

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exact reasons for Briana running away from home, it is evident that she lacked the support and resources necessary to keep her in her placement.

These experts were made to struggle and find resiliency in the face of systematic hurdles put in place by the family regulation and education systems. They were forced to become highly self-reliant and make decisions about their schooling and their future that their peers do not have to experience. In Ivonne's and Monet's cases, because they were good, quiet students, educators around them likely had little or no idea about the impact of their actions, or lack thereof, leaving them to navigate the barriers placed in front of them, alone. In Briana's case, educators were active participants in her school pushout, which also forced her to respond in isolation. While the adult experts reached their academic goals eventually, the support of at least one caring adult could have made a world of difference in each of their trajectories.

### *Externalized responses*

Other experts' experiences at school forced them to exert their resistance in more external ways. For many experts, this meant responding to incidents in ways that many would characterize as defiant or combative. As youth, Chrissy, Nadine, and CQ shared that their teachers would have described them as fighters, tough, assertive, outspoken, and problematic. In sharing their testimonies, I hope to understand their behavior as expressions of self-preservation.

For Chrissy, after reporting her sexual harasser at school, she recalled that no one believed her and the school administration refused to transfer her to a different class. She stated, "They eventually transferred me out of that class after kicking and fighting, but I had to do it on my own, without the support of my [foster] mom; she didn't care to fight for me." This seems to have been a common theme in Chrissy's educational career. She went on to share that she had been bullied and harassed by peers of various genders, which led to a number of physical

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altercations. While she now regrets the incidents, Chrissy remembers feeling that she had to take matters into her own hands because she could not rely on anyone else to protect her.

CQ also remembers engaging in physical altercations with her peers and verbal altercations with school staff, often because of her gender and sexuality. On one occasion, a continuation school teacher refused to use CQ's pronouns:

...And she calls me, "Mr. Fiones." And then I said, "Can you not do that?" And she's like, "Not do what?". I say, "Can you not say my name like that? Can you not put mister in front of it?". "But that's your name." And I'm like -- I said, "No." I said, "You know what you're doing." And I'm coming out her strong. Like, "You white bitch. You're not about to freaking sit here and tell me how I should feel because this is how you think that you're going to talk to us." So, I got up, and she's all like, "Well, if you don't like it," she says, "You can go outside." I said, "If I go outside," I said, "I'm not coming back." And then she's all like, "All right." She says, "You're gone for the day."

CQ articulated herself in a way that her teacher likely found unacceptable. However, she utilized the methods available to her to not only to protect herself from the violence of being misgendered, but also assert her identity as a trans woman. This resulted in her being essentially kicked out of class for the day, contributing to her ostracization.

Similarly, Nadine often felt the need to resist feelings of belittlement from her teachers. She recalled that she often engaged in verbal confrontations with her teachers:

I was always told that... you know, you have a bad attitude and you're not going to get anywhere with that attitude. And it wasn't... I'm going to be honest; I don't think it was that; it was my defense mechanism. It was my way of defending and

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protecting myself because I didn't... I didn't have anyone that I felt as a child that truly protected me and came to my rescue. So, it was just me. But I also, I challenge authority, I...yeah, I challenge authority I just didn't go with. If you said, "Oh, you know you need to sit over here." "Why?" or "Oh, you know no we just want, you know, these students to apply," "Why? Why can't I apply?" or "Why can't I go?" or, you know, "Why is it just for this student or that student?" kind of thing. So, I challenged authority often and I wanted an explanation and I felt that I was due one.

From her previous experiences, Nadine knew that educators were not always going to treat her fairly. She refused to take their word at face value, because she could not trust that she was not being given the short end of the stick and she could not expect that another adult would advocate for her. As a result, she was labeled by many teachers as a student with a bad attitude.

Claudia, like CQ and Nadine, felt the need to resist the treatment they were receiving from teachers. Most of Claudia's interview revolved around feeling dismissed by their teachers when they needed help. One day, this treatment proved to be too much, and they reacted physically:

I was expelled from one school because I told the teacher that I did not understand the work, and well, he.... I try to explain it to him again and I showed him the, the work that I wrote down and I just got frustrated, so I just folded the paper and I put it to the side, I told him that I don't understand it and I need help. Well, he grabbed my work, and he ripped it. I got up and I socked him, and then I was expelled.

When asked what happened next, Claudia recalled:

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Now, a lot of times when I would tell, when I would tell the principals and all that what happened, they would understand and try to help me. But then that's why I got moved into like smaller classes and smaller schools. And I felt like I didn't need that. I just needed someone that will take the time and tell me what I needed to do, instead of just explaining two words, and, like, hoping that we would understand it.

Claudia was eventually transferred to a behavior intervention classroom, a class for students receiving special education services and students with serious behavior challenges that a typical classroom has not been able to address. While Claudia ultimately felt supported by the educators in that classroom, they felt that they were unfairly sent there:

A lot of us were there because we would get provoked like the teachers or by other kids saying something like, "You are slow," or "You don't know what you're doing," or "We're behind because of you." A lot of times, a lot of us will blow up because of that.

While Claudia recognized that a physical altercation with their teacher may not have been the best course of action, they felt that they had been unjustly isolated from their peers. Claudia was given very little space to vocalize their discontent and used the only tools they felt they had at their disposal.

These experts' stories harken back to existing literature on the treatment of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in schools. Legacies of slavery and settler colonialism continue to reverberate through all areas of society, particularly in education. In schools, BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are characterized as exotic, wild, aggressive, and hypersexual, and their identities are perceived as affronts to standards of white femininity and socially agreed upon gender norms (Blake et al., 2010; Girgenti-Malone, 2018; Lajimodiere, 2013; Morris, 2016). As such, for Black youth in particular, any expressions of defiance are read as threats to white safety

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(Morris, 2016). Experts' narratives are illustrative of the consequences that result from resisting mistreatment when one's existence is inherently criminalized. To fully understand and reframe experts' behavior and their resistance, it is vital to examine it through the lens of disability critical race theory (DisCrit), in conjunction with youth resistance theory.

Disability critical race theory (DisCrit) implores educators and academics to understand that disabled girls of color are not inadequate because of their intersectional identities. Instead, they are skilled in responding to structural and interpersonal violence. In Annamma's (2019) groundbreaking DisCrit work, she recognizes that the girls with whom she worked had strategies of resistance to change their circumstances and ensure that their needs were met. Similarly, experts' anecdotes illustrate that as youth, they were adept at intervening on their own behalf when faced with challenges, discrimination, and violence. These strategies ranged from remaining silent to engaging in verbal or physical confrontations.

Ivonne felt it was best to keep quiet and distance herself from other youth in foster care. Annamma (2019) contends that this behavior stems from the understanding that even being friends with a negatively labeled student can result in being hyper-surveilled and categorized with an undesirable identity as well. Ivonne chose this route to survive school in the only way she knew how. Historically, individuals who are furthest from the norms of dominant society (ie: white, male, able, and heterosexual) have faced the most danger of violence in education (Annamma, 2009). As such, it is no surprise that, due to their gender, race, and ability status, CQ, Claudia, Briana, and Nadine were labeled and stigmatized as deviant and problematic, making them targets for increased surveillance (Annamma, 2009). For CQ and Claudia, they were dismissed and treated with disdain because of their gender identity and abilities. When given the chance, educators jumped at the opportunity to push both individuals to a "space of

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exclusion," where schools abandon "bodies and minds that tell the truth about who is there, and why" (Mingus, via Annamma, 2009). These spaces include special education classrooms, credit recovery programs, and group homes. For Briana, given the attitudes of school staff, it was clear that she was ostracized and pushed out due to her past traumas. As can be seen from Nadine's testimony, experts did not engage in resistance to discrimination and mistreatment lightly, or naively. As Nadine states in her interview, she refused to take discrimination lying down; she demanded respect from the adults around her and made sure that her voice was heard, no matter what.

Youth resistance scholars argue that popular culture picks and chooses to romanticize youth rebellion that is safe and palatable, from white, straight, working class boys and men, like James Dean, to small, "victims" such as Palestinian children who throw rocks at Israeli tanks (Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2014). Being Black and brown, women, and gender diverse people, the experts I interviewed were not afforded any of these attributes. Much of the literature on youth resistance values and celebrates actions that correspond to being viewed as a good citizen, rather than resistance that is sometimes contradictory or self-sabotaging (Tuck & Wayne Yang, 2014). As can be seen in experts' anecdotes, their resistance did not always fit standards of socially acceptable behavior, especially given the gendered and racialized stereotypes thrust upon them. Furthermore, Fine et al. (2014) argue that resistance does not require an objective and it does not assure success, only the desire for dignity. In line with this rationale, regardless of how it was done, experts' resistance allowed them to exert their humanity in the face of belittlement and to advocate for their needs.

In response to youth resistance, DisCrit and youth resistance theory encourages educators to reframe how we understand youth and to be in solidarity with their struggle. Resistance



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provides educators with a means to see youth as agents of political change. As school largely functions to silence youth, resistance serves as a platform to explore social change in a safe environment (Dimitriadis, 2014). For this to work, educators must be in solidarity with youth resistance. This does not mean that students should not be held accountable for their actions; however, classroom management should not rest on the need to fix individual behaviors, and educators should understand student behaviors in the context in which it occurs (Annamma, 2009). As such, DisCrit calls for educators to fight structural violence alongside their students (Annamma, 2009).

### **Key Finding 3: In Spite of the Barriers placed in Front of Them, Experts Survived the Education and Family Regulation Systems with Community Support**

For many experts, support meant finding a community of peers or caring adults on campus with similar backgrounds or interests. These relationships provided experts with a buffer from negative stereotypes and often presented them with the opportunity to learn how to advocate for themselves.

#### ***Peer Support***

Claudia's and CQ's identities were often the object of ridicule from teachers and students. Meanwhile, Ivonne's identity as a youth in foster care resulted in differential treatment from school staff and mistreatment from caregivers and social workers. All these experts were able to find support among peers who could relate to their experiences.

For Claudia, this happened in the family regulation system, while placed in a group home:

I mean I felt more at home than anything when I was in the foster system as a non-binary, because in my group home, there's a lot of kids [who] are transgender, non-binary,

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gender-fluid. So, I never felt left out or stuck or anything because a lot of times, there, there would be, staff, like females or non-binaries, other people that would understand.

While Claudia was struggling for their gender to be recognized at school, at home they had a safe place to simply exist, where no one questioned their identity. However, it is important to note, that unfortunately this is not the case for most gender expansive youth in foster care. CQ, on the other hand, was able to find this community at school. For a time, CQ was on house arrest, not attending school. She called a guidance counselor, Ms. Wills, to advocate that she continue her education. She remembers:

So, with that school, it was so much smoother. I was CQ all the time.... So that was really, really wonderful to me that there was two trans folks in there because otherwise, it was just questioning students that were at the school. It wasn't like any of them were truly gay, trans, or bi, but they knew about it.... And she had the students walk me to the bus stop that day to go see my probation officer because apparently, my mother had gone to the probation officer saying that she couldn't keep me at the house, that I was too flamboyant, that she was ashamed of me.... But I wasn't doing anything bad. I was hanging out with a community that accepted me and loved me and were good with me.

After this incident, CQ was placed in foster care. Despite the jarring experience of being on house arrest and then returning to school, only to be placed in foster care shortly after, CQ fondly remembered this community as one of the few times she felt safe at school.

Ivonne found a community of peers in foster care at school who taught her how to navigate the family regulation system and advocate for herself:

So, I had two cliques: my regular clique and then my foster family clique. I would say it was amazing because they were always advocating, and it was like a brother and sister

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hood. They knew I was in care. They were like, "Hey, you need to ask for this. You need to ask for that. Ask your social worker for this. Make sure you apply for this. Make sure—" and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" They hit me up to so many things.

And so, it was helpful to have other people to say, "No, she's supposed to do this." And so that started me to say, "Hey, are you supposed to be doing this?" And having more conversations with my first and second social worker to say, "That's not what's happening. No, that's not what's happening here." So, it was wonderful to have that experience, to have other people around me that were in foster care to help me know what I didn't know.

While stakeholders in the family regulation system, like social workers, are meant to manage youth's needs, they are frequently made to advocate for the resources they are guaranteed by law. Ivonne's experience is demonstrative of the fact that many youth in care survive because of the attentiveness and support they receive from their peers.

Claudia, CQ, and Ivonne experienced reprieves from the harm inflicted on them in the education and family regulation systems due, in large part, to the peer support that they found in their housing placements and at school. These experiences, however brief they were, had lasting impacts on their self-esteem and ability to navigate both systems.

### ***Adult Support***

Many experts were also fortunate enough to find supportive adults who could provide the resources, safe spaces, and encouragement necessary to survive school, the family regulation system, and to reach their academic goals. Nadine and Marissa were lucky enough to have found these adults in their caregivers, while Chrissy, Ellie, and Claudia found these adults at school.

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Nadine recalled that despite having a fifth-grade education, her grandmother, who took her in when she entered the system, was a safe haven. While her grandmother could not help Nadine with schoolwork or college applications, it appears that the emotional support that her grandmother provided was vital to building Nadine's confidence. Consequently, Nadine felt empowered to seek out the resources she needed to get into college.

Marissa was placed with foster parents who worked hard to broaden her horizons by exposing Marissa to new experiences:

Yeah. I feel like that probably played a major role in my perspective, when it comes to having the same opportunities as others might, even though maybe that's not true because of me being in foster care. But I felt like, because my foster parents were able to get me involved in things like, for example, CPR classes, the training, or just pushing me to get involved with sports or clubs and that sort of thing, really, I guess, impacted me in a way, where I feel like I was able to do that. And now that I am in college, I know that if I ever wanted to be involved in something, I could look for resources that'll help make that happen.

For both experts, it appears that having a solid foundation at home enabled them to feel safe and self-assured to pursue their educational goals, even when their caregivers could not necessarily provide them with resources, such as knowledge of the educational system, financial support, or academic support.

Chrissy, Ellie, and Claudia found adults at school, ranging from teachers to security guards, who offered them safety and support on campus. In high school, Chrissy was bullied and harassed by peers of all genders, which led to her involvement in a number of physical

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altercations. Once, Chrissy remembers that after she got into a fight with a male student for sexually harassing her, two security guards took her under their wing:

The same security officers that escorted me to the office after my first physical altercation are the same security officers that escorted me during this incident. They didn't try to "size" me up; instead, they de-escalated the situation and I felt that they were more empathic because they were gay women. They were kind of like my guardians throughout that for the first year and doubled as my high school coaches. Eventually they did tell me, "Chrissy we knew what it was to be you, because we're not accepted for whatever 'flaws'. We didn't mind standing up for our sexuality and we see that you were being ostracized for standing up for not wanting to be looked at as meat." And it was the first time I had ever heard, "You don't need to be sexualized, it is okay. What you're feeling is okay."

The security guards explained to Chrissy that because of their sexualities, they had also been ostracized from their community. They empathized with Chrissy's struggles and provided her with a sounding board to express herself. They also coached the girls' basketball team, of which Chrissy was a member, thus providing her consistent support in a hostile environment. Chrissy also recalled that during this time, her economics teacher encouraged her to use her energy differently:

My economics teacher... told me, "I could see you as a lawyer. I want you in my debate team. I want you there. I want you to take all that aggression, your thirst for knowledge." Like, she knew that in summer my fun thing to do is read the dictionary and understand what words meant. Kind of weird... it was my escape, you know, I didn't have access to

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books, but I had access to the dictionary. So, she knew that I loved to learn and that I don't mind standing up for what you believe in.

In sharing this with Chrissy and giving her the opportunity to join the debate team, Chrissy learned to see herself differently, envisioning a future for herself that she may not have accessed otherwise.

Ellie was enough fortunate to attend an International Baccalaureate (IB) school that provided her with opportunities to explore post-secondary education. From an early age, she remembered that educators stressed the importance of college:

They just kind of drilled into us from an early age. I remember there was some...door decorating contest where we put your dream college flag on your door. I'm sitting there like, "What?" I don't know. You're in first grade. You're what? Seven. So, I don't know. But they just kind of said-- it wasn't really even the question. It was like, "What college do you plan to go to when you're older?" I guess I have to decide, which is a little bit weird but ultimately positive.... They gave me opportunities to do dual enrollment at a college nearby. They would, A, pay for the course, and B, pay for my Lyft taxi to get there every Thursday....They gave us so many opportunities that I wouldn't have had anywhere else.... But the fact that I'm here [in college] and the majority of my tuition and housing is being paid for, it's really a blessing. And I don't think that I would be here had it not been for everything that my high school set me up.

Ellie's school culture revolved around the idea that their students were going to college, without question. This gave her access to resources that are often unavailable to students in Ellie's demographic (ie: Latina, queer, systems-impacted) While, this could be problematic for students

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who imagine something different for their lives, for Ellie, it was ultimately an important factor in getting into college.

While most of Claudia's interview revolved around the challenges they experienced in school, they recalled a handful of educators who made a positive impact on their schooling:

They would, they would never, they would never like making me feel dumb or anything or say, "Oh, that's an easy question," or "Read it again." They would take the time and helped me with it. And if I, if they did need to give me extra time, they would let me know, "Just try it one more time by yourself and if you still, still [don't] understand it [we'll] get to you...." I explained to one of my teachers, the teacher that helped me graduate... I explained to her that I did not understand the homework, I was confused, and she asked me, "Why don't you ask your mom or dad?" And I told her that both of my parents were deceased, and I don't have anyone at the house to explain it to me. She stayed on the phone she explained it to me, she helped me out.

Given that the majority of Claudia's educational career was marked by negative experiences with teachers, the fact that Claudia had teachers that were patient with them and went above and beyond to ensure that they understood the material, was powerful.

Youth in foster care are frequently stripped of traditional networks of support, such as parents, siblings, extended family, non-relative kin, and community. As such, they are frequently characterized as deficient of the motivation, cultural and social capital, and agency necessary to successfully navigate school. Due to the systemic barriers they are forced to confront, youth in foster care often exhibit confrontational behaviors in order to survive, which run counter to what educators view as behaviors of traditionally successful students. In my experience, educators are quick to see youth in foster care, especially BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, as having

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little incentive to create goals for themselves and even less potential to reach them. Expert interviews reveal that, even though many of the experts internalized these stereotypes at some point, with the support of caring peers and adults, they were given the freedom and self-determination to speak up for themselves, endure difficult situations, and dream of a life beyond the family regulation system.

Using Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, which views capital through a CRT lens, we can see that the resources experts received through community and supportive adults resulted in the accumulation of aspirational, familial, and navigational capital. Aspirational capital is the capacity to preserve plans for the future even in the face of barriers, allowing young people to imagine possibilities beyond their current conditions, even if they do not have the material resources to achieve them (Yosso, 2005). This type of capital is revealed in Chrissy's story, where despite the fact that she had little academic support in or out of school and was characterized as a less than ideal student, her economics teacher allowed her to dream of a future in a prestigious career, even as other adults in her life sent her explicit and overt messages that she did not belong at school. Familial capital is the cultural knowledge cultivated among kin, which can include nuclear and extended family, friends, and even ancestors, which preserves community history and memory (Yosso, 2005). This type of capital can be seen in Claudia's and CQ's stories of having their gender identities accepted by their peers, and Nadine's anecdote of being cared for by her grandmother. Familial capital was vital, as it reduced feelings of isolation and gave experts the space to feel connected to others with common backgrounds. Lastly, navigational capital refers to the ability to maneuver institutions that typically exclude, or in this case, harm BIPOC communities. This category of capital is illustrated in Ivonne's and Ellie's stories, as Ivonne's peers gave her the tools to navigate a hostile family regulation system and



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Ellie's school community supported her academic goals. While it is likely that many factors have contributed to the fact that all adult experts have attained or are on their way to completing post-secondary education, it is evident that community cultural wealth they have built has provided them with tools to survive and thrive, despite challenges stacked against them.

## **Chapter 6: Implications**

Literature concerning school discipline, push-out, and the school-to-prison pipeline is saturated with narratives of BIPOC boys and men. Their stories and experiences are vital to understanding the ways in which systems intersect and rely on each other to oppress communities of color. However, these narratives only give us a fraction of the story. The scarcity of research on BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, especially those whose lives have been impacted by the family regulation system, deprive scholars and educators of insight into the ways that these individuals are marginalized and pushed out of schools. While this study is small, its size allowed me to engage deeply over years and months with community experts to draw important conclusions about the educational experiences of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care. Community experts' stories identify the unique barriers these individuals encounter and the strengths they possess to overcome them, and point to changes in research and practice that are necessary to transform conditions for coming generations.

### **Contributions to Existing Research**

Even though research on the educational and disciplinary experiences of BIPOC girls has been a growing area of research for some time, the dearth of resources for these youth illustrates that there is still much to be desired in terms of policies and practices. Furthermore, literature concerning educational experiences specific to girls and gender expansive youth in foster care is virtually non-existent. The life outcomes typically attributed to this population demonstrate that a dramatic systemic change is necessary to stop their criminalization, which often begins in school.

Experts' stories align with much of the previous literature on BIPOC girls in school. As in the existing literature, the majority of community experts attended schools whose student population consisted of mostly Black and brown students, and through their interviews, it was

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evident that many of their schools relied on punitive measures to repress the student population. For many experts, school campuses represented hostile environments where they were stigmatized by racial, gendered, and ableist, stereotypes. Furthermore, in line with existing research, community experts were frequently made to feel unwelcome at school and were actively pushed out through isolation, neglect, and punishment. However, this study illustrates that the intersectional experiences of being women, gender expansive, BIPOC, and impacted by the family regulation system, produce additional barriers that youth who live with their biological families typically do not have to confront, including frequent placement changes, stigma associated with foster care placement, and contradictory or ineffectual stakeholders.

### *Frequent Placement Changes*

Given the odds stacked against BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth, completing middle and high school is an inherently difficult task. However, when taking into consideration the number of transitions youth in foster care experience, completing secondary school can seem impossible. The literature on youth in foster care demonstrates that Black girls and gender expansive youth, of any ethnic or racial background, experience the highest number of housing placements (Human Rights Campaign, 2011; Patrick & Chaudhry, 2017). Housing placements require youth to adjust to house rules and routines, navigate relationships with new caregivers and housemates, and are frequently accompanied by changes in school placement. The initial act of being removed from one's home and experiencing subsequent transitions are destabilizing for youth and have been found to impact development (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Marissa's, CQ's, Claudia's, María's, Hannah's, and Chrissy's narratives all reinforce such findings. Marissa attributed gaps in her learning to the fact that she was forced to change housing placements a number of times. CQ reflected mostly on the number of schools she was made to attend

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throughout her time in the juvenile justice and family regulation systems. Each school had its different challenges, from transphobic staff to gang activity. While CQ grew resilient enough to navigate different school cultures, problematic staff, and difficult peer interactions, she never should have had to negotiate those transitions, especially on her own. Claudia, María, and Hannah all lived in group homes after a number of individual foster family placements, which is one of the more difficult types of housing placement. While Claudia was fortunate enough to live in a group home that reflected and celebrated their non-binary identity, the experience also left all three individuals with little one-on-one academic support. Chrissy was eventually placed in legal guardianship with a foster family that abused her and left her to manage difficult school experiences alone. At a baseline level, BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth are already forced to manage low academic expectations from educators and substandard schools (Love, 2019). When placed in foster care, these youth are made to carry impossible burdens, which frequently prevents them from graduating from high school.

### *Stigma Associated with Foster Care Placement*

Previous literature describes the controlling images that inform mistreatment among BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth. Research shows that Black and Latina girls in particular are characterized as hypersexual, aggressive, and assumed to be more mature than their male counterparts, affording them fewer mistakes than their male peers, while LGBTQ youth are characterized as deviant (Blake et al.; Hurtado et al., 2015; McQueeney & Girgenti-Malone, 2018; Morris, 2016; Palmer et al., 2016). These youth experience harsh surveillance and punishment, efforts to force them to conform to dominant norms. Though these patterns are evident in the stories of the community experts, their involvement in the family regulation system had additional implications for them. My observations of Briana, along with Chrissy's

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and Ivonne's narratives, illustrate the stigmatization associated with foster care placement. For Chrissy and Briana, due to their previous experiences of sexual abuse, their foster family and school staff, respectively, positioned them as participants in their own abuse. Chrissy's foster parents and Briana's assistant principal reinforced their characterization as troublemakers, and deprived both individuals of adult protection. Ivonne remembered being pitied and patronized by her teachers because she was in foster care. While she did not experience mistreatment directly from her teachers, Ivonne described feeling as though she was 'less than' because of her family situation. In addition to being impacted by the gendered and racialized stereotypes, involvement in the family regulation system affected ways that educators viewed and interacted with community experts.

### *Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen*

Youth in foster care exist at the nexus of a web of stakeholders and systems, including, but not limited to, probation officers, mental health professionals, special education case managers, social workers, caregivers, and birth parents. The overall goal of family regulation is reunification with the family of origin or permanence with a legal guardian (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2018). Each stakeholder has their own individual goals that they work toward: A probation officer supervises and reports on youth's behavior; social workers help birth parents and youth meet their case plan goals; and foster parents are focused on providing a stable home (Badillo-Urquiola, 2018). However, stakeholders often lack the resources to fully support youth effectively, as group homes, mental health agencies, and family regulation agencies are frequently short-staffed and overwhelmed with clients (Badillo-Urquiola, 2018). In my professional experience, while stakeholders juggling all these needs, education often falls by the wayside. There are few, formalized spaces where stakeholders convene to discuss youth's

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progress that include educators, unless a young person has a special education Independent Education Program (IEP). Systemic issues, such as frequent placement changes and a lack of collaboration between systems, result in too little information sharing among systems (Zetlin, 2006). As stakeholders are responsible for very specific and siloed aspects of a youth's well-being, there is little understanding of how their complex needs impact their school performance, or their academic needs go unmet completely. All community experts, with the exception of Marissa and Ellie, remembered that, despite having a number of adults in their lives, they frequently felt unsupported and uninformed about the resources available to them as youth in care. For some experts, such as CQ and Chrissy, these stakeholders even imposed more barriers to success than already existed. Given that community experts had more adults in their orbit than their non-systems impacted peers, if the education and family regulation systems were as benevolent and unbiased as they are supposed to be, these stakeholders would have made their educational trajectory easier, not more difficult. While experts were able to draw on familial and navigational capital to survive high school and beyond, they should not have had to do this alone.

This study demonstrates that BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth have specific educational needs and challenges that often overlap with their non-systems impacted peers, but cannot be consolidated with them. This study supports our understanding about systemic and interpersonal barriers to academic success, and the unique ways that impacted youth resist these barriers. As such, community expert narratives illustrate the need for both academic and real-world changes in order to create more scholarship, more support, and ultimately, a better world for these individuals.

### **Recommendations**

Field observations, coupled with community expert narratives, demonstrate the urgent need for more literature concerning this population, as well as changes in educational practice to reduce barriers facing these students. Ideally, changes in educational practice would include improved teacher education and eliminating suspension in favor of restorative practices. While these changes would support youth in the short term, ultimately, these stories illustrate the oppressive and predatory nature of the family regulation system and point to a need to abolish the system as a whole.

### ***Academic Recommendations***

This study elucidates the need for additional research concerning youth in foster care that utilizes an intersectional approach and involves individuals with lived experiences as collaborators, not subjects. The overwhelming majority of literature regarding youth in foster care treat this population as a monolith. Of the over 60 academic sources I used in completing this study that focus exclusively on youth in foster care, only 12 articles center the experiences of youth and families of color; nine focus on the experiences of girls and women; eight center LGBTQ youth; and two center youth with disabilities. Furthermore, only three of these academic sources use an intersectional approach, examining experiences of girls and women of color. While many individuals who are impacted by the family regulation system encounter similar forms of oppression, we lose important perspectives that shed light on the unique ways that communities with intersectional identities experience systemic violence when we continue to treat youth in foster care as a monolith. Thus, we lose the opportunity to imagine and work toward solutions. Further research is needed to explore experiences of girls, gender expansive youth, boys, queer youth, and physically and intellectually disabled youth from various racial and ethnic

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backgrounds, both as distinct populations and as overlapping communities. Research that teases apart nuances in these differences will lead to much needed institutional and social change.

### *Recommendations for Educational Practice*

The overwhelming majority of community experts shared jarring incidents with educators that ranged from unsettling to outright traumatizing. In conversations with experts, many identified the need for educators to stand in solidarity with youth struggles, including having a better understanding of their experiences, high expectations for their academic abilities, and the opportunity to repair relationships when harm occurs.

Time and time again, community experts expressed that they wished that educators were more curious about their circumstances. Many experts expressed that they needed to talk to someone about their experiences and found few adults at school willing to hear them out. Additionally, experts shared that they wished that teachers would be more understanding that factors outside of school may have impacted their academic performance or behavior. Despite the fact that many experts had gaps in their education, placing them far behind their peers academically, some experts commented on the need for teachers that recognize their potential and encourage them to set high goals for themselves. Given these recommendations, it is evident that educators need to be better equipped to work with systems impacted youth. Education scholars contend that teacher education does not do enough to ensure that educators understand the sociopolitical context of their work. Rooting teacher education in social justice and a critical understanding of the oppressive foundations of public education can improve teachers' understanding of their role in the school-to-prison pipeline and increase their chances of playing a part in actively countering negative student paths (Raible & Irizarry, 2010).



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Experts also expressed the need for schools to repair student relationships in the campus community rather than isolating and punishing students. When asked what would have helped her thrive in school, DS shared:

I think would it have been helpful if we had this program for these individuals to come into, and it not be something where they're being punished, like you know we have, like, if for example you don't show up to class you're going to go to the cafeteria and sit with all the bad kids who don't show up to class. But what if during that time of sitting we're doing something to learn about our own roots, and our own abilities and being taught like of people who have been in these situations and overcome them.... [Y]ou probably need somebody to mentor these kids. That's why they're in this detention center, not to, you know, ignore and go on about things that are irrelevant to the structure of their life and their development.

Zero tolerance policies and the deficit mindsets that these policies cultivate among school staff and educators, rupture students' relationship with individual educators, as well as the school community as a whole and education in itself. DS's recommendation for additional resources that would enable youth to ground themselves in community and their own identity is in line with calls to eradicate exclusionary discipline in favor of restorative and healing justice. Restorative justice refers to a set of principles directed at mending harm by focusing on healing relationships, while healing justice refers to practices to support the comfort and safety of individuals and communities (Ginwright, 2016). These changes would enable schools to center wellness and compassion, rather than isolation and punishment (Ginwright, 2016). While changes in practice are vital to transforming the conditions that youth are experiencing in the present moment, they

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do little to interrogate the institutional violence that youth in foster care are forced to endure. As such, greater systemic changes are necessary.

