"They Don't Want to See Us Succeed": How Micro-Interactions Produce Problematic Identities for Black Girls in US Public Secondary Schools

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Elvira Pettaway, my grandmother. I wish more than anything

that you were still here with us—things would be so different. I miss you more than you know. I

hope everything I have done, and will continue to do, makes you proud! I love you!

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ABSTRACT

Current discussions about inequity within US public schools are centered on a singular narrative of the Black male crisis. Though warranted, this focus on Black boys has inadvertently left Black girls, and their struggles, in the shadows. To date, a primary focus of scholarly inquiry has been on examining the identities these young women bring into schools with them, as shaped by familial and community forces, and how schools *react* and *respond* to them via their institutional practices and policies. What has remained under analyzed is how schools actively construct Black feminine identities and what these constructions mean for the young women's academic opportunities, present and future.

In light of this extant gap, drawing upon socio-cultural theory and Black feminist thought, my dissertation project provided a 1-year critical ethnographic investigation of an urban high school to examine: (a) how schools *actively* construct Black feminine identities through their policies, practices, and norms of interactions; (b) what these constructions mean for Black girls' academic opportunities and orientations toward school; and (c) how Black girls interpret and respond to school based constructions of their identities.

The analysis of teachers' discourse revealed that both Black girls' socio-emotional and academic identities were imagined to consist of pejorative traits. When characterizing Black girls' socio-emotional identities, teachers described the young women as emotionally volatile in their demeanors and interactions. Using bomb-related imagery, they suggested that Black girls unpredictably erupted into aggressive, abusive, and confrontational behavior. In addition, teachers characterized Black girls as rebellious and intentionally acting in ways that were

difficult, combative, and manipulative in order to undermine the existing power structure within the school. Much like the way their dispositions and inclinations in the social realm were imagined, teachers characterized Black girls' academic identities as rooted in an intersecting web of problematic dispositions. They suggested that Black girls lacked the necessary attitudes, behaviors, and demeanors that were foundational to academic success.

However, a closer look at the interactions between Black girls and their teachers revealed that the negative qualities that teachers imagined to be inherent traits of the young women, in fact, were *produced* during their micro-interactions. Said another way, the teachers' own dispositions and behaviors called forth the problematic manner in which Black girls sometimes enacted their identities. While the school officials imagined Black girls' identities in ways that were static and one-dimensional, my participant observation revealed that the young women's enactment of their identities was tied to the contexts they were in and the opportunities the varied contexts afforded them to bring forth productive selves. More specifically, when Black girls were in contexts that supported and affirmed their socio-emotional and academic identities they enacted them in productive and positive ways. When they were in contexts (i.e. their classrooms) where they felt attacked and unsupported, they enacted their identities in the ways the teachers described. The teachers, in solely constructing Black girls as problems were unable to identify their role in producing the problematic behavior. This led to unproductive relationships, inequitable discipline referrals, and systematic denial of access to academic resources. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that schools differentially shape the opportunities and educational outcomes of Black girls through the identities they construct for them and calls for teachers to reimagine their role as teaching professionals.

Chapter I

Introduction

I was 15 years old when I was told that I was not authentically Black. Before then, I had never questioned my membership in the larger African-American community. However, the second I entered a majority White magnet program housed within a predominantly Black high school, my racial identity suddenly came under fire. My membership in the community was questioned because other Black students saw my attendance in the program as a form of betrayal. While I found ways to relate to my White classmates, I soon realized that I was one of few Black students to do so. During lunch one day, I remember two Black students loudly referring to me as "off-brand" as they walked by with muffled laughter. As I pondered over this label, it could only mean that I was a knock-off African-American; I was not the real thing. Instantly, my association with non-Black students made me uncomfortable. I was embarrassed that I felt connected to these students, while only existed on the periphery of the African-American community.

My call for membership into the community was answered junior year when I was referred to as "loud" and "ghetto" by my teacher. She repeatedly told me that my behavior was not indicative of students in the magnet program, but of those in general education courses. Although I never thought of myself as loud or ghetto and knew that membership in these categories did not reflect positively on my academic identity, they initiated a change in my sense of Blackness. These categories gave me the confirmation that I was recognized as a Black

student; I was not a traitor and I was not "off brand". It was at that point that a part of me felt affirmed in the identity I brought to school. Ironically, I used the stereotypical traits that were meant to oppress any form of authentic identity, as the very means to create a sense of authenticity.

As an undergraduate student at UC Berkeley, questions about identity did not stop as my role switched from student to educator. While I tutored students at a local high school, I watched teachers categorize their Black students into identity boxes similar to my experience. This time however, I recognized how these categories were restrictive and limited students' agency. I watched Black girls struggle with their identities as they confronted images projected upon them that did not match the ones they possessed of themselves. I did not have words for what happened to me in high school, but at the end of my doctoral career, through the work of this dissertation, I am beginning to find them. In many ways, these experiences inspired the research interests that guide the work of the dissertation.

Rationale

Despite the longstanding reality that Black students, both male *and* female, experience constrained opportunities to learn (Carter & Welner, 2013) given their shared marginalized racial status, the popular and academic conversation has remained narrowly focused on exploring the experiences and academic outcomes of Black boys (Davis, 2003; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III, & Jennings, 2010; Milner, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Roderick, 2003; Thomas and Stevenson, 2009). For over two decades, scholars have perpetuated a narrative of crisis surrounding young Black men that details how schools continually fail to meet their academic and socio-emotional needs, adultify them beginning at a young age, and create a school-to-prison pipeline (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2009). While Black boys' low achievement and attainment outcomes warrant

attention, a focus on their experiences alone has led to a paucity of research that explores the experiences of Black girls within and across school settings. What accounts for the limited focus on the experiences and educational needs of Black girls and young women?

In a seminal piece exploring this very question, Chavous and Cogburn (2008) argue that often times, Black girls[1] are ignored within scholarly literature because their relatively higher achievement gets read an indication that they are more advantaged when compared to their Black male peers. These authors argue that while Black girls' achievement processes could be explored as exemplary of academic excellence given their resilience amidst adverse conditions, in a climate concerned with the Black male crisis, the processes are primarily discussed insofar as they illuminate the dire situation of boys. Chavous and Cogburn maintain that this has resulted in little systematic examination of "how race and gender may uniquely shape Black girls' academic socialization, experiences in the school context, and personal identities in ways that have implications for their subsequent academic motivation, development, and success" (Chavous & Cogburn, 2008, p. 27).

In another seminal piece, Frazier-Kouassi (2001) writes that the experiences of Black girls are often "overlooked, minimized and ignored" within research because scholars either focus on the plight of women in school and obfuscate the role of racial and ethnic distinctions, or focus on the "crisis" of the African American male student which minimizes the experiences of the African American female student (Frazier-Kouassi, 2001, p. 151). Similar to Chavous and Cogburn, she writes that Black girls' higher achievement relative to boys leads to a conclusion that they are "triumphant in educational achievement and attainment" rather than "a stimulating,

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[1] Throughout the dissertation I will use Black girls or young Black women interchangeably to refer to the Black female students who participated in the project. I use the word "girls" despite their burgeoning adolescence because this was how they referred to themselves. I also made this decision in order to acknowledge their status as youth, which is often denied them within scholarly literature that positions them as prematurely adult.

more comprehensive analysis regarding the impact the social variables of race and gender have on the educational experiences of African American students" (p. 155).

Recent evidence has emerged that calls for a need to complicate this narrative surrounding Black girls' academic achievement and socio-emotional wellbeing in US schools. On average, Black girls lag behind their White counterparts in achievement and attainment (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) and are less likely to be recommended for advanced placement or honors coursework (Evans-Winters, 2014; Campbell, 2012). They are overrepresented in discipline referrals, being six times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White female peers (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011; Morris & Perry, 2017; Wunn, 2016). Currently, an estimated 37% of young Black women do not attain high school diplomas, and less than one third enroll in institutions of higher education (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Jyoti, 2015). Looking beyond their school experiences reveals that their prospects once out of school equally lack promise. The Status of Black Women in the United States Report documented that Black women experience poverty at higher rates than Black men as well as women from all other racial ethnic groups[2]. They experience disproportionately high rates of heart disease, lung cancer, incidence of AIDS, and domestic partner violence. Alarmingly, Black women of all ages are twice as likely to be imprisoned than White women, which is unsurprising given the increasingly disproportionate rate of discipline they experiences within schools. Taken together, this evidence reveals that the existing narrative that Black girls and women are universally "triumphant" in achievement and attainment is nothing more than a dangerous myth that must be nuanced, and situated the needs to explore their experiences more deeply.

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[2] The one exclusion is Native American women.

Albeit limited, some scholars have focused on the unique school experiences of young Black women. Within this literature one of the primary foci of inquiry has been on how young Black women's femininity gets articulated within educational spaces and the implications for their school experiences and outcomes (Fordham, 1993; Gholson, 2016; Morris, 2005, 2007; Lei, 2003;Wun, 2016). Often, scholars focus primarily on the femininity that Black girls bring into schools with them as shaped by familial and community forces. While one area of this focus examines the ways that the young women strategically use their feminine identities to promote *high* academic outcomes (i.e. enact resilience), a second growing strand of scholarship focuses on the way that schools *react* and *respond* to the Black feminine identities that the young women exhibit. This subsection of literature suggests that school officials view Black feminine identities negatively and situate them as incompatible with school norms and academic success.

These areas of focus have led to two major gaps in the field. First, in focusing primarily on revealing the ways a Black feminine identity can support academic success, the literature has contributed to the myth that *all* young Black women are automatically academically resilient and immune to the deleterious effects of adverse circumstances present within their lives and schools. In its current state, the literature does not allow us to imagine that there are in fact members of the Black female student population who are not high achievers and who struggle to overcome the challenges they face in and out school. Though there is work on Black student underachievement in general, how underperformance and diminished academic success within schools gets uniquely situated for Black girls warrants study.

Second, the focus within the literature on how schools *react* and *respond* to the femininity that Black girls espouse, has led to the under study of how schools, through their policies, practices, and norms of interaction, frame and produce identities for young Black women. There

has been a lack of consideration of how, in fact, part of the response school officials have toward the students may have to do with the identities that the school, as an institution, has already created. Although there is longstanding evidence that all social institutions are positioned to promulgate pejorative images of Black woman, we have little knowledge about how schools in particular may be recreating these images or producing new ones all together.

Design of Study

Given these gaps, this dissertation was guided by the following questions:

(1) How do schools and school officials make sense of what it means to be a Black girl and enact this sense making through policies, practices, and norms of interaction?

(2) How do the young Black women negotiate between their individual and community constructions of Black womanhood and the school's construction of Black womanhood?

(3) What are the implications (of the above) for Black girls' educational orientations, experiences, and outcomes?

Said another way, I desired to learn about the identities that *schools,* as social institutions, created for Black girls. I wanted to substantively examine the way school officials engage in race and gender making around Black girls, and what the implications were for their schooling.

In order to examine these questions, I conducted a critical ethnography of one small high school, James High (JHS). The data collection and analysis was guided by a Black feminist consciousness in that I approached the research as being *for* the young Black women I interacted with, and not just *about* them. A Black feminist consciousness privileges an activist perspective as critical to the research in order to spur actual social change in the lives of the participants and any others who may be indirectly impacted. As such, I engaged in critical ethnographic methods in order to explicitly illuminate, and begin to address, the areas of unfairness and injustice within

the school experiences of young Black women. In doing this, I prioritized buildings relationships with the young women and privileged their voices and knowledge within my attempts to understand what was going on at JHS.

I spent one year getting to know the school culture and environment at JHS and developing rapport with the students and faculty. The study officially began at the start of my second year of engagement. Prior to my involvement with the school, I determined that I would engage as a participant observer. I ultimately visited the school four days a week, for 4-6 hours each visit. Throughout the study I became embedded in the school's Restorative Justice Center, (RC) where I worked with students one-on-one and in group settings to repair troubled relationships with teachers that had resulted from perceived classroom misbehavior. In this role, I mentored and interacted with over 50 young Black women and had interactions with the entire teaching and support staff of 20 adults. In addition to my work in the RC, I interviewed the teachers and staff members, attended staff meetings, and observed classes. I also observed the school's common areas during passing period and the cafeteria during the lunch hour. I documented these observations through field notes and analytical memos. Finally, at the teachers' and staff members' request, I also facilitated a young women's empowerment group for 8-15 Black girls, which was held twice a week for the majority of the school year. In total, I observed for more than 600 hours, interviewed 15 staff, documented 100 field notes, and collected a plethora of school artifacts.

Overview of the Dissertation

Overall, the findings from this study revealed that school officials' discourse, oral and written, constructed identities characterized by deficits that situated Black girls as incompetent, overwhelming negative in their orientations toward school and interactions with others, and

ultimately un-teachable. These characterizations allowed school officials to deflect professional responsibility for the young women's academic needs, and deny liability for the way their actions, intentional or not, negatively impacted the young women and called forth their problematic behaviors.

The dissertation is organized in the following manner. This introductory chapter has provided a brief overview of the rationale and design of the study. **Chapter 2** provides a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to Black feminine identities as they are enacted in school spaces. I first examine the theoretical literature to provide a common understanding about the historical development of Black feminine identities within the US context. I then examine how scholars in the field of education have made sense of this Black feminine identity empirically within studies on Black girls' school experiences. I close with a discussion on the gaps that the review of the literature revealed and the way that this dissertation attempts to intercede. **Chapter 3** provides a detailed discussion of the overall study design including theoretical foundations, data collection, analytic methods, and researcher positionality. **Chapter 4** provides an in depth description of the JHS and the Obie community context. Here, I examine four areas of struggle within JHS that were critical to the experiences of the Black girls. **Chapter 5** explores how teachers and school support staff (i.e. counselor, social worker, reading specialist, etc.) characterized Black girls' socio-emotional identities (i.e. their dispositions and demeanors), while **Chapter 6** explores how teachers and school support staff imagined the young women's academic identities. **Chapter 7** completes teacher and school support staff's imaginations of Black girls by examining how their use of the Restorative Justice Center (RC) constructed particular images of Black feminine identities and capacities. In this chapter, I also explore how, despite the school officials' misuse of the space, the RC (and *RISE* within it) was

able to function as a space of affirmation for young Black children that contrasted the way they experienced their classrooms. Using the narratives of three young women as exemplary cases, **Chapters 8-10** explore how the problematic behaviors displayed by Black girls within their micro-interactions were produced by the actions and orientations of the school officials themselves. Said another way, these chapters examine how the traits that the school officials characterized as inherent within Black girls, became called forth by the school officials themselves. **Chapter 11** discusses the significance of the production of negative Black feminine identities at JHS and concludes with a discussion of the implications for research and practice.

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation provides a timely exploration into the under analyzed experiences of Black girls within US public schools. It provides the field with empirical and analytical insight into the particular mechanisms embedded within the organization and culture of schools that determine how they structure academic opportunities for Black girls via the identities they construct. Ultimately, what is learned from this dissertation can help scholars understand the importance of situating the social and organizational context of schooling as agentic in producing the inequitable conditions that Black students in general, and Black girls more specifically, continue to encounter.

Before moving onto Chapter 2, I want to make it explicitly clear that by no means do I believe that the focus on Black boys and men is unwarranted or wrong. I believe work on the school experiences of these male students is immensely important and critical to creating the educational changes necessary for advancing the way we educate Black children and young adults. The point I want to make within this dissertation is that a focus *solely* on Black boys and men, to the exclusion of young Black women, is unjust. The Black community is not just boys

and men, and to proceed with scholarly inquiry as if that is the case is grossly negligent. There is a dire need for scholarship that has the same energy and fervor as what we see with Black boys and men, to be focused on Black girls and women. If there continue to be no systematic inquiries into what may constitute the crisis in education for Black girls, I fear there will be no explicit efforts focused on improving their educational conditions and life trajectories.

I close this chapter with an excerpt from a fieldnote. On this day in the field, I was seated around a big wooden table in the RC having an informal conversation with three young women, all in the 10th grade. As was common, the young women wanted me to provide a listening ear as they expressed some of their frustrations about their experiences at JHS. The conversation was documented as follows:

> *I was sitting in the RC with Candace, Jana, and Anastasia. They were sharing their feelings about their teachers. Candace chimed in and stated, "they don't care how you feeling...they don't want to see us succeed...If they cared about us they would not be sending us out of the class all of the time"...Anastasia nodded her head in agreement. She added, "they always want to make a big deal out of everything. When Marvin (a Black boy) do something it'll be like oh this and oh that, but when I do something, you got to call a whole meeting with my mom, teachers, everybody!" Candace quickly added, "And call in Jesus too!"—FN 33*

I share this conversation because it situates the question that this dissertation in many ways sought to address—in what ways were Black girls imagined in JHS if they were constantly excluded from class, and could only be redeemed by a meeting where every important stakeholder, including Jesus, was present?

Chapter II

Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Overview

In this chapter I will first synthesize the theoretical research base that explores the historical and contemporary definitions of Black feminine identities. I start here because to some extent, whether explicitly or implicitly, many scholars have drawn upon this theoretical orientation in their empirical investigations of the educational experiences of Black girls. Thus, it is essential to understand these definitions before proceeding with an inquiry into how schools interact with these identities. Following this discussion I will examine how Black feminine identities have been taken up in the empirical domain. I will focus on how scholars have positioned the role of families and communities, peers, and to a lesser extent schools, within the construction of the feminine identities. I close the discussion by identifying the gaps in the literature that this dissertation seeks to address.

Theorizing a Black feminine identity

Scholars have argued that Black women must develop identities in a racist and sexist American society in which both their racial and gender identities are devalued (DuBois, 1903; Sander & Bradley, 2005; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). They must navigate between meanings about Black womanhood that emerge from inside their personal and communal conceptions, as well as the meanings that are made of them by the dominant group in society. As

such, both internal *and* external forces have necessarily shaped the nature of the Black

femininity. Scholars argue that forces external to the African American community define Black

femininity through a process of "oppositional difference". Hill-Collins (2001) writes that within

this process, "White and Blacks, males and females...are not complementary counterparts—they

are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites" (p. 77). As

such, Black women are portrayed as not merely different from their White female counterparts,

but as inherently opposite to them in the spheres of beauty, motherhood, domestic partnership,

and sexuality. Whereas White women are imagined to be attractive, sexually pure, submissive,

and ideal mothers, Black women are thought to be unattractive, sexual deviants, aggressive, and

unable to properly care for their families.

Scholars argue that these external definitions of Black women are transmitted through the

creation of archetypes that aim to reify the oppositional characteristics such that they can come

to be viewed as inalienable truths. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will only highlight three

images that poignantly demonstrate the nature of the external renderings of Black womanhood.

