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**"Am I No Longer Gifted?":
Imagining a More Capacious World for Black Girls in
Alternative Education**

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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“Am I No Longer Gifted?”: Imagining a More Capacious World for Black Girls in Alternative Education

Taryn T.C. Brown, Brittany N. Anderson, and Kiarra Wigfall

ABSTRACT

Advancing the discourse on the experiences of historically marginalized students in alternative learning settings, this track delves into the intricate terrain through which Black girls in alternative education navigate their high-ability and gifted educational journeys within these distinctive learning environments. In this sphere, we advance the evolution of innovative theoretical and pedagogical paradigms in alternative education, transcending conventional boundaries and drawing from the diverse lived experiences of Black girls. In this regard, the conceptualization of the Black Girl Educology (BGE) framework embodies this ethos, fostering an environment conducive to inquiry and exploration of essential variables in alternative education. Our BGE framework prioritizes the ways of knowing and doing that empower Black girls to occupy a central role within established systems of learning. As previous scholars have uncovered how underrepresented students manifest their talents, a recurring theme emerges: their potential often remains concealed due to preconceived notions regarding perceived negative behaviors, aptitudes, and traits. BGE prompts the essentiality of scholarly explorations that have predominantly focused on traditional educational settings, neglecting the unique context of alternative education. The primary objective of this track is to elucidate the status of Black girls within alternative education and to leverage the strengths in BGE as a tool to delineate the pathways through which high-ability and gifted students navigate their journey into and through these distinctive learning environments. By shedding light on the experiences of these students, we aim to foster an environment that recognizes their talents and unlocks their full potential.

As critical girlhood scholars continue to explore systems of learning through pedagogical approaches, practices, and theories that impact or harm Black girls, their teachers, and families, we simultaneously need to be perceptive to spaces that are often missing from schooling discourse. This is particularly important as local school boards and state legislatures are increasingly banning critical race theory and other “diversity”— policies and practices in public schools (Hartcollis, 2023; King, 2022; Lopez et al., 2021). To that end, much of the conversation about Black girlhood has been situated in traditional public-school spaces or third spaces, leaving a gaping hole in understanding the complicated nature of alternative schools for Black girls. Traditional mainstream public schools, designed with a one-size-fits-all approach, may not cater to the diverse needs of every student. In contrast, alternative learning environments can offer a range of possibilities and experiences for students. Approximately 800,000 students, constituting 1.6% of the total student population, are currently enrolled in alternative schools (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). However, what is conspicuously lacking is a thorough investigation by educators and researchers into the intricacies of these educational settings, and the possibilities within talent identification and development approaches that prioritize advanced academics within the curricula and pedagogical methods of alternative schools.

These experiences become even more complex when viewed through the lens of intersectional identities, often resulting in the oversight of the unique realities faced by students who are disproportionately represented within the alternative education system. More specifically, Black girls face a disproportionate level of bias and harm within educational environments, revealing a disturbing pattern where they bear the burden of enduring systemic failures, carcerality, and unjust criminalization (Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2016). This leaves Black girls grappling with the challenges of navigating educational spaces that often prioritize punitive measures over the well-being and the care they rightfully deserve. More specifically, Black girls consistently bear the brunt of heightened bias and harm within educational environments, revealing a disturbing pattern wherein Black girls often serve as scapegoats for systemic failures and are unjustly subjected to criminalization (Epstein et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2023). As a result, Black girls must often navigate through disciplinary learning environments that demonstrate a

notable lack of concern for their educational needs, aspirations for academic excellence, creativity, and talent development (Anderson & Coleman-King, 2021; Collins et al., 2023). For this study, we focused on Florida, a battleground state of anti-critical race theory, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices. This context is particularly important when considering the position(s) of Black girls in Florida. Despite making up only 21% of the state's female population aged 10–17 years, these girls bear an exorbitant burden within the juvenile legal system, accounting for about 45% of all girls arrested (Lydia & Gordon, 2021). This is a cause for concern, especially when we note that, within the educational context, 36% of Black girls in Florida's middle and high schools report feeling unsafe at school (Lydia & Gordon, 2021). This lack of safety in schools, combined with the overrepresentation of Black girls in the juvenile justice system, plays a significant role in driving the increased enrollment of Black girls in alternative learning environments.

Using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach, and through conceptualizing what we term Black Girl Educology (BGE), this track serves as a catalyst for comprehending the experiences of Black girls within alternative learning environments. This inclusive critical perspective delves into the complexities through which Black girls in alternative education negotiate their high-ability/gifted educational journeys within these anomalous learning environments. Derived from efforts to establish programs addressing barriers to students' success in conventional classrooms, alternative education employs the term "alternative" to describe a learning environment distinct from the usual or conventional (Robinson, 2021). Our goal is to shed light on the multifaceted experiences of Black girls, expressed in their own voices (Smith, 2019), as we strive to cultivate an environment that not only acknowledges their talents but also unearths their untapped potential. By incorporating nuanced perspectives, we introduce the concept of Black girl educology, designed to enrich the landscape of alternative schooling. This framework aims to create a dedicated space where the ways of knowing, doing, and being for Black girls take center stage within the established systems of learning. As we collectively strive to prioritize the experiences of Black girls, the Black girl educology framework enables us to better acknowledge and amplify their voices as they navigate alternative education. Drawing upon an educology as a framework, we incorporate insights from Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018), the Black girl literacies framework (BGLF; Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021), and afro-futurism (Womack, 2013), enriching our understanding and approach. By embracing these perspectives, we pave the way for BGE to illuminate crucial factors influencing the experiences of Black girls within alternative educational settings.

The following sections offer a review of the literature, examining the state of Black girls in alternative schools, with a focus on curriculum, academic rigor, social-emotional programming, and the facilitation of students' academic advancement and preparation for success in the alternative learning environment.