### *Recommendations for Systemic Change*

Immediate changes in educational policy and practice are vital to improving educational and life outcomes of youth in foster care who are currently navigating the educational and family regulation systems. Historically, however, such changes only serve to make these systems appear friendlier and do nothing to challenge their violent nature. As such, I believe that only the abolition of the family regulation system will create the lasting change necessary to protect youth from criminalization on school campuses. The family regulation system is largely viewed as a benevolent system, which exists to ensure the well-being of children and their families. However, historical context and experts' narratives tell us otherwise. Scholars who investigate the family regulation system argue that its exploitative and predatory nature is rooted in slavery and settler-colonialism, while experts' stories illustrate that even experts who felt safe in foster care still experienced trauma, mistreatment, and stigma in school. These experiences greatly impacted their well-being and academic outcomes. While improvements to the education system could mediate some of these challenges, the ways in which the education, family regulation, and juvenile justice systems intersect demonstrates that as long as youth are placed in foster care, they will continue to be harmed by these three systems, with few options to escape. Youth and their families would be better served by increased social safety nets that ensure housing, education, food, and employment for all.

Family regulation scholars argue that family disruption has, historically, been used as a tool of oppression, as the erosion of family ties serves as a method to subordinate entire peoples (Roberts, 2002). Slavery situated white masters as the head of the plantation family, which was

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considered an ideal system through which to transfer moral values to 'uncivilized' Africans (Roberts, 2002). American courts gave white masters divine rights over families of enslaved Africans, and subject enslaved children to their white masters' authority (Roberts, 2002). Similarly, removal of Indigenous children from their families served to eliminate Indigenous peoples by fracturing intergenerational knowledge dissemination and family growth (Jacobs, 2014). Family solidarity and cultural identity have become tools of resistance for these communities in particular (Jacobs, 2014; Roberts, 2002). In modern times, the family regulation system intervenes primarily in the lives of BIPOC families who are frequently affected by poverty, substance abuse, unemployment, and unstable housing.

The historical roots of family regulation inform how the system impacts youth and families to this day, as it continues to target BIPOC youth and families. Family advocates and activists argue that this historical context, coupled with the current lack of services that the system has to offer, results in a system that causes more harm than good. As such, a small but growing movement has begun to call for the abolition of the family regulation system. Following their lead, I believe that this is the only course of action to improve academic outcomes of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care.

Children are removed from their families and placed into foster care for abuse and neglect. The most prevalent reason for removal is neglect, which is an obscure classification often connected to a parent's irresponsibility or inability to provide their children with food, housing, or to receive treatment for mental health or substance abuse issues (Godsoe, 2020). In addition to the stigma attached to involvement in the family regulation system, families and youth who have been impacted by this system are found to have worse life outcomes compared to the rest of the population. For example, research demonstrates that while many youth in foster

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care are removed from their families due to homelessness, youth and families who are impacted by the system go on to face increased instances of homelessness, as well as higher rates of imprisonment and developmental challenges (Cloud, 2019; Greenberg & Tackney, 2017). The carceral nature of the family regulation system has become even more evident with the recent Texas Supreme Court ruling that allows the Texas family regulation system to investigate parents and doctors who offer gender-affirming care to trans youth (Chappell, 2022). While dismantling the system alone will not magically transform conditions for marginalized children and families, abolition calls us to repair harm that oppressive systems have caused. Child abuse and neglect do occur, and intervention is needed to keep survivors safe, but widening the carceral net to surveil and punish struggling children and families does very little to protect most of the youth in foster care. Much of the interpersonal and systemic violence that children and families experience can be mediated by increasing safety net programs that equip communities with sufficient food, housing, mental and physical health care, and employment (Cloud, 2019). Only then can we see real change in the educational outcomes of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Though previous research on BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care is extremely limited, research from the fields of education, sociology, and psychology suggest that BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth enter foster care at higher rates than their counterparts due to interpersonal and structural violence. Once in the system, racialized and gendered stereotypes influence their treatment by educators and lead to greater surveillance and punishment in schools. Critical race theorists propose that intersecting layers of oppression manifest in schools and work to further marginalize historically oppressed students. CRT theorists advocate for counter-storytelling as a method to challenge the dominant narratives of these populations. This study, using ethnographic and qualitative research methods, seeks to understand the educational experiences of BIPOC girls and gender expansive youth in foster care and the ways that they navigate mistreatment by educators. In examining data from field observations and qualitative interviews through a CRT lens, I came to the following conclusions:

1) Community experts illustrate that, as systems-impacted youth, they faced systemic barriers to academic success, unique to their intersecting identities. 2) Systemic barriers in education impact experts' feelings of school connectedness and give rise to complex behaviors in the effort to protect themselves. 3) In spite of barriers placed in front of them, experts survived education and the family regulation system with community support. While further research is needed to explore nuances of the educational experiences of various communities impacted by the family regulation system, these findings are important as they contribute to the limited existing literature on this population. This research sheds light on the barriers to academic success that BIPOC girls in foster care experience. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that these challenges are distinct from those of their non-systems impacted peers and thus require

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unique and creative solutions, ranging from short-term resolutions such as changes in educational practice, to long-term remedies, such as the abolition of the family regulation system.

## Appendix A

### Chrissy's interview

*So my first question is, do you off the top of your head happen to have a pseudonym or a fake name you would want me to use while like when I actually get to the writing stage to like refer to you*

Yes and no right so a lot of individuals, they know I present myself as Chrissy and I'm more than happy to use my name, and that is Chrissy.

*And then what's the highest level of education that you have*

The highest level of education is, I guess, college. It's not completed, I'm currently in my third semester at Fullerton College.

*Get to the actual questions. So, I want to hear a little bit about your overall experience in school. Like, just kind of generally what was like middle and high school like for you? Did you like it? Did you hate it? And, why?*

My elementary years, I really don't recall it much as, like... like kind of frozen in time, and that was like, when I was probably second or third grade, because I was in foster care right before I started kindergarten, I believe, and then I went back to my birth family for... up until second going into third grade, if not I think I was in third grade. So, I don't remember any unpleasant experiences. I... I do believe. During the elementary time [school] was more of a safe haven, I enjoyed it. I think in the areas that I grew up was, like you, know poverty stricken so, it was, you know, right in front of Ford Park in Bell Gardens, not a very good area. It was gang infested, it was normal to walk by gang activity as I was going to my elementary. But, I still felt safe like I was aware. I do recall being hyper aware of my surroundings and really being able to understand what was in my environment. But, I never felt scared or, you know, ostracized in elementary school, that's when I was living with my birth family then come elementary— post me being removed from my biological family. That first experience, I felt ostracized because the reality was that I was a Spanish speaking student, and pretty much every school after that did not have a fluid ESL program. They didn't have teachers that really spoke the language, even though I was in some communities that, you know, had a Hispanic population, but I was always the only student that spoke Spanish. I always struggled to speak English in the beginning of elementary post-removal. And so from that perspective I did feel ostracized. The first elementary school that I went to, I was very much welcomed but I was looked at like I was literally a foreigner. You know like, Oh my gosh, they... I don't know if the students had never spoken the language in their home or maybe they just didn't hear another student speak it but I, like, spoke absolutely no English. So, it was news to me and it was shocking because I was never in that situation prior to that were I was able to go to elementary school and speak Spanish with no problem when I lived with my birth family in Bell Gardens. And so that was, you know, a culture shock for me. And then, as well as being around other races. So up until the second grade going into third grade, before I got taken away before, I was removed, I don't like to say taken away right. I was properly removed from my biological family. I was around nothing but Hispanics and Blacks, that was my normal. And then I went from that to "Oh, there are Asian people, they're not just these individuals that are in my books." People that don't necessarily look like me. So I think that curiosity I also enjoyed. And then as I got into a more Anglo environment, that's when I

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experienced more, I wouldn't say racism but bullying because of my ethnicity and the fact that I didn't know how to speak English. So I would be bullied a lot in a specific elementary school by certain students but the one thing I do always recall is the learning institutions were always supportive of the fact that I did not speak the language, and that they always wanted to strive to help me be a better student. And then when I went to my final placement, my environment consisted of a mixture of Asians and Hispanics. So, by then I had already been exposed to different ethnicities, different races, but still primarily English speaking environment so that's where I always still felt, in the elementary stage right before I went to middle school, that I didn't belong. I didn't feel a sense of belonging even though the children were welcoming, I still didn't feel like very well meshed with everyone because my culture was still drastically different than everyone else's. I was still learning the, "American culture" right, despite the fact that there were a lot of Hispanics there. And also, I didn't get a lot of support from my... that last placement, to be comfortable in speaking Spanish I was often ridiculed there. So, I think that lack of confidence was already in my mind so I would go to school and probably feel that but, you know, I was also teased a lot for other things like my physical nature, you know, being over developed as a young lady. But such remarks didn't necessarily make me feel unsafe. It was *a* safe haven, at some point, and then when I went into middle school where it was kind of like my, my year of extreme bullying, where I was getting into a lot of physical altercations with both girls and men, you know, boys, I should say not men but they're, they're boys. And, you know, again, I wouldn't say that I felt unsafe there I just always felt like I had to prove myself as a 4 foot, you know, little girl to everyone that you can't do to me what was being done to me at home and the thing is, a lot of them didn't understand that I was still experiencing trauma at my last placement. So, now we, you know, I mean, referrals galore were in my file due to fighting and I was known to be feared, like, "Hey, she's a small and but don't mess around. She knows, how they say in the streets, you know, she knows how to get down, she had no filter," Like, "Oh, you want to get down, then let's do this. In class or out." And I transitioned into high school with the same attitude. I feel like that last mindset of like, kill or be killed in a sense, of survival followed me up until high school. And my experience there was also, you know, borderline violent, right, where I had to be in a community where I had to survive because of gangs, so either be looked at like you can be picked on and possibly, you know, not even bullied, but literally harassed by gangs, or show that you know how to show up, and that you're, you know, you're not scared. And so that's the mentality that I had with the type of crowd that I was able to be around, not to say that I was a gang member or affiliated in any type of way but the type of friends that I did have and I felt the most comfortable around, were individuals that had kind of hazy backgrounds. And also because I was able to really to somehow empathize with them. I understand the severity of gangs but at the same time, because I knew I wasn't in one for some reason I...I felt like I could empathize with them, maybe because I knew that possibly their behavior was because of where they were raised. That was my experience.

*What was your relationship like with your teachers?*

So, with my teachers, I felt like my relationship was really good in, um, Middle School, all of my middle school teachers were amazing like there's not a single complaint, if anything I would say that we were like terrorizing children. They're really doing, like, the Lord's work being teachers there. And also, a quick note on that so my middle school, our class was the first to be seventh and eighth graders. So, before that sixth grade didn't even exist but at some point in time, it did exist at that school and gave us a sense of collective pride and bond over that. The teachers were



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also extremely welcoming, and a couple of alumni and others that had their parents working at the same school as aids or teachers. Everyone knew everybody because it was a small little school and a small little city. And so I feel like already that respect factor was in place that you had for their parents automatically transferred to them as teachers, and also their way of teaching was very immersive, very inclusive, and they really pushed you to really do your best, like, "Don't let your surroundings tell you that because we are considered a poor school that you are unable to be a successful human being." They were always very positive and actually worked. From a child's perspective, I felt that they really pushed to create academic programs that our principals didn't even bother to do. An example was a history teacher who also taught AVID, studied to become a lawyer but he decided that he wanted to become a teacher instead so that tells you a lot of where his heart was at you know. Another teacher had at one point interned with the Lakers under the study field of sports medicine but she chose to become a teacher at this small school which I am sure at times felt like a non-profit type of work. I always felt a lot of gratitude that they chose to become teachers instead of pursuing their original passion.

*Well, thank you for sharing that. Sounds like you had an incredible middle school experience. Yes, I did.*

*Did you ever feel like you had to confront your teachers for how they treated you? And if so, could you tell me about that. I*  
In middle school specifically?

*In high school.*

Intense times happened a lot in high school, not in middle school. In middle school I experienced tense times but was eventually left alone. In high school, the hard part was that... I wouldn't say that, I thought of it like I was a child that didn't really think like, "Oh, because you're white you're treating me like this right." And I think that's where a lot of the disconnect happens. So, just to kind of give you a quick background, right, my high school, I had no idea where I was going to go at the time because my home High School was in the works of being completely closed down. So that's how poorly funded it was. Nobody wanted to be there, there were so many gang altercations and a low graduation rate. When I was entering my freshman year, it was not all exciting to be at Workman High School and many parents were doing their best to transfer their kids to another high school in the district. Freshman year was a fearful time.

For me it was a little shocking to have the experience of a lot of those teachers because I came from a very small environment with my middle school consisting of about six or seven teacher (I can't remember) who rotated subjects to an array of teachers teaching their own subject. Another major difference was most the teachers were Anglo during my freshman year. As a teenager, I didn't see them as just "white" teachers but looking back as an adult, I can see how it was important for me to understand why race may play a role in my treatment. I didn't understand why they were treating me certain ways, or why they're being dismissive. I also didn't fully understand what sexism or racism was but I did hear the terms. An example of such behavior, is how a science teacher would be inappropriately looking at me or making unsavory remarks. He was known to be inappropriate and to make inappropriate remarks to my peers. Being a person that was already a survival of sexual abuse you know the signs, you understand certain cues such as words or body movement that are red flags. I was sexually abused by men so

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his comments such as “I love it when you have your hair down.” and eye movements (glancing at my breasts) were alarming to me and made me feel uncomfortable. He would also make sexist comments relating to periods. Again, that I didn't identify those comments as sexist (I didn't understand what that term meant at that age) I just knew for sure it was completely inappropriate. There was a select few that I would say that I felt very close to and connected to, and the few that I did actually felt connected to happen to also be alumni of my high school. And they worked to make programs as academically challenging for us as possible so that the students would have a higher chance of being accepted by choice colleges. That was my personal experience with staff in high school.

*And, and when you, when you voiced your discomfort with this teacher, what was the, what was the response like?*

The response was, I was a liar. First and foremost complete denial by that teacher. Despite the fact that I knew I was not the only female student who had made these accusations, I was still not believed. In my case, I say the truth not an accusation because an accusation is saying that I acknowledge it may not have happened. I didn't understand at that time that sexual abuse was not my fault. I, up until that time had still believed that, I asked for the sexual abuse, it was normal for a man to make inappropriate advances or make inappropriate comments, without any accountability, that it was their right because they are men, and I'm just being sensitive. It was considered okay for me to be objectified and looked at. The best I can compare it to is as a meat inspector, it's their job to see if I'm Grade A meat. And if I can't see that's men's nature, then I'm the one with the problem. I wasn't sure if staff at either middle school or high school was aware (that I know of), that I was sexually assaulted prior to being placed in foster care and while I was in the child welfare system. I'm not even sure if they knew that the woman I referred to as “mom” wasn't my biological mother and neither was the family I lived with. All they knew is that that's my mom. Also my last placement did not believe my claims of sexual abuse from my birth family and she reinforced the idea I was a problem, you know, I am crazy. I was never in a situation as a child amongst my peers or with school faculty where I was able to tell anyone, “Yes, I did experience sexual abused,” and even throughout high school I was experiencing sexual abuse there at my last placement. That's not to say that faculty needed to be aware to be more sensitive of the fact that a student was making a serious claim against a tenured teacher. I don't even think that they at least from the perspective of like this is a huge liability if the student is saying this. What happened for the student to feel this way? And another thing that made me feel uncomfortable is the fact that I had to detail my complaint to another male. So, I have to tell you that your *male* teacher is making me feel uncomfortable because of these specific reasons and I did not mind being specific right because I had already had a similar interview with state and local officials about my previous abuse, but it wasn't with men. I figured if I was detailed during my complaint they would understand that I was telling the truth despite many years before I was told “no, no, no we can't we can't believe you.” when I reported previous sexual attacks. I don't know what happened behind the scenes, I can tell you this, the teacher ended up retiring before anything else so I can't imagine anything further happened. It felt humiliating because the faculty I reported it to and the foster mother I was placed with at the time didn't believe me. She went as far as telling me not to be saying things like that about teachers. I was expecting, “Hey, what is going on that you really felt that way?” Instead it was always,

*“You're the problem. You're lying. You're a troubled student. And because you're a troubled student, we're not going to figure out why you're a troubled student but we know that you're a*

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*troubled student, and you can't be trusted. So I don't know how, but you need to find a way to stick it out in that class."*

They wouldn't even transfer me out. I had to push and advocate for myself because nobody else wanted to do it. I would to the academic counselors, "I'm not going in. I'm not going into that class anymore either I fail it out completely or place me in in-house suspension because I will not participate or you get me out of that class and transfer me out."

They eventually transferred me out of that class after kicking and fighting but I had to do it on my own, without the support of my "mom" which now I identify her as just my foster mom. She didn't care to fight for me.

*Wow, I'm so sorry to hear that happened but it makes me really, really happy to hear how much you advocated for yourself, that's so important. So, um, I want to shift gears a tiny bit. So you talked a little bit earlier about getting a lot of referrals, you know, having like these altercations at school. And so I want to talk a little bit about like the discipline that you experienced like suspension and expulsion in middle and high school. And you mentioned like getting into fights kind of leading up to that but I'm curious what the, what kind of messages, did it send to you. Like we say let me let me start over, this is long winded. So when you would get in trouble. What kind of messages did that send to you about how you were expected to behave, or what kind of student you're expected to be well I knew that I was expected to be?*

I knew that it was expected to be a good student the majority of the time. You're focusing on middle school and high school right? This isn't something that I acknowledged at the time, but looking back in middle school, out of all faculty involved in discipline, teachers were the most understanding and actually wanted to know why I was having that type of behavior. I never opened up to them out of fear of retaliation from my foster family. My principals typically would tell me, "You got in trouble. You need to do this, and you need to do that.". Principals expected me to change my behavior with the "help" of my "family" but I was never genuinely asked why I was misbehaving. When principles asked me, "Why are you doing this?" or "Why do you continue to get into fights?" it wasn't really a question to be answered but more so a statement they were making. I don't know if that makes sense. My teachers were more inquisitive and would tell me, "Look, my mom had you in her class, you were not like this. So what's going on?" My middle school was "small town", everyone knew each other, and it was normal for faculty to be related or to have your 4th grade teacher now be your middle school English teacher. And don't think that I was in little catfights; I was involved in aggressive fights and often didn't mind telling a student to meet me around the bungalow so we can "settle" our dispute. My first big fight in middle school was because I was accused of being gay. At that age in my community that's like the ultimate slap, especially in the culture that we were in during that environment right. At my school there were three closeted gay students who we knew were they didn't mind saying it at school but didn't repeat it at home. The good news is that they weren't bullied for being gay but it was pretty much accepted and unspoken of within the student body so I didn't understand why these girls were saying, "Oh, you know you're a lesbian you're a butch." just because I chose to wear "boys" clothing and was really the only girl to play sports with the boys during recess. I felt very offended by that because my character was being challenged. My truth of being straight wasn't accepted as truth, and it triggered my anger from all the years before when adults would tell me that I lied about being sexually assaulted. Unfortunately, the girl who was bullying and calling me a butch felt the brunt of it. It wasn't a

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little slap, I got a binder and split the skin between her bottom lip and chin that required stitches, stomped on her and let all my anger out on her. It's important for me to be honest about the full aggression of these assaults because at that time, I didn't know that's what it was - an assault on another student. It would be unfair for me to give an opinion of whether or not I received fair disciplinary actions for my actions. The way my middle school teachers responded to my altercation, was in phases. The first was shock. I think I was the first student to display such aggression during a school altercation and since they knew me fairly well, they then transitioned to "What happened, it could not have just been because she called you a lesbian. I know you really care less about what people call you." Not to defend my behavior but they were kind of right. This particular student had been bullying me since I arrived at the school in 4th grade and transitioned to middle school with me (she even manipulated another student to write "Chrissy is a bitch.") on my AVID class white board to humiliate me but since no one was willing to come forward, she got away with it. So all those years of being told I'm a liar (at home and at school by some bullies) just really built up and I couldn't take it anymore. And I had to (in my immature mind) defend my honor, my character trait of honesty (not a lesbian but being called one) was being challenged and unlike the adults, she was "my size" so handling that difference physically seem appropriate. I was taught at home, if there's a problem duke it out. My principal reacted in shock, but the discipline that came out of that specific incident - suspension. One thing that stood out from being reprimanded was how the principal pretty much allowed the other student's mom to approach me and cuss me out swinging her hands and threaten to f\*\*k me up. I mean, obviously this girl's mom had the right to be upset, but I feel it was unprofessional for the principal to allow an adult to approach a student. I also believe that the principal let the student's mother show her aggression towards me to "teach me a lesson". Side note, I ended up seeing this girl when I was around 21 or 22 years old at a club, and she still has a scar on her face. That was the first thing she told me (while a little tipsy), "I will never forget you. I see you every day in the mirror. We hashed it out in that club's bathroom but in a civilized manner, understood each other's point of view and never saw each other again. Now circle back into high school, it was completely different. I think my first altercation, well my first physical altercation there was with a football player, a freshman football player there who kept teasing me, teasing me, teasing me, and this guy literally pushed me and I almost fell down the stairs. And, I literally box him up and I embarrassed him because he did not expect this little tiny 4'11" girl who probably weighed like 97 pounds at the time to literally uppercut him and embarrass him in front of hundreds of kids in the courtyard. When I was pulled away, by security and security who happened to be my freshman basketball coaches. They didn't condone the behavior but they were understanding the situation at hand by telling me, "You would not just hit this male, like the way you did for no reason. I've never seen a girl hit like that just because he was just about to push you down the stairs." There's an underlying issue. However, the principal who is male responded: "What is your problem? Why would you do that? You're a girl. Girls do not fight." It was more of an issue that I punched him and the fact that he attempted to push me down the stairs was minimized just like his previous behavior toward me such as "panting" (it used to be a big thing in high school). This male literally placed his hands on me to remove clothing (sweat pants) while I was in class without my permission, and wasn't given anything more than a verbal warning. Just because I had basketball shorts underneath doesn't take away from the fact that he violated me and attempted to humiliate me in front of my peers. For one, you don't even realize all this trauma I had before. All these things built up, why: because I wasn't able to fight back my adult abusers. Since he was another student, I was willing to fight back. Similar to other

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incidents, most faculty in exception of principals wanted to know what “caused me to snap”. My second larger altercation in high school was also freshman year. It was between a girl and I, that was teasing and bullying me since I was in middle school. I reported it to my middle school but no one really took it seriously, so when I realized we both were now in the same high school I took matters into my own hands. She was a year older than me, and I literally told her like, “on Tuesday, I'm gonna kick your ass, and you're gonna wish that you had never, ever, messed with me, like straight up, like I put it on my uncle, you're going down.” And I took out every aggression on her as promised. Her face was so swollen after punching her so many times in the face. Just like my middle school fight, I stomped on this poor girl and even went as far as grabbing her head and smashing it on the concrete floor. She ripped my shirt off, I was there in a bra still fighting, taking out my aggression and anger. A teacher, went in between us and I will never forget (besides my clear aggression) how his defensive stance between us was against me. Yes, I understand how aggressive my behavior was, but I didn't understand why he felt it was appropriate for him to puff his chest out at me, call me out and ask if I was going to fight him next. This grown man probably in his 30's or 40's, with lean muscle and about six foot in a “What are you going to do about it” stance against a freshman girl. I mean, other students were getting jumped all around the school campus, stabbed and probably getting high but he wanted to respond to me out of all people this way? Who does that? Who does that?! And my mind at that time was survival right, because I just went crazy on this broad, making all reason go out the door and his stance to me at that moment in time, I was like, I don't care who you are, I'll stand up to you too, and I told them that. “So what's up you're gonna hit me too? Let's get it on then.” He did respond, “What you're going to hit me next? You're going to hit me next?” in a taunting voice. What professional does that? What grown up does that? What male does that to a tiny, 95 pound, 14 year old, I was 14 at the time. I was a threat to the student, but I was no way a threat to him (no weapon); he could easily tower over me.. Mind you I'm barely dressed, I'm there in my bra and although I am partially exposed, taunting me and “sizing” me up was more important to him as a professional than to de-escalate the situation and help me cover up. I don't know if he was a Hispanic or Anglo, based on his last name, I would assume he is Anglo. I don't feel his response was appropriate at all and I felt he needed to be responsible and re-trained on how to de-escalate such an incident. As an adult, I can't help but wonder if race and sex played a role in how he responded to me. Security finally arrived to escort me, [are asking] “Chrissy what's going on,” “you know now you can't be in basketball.” Like, “you already know what the consequences are, girl, you need to talk to me.” The same security officers that escorted me to the office after my first physical altercation are the same security officers that escorted me during this incident. They didn't try to “size” me up, instead they de-escalated the situation and I felt that they were more empathic because they were gay women. They were kind of like my guardians throughout that for the first year and doubled as my high school coaches. Eventually they did tell me, “Chrissy we knew what it was to be you, because we're not accepted for whatever ‘flaws’. We didn't mind standing up for our sexuality and we see that you were being ostracized for standing up for not wanting to be looked at as meat.” And I was the first time I had ever heard, “You don't need to be sexualized, it is okay. What you're feeling is okay.” “We understand as us identifying as other...you know as a different sexual orientation...” they didn't go into depth, they were very professional “not everyone accepts that and it is ok to challenge views and beliefs that others think you need to fit into Chrissy..”

*“And because of that, there is going to be struggles and with our struggles....we didn't have anyone to say, we understand where we're coming from, but we're here to tell you that we*



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*understand where you're coming from and there has to be an underlying issue for this behavior, and whether or not you're willing to open up. Our door will always be open, whether or not we're still working at this school. We will always be there for you. And whenever you're ready to open up to you to us. You can let us know and you will be safe."*

Unfortunately, never accepted their offer out of fear, not because I was afraid of them, but because I was afraid of my foster mom. During this incident, the usual principal response and discipline followed, "You know what you did. You're a horrible human being. You're going to have to have a lot of consequences. That isn't lady-like behavior." As an adult now I understand that a physical altercation is considered assault and battery. As a child you don't think, "Oh I'm committing assault and battery." A physical altercation is minimized by calling it "just a fight", education for how serious the matter is and the importance of identifying it as assault and battery isn't even brought up during discipline, which I feel is a disservice. However, all of a sudden because the student's parents expressed to the principal that they would like to file charges against me, now the seriousness of the situation is address for what it is: assault and battery. I did mangle her face pretty bad and said, "She can't even see right now her eyes are so swollen and black. She's scared of coming back to school." The charges didn't go through but I was suspended for a week and I was not allowed to have any contact with the student going forward. I understand why I needed to be suspended but I feel like I got the short end of the stick again. The school administration failed to educate me and never provided me resources such as counseling to help me manage my anger and didn't care to find out the source of the problem. I felt I was treated like a loss cause; I wasn't worth investing time or resources on. I was just another ghetto troubled girl at Workman High. Then also, as the years progressed, I was still getting into altercations but it was more so with teachers. I would just challenge them if I didn't appreciate the way they would handle certain situations and I would voice it out. I think a lot of my aggression was a reflection of what I wasn't able to control at home. So I felt like because I was outside of the home in some sense I can control what was going on around me. I still didn't mind like throwing it down in the classrooms and some of these teachers are like, "Look, that's not acceptable behavior. When you're ready to act civilized, you can come back in." My freshman science teacher jokingly nicknamed me Rocky but he had a serious talk with me about my aggressive behavior outside the classroom that I need to be careful about falling into the "trap" because he "knew" I was a good student. My principals never gave me that speech. Theirs was, "You're the problem you need to figure out why you're the problem, and you need to take care of that problem."

*Yeah, that's, that's super unfortunate. So, just, I have a few more questions, but I know that you said you had to be done by 10, so I don't know if you would prefer before we get into them like I could email you the rest, and you can write them out or if you have a few more minutes after 10, it's up to you.*

Yeah, I'll have a few more minutes.

*What would you have wanted them to know to help you more?*

Well, okay, so that's a great question. There was actually a high school teacher that kind of hunch without being told that something wasn't right at home. I know this because of a remark that was made by my foster mom, which is my last placement who was considered my legal guardian. Okay. So again, up until this point that I was aware of, no one knew that I was in foster care (peers and all faculty members). This is why I was telling you earlier that I consider myself

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privileged in the sense of like, I felt like I had a lot of people along my journey to really help with the confidence and that's something that I could always reflect back on and see good things, not just bad things in my journey. In this case, my senior English teacher had a hunch that something wasn't right and he would always try to keep me at school to do other activities, it wasn't just myself and him, by ourselves. It was along with other students. We were working on a project for a Storybook theme float. At the time... I was really learning how to hone in on my artistry skills, and I was working with a student to create our first float that our high school ever had and it was an exciting time. While we're trying to do the sketch, I tell him, "Sorry my mom does need me to go back home right now, I gotta go," and he says "No way you got to stay and finish this, because we need this done." So, he called her and she said "She's not staying. She's not allowed to stay." I didn't have other pending activities elsewhere and I wasn't allowed to go out so she couldn't come up with a specific excuse. My English teacher asked her "Why can't she not stay? Is it an unsafe walk? I could accommodate to make sure that she gets home safely." And she said, "Well, it's unsafe because..." This is like, so heart wrenching....and I'm so glad that he told me because we became really good friends after I became an adult. He didn't want to tell me her response when I was a student. But her excuse was, I couldn't stay because I could accuse him of sexual assault and what was he going to do if I did that? He said, "I have never in my life been told that never, never." Specifically by a mom to say that is when I knew something wasn't right [from the POV of the teacher]. You know the little nickname that the students had for my mom was 'mommy dearest' and if you don't know about mommy dearest, I would encourage you to watch that movie. Because even at that time I didn't know what mommy dearest was until I eventually watched it, and I understood why they called her that. And then that's when he told me, "Now I understand why they call her mommy dearest right because she's a pretty vindictive individual to even say something like that. That would be the last thing on my mind but I would assume that you would accuse me of, and why would that be the first thing that comes out of her mouth, as opposed to saying, 'Hey, I just don't think it would be right, like I just don't feel it's appropriate for her to stay.' something along those lines but instead it her excuse was because she didn't want me to be accused of sexual abuse." He was unaware that at that time, it was actually her adult son that was sexually abusing me in her home. She was aware of it. And, I wish I would have said something but honestly at the same time part of my survival, was that I had two biological siblings in the same placement, and they were being physically abused by her son. I was afraid that if I were to leave what I was witnessing....Um, things could have gotten a lot worse if I had left. The whole purpose of being removed from my biological family was to be in a safe home that sexual and physical abuse would not be present in but ironically I went back into the same environment until I aged out. And that was something that, I mean, that's a whole story in itself, why you know the county worker was not notified, there's reasons for that. But ultimately, I wish I would have been like "Hey I'm being sexually abused at home. My brothers are being abused at home, I was removed from my biological family only to go back to the same environment and this is what's going on."