One image, the *mammy*, depicts the Black woman as a religious, loyal, strong, asexual, motherly

slave devoted to the care of the slave owner's family (Mullings, 1997). Physically she is darker-

skinned and overweight, with a broad nose and kinky hair (West, 2008). While during slavery

the mammy was dedicated to her slave master's family—living only to serve the slave master,

mistress, and their children (Ladson-Billings, 2009)—in contemporary times she is expected to

be wholly dedicated to her job, most likely in the service sector, even though she works twice as

hard as her White counterparts for less pay. The second image, the *matriarch*, works in tandem

with the *mammy*. However nimble the *mammy* is at being a "good mother" to those outside of

her family, the *matriarchal* image suggests that Black women are "bad mothers" in their own

families because they are aggressive, angry, unfeminine women with bad attitudes that emasculate any and all male partners (Mullings, 1997, Collins 2001, Ladson-Billings, 2009). This image emerged during the 1960's "war on poverty" in which explanations were being sought to understand the persistent state of Black poverty. Because the *matriarch* works outside of the home, she is imagined to be unable to mother her own children, which ensures a large-scale failure of the Black community through the generational transfer of poverty. Finally, a third image, *jezebel,* is perpetuated around Black women's sexuality. Whereas the *mammy* is depicted as asexual and the *matriarch* is too aggressive to keep a male partner, the *jezebel* is a Black woman who is hypersexual, seductive, manipulative, and unable to control her sexual desires (Townsend, 2010). This image depicts Black women as "sexually aggressive [and] provocative, governed entirely by [their] libido" (Mullings, 1997, p. 111). This squarely places the *jezebel* outside the realm of normative femininity because "proper" (read: White) women are pure whereas the *jezebel* has an uncontrollable sexual desire that exceeds that of men.

These images of Black womanhood are not innocuous; they serve as the ideological justification for the continued marginalization and discrimination of Black women. By situating Black motherhood, Black domestic partnerships, and Black sexuality in these pejorative ways, Hill-Collins argues that White men and women have ignored the political and economic inequalities that Black women face. She argues that they use these narrative blame Black women for their own disadvantaged status, and that of the entire Black community given their perceived cultural and gender related deficiencies. In portraying Black women as mammies, Hill-Collins (2001) writes that Black women are expected to accept their marginalization, be accommodating and deferential to Whites, and to be forever loyal to the service of White folks (in spite of continued mistreatment) while simultaneously deeply resenting those Black women who are not.

West (2008) writes that these images reinforce the beliefs that Black women effortlessly meet their many obligations and have no desire to delegate responsibilities to others. Portraying Black women as jezebels and matriarchs perpetuates labels of un-femininity and relegates them to the margins of womanhood because their perceived excessive sexual appetites and controlling attitudes are deemed more masculine in nature and outside of the boundaries of appropriate female expression. This marginalization denies them the systematic protections that White women automatically receive, and allows those in power to feel justified in their mistreatment of Black women on the grounds that they are not "true" women at all (West, 2008).

These articulations of oppositional difference between Black and White women originated during slavery, but have continued to be a major part of national discourse because they are constantly retold in social institutions maintained by White Americans such as the media, public policies, government, and of particular interest to this study—schools (Collins, 2001; Gordon, 2008; West, 2008). Yet, we know very little about the process by which schools construct narratives about Black feminine identities, whether they align with the dominant narratives detailed above or if new narratives are constructed, and what that means for their experiences within schooling institutions. We do have, however, substantive evidence that schools *are* agentic in constructing other social identities.

Schools can be Agentic: The Example of How Schools "Class" and "Race" Students

There has been substantive insight into how schools "class" students. For example, in a seminal piece, Anyon (1982) shows us that schools construct classed identities for students by stratifying school knowledge through curriculum choices that resign working class students to view themselves as compliant passive receivers of knowledge, while simultaneously creating opportunities for students from affluent backgrounds to construct identities as creators of

knowledge. Other scholars have similarly suggested that schools construct and reify class identities and divisions via how they act upon social categories within schools in ways that only allow for middle class students to view themselves as agentic (Eckert, 1989) and in how they construct notions of failure that become confounded with working class identities (Fine, 1991).

The work of O'Connor et al., (2011) and Tyson et al. (2005) demonstrates how the organization of schools, through tracking systems that disproportionately funnel Black students into the lowest learning tracks, construct a relationship between Blackness and ability. Because Black students have no physical representations of themselves as high achievers, as would be achieved by their placement in higher tracks, these systems frame Black students as unilaterally underachieving and underperforming and their White peers as the opposite. In the case of Black males in particular, Ferguson (2001) and Lewis & Diamond (2015) demonstrate that schools through their disciplinary policies adultify them subsequently situating them as troublemakers such that Black male identities become synonymous with misbehavior.

Despite this rich tradition explicating how schools construct social identities, there has been little work on the construction of Black feminine identities in particular, and how these identities become instantiated through schools' practices and policies. Concomitantly, we have no empirical insight into the feminine archetypes that are created in schools, whether they mimic the dominant narratives articulated above, or if they are distinct.

Black Girls' Experiences in the Empirical Domain

Despite the dearth of literature regarding how schools construct Black feminine identities specifically, there is a small, but growing, body of literature that foreground the experiences of Black girls in school more generally. Given a gender gap in achievement and attainment outcomes within the Black student population, the majority of the work on Black girls' schooling

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experiences has been focused on exploring the means by which they outperform their male counterparts. This literature has sought to understand how it is that Black girls are able to withstand challenges within their school contexts in ways that Black boys are not. In trying to make sense of their relatively higher educational outcomes, scholars have focused on the culture of Black femininity a key area to explore. As such, scholars have limited their considerations to: (a) examining the feminine identities that Black girls *bring into schools* with them, as shaped by familial and community forces and (b) how schools, via their institutional agents, *react* and *respond* to this feminine identity. I will discuss each area in turn.

Family and Community Constructions of Black Feminine Identities

In trying to make sense of Black girls' school experiences, some scholars have focused on how the culture of the Black family contributes to constructions of femininity that support Black girls' achievement in school. This body of literature, the largest of the two areas I will discuss, suggests that Black families socialize their daughters to have a greater belief in the importance and benefits of education to their future success, which then positively influences how their engagement within their schools (Archer-Banks, et al, 2012; Fordham, 1999; Higgenbotham & Weber, 1992; Hill, 1997; Hubbard, 1999). This literature maintains that while there are likely aspects of socialization within Black families that are consistent regardless of gender, given the "history of oppressive forces impacting male marriage and parenting partners", Black parents may emphasize the importance of education as the means of mobility more strongly for their daughters than their sons (Chavous & Cogburn, 2008, p. 29). This literature maintains that Black families may place a greater emphasis on school achievement for their daughters because they see education, not marriage as in White families, as the means by which women can improve their status and ensure their independence (Hanson, 2000). This literature suggests that this is a very different socialization pattern than what we see within the culture of

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White femininity because White girls are raised to value a certain amount of dependency in their relationships with men (Orenstein, 1994).

Higginbotham & Weber (1992) report that in their study, which explored social mobility amongst Black and White women, Black women maintained that a critical factor in their school success was a motivation to succeed that was instilled from their families. These women reported that this motivation was a product of the messages they received about the importance of getting an education in order to secure gainful occupation. The authors report that 98 percent of all Black women in the study revealed that their parents stressed the importance of education, while 70 percent of the working class Black women, and 94 percent of the middle class Black women revealed that they were expected to attain a college degree. The authors also report that unlike the White women in the study, the Black women reported receiving strong messages from their families that marriage was only a secondary route, if any, to economic security, which meant that they needed to secure an occupation of their own rather than expect a man to take care of them. As a result of these messages, the women talked about navigating their schools in order to make sure they would have the educational success that would support future occupational and economic security. Thus, Higginbotham & Weber maintain that the messages the women received around the importance of education to their lives as Black women were highly influential in the way they approached their education and likely contributed to their success. The authors suggest that this socialization helped the women to develop positive orientations toward school and helped them to be highly motivated to succeed.

Hubbard (1999, 2005) also considered the influence of the Black family on the construction of femininity for Black girls as a factor in the high academic outcomes they attained relative to Black boys. In her (1999) study she explored Black students' perceptions their

families influence on their college aspirations as well as the navigational strategies they utilized to attain academic success. She suggested that while both Black boys and girls received encouragement to go to college from their families, for the boys in the study, it was only one of many endorsed routes; other acceptable choices included going to the military and playing professional sports. In many cases it was acceptable for boys to think of college primarily as a route to a developing athletic prowess and not as a way to gain critical cognitive skills that would ensure future employment and economic security. On the other hand, Hubbard reports that for the girls in the study, college attendance, graduation, and academic achievement were the primary goals; they were the "first, last, and always". She reported that girls' families encouraged them to view education as the sole way to ensure their economic prosperity. The girls reported, similar to those in Higginbotham & Weber, that their parents stressed the fact that as Black women they needed to reject the idea of marriage and dependence on a man as a means for economic security, and needed to be prepared to be the financial breadwinners for their families. Their parents pushed the idea that success in their education would ensure that they had a well paying career that would help them get out and stay out of their current impoverished conditions.

Consequently, Hubbard maintained that these familial views contributed to the girls possessing a more positive orientation toward school than the boys, which proved influential in their day-to-day decisions within the school. These decisions included actions about how to spend their time, who to surround themselves with, and whether a romantic relationships would be an unnecessary distraction that would hamper their ability to attain academic success. Hubbard argued that it was the particular perspectives on higher education within the families that were "constructed in response to implicit and explicit ideas about gender in relation to

financial responsibility, marriage, and opportunity" that contributed to the success the Black girls

achieved in their high school (p. 370). Thus for Hubbard, the aspirations the girls in the study

developed, and the subsequent achievement they attained, was intimately related to the messages

imparted by their families, about what it would mean to be a wife and mother in their future

families and communities.

The work by Cogburn, Chavous, and Griffin (2011) also examines how familial

socialization plays a role in the way Black girls experience their educational institutions. Their

study explores the discrimination experiences of Black students, both male and female, as it

relates to various academic and psychological outcomes. In their study, although there were no

differences in the reported frequencies of racial and gender discrimination amongst Black boys

and girls, there were significant differences in how the students coped with these experiences.

While both racial and gender discrimination could predict boys' psychological and academic

outcomes, neither perceptions of gender or racial discrimination predicted academic outcomes

for the girls, although they did impact the girls' psychological outcomes and their academic

attitudes (i.e. increased pessimism about the importance of schools for their futures). These

authors argue that the Black girls' socialization surrounding the importance of education as

particularly necessary for their success could account for why there was no relationship between

these experiences and academic outcomes. They maintain that Black girls may be more able to

deal with discriminatory experiences in ways that do not impact their achievement because they

perceive education as more integral to their future success and thus may be more equipped with

coping strategies.

Hanson & Palmer's (2000) study provides another example. In their study, the authors

maintained that the way Black women experienced science courses and their high achievement

outcomes, could be attributed to the way African American communities and families construct gender identities for their young women. These authors argue that historically, in the face of the inability of marriage to secure economic prosperity, African American families saw education as a vehicle of mobility that would keep their daughters out of domestic work (where sexual abuse and discrimination were day-to-day realities), and push them into well-paying occupations. Using a nationally representative dataset (NELS) that included a sample of 922 African American women, the authors report that, contrary to theories that suggest that Black women would not fare favorably to White women (due to race) or Black men (due to gender) in the science field, there were no significant differences in attitudes or achievement between the groups. In discussing these unprecedented outcomes, the authors suggested that the value systems present within their families, including parents' higher expectations for their girls, was a critical factor in their success. They maintained that these resources contributed to the girls' achievement because they helped them to have higher expectations for their own futures, higher self-concepts, and more of a sense of control—all of which were critical for success in science.

As Hanson & Palmer's (2000) work begins to illuminate through its findings related to self-concept and sense of control, scholars have suggested that beyond emphasizing the importance of education to their lives as Black women, Black families (mothers in particular), also socialize their daughters to embody particular dispositions that contribute to their in and out of school resiliency. This research argues that Black girls, by virtue of the intersectional nature of their identities as both raced and gendered beings, are uniquely indoctrinated into a sense of womanhood that encourages them to be agentic in their lives and possess a strong sense of self. Hill-Collins (2000) writes that given the oppressive conditions originating back in slavery that diminished marriage and parenting partners, Black women have always had to work outside the

home in order to provide for their families. In order to navigate a patriarchal and racist working world, she argues that they necessarily developed a sense of womanhood that included characteristics such as assertiveness, confidence, and pride in self-efficacy. Chavous & Cogburn (2008) argue that educational scholars have posited that mothers pass along these particular orientations to their daughters that instill a sense of "personal pride and confidence" that in turn allows Black girls "to be academically resilient in the face of barriers" (p. 30).

Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein's (2012) study explored this dynamic. The study focused on exploring the way that Black girls constructed their racial and gender identities in order to attain high academic achievement. All of the participants in their study were academically successful, even those who were not in the most advanced courses. The authors suggested that a tenacity to be successful and not let negative circumstances get in the way was critical in their success. The girls attributed this tenacity to their families, particularly their mothers. The authors report that all of the girls felt encouraged to have a strong sense of self that not only contributed to their hard work and commitment to being academically successful, but that allowed them to fight for support during incidents where they perceived themselves to be marginalized. Despite their awareness of their school's inequitable policies and practices, the girls chose to stay engaged in the educational process. In order to be academically successful, they exercised their agency by seeking out relationships with teachers and peers who were understanding of their cultural identities and supportive of them. Even in the face of racist messages from school officials pertaining to their future potential, the girls remained confident in their ability to succeed in school and beyond. Thus, the authors argue that the high achievement of the study participants was intimately related to the construction of Black femininity within their families that encouraged dispositions that supported the girls' academic pursuits.

O'Connor's (1997) study provides a final window into how scholars have implicated the culture of Black femininity as significant to Black girls' school achievement. In her study, O'Connor explored how Black students' sense of a collective race struggle facilitated rather, than inhibited, their hopefulness and achievement in school. The girls in the study recognized class, race, and gender related restraints on their mobility, yet still retained their optimism about the value of education and pursued high achievement in their schools. When discussing these orientations, O'Connor suggests that the significant others in the girls' lives taught them about the struggles they would face as Black women and emphasized their ability, and right, to resist. Both through overhearing conversations between women in their families about their own experiences in the workplace, and by watching these same women intervene to help them deal with a problem they were facing in their schools, the girls reported learning that the subordination of women should not be expected nor tolerated, and the importance of fighting against efforts to marginalize them. O'Connor maintains that these messages contributed to a sense of self efficacy within the girls that enabled them to recognize the challenges they faced within their schools, but not become consumed or overwhelmed to the point of defeat. It allowed them to approach the challenges with an attitude that they could, and would, overcome them through individual or collective action of the significant others around them.

How do Schools via Institutional Agents React and Respond?

Another large focus within scholarship on Black girls' school based experiences is on how schools respond to the identities the young women bring into schools with them as per familial and community influences. Some scholars have argued that girls, in general, are more likely than boys to have positive experiences in educational institutions because they adopts norms and expectations that privilege feminine dispositions. However, the bodies of literature I discuss next suggest that this is not necessarily the case for Black girls given the intersection of

their gender *and* race. These scholars argue that although schools may exemplify standards of femininity through their behavioral expectations and constructions of the "good student", these expectations represent a traditional White middle class notion of femininity that does not align with the womanhood that Black girls often possess. As such, Black girls are likely to find themselves in school contexts where their Black feminine identities are devalued, seen as outside of school norms, and rendered problematic (Fordham, 1993;Lei, 2003; Morris, 2005, 2007). Although this research does not explicitly link these particular school contexts to achievement, the work suggests that academic outcomes are likely be compromised when Black girls are in school contexts where their expressions of Black femininity are not valued.

Morris's (2005 & 2007) studies exploring how race and class shaped teachers' perceptions of Black girls' feminine performances in one urban Mid-western middle school, illustrate this point. Although the participants' achievement levels ranged a large portion of the young women were in advanced courses. While observing the young women, Morris noted that much of their academic success was related to the fact that they dominated classroom discussions, were active participants during lessons, and demonstrated a willingness to compete and stand up to others in, and out, of the classroom. While he viewed these orientations positively, teachers interpreted them negatively and situated the young women as "loud", "combative", "aggressive", "confrontational" and "controlling". For these teachers, these "unlady-like" behaviors were incompatible with the notion of a "good" student. In an effort to improve the girls' educational outcomes and life chances, the teachers focused their attention on ridding them of these perceived problematic behaviors. Despite these good intentions, Morris argues that by sanctioning them for their disruptions of the normative feminine ideal, the teachers were removing the very behaviors that facilitated the girls' academic success.

Lei's (2003) study similarly demonstrates how Black girls may be in schools spaces where their femininity is devalued and rendered problematic. Lei explored how gendered and racial identities were created by and for Black girls within one urban high school. In her study, while both the Black female participants and school officials described Black girls as being loud and assertive, the girls themselves were the only ones to interpret these characteristics as a positive strategy for navigating their school contexts. The school officials were threatened by the girls' loudness and assertiveness, and rendered their ways of interacting as inappropriate within a school context. In perceiving their femininity in this manner, the officials positioned Black girls as against the regulatory norms of the school. These perceptions opened the girls up to increased scrutiny of their behavior and disciplinary monitoring. Ultimately, Lei's work suggests that the girls who refused conform to the White normative standards of femininity were unlikely to attain high academic outcomes given frequent interactions with school discipline policies.

Blake et al.'s (2011) study also revealed the way schools negatively respond to the Black feminine identities that girls bring to school. Their study suggested that Black girls were not only disciplined at higher rates but were more likely to be disciplined for infractions that represented a break from the normative White femininity. For example while White and Hispanic girls were most likely to receive sanctions for being tardy, Black girls were more likely to be sanctioned for defiance, inappropriate dress, profane language to a student, and physical aggression. These authors suggest that because many of these sanctions were for subjective reasons, the teachers were likely punishing the young women because they did not meet the norms of being quiet and passive. Similarly, in Murphy et al.'s (2013) study, the girls who were frequently disciplined were the ones who engaged in behaviors commensurate with Black feminine culture—they spoke loudly and stood up for themselves in the midst of unfair treatment.

The Gap: An Incomplete Narrative of Black Girls' School Experiences

Overall, the research on the educational experiences of Black girls has been focused on, implicitly or explicitly, how the constructions of femininity, and Black femininity in particular, are implicated in their educational experiences and outcomes. Some scholars have posited that the socialization practices within Black families that emphasize the importance of education as particularly critical for Black women, enables Black girls to construct a femininity that can be utilized to create high aspirations and increased motivation to do well in school. Furthermore, this research suggests that as young Black women they are encouraged by their families to enact agency in their lives and adopt dispositions and ways of interacting that allow them to persist toward their goals in the midst of obstacles and challenges. Finally, a small body of scholarship argues that school norms value White middle feminine ways of interacting such that the way Black girls construct their femininity does not align with expectations, and is thus, situated as problematic within school spaces.