Literature Review

Contextualizing Alternative Education

The role of alternative pathways has evolved to become increasingly punitive, frequently functioning as disciplinary placement for students who exhibit challenging behaviors that are considered unsuitable for traditional educational settings (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Alternative schools were initially established to provide diverse approaches and opportunities, emphasizing the limitations of a one-size-fits-all curriculum (Kim & Taylor, 2008). While increased enrollment over the past 15 years can largely be attributed to national mandates, standardized testing, and graduation rate considerations (Fresgues et al., 2017), research has shown that alternative schools continue to serve as a conduit for behavioral interventions that exceed the typical school environment's capacity. They have come to be predominantly populated by students referred for academic remediation, disciplinary measures, and therapeutic support to address a range of challenges said to foster healthy academic and behavioral development (Moore et al., 2020). Alternative schools have also been found to disproportionately enroll Black and Hispanic students when compared to their white counterparts (Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). In 2017, the ProPublica Data Store conducted an analysis of the U.S. Department of Education data for the 2013–2014 school year. These data revealed that approximately half a million students across the nation were enrolled in alternative schools during that year.

Foley and Pang (2006) conducted a study to categorize programmatic practices and student characteristics in alternative schools through three primary categories: Type I, Type II, and Type III programs. Type I programs encompass schools of choice, such as magnet schools, which often feature specialized program themes related to content, such as math, science, or art, and instructional approaches such as open grading. Type II programs are designated for students identified as disruptive in traditional school settings. These programs may serve as a final

intervention before expulsion and prioritize behavior modification, typically without considering modifications to curriculum or teaching methods. Type III programs place a strong emphasis on rehabilitation and remediation. Their primary goal is to prepare students for reintegration into traditional school settings. Due to much of the focus being centered around behavioral interventions and social-emotional support, few programs put a significant amount of emphasis on curriculum and academic achievement. Approximately one-third of students nationwide attend an alternative school that spends \$500 less per pupil than regular public schools within the same districts. This limited opportunity and disparate funding become further convoluted in the alternative education sector, which already functions with limited accountability and oversight in reform (Fresgues et al., 2017).

Who Does Alternative Education Serve?

In the 2018–19 school year, the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) revealed a concerning trend: minoritized students were disproportionately represented in alternative schools. Specifically, 19% of Black students were enrolled in these schools, compared to 15% in traditional schools. As reported by CRDC in 2021, discipline data from the 2017–2018 school year also highlighted a particularly alarming trend: Black girls were the sole demographic group among all races and ethnicities for female students where a significant disparity was evident. Specifically, Black girls represented 7.4% of total student enrollment but received in-school suspensions at a rate of 11.2% and out-of-school suspensions at a rate of 13.3%, nearly double their proportion of the population. Further studies analyzed by the CRDC revealed that across numerous states, Black students were consistently the predominant demographic transferred to disciplinary alternative schools. Among the minority female groups assigned to these alternative schools, Black girls continue to represent the largest portion (Sprinkles, 2021; U.S. News, 2023). This nationwide pattern of elevated suspension and expulsion rates further contributes to the growing enrollment figures in alternative education.

Cartographies of Black Girls in Alternative Schools

The alternative education sector currently lacks adequate accountability oversight, resulting in its exclusion from education policies and research. This disproportionately impacts historically underserved student populations, which exacerbates disparities (Fresgues et al., 2017; Kho & Rabovsky, 2022). Limited research has explored the role of institutional and systemic racism in this growing overrepresentation of Black youth in alternative schools (Malagon & Alvarez, 2010), leaving unanswered questions across racialized and gendered experiences. In working to better understand the nuance of these lived experiences, we must consider location when examining these girls' experiences in the alternative environment to account for all the variables that inform their experiences. This type of nuance can be best understood using Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018), which makes way for understanding the placemaking experience of Black girls across contexts.

Black girls contend with adverse academic, educational, and socioemotional challenges, often compounded by the complex interplay of age, gender, race, and locale (Anyiwo et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2022). Their experiences are further influenced by gendered racial socialization, which exposes them to intersecting systems of oppression (Winchester et al., 2022). It is imperative to gain insights into their educational experiences from their perspectives to ameliorate their realities. Blake et al. (2011) underscores the differential experience of discipline disparities faced by Black girls in comparison to Black boys and other minoritized female students. Their study investigated the disciplinary infractions displayed by Black female students in an urban school district to assess whether the patterns and consequences of these infractions disproportionately vary compared to all female students, particularly White and Hispanic females. The findings indicated that Black girls were overrepresented in exclusionary discipline practices, and the reasons for their disciplinary referrals significantly differed from those of White and Hispanic girls. These disparities, the study argues, stem from the influence of gender stereotypes surrounding Black girls' femininity. While the study acknowledges that Black boys are frequently disciplined based on stereotypes that portray them as inherently threatening and prone to violent behavior, resulting in premature and harsh disciplinary measures by teachers (Blake et al., 2011), the situation for Black girls is distinct.

Black girls continue to contend with the more nuanced stereotypes rooted in notions of femininity that perpetuate an image of Black girls as "angry, hostile, and hypersexualized" (Blake et al., 2011, p. 93), which counters the conventional expectations of femininity defined by the idealized images and characteristics of white femininity. Culturally, many Black girls navigate the cultural norms and expectations that impose standards of femininity that are said to significantly impact their formal and informal learning experiences (Andrews, et al.,

2019). These have also been found to propagate narratives and biases that project defiance and disrespect on the assertive, independent, and resilient nature of Black girls, rather than recognizing these as valuable qualities that contribute to academic success (Blake et al., 2011).

Carceral Inevitability Through Deficit Discourses

According to the National Center for Educational and Supportive Environments (2023), students in Florida can be recommended for enrollment in alternative learning programs by teachers, administrators, or bus drivers based on specific criteria. These criteria include contributing to disorderly classrooms or school buses and displaying perceived behaviors, such as disobedience, disrespect, violence, abuse, uncontrollability, or disruptiveness. Moreover, the existing policy recognizes the authority of the school principal to relocate these students to an alternative educational environment contingent on the appropriateness of such placement and the availability of alternatives. As placement may be based exclusively on referrals, which are largely without broader systemic oversight, these highly subjective criteria are susceptible to the influence of personal biases and unfounded assumptions.