*And, and what could. What could he have done to help you to not just like survive school but like thrive in school or not just him but any of your teachers?*

Yeah, so you know, this is again going back to my personal experience of identifying as privileged, right. Even though my foster mom made it very clear that I will not be a success because if her biological children were considered less successful than I was then that was a slap in her face. How can a child who, in her words, "Her mother didn't want her. She doesn't know

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who her dad is, her family is garbage. She is possibly not even a real citizen.” become more successful than her children, who are born citizens and who received a partial private education? So she did make it very clear to me that “Whatever your idea of successes is, it ain’t happening girl.”. Number 1, because of this [previous statement], and number two you’re incapable.” But my teachers, specifically in middle school and high school, told me, “You have so much potential.” My economics teacher who was a teacher and other subjects told me, “I could see you as a lawyer. I want you in my debate team. I want you there. I want you to take all that aggression, your thirst for knowledge...” like she knew that in summer, my fun thing to do is read the dictionary and understand what words meant. Kind of weird... it was my escape, you know, I didn’t have access to books but I had access to the dictionary. So she knew that I loved to learn and that I don’t mind standing up for what you believe in. She didn’t agree with me doing it the “street” way so she wanted to show me how to do it in a way that is more impactful and professional and positive. She made that very clear, “I could see you studying law, working for individuals that can’t do it for themselves.” And, of course as a high school student I didn’t really understand the concept of me becoming a lawyer or that it would be possible for me to achieve it.. You’re ridiculous, absolutely not I would say. Besides, my foster mom wouldn’t allow me to participate in the club anyway. I was in English honors in high school because my middle school teacher recommended it, in my opinion that is an excellent example of setting me up for success. I remember going to my high school counselor and asked, “Why am I in English honors class? I am not supposed to be in this class.” When they told me that my middle school English teacher recommended me, I was touched. At one point he was my English teacher in fourth grade who remembered when I arrived at the school, I didn’t speak a lick of proper English when I first got to his class. Now I don’t even have an accent, you can’t even tell that Spanish was my first language. He remembered my journey and believed in my future. So, my teachers were always planning the seeds of success and I felt very fortunate to experience that, because I can tell you that not every student was recommended. It’s not because those students didn’t deserve it, it’s just because perhaps they didn’t have the drive. I don’t know, just an assumption right. Teachers knew that education would be my only way of escape from a city that didn’t offer more than the broken streets. But they don’t understand how I was being limited to becoming successful. Education can be an escape, but when an authoritative figure is sabotaging that process in every way possible, then no matter what you’re not going to be successful. I can tell you that my foster mom took the most extreme measure possible, her sabotage will continue to create barriers in career opportunities. I created very deep emotional relationships with many of my teachers. In high school I was even part of a protest at my school (I still have two of my protest t-shirts) to save these teachers, because they were pro students and the new Principal at the time was against them because he had more of a totalitarian mindset. These teachers encouraged us by telling us, “You’re capable of more. Don’t let the lack of funding tell you that this is all that there is for you. There is more beyond the ghetto. I’m putting my time at Workman High because you are worth high quality education as much as those students who are in a ‘better’ funded district.” So, I was very fortunate in that aspect.

*That’s awesome. So I have three more questions but I just want to do another quick time check just to see how*

Yeah, go for it. Yeah, I don’t have to drive too far. I just didn’t want to push the time Yeah, no, I appreciate that. Go ahead.



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*So I'm curious how you feel like your gender, and your identity and your gender and ethnic identity impacted your experience at school?*

Well, Um, it's in school age right. I didn't understand that concept at all. I didn't even think like oh my age, my gender and my sexual orientation would be a factor in the way I was being treated. I would also say that it was very colorblind. I think it was because ironically the privilege of being able to live... maybe not the circumstance I wanted right....Being able to live in different homes that I did not identify with culturally.... It was a norm for me to view people in a colorblind way, unfortunately. And why I say unfortunately is because I didn't understand the impact that my skin color actually had on my treatment and the services that were available to me. Also, I was very much aware of sexism, but I didn't understand that it wasn't healthy to experience it. That it is not normal to be sexualized or to be barred from certain experiences because I am female. And also because I am a Hispanic female. When I was child and up into my mid-twenties, I had a lot of questions about my ethnicity primarily because they [others] thought I was, Asian, they didn't really think I was Mexican they thought I was at least biracial. So, for some reason that created... Well now that I understand right as an adult and being, you know, educated in this segment where Asian women are looked at very sexually... And at that time, I didn't understand why others (primarily men) would sound excited to ask if I was Asian or bi-racial (Mexican-Asian) because I just saw myself as a human being, why would my race matter? Why do you have to be so specific? But I feel like I was treated differently because I was a woman, but primarily around men as a sexual object. I think more so because they thought I identified as Asian, they were not aware that I actually was full blooded Hispanic. Whether I was around other Hispanic students or around different ethnic groups, I wasn't taken for any type of intellectual being by the majority of my peers when I spoke only Spanish. Often I was told to "know my place" as a girl by male peers and traditional female peers (hence being called a butch for wanting to play sports with the boys and "dress" like them). I am a Christian woman but I have a lot of friends who are also identify as gay. They describe me as - "She's a strong woman. She's a person who does not mind standing for her beliefs." But my personality description changes if you asked a peer with traditional values to - "Oh she's a strong willed woman. She's mouthy. She, you know, doesn't know how to behave herself." It's always like I'm always being negatively portrayed by that type of person.

As far as my race, in school I can't recall any direct obvious racism for being Mexican. I can only assume that my race has played a role in how I was treated by some teachers and faculty members that were not Latino.

*Right. And do you feel like it was similar, like in the foster care system that, like, your gender and ethnicity had a similar impact?*

You know that's a very interesting question because, um, as far as placement is concerned, my last placement...she had a very traditional view of gender roles and I experienced a double standard when I had less freedoms than my male siblings. As far as the system. You know, that's really hard to answer because the original case worker that I had, I think it's the state social worker, who was finding these placements, she actually knew me. I found that she knew me since I was born. I guess at some point in time, a worker was called when my mother gave birth to me, and cautioned that she's not fit to be a mother. So at some point she was involved. I was privileged enough to have that same worker throughout my entire life until I was assigned guardianship to my last placement and that's very, very rare to have the same state social worker. Very rare. That social worker's intention was to keep my siblings and I together permanently.

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So, I don't know...I can't say that if I was a single girl I would have the same fate, but I will say that because I was a girl with siblings, it did cause an issue with placement and it was a struggle to find a family that would take us all in. And then also, just by being told by individuals that were interested in adopting me...which I don't even know why they would want to be this honest... but you know, there were times when I had gone to summer camps and my assigned counselor was attempting to adopt me. She didn't tell me when I was a child because obviously she couldn't but I found her on Facebook and she brought it up during our conversation. She said that my adoption stipulation was to be adopted with my siblings. But I always wondered, "Why did you want to adopt me? Because I'm a female, and you didn't want my boy siblings?" So I feel like, if I would have just been a single female, I would have had a higher chance of being in a permanent home, that would encourage success and growth, but because I had male siblings, I wasn't "desired". Ironically, they should have had higher odds of being adopted because they were younger than me. Who knows, there may have been interest and because I was a girl, maybe that killed their chance for better placement. I kind of wonder both... because...was it because I was a female with male siblings, or was it because they are male siblings and I'm the female? That's, that's always crossed my mind.

*Definitely complex. Okay, very last question. So, I'm just so some context to why I'm asking this. And in my experience working with them folks like we, a lot of times use labels, as an in a way that kind of makes it seem like that experiences the whole person right. So we call kids foster kids or probation kids as if they are nothing through more than that. And so, I'm.... but I think it's really important to, to see people outside of the systems that are impacting them, right. And so I'm wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself as a kid as a teenager, outside of being in foster care, you know like, Who are you outside of that of that identity? The kind of person you were, the things you liked?*

Yeah, I think that's a very interesting question because I identified with whatever culture I was in at the time. So you know how you say that you are bi-racial. So my last placement was *Boricua* too girl. I identified as *Boricua*, well for that time. Okay, I was all about Puerto Rico, it was not about Mexico. That's the way I identified. So for example if you would have been one of my peers in high school and approached me, "Oh girl where are you from," I'd be like, "Oh you know I'm Puerto Rican." I never identified as my actual ethnicity, my actual race. And I think it got more complex with my last placement because, from my experience... Whether or not my last placement wants to acknowledge it or not, the fact that it is that they are racist...I was taught to be racist against my own ethnicity, which is Mexican. So it was hard to be proud and say, "I am Mexican." [speaking from a past point of view] I was ridiculed when I spoke Spanish in the home because my foster mom told me, "This is America. We speak English." but her mother was exempt from that rule because she is Puerto Rican. So I worked hard to get rid of my accent when I practiced English. I also didn't like looking like a stereotypical Mexican. Even being tan was disgusting to them, so I kept out of the sun when I could and wore long sleeves when I would walk home from school on a hot day. They would obsess over the skin tone of any newborn babies in the family and were often relieved that the child was fair skinned. I adopted those ideals too thinking it was normal even though down deep it didn't feel right, but she was my "mom" she wouldn't steer me wrong would she? So I had to come to terms that those ideals made me a racist. When I aged out of the foster care system and I started doing my own soul searching, research and sought out healing. Growing up as a "closeted foster child" enhanced my desire to be wanted, accepted and praised even if it meant sacrificing who I was (culturally,

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biologically, spiritually). My identity as a “girl” was already taken from me when I was sexually assaulted, what was left of me didn’t seem like much to give up. It also gave me an opportunity to “reinvent” myself in a palatable fashion that would blend me in with my foster family, and blending in meant that I was worthy of that family unit. Identifying as a foster child consumed my entire identity up until recently, but I’ve been able to reduce it to being a part of my identity and no longer a whole picture of who I am. I am more than just a former foster youth, I have an ethnicity. I have a race. I have a culture. I am a whole human being. I wasn’t just a foster care kid. And, I think it’s really easy to forget these things when you’re a kid right... especially depending on what type of placement you’re in. Not all placements are going to say, accept your culture or integrate your ancestral culture back into your life. In my experience I was ashamed of being Mexican and then I think also the trauma that came with it didn’t make it any better. I was removed from my birth family that is of Mexican descent. I think also it was painful for me to identify as Mexican because I thought that all Mexicans were all horrible human beings and never being placed into a home that was “pure” Mexican, reinforced the idea that they must not have loving homes. Identifying as Mexican as a child made me also feel like I was announcing to the world that I am an abusive person. I am a... I’m a drug addict, that is saying that I am a pervert. And that I am an alcoholic. You know, that is saying that I am a gangster. That’s what I felt I was presenting myself as to the world if I embraced my Mexican culture I was a child. So, I didn’t want to identify with any of that. As an adult prior to being a mother...I would always identify as just American because it was easier for my psyche. I would only say I’m American, and that’s all you need to know. But now, as an adult and being a mother, her [Chrissy’s child] father is also Mexican. It broke my heart to tell her you’re just American because I hadn’t dealt with my issues to comfortably identify as Mexican-American. I want to break that cycle of feeling ashamed of being Mexican-American...She looks a lot like me when I was little, it’s really like talking to myself as a little girl, [telling her] that you are Mexican-American. You are a native to this land and that your culture is valid. It is also valuable because our ancestors are potentially tied to what is now America the Great, and that is something to be proud of. I am a citizen, and it’s okay to feel comfortable to say that and I identify as Mexican and I think that’s where my biggest growth has been, as opposed to being a child. That I could identify as a human being. And, as a human being, I am a part of ancestral roots, some kind of heritage, and it is just as important as the ethnicities that all my placements identified with. It’s one thing if you identify because that’s where you grew up, what placement you grew up in. I always say that I still identify as Puerto Rican, because I grew up in that culture for 10 years, I understand the culture and the customs. I love it and I embraced it, but I am learning to embrace my Mexican identity too. And it’s still a journey that I’m going through, you know, literally went through 23 and me to, really enforce the fact that your DNA is not is not going to lie to you. And it’s okay to embrace that. So I think it’s more so me looking back as an adult and asking, ‘Who was that little girl before all the trauma and identity issues?’ And I can comfortably say, “That little girl was straight and Mexican. She had a beautiful laugh, didn’t mind standing up for what she believed in, a lover of all people no matter how they identified and had a yearning to be of service to others by sharing the same compassion Christ showed her when others shunned her.” I feel that I’m becoming who that little girl was supposed to be now as an adult. I wasn’t allowed to flourish as a child. And I think that to me has been the biggest eye opener that...at least I am still becoming, and then able to identify who that little girl should have [become] and actually was, before all the trauma, and before going through the foster care system. I can identify her, at least as an adult looking back, as opposed to not identifying with her at all like when I was a child.

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### **Claudia's interview**

*I'm going to ask you about, like, teachers, throughout your life mostly focusing on like middle and high school, from what you do could remember what are ways that are words that your teachers might have used to describe you*

Hard working, hard headed, very resilient. That's about it.

*Okay, great. Thank you. And that's really just to kind of get us in in the zone of thinking about thinking about like that time of your, of your life. So, before we really get into it. Do you have any suggestions for like a fake name you would want me to use for you. Otherwise I can just pick one.*

Anything is fine

*Okay, so the first thing I want to know is, what was your overall experience in school? So like was it...Did you like it? Was it good? Was it bad?... I don't know if I cut out for a second....But, um, what was your overall experience in school? Did you like school? Did you hate school? Did you feel comfortable there so anything around, around that.*

Umm it always depend what school I was sent to 'cause I was in and out, of different group homes. So there were schools that I loved and there were schools that I hated. But, overall the last one that I been through, I loved it.

*Okay, cool. So we'll kind of dive a little bit deeper into that. What was your relationship like with your teachers and school staff? So let's start with like the school that you loved. So thinking about that school like what your relationship was like with the, with the educators there?*

Umm pretty good. I would always have a teacher that could help me out with work and I wouldn't have to worry about taking time away from the other students or me getting left behind, not understanding anything so yeah

*And what about these teachers made you feel like you could like you could get extra help from them?*

They would, they would never, they would never like making me feel dumb or anything or say "Oh, that's an easy question," or "read it again," they would take the time and helped me with it. And if I, if they did need to give me extra time they would let me know, "Just try it one more time by yourself and if you still, still understand it will get to you."

*And so let's shift to teachers that, or experiences with school, that that you didn't like. So the schools that you hated. What about the, what about those schools, did you not like? What about those teachers did you not like?*

Um, they wouldn't help me at all. Only if I try telling them that I didn't understand it, they would tell me, "it's not that you don't understand it, it's that you choose not to understand it." Yeah, they wouldn't help me out, or they'll keep me after class and try explaining it a different way but not me understanding, either way.

*And so, what... do you remember what your reaction would be like if they told you, like, it's just you not wanting to understand, like blaming you for that.*

I would feel very ashamed and I would stop asking questions.

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*I'm really sorry that that happened that's, that's really not. Not the way that teachers are supposed to be interacting with their students. So with those teachers that you feel for didn't feel like we're really trying to help you, did you ever feel like you needed to confront teachers for highly treating you?*

Sometimes I felt like I needed to when I would ask why wouldn't they help me, or go through like the principal or whoever I needed to speak to, they would say that they tried explaining it to me and I just chose not to understand it. Or, or if I had my headphones in, and I wasn't listening.

*So really just like putting it on you and not taking responsibility for that?*

Yeah.

*At any of these any of the schools that you that you went too. Did you ever, have you ever been like suspended, expelled, been given like detention or referrals or anything like that?*

I was expelled from one school because, I told the teacher that I did not understand the work, and well he...I try to explain it to him again and I showed him the, the work that I wrote down and I just got frustrated, so I just folded the paper and I put it to the side I told him that I don't understand it and I need help. Well, he grabbed my work and he ripped it. I got up and I socked him, and then I was expelled.

*I see. And what was that process like for you, like, what kind of messages did it send to you in terms of like how, like being welcome at the school or anything like that?*

Well, I mean, it made me feel kinda dumb because my own teacher didn't want to help me, or nobody really wanted to explain it to me or I thought maybe it was my fault that I couldn't understand it.

*Definitely, it can see how that can happen. And like going through the expulsion process. I know that that's like, typically you know it's like a whole process you have to meet with people and the district gets involved in all of that. And, what, what was it like for other people to hear your side of the story, like did they believe you?*

Now, a lot of times when I would tell, when I would tell the principles and all that what happened, they would understand and try to help me. But then that's why I got moved into like smaller classes and smaller schools. And I felt like I didn't need that. I just needed someone that will take the time and tell me what I needed to do, Instead of just explaining two words, and, like, hoping that we would understand it

*Yeah, well that's, that's definitely that's definitely a problem and it's a thing that I see that happens a lot, you know like folks are not really trying to give the support that you know that you people feel like they need just kind of moving students around from place to place and that's like, well its never helpful. When you got moved into those smaller classes, and this like smaller settings. Did, did you feel like that was at all useful or did it feel like kind of like a waste of your time.*

The first one was not useful but the second class I was sent to was a lot more helpful, 'cause there were, there was more than one teacher, there were two teachers. They understood, like, if we were falling behind, they wouldn't stop the class, but for anybody that isn't in the same [place] as other people she would ask us, "is everyone on the same page?" So nobody was ahead of each other so that was a lot more easier and less frustrating.



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*Yeah, definitely. I get that. And if you if you don't mind me asking like the smaller settings, were they like continuation schools or where they schools classrooms for students with IEPs or did they just happened to be smaller classrooms?*

It was a behavioral classroom. So for any kids that were fighting or would get aggressive.

*And do you feel like, like other students like I know a lot of times like people get sent to those classrooms, like you said, because of behavioral issues and, and people have an idea that those classrooms are really disruptive because that's where the bad kids are (I don't personally believe that but that's what I hear a lot.) Um, do you feel like that was true or that like people were generally there to like you know do their work get through the day?*

I think it was like both ways. A lot of us were there because we would get provoked by like the teachers or by other kids saying something, like "you are slow," or "you don't know what you're doing," or "we're behind because of you." A lot of times, a lot of us will blow up because of that.

*That makes sense. And did you have a lot of experiences of teachers, kind of provoking you that way?*

Yeah, I've had a lot of that.

*I'm really sorry to hear that. And when they, when they would tell you. I know you mentioned like the other like incidents. You know like getting in the fight with a teacher but when other teachers would tell you that. How would you, how would you respond or how did you react?*

A lot of times I would say quiet and try to figure out why, why don't understand the work, how can I ask for help in a different way that doesn't sound like I'm lost.

*Yeah, it's, it's really screwed up that you don't have to do that extra emotional and mental work when that's kind of what the teachers are there for but very sorry. Um, so, okay my last question just about this particular situation. Getting expelled and moved to a different classroom like what, what messages did it tell you about how you're expected to behave at school, or like the kind of person that the school thought you were.*

Well made me feel like I had to keep my mouth shut, even though I didn't know... if I was lost, like in class or something that I shouldn't even ask for help because something like this would happen again.

*What would you have wanted teachers to know about you and your experiences like outside of school?*

Well I would let them know how it would be or how it happened for a long time, explain the situation otherwise. For someone would understand.

*So would you have wanted them to know, like what was the things that were like going on at home like being in the system and things like that or do you feel like that would have helped them to be more empathetic?*

Sometimes I think they would. But I notices a lot of the kids from my school were kids from my group home. I feel like we were a little bit more targeted every time that they would ask us, "Why don't you ask for help at home?" Well, we didn't really have a home so we couldn't really ask anyone at home.

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*Right. And so, like, maybe they didn't really understand that, or really know what that meant for you not, you know to not have someone at home to help you with your work?*

Yeah, 'cause like I explained to one of my teachers, the teacher that helped me graduate this year that I graduated, I explained to her that I did not understand the homework, I was confused and she asked me "why don't you ask your mom or dad?" And I told her that both of my parents were deceased and I don't have anyone at the house to explain it to me. She stayed on the phone she explained it to me, she helped me out.

*That's a great teacher. So thank you for answering that. What could you share with me now, that would have helped pass teachers to support you to not just survive school but to thrive in it, so like this, this teacher was a really great example but are there other things that teachers could have done to support you better?*

Yes, like try to understand a little bit more, or at least ask if there's anything happening at home that could be causing your performance at school or if something is wrong and if you don't understand something, don't be afraid to ask for help.

*Okay so almost done. There's three more questions left. So this next one is a two part question. The first part is how, if at all, do you think that your gender identity impacted your experience?*  
It kind of did. It went both ways. A lot of people don't understand what non-binary was. So it was kind of difficult sometimes in classrooms that people would point it out or say that you were born a female. You can't change those things. Stuff like that. I dealt with a lot of that at school.

*Was that mostly from students? Or both students and staff?*  
Students and staff and it would occasionally be a staff.

*And when it happened with staff. How would you react?*

I would go to the principal and speak to them about it. I would record most of the time, just in case if no one believed me.

*That's a really useful tool to have. And do you feel like the principal cared or wanting to make sure that you felt like seen and comfortable at school?*

Yeah, a lot of times, we would have to explain what non binary is or transgender or something like that. We would have to have like a certain topic of the day so if anybody has any questions you could just talk about it like that.

*Yeah. Wow, and what those conversations, would it be just with the teacher was like your classmates too?*

With classmates or just a teacher.

*How do you feel about having to have, like, really kind of educate other people about that or listen to maybe, like problematic questions about gender identity.*

Um. At times I felt like it was really dumb, like I didn't understand why I had to explain it to other people like..I thought was unnecessary but I guess it was a lot more necessary than anything because after we dealt with it, nobody else was misgendered or anything so I think that was necessary.

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*Well, that's a really powerful thing to have done it, you're right it is definitely unnecessary but. And again, like it sucks to have to put in that like extra work for people to get it but how powerful that you know other people didn't have to experience the same things because of it. Okay, so my next question is, how do you think your gender identity impacted your experience in the foster care system?*

For me, it didn't really change anything. I mean I felt more at home than anything when I was in the foster system as a non binary, because in my group home, there's a lot of kids are transgender, non binary, gender fluid. So, I never felt left out or stuck or anything because a lot of times, there, there would be, staff, like females or non binaries, other people that would understand. And we always had a gender month, or gender day to, know how we feel about it today, or we will never avoid the topic. So it was always like, clear out. It was always good.

*That's fantastic. OK second to last question. So the, I'll give you a little background of why I asked this question. So, working in schools with young folks who have been in foster care. A lot of times, educators, label them and really think of them in like one way, like, Oh, that's just a foster kid right and that's their entire identity. And so I'm really interested in people's identity outside of the system. So, is there anything you'd like to tell me about yourself outside of foster care like things that you're interested in, like, what, what you like who you are like that kind of thing.*

So, um, I just started school to study psychology. I want to be a therapist. I want to make... I want to help other people out. Because my therapist helps me out a lot. I don't... I want to be different of how my mom and dad, both grew up or the life they gave me. I saw every single day, they would work from nine o'clock in the morning to probably 12 at night, or one in the morning cleaning offices and stuff like that and I know I would not want to do that if I had a child and I not see them every day because I have to work all day and all night just to make them comfortable. I make sure I take care of my little sister's. My younger sister that my mom and dad left behind, I sent her money every day I make sure she's okay. I check in on her every single day as much as I can. And, I show her that even though we went through tough times and life kind of sucks and the foster system kind of sucks, it didn't leave. And it's making stronger than, then we both believe we were.

*Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate you sharing that about yourself.*

### ***Claudia's follow up interview***

*And so all of these are based on the interview that we did before. So they're just a few like clarification questions. All right. So the first one is in the initial interview that we did, you mentioned having a hard time getting help from teachers or that they gave you the impression that they thought you were intentionally not understanding the material. And I'm wondering how this impacted your interest in school or your connection to school.*

Well, that made me just want to like low-key just give up, not want to do anything because none of the teachers really listen to me. They thought I was just fucking around.

*Yeah, for sure, for sure. And are you in school right now?*

Yes.



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*Oh, okay. Cool. Where are you going, and what are you studying?*

I'm Mt. SAC, and I'm in psychology.

*Cool. And we talked a little bit last time about your motivation to do that. But did you have any adults around that supported you getting to that place, or encouraged you?*

No, not really.

*Okay, so that's something that you kind of picked out on your own and you--?*

Yeah.

*Yeah, awesome. Thank you. So an incident that you mentioned was when a teacher ripped up your school work, and you got into an altercation with him.*

Yeah.

*What do you think that teacher could have done differently to make you feel more supported in that moment, or just change the outcome of that incident?*

Not rip up my paper.

*And other than that, how do you feel like he should have approached that situation?*

I mean, he should have just taken the paper himself and just not giving it to me or show me what he's doing with it, and he just ripped it up in my face. He just took it and ripped it.

*Yeah, that's really messed up. All right, so two more questions. You also mentioned having to explain to your fellow students and sometimes teachers what being nonbinary is. And I'm just wondering if you ever had any teachers or school staff step in if they heard somebody misgendering you or just all around, like not treating you well because of your gender identity.*

I've had teachers misgender me multiple times, and I've asked them to kind of redirect them, and they push it aside like it's not right. What they just said, right, but it's not.

*Did you ever have any adults step in on your behalf if they heard that?*

I've had one time, but the other people, they kind of just like let it be

*So that was more of like a thing that you had to deal with on your own?*

Yeah.

### **CQ's interview**

*So now I kind of want to know about your overall experience in school. Did you enjoy school, is it someplace that you liked to be or not, or yeah, what was it like?*

School seemed good to me. I liked it. I'm still finishing right now my undergraduate program at UC Merced. However, I'm glad that I didn't go to school from the beginning-beginning because

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being in my 20s is when my identity as a trans woman kind of flourished more. And I definitely feel that I needed that because now that I see a lot of trans women transitioning after school, it's like they [inaudible] male identities and didn't allow them to really explore who they were as women, not to say that it was any easier to navigate the world as a woman with a penis, and in back those days, much smaller chest because they didn't have surgeries available to me through my insurance, so, well, grade school was very difficult with that. And I know that Foshay Elementary High, Junior High, kick me out and they used the excuse that it was because of my defiance, but I know that it wasn't that. I think they just didn't want to deal with a feminine boy going to their school and they were extremely rude. I was mistreated a lot by school staff, and then the other thing that-- I remember at Crenshaw High, there was a dean who one time looked at me and I don't even think he meant this because of my defiance, I think he meant it because of me being trans or at the time a very feminine gay boy, and he straight out looked at me and said, "Your mother must be really proud of you, huh?" But he was asking it in a very condescending way. And I just thought that was the rudest, rudest thing. There was a black woman who was much kinder and she, if anything, looked at my nails. They had chipped black nail polish and I kind of left the chip on purpose because there was kind of a look, kind of like the crackle nail polish that they came up around the 90s too. And she told me, "Look." She says, "If you're going to do this, you could go all the way." She says, "Don't have cheap nails. Look good with it." I think she had-- again, she was much older so she had probably transgender family members, or gay friends or community. I didn't have that at the time. The ones that I had at school were getting their asses beat because they were much quieter. Whereas, in my case, I would bark back at these animals that were acting the way that they were. And it was a lot of the times coming from my own community, Latinos. There was very little support at the school. One lady did try to help me. She was a white lady who married a black man, very handsome man. This was Ms. Goodman. And she sent me to a school in downtown L.A., a continuation. And they were so horrible there because the woman starts asking me-- or I presented-- it was a Spice Girls era too, then again, the '90s. So I showed up in these big old baby spice white platforms that I got for like \$10 at this Lawson [inaudible], the cargo pants with a pocket on the knee, kind of very loose pants underneath. I know that I had a tank top, but because it was school, I wore this big old gray sweater. But I had a bra on. And this bitch just kept on-- the dean or whatever she was at the school just kept on referring to everyone as mister or miss. So with me, she also did the Mister. And I'm like-- I cringed every time that was happening. And I know that she saw the little mountains of titty that I had stuffed my bra with. And I kept on-- finally again, that's why I put outspoken in this thing that you just said what a teacher would say about me. And I remember that I was talking to this woman, and I was sitting in the front row. And she calls me, "Mr. Fiones." And then I said, "Can you not do that?" And she's like, "Not do what?" I say, "Can you not say my name like that? Can you not put mister in front of it?" "But that's your name." And I'm like-- I said, "No." I said, "You know what you're doing." And I'm coming out her strong. Like, "You white bitch. You're not about to freaking sit here and tell me how I should feel because this is how you think that you're going to talk to us." So I got up, and she's all like, "Well, if you don't like it," she says, "You can go outside." I said, "If I go outside," I said, "I'm not coming back." And then she's all like, "All right." She says, "You're gone for the day." She says, "Come back tomorrow." And then I forgot what the hell I said, but she tried to bury the coffin by saying, "And leave the bra at home." And I'm like, "You disgusting old white bitch." So later on, when I was graduating from high school, because there was all the high school continuations that graduated together, I saw her. And at this point, I'm fully Christina. And I

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didn't have boobies or any facial work done yet. So I came up to her, and then I'm like, "Hey." I said, "Aren't you such and such from some school?" And she's all like, "Yes, yes." And then I'm like, "Yeah," I said, "You were a total piece of shit to me," I said, "When I was there." And she was taken aback, clutching her pearls. Says, "Oh," she says, "Oh, I'm sure you are a handful to your current teacher or whatever," which I wasn't. This was Ms. Moya, amazing, amazing lady. Even on my certificate, she made sure that even though my transcripts, when I presented to her, all my transcripts came under a male name, she-- at this point in my life, I had already done the gender and name change. Well, only the name change. I'm still working on the gender marker change because they didn't have a gender marker change in the '90s, early 2000s when I did it. And very cool. My certificates, everything, says Christina. I'm like, "Actually--" it was just that moment. And then like she left or whatever. But yeah, she was a total, total piece of crap woman that I don't even know why she was working in downtown L.A. I know that a lot of the times a lot of these white women got into academia because they felt that they were going to coach or monitor the behavior of Latino and black students and mold us to becoming these characters of what exceptional behavior was to them. I think back in the days, that's the reason why they were teaching schools in Sunday school trying to morph us into what their beliefs were. But again, being from Latino parents from Guatemala. My first language was Spanish, so it was hard for me once I got into school to learn about all these great white people, and I'm like, "I smell shit. Something's weird here. How come is it that it's only all these white people, white people, white people that you're dumping on us?" And, yeah, it would mainly be through black teachers that you would hear about the black inventors, and the black person who invented the light bulb, and the black person who helped with electricity, all that stuff, or where the term the real McCoy came from. I forgot what the McCoy is, but there's something about the McCoy that's a black person as well. But it was only because I was dealing with black teachers that I would learn some of this stuff. Later on, I also did kind of notice that, as my identity kind of became more solidified, I got a lot of crap by that too. That I don't know the reason why it would be, but I know that some teachers became more distant towards me. So it was an exceptional experience that I had in grade school. When I got to the continuation, like I said, that one was much better. I did go to another one that was primarily for LGBT kids, but once I got into the foster care system, they tried to put me in a probation school, which was terrible because they didn't tell anyone but the school people that I was trans, so then some of the kids started suspecting things and that just put me into more danger because they wouldn't let me go into the bathroom when the girls were going to the bathroom, they waited till the bathroom was cleared. So then the students started asking, "Hey, why do they make you wait?" And I'm like, at least if they were fucking-- if they were smarter, they would have left me in the classroom while you guys had your bathroom break. And then they would kind of tell me, "Oh, come in, go. Do you need some water or something?" Could there be a more discreet way that you could do it? So anyway, they didn't do that. So one day one of the dudes, he's-- I think the security guard that would kind of pat us down, told the students that there was something about me, kind of thing. So, again, it just put me into more danger. I was threatened that I was going to get beat up after school. So that day I'm like, "Fuck this. I ain't leaving when y'all motherfuckers leave, I'm leaving now." So I walked out of the school and then they called my probation officer, and automatically is you have to go back to juvenile hall because you're just awol. So it was really, really whack to go through all of that, dealing with, and then at this point I was already in a group home, so I was dealing with parents that rejected me, peers that wanted to kick my ass. It was just not a safe place for me. So I kind of gave up on school. I'm like, "Fuck this, fuck this." So when I did

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graduate from that school from the continuation, one of my supervisors that I started working with at the county-- I was 21, 22, and he says, "So what about school?" I was like, "Oh, yes. I already graduated." And then he's all like, "No." He says, "I mean, what are we continuing?" And I'm like, "What? Why?" So I ended up going to Santa Monica College and doing the assessment for English and math class. I was in the lower spectrum of math. I was two tiers away from being in an English one and English two class, but I still had to do those bottom classes, so it took me a minute, but whatever, I'm almost kind of accomplishing it. Once I got my boobs done and my face worked on, I ended up getting a job in the UCSF. I knew that the next steps were going to be much easier because all of a sudden I knew that I was going to become what people would-- people are crap in my so if you don't look a certain way, it's like they sometimes won't treat you with respect and dignity. So I just noticed that when-- even among the trans community, I always know that if you get your boobs done is one thing, but once you get your boobs and your face done, it's a total [for?] the trans girls. It's super different because you don't look like a man with titties is what I kind of think about. And then there was a meme that I remember seeing with Woody from Toy Story with Boobs, and he's posing with a tank top and he's pointing it in the front and being super cute. And I'm like, "Oh my God, that's what a lot of girls sometimes look like when they just get their boobs done but they don't get their face done." So in my head, it was all like, "Well, I also have to do this." My goal with school was that, "Oh, it'll help me pay for surgeries." But thankfully, once I got to San Francisco and I was working and with a job that had amazing insurance, once I found out that breast augmentation and face feminization surgeries were covered under that insurance, I signed up immediately. So at that point, I got off hormones so that my breasts that had developed with the hormones would have gotten flatter. And I went for a consultation and the doctor was all like, "Yeah." She said, "I'm referring you," and I'm like, "What? Do you think I'll get rejected?" She's all like, "No." She says, "A lot of the students that I-- I mean, not a student, a lot of the patients that I've referred--" I'm going to plug my laptop up. "A lot of the patients that I referred," she says, "have gotten approved of it." I was like, "Oh, my God, please sign me up. Yes, how much is it going to be? How much is it going to be?" So it was like a price that I would have never imagined that I would have gotten my breast done for. Say it was like \$100 for a boob job, and then for my face was \$250. So it was the same consultation that I ended up having. They treated me exceptional. And then like two years later is that I found out that they were finally starting to do those types of surgeries here in Los Angeles for trans patients, because even though it's Kaiser in both cities, I guess one of them is north and the other one is Southern, but they were not doing those types of procedures for folks, which is such a bummer because, again, you're paying into this policy, this insurance. I think you're not getting what you deserve. So once I was recovering from the facial work that I got done, again, it just seemed that people's behavior towards me was very, very different.