As is now evident, both the theoretical and empirical literature on Black girls and femininity discuss how internal forces play a role in shaping the nature of Black femininity. In addition, the empirical literature also speaks to how this Black femininity gets leveraged within the experiences of Black girls with the majority of attention paid to how it may produce *academic success.* In speaking about the first area, although we have a sense from both the theoretical and empirical literature of the way families contribute to the construction of Black femininity, what is less understood is the role of schools, via policies, practices, and institutional agents (i.e. teachers, principals, and school staff) in constructing meaning around Black femininity. There is literature that suggests that schools are making meaning of Black youth and producing particular identities around race, but we do not know how it is they participate in the

construction of Black femininity in particular. Much less is known about the ways schools may also be active in *shaping* and *producing* particular notions around Black womanhood, both through their policies and practices, and in the ways they respond to the varied expressions of femininity that Black girls espouse.

We know that there are dominant narratives about Black womanhood that position Black women in pejorative ways, but there have been few substantive inquiries into how, if at all, these narratives get recreated in schools—what are the micro-interactions and -discourses in school that are constructing Black girls? Are the larger discourses being re-constructed in schools and if they are mimicking these narratives what does it look like in school context? Are there different narratives being constructed? Have new tropes emerged in a post-Obama era? What are the implications? Hill-Collins (2001) issued a call to examine how schools, as social institutions, may be implicated in perpetuating these images and there is some indication that schools are doing this kind of work as evidenced through the afore reviewed scholarship (Blake et al., 2011; Lei, 2003; Morris 2005, 2007; Murphy, 2013). Part of the goal of this project will be to respond to Hill-Collin's call; I aim to gain a better understanding of how schools are making meaning of Black girls' identities and how the Black girls themselves navigate these articulations that are potentially distinct from their internal renderings.

In speaking to the second area, I argue that the focus within the literature on the use of Black femininity to leverage academic success has led to scholars overlooking, or ignoring, the fact that not all Black girls are experiencing high academic achievement. As the graduation and college attendance rates reveal, there are in fact many young Black women who may be struggling to attain academic success in their respective institutions. A cursory read of the literature would suggest that Black girls with diminished academic success are failing to do well,

in part, because of they do not construct and enact their femininities in ways that correspond to the norms and expectations of the school. The current literature cannot adequately account for the variation in outcomes within this student population, particularly those who experience diminished academic success. Thus, this project will in part examine the experiences of those Black girls who are academically less successful.

The primary goal of this study is to explore how schools are agents in constructing Black feminine identities. More specifically I aim to examine how schools and school officials construct and position the identities of Black girls in their school as evidenced through organization policies, practices and micro-interactions and discourses that constitute their culture. It is important to note that in order to understand how school construction of identities for young Black women operates, we must acknowledge that these students have an agency that will intersect with these constructions. That is, the girls will not necessarily submit to institutionalized efforts to define who they are and their capabilities (Collins, 2001). While the work of some scholars suggests that familial and communal socialization processes may facilitate Black girls' ability to resist institutionalized constructions (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996), the work of O'Connor (1997, 2011) and Carter (2006) demonstrates that whether and how students respond will vary. As such, there is reason to believe that Black girls will differ in their responses to these constructions as per their personal histories and backgrounds. Operating under this assumption, a sub focus within this study will be to investigate how Black girls differentially respond to and navigate these constructions. Ultimately, this dissertation is pursued under the assumption that schools are institutions that often reproduce social inequities, though not always, and thus should be positioned and studied

as critical actors in differentially shaping the school experiences and educational outcomes of

marginalized students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Chapter III

Research Designs and Methods

Theoretical Frameworks

In theorizing how schools construct Black feminine identities, this research project drew upon sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory suggests that identities are constructed via a relational process between individuals and the contexts they navigate. Reeves (2009) writes that "the relational nature of identity means that individuals are not the sole constructors of their identity, that identity is no longer viewed as an entirely internal process" (p. 34). Said another way, rather than positioning identities as static entities that inhere solely within the individual, sociocultural theory situates the cultural milieu of institutions—that is their practices, norms, biases, and relations of power— and interactions with institutional agents, as central factors to consider as identities develop within our social world (Norton, 2006; Wertsch, 1991). Given this theoretical orientation, I aimed to design a study that could examine how schools, as an institution, played a role in the way feminine identities were conceived of and enacted for Black girls. In addition, utilizing Vygotsky's notion that tools mediate thinking and learning, I paid particular attention to the way tools, including language, were utilized in these contexts to position Black girls in specific ways.

The study design and analysis was also guided by a Black feminist consciousness in that I approached the research as being *for* the young Black women with whom I interacted and not just *about* them. A Black feminist consciousness privileges an activist perspective as critical to

the research in order to spur actual social change in the lives of the participants and others who may be indirectly impacted by the research. Hill-Collins (2000) writes that research guided by Black feminist thought actively resists the system of oppression that relegates Black women to the margins of society. She suggests that scholars can engage in resistance by allowing the stories of racism told by Black women to serve as legitimate evidence that racism exists, and by using their stories to create counter narratives to the dominant ones that position them in disparaging and pejorative ways. In speaking about how to carry this resistance work in educational research specifically, Ladson-Billings (2009) write that scholarship "should both document the incidents of racism while simultaneously unearthing evidence to refute stereotypes… not to valorize or distort the evidence, but rather to help us move closer to the truth" (p. 97). In doing this, Few, Stevens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) write that the research should be, "practical, accessible, and empowering for the informant, the researcher, and the communities of which both are apart" (p. 206).

A Black feminist consciousness had several implications for the design of the study. First, it informed my decision to employ an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) and focus on the race *and* gender based constraints simultaneously in the young women's school experiences. Second, it informed my decision to engage in critical ethnographic methods (which will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming section) because they would allow me to situate the young women's narratives as authoritative and central within the examination of their experiences. Thirdly, it informed my decision to adopt a staff-like position within JHS, as the study progressed, because it was the best means of conducting the advocacy work that I desired to do. Although, I could not have anticipated this particular shift in my positionality as a researcher prior to starting the study, when I realized that it would serve as an opportunity to work in the

best interest of the young Black women in the school, I accepted the shift. Lastly, a Black feminist consciousness influenced the design of the study in that I actively strove to tell a story that would provide a counter-narrative to the dominant ones that position Black girls and women in negative ways. In line with Ladson-Billings' directives, I did not want to distort the truth but rather desired to focus on revealing the evidence that countered the deficit ideas and practices. Overall, as a Black mother and an educator of exceptional young Black women, I treated this work as much more than a requirement to complete a doctoral degree but as intimately tied to the preservation and persistence Black women.

Critical Ethnography

As briefly mentioned above, I utilized a critical ethnographic approach, also known as critical qualitative research, in conducting this study. Apple (1996) argues that because society is characterized by social antagonisms and inequalities, the socially committed researcher should strive to understand the way society is dominated from the perspective of those least dominant. While traditional ethnography focuses on examining the current state of what is, Madison (2005) articulates that critical ethnography goes "beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (p. 5). Georgiou and Carspecken (2002) argue that rather than simply "reconstruct cultures", critical qualitative methods seek to understand "the relationship of culture to social structures that largely escape the awareness of actors while influencing how they act" (p. 689). In other words, critical ethnography, as a method of discovery, explicitly utilizes tools of inquiry that unearth issues of power, injustice, and social reproduction within the lives of the marginalized and oppressed. As such, in designing this study I: (a) created opportunities for the Black girls speak on their experiences as individuals and

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members of marginalized social groups, (b) utilized participant observation as a means of explicitly engaging in the field in a manner that could reveal and simultaneously address injustice in the young women's lives, and (c) paid particularly close attention to how the routine actions within the school formed and reproduced systems of inequality for the young women based on their race and gender identities.

Researcher Positionality

In this project I desired to understand how JHS and the officials within, situated Black girls and their femininity—paying particular attention to the problematic ways in which they were imagined. However, at the same time, I was intervening as a solution to the problems that were presented through my leadership of key spaces in which the girls interacted. This meant that my interaction in the field and with the phenomena under study was more than minimal and that my positionality within this research warrants discussion. An important aspect of critical ethnography is an acknowledgment that who the researcher is matters to the work being done because objectivity within the context of ethnography does not exist and is counter productive (Madison, 2005). I acknowledge that who I am, was intimately tied to the shape the study took on and the data that was ultimately collected. As a researcher I acknowledge that I am not a blank slate—I bring a personal and professional history that undoubtedly played a role in my interactions in the field, the interpretations I made, and the story I have decided to tell about Black girls at JHS.

Speaking to my personal history, I am a Black woman and was in my mid-20s when I first began visiting JHS. I am originally from California and have what some students in the school described as a distinct "West Coast accent" (though it was never fully clear what exactly it was). I grew up the youngest of four children in a working class community with married parents who

had not attained post-secondary degrees, but had stable government jobs. Although the schools I attended were predominantly minority, for as long as I can remember, I was educated in majority White magnet programs. My membership within these programs afforded me with educational opportunities that undoubtedly influenced my ability to secure admission to a top institution, The University of California Berkeley, for my undergraduate career. There, I discovered a passion for education and the school experiences of youth and availed myself to opportunities to would allow me create an identity as both an educator and researcher. This ultimately led me to the doctoral program at the University of Michigan and the completed dissertation that you are reading. Without doubt, I know that my personal background and school experiences were present, within every interaction I had at JHS. While sometimes it was explicit—i.e. the principal's repeated advice to the young women that I was who they should strive to be because of my "triumph" over modest origins to a "one percenter"—other times it was not, as in the case of the teachers' hope in the ability of the Black girls to change given my presence as a relatively successful Black woman.

Moving to the professional side, I entered the field with a set of assumptions based on my studies of Black girls in US public schools. One of the most salient assumptions was a strong belief that Black girls, their families, and their culture, were not themselves *the problem* within their educational experiences. I fully believed that schools, through their policies and practices, continued to systematically fail them in ways that made it seem that they had done no wrong. Second, I brought an asset-based perspective to this research and assumed that Black communities were more than capable of providing their children with resources that would be beneficial for schooling purposes but that institutions needed to learn how to recognize them as such. Finally, I acknowledge that in this research I was explicitly setting out to tell a narrative

about Black girls that countered the existing dominant ones that perpetuate their marginality. I did not view this positionality as a weakness or limitation to my work. I believe that too many scholars start from a place of pathology when researching Black student experiences and outcomes, and I did not want to count myself as one of them. While I allowed my assumptions and biases to be challenged as appropriate, I actively resisted falling in step with scholars who tell stories that lacked the nuance necessary disrupt the status quo.

Given that this is a study exploring the construction of Black feminine identities I should note key aspects of my own feminine identity that resonated with the Black girls at JHS as significant. First, I have mid-breast length hair that I wore naturally in an assortment of styles ranging from a twisted textured Afro, to individual twists, and very occasionally, bone straight. The way I wore my hair was a deliberate choice. Given the ways that natural African American hair has been used to situate Black women as antithetical to what is considered beautiful and desirable in a women, (see: Byrd & Tharps, 2014, for a discussion of the history and politics of hair within the Black community), I wanted to embody what it looked like to embrace and care for natural Black hair. Second, I stand at modest 5'3" inches and am of average build. Given some of the body image standards in the African American community I would be considered on the smaller side but adequately curvy. Given that adolescence is a period of heightened physical changes for young women, my figure, and how I more or less "achieved" it, was of interest to the young women. Thirdly, I have a caramel-like skin tone. As with hair, African Americans have experienced discrimination in different ways based the intersection of their racial designation and skin tone. Although in my personal communications with others I designate myself as brown-skinned as a means to get away from the negative connotations that come with labeling Black people as light or dark, I acknowledge that most African American people, and the young

women in the study, considered me light-skinned. Lastly, during the second year of my involvement with JHS, I became engaged and pregnant. While some of the students knew me before these major life changes, many of them only knew me as pregnant and engaged. These various factors contributed to a particular perception about who I was as a woman and role model that was ever present within the relationships I developed with school officials and students.

Site Entry and Early Engagement

This study was conducted in James High School (JHS), a small, predominantly Black, urban high school. I became acquainted with JHS through Mr. Ferguson, a member of a church I was attending at the time. He was a retiree in his early 60's, and ran the Restorative Justice Center (RC) at the school. He came to run the center because of his deep community connections and experience working with youth in the juvenile justice system. During a conversation after service one Sunday, I expressed to him that I was looking to get involved in the community. He suggested that I come see if there was work in his center that I would be interested in. As the conversation continued that day and I shared my desire to better understand the experiences of young Black women, he immediately said that there were definite mentoring needs amongst the Black girls in his school. We set up a time for me to visit JHS to decide if volunteering there would be a good match. During the visit, I determined that JHS was an ideal site for the study because it had a large population of African American female students who were struggling both academically and in their relationships with adult members of the school community. The school officials at all levels were seeking to understand why this was the case and welcomed research that would help them identify the problem and learn how to better meet their needs.

Restorative Justice: The Theory

Within the study, the Restorative Justice Center (RC) became a key context in which I interacted with and learned about Black girls' lives and experiences in JHS. Before moving into a discussion about what my involvement in the space looked like, it is critical that I detail the theoretical foundations of the restorative practices that influenced the structure of the center. Restorative practices are becoming increasingly popular within schools given the high rates of disproportionality in the disciplinary sanctions that students of color receive under zero tolerance policies, when compared to their White peers. Restorative Justice relies on methods used in the criminal justice system repair the harm caused by an act of crime to the offenders, victims, and community through conferences rather than punitive punishment (Payne & Welch, 2013). A restorative justice model pushes educators to completely reframe how they view school discipline. Rather than view it as a reaction to students' inability to follow the rules, restorative justice asks educators to view disciplinary interactions as a chance to build students' capacity in a way that privileges the well-being of the entire learning community (Morrison & Vaandering, 2014). Instead of pushing students out of school by suspending and expelling them, which does little in the way of understanding the students' motivations for the misbehaviors or the negative impact it had on their teachers and peers, restorative practices ask that school officials work to pull students in by positioning them as part of a community that only properly functions when there is mutual respect amongst its members. Essentially, restorative justice seeks to create discipline practices that focus on student growth and the *impact* of misbehavior and not on the specifics of the misbehavior itself (Payne & Welch, 2013). According to Pavelka (2013), there are three core values that drive how restorative justice should be enacted within schools. They are:

1. **Repair harm**. Restorative justice requires that victims and communities be healed of the harm that resulted from the wrongful occurrence. Wrongdoers are held accountable for their actions and encouraged to make positive changes in their behavior.

2. **Reduce risk**. Community safety requires practices that reduce risk and promote the community's capacity to manage behavior. Citizens feel safe and are able to live in peace when wrongful behavior is prevented and controlled.

3. **Empower community**. Schools, along with the external community, must take an active role in and responsibility for the restorative response by collectively addressing the impact of the wrongdoing and the reparation. Students are empowered as active participants in the resolution process (Pavelka, 2013, p. 15).

These core values are most visible in the way behavioral misconduct is dealt with. The work of repairing relationships ideally occurs through conferences and circles with the student(s) and the individual(s) harmed by the behavior. Within these meetings, which can vary in size from 2-10+ people, there are guided discussions about what occurred from all perspectives as a means of reaching a resolution that can address everyone's feelings. During these meetings the wrongful act(s) are discussed from all perspectives, feelings on the impact of the actions are discussed, and a plan is created that will prevent the same action from happening again. The entire restoration process, and particularly the conferences and circles, are not be viewed or treated like discipline in and of themselves. They are to be positioned as opportunities to build and maintain relationships within the school community. As a tool within school's disciplinary procedures, the hope is that assisting the student to reflect on their behavior and the damage it caused will reduce the prospect of recidivism.

Restorative Justice: My Early Engagement

Beginning in October 2014, I began visiting JHS two to three times a weeks for a couple of hours each visit. From the moment I stepped into the school, Mr. Ferguson put me to work. There was little transition into the role of "restorative liaison" that I would eventually become over the next year and a half. On the very first day I was there, after a brief tour of the school and quick introductions to select members of the staff, Mr. Ferguson began to integrate me into the work of the RC. When Black girls arrived, he directed them to come talk to me. During the first few restorative meetings that I held, I was at a loss for what to do. I was unfamiliar with the official restorative approaches on top of not being sure what to say to the young women who were strangers. Another added layer was that I felt under immense pressure to be helpful during these meetings because Mr. Ferguson seemed to have placed so much hope in my ability to connect with and mentor these young women. In these early meetings with the young women, after I briefly introduced myself as a PhD student from a nearby university who had come to "help out" Black girls at the school, I focused on actively listening to whatever it was the young women wanted to share. Because I did not know the teachers or classrooms of which the students' spoke, I focused on being empathetic to their situations and reinforcing their right to feel angry, frustrated, or irritated. When it seemed appropriate I gave the young women advice based on what my personal experiences had taught me and encouraged them that if they remained engaged in school despite the challenges, it would pay off in the end. Early on, I left many meetings feeling unsure as to if I was engaging in restorative practices in the "right" way and if the young women felt as if they had been helped at all. I struggled with striking a balance between listening and empathizing with their frustration and helping them to critically view their interactions and relationships with teachers. I also struggled with wanting to be seen as an ally and not another adult in their life was not genuinely interested in their well-being.

After a couple of weeks into my time at JHS I made a conscious effort to observe Mr.

Ferguson conduct his restorative meetings so that I could be more knowledgeable and confident

as a restorative liaison. After Mr. Ferguson conducted his sessions with both students and

teachers, we talked about what intentional moves he made and why he approached the situations

in the manner that he did. We had similar conversations after meetings that I conducted. These

conversations about working with the students and utilizing appropriate strategies continued

throughout the duration of the project. Through this on-site training, I became immersed in

restorative justice practices and more confident in my role as a restorative liaison in the center. I

began to develop a regular caseload in the sense that I saw a subset of Black girls (and some

Black male students) regularly—some because they were consistently referred to the RC for

behavioral mediation, and others who simply wanted to stop by and talk through the frustrating

parts of their days and get a empathetic, positive, and encouraging word. As my "caseload"

grew, I increased the frequency and duration of my visits to JHS to 4 days a week, for 5-6 hours

per visit, to strengthen the relationships I was building and create more constant support for the

young people I was assisting.

The Request to Expand my Reach: The Development of *RISE*

About one month into my first year of involvement with JHS, the principal (at the time)

and Mr. Ferguson expressed that since my arrival, there had been some "positive changes in

behavior" amongst the Black girls. They inquired if I was willing to create a group space where I

could expand my reach and mentor more young women. The principal was interested in a group

that would teach the young women how to engage more productively in the school by

transforming their negative behaviors into positive. As I pondered on what kind of group I would

create, I casually mentioned the idea to some of the staff members within our informal

conversations. They also seemed to agree that my working more intimately with Black girls would be beneficial. For example, when I introduced the idea to the school social worker, Mrs. Henry, she stated that she was "thrilled" about the idea and expressed that she could "already think of some students who could use a group" like what I was putting together. Her response was interesting because at that point she was confident about the utility of a group that had no definition other than its goal being to support Black girls. What about the young women's experiences would be supported, and how, was undetermined.