Black girls in alternative schools are typically in constant negotiation with discourses that portray them from a perspective of deficit (Decuir-Gunby, 2009; Delpit, 2003). These are further exacerbated by additional intersections of identity, which portray Black girls who find their place in alternative schools as delinquent (Pugh-Lilly, et al., 2001), at-risk (Dunning-Lozano, 2016), and lacking the academic ability to achieve in traditional public schools (McArthur, 2018). These ongoing dialogues traffic in deficit language, paying no attention to the complexities of the lived experience of girls who find their solace and space in alternative learning environments, which may have the autonomy to provide the additional support and resources that may be necessary for them to thrive.

Moreover, deficit discourses frequently accentuate the labeling and stigma experienced by youth in alternative schools, perpetuating the carceral nature of spaces intended to disrupt the conventional ways students navigate similar challenges in mainstream school environments. It is crucial to acknowledge and scrutinize deficit perspectives, recognizing their detrimental nature is grounded in stereotypes. These viewpoints attribute the perceived "failure" of individuals to the deficits and challenges of people from marginalized communities, rather than acknowledging systemic inequities in access and opportunities. The history of deficit thinking shows how, despite the macroeconomic and societal influences that generate and perpetuate it downward, inequity is often viewed as a problem created by the disadvantaged and driven outward toward the community (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Menchaca & Valencia, 1997a). The term deficit discourse encompasses discussions that portray individuals or groups in a manner that emphasizes their shortcomings, whether in terms of absence, lack, or failure. More specifically, it contextualizes the discourse that narrowly assigns blame for problems to the affected individuals or communities, often neglecting the broader socioeconomic structures within which they exist. To effectively combat deficit discourses, it is crucial to comprehend how they are generated and sustained. Given that much deficit research consolidates issues across intersections of identity, the following sections discuss what we believe to be most pervasive in Black girls' negotiations within the alternative learning environment: (a) academic discourses, (b) intrapersonal discourses, and (c) space and place discourses.

Academic Discourses

Ruzzi & Kraemer (2006) evaluated the literature for academic programs in alternative education, surveying fifteen alternative schools. The prevailing academic discourse on alternative education often operates under the assumption that the academic expectations in these settings should be less demanding than those in traditional learning environments. However, their findings indicate that academic programs within alternative education can thrive when there is a comprehensive commitment to academic excellence. This involves delivering effective instruction and cultivating a culture of high expectations for all students, regardless of their location. The curriculum should be characterized by its academic rigor and alignment with state standards while also being thoughtfully designed to be both relevant and applicable to real-life situations. By challenging the prevailing "less than" mentality in alternative education, these changes can trigger accountability systems that support differentiated instruction and facilitate ongoing professional development for educators in these settings, emphasizing the enhancement of academic expertise, teaching strategies, and the exploration of alternative instructional approaches for students. A place for considerable research and inquiry, as highlighted by Ruzzi and Kraemer, the dearth of literature in this area

could further illuminate the challenges associated with exploring academic programming within alternative education.

The negative associations with alternative schools and the students they serve impact the belief of academic and social success within these environments. Redefining and reclaiming what success looks like for high-needs students and what environments it can be found in is critical to the much-needed overhaul of the perception of alternative education (Kokkinakis, 2013). Without this shift in perception, the stigmatization of alternative schools will continue to frame these institutions as “dumping grounds” for undesirable and undeserving students. Exploring new and innovative approaches to support these learning spaces can be a step forward in reclaiming and reforming them to foster self-efficacy and empowerment for Black girls who are enrolled in alternative education programs.

Intrapersonal Discourses

In contrast to interpersonal communication involving two or more individuals, intrapersonal communication pertains to communication with oneself. Various terms, such as self-talk, internal monologue, inner speech, inner experience, and internal discourse, are used interchangeably to describe this concept. While alternative schools are often perceived as a last resort for students seeking to earn a diploma, there is insufficient awareness of the profound impact of internal negotiations concerning place and space. Understanding how students define themselves and establish a sense of belonging both within and beyond these settings remains limited. Moreover, within alternative learning spaces, students frequently grapple with externally imposed self-perceptions rooted in the assumptions that led them to such spaces initially. This hinders our comprehension of their intrapersonal experiences and, in conjunction with a scarcity of literature on intrapersonal discourse, limits our knowledge of their capacity to thrive in this distinctive environment. The prevailing discourses surrounding students' identities tend to be constraining, influencing how we interpret their educational journeys.

While alternative education programs champion a holistic approach for students facing challenging behaviors or extenuating circumstances, they grapple with negative stigmas and associations (Gode, 1997). Scholars like Gode (1997) propose that the stigmatization of attending or being administratively placed in alternative schools can adversely affect students' self-perception and how they are viewed by educational stakeholders in their districts. These stigmas extend to the district as well, prompting some stakeholders to question the necessity of alternative schools and how such perceptions impact the district's reputation. Although alternative settings aim to offer a therapeutic and nurturing atmosphere for students with significant needs, they are frequently associated with those labeled as troubled, disruptive, and facing severe behavioral challenges (Kokkinakis, 2013). This linkage complicates the deliberate consideration of accountability adjustments required to support these students in thriving.

Space and Place Discourses

Cultivating a sense of place for youth is pivotal in helping them comprehend their role and significance within their communities. This process is integral to cognitive, social, and emotional development and fosters experiences that encourage positive community interactions, nurturing a profound connection to specific places and people. This sense of belonging holds immense significance. For Black girls in alternative schools, discussions about space and place become particularly challenging due to the broader stigma placed on choosing to enroll in these nontraditional educational environments. The absence of a sense of belonging among Black girls often results in feelings of disconnection and insecurity, creating an environment that hinders the ability to learn. In this state of disconnection, their self-confidence and identity can be negatively affected, leading to a perception of being outsiders who are unworthy of acceptance. Conversely, when we challenge narratives that exclude Black girls from discussions on place—and space—making, we foster a strong sense of belonging and connectedness, empowering them to actively engage, explore, and learn.