*Thank you for sharing about that. I wanted to kind of revisit one of the teachers that you mentioned earlier. Was it Miss Moya who helped with putting your name on your transcripts and all that? And so I was just kind of curious if you could-- sorry, my dogs. It's a day here. [laughter] Could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with that teacher and the way [say?] she supported you.*

She was really great because with her, I had to go-- it was a continuation, so weekly, I would have to go and pick up my package of homework. And with that package, I would complete it during the week, and if I completed it quicker, I would just bring it in and submit it. And I did

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exceptionally good with that, with the exception of geometry. It was a little intense to do that homework, but I submitted it. I got a D in it, and again, at least I graduated. At the time, that's really all I wanted to do. My biggest goal was just to not get a GED, but get a high school diploma that I would also walk to the stage. And I was able-- the [inaudible] went to Palisades High did that. Again, Ms. [Moya?] was amazing because she how she ended up having a little boy not too long ago, so that was also beautiful to see. I stayed in touch with her only as much as I could because sometimes people don't really stay in touch with you. And because of the chaos from my lifestyle, I do like to nurture relationships that are good and I know are people that I appreciate, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way, so. But yeah, that was beautiful. I met her when I was living at a shelter in Hollywood. Two lesbians, I guess, knew about the school, and one day they're all like, "Oh, I'm going to school." And I'm like, "To school?" I'm like, "LA High? LACC?" And then she's all like, "No." She's all like, "High school." And then I'm like-- because I had tried going to LACC to get my GED, but the first day that I showed up I had some guy that waited until I got out just because he wanted to talk to me. And I don't even think he-- he didn't want to take me out. He wanted to mess around with me on campus because he was married and he had kids. And I'm like, "What the fuck am I doing here? Fucking men." And then they still haven't changed. It's still the same crap these days. Nothing has changed. And I'm like, "Ew," so I never went back. But anyway, with these two girls, it was one day that I was not going-- I was working at General Nutrition Center at the time, I think. And I'm like, "Oh." I said, "I have the day off." I said, "Can I come with you?" They're like, "Well, do you have your transcripts?" I'm like, "On the drawer." So I opened the drawer and [inaudible]. And those transcripts, I got them from Crenshaw High from Ms. Goodman, who was a total sweetheart. That lady from Crenshaw High, she witnessed when that piece of shit dean said that terrible thing to me [and?] a black man. So when she saw that, she was all like, "I want to talk to her." She says-- I mean, "To him." She says, "Can you--" [In a way?] she was like a guidance counselor or something. And that just changed my life a lot because she became a support for me. Whenever I got kicked out of any classes, she'd always be like, "Just come to my office. Just come to my office." There were friends, guy friends that I had initially at school. But again, when I started my thing, a lot of them kind of turned on me and would use me as the butt of a joke. And then when I would talk back to them, I would be the one to get kicked out of the classes, so it was bad. And same similar things that go on in high school, where teachers kick out the person that they don't want-- that are the problem, even though they're not the problem, problem. The problem is how you're handling a situation when you're allowing them to get bullied for whatever reasons. So it was weird. Like I said, I have very little trust in people. Family, even, because I was molested around the age of seven by a family member that my family still considers a friend. So every time that somebody dies, I have to end up bumping into this person. And I'm like, "You guys are all pieces of shit in my eyes." My sister, now that she's in her 30s and she's got her little boy, now she sees a lot of the stuff that I never told her because she was-- a lot of these people were so much younger than me. I'm the oldest and the first one that was born here in America. I have older cousins, but they were born in Guatemala, and then they came here. So once they got here, immediately, they married or had kids because I guess it was the thing that they thought they had to do. Now they're like five, six kids in, and it's like they look all old and aged. Then I'm like, "Fuck, I'm old and aged too." But I already got a facelift and stuff, so I'm like, "Oh my God." But so that was, yeah, definitely, definitely Ms. [Moya?] helped out a lot with that. So I did have a good network of other folks because even at Santa Monica City College, I started looking at other resources. And right there they had the Adelante Program,



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which focuses on helping Latino students a lot. And right next door they had the Black Coalition Group. So at Santa Monica City College, again, because I'm careful also with who I share being trans with-- I mean, if they know, they know. But for me to say, "Oh, I'm I open up with you, and I'm going to share this part of me," very, very careful. So that was Ms. Maria Martinez, who was also very supportive in assuring that I took the classes that I needed to take so that I could graduate and do all the things that I needed to do. So every semester, I always wanted an appointment with Ms. Martinez, every semester. And then other people would be like, "Well, you can also make an appointment with me." And I'm like, "Nah." I'm like, "Maybe next semester." I'm like, "I just want to talk to Ms. Martinez real quick." And so tell Ms. Martinez became a director of the program, and she personally walked me to the offices of some of these folks. So she kind of knew [inaudible] that we needed to-- how to make me feel comfortable and safe without just being like, "Oh, no, just make an appointment with so-and-so. They're great." No, she would walk me over to them, introduce me and stuff. So then I would meet other people like Ms. Patti. And I like calling her Ms. Patti because I remember there was like a video where this woman was saying-- a black woman, trans woman, has her makeup done very pretty and has a little Dora the Explorer wig, I call it. And she's looking at the camera. She's all like, "Do you see her? Do you see Patti? Do you see Patti?" Basically, Patti LaBelle. And I'm all like, "Oh, right." So with this lady, I started calling her Ms. Patti. And again, once I moved to Berkeley City I still kind of needed transcripts and stuff from Santa Monica City, so I would contact Ms. Patti or whatnot. And as Latinos, we barely go to any place empty-handed, so one time I stopped by at Ralph's and I picked up like some food and stuff. And I'm like, "Oh, maybe she'll like this. Maybe she'll like that." Not realizing that she's probably a vegan. Latinos aren't vegan, girl-- but I guess Latinos are vegan now. But in those days, there wasn't a lot of us. So she wouldn't eat it, and then I'm like, "Well--" I said, "Well, keep it so you can give to one of your student workers or whatever." I said, "But that's for you. I'm not going to eat that. [inaudible] hot plate." So she gave it to one of her other students. And I found out that I guess she had gotten breast cancer or something, or she had been-- so that's why she became vegan. So in my eyes, I think that conversation came up because of the whole breast augmentation thing and how I had been saying, "This is what's going on. I'm doing this. I'm doing that." And then the similar thing happened to me when I got to Berkeley, when I moved because around the time that I moved, it was 2013 and the schools over there had-- they weren't accredited or something because there was something going on with the accreditation, with some of the schools. So I was afraid of what school I was going to go to and if it was going to affect anything with my academia. So I went to one counselor. It was a black woman with short hair and I didn't really like how she was talking to me. And I'm like, "You must realize that I'm a little older and you can't sometimes talk to older students the way that you would talk to a younger student. And sometimes even younger students don't like it and they never go back to see you. But unlike the young students, I'm going to tell you what you're doing and this ain't working." So ever since, I never want to see her. And then, the next time I met someone else who it turns out, she was the-- again, I always get along better with the directors. So she was the director of the program and she had just started and super, super wonderful woman. Susan [Trong?]. And we still email with each other. And through her, I met the transfer center staff. One of them was moving and leaving the job. But then there was another lady, Andre Williams, I believe was her last name, and we just bonded a lot. And then after getting my face feminization surgery in 2017, she was very supportive. And I was very vocal about the experience that I was going through. The pain that I was kind of going through because I also got some jaw work. And for that, they had to cut the inside of my mouth and

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basically separate all the skin and remove a chunk of bone from here. So all of that was super, super numb and I couldn't move. And then when I would move, I couldn't move. But then you could see that there was some parts that weren't moving because I guess [inaudible] things that were still happening or getting the nerves reconnected and muscles reattaching. So it was the worst, worst thing. But they were super great with taking me on the field trips to UC Davis to see the campus or telling me when representatives of the schools were going to show up so that we could talk about transferring and stuff. So I connected with those folks immediately because I didn't want to be in these spaces with a lot of these young tweens, 17, 20, 16-year-olds for much longer. So, yeah. It was helpful.

*Wow. Yeah. I can imagine it being really helpful to have that kind of support system, especially in a place where there's not a lot of that. And so, I think kind of going back to some of the teachers that your-- educators that you didn't get along with or even just school staff. You mentioned a little bit about-- I can't remember her name, but she's irrelevant. The lady at the continuation school, right, who is misgendering you and how you resisted that. Are there other instances where you felt like you had to confront or resist school staff or educators for the way that they were treating you?*

I think all the time. When I was in elementary, I remember that there was a woman name is-- I don't remember her first name. I heard she ended up dying in a fire. These urban myths that you hear from all these students after the fact. And they're all like, Oh, yeah, she died. She was smoking a--" or maybe that was a different teacher. But she scratched my face with a pen one time. And I mean, I guess back in those days, you couldn't really sue people or what. Or maybe my mom just didn't want to make noise because she's a single mother, Latina, monolingual. I didn't know how to spell it. Not the eye, but when you're speaking about yourself. And I was writing it with a small I, not the capital one. "No, that's wrong. No, that's wrong. Were you not paying attention?" And I'm like, "I don't know how to spell it." And then I'm spelling I like I-E-Y-E. And then one time she scratched my face with the blue, those blue paper mache pants, the real flimsy, cheap ones, the regular office pants. And yeah, my mom never really vocalized or said anything about that. And then she also called me a pig one time, and I'm like-- this weird, weird stuff that nobody was ever standing up to. So when I would say something or advocate for myself again, it was seen as defiance because I was the one-- I was the one that spoke both English and Spanish. My mother had to take things off of work. She was a housekeeper. I don't know what she's doing now. I could care less. I couldn't care less. But, yeah, that was another incident. There was another teacher that I always wanted to be in her class, and that was Ms. Arlene Marinoff. And I went back to visit her a few times at the school. She reminded me of Peggy Bundy but with brown hair because she had the big old, beautiful, curly, brown hair and very motorcycle chick with leather jacket. Very, very hot lady. I don't know what ended up happening with her, and her classes were much, much better. I think that was for my senior year. And yet it just made me very, very happy. Yeah, junior high, like I said, it was off and on. By the age of 13 is that I got into foster care. So there, I had to navigate a bunch of schools over there. I went to Inglewood High for a little bit. I went to Dominguez High. When I went to Dominguez High was a little easier for me to transition because, at that point, I was, again, in [inaudible] in a group home with all boys. The Spice Girls were a big thing. So I didn't really get harassed for polishing my nails or doing my eyebrows or putting peroxide on my hair to get the color out. The school was also okay. I always wore-- I would gel my hair and do the ghetto [inaudible] one that hairspray, but it was in a boy haircut. But again, other features were a little more fem. I

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remember being at the cafeteria one time, and there was a table that sat with all girls, and then there was this one very hyper-feminine gay boy, a little bigger. He was always very quiet. And we never really spoke until one of his friends came up to me at the line to get our food, and she's all like, "Are you a friend of Dorothy?" And I'm like, "What?" I'm like, "Who's Dorothy?" And then she kind of whispered. She's like, "Are you gay?" And then I'm like, "Aw." I'm like, "I don't know." I wasn't really like-- at that point, I didn't know if I could really share what I was doing. I wasn't sure the direction that I was really taking with my life. But anyway, she invited me to sit with them, and I would sit with them and have so much fun. And I remember that the boy one time invited me to his house to listen to music. And he had all the music that I loved. Monica [inaudible], who was this Spanish diva that we just-- her voice just resonates to the gay community at that time. The Spice Girls, listening to a bunch of awesome things. I found out after I left that school. I forgot, oh, I left that group home because my mother completed her parenting classes and she was all of a sudden going to be a great parent. That she was like-- I cried actually when I got the call from the social worker that I was going to be taken back home. And I'm like, "Why? No." I called the police on this woman. You guys removed me and my sister from her house. You think this is over? I already knew it was this boy. I felt it. I'm like, "This isn't over." I said, "This is a trick." And yeah, she ended up kicking me out and screwing me over a lot. I was even in-- I was in the choir at one point. I was really doing good stuff with the instrument. I was playing the-- I learned how to play the flute, the trumpet, the clarinet. I was into all of those things, but yeah, once my mom started kicking me out and being messy with me, it just affected a lot of those things. I could have been somewhere else right now, I think, in life, but I can't really reminisce too much on that because I'm still not too old to appreciate the little things that I'm still getting my way. There was Miss Brown, I think, was her name, and she was at John Muir. That was a junior high. And she knew this boy that I was crushing on. And that boy actually lived right across the street from where my mom lives now. And she ended up-- whenever he would show up to class, right, but she ended up assigning me to sit next to him. And I'm like, "Oh, Miss Brown, you'd better stop. [laughter] I'm so happy. I'm so happy." She did such a favor. And I would be a fucking geek. I would show up with a little box that had-- a very pretty box that I got at Big Lots back in the days it was Pic 'N' Save, very cute little bag with all these beautiful gel pens that I loved. So even my handwriting is very nice. I love, love, love, love pens back in the days. And he'd go, "Do you have a pen?" I'm like, "Yeah," but I would always give a cheap one because I was never going to get it back. And I'm, "Ah." I'm like, "Why don't you go ask one of your little friends for a pen?" Well, by the time that I in my 20s, we finally did end up hooking up, but at that point, I was a little more-- I didn't have this yet, and I didn't have any facial work done, but I was happy that at least that moment was relived for me and I was able to say it happened. It didn't last for a long time because he wasn't also doing the things that I would ideally had wanted somebody to be doing with their lives for me to be involved in it, but at least I could say I did it and I tried it. Yeah. So that was a good thing. But yeah, again, because I wasn't in the school long enough to get the basics of algebra-- and for algebra, you can't be going from one school to another because you might leave one school, and even though the semesters are still going, they might not be teaching the same piece of the material at that time. So it screwed me up a lot in those in those pieces. Because there was a teacher, Miss Guillinettes, that she was so good at teaching me algebra and stuff. I was in an algebra class at Foshay, but I guess something was off. It just wasn't really working for me there. Plus, they made fun of that teacher a lot. So that was a big distractor for a lot of the Black students, that we were making fun of this overweight white man. Dominguez High was the same



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thing, oh and where there was an older white woman that some of the students even threw like a bottle at her of soda. And then they tried to say that it was me. So then she kicked me out of the class. And then I'm like, "Why would I throw a bottle of soda at anyone?" I said, "I'm not going to tell you guys who did it," I said, "because then I'm going to get my ass kicked," I said, "but I can assure you I didn't do that to that lady." So that was terrible. And then at Crenshaw High, there was this Jamaican-ish kind of lady the fucking students snagged her wig off just like when---[crosstalk] pulled my curly cute hair off. Yeah. And I'm like, "Damn." So I'm like, "If that's what they're doing to y'all bitches, what the fuck do I expect that is going to happen to me if I try to stand up to them?" And one time I did try to stand up to them and here's another crush that I had. But thankfully he didn't do anything with the crush that I had because I would have really fucked my head up. I think he was a teacher at the school. But his name was Mr. Savage, yes [laughter]. Girl. Mr. Savage was a piece of work. So I'm in his class. But before I'm in his class, girl, I have no idea what background he has or what types of friends he had because he was hella cool with me. He would talk to me during my breaks in class because he was-- even though he was a teacher, he would still come out [inaudible] and the activity with us before class during the nutrition, the little breakfast break that they give you, and lunch. And he says, "You should talk to your guidance counselor," he says, "So that they can put you in my class. I would love to be [inaudible] teach her." I think he was doing a class on not life skills But basically, it was kind of life skills. Because one time I had to come to class in a professional suit or work attire. And I'm am coming to this ghetto ass school and a cute little girl, female outfit. [inaudible] no, he said. And then, he told me that I have to kind of a suit. Then I'm like, "A suit?" I'm like, "[inaudible] fucking around here thinking I'm a Spice Girl. What the fuck do you think? I'm going to wear a fucking suit?" With anything, I'll find a suit where I can show off my bra, have the little titties, I would see the girls going to the movie premieres because back then I didn't know any better. So I remember that day that I'm like, "Okay, well, fuck it. I'm going to take my clothing in the backpack and I'm changing right as soon as this is done." So I put on the clothes before I go to your class [inaudible] as soon as I'm done, I'm going to the bathroom and changing [inaudible] in fact, I'm taking the pants off in the class because I'm just going to put them on top of my regular clothing. And that's what I did. But what I also did was that I think that [liya?] had been she performed at the Premio Lo Nuestro or something. And that [inaudible] pair it looking makeup or her makeup was coming down her nose. She had some neon yellow blues and pinks. And then I'm like, "That's what I'm going to do with my face that day." So I had this really crazy-looking makeup. And then I did do the clothing and stuff. But I remember one time before I was even in his class, a bunch of dudes got together that day because I think I had gotten in a fight with another guy. There was initiating into a gang. They're like, "But you're not going to be with the--" He's like, "You're not going to fight a girl. But we're going to put you in the girl gang." [inaudible] [not the pimps?]. "But you're going to have to fight this dude." So we're going at it. We're going at it. And then as soon as they're all like "Stop." And my arm was already gone. And I hit the guy on the face who was friends with this other Latino one time that I messed up his eye, we were getting in a fight and I think he was on top of me and I had red hair spray on my head. So then I saw red on his hands. So I thought he made me bleed. So then I flip them over and I just started going crazy on him. He got a black eye. So then the next day, he had to come to school with a black eye and they said that a faggot beat him up. So that was more-- that boy ended up wanting to fight me so many times after he would see me in the street because that if he always wanted to relieve himself at that incident. But I always ended up-- we're not you're not fighting a girl, and you're not fighting a bitch. "I'm a boxy. I'm not going to scratch or pull your

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hair, but you do, obviously." Mr. Savage, that day that all these students were coming at me that they're going to fight, he just sees where the group of students are going to. And then he turns around, and he sees me and he just kind of stops in between us. And he's like, "What are you motherfuckers about to do?" And then I'm like, "Oh." Because he's cursing, right? But then again, that's what Mr. Savage became, my savior. I was like, "What a fucking delicious, yummy man kind of thing, Mr. Savage." Really, really. And then like I said, I know that you us about like, you know, other teachers that I had to like maybe fend off or like not like really be too interested in. I can't really think about because I think later on they became a little less obvious and the shit that they were trying to pull. But it was definitely a time where a lot of our community was mainly hiding and not just kind of like I see now still that a lot of these students go to school in the identities where their parents sometimes don't even know that they're gay. And I'm like, "Bitch, you're wearing blue contacts and a bright pink shirt. You have bleach, blonde hair. You really think your parents don't think you're gay? Who're you fooling, bitch? You're not even fooling the mirror." But it's still sad to see like this is like two, three semesters ago at UC Merced that I'm like, "Girl, what do you mean your parents don't know you're gay. You switch your hips more than I do. What are you talking about?"

*Well, folks have to do to get by. So you mentioned earlier, like instances where you maybe got kicked out of a school or like you said, getting in trouble when things were not your fault. I'm curious, like what kind of message does that send you as to, like, how you were expected to behave or just about you as a student?*

I think it ingrained into me that, like, I was bad, I am bad, I was undeserving, this isn't a space for you. And I think that's why I was so afraid of going to college afterwards, that I'm like, "No, I don't want to be here," kind of thing. But then noticing that I was taking evening classes so that just helped them [inaudible] with having to deal with the younger students kind of thing because I would see them open the window. I would see that sometimes with the [inaudible] program, they would have meetings that required that I attend. Whatever kind of meeting that there is, workshops that they would have. And I'd be like, "Oh my God, this is like I don't want to be here. I don't want to be here." And but it is definitely, again, put that burden and fear in me that, like, school wasn't for me. But as a trans-Latina and seeing a lot of the hardships that I went through school, I think that's why I wanted to get involved in psychology, to kind of break those misconceptions with a lot of parents about what a transwoman looks like or is. I didn't like when they would try to compare their kids to me because I'm like, "Bitch, your kid is just starting and you're putting so many obstacles in front of them. Of course, they're not going to become who they need to be." If anything, what I see happening, but I wouldn't tell them this part, they're probably going to reject you the way that I'm rejecting my parents now, because you're making it so much harder for them to access hormones, for them to find the clothing that they want to wear because you're so ashamed of what your family members are going to say. I started appreciating a lot of sadly, like white culture at this point because [inaudible] at Crenshaw High. It was them who are a little bit more educated and open-minded to these experiences of the queer community. So it's kind of what ended up happening there for a long time, I would not really indulge in spaces with Latino or black people because of those things. But slowly a lot of that stuff was broken down. Like I said, Ms. Maria Martinez, although in the back I would always think, "But if I was your family member, would you still accept me the way you do as a student? Because now you're working. But would this be the same situation if I was in your-- because that's where it's very [inaudible]. Yeah, yeah. You know, a lot of times we say, "Oh, I'm open-minded, I'm

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open-minded." But what if I was your family member, would you still say you're open-minded, you're open-minded? So it opened my mind to a lot of different things. There was this one white guy that we dated, but we weren't dating because we dated because he thought we were dating and he never really told me. And then things didn't work out too well. And I'm like, "Well, I didn't know we're dating." And if anything, I remember him one time saying something about the thing with me and school is that I would become more dangerous because I'm basically becoming educated on the crap that I see. And now I have these tools and these skills to advocate for myself and others. And I never really knew what he was talking about. But like even amongst Latino men right now, like, I'm a bad bitch because I got bigger balls than they do. For real. I'm not afraid to say that a lot of the times. I'm like, nah, like, no. Even like, yes, sometimes I run into men who are comfortable with me in the sheets, but they don't act the same way in the morning. And I'm just quick to catch a lot of that stuff. But know and again, a lot of like a lot of men of color, they don't like to be called on their crap. So like a lot of the times I'm like, "I'm like, "Shit, you think that calling me a man is going to hurt me? Bitch, I'm more of a man than you are. Like, I've done more shit with myself." And not to say the fact that I've gone through so many fucking surgical procedures without any family members or a caretaker to take care of me. If anything, the only thing that I've requested is for somebody to pick me up at the hospital because they wouldn't release me on my own. But as soon as they get me out of the hospital, I'm like, "Nah, drop me off at the train station. I'm fine." [inaudible] bandaged up looking like Michael Jackson. But I knew all of the things like even for the surgeries, I knew to prepare myself by buying shoes that were like the ones that I could slip my feet into but they were going to stay on my feet, buying onesies on Amazon, you know, where I could like, if I needed to cover everything up, I would be fully covered up and just take off my glasses when I got to my bus stop and walk home or whatever. A lot of these pussy motherfuckers, you know, they hurt themselves, they hurt their ankle and they need a ride to the hospital. It's like, "Bitch, take the train at 5:00 in the morning, honey. And if you need someone to release you, you go figure out how they're going to release you. If not, then [inaudible] fucking limp to the bus stop, honey, limp.

*Yeah. Wow. Thank you for sharing those experiences. I really appreciate it. So one thing that I'm curious about, once you went into the system, did your teachers or school staff know that you were in foster care? And if they did know, how did they find out?*

Some of them did, because see, I was on probation, too. Because the way the way the things are going on at home, my mother started locking up the food in the backyard with a lock and chain that she put around the entire refrigerator so that I couldn't get milk for my coffee. She hid a lot of the stuff from me. She wouldn't do my laundry. She would hide the detergent. So then those were things that I had to buy. So at the age of 12, 13 years old, how am I going to buy anything these things if I don't have it? So I started prostituting. And then from there, I got caught because-- I wouldn't have gotten caught, but there was this stupid boy that I had a crush on who set up this thing with with these undercover cops. And me thinking they were going to fucking have a good ol' time. Of course, I'm, "Shit, let's do this. I don't give a shit. You're fine. That's my man. We're going to do this. What?" We ended up getting arrested. I ran and I hid, but they still got me because I got out too soon. They caught my mom. They're like, "You're going to have to tell her." I'm like, "I'm not going to tell her." I said, "You're going to have to tell her. You arrested me." I said, "Otherwise, let me go." I said, "Because I ain't going to tell her shit." So I was on probation first, and then I didn't know what school I was going to go to because-- I forgot

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how I found out about the school. It had to be Ms. Goldman from-- Goodman, excuse me. Goldman is my white foster parents, but it had to be Ms.. Goodman from Crenshaw High that told me about Eagles' Academy. And for some reason, I got kicked out of there, I think. But Eagles' Academy was not a real school. It was like we would go over there, just have a good ol' time. Sometimes there was homework, but other times we were just all drinking coffee and sitting around. It's not a real school. So I ended up at [Frida Kahlo?], which was over here by Santa Monica, across the street from USC at a library, now the library moved to West [inaudible] 37 Street. But the school stopped going there, and now they were-- I even took some college classes at El Camino College. I ran into some of the students that were at that school too. And it was so-- at my graduation from high school, it was so beautiful about that was that they were graduating with college credit. I'm like, "Damn, bitches. Y'all really did it." That was even better. But fucking El Camino was like 45 minutes, so all the way in the boonies of Los Angeles. It was still too far. So that lady from that school, from Frida Kahlo didn't know-- she knew about me because one of the guidance counselors from Foshay was her partner, and one time she said something about being gay. But I didn't know what she was talking about because it was language that I still didn't really understand. I was listening to [Selena and Talia?] at the time. I really wasn't into the whole American culture fully. And I remember again, there was a guy that I would always hang out with. I kind of liked him too. And he also kind of detached from me. He would come to my house, and we would hang out. But afterwards, yeah, we just kind of drifted apart. Shut up. Another time, there was even this one guy that I saw on the bus. And at this point I was already Christina. And we started talking. We start talking, and I'm like, "Yeah," I said, "I went to school with you." He's like, "I don't remember you. I don't remember you." And then I had to tell him who I was back then. It crushed me because he stopped talking to me, too. And I'm like, "Damn, even if we wouldn't be getting in a romantic, anything. You can speak to me as a prior school friend. But anyway, Ms. Wills-- what's her name? I forgot her first name. Black guidance counselor was in a relationship with this chubby, Latina lesbian, or Chicana who is [inaudible] because her Spanish is terrible. So I do not remember how they found out about me. At this point, I'm on house arrest because of the prostitution thing. And I'm trying to figure out what to do with school, so I think I called her. And this lady came to the house - but it wasn't that far; it was like maybe 20, 25 minutes - and spoke to me and my mother that day about the school and me registering. And she's all like, "Well, if it's going to make him happy, whatever." So with that school, it was so much smoother. I was Christine all the time. One of my good friends, who's in prison now because of some stuff that she ended up doing when she was 18 - she's in her 30s now; she spent all her youth in there - ended up going to that school with me too. So that was really, really wonderful to me that there was two trans folks in there because otherwise, it was just questioning students and [foreign] that we're at the school. It wasn't like any of them were truly gay, trans, or bi, but they knew about it. Sadly, I think what happened there was that my mother went to the probation officer. And, at this point, I was putting on glittery nail polish on my teeth so when I smiled, I glistened. Now, people are crazy gluing diamonds on their teeth, but I was doing nail polish and stuff. And she had the students walk me to the bus stop that day to go see my probation officer because apparently, my mother had gone to the probation officer saying that she couldn't keep me at the house, that I was too flamboyant, that she was ashamed of me. There was a girl that I was hanging out with, that I went to the school with. She was a TA for the school, and she introduced me to the movie *The Crying Game*, which is-- I don't know if you've seen it, but in the end, one of the characters that you do not know through the movie turns out to be a trans woman. And you only see that because when she takes her skirt off, there's a penis

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there. And I'm like, "Oh." So amazing. But a wonderful, wonderful movie. And she ended up not even dying in the movie. So it was nice to see a film where we're [victimized?]. And then they also introduced me to the movie *Girl Interrupted* with Angelina Jolie and Wynona Ryder. So I was like, "Yes, badass bitches." So my mom was saying that I wasn't coming home and that I was doing this and I was doing that. But I wasn't doing anything bad. I was hanging out with a community that accepted me and loved me and were good with me. But anyway, she went over there and told the probation officer on Exposition and Crenshaw that she didn't want me, fuck this kid, blah, blah, blah. So when I get to the probation place, I'm all sad and scared and the first thing that this lady does is that she's apologizing for calling me the wrong name. She said, "I didn't know that you were going by Christina." She says, "I've been calling you the wrong name. I'm sorry." And that's when I think some things became more-- I became a little more human to women, though, because some men were still crap. Because after she put me in the foster care system, she could no longer be my probation officer. I had to be put in a different department which was with Willie Willis, who was a total piece of shit, and he was the one that put me on [AWOL?] and to go back to juvenile hall when they wanted to beat me up at that probation school. So it was this weird roller coaster that I've been going through all my life. Because it was the White counselor that was at the group home that I was last in that-- it was her freaking idea that because I looked a certain way oh, they won't know. Girl, you don't know our community. You don't know black and Latino kids. We look for the smallest details when we look at people. We'll figure it out. We'll figure it out. But, yeah, it was a wild kind of little thing to navigate.