On another day, I wound up having a conversation with the school secretary, Mrs. Collins. At this point, we were not very familiar with one another. When I stated that I was working with the restorative center and was possibly going to lead a women only group, she responded, "good" because someone needed to "work with the girls and teach them how to be ladies because they surely [did not] know how." Although in many ways, the desires of the staff seemed to be that I would create a group space to address a set of deficiencies within the young women, I knew from the start that I had different goals in mind, which I will elaborate on in the next chapter. Ultimately however, I did fulfill the request from the principal and Mr. Ferguson and developed *RISE* as a group space for the Black girls. *RISE* became a second critical context in which I interacted with and learned from the young women.

I facilitated *RISE* both in the year I was establishing rapport and in the official year of the study. In order to gain participants for the group, I initially requested nominations from teachers. I attempted to collect these nominations online and via a physical handout that could be returned to the RC at any time (see Appendix A). Both forms asked teachers to nominate students they felt would benefit from being a part of *RISE* and to provide the reasoning behind their nominations. Despite the support for me to create a group for young Black women, across both

years I received a total of three nominations from school officials. When I would casually see teachers or support staff in the hallways or after staff meetings, they would make mention of the fact that they still planned to submit names, but they never actually did. I had imagined that the nomination process would reveal, in part, the way that school officials were imagining Black girls within the school. In the end the near total lack of response suggested that they really were not thinking about them much at all unless my physical presence reminded them.

When the nomination process did not work out, I decided to open the group up to any student who was interested. I posted a sign in the hallway outside of the RC that included flyers announcing the first session of the year. I also asked students who I knew well, and who themselves wanted to be in the group, to invite their friends and spread the word. Finally, I mentioned the group to any student who I interacted with in the RC in the week leading up to the first meeting.

During the official year of the study, *RISE* was held twice a week in the RC for 45 minutes during lunch from October thru late May, excluding holidays, school-wide breaks, and days when the school day was shortened and there was no lunch break. Although I had only intended for the group to meet once a week, the participants campaigned for me to add a day by coming up with several reasons as to why it would be mutually advantageous for their well-being and my research. Because of their efforts to convince me and their genuine desire to have more opportunities to be in a space like what *RISE* presented, I obliged.

The typical *RISE* meeting included a check in question, group discussion, and activity. The curriculum for the discussion portion was co-constructed with input from the student participants. While I initiated ⅓ of the discussion topics and activities to address my research concerns—i.e. perceptions of Black female within JHS—the rest were topics chosen by the

students themselves. I sought parent permission for the young women to participate in the group, as well as IRB and participant assent to video record these sessions and retain copies of documents related to the work completed during meeting time.

Creating and Sustaining Relationships

The RC and *RISE* were able to function as critical contexts to gather data about the Black girls' experiences in JHS. This was because I utilized the spaces to create deep relationships with the students. Though the teaching staff assumed that I was an automatic insider to the community because the young women and I shared the same race and gender, my relationships with them were by no means automatic. Even though I was Black and a woman like them, I had very different life experiences before becoming involved at the school. The young women picked up on these. These differences related to my speech, dress, educational background, hair preferences, romantic life, diet, and more. What this meant was that contrary to teachers' beliefs, there were no automatic relationships with the young women with whom I worked. In order to establish the meaningful relationships that I did, I had to do the work of traversing the differences between us and establishing shared connections in order to facilitate the development of bonds.

One way that I created a pathway for working through our differences was being very open to engaging in conversation and answering questions from the young women about my personal background. The questions they asked ranged from where I grew up, to why the texture of my hair was the way that it was. The students often questioned me about my experiences in school at their age, what it meant to get a college degree, and seemed curious about what kind of person "liked school" as much as I did to stay in it for over 20 years. They were particularly interested in my personal life outside of school in terms of my romantic relationship with my

husband and my new identity as a mother, particularly as my pregnancy progressed. In answering these questions about my life, I showed them I wanted to be in a reciprocal relationship where I did not just learn about them and their experiences, but was willing to be open and vulnerable with them as well. I opened myself up in this manner to build trust with the young women, which helped to create the foundation for a strong relationship.

In addition to engaging them around the areas of difference that they observed in my personal life, I gained the relationships that I did by actively seeking out ways to talk and connect with them about *their lives*, in and out of school. Sometimes I sought them out before or after school, and other times I caught up with them in the RC before dealing with the incident they may have been involved in. During these interactions, I focused on actively listening to them and allowing them to guide the conversation. When they shared their stories I acknowledged our differences in age, upbringing, personality, and educational experiences by asking questions about topics I was not sure about and never assumed that I knew anything. I allowed them to be the experts of their lives. In these conversations, I learned a range of things from their familial background, to what kind of music was popular amongst community members, to the kinds of stereotypes that existed around Black girls and women in the community. I was able to reference the information I learned within these informal conversations throughout the year as a means of personalizing my interactions with each of the students.

Within these conversations, I made an effort to emotionally connect with them when the opportunity presented itself. There were many times that students shared stories with me about difficult situations at home, challenging romantic relationships, and problems amongst their peers. In these situations, I focused less on research and more on providing empathy. On many occasions the young women shed tears and I allowed them to cry with me for however long they

needed to. During times when tears flowed, sometimes I held the young women in my arms, close to my chest, and rocked with them. When I could, I opened myself up to them and shared stories from my own life that dealt with loss and difficult times. I tried to encourage them by sharing that the hopes and dreams I had for my unborn daughter were the same hopes and dreams I had for them.

Also critical to my development of strong relationships with the young women in the study was that I did not judge them. Within our conversations, I allowed them to discuss their school experiences in an unfiltered, brutally honest manner. I allowed them to vent about their frustrations, celebrate their triumphs, and process the daily experience of being a student at JHS in whatever manner they wanted. Though I pushed them to be critical thinkers, I never forced them to change their opinion about a situation to fit what I thought was best and I placed no value on how they shared their feelings with me over what it was they shared. I never told them they were overreacting or questioned why it was they felt the way they did, but tried to be affirming at all times. I discuss these types of interactions in more detail in Chapter 7.

Most importantly, I created relationships with the young women by celebrating who they were. Though I will provide more detail in Chapter 7 about how the RC and *RISE* provided critical contexts for facilitated this, for now it is sufficient to state that I recognized them as adolescent Black youth in ways that they were not recognized in other spaces in the school. Thus, in all of these ways—opening myself up to students, seeking to learn from them about their lives, emotionally connecting with them, and refraining from judgment about their methods of expression, I built relationships with the young women that allowed me access to their experiences and perspectives.

Research Design

Participants

        The focal participants in this study were Black girls who attended JHS. All participants were in grades 9-12. Please see Table 1 for a specific breakdown. Of the 50+ young women that I interacted with within the RC and *RISE*, the majority were in grades 9-11.

Table 1: Grade Level of Participants

Grade Level	Number of Students
9	10
10	25
11	10
12	8
Grand Total	53

        With the exception of ~10 participants, all of the young women had been in JHS for their entire high school career. The majority of the participants resided in the Obie community. Less than 20% of the participants would be considered high achievers by traditional standards (i.e. GPA); the majority of participants were struggling academically in 2 or more of their classes. About 1/3 of the participants were missing credits based on their failure to pass courses in the previous one or two years and were technically considered a grade behind.

        Secondary participants included 18 teachers and 11 staff who interacted regularly with Black girls at JHS across the two years of my involvement. Please reference Table 2 for a list of these individuals[3]. During the official year of study, 17 of the 18 teachers were White—the one Black teacher was a long-term substitute who filled in for several months while the resident teacher was treated for an illness. All of the teachers had been teaching for at least three years at the time of the study, with the vast majority of them having taught for over seven years. The staff at JHS was a bit more diverse, with six Black members and five White. During the first year of

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

my engagement in the school JHS was led by a White female principal, but during the official

year of study the school was headed by two Black male principals.

Table 2: Demographics of Teachers and Staff at JHS

Name	Subject/Role	Race
Mr. Bryant	History	White
Mr. Ferguson	RC Director	Black
Mr. Chase	History	White
Mr. Clark	Math	White
Mr. Corning	Culinary Arts	White
Mrs. Collins	Secretary	Black
Ms. Conrad	Former Counselor	Black
Dr. Campbell	Interim Principal	Black
Ms. Dennis	Math	White
Mr. Eagen	Community Liaison	Black
Ms. Eckle	Math	White
Mrs. Fitzgerald	Art	White
Ms. Fran	Special Education	White
Ms. Grant	English (long term substitute)	Black
Mrs. Henry	Social Worker	White
Mrs. Jones	Counselor	White
Ms. Kemp	Math	White
Mr. Longhurst	Composition	White
Mrs. Leslie	Afterschool coordinator	White
Mrs. Macer	Special Education	White
Mrs. Mann	Foreign Language	Spanish
Mrs. Mahoney	Reading Specialist	White
Mr. Pickett	Physics	White
Ms. Rose	English	White
Mr. Richards	Math Specialist	White
Mrs. Robinson	Para Professional	Black
Mrs. Simpson	Science	White
Mrs. Shaw	Psychology/Credit Recovery	White
Mr. Styles	Principal	Black
Ms. Smith	English	White
Mrs. Taylor	Business Elective	White

Data Collection

The study included 1 year of rapport building and preliminary data collection, and 1 year of formal data collection, both ethnographic in nature. Formal data collection began at the start of the 2015-2016 school year when I attended the new student orientation and culminated two weeks prior to the end of school year. I visited JHS a minimum 4 days a week (many weeks it was every day) from 9am to the completion of the school day at 2:40pm.

I drew upon the following methods of data collection: (a) participant and non-participant observation, (b) formal semi-structured individual interviews with Black girls and adult school personnel, and (c) informal conversations with primary and secondary affiliated participants, and members of the student body. Each will be discussed in turn.

Participant and non-participant observation

I engaged in participant and non-participant observation of the Black girls at JHS (Maxwell, 2005). Loosely defined, participation observation is a methodological technique whereby the researcher gains knowledge of a group or culture by taking part in its activities. While a non-participant observer watches the subjects under study without taking part in the activities being studied, a participant observer, gains their knowledge from not only observing the activities as they naturally happen, but also from an insider perspective gained from participating in them (Kusenbach, 2003). The participant observation occurred through my leadership of *RISE* and role as RC liaison. The *RISE* meetings provided me with data on the young women's personal background—i.e. family structure, community of residence, schools attended, etc.—as well as their personal history within schools thus far—i.e. the idiosyncratic nature of the participant's interaction within the school context determined by their personal background. I learned about the participants' aspirations for their future and the ways in which

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they women felt they were supported or hindered in actualizing these goals within JHS. Given

the group dynamic these meetings also provided insight into the collective educational

experiences amongst Black girls within JHS. Most importantly as will be discussed in the next

chapter, *RISE* allowed the young women to show, and me to get to know, a more authentic

presentation of self that they rarely felt able to display elsewhere in the school. All observations

were documented in fieldnotes shortly after they occurred or within four to five hours (Emerson,

Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). For a list of *RISE* members, see Table 3.

Table 3: *RISE* Participants

Name	Grade
Alaya	10
Anastasia	10
Arlene	11
Aundra	10
Bebe	9
Candace	10
Demetria	10
Egypt	10
Jana	10
Latrice	10
Melody	10
Nadine	10
Paulina	10
Rayna	10
Shanice	9
Shannon	9
Tiana	10
Trina	10

In addition to my leadership of *RISE,* I also engaged in participant observation through

my role as a RC liaison where I ultimately became the resident "expert" on all things related to

the success and well being of Black girls. I conducted anywhere from 3-6 restorative meetings

per day. These sessions could last anywhere from 5 to 30+ minutes depending on the situation and the students' openness to talk and the teachers' availability to meet. Very soon into data collection, I realized that I could not fully do the work required of conducting restorative meetings and take notes at the same time. Because I was committed first to the well being of the young women and wanted to provide them with the best support that I could, I opted to be fully present during the meetings and take notes immediately following. Sometimes I was allowed to audio record meetings so that I could return to them at a later time and better recall what had occurred. It is important to note that although assisting the Black girls was a priority, I assisted any student who was sent to the RC when I was available, which included Black male students and very rarely, White students. In my observations as an RC liaison, I aimed to understand what the official and unofficial school policies and practices were as well as how school officials interacted with and around Black girls. For the list of Black girls with were sent and/or visited the RC, please see Table 4.

Table 4: RC Interactions

Name	Grade
Abrelle	12
Alisha	11
Amber	12
Brandy	10
Chloe	10
Christy	9
Dior	9
Dominique	11
Fatima	11
Jackie	12
Jacklyn	11
Jo	12
Jonisha	10
Kiki	9
Mary	12
Megan	10
O'Mara	11
Sabrina	10
Sage	11
Shanell	12
Sharonda	11
Shawna	11
Simone	11
Tam	10
Tanya	10
Trini	12

In addition to my participant observation, I also engaged in non-participant observations (see: Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015) of Black girls and their interactions with others in school spaces including, but not limited to: classrooms, hallways, lunchroom, extra-curricular activities, and school programs/events. In these instances I did not involve myself in their activities but simply observed for the ways that the young Black women acted and interacted within their school context. I paid particularly close attention to the school officials' interaction with and discourse surrounding them. These observations allowed me to

better understand how the young women articulated their identities, and the variation in these articulations, as well as the way school officials were responding and framing these articulations. Additionally, these observations were used to substantiate the participants' renderings of their experiences (both student and adult participants) and to occasionally guide the activities of *RISE* meetings. Below, Table 5 displays the method of observation cross listed with the number of students, Table 6 displays the level of interaction (i.e. high-near daily; medium- 2-3 times weekly; low-sporadically) cross listed with the number of students, and Table 7 displays the level of interaction cross listed with the number of students.

Table 5: Forms of Data Collection by Number

Interaction Location	Number of Students
Observation	9
RC	26
RISE	18
Grand Total	53

Table 6: Frequency of Interaction by Level

Level of Interaction	Number of Students
High	27
Medium	12
Low	14
Grand Total	53

Table 7: Level of Interaction by Grade

High	
9	5
10	15
11	7
Medium	
9	1
10	3
11	3
12	5
Low	
9	4
10	7
12	3

Formal interviews

As mentioned previously, in addition to the participant and non-participant observations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with student participants (Maxwell, 2012). The interview protocols are located in Appendix C. The first interview was designed to capture a narrative of the participants' personal and familial backgrounds, their general orientations toward education and the future, perceptions of opportunities, and current school experiences. In addition to general demographic information (grade, age, length of attendance at the school, etc.), the interview was designed to capture the following in relation to the participant's personal and familial background: (a) the origin, composition, and educational background of the participant's family, (b) the relationship(s) the participant has with members of her family with an eye toward how they view education and the kind of support they provide support (or not) for education. In relation to the participant's general orientations toward education and the future, perceptions of opportunities, and current school experiences, the interview captured the following information: (a) how the participant defined "making it" (i.e. success) in America, (b) the personal and career

aspirations of the participant and the role the participant saw education playing in attaining those aspirations, and (c) how the participant makes sense of school and her experience in the school thus far.

The second interview was designed to ascertain the meaning and salience of race and gender in their lives, in and out of school. I hoped to understand how the participants personally made sense of their racial and gender identities, and their discourse around enacting these constructions in and out of school. The interview captured the following: (a) how the participant described herself and the meanings she ascribed to her various social identities, (b) how the participant believed various contexts (media, friends, family, & school) influence the way she made meaning of being Black and a Black woman in particular, (c) what the participant saw as being unique to the experiences of Black women, and (d) how the participant believed race and gender to operate in society to impact educational achievement and her social mobility.

Finally, the third interview was designed to capture participants' perceptions of their school related experiences. The interview captured the following: (a) how the participant evaluated her current performance and level of engagement in school (time/effort spent on school work, participation in extra-curricular activities, classroom behavior, etc.), (b) the participant's relationships with school administration, faculty, and staff, (c) how the participant perceived her social identities to impact her experiences in the school, and (d) what efforts she identified that school could take to enhance her experience.

As I entered the field and attempted to conduct these interviews with student participants, I quickly learned that the students did not desire to participate in individual interviews. Given the heavy reliance students had on the bus system, before and after school interviews would have been hard for students to accommodate so lunch was the best option. This created a bit of

resistance from students because they did not want to give up their only free time to talk with me. But more than that, the students valued the group time we had during the lunch period and expressed that they would rather I lead a group meeting than check in with them individually. During the first round of interviews the young women brought their friends. Even with an explanation to all in the room that it was an individual interview, all of the young women would chime in when I asked a question. In these instances (and in *RISE*) it seemed as though they really drew upon their peer's experiences in characterizing their own. Because they were not often allowed to speak freely on what was happening in the school, they developed more confidence in speaking up when they were in a group setting where other people were naming things that they too had felt and experienced. As such, after the relative failure to gain traction with the individual interviews, I decided to stop conducting them and instead find other ways to gather the information that the interviews were designed to capture. While most of the information was gathered in *RISE* meetings, which allowed for focus group-type conversation (see: Marshall & Rossman, 2014) I also found ways to get the information during informal conversations.

I also solicited interviews with teachers and school support staff to get their perspective on the experiences of Black girls with whom they regularly interacted. These interviews, which ranged from 30-60 minutes, were aimed at understanding the nature of their interactions with and perceptions of the Black girls in their school. The interviews captured the school officials': (a) professional background including the motivations driving their choice of career, (b) perceptions of Black girls' academic and socio-emotional identities, (c) characterizations of the challenges that Black girls faced in JHS and the ability of the school to meet said challenges, and (d) challenges faced when working with Black girls. I used these interviews as a means of assessing

the school officials' formal speech about their Black girls so that I could draw comparisons with what I observed through interactions and document analysis.

Informal conversations

As with any ethnographic project, I engaged in informal conversations with primary and secondary participants, as well as general members of the school community, as opportunities arose (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). By just being in the space I interacted with students and adults who were not officially enrolled in the study, but who engaged in conversations with me that enabled me to better understand the school context and provide insight into how young Black women were imagined in the space. Many of these conversations were spontaneously initiated. These conversations were aimed at clarifying information I had gathered during a *RISE* meeting (i.e. member-checking, see: Morse, 2015) or formal interview or served the purpose of checking in on participant based on prior knowledge I had of what was going in their lives. Other times, these conversations occurred when a participant approached me and stated they wanted to discuss something. These conversations occurred before or after school, in the lunchroom, in the hallways between classes, or when a participant was sent to the RC and I handled their case. Whenever possible, I used informal conversations to gather more information about how various entities contributed to a construction of a Black feminine identity within JHS as well as how they perceived young Black women to experience school.