Talent Identification and Development Disparities for Black Girls

While there is a growing body of research that delves into the distinct lived experiences of Black girls within and beyond K–12 educational institutions, as exemplified by the summaries of works from Brown (2013), Cox (2015), Morris (2016, 2022), and Smith (2019), it is worth noting that the active participation of Black girls in research as true partners and collaborators remains a largely underexplored and undertheorized area. This is especially pertinent in the context of the challenges posed by the alternative education system, where students often

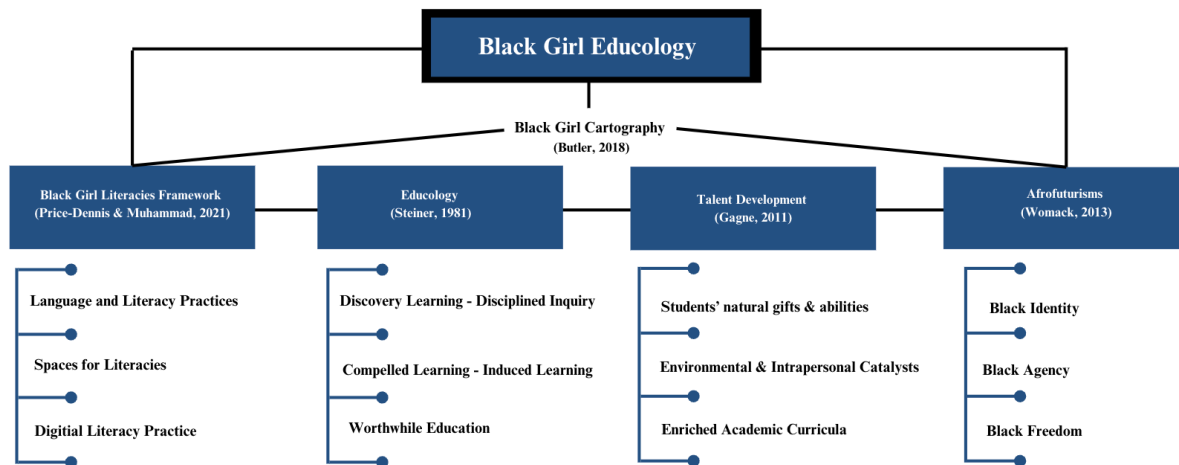
confront deficit discourses and the negative stigmas associated with alternative education programs (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The complexity of this experience is amplified for Black girls who must navigate the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. The situation becomes even more intricate as states introduce accountability measures designed primarily for highly mobile students, placing alternative school students in the margins and further emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the students affected by these institutions. To provide a more concrete context, in the state of Florida, only 9.9% of students identified as gifted and talented (GT) are Black girls, which is a total of 8,698 girls. When considering all female students, a total of 87,628 girls have been identified as GT. It's noteworthy that this includes 44,273 white female students, representing 50.5% of the total female GT population, and 25,436 Hispanic female students, or 29.0% of identified all GT students more broadly. These statistics offer valuable insights into the distribution of GT identification among different racial and ethnic groups in Florida. Information regarding the placement of Black girls identified for GT programs and courses and their enrollment in alternative schools is often not publicly accessible or integrated into accountability systems. This lack of retention and accountability to girls in alternative settings exacerbates the recruitment of GT Black girls' quagmire, raising the question: What talent-identification services and referral processes are available for girls who are in alternative schooling spaces?

Based on this comprehensive literature review and the various factors to consider when recognizing the importance of prioritizing Black girls in alternative education, this space acts as a glimpse into the experiences of students in alternative schools. It highlights those who are marginalized by conventional educational institutions and, as a result, often excluded from existing school accountability mechanisms and educational reforms designed to achieve greater inclusivity. In response to this substantial gap in the existing literature, this track provides significant theoretical and empirical contributions to our understanding of the experiences of Black girls in alternative education. We aim to reveal and address the disparities perpetuated by racial bias and the stigmatization of Black girls within the alternative education system. We further envision and propose enhancements in teaching and learning practices for Black girls across various educational contexts. These improvements prioritize the removal of obstacles that impede access to a comprehensive range of curricular offerings and talent identification practices within alternative learning environments.

Conceptualizing a Black Girl Educology

Educology (Steiner, 1981) frames education as the focal point of investigation. In this dynamic, participants assume specific roles to foster meaningful experiences. In practical terms, a teacher serves as a guide, steering the learning journey of another individual, while students actively embrace the chance to learn under this guidance. The crux of learning lies in the evolution of structured interactions, where complexity is progressively enriched, mirroring talent development theories and frameworks (VanTassel-Baska, 2021). Within this focused realm of inquiry, discussions regarding the intricate connection between education and learning can be explored in greater depth and, consequently, realized. In this pursuit, as we amplify the voices of Black girls navigating alternative education, we adopt an educology framework rooted in its foundations, integrating concepts from Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018), the Black girl literacies framework (BGLF; Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021), and afro-futurism (Womack, 2013). This amalgamation forms what we term Black Girl Educology.

Figure 1. Black Girl Educology



Note. Conceptualizing Black girl educology model

Black Girl Educology (BGE) envisions an educational landscape for Black girls that celebrates and nurtures their brilliance, transcending conventional constraints (Brown, 2022). Aligned with the fundamental principles of educology, the essence of education is seen as both instrumentally and intrinsically valuable (Frick, 2021)—a realization that, for Black girls, unfolds most authentically by embracing the strengths embedded in these Black girl-centered frameworks and the possibilities inherent in afro-futurism. The BGLF draws from the collective and individual experiences of Black women scholars and teacher educators, providing valuable insights into transforming the identity development of Black girls within and beyond official school contexts. Situated within the broader landscape of inclusive education, the BGLF focuses on empowering pedagogies and practices with nuance emphasizing transformative pedagogical practices. This framework combined with the significance of placemaking for Black girls derived from Black girl cartography, paves the way for afro-futurist possibilities in envisioning BGE. In this dynamic interplay, we position BGE as an invaluable resource for essential stakeholders in teaching and learning spaces involving Black girls. As we continue to grapple with issues of race, school, and centering youth voices in school reform efforts where Black youth can thrive, key stakeholders must remember these often Othered cartographies of Black girl experiences in alternative learning that must be at the center, not in the margins. The stakes are too high to maintain the status quo and limit our spaces of Black joy and thriving to traditional schooling systems, which marginalizes the salient voices of lived experience within alternative schools. Black girls not only deserve a seat at the table, they deserve a voice in the conversation.