*Right. And so is if-- so I'm curious if more of your teachers knew about you being in the system, what would you have wanted them to know about you, and what could they have done to help you thrive in school?*

Letting me know about after-school programs, focus on English and math, preparation, or more advanced content, because I remember when I was at Foshay, I was a part of the MESA program, which was mathematics, engineering, science, and something. And the field trips that we would go on and the extra credit that we would get on the assignments, it was wonderful. I wish they would have done that for me, continue doing that. But also [inaudible] that it should require that the most vulnerable parts of me to help me. I just kind of feel that as women, as Latino, as Latino boy, as a Latino girl, you should help those communities a little bit more even so, especially in these neighborhoods because it's clear [inaudible] that we don't have a lot of these resources. "Why should I adjust in being your underdog or working under you?" kind of thing.

*Coming to the end here. So I'm curious how you feel like your gender identity impacted your experience in foster care.*

I'm thinking. It didn't really. I mean, I don't know if the social workers could have played a better role in certain things. Maybe. I mean, I know that sometimes-- like in some cases right here at-- where was I? When I was working at a group home with all boys here in Turlock not too long ago, one of the boys was in a gymnastic extra school program that I think the social workers of the county were paying for. And I'm like, "How come we didn't have that back in the days?" Because otherwise, like I said, even when I was with in the all-boys group home myself-- but I wasn't working at that. When I was like living in it, and the one in the [inaudible] in watts. I think it was watts. Around. But it was willing and we were kind of around the same age, so it



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wasn't like that weirdness of feeling objectified. Now one time when a staff did come to the room, he asked what we were doing. And I felt like we were a couple because it was the last room that we were in. And then there were two sinks, and there was one bathroom. It was weird. But the staff asked they're like, "What are y'all doing?" And then the boy threw himself over to the other side of my bed, and then he's all like, "Oh." He says, "I was getting something." I forgot what the hell it was that he said. And he looks at me, he's all like, "What are y'all doing?" And I looked at him, and I was like, "Why are you asking me?" I said he's on my side of the room. [laughter] Bitch, I'm trying to fucking-- what do you think we were doing? But, not in that way of like he was a very cool man. He was the son, the oldest son, I think of the lady who ran the group homes. But I'm like, you're not about to blame me for this shit. I'm like, "As you saw, he threw himself on this side, like, what are y'all do? What is he doing?" That's my man. That's my man. But no, they let me be myself. They let me do the nails. They let me they let me watch the Spice Girls. They let me watch Natalie Imbruglia, the fucking girl that sings, "I'm all out of faith. I'm torn." There's right, I'm torn lying naked on the floor. Yeah, me too, Natalie. Me too. It was, I mean, the song, the shit that I was listening to, but they were like super cool with it. And I would cry myself to sleep because they would take us to the park and they would play football. And I'm like, "I'm just going to watch you guys and do a performance to Janet Jackson or listen to some sad Spice Girls song." And in my mind, I always envisioned my mom pulling up in the car and loving me kind of thing. But it wasn't my reality. So I had to really be strong and just kind of like, let myself know bitch, this is not your reality. You don't have parents. This is not your truth. This is your life. I started going to some support groups when I was at this gay school in Hollywood that wasn't a school school, but I ended up going to there anyways. And I found a space where there were other trans women. And one of the times this one woman's asking what was my name, and then I told her my name. She's all like, "That's not your name. You're a woman." And then I'm like, "No, I'm not." being very like, "No, I'm not." or [inaudible] trans or something and I'm like, "No, I'm not." or whatever. Later on, I ended up working with her, and she was a total piece of shit woman, too. She wasn't the greatest lady. But then again, it's all the trauma that so many trans people go through. But, yeah, in between, it wasn't only schools that I was getting support from. I also looked for it elsewhere. They would host like events. And we would we could come dress in like big old Pamela Anderson stilettos and like dresses or whatever, whatever. But those things were different. But it would have definitely had I known those types of services-- Crenshaw High did try to have Impact. I think it was called. Or Project ten I think it was called back in those days. And it was basically an LGBT group that would come together. But unfortunately, it was during period four which for me was algebra. And the lady didn't really want me to be missing class. And I remember one time I didn't know the answer to one of the questions and I wrote screw you. And I wrote screw you, because there was something that I heard when I was watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer, because that's where I got my female empowerment from. And she asked me one time, she's all like, when she saw the exam she says, "Do you know what this means?" I'm like, "No." She says, "That's basically saying fuck you." And I'm like I said, "I'm sorry." I said, "I didn't know that." Again, I'm still kind of learning what English really is and with other speeches. But she was a good lady. She was a good lady. But unfortunately, the class met-- the group met while those classes were going. So those were other things that really helped out. Sadly, though, that impact the people that would go to it, I remember I dated the boy for like a little bit. He used to work at McDonald's. And we went on a date one time and it was we went to the Huntington Park and his sister and one of his friends that I didn't know had a crush on him. And she was also my friend,

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knew it. And I felt so weird because I'm like, "Fuck, I'm not trying to take your crush, but girl, he's gay. Bom, bom, bom. I felt so bad for her. [inaudible]. And he would go to that group, too. But again, nobody was really out. I don't know. I don't know what it-- I think for me, it was the whole thing about the Spice Girls and girl power and equalization between the sexes kind of thing, that it was like, "Oh, yeah, female empowerment. Yeah, yeah, yeah." But all these other-- I just I don't know. I think I had a different bravado, watching Buffy, all of those things. It did something, it expanded my mind differently. And the fact that I had-- like I told you, being seven and getting molested in the family also tore me from that connection, that network of saying this is my family, this is who we are. It was like, "Yeah, I don't trust you bitches either. So if you tell me this is wrong or 'Oh, why are you looking-- why are you watching this crazy concert with those five crazy looking women?'" It's like, "But aren't they awesome? Don't they look so happy? Blah, blah, blah kind of thing." And then we already know what happens to Scary Spice with all the lawsuits that she's going through with her ex-husband, cause she didn't even have a prenup with him. And then her first boyfriend or her baby daddy, I think was one of her backup dancers who was gay and ended up [inaudible] whatever. But she got to-- yeah, it's been a big old mess, but yeah, otherwise, that's how I feel school could have done something better.

*Yeah, for sure. So this is my last question and so just some background as to why I ask it. In my experience working with young folks in the system, there's a tendency to look at them as if all they are are kids in foster care or kids on probation, right? That's their entire identity. And so I think it's important that we understand that that's not right. That there's so much more to people than those systems that they have to deal with. So I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about yourself as a teenager outside of the context of being in foster care, or being on probation. So who were you? What did you like? Tell me a little bit about that, if you could expand on that.*

I was a [Spice Girl?]. I was a nerd. I mean, I was listening to No Doubt when no doubt was no doubt-- when Gwen Stefani was No Doubt - Don't Speak. I didn't really like the song Don't Speak because I didn't know what it was saying. I mean, I knew what it was saying, but I'm like, "I don't know who you're talking to." But I liked Spiderwebs, Sorry, I'm not home right now. I'm walking into spider web. Leave a message and I'll call you back. Or I'm just a girl in the world or why don't you just [inaudible] girl, because it was like a rival band kind of thing. Then Evanescence came about years later where it was like the dark side of like the pop girl bands or whatever. Selena, I mean, fucking Selena Quintanilla. You know the original Selena hands down. Like Como La Flor. Love, love, love, love, love that. I was a passionate girl ready to fucking fall in love because Selena was broken-hearted. Even though she wasn't. Even what you're doing now, I was always like putting smiles on people's faces just with anything. If people were having a bad day, here let's do this, let's do that. Oh, I've always had daddy issues. So I was always kind of dating guys that were older than me. Now I'm almost 40 and a [inaudible]. I can't be no sugar mama. I can't be no like-- then even these boys in L.A., right now, they are not fuckboy material. The dancing I love-- So obviously, I love music, I love dancing, alcohol or drugs were not really a thing in my life. It wasn't something that I gravitated towards. And when I did see it, I didn't like what I would see in people. So, I never really wanted to sniff coke or sniff crystal meth in the back of the auditoriums of the church that the school-- of the school was the continuation for the gay kids without a church. And I'm like, "This is so fucking ironic. We're gay. And then on top of it, you bitches are doing coke behind the fucking-- not even coke, it was meth behind the auditorium curtain." I'm like, "Nah, I'm cool. I'm cool." Yeah. So I've always

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also been the caretaker. So that's also been one thing that after getting so much plastic surgery and then focusing on school, I'm like, "Okay, I have to back up a little bit on being taken care of people because who's taking care of me when I'm down," kind of thing. I have a little sister who I adore dearly. And she gave birth to my wonderful little nephew. He's Latino and black. Her husband is black. And that's kind of like the one time that I am okay with being a caretaker right now. When I'm getting him things or getting her things for him or getting things for her to make their life a little easier even though the daddy is involved or whatever. But it's different, definitely. Yeah. I'm more guarded now because before I think I was a little more trusting, but in love, I was taken advantage of with the exception of my first boyfriend. He was always very chill and very cool, but he was also smoking crack and injecting heroin. So it was a little tricky. But with him, even though we dated for like three years, I was 13. He was 19 when we met, but we didn't do anything until I was 16, and it was my birthday and I was like, ready for it. But again, that was the one time that I didn't feel taken advantage of. If anything, it was stupid because he had a girlfriend. So then I felt that because I wasn't a girl girl, he could do that. It was a dumb place that I was-- I was still learning. Oh, and Shakira. Oh my God, love Shakira. And she totally [inaudible]-- even though she's not fully Latina, totally represent the Latin community way more than Jaylo. And Olga Tanon too. Definite Puerto Rican. Yeah. Too much, too much, too much. And now we got [inaudible] medical back in [inaudible]. Lorena Herrera, Pamela Anderson, were like idols. I'm like I totally grew up with and stuff. So yeah, that's kind of where I was as a younger person.

*Thank you. So that was that was my last question.*

### **DS' interview**

*Alright, so, my first question is, what was your overall experience of school? So you could share, like if you liked it, or if you hated it and why?*

Um, so I, beginning with Elementary, I remember my first experience being traumatizing because, I think I was... I came into the school structure as a very open child and with a lot of uncontrollable joy, I'd say, I would talk and laugh during her instructions. So, my first, my kindergarten teacher slapped me and I remember taking that away and not sharing it with anyone. So, my first grade experience, I remember I was in a private school so the teachers were a little bit stricter. I ended up staying back in that class so, I repeated the first grade because my parents did not prioritize my attendance and so I entered the foster system after shortly after that, I remember transferring to Downey, the city. And I was so... I think... The social aspect and the differences between those two. I was from Los Angeles, the center of Los Angeles and transferring to Downey was a difference within the dynamics. And I came into the classrooms and I noticed that shift quickly. It was no longer like fun games, it was like seriousness and the teacher, my third grade teacher, was really concerned that I didn't know my alphabet sounds at the third grade.... I wasn't.... I remember sitting in this classroom, and like shutting off completely. Like, my whole nervous system was shut off and I would feel [what I still feel today as an adult and some of my JC classes and it's gotten a lot better now because it's been a four year process of dedication and hard work on my end.] So, but my might the left side of my brain would like fall asleep. And I remember just feeling.... like it was.... there was no information flowing because I didn't know and I wasn't accepting to the information that the teachers were attempting to provide and I think also, as I realized as they become an adult I realized there's



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only so much at the teachers can do, right, because that information should have been instilled as a chat, like from learning how to pick up a book at an early age but if that is not present, If we're not looking at like what our parents did not do, then I think that's the biggest issue. But, um so yeah I suppose like third grade that's when I completely shut off as a student, so from third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, I came into a different elementary school, I transferred over for the fourth grade, and those teachers were just much more caring, so they allowed me to enjoy coming into school because they didn't see me as like, "Oh my gosh, This kid is incapable of, you know, having the, the skills that these other kids have." And in this school it was predominantly white but there were other, you know, Latinos, and also individuals of color, but I do remember my instructors being extremely kind with me, and they would share things. My fourth grade math teacher. When she would ask me a question I remember answering the question and then she would say that's really strange that you're answering the question this way, because only doctors seem to answer questions when they're ask it in this way. Then she like, I remember her grabbing me by the shoulders and saying to me one day you're going to become a doctor. And that memory stuck with me.

I'm obviously 31 and just finishing my bachelor's degree. So, I think to myself like what is my, what does my future hold. And, I don't know but I hold those things that this individual in the fourth grade told me and I hold it, like, sacred to my heart because I've struggled so much with my educational process. So there has been teachers that have really like shaped and inspired me through my elementary process. In middle school, things started to change because I got into a lot of trouble. And I think at this point, my teachers were.... my principal is very inspiring and he had tried his hardest to make me feel that I wasn't in a bad kid but I was a special kid. And because, during the issues that I had in middle school and elementary my guardian had to share the fact that I was a foster child. So these are these instructors really took that to heart, I think, and they saw me as a child in need. They gave me that extra attention but it was more kindness, it wasn't like, like I mentioned again, earlier, it's very hard for teachers to do so much when it comes to implementation of education when we don't have the concrete foundation so there was only so much they can do to attempt to teach me and have me want to learn and want to engage in those classrooms.

*Thank you for sharing what a powerful story I love to hear about, you know, the people who impacted you and how you, you really hold that with you. This is beautiful. Thank you. So you mentioned a little bit about some teachers that again impacted you. But I'm kind of wondering if there was, you mentioned some teachers that you liked if you can, like, expand on the things that they did to make you feel like cared for, you mentioned that they were you know supportive in that way. We'll start there*

I do remember they were very like mothering figures like just, they sit there and they look at me and they want to know like how they can almost protect me, in a sense, like they were.... there was a teacher, Miss bliss... she... I remember having like this one on one time with her where we would have to listen to stories because I didn't know how to read in the fourth grade. And, I still have very hard time. I wouldn't say I'm perfect at literacy. If I'm being honest but this teacher would have us sit down and listen to the book, and we would go over the book and that was like my favorite thing to do. And because I actually somewhat understood like what was the plot of the stories. And she was just very supportive like she would make us do this...

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We had this jar of...I believe was a jar of gum balls. And for math we had to do the estimate. You know, for a prize we would do like, what's your estimate of the color red or the color blue, and I would have for some reason always get the right estimate. And that was like my thing and it was like, so exciting because I knew that I was. One, right and yeah she shared that with me and I thought that was really nice. Like, she would...she was very inclusive and I think it's important for teachers to, you know, treat kids...I think it was part of your question like, treat kids like they're alike even when you clearly see that there's a huge difference you know and I see that today. I see that today in the JC structured like when I first started school, after you know, being out of school for about 10 years, I remember coming in and learning about racism because as a third grader, fourth grader, fifth grade or sixth grader yes your teachers are white, and kind and like completely different from your parents but you don't understand why. You don't understand that there's something heavier that, I still to this day I'm learning to understand. But um. So then I didn't see it but as an adult, I go into these classrooms and I start seeing the dynamic and the changes within my peers and I start seeing that there is a structure, and there is a difference and I, you know, I'm taught in this JC level to, to look at it and acknowledge it and see it for this is what it is. And we're calling it out in our history books we're calling it out. And as a 30, or a 28 year old going back to school I'm like well that's not what I want it to be and that's not what I want to accept it as because you know I'm a unique individual and I hold a unique story. That doesn't make me different from the privileged individual that sits in front of me, that's had like 10 years of, you know, whatever they've had.

But in reality it's like, it actually does. Yeah, so that's where we are now, but I think going back to high school. There was so much that I dealt with internally that I don't understand how I made it out.

And I wonder like how did these teachers even pass me, you know, like I...even at the JC level like, and at the college level, I'm like, there's so many things that I should really be focusing on that get like foreseen and just passed, and I don't know how healthy that is when you're entering the actual work field. But, in high school I suffered a lot, and my grades showed it, my attendance showed it, and there was finally this professor who was a white lady with blue eyes she had big curly hair and she said this brown wooden desk, and this is my history class in the 12th grade and it was, we were getting ready to graduate as seniors. And I wasn't attending her class because there was a guy there who was very mean to me, Tony Pianelli. And, I felt intimidated because the professor was like very bright and she challenged her students and I felt like again that sleepy brain student in this dark entity sitting on her desk like not capable of, you know, taking pop quiz about the history of the United States and I remember feeling like "oh my god I don't want to embarrass myself again in that seat so I'm not going to show up to her class." So, I stopped showing up to her class, and she...the day that I did show up she said you know, "Daphne you're failing my class and without this class you're not going to be able to graduate high school." So, I remember, like, pulling up to her... to her desk as she was telling me that and I can remember myself like holding my body to her desk. And that image has driven me to where I am today because it was almost like...I won't use religion as a form to remind myself of it... but it was almost like I was like dying. And just like pleading for help, you know, I remember thinking like "God you just don't know what I've been through, like I can't sit in this classroom." And, since that memory of her failing me and not being able to walk with my class and having to go through the other steps to get that GED, that was no longer considered a high school diploma, has completely shifted and change my life because I don't think that I would be as driven to receive an education if it wasn't for that memory. So I actually think her now. And I remember

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she used to drive a two seater convertible Lexus. And that was... as a senior I was so mad at her and now as an adult I'm like, "oh my god I can't wait to one day, own my convertible two seater Lexus." But, um, yeah so I think her now, because if it wasn't for her, I probably wouldn't be as determined to receive a higher education.

*Wow, thank you for sharing that I know it might bring up some uncomfortable feelings, or do you need a minute or...?*

No, I'm fine, I'm fine, thank you for that.

*Um, so I guess in the same vein, whether other teachers that you that you didn't like or felt like didn't understand you while you're in high school?*

In high school I think she was like... she was the only one that really impacted my life. The other teachers they just didn't really deal with me like, it was just, you know, I would see for example the difference with students that actually did their homework and participated and were like really good writers, they probably were praised more and had more attention from the teachers. Otherwise in high school was kind of like, I think they have so many students that if you're not really shining and doing your work, you're just kind of like not even bothered. Yeah, so, um, I don't, I don't think I had any problem but I also feel that, perhaps, like being neglected as a high school student is a problem.

*Okay. So, in a similar... I think, kind of going off of that of what you mentioned, like that teacher and not really understanding the things that you've gone through. If you had the chance to like, share with your teachers, what would you have wanted them to know about your experiences like, specifically in high school?*

Yeah, I think I would have wanted to share everything that I was going through. You know, I don't know how or why I wasn't able to and I still have it haven't been able to share that with my guardian, and my family members but you know I would have said, like I'm in need of help, like, please help me, because I don't understand the academic structures, I don't understand what we're learning, I don't know a thing about history, I just know that I have suffered a lot. I know that at that time, in high school, I had already experimented with alcoholism and drug abuse. So, I was just dealing with, like these terrible, terrible demons, I'd say. You know, I had gone through my first abortion at 14 like, I probably... not probably, I definitely shouldn't have been having like sexual intercourse. And I feel that, you know, all of these things had to have been seen because they were felt. It had to have shown within the essence of who I was as a student, and it was ignored. Like, it was ignored by my foster or my guardian it was ignored by my family and relatives, it was ignored by my school institution. And I think that it cost....

And it's a terrible thing to be ignored. You know, because you just...you don't know...I mean people tell me well you are an adult like you should have known the decisions that were making, were not good decisions for you and it's like, No, you don't know because I don't consider myself an adult, where I'm using my logic and my mind to know what's right and wrong. I've, I've learned at 30 years old I can say like okay now I understand what's right and what's wrong. So as you know as a freshman, sophomore, junior and senior, I had no idea that I was, you know, puncturing myself so deeply that it was going to affect me the way that it did in those years. So, I think I would have wanted to share...I think it would have been important for me to share openly with my teachers like, this is what I experienced, you know, I'm actually under this, you know, drug. Like, I'm probably not functioning properly because of this and that, like, Can you help me.

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*And what do you think they could, like, if, if they were to be able to support you. What do you think would have helped you to not just kind of like survive high school but to really like thrive in high school?*

I think about this too as I study and I think about people that are in my shoes, I think, would it have been helpful if we had this program for these individuals to come into, and it not be something where they're being punished, like you know we have, like, if for example you don't show up to class you're going to go to the cafeteria and sit with all the bad kids who don't show up to class. But what if during that time of sitting we're doing something to learn about our own roots, and our own abilities and being taught like of people who have been in these situations and overcome them. I've always... something I loved about high school was seeing inspirational speakers come in because, obviously that used to, that was a memory of mine that triggered that showed like excellency and, you know, just much more. They inspired me during their talk so, you know, having more inspirational speakers or organizational speakers coming into these groups within these high schools and saying okay this is not the end for you like you have probably gone to x y and z. But the thing is like would I even have shared like oh Hi, I'm 14 and I'm having sexual intercourse, and I got pregnant, and now I'm drunk and probably high off of something. Like would that have been an open topic because it was seen as so bad and so negative. You know, do you have, would you have had like an open free spirited speaker say like sex is healthy. At 14, like, is that really the message that you want to share with people? Because I think if I would have had somebody who was like, Oh, well, that's okay like you know it's not the end of your world or at least it shouldn't be the end of the world, you should realize that there are consequences that come with that. But don't see yourself as a bad person. So, if I had a group of, you know, counsel, instead of like this, African American man who used to like sit at the end of our table, and just joke and talk about stupid things like football and like the sports and all that, like, you probably need somebody to mentor these kids. That's why they're in this detention center, not to, you know, ignore and go on about things that are irrelevant to the structure of their life and their development.

*Definitely can see that being really, really impactful.*

*So I'm gonna shift gears a little bit. I'm curious if you ever felt like you needed to resist or confront educators, like teachers, school staff, what have you, about how they were treating* You, you know, um, I don't think I ever had that problem in high school, I do recall in the JC I felt a little bit more uncomfortable with one professor just because I didn't like the way she like stared at me and I felt that... I felt that she had higher expectations for my for me as an individual and as you know the individual that I am and the... the... I won't call it pain, but the passion that I carry. It's like she would kind of look at me and just like in disbelief, like she wanted more from me, but I never confronted her. I just evaluated her at the end and the Dean of the department was there he was present during my evaluation and, you know, I really had to take my time to, To answer these questions because I can feel that everybody in the room was all about the professor and like just giving her good credit. And I was like, No, like, that's not like yeah she's awesome I'm sure like you know she is lively and... but she didn't give me what I was expecting to receive from myself in this class like I remember the first day I wanted to comment on how I felt about the government, because I've been part of the system for 30...x years. You know, I grew up in the system and the system has... the government has always provided for me like my education is free. So I was speaking highly of it and she got kind of like she looked at me

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like, "you're such a moron, like you're not in...like the government isn't for you," basically like take this elsewhere, you know, and I remember feeling like well, I don't know I just felt like okay, maybe I shouldn't participate in this class and I started sitting at the end of the classroom. And I just disengaged with that class I got like a C. But, yeah I mean, as an adult it's hard you know to stay engaged with teachers that you don't feel are respecting of your thoughts.

*And then, in high school or middle school. Did you ever experience any like disciplinary action like suspension, expulsion, detention even, and if so, what led up to that.*

Sure. I do... from I think middle school I was always in trouble for dress code. That's when it started my science teacher would always send me up to the principal's office in the mornings because I was wearing lower shirts that showed cleavage and...or I was sent home because I had to change, and it happened so often that I don't understand I wonder where my guardian spring was half of the time. Because she was probably so busy with her life that she would forget to say "oh that's right like I can take you to school wearing like," or make those extra steps to like not make sure I'm not coming out... but also these questions trigger back to like, what was it that I was trying to you know...what type of attention was I thriving on. And where did that come from and how could I have healed those roots without thriving for that attention. Man, it's terrible but there was that there was also like writing on the walls that I was involved in that got me into trouble and I don't...I don't think I was ever expelled from any school. But I was definitely suspended and I was always in detention for tardiness. Really, those were the three top.

*And so thinking about like getting in trouble for your... for your dress... what kind of messages did that send you about how you are expected to look, to behave.*

Um, I remember, I really liked this teacher that would always direct me to the principal's office because she was funny. So I remember feeling like man I don't get to participate in her class today and then I felt like... I was, you know... I feel like I develop much quicker than my other peers also in middle school so that was something that I couldn't really help. But at the same time...And I want to say that I was shopping like justice, which was, you know, a store for like young girls so I don't understand like, why... I feel now as an adult that it triggered from something else that happened that was like, possibly a form of me relating the message that was, you know, that it was experienced and attempting to find a form to stop that prior to getting to where it did get, but I just remember feeling like yeah it was it was not something comfortable that I felt with, but I kept doing it. You know, It's like, get the damn message buy yourself... Now I obviously dress differently but it was just interesting and I don't understand and thinking back when I was suspended I remember sitting at my outside of the principal's office. And I was just like, just sitting there I didn't really feel anything. You know, I didn't feel like I was a bad kid. I felt, if anything like... He made me feel like, again, like I was a special kid not a bad kid. Thankfully, because had I felt like a bad kid I probably would do more things

*Shifting gears a little bit before... we're almost to the end. So I'm.. I want to know how you feel like your identity with, like, your gender and racial identity. So, being like a Mexican female impacted your experience in school.*

Uh huh. Um. Like I said earlier, I didn't see myself as a Latina, you know, because I didn't know that racism existed. At that point I didn't understand it. But I think now looking back to it I do see that, you know...and I'm not going to say this because I'm a Latina, because there are Latinos in my classrooms that have probably had 4.0s and ended up going to prestigious universities and



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were on top of their classroom ...but in my case it was...you know, I think that...that's a very hard question to answer. I think I have to reference to what I wrote earlier. I, it's interesting you know like, I'm just learning about my own identity and my own culture. So how I remember these teachers perceiving me as a woman, a girl of color...

You know there was Brandy Otis who's now also working on her PhD in special education at UCLA, and she was in my class, like she was my peer and she was always very well respected because she always had carried a book with her. So, and she was a woman of color so women of color and my eyes were always respected and known as women who were intellectual and you know the white boys were always like troublemakers like it was kind of weird. But how they saw me... God knows how the professor, the teachers, really saw me when being honest but I don't think it had anything to do with...I mean, it probably did with the fact that I was from Los Angeles from poverty from, you know, the systems that carry so much heaviness that is very hard to carry for a young individual but I think I wrote here

*"I believe we all stand in distinctive and unique light. I have found my experience to be challenging in spite of others, but I've learned not to compare myself to others. In fact, learning at the JC level has taught me to look closer to the students that stand within the same shadows of my own light and see that there is a need to unify and support one another."*

*Awesome. Thank you. How feel like your gender identity or your culture identity impacted your experience in the foster care system.*

Um, I wish I was more involved in the foster care system because my guardian was actually a case worker and now she's like a director. Yeah. So, and it's funny. She's my cousin. But, you know, in high school. I didn't really have, like, I would consider it the privilege that a lot of these students have because there's so many programs that, for example allow students to go branch out on their own after high school and, you know, they pay for their living and they learn how to use like expenses and, you know, things of that nature. She used to mention them to me but she never directed me and said, "okay this is what you need to do. This is how you're going to get there like," it was never like that it was kind of like, "ok you're 18 now, time to move out." You know, because she was starting her own family and she was in law school and there was a lot of things that she was doing which, I don't blame her. I think she did her very best that she could, given the circumstances that we were all in, but I do wish like now as a, as a adult at the JC level I was part of the care...The Star Program. And I was just so thankful because they pay for my books, my counselors were the like best, you know they were so amazing. They really inspired me to keep going because I came in and I'm like, "okay well I still don't know anything, like I don't know how to read really well. I don't know my history. I don't know the United States history like how am I going to get through college. Like, I'm not sure if I even know math." And they were just so... they had tutoring available. They were like yeah you're a foster youth kid like this is what we like to see, like thrive and, you know, just so supportive. And that was necessary for me, for sure so had I had that earlier on, I think I would have been better off.