Collection of artifacts

I retained artifacts from JHS including the mission statement, student code of conduct, any literature sent home to families, a multitude of artifacts that constituted the print culture of the school, and RC related documents and student referrals (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). These artifacts provided insight into the formal rules and policies of the institution. They also enabled

me to analyze how Black girls were situated within official documentation and if these constructions coincided, or not, with informal practices.

Analytic Methods

The dataset includes: (a) 100+ field notes from participant and non participant observation detailing interactions between school officials and Black girls within various school spaces and reflective memos following interviews with school officials, (b) detailed descriptions of restorative sessions, (c) video and voice recordings of over 20 *RISE* meetings, (d) interview transcripts from 18 school officials, and (e) school artifacts.

Data analysis was ongoing and cumulative throughout the duration of the ethnography. While in the field, I regularly wrote memos reflecting on my emergent thinking around what I was observing (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Merriam & Tisdall, 2014). These memos documented patterns and key areas for questioning as well as provided a space for me to make sense of the complex emotional responses that came with working with urban youth in challenging school environments. Upon exiting the field I began the formal process of analyzing the data corpus beginning with the field notes. In order to section the data into more manageable sizes, I first created a meta-matrix for every month of data collection that included only pieces of data that communicated the perspectives of school officials. This data included informal conversations where the school officials spoke explicitly about young Black women to me or within a group setting, transcripts of restorative meetings, and observations of school officials' interactions with Black girls within their classrooms and school common areas. I selected two months of data collection that represented different time periods in the school year—September and March—and read them with the following question in mind: how do school officials characterize Black girls within JHS? As I came upon answers to this question, I created codes

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that could succinctly capture what was being conveyed (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2014). For example, I created codes such as "school officials' characterization of Black girls' academic identity" when I read comments about the young women's academic performance or dispositions within school. I also created a code "school officials' characterization of Black girls' socio-emotional identity" when I read comments that situated the young women as angry, explosive, or when they were labeled difficult to work with. Once I completed the first read through and had generated a set of codes in response to the first question, I read through the same two meta-matrixes again and asked: what is the nature of the interactions between school officials and Black girls? Again, I developed a set of codes that could organize the varied answers I found to the question. For example, I created the code "behavioral monitoring" to capture disciplinary interactions, the code "constructive student interactions" to capture positive moments between school officials and Black girls, and "conflictual student interactions" to capture negative interactions between school official and Black girls. Once completed, I added these new codes to the initial codes that had been created within the first read. I repeated this process of reading the meta-matrixes and developing codes with regards to the following questions around: (a) how race and gender was invoked in the school officials' characterizations and interactions, (b) when and how the official school policies were invoked, (c) how school officials spoke about me in relation to the young women, (d) how the young women's families and communities were situated, (e) the needs they identified the Black girls as having as well as the support within JHS to meet those needs, and (f) how they situated their role as a teacher. I gathered all of the codes together and created a codebook that could be applied to the entire set of monthly meta-matrixes of field notes detailing the school officials' perspectives.

After all of the monthly meta-matrixes had been coded, I looked within and across the codes to ascertain how they related to one another (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). For example, during this stage I noted that the majority of the data coded as "conflictual student interactions" was also coded as "behavioral monitoring". I considered what it meant for certain codes to cluster together, over others, and what the larger themes that they revealed. Using the example provided above, a theme that emerged at this stage of the analysis was that Black girls experienced negative interactions around discipline policies and procedures. During this process, I maintained notes detailing how and why I collapsed the codes in order to maintain the nuances of each coding category.

Next I turned to the interviews from school officials. Similar to the field note data, my guiding concern was what could be learned about their interactions with and perceptions of Black girls and what that might mean for how Black feminine identities were constructed and enacted within JHS. Using Dedoose, a qualitative software program, I read two interviews and asked the same set of questions as I did of the field notes to identify codes that were not captured by the initial set of codes that were created based on the interview protocol. The codebook ultimately had 6 main coding categories (i.e. school official background information, JHS district context, JHS social context, JHS academic context, family and community context, and Black girls' orientations) and over 40 sub codes. A sample of the codebook can be viewed in Appendix G. Once all of the interviews had been coded, I again considered what it meant for certain codes to cluster together and what the larger themes they revealed were. At this stage in the analysis I compared how the school officials discourse in this formal setting compared to their discourse and observed actions in informal spaces. I located the areas in which school officials' behaviors

and discourse across these settings were consistent and when they contradicted with their own personal statements and that of the official school policies.

Next, I tackled the students' perspectives on their experiences in JHS. I repeated the process I took with the school officials' perspectives and created monthly meta-matrixes with data that revealed how the students perceived their experiences using their voices. This data included descriptions and transcripts from restorative meetings, informal conversations where the young women spoke about the educational and social experiences at JHS, observations of Black girls' interactions with others students and their teachers (as told from them), and observations of the young women in their classrooms and school common areas. This time, I read the field notes with the following questions in mind: (a) how do Black girls imagine themselves as students, particularly at JHS? (b) how do they describe their interactions with school officials?, (c) how is race and gender invoked in these characterizations and interactions with their teachers, (d) how do the young women position themselves in relation to me?, (e) how do the young women situate their families and communities, (e) what are their academic and socio-emotional needs what support do they have within JHS to meet those needs, and (f) how do they enact a Black feminine identity? Again, I developed a codebook that I applied to remainder of the monthly meta-matrixes. Next, I turned to the *RISE* data, which was primarily video and audio recordings. I watched, or listened, to the data source and wrote detailed descriptions of moments that were coded given the codebook I had generated. I took all of the codes from the fieldnote and *RISE* data and created larger themes about the young women's experiences. This time, given the archetypes I had already gleaned from the teacher interaction data, I also analyzed for: (a) the young women's awareness of how they were viewed by their teachers, and (b) how the variations in how they responded to the constructions. I explored why

it was that young women who were situated in similar ways responded differently to the school

officials' characterizations and what the implications were for their educational opportunities

within JHS.

Next, I analyzed the artifacts I had collected while in the field. These artifacts ranged

from RC or office referrals, announcements to parents and the community, and pictures of boards

and announcement walls in the school. I reviewed these artifacts with the question of what image

they portrayed regarding Black girls' demeanors, interactional styles, and academic identities. I

coded these documents using the codebook I had developed for the field note data. I compared

the archetypes these documents created to the ones that had been revealed in the interview and

fieldnote data analysis thus far. Together, the varying data sources were used to develop the

archetypes of how Black girls are imagined within JHS. As a final step, I analyzed for evidence

that girls were responding differently to these constructions as per my observations of their

behaviors and conversation within *RISE*, the RC, and in general school locations. I explored why

it was that girls who were similarly situated respond in different ways and what the implications

were for their educational opportunities within JHS.

Chapter IV

Many Elephants in the Room: JHS' Context of Struggle

Overview

In this chapter I will engage in a detailed discussion of the context in which JHS was embedded. I argue that academic and social structure within JHS had the potential to be a productive environment for Black children, particularly Black girls given: (a) a partnership between JHS and New Designs Network (NDN), a national school management organization that partnered with schools to help them redesign their instructional models towards better empowering students, and (b) the utilization of restorative justice practices. However, the pressures of being a "concern school" with a state mandated improvement plan and the racial mismatch between the all-White teaching faculty and the majority Black student population, directly impacted the ability of JHS to fully implement these productive educational models. What resulted was JHS' inability to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of their Black student population.

Community Context

I conducted my ethnography in one high school, James High School (JHS), located in Obie, a small urban city. Obie is home to approximately 19,000 residents consisting of 61% White, 29% Black, 3% Asian, 4% Hispanic or Latino, and 4% two or more races (2010 Census). The median household and family incomes are roughly $28,000 and $40,000 respectively (2010 Census). Despite Obie being one of the first cities in its state to pass a living wage ordinance, in 2010 approximately 15% of families, and a quarter of Obie's total population, were below the

poverty line. This high rate of poverty was influenced by the fact that Obie, a big contributor to

the automotive industry until a major automotive producer moved its factory to a neighboring

state in the early 1950's, was experiencing steady decline in its primary industry. Obie is home to

a university that enrolls 22,000+ undergraduate and graduate students—the largest employer in

the community. Geographically speaking, Obie sits between two of the largest cities in its state—

Harbor, home to a more prestigious university where the resident population is predominantly

White and the median household and family incomes are approximately $46,000 and $71,000

respectively, and River, a once thriving city currently in the midst of revitalization through

processes of gentrification, where the resident population is predominantly Black and the median

household and family incomes are approximately $25,000 and $31,000 respectively.

JHS Demographics

At the time of study, JHS had a school population of 250 students on record, although far

less showed up on a day-to-day basis. Of those 250, 60% were African American (~25% female,

~36% male), 29% White, <1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 7% Hispanic, and 3% two or more

races. Despite the fact that the majority of the school (and district) was Black, as mentioned

prior, there was not a single Black full-time teacher in the building. The entire teaching faculty

was White except for one long-term substitute teacher, and the majority of the support staff was

also White[4].

JHS was housed within a newly formed district that was experiencing major financial

troubles, frequent shifts in leadership, and severe under enrollment at all levels[5]. In the midst of

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[4] Given the demographics of the teaching force, it is not uncommon for Black students to be taught nearly exclusively by White teachers (Emdin, 2016; Hodgkinson, 2002)

[5] Black students overwhelmingly attend schools plagued by financial issues (Condron & Roscigno, 2003), limited resources (Kozol, 2012), less qualified teachers and/or teacher retention issues (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002) and those identified as "failing" (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005).

these troubles, the new superintendent, Dr. Brothers, wanted to revitalize school and renew the community's faith in its school system. He believed that what was missing within the district was an explicit focus on race in the lives of students, both in and out of schools. In interviews, he often talked about the need to recognize the way race disadvantaged Black kids' opportunities from the moment they were born and that became compounded when they got to school. He maintained that in order to address the challenges that came along with being Black in Obie, the state in which Obie was located needed to create legislation that would dedicate specific funds to meet the needs of Black students. In one interview, he stated that if he were to receive such funds, he would direct it to programs for Black girls specifically because of the "strong connection" between a mother's educational attainment and the academic achievement of her children. In the absence of such funds however, there were no district-wide initiatives directed specifically at Black girls. However, Dr. Brothers *did* find the energy and financial resources to support a district-wide initiative aimed at assisting and mentoring Black male students[6]. This lack of attention to the specific needs of Black girls situated the importance of a program like *RISE* within JHS.

As I alluded to at the start of the chapter, JHS was struggling in areas that directly impacted the educational experiences of Black students in general, and Black girls in particular. Though there were a myriad of intersecting challenges and struggles that could be discussed as tangentially influential to the experiences of Black girls, here, I discuss the four areas of struggle that had the most direct impact on the young women's academic and social experiences: (a) raising achievement in JHS, (b) implementation of the NDN model, (c) implementation of restorative practices, and (d) the racial mismatch between students and teachers.

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[6] His program was in part made possible because of the nationally funded program, My Brother's Keeper, which provided federal support for initiatives aimed at improving the educational and career trajectories of boys and men of color.

The First Struggle: Raising Achievement in JHS

The reality of JHS was that student achievement was low. The results from the last nationwide standardized test suggested that JHS struggled to provide academic success, for all students, but particularly for its Black students. On the 11th grade math portion of the exam, ~71% and ~29% of Black students were identified as not proficient or partially proficient respectively; 0% were identified as proficient or advanced. On the 11th grade reading exam, ~38% and ~29% were identified as not proficient or partially proficient, while ~31% and ~2% were identified as proficient and advanced. While the reading scores were slightly more promising than the math scores, both indicated that a large majority of the Black students were not proficient in these core areas.

These scores placed JHS's performance within the bottom five percent of all schools in its state. Though these scores only provide evidence from the latest year, they were consistent with the historical patterns of achievement within JHS since it had opened its doors. Due to this persistent low achievement, JHS had been placed on a list of "concern schools" within its state, and had been mandated to participate in a statewide school improvement program aimed at increasing teacher effectiveness and student performance over a four year time period. If at the end of that time there had been no improvement, the school would face significant restructuring or complete closure. By the time I became involved with JHS they were over halfway into enacting their improvement plan.

The dire need to improve the academic achievement of students was an ever-present reality within JHS. In at least half of the staff meetings I attended, the focus was on ways to get student performance up. Sometimes improvement was discussed as a matter of institutional changes that could help to create a better learning climate—i.e. deeper understanding of the

NDN model, how to structure advisory periods to include more one-on-one academic assistance, shortening the passing period to eliminate student meandering and increase the amount of potential time for instruction, etc. Though these collective brainstorming sessions were productive in coming up with ideas that might spur improvement, there was whispering about the ideas amongst smaller groups of school officials after the meetings. For example, after one meeting where Principal Styles asked the staff to come up with a new mission statement for JHS, I heard a small group of teachers passing comments back and forth about how the students were not going to care about a different slogan. On another occasion, the group engaged in a discussion about attracting higher performing students from the community by rearranging the teaching loads to add advanced classes (JHS currently had no honors or AP courses). Though most of the teachers and staff participated in the discussion, and had opportunities to share their perspectives, as soon as the meeting was over, I could hear talk about how it was unlikely that they would even "survive" until next year to actually implement the plan. Comments like these made me question the extent to which school officials individually believed there was a future for JHS at the end of their mandated turn around time. Other times, Principal Styles would situate JHS's academic improvement as a matter of individual teacher improvement. For example, at one meeting toward the end of the first semester, teachers were discreetly presented with the numbers of students who were failing their courses. After allowing them to process their numbers, Principal Styles then launched into a speech in which he referred to that percentage of kids as the reason the school was underperforming. He stated that he needed for everyone to bring his or her percentage of failing students to zero.

On several occasions during our private conversations, Mr. Ferguson shared with me that teachers "knew" they would "lose their jobs" if they did not find a way to get their lowest

students to perform better. He felt that they were "struggling" with doing that because they believed the NDN model was not "working" for the primarily Black student population that they served. In turn, he believed the teachers were feeling "frustrated" and that there was "tension" between themselves and the students. His ideas were particularly important for this study because the absolute lowest performers at JHS were the very same Black girls that the teachers had the most difficult time working with. Though the teachers rarely came right out and explicitly confirmed Mr. Ferguson's thoughts that they struggled in their capacity to productively work with Black girls because they were the primary students who were threatening their job security, their use of the RC as a pseudo disciplinary space nearly exclusive for this group of students, suggested that it was likely true (this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7).

The Second Struggle: Implementing New Designs Network's Educational Model

Student achievement may have been low within JHS because they did not fully take advantage of their partnership with an external national organization called New Designs Network (NDN). NDN partnered with existing schools and school districts to help them transform into innovative institutions that inspired and engaged all students. At the time of the study, NDN had partnerships with nearly 200 schools across the country ranging from elementary through secondary school. NDN trained teachers in its partner schools to provide what they called "authentic learning" so that students would be college and career ready[7].

One hallmark of the NDN educational model was project-based learning[8] in which students were primarily instructed through a series of projects that required teamwork and collaboration amongst students, rather than traditional lecture and recitation. In order to enact

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[7] For a definition of college and career readiness, see: Conley, 2012 or Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014.
[8] For further information on problem-based learning practices, see: Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Jonassen, 2010.

this model, NDN encouraged all of its partner schools to engage in team teaching of interdisciplinary courses. That is, two teachers would teach, for example, a block class of science mixed with humanities in order to make explicit the connections that existed amongst the two subjects that may have appeared dissonant on the surface. Students were expected to conduct projects that mimicked the realities of their communities, encouraged them to think critically, and prepared them to adopt a problem solver orientation.

Another central part of NDN's educational model was that students were to be immersed in a "technology rich" environment that would support the project-based learning. The hope was that students would engage in a self-directed learning experience so they could cut their dependency upon teachers and textbooks for "knowledge". Instead, teachers would only act as "facilitators and coaches" and assist the students in taking "ownership" of their learning, developing their own "solutions", and building their skills of self-management. In order to achieve this, NDN provided their partner schools with an online learning platform—Sonar[9]—that would allow both students and teachers the ability to access the information most relevant to student learning. This information included a variety of resources such as future and past assignments, assessments, reading materials, links to online content, and a school moderated email and announcement service. Most significant to the students, however, was that Sonar included an interactive grade book in which they could receive real time information on how all of their coursework had been evaluated.

Lastly, NDN emphasized the importance of a positive school culture as critical to supporting student success. They believed that schools should adopt a culture where there was mutual responsibility, trust, and respect between all members of the community. They

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[9] This is a pseudonym.

maintained that this type of school culture enabled *both* the students and the teachers to have ownership of the learning experience. In their estimation, student responsibility would be demonstrated through their ability to manage their own projects, use of technology, and make decisions in terms of the best means of collaboration with peers. Trust would be evident by school officials doing away with traditional management tools, such as hall passes and class bells, and believing that best intentions of their students as they worked individually or in a group.

Taken together, the NDN model explicitly imagined students in positive and constructive ways. It suggested that within a school environment that provided the right tools and culture, students were capable of taking ownership over their learning experiences. The model assumed that students had the ability to work with peers and teachers at the level of near equals. This educational model envisioned the students as driven individuals who were committed to their education for a purpose greater than themselves—their communities. They were viewed as capable of critical thought and action and as agents of change in their own life and that of others around them. It is important to note that NDN was confident that their model could be utilized at any time, in any school[10].

The influence of the NDN was evidenced in the ways JHS *marketed* itself to the community. Based on their webpage, brochure, and press releases, the list below sums up the skills they believed students would have if they attended James High. They wrote that JHS graduated students who were:

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[10] Indeed, one of the ways NDN advertised itself was as providing tools that could be utilized in any demographic of students. They did not seem to take into consideration the specific geographical or cultural contexts in which their partnership schools were embedded. Interestingly, both the leadership team and the governance and the advisory board appeared to be predominantly White which raises questions about how well they were positioned to identify challenges related to implementing the model in majority minority spaces.

- able to think critically in order to solve complex problems in the community (broadly construed);

- independent thinkers who engaged in active learning;

- confident in their abilities to express and present their ideas in formal and non-formal settings;

- responsible;

- able to take ownership over their projects, manage their time, and create plans for successful completion;

- able to work in partnership with their teachers so that both were equally responsible for their success;

- self-directed and not dependent on textbooks or teachers for knowledge;

- goal oriented with plans either to attend college or enter the workforce after graduation; and

- connected to their communities.