Given the limited knowledge concerned with the protective mechanisms within alternative educational settings that can enhance the academic success of Black girls, the present study explored how a culturally promotive curriculum in one alternative school bolsters the resilience of Black girls. The attempt to locate this analysis in one alternative school setting also allows for a more organic assessment of how strength and culturally based alternative learning spaces can promote the academic success of Black girls in these spaces. Alternative schooling spaces are seemingly taking a one-size-fits-all approach, anchoring behavioral interventions rather than broadening curriculum designs to accommodate the needs and intellectual abilities of students. We advocate for the adoption of talent identification and development frameworks that can readily accommodate the unique requirements of high-ability Black girls across various contexts (Brown, 2022, Anderson, 2021). The BGE model stands out as a fitting approach to address these needs.

Methods

Black Girl Epistemologies and Ways of Knowing

Recognizing the historical significance of liberatory space and placemaking for Black girls, this study draws in the work of Butler (2018) and adopts a Black girl epistemological perspective within the ecologies of

alternative schooling experiences. With a deliberate focus on centering the interiority of Black girls, our objective was to explore how we could better understand the needs, desires, and preferences in teaching and learning articulated by the girls themselves, acknowledging them as experts of their own lived experiences (Evans-Winters, 2019; Halliday, 2019; Smith, 2019). This research's theoretical foundations were critical in emphasizing the positive implications for educating Black girls within environments that not only recognize and amplify their strengths and desires but also collectively (re)envision them as integral to the future of Black girls engaged in alternative learning spaces (Brown, 2022).

Using YPAR, a critical research methodology centered on amplifying youth voices and positioning our girls as authorities on their own education and experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Bautista et al., 2013), our approach encompassed three fundamental principles: an exploration of the challenges faced by Black girls in alternative learning environments, the recognition of the value of their indigenous knowledge in understanding their own experiences, and the envisioning of transformative possibilities for their future selves as a collective endeavor (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). As a methodology, pedagogy, and theory of action, our commitment to centering YPAR in our community-engaged work was a deliberate choice to maintain the integrity of our research and analysis efforts (Torre, 2009), thereby nurturing the potential for transformation within the alternative education space explored in this paper. Our data collection methods included peer-to-peer interviews, large group observations, and arts-based techniques, which contributed to the development of a thematic analytic framework. In a collaborative data analysis process aimed at enhancing research literacy within the YPAR project, our co-researchers identified and proposed two primary themes and recommendations for changes they deemed particularly relevant within the alternative learning environment.

Our collective objective was to expand on the existing body of scholarship that concentrates on the lived experiences of Black girls navigating alternative educational settings. In gaining a deeper understanding through collaborative methodologies, we were able to co-create, recognize, and nurture the untapped talent potential of our youths' research literacies and self-awareness of their academic identities. Moreover, our collaborative efforts aimed to shape curricular and pedagogical practices, enrich learning interactions, and contribute substantially to the understanding of both inter- and intrapersonal dynamics within alternative education. Employing an afro-futurist feminist perspective (Morris, 2012; Womack, 2013), this work not only reimagined but also emphasized the imperative for pioneering practices in alternative education, encompassing talent development and pedagogy. Our ongoing commitment in critical girlhood studies is to craft inquiry spaces that seamlessly incorporate the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of Black girls. This expands our collective freedom dream (Love, 2019) within the cartographies of Black girlhood. Utilizing Black girl cartography, we can scrutinize material geographies and unveil the human geographies of Black girls within these freedom dreams. These connections, shaped by race and gender, present opportunities for efforts aimed at establishing meaningful sites of healing for Black girls. This pursuit also aims to spark the creation of self-defining pedagogies and strategies, both within and beyond the intricately tailored unique experiences of Black girls in the alternative education landscape.

Research Context

According to the Florida Administrative Code Rule 6A1.099822, an alternative school is defined within the context of school accountability improvement ratings. It refers to a school that provides dropout prevention and academic intervention services, as outlined in §1003.53, F.S. Notably, charter schools can also be classified as alternative schools if their charter explicitly states a mission to deliver dropout prevention and academic intervention services through alternative education. However, it's crucial to emphasize that §1003.53, F.S. excludes "second chance schools" and educational programs operated or contracted by Department of Juvenile Justice facilities. Our YPAR research project was carried out in an alternative school with a clear mission: to proactively deter girls from involvement in the juvenile justice system. The school's primary focus is to empower girls by nurturing their life, health, and academic skills, and a substantial number of students opted to enroll in this school for diverse reasons related to previous challenges in their former educational settings. They additionally sought the advantages of a smaller and more supportive learning environment to bolster their academic progress.

Our YPAR team took the lead and engaged in the study through a series of tiered interactions spanning a seventeen-week YPAR process. Each co-researcher actively participated in weekly enrichment activities designed for girls within the school as part of the co-created learning community and critical reading group Girl Talk! Table 1 shows the self-reported demographic characteristics of the co-researchers, derived from program reflective journaling and a program intake form. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. The following section

includes brief introductions to the co-researchers as they illuminate how their experiences enhance our comprehension of their perspectives, contributing to the thematic analysis of findings regarding the future of alternative education.

Collaborative Research Team Positionality

As critical scholars committed to social science research through racialized and gendered lenses, it is crucial to recognize how our positions and experiences shape our involvement in this work. Embracing self-reflexivity, we collectively acknowledge our standpoint as Black women dedicated to collaborating for and with Black girls in diverse contexts. Leveraging our diverse expertise in Black feminisms, critical girlhood studies, gifted education, curriculum and instruction, and urban education, our collaborative efforts are centered on extending scholarship that actively contributes to participatory approaches. Our collective goal is to focus on centering Black girl ways of knowing, being, and thriving across diverse educational landscapes.