*So I'm wondering if there's anything you want to share with me about who you were outside of the context of foster care, and a little bit of why that's important: In my experience, we look at young folks who are in this situation as if that's it so like even just using the word like, foster youth, like well that's, that's all you are, right? And, so I think it's really important to kind of separate people from that and look at like who they are outside of that, right, like that's not your*

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*entire identity. And so yeah so I'm just kind of curious about who you were as a teenager, outside of being in foster care.*

Sure I guess I can see myself as a seeker. I was a seeker, like I wanted...I was seeking freedom. You know I wanted I wanted power. I wanted more than the limitations that were set and bounding me from, you know, really feeling like joy and happiness and, for example, like, you know, staring off into like the sky for hours and, you know, feeling that there was much more inside of me that I was capable of doing. I really enjoyed as a young teenager, I actually really enjoyed listening to music, and I always listen to different types of music I remember my guardian would not like me to listen to kiss FM because she's like your brain washing yourself from, like the white scene. And I'm like, okay, so I'll just listen to Tupac then and keep it real like I don't get it, you know. So, but I remember then I felt like I could...I could be a music producer. As a young kid I remember thinking like, oh, it would be so fun like I would listen to the music and in my head I would be playing like the scenario. And I would think to myself like, oh, this would be the perfect video. So I guess, you know, music was the thing that I derived on. I enjoy spending time with my friend Stephanie who is my neighbor. I would walk to her house so I enjoyed biking to her house as well. And I enjoyed spending time with my teacher, as well. I was in very... I did actually run, and I played basketball. That was fun. But I guess yeah I mean...it's interesting because this is the first time that...and I'm probably going to think about this outside of this talk. I'm going to think like, "damn, what were the things that made you happy as a child...as a teenager?" Because those are really hard to distinguish when you're going through so much and. But I think liberation, or attempting to find and feel liberation was probably the most thing that I enjoyed as a young adult.

*That's really special to hear it. Thank you. So lastly, and I'm just curious like if there's any if you know, if there's any final thoughts you'd like to leave or anything that you feel like you wanted to share but to get a chance to.*

I guess the final thoughts, with the out of my own curiosity as a student and a researcher and not knowing what I'm going to do with my future. I'm curious to know...You know I mentioned earlier, like the...having those circles within these institutions, where children like myself don't have to feel fear or judgment. I wonder and question whether or not these are actually available these. These groups are available for kids in these institutions.

*For sure, definitely, definitely very very.*

Thank you for allowing me to share my story.

### **Ellie's interview**

*Great. So, um, I first question is, can you tell me a little bit about your overall experience in school, focusing mostly on like middle and high school like did you love school did you hate it. Were you did you feel like you're a good student and like that kind of thing.*

Um, so Middle School was pretty awful. At that point, I was really confused about just a lot of things you know, mainly my own like identity, just with a whole bunch of different stuff. You know, I had lost...I lost my mother when I was very young. And, like I dealt with that growing up, but like in middle school that's when it like hit me, you know, like that I was so different that I had to deal with this and that just like...And you know, along with, you know, everything, changing biologically, all my hormones so that just made it worse. So Middle School is like super, super rough. My freshman year of high school, you know, you're still kind of a middle

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schooler when you're a freshman in high school, so it was about the same. But, as I got through high school things just like got like way better just really quickly. Like so...I just I did a lot better in high school, I think my junior and senior year of high school were probably like they're definitely like my best years my senior year of being a little bit better.

*So, what was your relationship like with your teachers and school staff. So, this as a two part question. So the first part, did you have teachers that you liked, and why.*

As far as teachers went, I was usually really..... like I was pretty...let's see. Middle school was a little bit of a different story. I got along with my teachers, not all of them, obviously, just because you know i don't think everybody gets along with every single one of their teachers, but I really was kind of in the background. I really tried to just not talk too much not to like be at the center of attention very much in middle school so I didn't really get to know many of my teachers as well, maybe like one or two. Like, really, they saw that I was struggling and they tried to help me. I do like... I don't know if I should talk about like that at this point but I had this one particular teacher who just like really kind of provided a really traumatic experience for me while I was in school. So I don't know if I should talk about that like right now.

*Yeah*

This teacher...She let me... like, she wasn't qualified for a job, she didn't like being a teacher you could tell that she wasn't planning on being a teacher that it wasn't her thing. My middle school, they like, wanted to incorporate like a common core thing, and like I'm not really sure what the point was, but they basically wanted us to have a Middle School theatre program. And it ended up being complete BS, but like, that was my sixth period like for two years in a row. It was just god awful because the woman was a theater kid, you know, trademark. But to the point that it was really awful. She was constantly having issues at home. She had these two daughters, that like the majority of time were like actually in her class like on the floor with stuff like screwing around, and she had like...she would have like six pairs of shoes on her floor just like kind of laying around, like when she wanted to change them out or whatever. So like her room always smelt like feet. She constantly had snacks around her, and like I know at some point. She had like these cupcakes that had mold on the bottom, and she ate them while we were in class, and she had to go outside and like throw up while we're in class. Um, but the thing was that like, she -and I didn't realize that's what it was at the time- but she really had a like white savior complex. She showed us the movie *The Freedom Riders* diary, while we were in class, and like I enjoy that movie but I do see you know the underlying, you know, this woman has a white savior complex. And so this teacher, she basically wanted to be the teacher in the *Freedom Riders* area, but like a Walmart version of it, you know. So like the entire... my school you know we grew up in a very brown school we were all Latino/Chicano, you know, so she had this idea that she wanted to save all these little brown children and she had us write, you know the notebook thing. You can either have this read or not and you are allowed to talk about whatever you want and it was great, and like, you know, go ahead and do that. And, me at the time, I was very naive I was hurting in middle school so I decided you know, I will pour myself out into this notebook. And I don't really remember what caused us to really clash so hard what made us not like each other so much, but at some point...I don't know if I was being difficult, I don't know. I really don't know what prompted her to do it but at some point during class she pulled out these papers that she had printed. And so we had done our notebooks online, we just type them up instead of having a legitimate notebook and we would, you know, submit them blah blah and she would just like



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grade them, like that we did them, or something. And so she pulls out these papers. And it's all my writing, of all the stuff that I had poured out. And she says to me like, "you know I know everything that's going on in your head, and I could say all of this out loud right now." You know, and like I never went to anyone just because like I didn't realize that she was using that she was manipulating me I just like I was like 'oh she, she would she's gonna if I say anything to her she's probably going to get back at me somehow,' so I never said, and it was just super rough. Um, she got kicked out. She got fired for like some other thing, and it's probably better that for her. Whatever. In high school, I was doing a lot better. And I really established myself like, I grew up, you know, not only... you know, just like... I grew up, you know I didn't feel like being quiet so much anymore. I wanted to... I just, I changed as a person. I wanted to talk. I wanted to make friends. I wanted to be a leader. So I really in high school establish myself as such. I was an activist in high school I was on my... I was on student leadership as Vice President for two years. And so, like, I enjoy talking to teachers and like getting to know them, like, on a, you know, not personal, personal level but like a pretty personal level. So, I got to know most teachers, and like I was very outspoken and I would talk to other people. And so, like, I was able to get away with kind of a lot while I was in high school, which is a little bit weird to me just because like, while other people... like, I don't know what I did that allowed me to do that but I would just come and go as I wanted and I wouldn't get, you know, in trouble for it. Like, you know, they would be like, 'you have to use a ticket to go to the bathroom, you have to ask blah blah blah.' But once... like, I would just walk out and go and do whatever I wanted. But I always came back and I did really well with my, you know, academics. Pretty much straight A's throughout high school. I was like, top 10 students in my class. And just like, my teachers liked me a lot, and I like them, so I did really well. It was really easy for me to get recommendation letters. I did extracurriculars a lot. So I had a really good time, so it was a pretty drastic difference.

*Yeah, wow. What an interesting teacher, I've never had anything like that but I'm glad I got better after that. So you talked a little bit about being like, kind of an activist at school right. So I'm wondering if... did you ever feel like you ever had to confront as teacher or staff member on how they were treating you or advocate for yourself, to get something that you needed, and if so, can you tell me a little bit about that.*

Um, let's see. Not particularly having to advocate for myself or, I never... I definitely never had to confront anyone about their behavior. You know, I'm very thankful for that. I never had to, you know, actually go and say you know you're being sexist or you being racist or homophobic I never had to do that. Advocating for myself... on, like, as far as like real issues go I never really had to do that, you know,

I don't know if it matters like if this correlates, but we had a cultural studies class that I... We had a, like a women's unit just about talking about women's issues. And we ended up talking a lot about, you know, race, gender, sexuality, how it, like... and women, you know. And so the teacher at the time, he wanted the girls in the class to basically lead the class that month and he would kind of like organize it, but he would have us teach. And so I ended up being like, one of the main teachers. And it was kind of cool, like talking to, like... because this class, it wasn't just like... I was a junior at the time so it wasn't just juniors, it was like freshman to senior girls and boys, you know, and other individuals. It was, it was really cool knowing that like, you know, I got to sit here... we'd like do a panel thing every single day on a different discussion and

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different topic. And, we'd have a discussion with men in the class and, it was just really cool knowing that like, you know, I was kind of leading this instruction on women's issues to these different guys that I've known you know since I was a kid. Yeah.

*And how did you get picked for that?*

Let's see...just like... he was doing it on like a volunteer, kind of thing. And like... like a group of, you know however many girls would, you know, talk about each issue and....But and... like you would go like... you could have.... you... It wouldn't just be like one girl, you know would go to one thing. And, you know, you wouldn't have to do it again. You can do it as much as you wanted. But, you know, I chose you know...I won't mind being on a panel, every single lesson, you know. And, in all the panels, it was like me and like a couple of other girls that just like would talk the most, you know, just because they have more knowledge, and I was one of those girls I would just talk a little bit more and kind of lead that kind of discussion.

*Very cool. That's awesome. So it seems like high school there's this kind of drastic shift but in middle school, or it might have happened in high school, did you ever experienced any like disciplinary action so that could be suspension, expulsion, detention like referrals. Anything like that. And if so, what led up to that.*

I cannot like I've only had detention like a handful of times. Let's see. Well, like detention versus like a lunch detention, they were different things at my school. Like you would get a lunch detention, usually for like a dress code violation. That's really all I got my lunch detentions, for like dress code stuff. But as for like actual like detentions we have to stay after school for it, I only... let's see. I remember getting attend a detention one time when I was in, like eighth grade, because of like, like some boyfriend that I had at the time, like they saw us, like, kissing. And when I say that I don't mean like making out I mean like, you know, kiss goodbye kind of thing, you know, I'll see you later. So I gotten major trouble for that... I think I'm wondering... I think it was that same thing again like at some...like, when I was like a freshman in high school, or something. But there was this one time I did get like a couple days lunch detention, because, like.... and.... like the teacher... I had like...when I say that I punched him in the face, I don't mean that I punched him in the face, like I punched him just to do it. We were at like a harvest festival and we were doing a little pie in the face thing and I guess I just did it a little too hard. And so, I got, like, a couple days lunch detention for that. But other than that, nothing, nothing other than that.

*And you mentioned....So you mentioned like getting lunch detention for like dress code. What kinds of messages did it send to you about like, like the expectations for you or what kind of student... like how you should show up to school, getting those lunch detention for how you were addressed.*

So, I'm like I wish that I could say that it was because you know I was wearing like a crop top and that I was distracting boys or whatever like that. I wish I could say that, but my school had like a uniform policy anyways, where you would wear like a polo shirt, like a plain colored jacket, khaki pants or black Dickies or whatever. And just so like, they avoided that all together. I just wasn't allowed to wear anything, you know... I wasn't allowed to work crop tops, it wasn't allowed to wear spaghetti straps, skirts too short. I never wore skirts anyways so it wasn't really a big issue for me, but like it was because like my jacket had like some logos on it, or whatever and I just wasn't aware of that. So, It was, it was just all stupid stuff.

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*Makes sense. Um, so shifting gears, a tiny bit. Um, did your teachers and know, or like other school staff, know that you were involved in the system in some way and if so, how did they find out.*

Huh. Ah, let's see. When I was in middle school. The teachers would kind of do a thing at the beginning of the year where they would ask parents like, 'Is there anything we should know about your child?' and my parents would always...my mom...My mom, I call her my mom but she is my, my maternal grandmother, and so they raised me and my little brother. And so my maternal grandmother always made a point to like writ, you know, 'my granddaughter she...' you know, she would write out pretty much everything that was going on and you know. So, 'understand that she needs patience and all that.' So, it was like pretty much like pre-established when I was a middle school and elementary school too. But once I got into high school, I was a lot more comfortable with it like by myself and so, you know, if we had... there was always some kind of writing thing where we'd have to do... or do...like you know talk about, you know, an experience we had overcome and all that Bs. So I made it a point to write about that just because I knew that like, I'll get a good response out of it and I would get, you know, full points. And so then they would also, you know, know that like, you know, give me, like, you know, recommendation for something, you know, like, and that I wasn't just like, like it would give me a leg up, and I'm like, just like...I was comfortable with it. I was open to talking about it and just like...yeah I just...I was pretty open talking about it and writing about and so it would usually come up at some point, especially if I was comfortable with the teacher. But like yeah, it just... it just kind of, at that point, you know everybody that was in, you know, my elementary school was at my high school we were just... we were K through 12 school. And so it was just kind of common knowledge at that point just

*Um, so, for, for the teacher that you had... I mean, again, it sounds like you did pretty well throughout high school but is there anything that you feel like was missing in terms of support. And so, if there was like, how could your teachers have supported you better in either middle school or high school.*

Um, I let's see. That's kind of a difficult question for me just because you know I, I've always just been pretty independent. So, I've never really, like, needed a whole bunch of support, you know, everything that...the majority of the stuff I do is just kind of done by myself and I usually do pretty okay. So I really couldn't say, you know what kind of support I was missing over what support I just wasn't taking, you know I really couldn't...I'm really, I'm not really sure. So I'm sorry I don't have...

*Yeah, that's fine. Um, and so being that independent, where do you feel like that comes from. Is that something you feel like you always had or somebody give you like that example for you to be like, 'okay, that's how I should be.' Is that just how you've always been?*

I think I really got that when I was in middle school, like, even though like it was pretty awful out of the awfulness came like a sense of myself, you know. Nowadays it's translated into like self centeredness. I am pretty narcissistic, you know, I will. I'll admit that. But only because like I spent so much time by myself, you know, getting to know myself, not really wanting to open up to other people just out of...I don't know why I didn't, I had so much support, I just chose not to take it out of...I have no idea what. I just didn't want anyone to help me. I wanted to be inside this box by myself. And, like, it sucked. It was really awful, I really should have asked for more

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help more, you know, I should have accepted the love that people were trying to offer me through this, you know, such a difficult time. But as I grew up that, that, that just confined space opened up, and I, I can.. you know I allow myself to go. And you know, I know I'm loved I know I have support, I know where to find that support. But I just, I, I think I'm so used to working by myself that I'm pretty like comfortable with it, you know. I understand pretty much everything that's going on, you know with myself. I know how to take care of myself. And so, yeah, yeah, I think the middle schools where that all stem from that make sense.

*So we're almost at the end. And so I'm curious if you feel like your gender, and or like racial identity impacted, how you experienced school at all.*

Um, let's see. Definitely yes for both, I'm just trying to figure out like I'm trying to phrase like how. As far as, I think, Oh my gosh, that's kind of hard just because like I think that my home, you know your home life impacts how you do at school, you know. And so, gender, and my, you know, my racial identity, it was, it was so important at home, that it was important at school, you know. At school, I never really had to you know stick up and like stand up and say like, you know, 'I'm brown and that's not bad you know it's good thing,' just because everybody at my school was brown, you know, so it wasn't an issue. As far as my gender went at school you know all the girls there were had the pretty much the same mindset, you know, 'I'm a, I'm a woman, and you know, I'm worth just as much as the man sitting next to me.' And like we establish that so much that like the men understood that as well, you know, so I never...I didn't really have a huge problem with anybody thinking that I was less than then because of my gender. You know, there was a few, you know, instances where there was, you know, one or two men that wanted to say something, you know, rude. But, they were very, usually really quickly shut down just because of, you know, how strongly everybody felt about it, you know. Even the men in my, specifically my graduating class, because so many of them had grown up around these other girls, you know, that they know and pretty much forever, you know it...like we did see a lot of our boys, turn into, you know these awesome intersectional of feminists, you know, who advocated for these girls, not only because of their race but because of their gender, you know. And so, and they themselves recognize that they were brown men and that was a good thing. And so, I didn't really have an issue with that growing up, maybe like a couple things here and there but nothing that would really like, say you know I struggled so much with sexism while growing up. I never had that huge issue, you know, so I'm very blessed for that.

*Yeah, that's it, that's such an interesting, an interesting perspective, like, I'm a millennial right so like being around people who are younger than me like that's it's such a different experience for a lot of people not for everybody obviously but it's really really cool to hear about folks like really changing the way that they see each other the way, that they interact with people, calling people out like that was not a thing before so it's awesome to hear about that. Um, do you feel like your, I don't know if it's maybe like a long time to think back to, but do you feel like your gender, and or like racial identity impacted your experience in the system.*

Not particularly just 'cause like the system that I was involved with again was in... We have like our own like foster system like an adoption center in, like, my the city, that I have that I'm living in currently. And its very you know it's very...so it's led by brown women it's, you know, occupied by brown kids so it's not really, it's never really been something, you know, it was never something that was really addressed, you know.

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*Also very important and again not everybody's experience it's great to have this like kind of this contrast right between like how other people experienced that. So I think you've told me kind of told me a little bit about this but can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a teenager, kind of outside of the context of those experiences of like having interacted with the system. And I'll tell you a little bit why that's important to me. The young folks that I work with a lot of times like when teachers or staff know that they've maybe gone through difficult, like life experiences. We tend to think of them as like just this person with this experience and nothing else. Right. And so, I think, you know, luckily you were able to have teachers who maybe didn't think of you that way. It's important for me to kind of show this like full picture of the people that I'm talking to right. So yeah, so kind of go back to the question. You can tell me a little bit about yourself as a teenager, like the kind of person you were the kinds of things that you were interested in that, maybe outside of having this experience in the system or these difficult life experiences.*

Well like. Let's see what as I was talking about just like both middle school and high school, like specifically high school where I was really...

*We could think like yeah middle to high school.*

Right. Okay, so middle school I really, that where I really developed my...just like, my creative abilities. I was really into...my first kind of like love was like in, you know, drawing. I was really into, you know, sketching out different things, just like traditional art, you know, I think I tried getting into like digital art but I just couldn't, you know, you know the equipment is expensive that.... you know my I didn't have and, and also just, I was more comfortable with a pencil in my hand. You know, so I really worked on that a lot I developed, you know, a lot between sixth and eighth grade. And since then I've been kind of in and out of it, I'll spend like...or they'll be like a couple months I do nothing but draw, and then like, add the year after that I don't touch my notebooks whatsoever. So, but once I got in high school, I've got much more into my music, which is what I've been consistently kind of into for the past like four or five years. So, when I was 12, I started singing with my churches like worship band. And like, I was kind, like, volentold to do it. That's what we call it when you're volentold to do it. And I was good at it and like it wasn't my biggest interest. I like actually didn't really enjoy it as much, I kind of... There's...there's a handful of videos that you can find them you know, on some persons Facebook where I'm like standing as far away the mic as possible just because I knew that people were listening to me and that I didn't want that, you know, kind of attention on me. But as I grew older, I really grew into it. And I went from, I started as just like a.... I went as like... it started as, like, backup vocals, and I moved up to being lead vocals. And then, you know, as of recent, like, I think the past year and a half, I am the lead vocals like lead, lead and like lead guitar, and I'm just like the leader, you know, I really had to step up into that role. Once you know... we've gone through so many different leaders and you know the recent, recent one just left he took off for college. He's my current partner, you know, so he took off and so I had to take his role and it was a little bit daunting at first but like I'm used to it and I'm really interested in. And I've also established...we got a Spanish pastor, you know who does, like.... we do. like, two services in the morning: one in Spanish and then one in English. First one led by Pastor Jose who does in Spanish, the second one being led by Pastor Tom who does it in English. And so, I've also established a, you know, completely Spanish speaking worship team. And so it is really nice. You know, kind of incorporating, you know, my culture along with my interests, you know. And, I know that's not really that's like not separating it but yeah yeah, so I'm super into music. People knew that when I was in high school, my band like my personal band I had, I started a



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personal band with me, my brother, at the time, we're just friends but my current partner and his brother, and we set up, just, a little Garage Band. And we ended up being really good, so my school would ask us to come and play for stuff. We did... We did a couple of harvest festivals, we did a music festival, specifically, and we just like we did really good. And after that they were just like, 'God come and play for us again,' and so it was really great. We played for my graduation. They always have like a singer or somebody come and play guitar or something like that. But then they were like, 'no, let's have your band play this year, it'll be really great,' and so I was like, 'okay, sweet.' So everybody like my teachers, especially, knew that I would like... that I think my teachers cared more that I played, you know, with my band than the majority of other people. And so a couple teachers would come out and watch, just like to see. They would come out to harvest festival just to see my band play and so I was really into that. I... at the beginning of high school. The beginning of high school I was like really into writing, before I was into music. So it basically went: traditional art, writing, like Creative Writing into music. At the time I was seeing some girl, and she, she started up this like writing club, essentially, to, you know, share our writing but also try and, like in... like, improve it. So, now I would, I would like bounce out... we would do like a writing practice where we would would, like, write a story with each other, you know, and we would feel like we fill like five notebooks just have like different stories that we would write you know, co-write together. And so I was really into that for a while but after we kind of like fell out it was just like, 'I'm not really into this anymore.' So after that... So really I was, I was a very big like art student, you know, and you know, I would try and get feedback from my teachers and my peers. And, like not even... not just feedback, to just be, 'like hey I'm super jazzed about this, will you like look at it and just be jazz with me.' My teachers, you know, they would appreciate that and so, yeah, that was that was, yeah i was a creative in high school and so, Yeah, that's, that's awesome.

*Well, thank you. So that's all that's all the questions that I have for you.*

### ***Ellie's follow up interview***

*And we'll get to it. So the four questions I have for the most part, are kind of based off of stuff that you mentioned in your first interview, that I just wanted to get a little bit more information on your details or brought up other questions for me. So one of the things that I thought was really interesting was this idea of you kind of reinventing yourself in high school to be more outspoken and stand up for yourself a little bit more. And I'm kind of curious if anything led to that.*

That's a really good question. I can't remember just having such a terrible time. I think, unfortunately, I thought that I was a problem and that I needed to change in order to have a better time. I don't think it was the case now, but I was not outside people. Just things are just making not really enjoy myself. Despite that, I tried doing different stuff and maybe find something that I'll enjoy more than what I'm doing currently. Maybe I'll just better about myself, about my situation, about everything else. And I wasn't doing bad in school when I was younger, but I remember I got my first B in middle school and I was like, I just like, even though it's totally not a problem whatsoever, and I just remember myself, I guess I just liked who I was so much that I thought it would be better to do something different. And I was so tired of feeling anxious all the time doing little things, and just like going to therapy helps a lot with that. Anxious about things. Even when I was anxious about something, I would still go through with it. Just like to say that I did it make me feel better about what I was doing, even though maybe I ended up hating it. There was a lot of things that I'm hating in the end, but I can still say that I did it. And at the time

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I knew that it would feel like that I would do it, and I'd be like this. Does that answer the question?

*Yeah, no I really that's a hard question to ask but it-- or answer, but it does really-- it does help. I think not everybody has that kind of internal drive to push them to just like say, "Okay. Fuck it. This is going to suck, but whatever, I'm just going to do it anyways." So it's really interesting to hear how-- that kind of process from you. My other question was-- just kind of hearing about your educational experiences overall, it seemed like they were really positive. And so I'm wondering what impact you feel like this might have had on your post-high school life, just how you navigate college or how you even decided on going to college and all of that.*

That's what I went to-- it was an IB school. There was less AP more IB-focused [inaudible] classes, which-- didn't end up transferring just because I didn't do really well on the test, but-- sorry. They just kind of drilled into us from an early age. I remember there was some dumb-- I don't know if you know-- if you ever had a door decorating contest when you were in [inaudible] high school. But I remember doing them in first grade, so the door decorating contest where we put your dream college flag on your door. I'm sitting there like, "What?" I don't know. You're in first grade. You're what? Seven. So I don't know. But they just kind of said-- it wasn't really even the question. It was like, "What college do you plan to go to when you're older?" I guess I have to decide which is a little bit weird [inaudible] but ultimately positive, not just-- we had to really do-- not just to do the assignments but to-- it was required to do a weird reflection at the end of each semester. We have to have conferences. And we have to fill out some bullshit about, oh, which of these IB traits did you do [inaudible], so it was random bullshit [inaudible], and I did it. But ultimately, I didn't [inaudible] my writing skills just because I had to really-- I had to write a lot. And I had to reflect a lot. So I had to-- they kind of drove into us this kind of philosophical approach to everything that you did. Not just doing an assignment, but really thinking about it and thinking about the deeper implications [inaudible] deeper implications to things. Like math they have us do those weird reflections from a math test that I did. And I have to come up with something. But ultimately, it would make sense. And if I was just going to surface-level stuff-- and I took a couple of IB courses. I didn't have to take the entry-- writing courses that I-- that are required here. So that knocked a good-- you credit out that-- that just took care of some stuff. That'd be less tuition for me to pay, less time spent here, paying for housing and stuff to do-- they gave me opportunities to do dual enrollment at a college nearby. They would, A, pay for the course, and B, pay for my Lyft, taxi to get there every Thursday. Yeah, every Thursday. And so I gave my high school a lot of shit. I'm not going to lie to you just because there was some weird stuff going on. But ultimately, when I think about it, as far as the education part of it goes, I did have it really good. Yeah. But they gave us so many opportunities that I wouldn't have had anywhere else. If I had gone to one of the other two high schools that were in my area, I don't think that I would be in the position that I am now. I don't think I would have been in the position [inaudible] high school [inaudible] my graduating class. So if I had gone to SJ where there was 500 students to lose myself in, I would just be [inaudible] in the crowd [inaudible]. Obviously, this university [inaudible] is huge and I'm kind of lost in the crowd. But the fact that I'm here and the majority of my tuition and housing is being paid for, it's really a blessing. And I don't think that I would be here had it not been for everything that my high school set me up.

*For sure. And how did you end up at that high school? Do you have to fly, or? Yeah, how did you end up there instead of one of the other ones?*

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So it wasn't a private school. It was a charter school, which is, I think, a good mix between a private school and a public school. You get certain private school experiences, but you also get public school experiences, which is like-- or maybe I felt like it was [inaudible]. The other one, I started there [inaudible]. I just started there and I kept going [inaudible]. But when I first started there, it was really small and was so [up there?]. Oh, yeah, there's a lottery, but there's five people in the lottery so you're going to get [inaudible]. So in fact, it was really easy for me to get in just because they were barely starting out when I was there. I think they've been there less than a decade when I started there. [inaudible], let's see. [inaudible] high school, I remember somebody mentioned [inaudible] impossible to get here. I got really lucky. I got in early, and yeah.

*Interesting. Good to know. And do you feel like your caregivers - I think you said you had lived with your grandparents - did they kind of also push you to pursue college?*

In a way, they did. [inaudible], so I think they took a handful of college courses [inaudible] went to college. And my mom [inaudible] at the time. I think my cousin graduated from college a couple of years ago. So I was right behind him, but as I was growing up they knew I was smart and capable, and so they [inaudible] into keep doing well in school. But when the conversation of college came up, they didn't really talk about pretty much [inaudible]. Because I think the big thing was paying for it. They knew that they couldn't pay for it. They didn't really talk about it too much because they knew that would be the first big kind of issue] over that. It's because that's what comes up when you're discussing going to college. As I got older, when I was in high school, sophomore year, they started getting a little bit more serious about the conversation. That's when they really started pushing. You do really well with your grades. [inaudible] extremely well. They had this idea of-- they were like [inaudible] whatever. But they had an idea that if you're exceptional, then maybe you can get help. I don't think they ever really planned on helping me. As far as cost goes, they realized that being [inaudible]. I think it was going to be a painful conversation and so they didn't really jump in [inaudible] have that conversation with me. And then later on [inaudible] conversation with me.

*Thank you. Okay. My very last question is-- I'm just wondering if any of your classmates or your friends knew that you had been in the system, and if so, what was that like for you having them know?*

You have a lot of people that you, you have friends with different people. That's kind of sounds a little bit more of a rough question because there are so many people that came in and out of my life. Some of my friends, I've never had that conversation with them. They don't know why just because I don't care to talk about it. Not that I don't want to. It's just right now I feel like it doesn't come up. And it's kind of weird to put that into a certain conversation. I guess my best friend and Michael, in middle school, she knew about it, but only because my grandma. Some people, she would just bring it up too. If she knew that I was close to someone, she would want them to know, "Yeah, this is something that you should know about my "daughter" in case of-- if something happened." But I guess her mom knew about it. She just wanted to know the details. And it was like, to a weird degree, this thing-- I don't know. And in another kind of situation, there was this girl-- I was talking to, we were kind of seeing each other. And I went out to dinner with them. And I think I told her, Hannah. I think I told her about it. Just bits and pieces.



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*Yeah. Thank you for sharing that with me. So that was the last question I had for you. So this will be the end, unless there's anything you want to share that came up that I either didn't ask about that you want to share or anything that you wanted to add.*

No, I think I'm all good.

### **Ivonne's interview**

*So the first question is what was your overall experience in school? So did you love it? Did you hate it? Why?*

So I loved school. Okay. I love school. Let's just start there. Before foster care, yeah, I loved it. I didn't have too many issues when I was in school. Yeah, I love school. Yeah.

*So what was your relationship like with your teachers and school staff? So we could start there, and then if you have any teachers that you liked, maybe describe them and why you liked them?*

Good question. Okay. Well, let me back up. So my teachers, for the most part, were really cool. When they knew that I was in foster care, some were very helpful. They were like, "Okay. You need to ask for this. You need to advocate for yourself." And I'm like, "What are you talking about?" They're like, "Just make sure you get everything that you need." And I'm like, "Okay." But I also had some people take kind of pity on me. They're like, "Okay. She's in foster care, so she doesn't know," or, "She's less than." So their treatment was a little bit different. Their treatment was more coddling in some cases or-- I've never really had anyone that was super mean. But I know there's definitely a difference between having a mom come in and having a conversation with the teacher versus the foster mom, where it's like, "Okay. Well, she just got here to my home. And so far this is what I'm [inaudible] dealt with her [inaudible]," that kind of thing. But I mean, overall, once they've known, the majority of my teachers once they knew that I was in foster care, they were like, "Okay. Well, let's do something different. Let's coddle you a little bit more," so.