However, the influence of NDN *on the ground* was murky. Early on, I realized that JHS struggled in its implementation of the NDN model. As indicated, one of the hallmarks of the model was student independence and responsibility. JHS was supposed to cultivate these dispositions by doing away with unnecessary mechanisms of control like hall passes and bells. Students were to be trusted about their whereabouts and expected to be responsible with how they moved about the school in addition to their use of technology and completion of group work. This was not the case in JHS; hall passes or the word of a trusted adult like myself was a necessary currency in the school. Students' movements were extremely monitored and regulated. For example, consider the following incident that occurred between Egypt (10th grade, Black

girl), Mrs. Taylor, an electives teacher who had the longest history of teaching within JHS, and

myself. On this occasion, Egypt had been given the go ahead from the principal to post flyers

during the passing period that advertised a club she was participating in. On my way to a

classroom to check in on a student, I ran into her while she was in the midst of completing this

task. After my check in with that student, around five minutes after initially seeing her, I passed

her again on my way back to the RC. This time, she stopped me concerned that she was unable

to get inside her classroom. At this point, Chloe (10th grade, Black girl) had joined her outside of

her classroom door. The field note reads as follows:

> *Egypt told me that Mrs. Taylor would not let her into the class because she was late. She*
>
> *asked me if I could tell her that she was with me so that Mrs. Taylor would let her in. I*
>
> *told her okay and to let me see what I could do. I knocked on the door and waited for*
>
> *Mrs. Taylor to answer it. While we waited, both Egypt and Chloe told me how they were*
>
> *about to "go off" on her when she had initially refused to let them in. Chloe exclaimed*
>
> *that Mrs. Taylor had slammed the door on them and that, that had been all she really*
>
> *needed to go off on her (she stamped one foot, placed her hands on her hips, and leaned*
>
> *her body to left side without losing eye contact with me to add emphasis. Her lips were*
>
> *pursed and her demeanor was serious). I thanked them both for not going off and*
>
> *expressed my pride in their ability to maintain their composure in the midst of disrespect.*
>
> *When Mrs. Taylor opened the door, I expressed to her that I had talked to Egypt when*
>
> *she was in the hallway posting signs that Mr. Styles (the principal) had approved her to*
>
> *post. I added that I believed that was the reason she was tardy to class. Mrs. Taylor said*
>
> *okay, but only let Chloe into the classroom. I was a bit confused but she explained that*
>
> *"she had an excused pass" (referring to Chloe), but "that one" (referring to Egypt) does*

not. With squinted eyes, she asked me if Egypt had been out there with me for 6 minutes and I responded that I had stood there talking for at least a few minutes. I was unsure of what answer to give because I did not want to lie and get caught in that, but I also did not want Egypt to be unable to get back into class. Mrs. Taylor appeared to ignore my answer and responded that Egypt was 6 minutes late and that she had already come once looking for an excused tardy (as if to suggest that I just gave her what she wanted). I said okay but continued to be a little confused at what exactly was happening. Mrs. Taylor continued on to say that this was an everyday thing so… and let her voice trail off. She stepped aside to make room for Egypt to pass through and closed the door once she had entered. As I made my way back to the RC, I reflected on how tied Mrs. Taylor was to the students needing a hall pass to the extent to where it felt ridiculous—what good would it have done for Egypt to sit outside of the door? –FN 9

This example demonstrated how important strict rules and policing was to teachers, which ran counter to the NDN rhetoric. Egypt was going to be denied entry into her classroom because she did not have the "proper" documentation to explain why she was late to class. Her word that she had permission to post the flyers was not enough. Though in the end my vouching for Egypt helped to get Mrs. Taylor to at least come to the door and open up her mind to the possibility of letting her in (rather than slam it as the students' shared had happened prior), it was still clear to me that the lack of a physical pass bothered her tremendously. She made it a point to let Chloe in and declare it was because *she* had the correct documentation—a paper pass. As she pointed to Egypt, she refused to say her name and simply referred to her as "that one" to denote her membership in the larger group of disobedient Black girls in the school. Not only was this an extremely rude gesture, it was dehumanizing to Egypt. Through these actions, Mrs. Taylor

stripped Egypt's individuality by denying her right to be acknowledged by her proper name. This act of dehumanization was enabled by the power that Mrs. Taylor had to act as the gatekeeper of her classroom given her role as the teacher. Though Egypt did not react in the moment to Mrs. Taylor's efforts to dehumanize her, there is reason to believe that continued interactions like this would negatively impact her[11]. To be fair to Mrs. Taylor, the unofficial policy in JHS was that students were to have passes when they were moving about the school. However, there was nothing that stated they had to be paper versions. Encounters like this did not promote the trust and mutual respect that was supposed to dominate the school.

I myself experienced this type of monitoring throughout my time at the school. School officials would randomly call out to me with a "hey" or "where are you going", as I walked through hallways. When I would turn around to see if they were talking to me, they would say, "oh I thought you were one of the students, you look so young". This happened to me even when I was extremely pregnant with a very large belly. I can acknowledge that most of my weight gain had been in my belly, so from behind it may not have been obvious that I was a pregnant woman. However, there was still no reason to call out to someone in that manner and assume they did not have permission to be where they were. After these cases of "mistaken identity" (if I'm being generous), the school officials typically shrugged it off and laughed as though it were a compliment to me to be treated like I was still a high school student. I was often left feeling irritated following the encounters and that a part of me now understood a little better with what the young women were dealing.

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[11] Goff, Jackson, Leone, Lewis, Culotta, & DiTomasso (2014) argue that when Black youth are subjected to acts of dehumanization in their schools, they are less likely to be afforded the privilege of innocence and the institutional protections that come along with it. As such they are more likely to be victims of symbolic and actual violence in their day-to-day school lives.

JHS also failed to fully enact other portions of the NDN model with fidelity. While a technology rich environment was a staple of the NDN model, not a day went by that students did not complain about the computers or laptops having a glitch, operating slowly, or having a part that was broken or missing. Students would submit their laptops to the IT part-time staff member to be fixed and then go days without them. While sometimes they would be given a loaner computer, other times they just had to wait. Given that all of the courses were structured to heavily integrate online resources through Sonar, not having a computer while in school was a huge problem. In a glaring example, in April 2016, I overheard Demetria (10th grade, Black girl) on the phone in the RC asking her father if he had money available to purchase her a new computer. When I asked her what was going on, she stated that she had been without her computer for 1 ½ - 2 months. Shocked that it had been so long, I asked what was being done to replace it and why she had not gotten a new one after all of this time. She expressed that she could not get a new one without purchasing the old one. She stated that Mrs. Collins, the school secretary, refused to make a school wide announcement that her computer was missing because the teachers had already received an email about it when it first disappeared. She felt like she was being set up to fail because they were not trying hard to figure out a solution. Although she did not come right out and say it explicitly, it seemed as though she felt that a White student would not be allowed to go so long without a key school resource. As time went on, Demetria's missing computer prevented her from turning in many of her assignments on time and led to several conflicts with her teachers when she attempted to use the computers in the common areas during class time.

In addition to the problems with hardware and creating a functional technology rich environment, the teachers struggled to effectively engage in team teaching of interdisciplinary

classes. When I would try to help students figure out missing assignments, it was not uncommon for teachers to respond that they could only help up to a certain point because the questions the young women were asking had to do with their team teacher's "stuff". While I did not have data on the way the teachers prepared for their classes, and the extent to which they worked together to structure lesson plans and activities that complemented one another, these kinds of comments made me question the reality of "team teaching" in JHS. For example, in one field note I documented an instance where Anastasia (10th grade, Black girl) approached one of her team teachers, Ms. Rose (English teacher), and attempted to take a test that she had missed during a recent absence. She was told that because it was Mr. Chase's (History teacher) test, she would have to talk to him about getting access to it. When Anastasia approached Mr. Chase about the exam, she was told that because it was Ms. Rose's day to teach, she had to speak with her about taking the exam. A situation like this raises questions about how the teachers were working together if one teacher did not have access to the other's materials, and if each teacher had a "day" that could not be interrupted by the other. We will return to this example in Chapter 10 when I explore Anastasia's school experiences in more depth.

In the midst of other challenges with implementing the NDN model, what may have been the largest factor driving the incompetence was that JHS had experienced a large amount of turnover such that many of the staff was not NDN certified. In the few years that the school had been open, they had lost nearly all of the original staff that had been with them. This was important because unlike the original teachers, the replacements did not receive the official training about how to implement the NDN model. In fact, during a staff meeting in early October, Principal Styles discussed the need to become more grounded in the NDN model as a means of improving student achievement at the school. Mrs. Taylor, a business elective teacher,

and Mr. Clark, a math teacher, were the only remaining teachers who had received training in the NDN model. In her interview, Mrs. Taylor spoke about this particular challenge for JHS. She stated:

> So from 2010 to now we have officially had four principals on record, but unofficially there have been seven principals in the building. Staff has been a revolving door since we lost the national demonstration site status and the merger[12]. It was a very stressful rehiring process to get hired back in with the merger. As we move forward, again, constant principal changes, staff changes, and it's very hard to stay true to what the James High project based model is...When many of the staff members that have come in are no longer trained in it or they had a one-week ramrod of what New Designs Network is in the summer but still don't have that full idea...You know, same thing is true with our principal. Our principal was hired the day before we left for the New Designs Network conference and when they were in (neighboring city and state) with us, New Designs Network denied them going into the new school's training, which is what they really needed, because the previous principal has been through this and was on a different track. So there are a lot of factors that have been frustrating for administration and teachers, and if that's happening at our level you know the kids are feeling it.

Mrs. Taylor described the district as having a revolving door of teachers and administrators—many of who were not sufficiently familiar with the New Design model that was supposed to be enacted at JHS. She shared that she knew there would be a disconnect when New Designs Network itself had denied the principal access to the training necessary for him to be able to lead

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[12] When Mrs. Taylor referred to the "national demonstration site" status she was referencing that at one point JHS had been acknowledged for successfully implementing the NDN model. They lost the status right around the time that the Obie Community School District combined with two other school districts to address declining enrollment and large amounts of debt.

his team of teachers in understanding what the educational process at JHS ideally should look like. Though she did not explain exactly what her training was, her framing of the current weeklong introduction as a "ramrod" gave the impression that she believed it was not a sufficient amount of time for the information to properly sink in and fully be absorbed. Importantly, she maintained that if she and her peers felt frustrated at the lack of true integration with the NDN model, the students were definitely feeling frustrated as well.

My interactions with the young women confirmed Mrs. Taylor's feelings that the students were frustrated by teachers' incompetency related to implementing the NDN model. While the students may not have explicitly talked about NDN, they were aware of the way JHS had been advertised to the community. For example, as early as September, I had a conversation with students who were frustrated at the lack of independence they were given. The fieldnote reads:

> *Jacklyn* (11th grade, formerly lower achieving student but academically successful in the current year) *and Shanell* (11th grade, mid-high achieving student) *wandered into the RC during third hour. I greeted them and asked how their days were going. Jacklyn answered by saying how Mrs. Shaw was "so irritating" because when they asked to come see Mr. Ferguson to talk about something, she said no. As Jacklyn shared this story, I wondered to myself how it was they were standing here with me now if they had not gotten permission, but did not say anything. Jacklyn explained that Mrs. Shaw (who was in her first year at JHS but not a first year teacher), was a lot like one of her former teachers because she "treated [them] like children" by making sure they "pushed in their chairs before leaving the classroom" and "hovering" around them when they were doing their work. She looked over her shoulder as though she was imagining that Mrs. Shaw*

was there right now, and shook her whole body in disgust and repulsion. She exclaimed

that all she wanted was "personal space". Shanell agreed with Jacklyn and expressed

that she felt Mrs. Shaw was "always down their backs" and failed to treat them with the

"maturity and independence" that they deserve to be able to work on their own. –FN 8

Within the NDN model, teachers were supposed to facilitate the students' independence as

learners yet Jacklyn and Shanell expressed feelings that they were treated below their maturity

level and as though they could not, or possibly would not, complete work without a teacher's

presence in close proximity.

On another day, noted in Fieldnote 30, I sat in the RC and had a conversation with

Anastasia where she expressed her frustrations over the interdisciplinary class structure. She

explained that in her art and biology class she had to write an essay about Marilyn Monroe (a

famous White actress, model, and singer most known for her iconic "blonde" bombshell roles in

the 1950s). She expressed that it did not make sense to her why she would be doing this

assignment in this particular class. As I tried to come up with a way that it may have fit with both

art and biology (and was admittedly struggling to do so), Anastasia retorted, "see it's stupid! It

don't make any sense". Though her teachers may have had a rationale for this assignment, it was

not immediately evident to Anastasia (or to me) what that rationale was.

The Third Struggle: Implementing Restorative Justice Practices

Not only did JHS struggle with its implementation of the NDN model, which may have in

fact influenced their inability to raise the achievement in JHS, they also struggled with

implementing the restorative justice program.

The Vision for Restorative Justice at JHS

When I first talked with Mr. Ferguson, the founder and the director of the RC, it was clear that the theoretical foundations of restorative practices influenced his vision for the management and organization of the center. In fact, during our first meeting, he pulled out several books for me to quickly skim that outlined the restorative justice model he wanted to enact in ways like what I discussed in Chapter 3. He wanted the RC to function as a "community" environment that would serve an "intermediary" role between classroom misbehavior and disciplinary action. He desired for it to "operate independently from the disciplinary process" within the school. The center would operate as follows:

1. **A problematic incident occurs** in the classroom between a teacher and student.

2. **The teacher enacts classroom based restorative practices** in attempt to work through issue(s) with the student.

3. In the event that the classroom based restorative practices fail to be successful, **student is referred to RC.**

4. The restorative liaisons **engage in phase one restorative meeting protocol** which is: (a) procure student version of events, (b) acknowledge their feelings and possible hurt, (c) share the teacher perspective (as provided on the referral form) and (d) discuss alternative patterns of action for the future.

5. The restorative liaisons **engage in phase two of restorative meeting protocol** which is: (a) set meeting with all directly affected parties (i.e. student, peers, teacher), (b) acknowledge emotional impact of actions on all in attendance for the meeting, (c) jointly determine solutions for moving forward to repair the relationship and prevent further incidents like what had occurred, (d) set timeline to revisit plan set during the meeting.

In order to support this process amongst the school officials who had not received any formal training[13] into the theory and methods of restorative justice, Mr. Ferguson created a RC folder with varied resources explaining what restorative practices were and an RC referral form that could help them to quickly identify how to engage in restorative practices within their classrooms, where the RC fit within that process. These can be reviewed in Appendix D.

If implemented correctly, Mr. Ferguson hoped that the restorative process would help the students by "bring[ing] them back into the educational process", which meant grow their engagement with school, increased focus on their academic work, and higher academic performance. Below, I share a portion of a restorative meeting that had reached step five of the restorative process. The participants were two teachers, Mr. Clark (math) and Mrs. Fitzgerald (art), Dior (a 9th grade, lower performing, Black female student), me, and Mr. Ferguson. The meeting was initiated because Mrs. Fitzgerald had called Dior's Dad on the phone the previous day and told him that she often seemed to be disengaged and off task during class. When Dior went home that night, she was told that she needed to "fix the problems" she had at school[14]. When she expressed this to Mr. Ferguson, he suggested that she meet with the teachers whose classes she had the most difficulty concentrating in as a start. She agreed to have the meeting. Mr. Ferguson opened the meeting with a brief explanation about the discussion structure, which was that Dior would speak first while the teachers listened, and then the teachers would speak while Dior listened. After both parties had made their comments, Mr. Ferguson would step in and help the group to create a plan for moving forward. When Dior got the chance to speak, she

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[13] The teachers had undergone a two-week long cultural training the year prior to my involvement at the JHS. Mr. Ferguson suggested that it could have set the foundation for some of the assumptions necessary for restorative work but it "fell flat" because both the students and the teachers felt it was "basic" and a "waste of time". During my interviews with the school officials, many commented on the fact that it felt like an inauthentic way to connect with students because it was short in time and detached from the everyday happenings within their classrooms.

[14] Lareau (1987) wrote about how parents from working class backgrounds are more likely to defer to the authority of teachers when presented with information about their child's classroom behaviors.

explained that she just wanted to know what they thought she needed to do to "fix things". The meeting then went as follows:

> *Clark: We are on your side…you just have to work with us*
>
> *Fitzgerald: What can I do to help you work on a particular thing in my class?*
>
> *Dior: Well I need to work on focus, working with others, not being on YouTube, anger management and catching up on my work after my computer get fixed. I led a group in my connections class with Mrs. Simpson. That was cool. I like leading the group. I was good at it.*
>
> *Fitzgerald: (referring to the statement about leading group) Why don't I see any of these qualities in my class?*
>
> *Dior: (shrugged shoulders and looked away) Well, I know my grades aren't perfect; in fact they aren't perfect at all. But my dad said I could do better and I know I can.*
>
> *Fitzgerald: The goal shouldn't be perfection because that does not exist for humans, but it should be on improvement.*
>
> *Clark: Let's set a grade goal to make it more concrete.*
>
> *Dior: (paused and thought for a second) Hmm, I want to get at least a B in all my classes.*
>
> *Clark: Do you think you did "B" level work in class today?*
>
> *Dior: (with a slight smile) I was until those kids who were joking too much distracted me. I need to work on being able to block them out. See, before I would be doing what they were doing and get kicked out of school because I be bored.*
>
> *Clark: Sometimes I get bored with it too. But you know, there are just going to be days where the stuff isn't always interesting.*

Following these comments, Mr. Ferguson closed the meeting with asking how the RC could be a support to her and finalized a plan to keep her focused and engaged in class. As this interaction demonstrated, the restorative meetings were intended to be spaces where both teachers and students could share with one another in non-confrontational manner. None of them were perfect, but some certainly better than others. In this meeting, Dior was able to express the concerns she had about her in class engagement—ones that were likely shared with her teachers—and her teachers were able to express their support in helping her to address the concerns. Importantly, both Mrs. Fitzgerald and Mr. Clark were able to have positive moments during the meeting where they shared words of wisdom and encouragement with Dior. They had the opportunity to verbally express their desire to work collaboratively to help her be more successful and engaged in school. Together with Dior, they were able to set a goal that would enable her to experience greater academic success. Dior walked away from that meeting smiling, in good spirits, and with a positive outlook for what the next class meetings would bring.