Table 1

Girl Talk! demographics

Co-researcher Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Duration	Alternative Education Entry
Jasira	14	9	1 year, 3 months	To do better and focus on myself
Trina	13	8	1 year	Work on my anger
Chrisean	16	10	6 months	Removed from previous school
Debbie	16	9	2 years	Catch up on work and change
Durkio	14	9	1 year	Removed from previous school
Lil Pookie	16	8	6 months	Mom likes the school; aunt attended.
Lynn	16	10	3 months	Too personal
Mary J.	16	9	6 months	Too personal

As our YPAR experience uncovered themes across different realms of reflection and change within alternative education, this track specifically focuses on the findings related to alternative education and talent development. Although a total of 8 girls participated in the Girl Talk! program throughout the academic year, this study intimately captured the sentiments of Jasira, Trina, and Chrisean.

Co-Researcher Introductions

“We are bold, positive, inspirational, strong, pretty, funny, ourselves, important, powerful, caring, calm, cool, gifted, gorgeous, innovative, and collected.”

—Girl Talk! affirmation (2022–2023)

As scholars and co-researchers immersed in our Girl Talk! program, our sessions commenced with a ritual that allowed us to center ourselves collectively, while our shared time concluded with the co-creation of the Girl Talk! affirmation—an intentional practice for framing the entrances and exits to our shared space. The ensuing sections offer introductions to our co-researchers, providing insights into the unique perspectives of Jasira, Trina, and Chrisean.

Jasira. *"If I had superpowers, I would go around and give love to everyone."* As an aspiring entrepreneur, Jasira brings with her strong attention to what she feels she needs to thrive and how that should shape how we think about teaching and learning spaces. As a lead in how we think about curriculum, Jasira was identified as GT before she transitioned into alternative education. She continuously brought perspective to how we should be thinking through the type of curricular offerings experienced within her learning environment, and how we could improve to meet multiple learning styles.

Trina. *"If I had superpowers, I would expand the school."* Trina was a member of the school leadership council that created opportunities for the girls to lead both within and beyond the school. Trina brought up many conversations around how we should be thinking about the spaces the girls had access to throughout their day. This became salient at many points throughout the YPAR process and ultimately informed how we think about the various reasons girls select alternative learning spaces for their own communicated needs.

Chrisean. *"If I had superpowers, I would make this a gender-neutral school."* Chrisean brought many perspectives to the YPAR team in her centering of academics and enrichment activities. Homing in on the interpersonal needs within the alternative learning space, Chrisean often spoke about the need for more active and engaged learning experiences that infuse creativity and movement. She also had advanced coursework in her previous school and spoke many times of her desire for more tiered and differentiated instruction that often provides opportunities for advanced academics and enrichment.

Findings

Future-Casting for Black Girls in Alternative Educational Spaces

Alternative schools were instituted to provide options and opportunities to address diverse challenges and to reinforce the notion that a one-curriculum-fits-all approach is ineffective and alternative pathways to educational success are needed to support student needs (Kim & Taylor, 2008). These alternative pathways over the years have become more punitive in purpose and utilized as disciplinary placement for students who exhibit challenging behaviors not suitable for traditional educational settings to address. As several scholars have identified ways in which underrepresented students showcase their talents, it continues to be found that their potential is often overlooked because of perceived negative behaviors, aptitudes, and traits (Anderson, 2020; Davis, 2022; Ford et al., 2008); this scholarship has primarily been in traditional schools, not alternative education spaces. During our collaborative research, two predominant themes surfaced, presenting alternative narratives to address previously identified tensions and shape the future experiences of Black girls in alternative education. These themes revolve around the potential for enriched curricular offerings and the empowerment of Black girls as active contributors to their own educational journeys. The ensuing discussion will shed light on each of these themes, exploring their pivotal role in nurturing supportive learning environments within alternative education, thereby empowering Black girls to thrive. Additionally, it will prompt deeper reflections on the manifestation of Black Girl Educology in the lives of Black girls within alternative learning spaces.

We Want More, Enhanced Curricular Offering in Alternative Learning

"I think we should have more honors classes; they could expand their subjects."

–Chrisean

Employing trial-and-error methods for education improvement poses risks and inefficiencies. The research findings indicated a notable absence of talent development opportunities through robust, enriching curricula in their alternative schooling environment particularly concerning for Black girls. The majority of the co-researchers expressed a desire for more challenging content and academic experiences that resonated with their interests. In addition to seeking a robust curriculum, Jasira and Chrisean mentioned on different occasions their prior enrollment in GT programs and honors courses. Despite their background in advanced academic settings, the school did not adequately address their need for challenging coursework.

Chrisean: *I want something other than just looking at a screen all day.*

During group activities, the co-researchers shared their disconnect with much of their curriculum that was implemented through online course modules. Beyond the often-stagnant understanding of rigor or lack thereof in these academic spaces, the co-researchers maintained a high level of curiosity, inquiry, and expectations to learn new content. The retention of high academic aspirations is a hallmark of a strong self-identity, which correlates to students performing well in post-secondary spaces (Anderson, 2020). While upholding academic rigor and standards remains crucial in traditional schooling spaces, our findings suggest that it is even more vital to recognize the need for nuanced curricular offerings and structures tailored to students contending with the unique set of challenges found in alternative school settings. These students require teaching and learning experiences that cater to their specific needs and wants, thereby supporting their own form of academic rigor and inquiry within an alternative learning environment. Jasira advocates for more hands-on learning experiences:

Jasira: *I feel like we should have more hands-on stuff because not everybody learns on the computer. For me it's very difficult because I don't really like listening to long lectures. I like hands-on type of learning and—and it's not helpful when the teachers tell me to, 'Oh, it's right there. You got to read it'.*

Jasira's experience is a foundational principle of high-leverage academic experiences that all students need, but high-ability students are actively seeking (Renzulli & Renzulli, 2010); however, if these needs are not met, students underachieve, particularly those historically marginalized in schools (Collins et al., 2023). Attaining a high school diploma while simultaneously navigating additional responsibilities or traumas demands an extraordinary level of determination and requires a learning environment that can balance the need for standards and rigor with comprehensive student support. Creating alternative schools in response to emerging needs is a prudent decision for public school districts. That said, a more intelligent approach involves consistently improving these schools' curricular and pedagogical practices to amplify their positive impact on students and (re)envisioning their learning experiences as contrasting with traditional schooling environments.