*And how did your teachers find out? Was it something they already knew or something that you shared?*

I want to say it was something that they knew just because of-- I'm thinking registration because once-- yeah. I want to say it was when-- registration. So registration and that the-- oh, gosh. Registration and my social worker actually came to get us from school. And so whenever she could not find us, it would just be pulling out me from class in school. And they're like, "Oh, where are you going?" It's like, "I don't know." Then I'm like, "Oh, my social worker came to talk to me." So that kind of [crosstalk]. Yeah

*Right. Okay. That makes sense. And so you gave me so many things to ask questions about. So how did it feel for your teachers to know that about you? Did you like that they knew? Did it feel a little weird that they had this kind of information?*

I don't think I thought it was weird. I just thought that it was good that they knew, so they would kind of understand. But I didn't think it was weird. No one truly made it weird, like ridicule. None of the teachers, they weren't like, "Her over there, kind of stay away from. She's a bad influence." Nothing like that. I think they've known-- I got closer to a couple of them, which

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were the African-American teachers, the women. And it was just different. Yeah, it was just different.

*Okay. So I want to-- before I forget, I want to circle back to the idea of them kind of coddling you. And how did you feel about that? Was that something that you felt like was unnecessary? Or, yeah, how did you feel about that?*

I think it was necessary. Now that I'm older-- yeah, it was definitely necessary because I wasn't getting coddled at in foster care. My women, they took a different approach. They were more understanding. We had one guy that he was my brother's teacher, and he knew my foster mom, and so he actually recommended my last foster mom, and he was just-- he didn't coddle, but he was straightforward, like, "Hey, you need to do this, this, and this." And I think having that support was really different versus them not knowing, and them just being like, "Oh, she's just another kid," so.

*Right. Yeah, that makes sense. And you mentioned your relationship with black teachers, and how do you feel like that impacted your experience at school or your ability to do well in school?*

I would say they were a little more giving. I think they understood a little bit more versus some of my other teachers, who just thought-- so I was in the Health Careers Academy. And so we only had two black teachers, and then the other were Caucasian, and then my one Spanish teacher. And so the rest of them-- we only had two girls that were Caucasian, and then the rest were boys. I mean, I think they weren't necessary harder on me. I think the black women were a little more coddly because they understood. [inaudible] my teachers all, "What's going on? Your grades are kind of slipping for a second. What's going on? We know you could do better." But other than that, I mean, they weren't super mean. So my women were still coddling.

*Did you have teachers or staff members that stood out that you really didn't like? And if so, why? That I didn't like? I don't think there was anybody that I didn't didn't like, where it was just like, "Oh, my gosh. I hate going to that class." Yeah, not in high school. Yeah. Yeah, college was a whole different story.*

*Well, so I'll move on to my next question. So that was all part of my first [laughter]-- part of one question. So my next question is did you ever feel like you needed to confront or resist teachers or staff members about how they were treating you or advocate for yourself? I know you mentioned some of your teachers really encouraged you to do that so that you could get the support that you needed.*

I think there was only two. And it was my Caucasian women. And so they weren't necessarily harsh. They were just older white women. They didn't truly understand foster care and what that looked like. They knew I wasn't a bad kid. They just knew there was something there, which makes it a little bit harder to kind of navigate. But I mean, it wasn't horrible. Yeah, it wasn't horrible. But I knew I had to advocate for myself for a few classes. And so it was typically my English teacher and one of the other ladies' classes. So Mrs. Taylor, Miss Owens, and Miss [Vaughn?]. Those are my top two that-- well, three. But they weren't horrible. They weren't horrible.

*Would you mind telling me a little bit about what made you feel like you had to confront them or push back against them?*

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Their expectations of what they thought I should be doing versus what life actually looked like, which was difficult because I had in my head still-- let me back up. So I had in my head-- I knew that I was in foster care. I just didn't understand it until I saw-- I think it was Angels in the Outfield, I think, where they were like, "Hey! There are some kids in foster care." And I was like, "Oh, that's me." And so it just threw a light to me. So I didn't think they thought that I was a bad kid. They just knew it was just really-- I was in foster care for whatever reason. And so me advocating for myself and pushing back really looked like, "Hey, you're giving me too much work." I'm still trying to deal with going to court, trying to still deal with-- Now my [inaudible] trying to still deal with all those different pieces. And then my foster mom wasn't really an advocate. Yeah, she wasn't an advocate, so I had to stand up and say, "Hey, this is still a lot. It's not very helpful. That I'm trying my best, and just because I don't have certain things, that doesn't make me less than," so.

*Were they receptive to that?*

One of them was. The other one came around the end of my senior year. And then the other one, I don't think she really cared. Yeah

*That's unfortunate, situations like that. So my next question has more to do with being disciplined. So I know you mentioned you've never been expelled, but I'm wondering if you've ever been suspended or even-- I guess it depends on the school, but written up or given detention. And if so, what led up to that? If not, then we can move on.*

Okay. No, that was before. I'm like, "That was before foster care."

*And it could also be middle school. So if you can reach back that far. But I can't reach back that far. But if anything stands out to you then, you can also mention it.*

Okay. So I mean I'll go back a little. It was before foster care. And there was two incidents. One was not really expulsion-- or not kicked out or anything like that. So what happened, I lived with my mom in Alabama, and if you ever been to Alabama, there's nothing to do there. It's [odd?] teachers. So I was not a part of the crew that was acting bad, but their thought process is, "One person is doing it, the whole class and doing it." Well, it was half the class and the rest of us, we were working. And so it was by punishment. So we didn't get suspended or anything for that. We got paddled. You remember what paddling looks like?

*Yeah, wow.*

So, yeah. I've been paddled in the hand and on my bum for stuff that I did not do. But that was interesting. And then also in middle school, I got into my first fist fight and so that-- they knew that I wasn't the person who started it, but what led to it is my mom and my teacher not being straight with me about my period, and they made it very awkward. So I was eight going to be nine, so I started. My first semester in fourth grade, I had a cycle. And yeah, they just didn't make it easy for me. Give me not a plastic bag, but a paper bag with the huge pads in it from back in the day. And of course, I'm lying to my friends like, "Hey, no. I don't have a cycle." And so that's what led to my first really disciplinary, "You're in the office for fighting" because I didn't want anybody to know I had a period. And of course, parents and teachers didn't think that it was necessary to hide stuff appropriately.

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*And what kind of messages does it send to you to get disciplined in that way, especially, getting paddled. That's something that doesn't happen a lot these days. But, yeah, what kind of messages does it send to you about how you're expected to behave or even what kind of student you are?*

Oh, it reminded me that I had to be good. I couldn't do anything that was out of place. I couldn't express myself. I just knew I was going to get in trouble, if I yelled or screamed or talked back, that in the South it's like, "Yeah, you're not having that. You're going to get paddled." And then when you get home, your mom's going to lock me. So for me, I've kind of always-- but I don't have the temperament to be argumentative unless it's something that I feel like, "Oh my gosh, this is something that it needs to be a conversation [inaudible]." But because I didn't have that outlook, I see now how I'm a little bit more stifled as an adult, and so not being able to have certain things and having-- the way I raise my son is where you can have a voice and you can talk to me about stuff versus back then. And so I, of course, now have someone that's pushing back on me all the time, whereas I was more conformist. And so now I still see myself-- even when I don't want to conform, it's first nature that I'll conform, and then I am agitated because I didn't push myself to have that voice because I didn't have it earlier on. So now it's me teaching myself to have that voice.

*Wow. Thank you for sharing that. So my next question is-- so I know that you mentioned that some of your teachers knew that you were in foster care, but even though some of them knew, what would you have wanted them to know about you and your experiences? So we'll start there. This is another two-part question.*

Okay. That every kid isn't a bad kid. That every kid still deserves love. That sometimes you just need to hear their story and see what's really going on with them, and not just another kid. I don't know if you're familiar with Blair High School. So that's where I went, and it was so-- I don't say ridiculous, but the amount of kids that were actually in foster care when I was in care was amazing. It was super astonishing to the point where there would be kids that I would just see-- once other people knew that I was in foster care, they were like, "Oh, yeah. You're a part of our clique now." And so it was definitely--I didn't get picked on, but I feel like if teachers understood that we needed a little bit more love than what was actually going on in our houses, then that would have been a lot better for the experience. Not having certain things because our foster parents didn't do certain things. Or the expectation that I was going to be able to, I don't know, start driving and go to prom. And they're like, "Well, why aren't you going? And why aren't you--?" I'm like, "It has to go through the courts." And then them just not being educated on certain things with the system, whereas some people were like, "Oh, yeah. You're not allowed to do that." So I feel like if they knew a lot or were educated back then, then they would have had a different perception.

*Okay. So I'm curious how that changed your experience to have other kids your age who kind of brought you into their community and, yeah, how that changed your experience. Did that feel like a positive thing for your high school experience?*

There's a mixture of that. So I had two cliques: my regular clique and then my foster family clique. I would say it was amazing because they were always advocating and it was like a brother and sisterhood. They knew I was in care. They were like, "Hey, you need to ask for this. You

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need to ask for that. Ask your social worker for this. Make sure you apply for this. Make sure--" and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" They hit me up to so many things. My first foster mom was gypping us on, oh, gosh, on our stipend for our clothes as well as for our allowance. And so she would give us \$20, and then make us go and buy our basics out of that. That's pads and lotion and all that stuff. And so we had to go and do that with \$20. And so of course, we would go to the 99-cent store, and me and the other girl, we would piece up our money and got \$40. And so we're just going to share pads and we're going to share tampons, and go from there because she didn't do it. And so it was helpful to have other people to say, "No, she's supposed to do this." And so that started me to say, "Hey, are you supposed to be doing this?" And having more conversations with my first and second social worker to say, "That's not what's happening. No, that's not what's happening here." So it was wonderful to have that experience, to have other people around me that were in foster care to help me know what I didn't know.

*Right. That's super important. So I'm going to switch gears a tiny bit. So I'm interviewing only women and gender-expansive folks, so like trans women, non-binary women. And so I'm curious about how gender plays into people's experiences. And so I'm wondering if you feel like your gender at all impacted, first, your ability in school, and second, your ability in foster care. So we can just talk about school for now. So being a woman of color, being a black woman, did you feel like that impacted your experience in high school or middle school?*

Yes. Most of my teachers knew I was smart. You didn't have to push me. I was a go-getter, super smart. But comparatively, I think they thought that-- let me say that. Sometimes I felt like I was getting compared to the other students of different races and versus-- or me being one of the smarter black kids if that makes sense. And one of the smarter black girls in the group because I remember being, oh, my gosh, one of the highest in our crew, that was African-American women. Yeah, I was one of the highest in they're, like, "Oh my gosh, Elbony, you're doing so great." But I'm not hearing them say anything to anybody else in terms of grades in school and stuff like that. So I think there was definitely a different treatment.

*For sure. And how do you feel--? How, if at all, do you feel that your gender identity and your racial identity impacted your experience in foster care?*

Well, honestly, I think when we're looking from a social worker standpoint or a court standpoint, even just outside looking in-- that one is hard. Okay. I'm going to have you re-ask the question.

*Yeah, definitely. So I'm wondering if you feel like your identity as a black woman impacted your experience in the foster care system. And if so, how?*

Okay. So it's double-folded, right? So sometimes I felt as if I got more, in a sense, versus my-- I'm going to do a counterpart against my brother. My brother is a boy, right? He can't read. But he still was in the foster care with me, and it was just a whole different experience for him versus me, where I was able to-- I don't want to say get a little bit more from the system, but I was able to kind of navigate a little bit more versus him. And so although I have one of the more positive experiences at foster care, I do know that in some ways I was just treated differently. When it came to [inaudible], and being in foster care, and being with my social worker, or being in courts whereas sometimes they would let different races go back home versus us. It'll be like, "Okay. Well, your mom didn't do X, Y, and Z." But I saw a different treatment from different races and



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so I'm like, "Wait, wait." They're like, "We're going back home." And I'm like, "Wait. What happened?" I can see the different treatment. Yeah. It was definitely different in certain aspects. But I also had one of the more positive experiences. I remember having a social worker that didn't really want to work. And until I had a black social worker that had to go over to the other one, that was like, "No, you're going to do this. You need to step up and do your job. And do X, Y, and Z for her." And she had to advocate for me. And so I mean, it was just definitely different. I can see the race on both sides, but I had a better experience than most people that I know. Most girls.

*So I have just a couple more questions left. So I feel like part of why this work is really important is that I really want to hear about who people are outside of the system, right? So especially coming at it from an educator standpoint, we very much put people into boxes, like, "You are a foster youth. That's all you are," or someone is a homeless youth. That's all they are, right? And so I'm just kind of curious about who you are-- or we can think back, right, to you being a teenager. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a teenager outside of the foster care system? Who were you? What did you like to do with your time? What kind of music did you listen to? That kind of thing.*

I think I'll start with the music. So I was very much into Dave Hollister, Bones Thugs-N-Harmony, Master P, the Southern music, of course, because I came from Alabama and then I've actually lived in Ohio, so I gravitated towards those. And then I liked my Tupac when I got out here. But identity-wise, I honestly didn't have an identity. I think I tried to establish my identity as being the good girl by making sure that I was-- I didn't get all A's, but I just knew I had to step up my game versus-- my foster mom had us in charge all the time. And it wasn't like, "This is my daughter. This is just my foster care." And so that was the box that I was always in. Or, "Elbony the foster kid." Not, "Elbony the smart girl. She's brilliant. She's this, that, and that." Or even thinking beyond-- I would say, yeah, my identity was just wrapped in foster care because that's what we had. It was like you couldn't do this because you're in foster care or you couldn't do this-- or you can only do this because you're in foster care. You can only get this because you're in foster care. It wasn't like, "You're not going to get this because you were bad," or you're not able to go outside after this time because it's curfew, and you-- where you differentiated curfew is 10 o'clock, you're allowed to-- so it was always-- my identity was wrapped in that. I wish it wasn't, but it was. I mean, I think I was a good friend during that time. Yeah, but it was-- yeah. It was always somewhere wrapped in there if that made any sense.

*Oh, yeah, it definitely made sense. I want to kind of go back a little to the part where you're saying that you felt like you wanted to be seen as a good girl, good student. And I'm wondering what pushed you to want to strive for that?*

Part of that is-- part of that is my bio mom always gave more to my brother versus me. And so she's always told me, "I know you'll be fine" because I could read, and I can try to figure out stuff on my own. I was always super smart. And so I think that just stayed with me, like, "More people will like you if you are more compliant. You're not as needy." Even when I needed help, I would just not ask for it. I'd just figure it out. So it was that need to push and to still be seen as-- try to differentiate myself from being a foster kid as much as I could, even though it's still wrapped in there, but to be seen as like, "Okay. She's a foster, but she's a good foster," if that made sense because there was definitely--I know you asked a question a couple ago about being

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in relationship with other foster youth during that time. And we had a bad selection of foster kids that were just like tearing shit up, and just being really push-backers. No authority. "You're not going to tell me what to do." The whole gamut. And I'm still related to them, but I just wasn't that person that was going to push back because I would try to keep my image-- and I didn't want [inaudible], so that helped me be a little bit more pliable.

*Good. Makes a lot of sense. Thank you. So we're at the end, just kind of wrapping up. So I just kind of want to leave it open. If you have any final thoughts you'd like to leave, anything you feel like you want to share that you might have missed out, or anything like that?*

Well, yes. I will say it's a-- let me back up. So being in college and people knowing that you're a foster youth is somewhat still like being in high school. And sometimes when people know you're a foster youth, they still have that label for you. In high school, I had an internship where I worked for Kaiser. She and I became really close, and now I still hang out with her. This is, of course, almost 20 years later. And I hang out with her and her friends, and I'm still seen as still the young foster youth, where they'll still want to coddle me and take care of me to a certain degree. Even like my aunties, they're my play aunties, but they're like, "No, we got it." And I'm like, "I'm not the foster youth still." I have to say, "No, I can pave my own way. And if I can't do it, I can't do it." And so it's the [inaudible] I think once you start to have the conversation or even say that you've been in care, sometimes people look at you as if you're still less than, you're still-- not worthless, but different. And even as your older, the label still has an effect. So it's just different.

*Thank you so much for sharing that. I know can bring up some emotions that are uncomfortable or hurtful, but I really do appreciate you sharing your story with me. It's really powerful. So thank you.*

### **Marissa's interview**

*What was your overall experience of school? (you can share things like: whether or not you liked school, what kind of student you considered yourself, your relationship with your peers, etc)*

I always liked learning new things, until it got difficult. I was afraid to ask questions at times and relied on myself to learn the subject, or not at all. I got along well with my peers and had strong, positive bonds with a few of my teachers.

*What made you hesitant to ask questions or reach out for help?*

I was hesitant to ask for help or reach out because I was very timid and shy and was unsure how to use my voice to advocate for myself yet.

*What was your relationship like with teachers and school staff? Describe teachers that you liked, and why and/or describe teachers that you didn't like, and why.*

I got along well with a few of my teachers. They were extremely understanding of my situation and I was comfortable enough with telling them the things that were going on at home, and they were willing to give some valuable advice. The teachers I didn't get along with (which was very few), seemed to not have been as compassionate towards me.

*What signals did they give you that they weren't as compassionate?*

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The teachers I felt weren't as compassionate towards me would be because they seemed to have a disconnection with their students and became reactive towards me if a mistake was made, and more of the time seemed stressed out by their own personal issues.

*Did you experience disciplinary action (suspension, expulsion) in middle or high school? What events lead up to the action?*

No

*Did you ever feel like you needed to resist or confront teachers or school staff because of how they were treating you?*

No

*Did your teachers know you were in foster care? If so, how did they find out this information?*  
Only a few of my teachers knew because I had informed them.

*Because a lot of times educators categorize youth in foster care as 'foster youth' as if that is their entire identity. I'm interested in knowing more about you as a person. So, tell me about yourself as a teenager outside of being foster care. Who were you? What did you like to do in your free time?*

As a teenager, I loved to read books and learn about new ideas. I loved to spend lots of time with family and I took a lot of naps. My foster parents were always on the move and encouraged me to experience new things by getting involved in volunteering and traveling to new places.

*Are there any final thoughts you would like to leave? Or information you want to share that I didn't ask for*

NA

*How do you think your gender & racial/ethnic identity impacted your experience, in school? In the foster care system? (for example, did people treat you different, unfairly, the same as everyone else, etc)*

I believe I was treated the same as everyone else, if not maybe a little more with care and understanding.

*Can you expand on this? What kind of support did they give you? Examples?*

When applying for colleges and finding the proper information to include in my FAFSA since I was a former foster youth, my AVID teacher seemed to be more attentive and more understanding of my situation and went out of her way to find resources for me and spend more time making sure I have the correct information and taking advantage of the resources available to me

*If you did experience school discipline, what messages did that send about the kind of student you were?*

NA

*What would you have wanted teachers to know about you and in the system?*



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It can be difficult at times, but it is important to hold the same goals/expectations and to be encouraging and motivating because it can be hard motivating ones self.

*What could you share with me now that would have helped past teachers to support you in school?*

Understanding that every one of their students has a story, and to continue to encourage all of their students.

### ***Marissa's follow up interview***

*So in the written interview that you did for me, you mentioned having positive bonds with teachers. And I just wanted to see how that made you feel about school, and how connected that made you feel.*

I felt pretty good about school. I feel like I was able to have direction because of the help that I got from the adults, like how to navigate [inaudible] school and the next steps and what they look like for me.

*Yeah. Yes. Great. Thank you. And then you mentioned, also, in the interview that you had teachers that were willing to give you valuable advice. Is there any more-- is there any of that advice that sticks out to you or that you can remember pretty clearly?*

I think just them letting me know that I have certain options and that I can reach out to the schools to ask for resources that I probably would need in the future. I think that's probably the most valuable advice that I got from them.

*That's great. And did you at any point utilize those resources that they gave you?*

Yeah. So one of them was reaching out to any tutoring services [inaudible] or any opportunities that I could get through the Guardian Scholars program and that sort of thing-- help with financial aid, getting in touch with financial advisors, and having them understand what to do in my situation because I was a former foster youth

*So another question I had was, in terms of you telling your teachers in high school that you were in foster care, what made you comfortable to do that?*

I felt like I trusted them. They were typically the teachers that I felt comfortable with at school who were willing to help. And I think just being comfortable around them let me open [up?] to them a little more. They would always make me feel-- they would always make me feel included or [inaudible] me feel like they actually care about my education.

*And did they do anything else to make you feel like they cared, other than, like you were mentioning earlier, sharing resources or telling you that you could go to them? Is there any other things that stand out that were really important?*

The fact that they were with [inaudible] students; it wasn't just me. But a majority of the students in those classes also felt understood by these teachers.

*That's great. Did you ever feel like anytime--? I'm not sure what years you were in foster care. Not super relevant, but anytime between middle and high school that you were treated differently at school because you were in the system?*

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No. I never really had that experience.

*Great. And then my last question is-- you mentioned that your foster parents made sure that you got involved with volunteering and traveling and things like that. And I'm wondering what kind of impact that might've had on you or how you carry yourself or your perspective around school or just around the world, in general?*

Yeah. I feel like that probably played a major role in my perspective, when it comes to having the same opportunities as others might, even though maybe that's not true because of me being in foster care. But I felt like, because my foster parents were able to get me involved in things like, for example, CPR classes, the training, or just pushing me to get involved with sports or clubs and that sort of thing, really, I guess, impacted me in a way, where I feel like I was able to do that. And now that I am in college, I know that if I ever wanted to be involved in something, I could look for resources that'll help make that happen.

*Those were the only questions I had. Do you have any questions for me or anything that, maybe, I didn't ask about that you'd like to share?*

I think it was in one of those surveys-- I forget which one it was, but the one asking about if I feel like-- I think the question was about what were the biggest barriers that I experienced in school because of foster care. I feel like a big impact on me would probably be moving to different homes while being in school. I definitely feel like now I sometimes catch myself not knowing certain things that I should've learned throughout the time that I was in foster care. So there are, I feel like-- not major gaps, but there's definitely gaps in my education because of [inaudible] that's made it a lot harder.

*Thank you for sharing that. Does anything in particular come to mind-- things that you feel like, "Oh, I should know that"?*

Yeah. So in my math classes [inaudible] when I was in middle school and high school-- that's around the time that I was in foster care and [inaudible] time where I should've learned how to do certain math, for example, simple trigonometry that people should know entering college. I feel like [inaudible] really don't know [inaudible] things that are a foundation of [that?], I guess.

### **Nadine's interview**

*Ok. So my first question. It's not quite a question but just, you know, asking you to tell me a little bit about your overall school experience like Middle High School. What was so school like for you?*

So, I don't really remember a lot of my childhood. I think that has a lot to do with just the trauma that I experienced in, and my elementary years. Um, I didn't really get into a stable life until I was in eighth grade, going into ninth grade. So, um, I don't remember, like... so like elementary was fine. It was good, you know my father was super, super strict. And I believe I did pretty well in school, I think I did. High School, you know, good I always knew that I would go to college, but in high school I was told by my high school counselor that I should go to, like, a community college. Even though I had like a 3.3 GPA and didn't quite understand that I was super super involved in high school with, like, young black scholars I was the captain of the drill

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team. And you know just really involved and active. And so really didn't understand why, which I think propelled me into the work that I still do. You know, when a male counselor, you know, told me I shouldn't go and I got into Berkeley. Then I went, you know, went to college and I ended up transferring, I didn't like Berkeley. I did it all for the wrong reasons. I would always tell someone, make sure you visit the college first because you know every college has its own kind of, you know, feel and personality and community and so, Berkeley was just not my cup of tea coming from Southern California, and so I ended up transferring and graduated from Cal State Northridge. Um, but yeah so college experience was amazing was great.

*So, that's tough to hear about, your counselor. Do remember your response when he told you that?*

Yeah, so basically he was like, you know, "hey you know you should really consider maybe consider going to Long Beach City College." Grandmother is the one who took me in, when you know when I went into the foster care system. She's the one that that gave me safe haven. So, and she was, you know, fifth grade educated, didn't you know have big education. And her both of her kids went to like community college or whatever so none of, no one that was like within my immediate family could help me, like, help me with the applications or anything like that so when your counselor tells you that it's like, well, what do you do? But because I was, I think, so involved, and again I was with young black scholars I was, I was with a couple of the programs, and I had two teachers that were like, No, you're going to apply and I'm like right I'm going to apply. And so I did, I applied to a few UC's, I applied to a few Cal States. I applied to one private, my, my number one school that I really wanted to go to was Redlands. I really wanted to go to Redlands because Redlands at that time had like 12 students to one teacher and I was like yes I'm going to get the personal attention I want. My high school had like, you know, five, six thousand kids it's huge, I went to Long Beach Poly. So I was like, "yep." So the only school I didn't get into was that school but all the UCs and all the Cal States, I got into I got into every school I applied to. And so of course that made me feel good like this counselor doesn't know what he's talking about. And actually caused me and a few of my other classmates to go back to our high school and begin to start encouraging black students, "You can apply, you can apply. Don't listen to what these counselors are telling" you. So, yeah.

*So I kind of want to expand a little bit on your relationship with teachers and school staff, so teachers that you'd like to and why and teachers that you didn't like, and why.*

Hmm. So, again, I don't remember a lot of my Elementary. My high school I don't really remember my teachers and middle school. My high school teachers are remember a couple of them that were...they all to me were caring. I had a black teacher for history, back history and then I had a, I remember having a black teacher for English. I think in my 11th grade year. But I don't...I mean, my, my run ins, well not run ins. But, any conflict I had with teachers was all around attitude. So, I was always told very young that you know that you got bad attitude, you got a bad attitude, you got a bad attitude, that kind of thing. And so my run ins with teachers were always around probably questioning authority or feeling like, no I have a voice and so, you know, I want you to hear me and don't kind of shut me down and shut me out. When I went to college I ended up majoring, I did a double minor in psychology and pan African Studies and that's one of the reasons why I ended up transferring to Northridge. Because Northridge had the largest pan African Studies program in in the in the United States, actually. So, I was able to take all of my classes with black teachers, none of my teachers, I don't think ever knew. No, none of

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them ever knew that I was in the system. None of them. In elementary a few of them knew that my, my...I call her my gran. My gran was raising me but they just thought, "Oh you know she's your grandmother kind of thing." But um not that I can...I don't think...I really never talked about it to be honest. My best friend knew. In high school, I had two best friends in high school into college but other than that. My husband didn't find out until like, way later, I mean we dated for seven years though, so it's not something that I freely we talked about. So I don't think my teachers knew. I just think they just know thought "Oh, Black Girl, you know, who is... has an attitude and probably comes from inner city." And, you know, my, my grandmother we were not... We were poor. We were poor. And so any and everything I was...I was working by the time I was 15, and had my own job. So me being in the system, I use that to my advantage. So when I went to college I realized, oh, there are resources available for me, and I took full advantage of those resources to pay for my education. But again, I had to find all that out on my own.

*Well, yeah I feel like what I'm what I'm learning is, is I think women especially women of color just needing to like be resourceful right and be resilient, and some, it's, you know, across the board so that's, that's amazing. I want to go back a little bit to that experience with your teachers that conflict of, you know, their perception of your attitude. Did you ever...Did you ever, or do you remember ever confronting them about that or.*

Oh yeah, all the time. All the time. All the time. And so it was my. It was the vice principal we call him, cool breeze but he was black principal, super cool is like a big dad on campus. And then my track coach, but I would get in trouble a lot because of my mouth, and I was, I was always told that, well not always, but, you know, teachers, white, Asian, even black, you know you have a bad attitude and you're not going to get anywhere with that attitude. And it wasn't...I'm going to be honest, I don't think it was that... it was my defense mechanism. It was my way of defending and protecting myself because I didn't... I didn't have anyone that I felt as a child that truly protected me and came to my rescue. So it was just me. But I also, I challenge authority, I...yeah, I challenge authority I just didn't go with. If you said "oh you know you need to sit over here."

"Why?"

or

"oh you know no we just want, you know, these students to apply"

"why? Why can't I apply" or "Why can't I go" or, you know, "Why is it just for this student Or that student" kind of thing.

So I challenged authority, often and I wanted an explanation and I felt that I was due one.

The teachers that, that didn't I think have a gift for gab sent directly down to the vice principal's office. The other, you know, some of like my, like I said my English teacher that's female. She pulled me to the side, she, you know, she...

"Natasha, you don't have to be so hard. People are here to help you, everyone's not against you" kind of thing and I heard her, but for me everything felt like a fight. Everything. I had to fight for everything. So, but yeah, my, you know, most of the time, like I said they would...not most of the time but you know a lot of times, they just kind of, you know, send me down to talk to the principal

*And, did any of that ever result in like suspension or detention or anything like that?*

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Detention, yes, I even remember detention in elementary school. And I hate that. Now, those are the things I do remember because they would call my, at that time, my dad, and my dad would...He was a...he was a...he was a disciplinarian and he was abusive. So don't let a call come home. Boy, you are in a lot of trouble. So, I would get detention, because of my mouth. I didn't get it as much in high school and because I had outlets like I said I was cheering since the day I got there. So, in ninth grade. I started... I tried out for the drill team. I kept myself involved and active. I ran track ninth and 10th grade, I cheered 9th, 10th 11th and 12th. Like I said I was involved in young black scholars, I just, so I tried to find outlets and also because if I went home it was just me. So, you know, my grandma was a pastor, and she was really involved with church and everything and. So yeah.

*And so I know you mentioned that your teachers didn't really know about your experience, but had they known, what would you, what would you have wanted them to know about the things that you were experiencing at home or the movement that you're, you're going through.*

So I don't think I learned a lot in high school. And, I mean I learned and did enough, I think, to get by. But, but, like, I think had, well, had they known, I probably would have hoped that they would have taken more time with me to make sure that I was learning and getting the information, like for example, and a lot of people don't know this but like I didn't learn phonics. Like, I didn't learn basic things about reading I learned I read by memorization I, and I learned this as an adult. And I found this out because I wanted to make sure that the stigma I have around reading, I didn't pass on to my kids. So I did a bunch of research I did a bunch of literacy thing as an adult, you know, 28 to 35, because I just wanted to make sure that I didn't pass these things on to my kids so I didn't realize that there was a phonics I didn't realize, any of those. So I think that maybe I would hope that if my teachers knew that they slow down enough, and I know there's 30 plus kids in the classroom but would have pulled me to the side to say, "Are you really getting this, are you really comprehending and understanding this?" You know, things of that nature. I think I would probably would have had a better high school education.