To further illustrate the productive possibilities of restorative meetings, I share another example of an interaction that occurred between Mr. Pickett (science teacher) and Demetria (10th grade, Black girl) whom we met before during the discussion of JHS's struggles with creating a technologically rich environment. Demetria arrived at the RC with a referral for disrespect and lack of engagement with the classroom activities. Once she got settled, Mr. Ferguson and I jointly went through the first four steps of the restorative process. The excerpt I share now is from the last step where the student and teacher engage in a meeting in an attempt to resolve the problem in a mutually beneficial way. At this point, Mr. Ferguson facilitated the meeting while I observed. The meeting went as follows:

Picket: Demetria here, uh she thinks this is hilarious and which is also super disrespectful just so you know. So she continued to put her head down (he was reading the referral sheet that he had written but also making additional comments), be difficult, and just kind of walked out to come here, but I was about to send her somewhere anyways. So I redirected her and reminded her that the expectation is that we don't have our heads down in class especially when we are actually not all caught up on the classwork that we are doing. So there were multiple times today where you (now he spoke directly to Demetria) were behind on what we were doing, seeming like you understood it but still making mistakes and that's because you were not staying with us. I don't know if it's because you think you understood it or what, but it's important to stay with us, okay? (Back to speaking to Mr. Ferguson) And then when I reminded her she told me how much she hates the class and I said that's okay I hate that you aren't doing what you were supposed to be doing, and that it's my job as a teacher to make sure you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. At that point I asked her to step out into the hallway and a couple things were said and just a lot disrespect is happening. So that's pretty much what happened.

Mr. Ferguson: (to Demetria) What's your side of the story?

Demetria: So I was doing my work and I did not write down the numbers on the side of the graph because I felt like it was going to throw me off. If I have too many numbers in one area, I'm not going to understand it and it's all going to be confusing. So I put my head down and Mr. Pickett came over and asked me to put my head up, and I was like I hate this class and he was like I hate that you aren't doing your work. But before that, he told me to write my numbers on the side of the graph and I said no, it's confusing and it's

going to keep throwing me off. Then he said okay so then you are going to keep getting

the wrong answer. And then that's when I put my head down and he told me to pick my

head up

Mr. Ferguson*: Why did you put your head down then?*

Demetria*: Because I was irritated. And when he asked me to put my head up, I did tell*

him that I hate this class and he said he hates that I'm not doing the work. But then I told

him that's a personal problem and maybe he should just leave me alone. And then he was

like go stand in the hallway. I told him that when he went out, I was not going to be out

there because I was going to the RC. And he said that's fine.

Pickett*: And so I felt very disrespected by the "it's a personal problem go fix it". That's*

very unacceptable to say to anyone let alone a teacher

Demetria*: Okay and I feel like you're not motivating me as a teacher to tell me to write*

down the numbers and then say "oh if maybe if wrote down the numbers you would not

get the answers wrong"(said in sarcastic mocking tone).

Ferguson*: (to Demetria) Let me ask you a question, if you perceived that Mr. Pickett was*

doing something that was not cool, was your comment going to address that? Or just

indicate that you were frustrated? (Silence from Demetria) C'mon now...

Demetria*: Indicate that I was frustrated.*

Ferguson*: Its times when I get frustrated and the first thing that comes out of my mouth*

makes the situation worse and not better. And I don't believe you wanted to make the

situation worse (more silence from Demetria).

Pickett*: Can I explain to you why I said what I said? (Demetria: mmhmm) I promise if I*

tell you do something it's super important and here's why (pulls out sheet of graphing

paper). Here we are on the X-axis and we are going by 1's. On the Y-axis we are going by—

Demetria: Two's.

Pickett: If you don't write that down you make the error and this is why you said the slope was 3/2, because you did not have the numbers there and you counted 1, 2, and 3, instead of 2,4,6. It would have been 6/2, which is a slope of 3. And that's why I said if you continue not following those directions, you are going to continue to get the wrong answer. Because these are important things to have. Now if you think this looks ugly or its too much information, unfortunately that is a problem we are just going to have to move past because this is most appropriate way to create the graph. Without it, you will continue to get the answer wrong and Mr. Longhurst will probably mark you down because you can't show him that you understand the scale. And that's why I said if you continue to do it that way, you would continue to get it wrong. There was no disrespect intended, I was just telling you the truth and this is why this is important.

Ferguson: So that was going to help her be more successful?

Pickett: Very much so. Because she is obviously a very intelligent young women and if she wrote down the things we asked her to, she will get the right answer because she did, but just with the wrong scale. (To Demetria) You counted it right, but you had the wrong scale because you did not write it down and when you get one thing wrong it throws off the rest of the problem. Does that make sense? (Demetria: Mmmhmm) and that's what frustrates me; I know your potential because I've worked with you for almost a year and a half now. When you chose to do the right things the sky is the limit and I really take that as a personal problem. If you tell me that I'm not motivating you, that's really important

information for me and now I need to know what I can better to do to motivate you. Does

that make sense (Demetria: yea)? If you feel like, hey this isn't working for me... (Left

unfinished, but insinuating they can talk about it)...but one thing I need you to do is

follow the directions I give you because that is the only way that we can find common

ground to then figure out what else will motivate you. Does that make sense? (Demetria:

Yea). I was you in high school to a certain degree. I thought I could just do anything and

sometimes it works, but a lot of times it does not. So I understand the frustration. But I

need some commitment from you that you will just trust that when we tell you to do

something we are doing it for a reason. Is that fair?

Demetria*: Yea*

Pickett*: Okay*

Ferguson: *Thank you*

During this meeting Demetria and Mr. Pickett had the chance to explain to one another exactly

how they interpreted the incident—which we learned was quite different. While Mr. Pickett

perceived Demetria to be disrespectful towards him because she continued to put her head down

and stated that she hated his class, Demetria felt like she was being disrespected when she was

told that she would get her answers wrong if she continued to construct her graph in the way she

felt would help her to get the right answer. The meeting provided the opportunity for Mr. Pickett

to explain the rationale that undergirded the directions he gave and demonstrate how, if followed,

they would help her to be more successful in his class. In this meeting he was able to affirm her

intelligence and capacity to do the work, as well as express his desire to make sure she felt

motivated to do so. In the end, although Demetria would have to do exactly what she had not

wanted to do in the first place, she came to a point where she could understand why it was the

necessary way to do things in Mr. Pickett's mind and why it was not needlessly being enforced[15].

Though the meeting started out with tension and frustration between the two, it ended with a

common understanding of one another's perspective and a commitment from Mr. Pickett to

continue to work in Demetria's best interest, and a commitment from Demetria to trust that he

was doing so.

Despite the potential of meetings like these to address concerns with students by

establishing relationships and increasing constructive communication between teachers and

students, overall, as will be discussed next, they were rare occurrences because the restorative

model was not implemented with fidelity.

The Teachers' Misuse of the RC

When the 2015-2016 school year began, Mr. Ferguson and I hit the ground running with

excitement for the promise of what the restorative practices would offer to the school community

at JHS. During one of the first staff meetings, Mr. Ferguson talked with the teachers and staff

members about what restorative practices were and how he imagined it would be implemented

within the school. He provided everyone with the folder of resources and explained how each of

the items was meant to support their implementation of restorative practices. He presented them

with an open door policy where they could come to either of us with questions or concerns about

the center or individual students. Additionally, he invited them to bring their entire classes to the

RC so that as a collective group, the students could learn more about us and create a common

understanding about what restorative justice would be in the context of JHS.

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[15] Given the power structure in schools that places teachers in complete control and students as relatively powerless
(Friere, 1968), Demetria's acceptance of Mr. Pickett's learning tool (i.e. numbering the axis) was the best way to
keep out of trouble and position herself to have positive interactions with him in the future. However, good teaching
practice would have been for Mr. Pickett to figure out a better tool for her to use altogether (Ladson-Billings, 1997).
It was clear that the math "rules" that he wanted everyone in the class to use were not working for Demetria, yet he
insisted she use them or else she would be continually penalized.

Despite sharing a clearly defined vision for the RC, and distributing tools to support the implementation of that vision, Mr. Ferguson and I encountered challenges from the very beginning moments of the RC's operation. Over time, there were several indicators that the RC was not being implemented with fidelity. The first happening that alerted us to the misuse of the center was that despite the availability of the RC for every student in the school, nearly, 95% of all of the referrals to the space were for Black students, with nearly 80% being Black girls. When I asked Mr. Ferguson why he thought this was the case, he felt it boiled down to a matter of race. He stated that the "main issue" was that "the entire teaching staff [is] White and the support staff [is] Black". He conveyed his feelings that the teachers did not have the "cultural proficiency" to work with Black students. He stated that in the absence of trying to figure out a way to work with the Black children, the teachers and support staff focused on the White students. He stated that "no matter how differently the White kids present[ed] themselves" (from the normative idealized version of Whiteness), they were "treated better" and given more "positive attention" than the Black students, which was obvious in the ways that we saw so few White students in the RC on a daily basis.

The second happening that indicated a misuse of the space, was the continued use of discipline referral forms when sending the students to the RC, rather than the specific RC forms Mr. Ferguson had created to assist teachers in their use of classroom based restorative practices. As mentioned earlier, the official protocol in referring a student to the RC was that they would be sent over with the RC pass. The use of this particular pass was critical because it could empower the teachers to enact restorative strategies within the classroom if they found themselves at a loss for what to do in the moment, prior to removing the student from the class. Moreover, it provided information about the students and class they were in, the incident that had occurred that led the

their dismissal from the classroom, the particular strategies the teacher had employed before sending the student out, and the desired goal of the restorative process—all important information that was necessary to conduct productive meetings following the incident. Mr. Ferguson and I would use this form to gather context from the teacher's perspective as to what happened that led to the problematic behavior. However, nearly half of the time, the teachers referred students using the traditional disciplinary referral form. Mr. Ferguson lamented the fact that the teachers were "exchanging the discipline referral for the restorative pass without really altering their frame of mind in terms of the differences between the two". The traditional form was about labeling the student behavior, which the RC form was intended to prevent from happening in order to focus on the larger impact of the behavior on the classroom community. Moreover, the official discipline form was structured in a way that categorized students' behavior by offense levels that would result in varying levels of punishment. The RC form did not set students up for consequences because that was in direct opposition to what the center stood for and, in fact, beyond what the RC even had the power to do[16]. Even more critical, the official discipline forms did not provide strategies for responding to misbehavior within the classroom and did not have a space for teachers to state what actions they took in their attempts to keep the students in the classroom. It might be plausible that at times the use of the discipline form was driven by a mistake or limited access to the RC form, but Mr. Ferguson had specifically printed the RC forms on brightly colored paper (the official discipline forms were printed on white paper) *and* personally delivered stacks of the forms to every classroom on multiple occasions. The fact that the teachers kept using a form that was about disciplinary

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[16] As the year progressed, the RC did come to have a seat at the disciplinary table so to speak. Teachers would consult with us about students before writing official referrals, and the principal would sometimes consider giving students less days of suspension if they could work out a plan to work with us in the RC and receive extra support.

labeling[17] rather than community building, strongly signaled to us that they were making little distinction between the RC and the traditional discipline policies it was trying to disrupt. Chapter 7 will provide a more in depth look into how the teachers used the two forms and what that meant for how Black girls were imagined.

The third happening that signaled a lack of full integration of the restorative justice model was that less than half of the referrals to the RC actually ended with the student/teacher conferences that were a huge component of restorative justice practices. Although the use of the traditional discipline forms rather than the RC form was problematic in and of itself, if the rest of the restorative process had been implemented with fidelity, the misuse of the forms could have been remedied. However this was not the case. Often times teachers were "too busy" to participate in the meetings directly after an incident and offered to sit in a meeting "later". Many times later never came. Without conferences the restorative process was incomplete. As such, it appeared as though the teachers were not sending the students over in an attempt to really restore relationships, but were just using a RC referral as a way to remove students from the classroom so that someone else would deal with their perceived problematic behaviors. Ultimately, the teachers did not see the RC as a place for restorative practices, as it was intended, but instead treated it as an in-school suspension space for Black students generally, and Black girls in particular[18].

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[17] Scholars have discussed how these discipline forms function as a primary site for constructing Black girls as "unfeminine" and lacking the proper attributes of "ladies" (Blake, Butler, Lewis, Darensbourg, 2011; Morris & Perry, 2017). This work has argued that when Black girls' behavior becomes labeled in this manner, they are more likely be disproportionately disciplined and excluded from their learning environment.

[18] Exclusionary discipline practices are not new to US public schools. There is a large body of literature that argues that excluding Black students from learning spaces has been heavily practiced since the introduction of zero tolerance discipline policies in the late 1990's (Hines-Datiri & Carter-Andrews, 2016; Morris, 2012; Skiba, & Peterson,1999). Exclusionary discipline practices, such as in-school suspension space, function as a key mechanism through which schools reproduce inequality as there is a link between the use of these practices and a student's entry into the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003; Winn, 2011; Wun, 2016).

The last happening that indicated the teachers were not fully implementing the vision of the RC was that they developed the habit of treating Mr. Ferguson and me as if we were security. In fact, during a conversation one day, Mr. Ferguson noted that the teachers were using the center for the "wrong purpose" because he and I were not "discipliners". There were many occasions where teachers called upon us to deal with students who they perceived to be threatening in some manner. These requests would come before—i.e. they were concerned that something would happen so they wanted us to be present to deter it—during, and after an incident. While sometimes the desire was for us to completely remove a student from the classroom, other times it was to pull them aside and provide on-site services. These calls were predominantly for Black students whose behavior teachers felt was so unpredictable and so threatening that that they did not think it wise to continue to be in the classroom with the students without assistance. For example, I documented an interaction in Fieldnote 11 where Mrs. Simpson, a science teacher, stopped me in the hallway and stated, *"Can you help? I have student who is refusing to leave the class? It's Anastasia."* In this case, she wanted me to force Anastasia to leave the classroom because she felt she was being rude and insubordinate. She felt that she did not have the tools to get Anastasia to leave on her own. I note another example, in field note 21, where I wrote the following:

> *Mrs. Fitzgerald entered into the RC while I was sitting at a table writing up some quick notes from earlier interactions. When she entered the room, she asked a couple of students who were sitting at desks working, "Is Alaina here?" She seemed a bit exasperated as she asked this because her words were rushed and her breathing a little heavier than usual. As I got up from my table to walk over to the doorway where she is standing, I loudly stated, "I am here". When I get close enough she speak in a softer*

tone, I inquired what I could do to help and she said that she needed some assistance

with BeBe. I asked if Bebe was in the classroom. She replied yes and that she was

blowing up. She recounted that BeBe wanted to go to the office for her charger but that

she was told no. At this point she began to slam Donovan's computer on the desk. She

also would not sit in her assigned seat because she was unhappy with where she was

sitting.

Please note that we were only ever asked to remove a White student out of class on two occasions. In these instances the staff had serious concerns about the students' mental stability and the potential of self-harm. This was very different from when they called us to remove Black students because in the cases of the White students, they were concerned with the well being of the *student*. When it came to the Black students they were concerned about *themselves*—i.e. their safety, ability to teach their class, or just not wanting to deal with the problematic behavior. The use of Mr. Ferguson and myself as entities of removal was not the way the RC was supposed to be used. The whole point of the RC was to be a community building space, not a place that housed security guards who would remove students from class if they were deemed a threat.

The idea that the RC was not being implemented in the way that it had been imagined, was not simply in Mr. Ferguson's (and my) head. The range of teachers' comments during the interviews confirmed some of the challenges Mr. Ferguson articulated. Many teachers spoke in ways that suggested they knew they were not using it in the way Mr. Ferguson had intended. For example, Mr. Chase, a history teacher, suggested that the instability within the district made it difficult for teachers to properly utilize spaces like the RC that, in theory, would be super helpful to students. He stated:

The teachers are losing faith and trust too in the school district just like the students. When a program like the RC gets rolled out, it's looked at like it's just one other program, like it's not a big deal, even though it could be a really big deal, even though, on a day-to-day basis, it is a big deal here. So they're less likely maybe to engage with it, and you see that maybe sometimes, in the sense that – and I've done it too, just use it as a dumping ground like, "Get out of the room right now, please, and go over there," instead of, "Do what you're supposed to do."

Mr. Chase maintained that within a context in which so much was continually changing and shifting, a program like Restorative Justice that had promise for positive change was easily tossed to the side and not given the full effort that it was worth by teachers. He praised the program as being one that had the potential to be a "really big deal" on a "day-to-day basis", but that got treated like it was not a big deal because teachers did not want to invest in "just another program". Instead of utilizing the space in its intended way, to restore relationships and promote student engagement with the educational process, Mr. Chase stated that it easily became a "dumping ground" for students that he did not want in the classroom. At times, he admitted that having the center allowed him (and other teachers) to actively decide that it was not a good use of time to attempt to work through issues with particular students. Mr. Chase suggested that sometimes teachers did not have the time it took to invest in a true restorative process, that when coupled with the instability in the district, caused them to put limited effort into engaging with the program. This account of how the RC was positioned within Mr. Chase's practice fully supported Mr. Ferguson's frustrations about it being treated as a space for perceived problem kids who needed discipline, that teachers could not, or rather were not willing, to provide.

Mrs. Taylor, an electives teacher, also maintained that the RC was not being used in its intended fashion. She stated in her interview:

> *We have the Restorative Center where there's good and there's bad. I think we have good people in the Restorative Center but I don't think we necessarily have the adult staff using it correctly to restore relationships. So...*
>
> ***Alaina****: Right. Right. I mean do you think that if more of that work happened, if more relationships were restored that we would see different outcomes I think between how it is that these girls get along in this school and their school experiences?*
>
> ***Taylor:*** *I do. When I hear young ladies say, "I'm gonna go to the Restorative Center, they're just gonna make me apologize and I really don't feel it was my fault," then there's a systemic problem and we need to have more conversations because in my eyes the Restorative Center was never meant as a – only the students apologize. It was meant to figure out what the problem is, everyone be honest and you both have to work. It's give and take on both parts. That's not happening.*

She expressed that the problem she saw, was that the space was not being used to restore relationships like it was supposed to be. Instead of authentic communication, she felt that students were being blamed for problems and expected to do all the reconciliation. Although I never observed, or myself held, restorative meetings that culminated in requests for the young women to simply apologize to their teacher regardless of what happened and who was at fault, students *were* routinely encouraged to think of ways to make problematic situations better, and often times it did include making amends with teachers and peers. Mrs. Taylor's comments revealed her perception that teachers were not engaging in the necessary work to figure out the root of the problems that were causing student misbehavior in class and as such, limited the

potential of the RC to function properly. These examples demonstrated that while both Mrs. Taylor and Mr. Chase could articulate the intended purpose of the RC, they could *also* highlight the ways in which it was not meeting that said purpose particularly because of reasons related to their own, and other teachers' inaction.

The Fourth Struggle: The Consistent Race Elephant in the Room

The School Officials' Perspective on Race

Lastly, JHS was struggling around the racial differences between the teaching staff and the predominantly Black student body. As a reminder, 100% of the teaching faculty was White (see Table 5, in Chapter 3). When I talked to Mrs. Taylor, she shared that given the constant staff changes, the racial differences between the teaching staff and students was a "consistent elephant in the room". Unfortunately, she never got the chance to explain what she meant by this comment because she had to unexpectedly stop the interview. However, earlier comments she made, and other teachers' statements in their interviews, confirmed her assertion that the racial differences were an obvious problem at JHS. From the teachers' perspective, the racial differences were mainly due to struggles on students' end[19].