For Us, By Us: Black Girls as School Makers

"I think we should learn more about how our skin doesn't define how we should be treated or how we act!"

—Trina

Achieving a paradigm shift to enhance education necessitates a foundation of sound knowledge. Our findings further revealed that teaching content that aligned with students' real-life experiences significantly increased their engagement in school (Gay, 2018). At many points, our co-researchers conveyed a sense of empowerment stemming from the possibilities explored through the Girl Talk! curriculum structure, which empowered them to think through their own agency in contributing to their schooling environment. In these activities, the co-researchers brought perspective on what they felt like should be present given the unique space of possibility in alternative education. Jasira shares:

Jasira: *Being stuck on a computer is not the best thing and staring at a screen for too long... we're not really getting into the real world like we would in regular school, if you know what I'm saying?*

At many points, our co-researchers' group discussion outlined how they had experienced different realities in their previous schooling space and how the alternative education space was a way to gain more support in goal-setting and intrapersonal relationships. These shared discussions maintained the sacredness of the research space and cultivated counter-stories and strategy for the girls. Throughout our process, there was also a keen awareness of who the co-researchers knew themselves to be as learners and the connection to the recommendations they contributed to the discussions. Having a strong academic identity in schooling spaces positions Black students, especially girls, as conduits of their academic progress; through multimodal activities and literacies, Black girls' positive self-concept actualizes pathways for them to advocate for enriched learning experiences that are tethered to post-secondary trajectories and joy (Griffin et al., 2022; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Wade-Jaimes et al, 2021). Trina shares:

Trina: *I'm passionate about schoolwork, sports, and other things like that. Hopefully I have my own business. It's successful. I just—those are the main things that I want in 5 to 10 years.*

At many points, Trina shared about her passions and the goals she has for herself in the future. Her experiences in the space reflected her effort to better align with the future she had envisioned for herself. Jasira also shares about aspects of her identity as a learner:

Jasira: *Personally, I'm a better learner hands-on. I've been saying through this whole interview, I feel like a lot of people learn better hands-on because instead of just listening, you're actually doing it so it stays in your mind better.*

Serving as a clarion call for alternative settings to reconsider their approach to students' needs, our collaborative research highlighted and responded to the need to consider the important role space, place, and relationships can play in bolstering Black girls' educational resilience in alternative and informal learning spaces through culturally competent curriculum. In this sense, the current study calls for more empirical studies dedicated to school actors' out-of-school interactions and teaching experiences.

Nuancing Talent Development for All Girls

Talent development should not only be promoted to those who are formally identified for GT education services and programs. All students deserve a rigorous curriculum that taps into their talent potential (Renzulli, 2005), and this work is especially critical in alternative schooling spaces. In this track, we intricately explore the scholarship on talent development for Black girls in alternative schools, aiming to anticipate future needs. This exploration is facilitated by extending Gagne's (2011) Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT). This extension in the scholarship will help challenge the narrow confines of talent development theory and curricular offerings in alternative schools and classrooms as primary identification sites for students. We aspire to equip educators with resources of consideration for supporting all GT and high-ability students in the classroom. This study's findings highlighted, through the centering of Black girl educology, the reciprocal relationship between school curricula and the developmental needs of Black girls as foundational to maintaining strategies for high-ability students to still benefit from programming and support in the alternative learning environment. By framing Black girl educology within the context of talent development strategies and experience mapping in alternative education, new lines of inquiry emerge, prompting a deeper exploration of the nuanced strategies required for talent development/identification.

Jasira and Chrisean, both recognized as GT students in their prior educational contexts, were pivotal in sparking continuous exploration into the reconceptualization of talent development within alternative education. Their insights have motivated us to delve into varied learning preferences and enrich culturally responsive/sustaining educational experiences across diverse learning environments. This was evidenced by narratives from girls participating in the YPAR project, which confirmed that when Black girls are given the opportunity to conceptualize and create individualized learning plans and classroom environments, they achieve the benefits of engaging with a curricular context that simultaneously is relevant to their interests and challenges their intellectual pursuits in ways they desire.

Implications of Talent Development in Alternative Learning Spaces

Talent Development and Identification Theory and Approaches

Over the past 150 years, the literature on gifted education has predominantly emphasized identifying optimal interventions and processes for talent identification and within talent development approaches. The underlying assumptions of talent development theory vary, ranging from domain-specific to practice/expertise development to individualized to process-oriented (VanTassel-Baska, 2021). These processes and theories have yielded contemporary approaches and interventions that moved from a focus on individual cognition to systems of learning methodology that involve context-specific development that can promote or impede learning (VanTassel-Baska, 2021). Although the research documents that understanding individual differences matters in the capacity-building and productivity of these domains and areas of expertise (Jensen, 1998), the storied history of the

field's erasure of marginalized groups in these studies and identification processes is an issue to contend with. The scholarship has largely been predicated on the talent development and identification opportunities devised and validated through hegemonic standards and practices. Talent identification and development in praxis and scholarship have largely been race-evasive, and lack an intersectional perspective, particularly as talent opportunities are nuanced. Talent development research in gifted education discusses race, poverty, and ill-health as circumstances of chance (Wyner et al., 2007; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2018) rather than systemic and structural issues embedded into the fibers of society (Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Also, talent development research has not troubled the nature of these theories using ecological or social contexts of education and society frameworks, nor has the field fully nuanced issues of underrepresentation and equity beyond the white gaze of the field, and if so, it's from a deficit/chance perspective. Using Critical Race Theory or an ecological systems approach as theoretical grounding for understanding talent identification and development is often a subdued or overlooked metric for talent identification and development in educational settings.