*So, almost to the end is have a couple few more questions. I know you're a little bit removed from your from your high school experience but kind of going back there. I think something that's important to me is to show young women outside of the context of foster care because, you know, we label youth in foster care as foster youth is if they are nothing else other than that. So, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about yourself as like a teenager, outside of your experience in foster care like, what did you like to do, who, who were you.*

Hmm. So I was, I think, resilient. For sure, and a force to be reckoned with. I, again, as I said, I got involved in a bunch of things. I was popular but I didn't have any friends. I didn't let anyone close enough. I had two girlfriends in high school and that's it. No one else, and that's real talk, so I had, I mean again, I was popular I was involved the whole nine, but I never let anyone in. There was nothing that, so when the counselor told me, you probably should go to community college, I was like "Oh, I'm gonna prove you wrong." Everything was again a fight, a challenge, and I was very resilient, and I...I was...loved, but desired love from my parents, you know what I mean? And so I was loved by my grandma. She loved me, I knew that and the whole nine. She was literally my Savior. But you know the love of a mom or a dad is just, you know, so therefore, it was very hard for me to express it. I, I never, I wasn't promiscuous. I've never gotten like really involved in anything like that. But yeah, so I worked at 15, I always gave back to youth. I always worked with youth. I did well in school, but you know... but that's relative right.



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I was, I would say, I was...I was superficially happy because I had a safe place. But I don't think I really fully like... happiness probably came once I was married with children. I've always given back, I've always felt that that was important and more and tried to share my story whatever I could to encourage other young girls. But yeah, so looking back there I would say I was resilient, a force to be reckoned with. But you, I didn't have any friends.

*I love that you describe yourself that way. And I'm curious like how do you think that, that, you know, having that kind of fight mechanism or being that that force, kind of helped you along the way, you know, it definitely pushed you right to to apply to all these colleges that your counselor told you that you shouldn't apply to right. But how did it kind of bolstered you throughout the rest of your career in your life.*

Okay. What do you mean?

*Um, I think, you know, a lot of times we think of like folks who challenge authority a lot as as being a problem. But, you know, but I think that...I think a lot of your story and kind of exemplifies this is that it's actually an asset.*

Right.

*And so I'm wondering if you've thought about you know like how that's been an asset to you or how you've used that as an asset throughout the rest of your life.*

Mm hmm. Um, I think I recognize that, you know, a lot of times...like so, teachers, and folks trying to label me with "Oh, you're the girl with a bad attitude." And then me thinking, Oh my gosh, you have a bad attitude it's a problem, I gotta fix this. I decided I think early on: "Okay, so maybe I do, let's just say I do, that's maybe a weakness so I'm not going to focus on my weaknesses I'm gonna focus on my strength." So what are my strengths, my strengths are: I know who I am and I'm not going to allow a system to define me. I'm not going to allow a teacher anyone else to define me, I'm going to define me. So, because I question authority, should not mean that, to me, that doesn't mean that I have a bad attitude, that just means that you need to probably be articulate enough to have a conversation with me. You need to be able to help me understand and bring me along. I don't like, I don't believe, in oh you stayed in the child's place. Like, what does that mean that you're the teacher like, I don't believe that. So those things don't matter to me treat me with respect, I treat you with respect like and we can mutually be respectful of one another. So I think that it's helped me because my experiences would have caused me to be shamed. To walk in shame to hold my head down to, you know, as a child, those things, I think would have put...So, but I just decided to just choose the other side of the coin, you know what I mean. I think that, you know, a choice that I'm not. And it's not going to define me that they're going to, you know, and I'm going to focus on my strengths, so let me build on those things, let me build on the things that I'm good at.

And I think that because of that, It's also then caused, like even in school, whether it's in college or high school, it also caused for teachers, and, and, and employers that I worked with to be like,

"oh, okay" And, not just think...I think it's caused him to step up their game too, like, you know what I mean, and not just think that they can just do whatever. I think it's caused them to want to put out a hand to say, "How can I help you." Like that English teacher, like my black history teacher, like Mr. Collins, cool breeze, my counselor, like, "How can I help you, how can I support you?" And lastly, I would just say with just that idea it's also allowed me to, like, focus

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on those that are for me. And okay if you're not, that's fine. Right, like you know so focus on those that are better for me.

*Beautiful. Thank you. And so my last two questions are pretty brief, just as if there's any final thoughts that you'd like to leave it, anything that came up that I didn't ask about. And if there's not that's okay. But yes, there's anything you want to leave with*

Again so if I'm understanding based upon your questions. This is mainly about adolescence right? So foster youth women especially a woman of color, and the system. So what I will say is, that I think it's important, and this is what I told my children especially my daughter and my son: I'm not black first. I'm not a person of color first, I am a person. I'm a human, first, then I'm female identify as female, second. And then third, I'm a woman of color. So now if you choose to treat me differently because, one I'm a woman, because that's probably what will start and then two, I'm a woman of color. Those are your choices, but I walk in a room. All humans, just like you. And I think that's probably also, you know, as a teenager. But I believe that to my core, to my core, we are equal, at this table, whether you're a teacher, whether you're male, female, whatever we are, we are equal in all aspects of the human, blood running through our veins. Now, if you choose to treat me or talk to me or act differently towards me because of maybe those other two things, you know, then those are your choices, but I would hope that you, we can respect one another mutually as being human being. Be kind to one another and things of that nature so. Yeah, that's what I would add.

### **Monet's interview**

*So my first question is, how was your overall experience I'm going to put the questions in the chat to just in case.*

So, I will grew up very poor. You know, so I'm going to the schools, you know, based on where we were zoned. But I also went to school during time they were doing busing trying to de-segregate school was based on our geographics and so I went to white elementary schools. And so that was where I saw...I termed myself the black white girl. And so, I was black in the neighborhood and then when it came to school, especially before High School, once you get to high school, your classrooms tend to be more diverse but prior to that. I was in what they call I think it's the gates program now, but you know they call the gifted and talented, you know so and I had to test twice for that because I guess I was on the cusp, I don't know. But then once that was determined, it also changed my classroom environment, which was helpful academically but not so much socially. And so, you know, I just, I never really thought about how people looked at me differently or strangely, because I like to read and that was you know, a weird thing. I like words and I like school. And that wasn't traditional in my house and in my neighborhood. So I was, you know, I was made fun of. Because of that, the things that I wanted to do this summer, you know, I wanted to read Reader's Digest while everybody else was outside playing basketball. And, you know the time doing it, but I know again socially, you know maybe look different. And so, in the school environment, and you know I liked going to school, I hated missing school, you know. I had to have a doctor's note to miss school. And so I actually enjoyed the learning and the environment. And then, well I wasn't, I was socially awkward at the time because a lot of is because of the poverty. But people...I stood out in a way I didn't want to because of the [GATE] program, where you know you'd be in your class with all your, your peers for a while and then at some point in the day, maybe it was from math or one of the core subjects math or English usually, then I would be taken out of the classroom to another room with a bunch of kids I didn't

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know, I didn't identify with. So I didn't really make friends with them but I would just go in and do my work. So I can go back to environment that was more socially comfortable but then when I came to the environment. I didn't fit in there, either. Because, "oh well What's wrong with you? You're special, you have to leave the classroom." almost like you know so as a kid. You know there's pros and cons to that. And so, again, that carried through, you know elementary and then moving schools. You know [we lived] in an area which is primary consider Northwest Pasadena so more the impoverished area, but when I went to school it was in the rich white neighborhood. This was up on the hill. You know, it was fun but it just, it was... I was so little. And, you know, but yes I was always a little different in now as an adult recognizing what some of those things were but as a kid, you just kind of follow along, but you know and I remember third grade. Somebody had me tutoring kindergarteners I was like who does that? I loved it I thought it was cute, It was fun, and not realizing you know because, in terms of education and where my peers were, I was a little ahead them but I just, I didn't know it, that just had always been, you know, what I was doing so, not realizing it till later. And then by the time I got to high school, like I got sit back and math because they decided to change the way, used to be able to do second semester and first semester so there was almost a year right and have math and so by the time I graduated from school I wasn't as far ahead in math. I ended up in algebra two when I had I stayed on track, you know would have gone on to Calculus which I had no idea what that was and what that meant. By the time I got to high school I started to kind of balance out a little bit with some of my peers, where I started off felt like I was really on an excelled academic track. Somewhere I got lazy wasn't as pushed and didn't really know... I didn't know the value of the high school education when it came to really make that connection, and in hindsight wish that I had pushed it done a little bit more. Yeah, that was kind of my educational experience, I never liked getting in trouble because I didn't like the consequences of getting in trouble. I learned that at home. And then I knew if there were consequences at school there was *really* going to be consequences at home. And so, I didn't like people telling me what to do. So if I knew the rules and I will follow the rules, and you'll see in my answers [identity chart] I was one of those kids that, you know, if I follow the rules, know that about me so if, if something happens outside of the norm. You know it's not my fault. And it's not me not wanting to take responsibility but the few times that I did get in trouble in school It really wasn't because of my doing it wasn't because I was sassing the teachers, well it was because I was sassing the teacher, which is how they interpret it. but because I was being falsely accused or something. And while I typically was quiet into like a person in the corner, like, that wasn't me I didn't do that and then you know the few times that I did get in trouble. The first time was in seventh grade. You're trying to figure out where you fit in a year so I tried all kinds of student groups. So I got the stupid criminal group that was that was a waste of time. I was like, Okay, if you guys are gonna do crime you gotta do something a little smarter, so I got in trouble because we decided to throw the trash can from the second floor to the first floor, and we weren't smart enough to exit out of a different door, we exit out of the door right next to where we do trash cans when we came down the stairs from the fire escape the assistant principals at the bottom of the stairs. As I was like, you guys are too dumb form me. So you know me getting in trouble wasn't even worth it, and boy did I get in trouble at so I was like, Why don't kids do this kind of stuff like this is stupid. And then, in eighth grade I got in trouble. And so it's funny because we're best friends now, but one of the girls pushed me on the line, I think it was accidental. I don't know if it was because I was new kid at a different school. And so, you know, when the teacher looks up and you're out of line and you're supposed to be conforming to the space and we got back to the classroom, and she was reprimanding the class



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about how horrible we did during the fire drill, and it was because I was out of line, I tried to explain to her What happened I was like no I wasn't just outline and she told me to shut up. I was like, well don't tell me to shut up and got sent to the principal's office because I was sassing the teacher, but I felt like I had been done, a grave injustice. And so I was like no you're getting me in trouble for something I didn't actually do and wasn't my fault. Those two stand out, specifically. And then it was challenging because education, wasn't it wasn't a priority in my house. And so, I didn't always have the space to learn and experiment with new things, like I would have liked to I tried music. I couldn't practice the violin at home, no matter where I was and how far I was in backyard. So really not having that support. You know when it came to academics, this wasn't something that was a priority or, you know, my mother never graduated from high school. And so, when I went into foster care though from between seventh and eighth grade. I had more support in eighth grade and more support academically but I had lost a lot of momentum. Prior to that, and not having that family support so it never occurred to me to try and pick up music again. However, I did have a more supportive environment when it came to homework or other kinds of projects and things. And then, I didn't get any calls from high school I was I was, I was cool.

*So we talked a little bit about your relationship with your teachers, you know, when you would get in trouble, but just in general. Yeah, what was your relationship with like school staff. Teachers you liked, and why teachers you didn't like, and why.*

So, as far as teachers and I liked. There were some teachers that I, you know, few that I feel relationships with. There were very few teachers and looks like me in school, though. And so I didn't really have that connection, which I think that would have been nice to have, you know, more teachers are color, least in, you know, in my classes. But the ones that I liked, they let me know like, what they saw special or different, or maybe called that out in projects I was doing or asked me to do different kinds of projects. First example, I want to say was in 3rd grade, when we had to do book reports. And I don't remember her name, I can kind of see her face but I remember she asked me, Well, why don't you try doing something different for your book report. Well, all we knew of book reporter, you read the book and you write it down. So she encouraged me to record my book report, which nobody else was doing, you know, because she can you say well why don't you try doing something different. You're talking to anybody else. So to me, that was cool. You know to be singled out and that kind of way, like, you know, I think you're a little different, you should try doing something different. Um, I ended up reverting back to the old way though and doing the book report, because, I'm accustomed to it now but if you're not accustomed to hearing your voice on recording. It was like there's something wrong with this recording. Because, trying to play it back and I'm like, it's the machines not working right but it wasn't really explained to me that, you know, when you're not accustomed to hearing yourself. It sounds strange to your ears. So, you know, there were a few teachers that where I felt like they came to me, individually, not you know in a big crowd, but saw something and encouraged, whatever that specialness was and it may not have been so special, but I felt like it was because they came to me privately, directly and included me on something special. Even back to the, you know, having me tutor the kindergarten, and I think I was just reading to them. And so, I actually had a really great relationship with the school psychologist throughout my k 12. And as I move school to school, you know, now I joke I was like maybe he was stalking me but he really wasn't, but I didn't really fully understand what his assignment was but as I went from school to school. He was at a different school sites and so he would find me. I check in and connect me to

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different projects and so he was, you know, African American, he went to USC so I had set my mind, I was going to USC because of that connection where he saw something, he was the one that had done the testing, and so will periodically check in with me through my whole k 12 career. And so those are the kinds of positive interactions that I had with teachers. The ones that I didn't like so much definitely you know the ones that yelled, nobody should be you know that especially school, or again the ones that didn't know me enough to know something was out of character, and just lumped in with everybody else. and like is one got in trouble, we all got in trouble. So those were kind of the negative experiences, or the ones that have, if I had a question. If I felt like I couldn't come to you to ask a question or, you know, the assumption is well, you know my explanation was clear as mud I don't understand why you didn't get it. You know there's some teachers that are like that that don't like to entertain questions and feel like they were clear enough for you should just read harder.

Yeah. So those are kind of the differences for me in terms of... There was one, we had a substitute, there's one class in elementary where I was being tortured by this girl. Really was bullied, in hindsight and nobody, Nobody helped me. And even in my regular class but I think the worst of it was we had a substitute, and I oh this is one time I intentionally got in trouble so I could get kicked out of the classroom. Or no, I take that back. No, back to, because she was bullying me and I wasn't able to get my work, and she was bothering me and so I got sent out of the classroom and then she end up getting in trouble on purpose so she could also get sent to the principal's office. To just continue to torture me. You know, so I had those in those horrible experiences, and wasn't a tattler, you know, I think we learned that in the neighborhood, you know snitches get stitches. And so, I didn't think to go tell the teacher and I even know how to articulate because it wasn't always the same thing. She would, I remember one time I stepped away from my lunch, which I don't know why I did, and she promised to watch my food. But of course you come back and everybody's laughing. It was a burrito, so I assume she put something in so I only ate the outside and then when I got finished somebody told me she had spit on my burrito. She would, they used to make these pens that they stopped making. They had these little metal balls on them. Kids used to rub them on the carpet and go around and burn, other people with them. Yeah, I got lots of little metal ball marks. Just all kinds of stuff but I didn't really know that I should have, or how to tell the teacher what she was doing, and I was scared that if I told it was just going to get worse. You know, so I struggled for a long time and I think, you know, the negative experiences like teacher, how do you not see this. You know, but from an adult educator now knowing you can't see everything. And, you know, and for kids who are trying to be sneaky, that's exactly what they're doing. But yeah, just where I felt like maybe there's a little bit in injustice and not necessarily academic but just, you know. Oh, you just another one of... yeah if I was in the classroom I felt invisible. It wasn't really a good experience. You know, although there are some kids that thrive on that because they don't want to be called out, you know, so there's a mixed bag with that but to feel invisible, you know, being bullied and tortured and I'm glad we're more aware of it now there's still a lot of things that slip under the radar but yeah now that I'm talking to you, that was probably a form of bullying. If you had asked me prior to today if I was bullied, I would probably say, nah I was cool.

*Yes. Alright, so move on to the next one, which is what would you have wanted teachers to know about you and your experiences. What could you share with me that might have helped past teachers to support you not only to survive but to thrive in school?*

I think it really is, I don't know that I have anything new than then what I said. But I think, where

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it will be helpful...So definitely would want to teacher to know that I was being bullied, you know, and that this girls wasn't being my friend, and for them to stop it to address it. Or even knowing that these kinds of things exist to address it in a larger scale. And then to monitor these kinds of things, you know. Well I know I should have said something, but I was never really told that you know "hey, these kinds of things are happening, make sure you say something to somebody." You know I would spend a lot of time in the classroom or recess just to try and wait, going out for certain kinds of things, and I was never athletic but that should have been a sign to someone. Yeah, the kind of support...so I think sometimes where as adults, and I do this as a parent, and I'm doing better with it. But we use grades, as a gauge for wellness, you know if you're getting good grades, then you're fine. You know, doing well it's all good. That's kind of our immediate go to. And in talking with my daughter about her seventh grade year and I did that same thing on my but you were doing fine. And, she was like "No mom that was a year I got all Ds, you came in for parent teacher conference" and I was like wow. So, I think, looking at the social emotional aspect and not just the academic as to our kids doing okay because you could have students who were doing well academically and it's, it's an escape from some of the social things that are going on, or for me to make sure was doing well academically to avoid some of the abuse that was going on at home. To give me something to focus on. I tried to use it as use us to do extracurricular activities when I was at home or birth mom so I could spend time after school but she was like, "No, you need to be home by certain amount of time" so I missed out on those kinds of things. And so again, not just using the ABC ruler. But knowing, and providing an opportunity for building a relationship, so that students are comfortable when things are just outside of range, be able to come and tell you, you know, Miss Francesca you know because we'll ask, well how's the school project going, Oh, you know, and I'll answer that yeah I did my piece my project my this. But then, there's bad relationships or awkward relationships in the classroom, the social emotional kinds of things, you know, well I noticed, someone so keeps coming to you. Are you friends are you engaging how's that going, or sometimes you know just having that extra eye on some behaviors, and even checking with kids like you know, Hey, is this something that you're comfortable with is this working for you, more of a child's not participating in some group activities and shy away to kind of check in with them.

Since I do the training of Mental Health First Aid. And this is really fresh we talked about anxiety disorder and how was diagnosed at early age six. And we missed it because we're like, oh, that's just a child, you know, every kid had stage fright of their first school performance. But looking at the different lens and I know it's hard for teachers because you know what I'm supposed to teach you the three R's the reading, writing, arithmetic. But it's the non-academic things that are various to the academics. We know that but don't put time into the non-academic things and expect somebody else to do it, but the kids in the classroom with the teacher, most of their awake hours. And so how do we equip teachers or do we put us at a different set of eyes in the classroom to see when it's those non-academic things that are showing up that's affecting you know you know the child screaming inside, you know, and you don't see it because well they, they passed their test and did all of your classwork, so for sure everything is fine.

*Um, and you mentioned earlier, like when you got to high school things kind of shifting or balancing out. And, you know, like, kind of falling a little bit further behind than maybe you could have, if you know things had been different. So I'm curious like in that situation, what*

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*would have helped you to stay to stay kind of like academically, ahead of you know your peers are at the top of the top of the game.*

I love my counselor to death. You know, but I was not fully versed on what we know as the A through G requirements and what student kids need to do to get into college, I knew some pieces I knew I needed to do extracurricular activity but I didn't really know why. I also didn't know the value of GPA. And I wish that someone has set a goal for me. While I said I wanted to go to USC, I wish someone had known that as an academic goal. it wasn't so much your academic goal but it was like, I, you know, gravitated to this role model, but had, I had a conversation with someone my counselor knowing that was my academic goal that would have set me on a different trajectory oh you want to get USC here and then make sure you take these classes, keep your GPA up here, you know, and then the more so there's a balance, the more social I became the less academic I became so I look at my transcripts, you know, ninth grade I was taking seven classes, and you know you only need six. My GPA was off the charts, you know, but as I progressed up the ladder....So someone had the great idea of putting me in AP classes. I wish I started that as soon as I entered High School. Because I already had... I didn't have the rigor or the study habits, I didn't need to study that hard with the level classes that I was it. So once I was introduced to AP. It was a lot more work than I was accustomed to doing, and I didn't have anyone kind of really pushing and telling me so I failed my first English class. I repeated in in my senior year so I'm a senior in the classroom of 10th graders. I do really wish that I had had a better counseling experience to really kind of keep me on track and then again like I said once I got a little more social, I enjoyed the social aspects so then I wasn't, you know wasn't buried in a book called The time. You know, 10th grade I was class president and it's funny thing is, I was really voted in because kids knew me from the neighborhood. **And so that's it's** a popular user like kids was but no one really kind of wanted to hang out with me until was to their advantage. And so, as I get more social and you know it was about the time I found myself having a boyfriend. You know all that stuff is a distraction. So yes, I got a little more social which I didn't have as much before so just having that balance. So I wish I had had better guidance and keeping a balance for future plans and it's funny that I didn't realize I was doing really well. But I didn't realize until I was in my career. And I pulled my transcripts because I was teaching life skills classes to a group of foster youth. And so I was telling them how to get their transcript and so I got mine, you know I was using them as an example in the classroom, I was like whoa, you know, I could have went just about anywhere and just apply, you know, and looking back in hindsight, if I had just done just a little bit more, but I didn't have that level of guidance and information. And as far as USC, I started off actually applying for an ROTC scholarship. I was going to go into the military just because I wanted to go to USC. So I was going to go into the military and then when I got out, I was going to go to USC on ROTC scholarship, and they would have to go into the military when I came out. Just because that was a conversation I had, the recruiters were there and it was attractive and made sense because I wasn't getting the other conversations. So looking back in hindsight I was like there was a reason they were little more aggressive, and it was an attractive package it made sense at the time. And so, yeah, there had been a disproportionate targeting of foster use for the military. When it comes to recruitment. And then because there's an opt out on some of the forms and so with foster youth because foster parents are legal guardians there's things that they don't sign.

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*The kind of, yeah and imagine that its similar for a lot of folks that you know you're looking for the path because it's not clear in front of you, and something I found that as an adult for military recruitment.*

I think some of that has changed but and it's no longer the No Child Left Behind, yeah she [Foster mom] didn't sign off on it. you know I wanted to go to USC bad enough that I was willing to go into the military. Even though I was in ROTC throughout high school that was my extracurricular my mom was like, do you really want to go into the military, it's not the same as high school. And so I was like no I don't want to get up early, I don't want to be yelled and I don't want anybody telling me what to do but that was my logic

*So I want to kind of rewind to talk a little bit about, I know you mentioned like didn't really get in trouble whole lot while you're in school. But the times that you did get in trouble. You mentioned a little bit about the events that led up to that but if you can share a little bit more. And then, and then what happened after so we, you know, did you get detention or suspension or whatever. We just wanted, whether that look like.*

So, just I'll start with the end fortunately I did not get suspended, and definitely not to the point of expulsion. The extent of what happened I was, I was like in school suspension for the day, you know, but it was because, I think because I was socially awkward, we'll use that term, you know. And, again poverty was a contributing factor to that. And there was no room to say "hey mom you know kids are making fun of me because I have these shoes and nobody can read the name on it," and then developmentally, physical development that you're going into adolescence you know man, that really awkward time where I was taller than most people, I was wearing a women's size clothing. And so, you know, and kids, kids will find any of your quirks and make fun of them and point them out and so that can be really really challenging but interesting like I mentioned, the first one when the girl was talking me and so because I was so focused on trying to do my school work. She was always trying to keep me from doing my schoolwork. You know mess with me. And so, and interesting as it, and it still happens this way. The last one, the one that's really defending themselves is more of the one that gets caught, than the, the one who's intentionally bullying and manipulative, but that's also because of the mentality of the person, the bully, is to be sneaky. And so that was challenging because I was made fun of for the thing that I love most and that was you know trying to learn. And so, you know, I really wish teachers had notice that kind of thing where you know someone was interfering with my ability to do that. So yeah that resulted in in school suspension on both occasions. And interestingly in the first one I was with my biological mother. I don't know if they got back home to her. I think they resolve this. Yeah, I don't think that news got back to the house. Because that would not have been a pretty sight. And then, in middle school I was in foster care in a foster home, and a very home, family environment. And that did get back to her. But I appreciate the fact that we were able to have a conversation I was able to tell her what happened you know, you know, my side of what was going on, because she knew I wasn't a kid that was, you know, that was just out getting into trouble getting those calls all the time. So, at least it was something that we were able to talk about. And I just hated the fact those little pieces of paper I don't know it's just it's more like a demerit kind of thing. I don't know if I ever had to do detention. Oh I did get detention the time where, oh yeah I got in trouble for that one. In middle school when we threw in the trash can over. I definitely got detention, that definitely was a call home. And, you know, lots of extra chores and, you know, and whooping everything. That was the other thing I was like yeah I can't keep going home to this kind of stuff. So it just was not appealing to me, you know, after that.



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Um, yeah so each one was a little different but it just was frustrating for me, you know, having to do the in school suspension. Yeah, you had some of the work but then you're still missing some of the lessons you're having to play catch up. And so it's time lost. You know, or they're giving you extra, extra work as a penalty.

*And you mentioned before, like, you know, getting in trouble and feeling like maybe it wasn't warranted right and having the those interactions with your teacher, kind of pushing back against that. What was the, do you remember with the teacher's reaction to you, kind of pushing back?*

Yeah, that's why I got sent to the principal's office

*That's right! What was that like?*

First off all, it wasn't it wasn't a pleasant conversation because she was she told me to shut up. You know, and you never tell a kid to do that. And so I was like "No, don't tell me Shut up, I'm trying to tell you what happened." And she was like no you don't not talk to me like that just go to the principal's office. You know, and I don't remember like going back to the classroom but yeah she wouldn't be on my favorite teacher list. I just kind of got to that class and it was like you know whatever teacher. I know I couldn't go to her if something's going down, you know I was on fire or something. But that also impacts the academic environment like, what do I have to do just to get out of here. Yeah, so that's never a comfortable feeling and you want to be able to go in your classroom. You, like "Hi Francesca" you know I think that does impact whether you even want to do the work.

*If you tell me a little bit about yourself out side of foster care. They know a lot of times. And, you know, you might feel a little bit more removed but a lot of times like our, our young folks are kind of defined by that right we call them foster youth that like they're not anything else other than that which talks about a lot. So, yeah, so I'm just kind of interested in knowing a little bit about yourself outside of that experience, like, Well, you know, are you what do you like to do with your time.*

Now or then?

*Um, let's talk about then.*

So, even while I was in it I didn't fully understand what it meant to be in foster care, other than I couldn't live at home with my mother. And then there were things going on that it wasn't a good environment. And so just to give a little context. So, my mother had 11 kids. I was number three out of 11. And as we all turned 13 we were all sent away, a couple in foster care, but I also saw a pattern where my two older siblings came back home, then within six months, were going again. And, but I saw what it was like while they were gone and then when I became the oldest and not really been able to do school and it just wasn't, it really wasn't a healthy environment. And so I remember when I was asked to go back home, the judge asked me if I wanted to go and I told him no, because I liked being in a foster home where I was the only child, most of the time. And where I could go to school. I could do homework, because sometimes when I was at home I couldn't do homework, I was babysitting because again I'm never 3 out of 11. And even though all of us weren't home at the same time. And so when I was with my biological mother. You know I get to hang out in the neighborhood on the weekends with with other kids. And then a lot of my identity was attached to my older sister I was, you know, the hand me down and I didn't

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really have a singular ID, I felt kind of invisible. And I was that middle child. You know at the time and so I really did feel invisible so I, especially in hindsight, found that I was doing a lot of things trying to seek approval. You know, making sure I was doing good in school so you know “Oh, that’s my smart girl!” that’s kind of how I was referred to by my mom. And, you know, trying to do stuff to win her approval. Mostly winning approval to avoid her wrath. And so, when I did go into foster care my first summer experience was horrible we just kind of erase those two months from conversation. It was in South Central LA, it just, it was horrible. it was, it was scary. And so when I was moved back to Pasadena, I had to switch to a different Middle School. But with that, I wasn’t defined by being a foster kid The only reason I knew other foster children at the time and it is, it’s significantly different now. But I knew other foster children because our families hung out. And so my, my foster mom’s best friend was also foster mom and they both had girls and we hung out that way. But I was able to do more stuff like I mentioned in high school I was in ROTC all for years, that was my pride and joy and that was I got to do field trips I that was my social identity. And it was embraced. If I did a field trip, somebody was there to pick me up when I got off the bus, those kinds of things I didn’t have to worry about okay no you got to walk or no I can’t go. It was a lot of no I couldn’t do stuff when I was at my mom’s. And so then I got to be a little more social. Being with my foster parents. I participated in the Red Cross club and it was never an issue about okay here’s the activities we have to do on Saturday. I was able to do those things without question. I started working during the summers. And so I had a lot more freedom and trust and autonomy and independence. You know I work during the summer so I have money during the school year. I started work when I was 14. And then I worked at a daycare during my senior year, you know, did the ROTC programs and trying to figure out what I needed to do to be an adult. You know, that kind of stuff was expressed a little bit more so I started trying to do stuff early to be an adult because at that point, once I went into foster care I felt like I was really on my own to do stuff that I really wanted to do. Like I never asked my foster mom for an allowance if I wanted to go to the movies if I didn’t already have money, from the allowance that she gave it wasn’t something that went and asked for that just had not been something I had been accustomed to. And so again I work in the summer so I don’t have money doing the school year to do the stuff that I wanted to do.

*So, my last question, or is just kind of to wrap it up it’s like if. Do you have any final thoughts you’d like to leave anything that came up for you, like for other questions that I asked you might want to share.*

I think you’re looking at the connection with, you know, foster care, there is a connection between the home environment and the school environment, which will make the difference too. So I’m not sure how you can add variables for them. Again, where I talked about the differences in the home environment, feeling supported and could do things and be as adventurous as I wanted to be which wasn’t very adventurous that’s just my nature. But when I was in foster care and felt safe, didn’t feel like I was going to be penalized for the things that I did wrong that were just kind of child’s nature and felt heard. I felt like I could relax a little bit. I can be myself I was able to make friends because, you know, when I was at my mom’s there’s no friends, no friends coming over to the house that didn’t happen. And so it was a nurturing environment and so I think that also makes the difference. Even if the parent didn’t necessarily go to college, but allowing the child and being there, you know parent teacher conferences, my biological mother never went to those. When I went into foster care, nobody knew that that wasn’t my mom because they never saw my mother prior to that. You know, and so we did the parent teacher

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conferences, open house, you know, my classmates never knew what my mother looked like, except for the one time I got into a fight and she came after school to get me, and it was only a few people around but other than that, nobody knew who my mother looked like. And so, again, I think that connection to the home environment, whether it's supportive, or stifling, you know, that translates into... because just as adults we bring our personal selves into the work environment and work home, and so the same thing with kids. If there is, whatever's going on the home environment we show up with it in school. You know, like the bullying situation where the girl was stalking me, if I have been with my foster mom, she would have known, I would have been able to talk to her about it, I couldn't talk to my mother about it. You know, and not even really my siblings and also I didn't really know exactly what was going on but I felt like if that had happened After 13. It wouldn't have lingered, as long as it.



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