We chose to situate Gagné's (2004, 2011) DMGT into this study because it included components of environment and intrapersonal realities to understand academic talent development. Gagné defines talent development as "the systematic pursuit of talent, over a significant period of time, of a structured program of activities aimed at a specific excellence goal" (Gagné, 2009, p. 67). Gagné's (2011) model outlines six elements to undergird the development of talent: (1) an enriched curriculum/training program; (2) a clear and challenging excellence goal; (3) selective access criteria; (4) systematic and regular practice; (5) regular and objective assessment of progress; and (6) personalized or accelerated course-pacing (p. 12). The modalities of natural abilities (gifts) and competencies (talent) are outlined in his model, with consideration for environmental and intrapersonal talent catalysts that lend themselves to the developmental processes of DMGT. It is important to note that this model was not developed with the understanding of systemic and structural issues that Black and Brown students face in public schools. Regardless of the environment or income level a member of an oppressed group is born into, there will be barriers and constraints embedded in their academic experience. Gagne's conceptualization and perspective on issues of equity for Black children are not reflected in the theoretical model or later writings, nor is the operationalization of "chance" nuanced in a way that speaks to the oppressive realities of gifted education in the U.S..

As we examined the nuanced processes for developing talents in alternative schooling spaces, we found it necessary to adapt the educology framework to center the needs, experiences, and growth opportunities for Black girls. We were particularly careful of using Gagné's (2011) model to situate students' gifts and taking into consideration ways the environment can develop enriched curricula to invest in students' academic talents.

Future Directions of Black Girl Educology and Talent Development

In *Punished for Dreaming, Love (2023)* passionately argues that the systematic targeting of Black children through pathologizing and punitive measures has resulted in the creation of carceral learning environments characterized by over-policing, school closures, and funding disparities. In response, school reform efforts have often adopted a white savior mentality, promoting egalitarian initiatives that inadvertently open the door to private interests infiltrating the educational system. These changes have had a disproportionate impact on children of color, particularly Black children, often labeling them as low-performing and contributing to their disproportionate rates of conviction and incarceration. Love (2023) meticulously highlights how school reforms such as No Child Left Behind and school choice, though purportedly aimed at aiding Black children, were deeply rooted in racism and white supremacy, ultimately perpetuating harm rather than progress. With a deep comprehension of the intricacies within the education system, we heed Love's call for concrete solutions to tackle systemic inequities. Recognizing the expertise she brings and the imperative of educational reform grounded in Black thriving, lived experiences, and community, we understand the vital role these elements play in fostering authentic change and promoting equity in education. Love's insights have served as a catalyst in shaping the future trajectory of our utilization of Black girl educology and talent development practices, guiding us towards transformative directions.

Through our ongoing inquiry, we have shed light on how these challenges are magnified within alternative learning environments, which often lack consistent accountability measures yet disproportionately enroll Black and Brown youth. Inspired by the potential for transformative change in disrupting conventional schooling practices, this endeavor sought to elevate lesser-explored realms in envisioning freedom, empowerment, and joy for Black youth. As we contemplate identity, belonging, and thriving for Black youth, it becomes imperative to extend our exploratory horizons beyond traditional educational settings. Opportunities for reform and visionary thinking should

permeate various educational landscapes, particularly in alternative schools equipped to offer tailored programming to meet the diverse learning needs of all students.

Our Black girl educology encourages us to critically examine the national dialogue surrounding the structural transformation of all educational settings, including often-overlooked alternative educational contexts that are deeply ingrained with anti-Blackness. Black girl educology also places emphasis on the actors of the environment, inviting us to explore nuanced possibilities for how these spaces create pedagogical pathways that promote holistic student development and support thriving, both within and beyond the realm of education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Taryrn T.C. Brown (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor in the Teachers, Schools, and Society program at the University of Florida. Dr. Brown's program of research has three major foci: the intersection of gender, race, and class in the lives of Black women and girls in and out of educational contexts; the amplification of Black women and girls' voices in prevention science; and the role parents, schools, and communities play in Black girls' socialization, literacies, and identity construction. With research at the nexus of Black girlhood Studies and Black feminist thought, her work leverages various theoretical foundations (e.g., Black feminist thought, ecological systems theory; and Black girl cartography) and critical qualitative methodologies (e.g. youth participatory action research; photovoice; and photo elicitation) through various university-community partnerships. As a scholar-practitioner, Dr. Brown is dedicated to advancing equity-centered pedagogies in teaching and learning, with a broad focus on educational equity. Currently, Dr. Brown's research critically examines issues of racial justice within P-12 learning environments, emphasizing a commitment to critical race praxis in collaboration with key stakeholders in education. Dr. Brown's teaching and writing center around themes of social identity and equity, particularly exploring racialized representations of gender and sex. Notably, she is the visionary founder of the Black Girlhood Collaborative, a collaborative space fostering research, teaching, and learning focused on the nuanced exploration of Black girlhood.

Dr. Brittany Anderson (she/her/hers) is an Assistant Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K12 Education. Dr. Anderson is a community-engaged scholar who facilitates university-school-community partnerships to illuminate and address the needs of students, teachers, and families in urban schools. In cooperation with the local Charlotte community and schools nationwide, Dr. Anderson is committed to co-developing pathways for historically marginalized students, specifically challenging the status quo of gifted identification norms and practices. A former elementary educator and first-generation graduate, Anderson utilizes innovative teaching practices, grounded in lived experiences and critical pedagogy, to facilitate active learning in K-12 and college classrooms and to challenge students to expand their worldviews. Dr. Anderson's research specifically centers the lived experiences of gifted Black girls and women, with an emphasis on their academic, social-emotional, and occupational needs. In 2022, Dr. Anderson received a \$1,062,034 CAREER grant from the National Science Foundation for her pioneering research on gifted Black girls with science, technology, engineering, and math talent in elementary schools across the country. She is recognized at the state and national levels and continues to be actively engaged in the professional learning of in-service teachers in urban schools in Charlotte and surrounding communities.

Kiarra Wigfall (she/her/hers) is a graduate student in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Urban Education program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and a Master of Arts in Teaching Secondary Education with a focus on social studies, both earned at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Possessing a Highly Qualified Educator license in the state of North Carolina for teaching 6th-9th and 9th-12th grade Social Studies, Kiarra's research interests revolve around Alternative Education programs and curriculum development. Her primary goal is to ensure that students facing behavioral challenges and mental health diagnoses receive equitable educational opportunities, fostering academic and

professional success. Kiarra's ongoing research projects delve into professional development, culturally responsive pedagogy, and best practices for managing behavioral challenges within the classroom.

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