The teachers felt like the students did not believe that they, as White teachers, had the ability to relate to them. Nearly every teacher stated that a critical part of teaching was establishing relationships and connections with students, but that as White teachers, working with Black students at JHS was difficult because the students assumed they could not relate to their life experiences. For example, Mrs. Mahoney stated in her interview:

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[19] Denying their potential role in creating the problems evidenced the presence of White Fragility. DiAngelo (2014) defines white fragility as occurring when white individuals respond to named racism with anger, withdrawal, and a range of defensive moves including blaming the person or event that triggered it. In this case, White fragility was evident because when pondering the challenges related to being a White teacher teaching Black students, the teachers' first move was to situate the students, and their orientations, as to blame.

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I think, in general, maybe more than I realize, there might be a, "Dang, another White teacher!" [Laughter] I could see that from their perspective, where they'd be like, "Well, there's just—you know, just another White lady in the line of all the other White ladies that I've talked to—taught me." And I can see where that would be a division [between the students and the teachers] because they [don't] have a role model of somebody that might understand where they're coming from...But so—I do feel bad for the kids that there's not that connection for them. They should have a better connection like that.

Mrs. Mahoney perceived that Black students felt less divided from a Black teacher because they assumed that he or she might understand better where they were coming from. On the other hand, she felt that the students viewed her, as White teacher, as "just another White lady" sent in to teach them who, like the White teachers from their past, was unlikely to possess a deep understanding of their lives. Mrs. Mahoney did not seem to think students' histories of interactions with White teachers was meaningful and important to consider.

Ms. Kemp also maintained that as a White teacher, students' assumed that she would not understand their lives. She stated:

I mean, I don't have the same experiences that they have. So I wonder if sometimes they, "Oh, Ms. Kemp just does not get it." Like she's – you know? And I'm sure that's a thing, just because I don't understand all of the situations that they're experiencing. I understand a lot, like some of [what they are experiencing]. But oftentimes, I mean, I can be, like I come from a place where all of this drama, like that you get yourself involved with, you just need to like get it out of your head and you need to focus on this.

In discussing the students' perceptions that she "does not get it", Ms. Kemp inadvertently confirmed their suspicions. After admitting that she did not have the same experiences as the

students and suggesting they were experiencing "situations" (which appeared to be a code word for challenges due to race and socio-economic status[20]) which she was unfamiliar, she did not appear willing to try to understand them either. Instead she stated that they needed to just "get it out of [their] head" and "focus" on what was going on in the classroom. This mentality of refusing to engage with them around the perceived "situations" they were dealing with meant that she would remain ignorant about their experiences[21].

Mr. Chase also provided comments within his interview that suggested that White teachers were not given the same kind of chances to form relationships that Black teachers received. He stated:

> [Black] kids will maybe establish relationships, establish trust, or trust teachers more, and give them that benefit of the doubt if they see a person who looks like them, and maybe has gone – they'll make assumptions about what that person has gone through and maybe see commonalities between that.

From his perspective, Black students were more willing to engage in relationship building work with Black teachers because they assumed there would be commonalities[22]. Though he later stated that he tried to establish connections with them via experiences that transcended their racial differences—"Dude, my mom was on welfare too," or, "I did not have a dad my whole

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[20] If this was a code word, it should be noted that in the absence of knowing the students, Ms. Kemp immediately defaulted to stereotypic assumptions that students from Black and low socio-economic backgrounds lived lives full of self-created "drama".

[21] See: Howard (2016) for the dangers of teachers choosing to remain ignorant about their multicultural student body.

[22] There is evidence that Black students perform higher when they are matched with a teacher of the same race (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015), which suggests that they have a more productive student/teacher relationship. However, scholarship that investigates these relationships demonstrates that Black students develop these connections for reasons that expand deeper than "looking like one another". The literature suggests that Black students feel deep connections to Black teachers when they perceive them to care deeply about them as though they were family (Case, 1997; Guiffrida, 2005), held high expectations for them (Ladson-Billings, 2009), and treated them with respect and dignity (Walker, 1996).

life,"—he felt it was difficult to do in JHS and described it as "tough" work. Mr. Chase's attempt to establish connections with Black students in this way was problematic if it emerged from assumptions about the family dynamics of Black Americans, rather than actual evidence that these were situations that were actually relevant to them.

Mr. Bryant felt as though Black students were hesitant to create relationships with their teachers because they felt that White people were out to get them. He commented:

I mean I was in the other class next door...but we were talking and a Black female student said that she was brought up to just think that all White people were the devil. And you've got kids who [chimed in] yeah, that they'll trick you in a turn, they can't be trusted, and so, she's one of, I'm sure, at least a few people, and you can sense that sometimes, when their parents come in. So I guess I was not expecting that when I started teaching. I was not expecting this, being treated like I'm some cop out to get them. I was not expecting that, and I get that feeling a lot like they think I'm just someone trying to jam them up. I've found myself saying that on more than one occasion. I don't get up in morning and put on a uniform trying to write people tickets. I get in the morning to try and make you better in life and help you be successful...But they just think I'm here to jam them up.

Mr. Bryant felt that the Black students prejudged his intentions as a White man. Rather than believe that he was trying to make their lives better, he believed they viewed him in a manner that they would the police. This is a particularly powerful statement considering the strained relationships between the African American community and law enforcement that were currently playing out on the national stage[23].

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[23] Part of the reason students may have viewed White teachers as akin to White police officers is because of the way school discipline policies and practices increasingly mimic prison-like conditions where students are subjected to heavy surveillance and harsh punitive practices (Smith, 2016; Wunn, 2016). Similar to interactions with police officers, when Black citizens report being stopped and frisked at random because of their race, Black students report

Only one teacher, Mr. Richards, acknowledged that at a certain level, he would <u>never</u> be able to fully relate to Black students' experiences given his identity as a White man. He shared:

You know, as diverse as my life experiences have been, and as much as I love all of my kids and I wanna help all of them—yeah, there's certain things that I can thought experiment and put myself in someone else's shoes in my head. But there are some things that I'm just, you know, that you can't get through explanation, through sitting down and having a conversation with someone.

Though Mr. Richards expressed that he tried his best to put himself in his Black students' shoes, he recognized that as a White man, no amount of conversation about the Black experience would imbue him with the knowledge that was gained from actually being a Black person. Absent that kind of experiential knowledge, he knew there would always be struggles in relating to his students.

A few of the teachers talked about race as a struggle primarily on the teachers' end. They spoke about how the racial differences were challenging because as White people they had biases that, intentional or not, negatively impacted the students[24]. Mrs. Taylor stated in her interview that she knew the teachers were struggling around unconscious bias when during a group trip, the conversation centered on negative experiences with students and no White students were mentioned. She stated:

What got me is, we would do meeting of the minds and all of us would be in a 13-passenger van or whatever and go to this meeting of the minds and the teachers would be

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feeling as though their teachers problematized their behaviors and disciplined them for no reason other than because they were Black (Marsh, 2013; Parks, Wallace, Emdin, & Levy, 2016). Furthermore, just like what often occurs in criminal courts, they perceived White students to be punished less severely and less often than Black students who engaged in similar behavior (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Wunn, 2016).

[24] There is a growing body of literature that discusses the negative impacts that White teachers' "unintentional" racism and implicit bias has on Black students (Hyland, 2005; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Milner, 2010; Moule, 2009)

talking about students that they were having problems with, and it was always the White

teachers and they were naming specific students and sharing experiences, and at one

point one of the teachers of color just very quietly said, "Excuse me. Do you realize that

none of you have mentioned a White student? But I can name some White students that

have the same behaviors."...So when you ask, it's the problem's across the board, it just

seems that we're predisposed for not necessarily you're black, I'm picking on you, [but]

you're louder I'm noticing you more because you are fighting for your rights and you are

voicing your opinion but I'm not seeing it in the same way you are.

Though Mrs. Taylor believed that the teachers were not necessarily "predisposed" to pick on

Black kids—a discursive attempt to avoid naming their behaviors as inherently racist—her

comments suggest that she believed that teachers *were* implicitly biased when it came to these

students (i.e. perceiving loudness and opinions on Black bodies as negative). Whether Mrs.

Taylor wanted to acknowledge this bias as racism or not (which it clearly was), it was

problematic because it ultimately led to disproportionate behavioral monitoring and sanctions for

Black students.

When discussing the challenges around race at JHS, Ms. Rose shared a narrative which

suggested that how the school handled Black history month illustrated how negative

presumptions about Black lives became unconsciously articulated. She shared:

I think that's a huge struggle. And there are – like in our class for Black History month

last year people were crying 'cause they – it was not discussed during that month and

then what was brought up was like, oh, this is the housing gap, this is the educational

gap. It was all like negative things so people were really upset. Like Shakia was crying.

She was like, "This is just setting me up –" like Sheldon Matthews came up – and goes,

"This is awful." So things like that, like kind of like – I don't know if you want to call it

ignorance but it was just like – how is that celebrating anything? It was cutting them

down when they were already upset about not learning about it.

In this situation, the White teaching staff, likely in conjunction with school leadership, allowed

Black History month to go unacknowledged[25]. While that lack of acknowledgement in and of

itself was likely very upsetting to the students, when Black lives were discussed they were talked

about in ways that evidenced the history of pathological thinking often inherent within

conversations about the Black community[26]. Rather than take the opportunity to highlight the

strengths and triumphs of Black Americans, the students were instead faced with stories that

depicted Black people as unsuccessful in school and in other key areas of American life.

Mr. Richards believed that a huge problem was that when teachers first met Black girls,

they likely categorized them according to the existing preconceived notions about them. He

believed that this created tension that potentially led to greater issues. He stated:

But—so I think I do, initially, the same way that, you know, being humans and

categorizing things and therefore people, I think in the same way that some African-

American females get categorized by people as, you know, there's preconceived notions

there somewhere...So I think initially, that causes—that might cause some tension here

and there or some issues or whatever.

Though Mr. Richards did not state what exactly those preconceived notions were they were

likely negative if the result would be increased tension.

Black Girls' Perspective on Race

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[25] When it was revealed that there would be no celebratory events, the counselor at the time, who was Black, created a program with student performances that would honor Black history. It was held in March.

[26] See O'Connor, Hill, & Robinson, 2009; Chavous & Cogburn, 2007.

The students also perceived teachers to struggle with the racial differences at JHS. Although Mr. Ferguson and me would routinely make connections between what we saw happening within the school and how Blacks were treated by Whites in the real world, many times the students incorporated a racial analysis of their situations without our pushing or prodding. Their narratives revealed that they believed the teachers in JHS were racist, or at least heavily biased toward non-Black students, and did not desire to see their African American students be successful. As early as September, I began hearing stories from Black girls about how they felt their teachers treated them differently because they were Black girls. For example, in my fieldnotes I recounted an incident where a Black girl was sent out of Mr. Chase's room because of electronic use. As she shared with me what happened, she stated that she had her phone out and was turning it off, but was not using it. She recounted that she felt like others had their phones out but did not get into trouble. She used the example of Daniel, a Black boy, to make her point because he was not sent out of the room despite what she perceived to be obviously using his phone. She insisted that she was targeted in a way that others were not. The following month when I was walking down the hallway I stumbled upon Kiki (9th grade, Black girl) who was yelling in a rage, "I hate White teachers". When I followed up with her as to what was going on, she recounted that had been unjustly given a referral for insubordination for using her phone in the hallways during passing period. She was confused because she had not broken any rules.

In field note 25, I documented a conversation with Mr. Ferguson where he recounted that Candace (10th grade, Black girl) had almost been suspended for a verbal altercation with Mr. Chase where "she was going off on him and telling him how he did not like Black girls". The following month, I documented another interaction where Candace again shared a perspective

that her teachers had a problem with Black girls. This time Anastasia (10th grade, Black girl) and Jana (10th grade, Black girl) joined her in conversation. The situation was that all three young women had walked out of the class they were in because they felt their teachers, Mrs. Simpson and Mrs. Fitzgerald, kept calling them out for behaviors that other students were obviously doing as well. The interaction went as follows:

> *Jana: (directed at Mrs. Simpson) I don't want to go in there, y'all don't know how to control your students. Marvin over there talking and doing stuff on his phone and ya'll don't' say nothing. Put him out like you do us. Y'all act like y'all scared of him or something when he talk*
>
> *Simpson: I don't put anyone out for talking*
>
> *Jana: I had my phone out and was just looking at it and you [said something to me] but you don't say nothing to Marvin.*
>
> *Simpson: I'm sorry if you perceive it as unfair*
>
> *Jana: You treat Marvin like he's the president. But no, he's slow and he dumb (Anastasia and Jana begin to laugh) you see us doing good, getting our work done and there is Marvin on the phone and you don't say nothing to him.*
>
> *Candace: They don't want us to do better*
>
> *Anastasia: Sho don't*
>
> *Jana: You want us to be in the same class again but no I'm getting my credit and getting out.*
>
> *Simpson: This conversation should be held when you are not so angry (begins to leave)*
>
> *Jana: I'm not angry (Anastasia was also saying things under her breath)*
>
> *Anastasia: they act like…ooo (sucks in air) they don't like black people. They don't like*

Black girls because we can wear weave

Candace*: they wore them before us! But now they are mad because the Black girls do it better!*

In this exchange, we saw Jana trying to express to her teacher how she felt Marvin, a Black male student, got treated differently when it came to his use of forbidden electronics. Though her teacher attempted to acknowledge that she did not intend to treat her unfairly, all three of the young women were adamant that it all boiled down to her not wanting them to experience success. At the mention of this being the motivating factor in how she treated the young women, Mrs. Simpson promptly left the room citing their anger as prohibiting the conversation from being successful[27]. Her behavior was indicative of how teachers used their power to not engage and simply shut down conversations with Black girls, which stripped them of the little power they had, and a was particularly racialized endeavor. In the next chapter we will explore in more detail the ways teachers routinely characterized Black girls as angry and unable to engage with them in positive ways. For now, however, the point I want to highlight is that following this interaction, the young women were convinced that their teachers simply did not like Black people. While on the surface, their reasoning as it being related to their ability to wear a weave may seem trivial, Candace's comments make it clear that it was really about the fact that she perceived White people to feel a type of way when Black people, in this case specifically Black girls, achieved excellence in a presumably White domain.

In a Fieldnote from February, I noted a reaction from Dominique regarding a teacher's joke about making photocopies of a discipline referral for a Black girl because he fully expected her to get one every single day. Though Dominique acknowledged that the student was likely to

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[27] This is a prime example of how White fragility manifested in JHS. When faced with the notion that there were racist motivations guiding how she interacted with the young women, Mrs. Simpson immediately could not tolerate the conversation any longer and withdrew citing the young women's "anger" as the reason.

get one because she did not get along with her teachers, she did not think it was an appropriate comment for this teacher to make. Despite its inappropriate nature, she knew it would go unchecked because the teacher was White and "White people get to say whatever it is that they want to say" in and out of school.

I documented another situation in February where a student expressed feeling as though her teacher's behaviors were racially motivated. In this case she explicitly names his behaviors as that of a "racist". She shared the following:

> *Mr. Corning is really pushing me today, he is mad about some crackers that got opened... So everyday the class goes to get lemonade, he gets mad at me today because I did not ask... he blocked me in the corner, he started screaming at me and I said oh that is not gonna happen. I started screaming back and I told him that I will throw away the lemonade to show you that I don't care. So I threw it away...then he went to email the principal and so I said I will text the principal, so how do you feel about that email. I swear he is a racist.*

While these are only a handful of examples, I shared them in chronological order to demonstrate that there was a consistent feeling amongst Black girls that their teachers interacted with them, as Black students and in some cases specifically as Black girls, in problematic ways resulting from their perceived bias as White people.

Concluding Remarks

Some facets of the educational model at JHS were promising towards creating an environment where Black children, including young Black women, would thrive. One could imagine that the partnership with NDN could have created an enriching environment. Within the NDN model, children were imagined positively and productively as they were situated as

engaged and responsible students who were willing and able to take control of their learning as important to their lives and those in their communities. One could also imagine how the implementation of Restorative Justice could have contributed to a positive environment for these children as well. Given that restorative justice focuses on the humanity of students and encourages shared responsibility for the success of the community, the implementation would suggest that Black students would be unlikely to be disciplined negatively and without regard for their larger academic goals and socio-emotional well-being. If the NDN model and restorative practices had been implemented with fidelity, JHS could have been a space where Black girls' agency would be supported, their confidence honored, and their independence endorsed.

The problem was that JHS struggled in its capacity to enact both the NDN model and restorative justice. This was partially due to fiscal restraints, which meant that a large portion of the teachers and administrators did not even know how the NDN model was to be enacted and thus did not have the tools to implement with fidelity. Another part was the tenuous situation the administration and teachers were in with regards to JHS' status as a "concern" school. They were under immense pressures to improve the student achievement. Ironically, the very students whose achievement was the most critical to raise were the very students the teaching faculty were incapable of working with—Black students and primarily Black girls. This incapacity, driven by the racial differences between the all White teaching staff and the student population, meant that they were unable to produce the very outcomes they needed in order to address the low achievement at JHS. These pressures may have magnified their sense of inefficacy in working with these students.

Although in the end, Mr. Ferguson and myself, were able to create spaces that provided the promise that these models had theoretically offered, the next chapter will demonstrate that in

the place of positive and productive constructions of Black girls that would have come via a true

implementation of NDN's model and restorative justice, teachers imagined the Black girls in

unfavorable and unproductive ways.

Chapter V:

"There's a Jekyll and Hyde Thing Going On": The "Strange" Construction of Black Girls' Socio-Emotional Identities in JHS

Overview

At the close of the previous chapter, I argued that JHS' inability to implement the NDN and restorative models with fidelity, and the racial mismatch between the students and teachers, contributed to their inability to adequately support the development of positive, productive identities for Black girls that the educational models had promised. In this chapter, I specifically explore how it was that school officials positioned Black feminine identities and capacities within their discourse given they were unable to produce the constructive identities that could be part of the NDN model depending on its implementation. By position, I refer to the ways that the teachers in JHS placed Black girls as members in a particular category that imbued them with: (a) certain rights and responsibilities and (b) assumed character attributes, knowledge, and authority[28]. I rely primarily on data from the formal interviews and informal conversations as documented in field notes.

Before beginning the discussion, I should acknowledge that who I was (i.e. a Black woman), and the work that I was doing in the school (i.e. supporting Black girls) undoubtedly impacted the nature of the formal and informal conversations that occurred with school officials. As I mentioned previously, from the beginning of my time in the field the school staff knew how

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[28] This definition of positioning is based on the work of Sosa & Gomez (2012).

deeply I cared about the Black girls in the school. They understood that beyond the research, I really desired to support the young women in a real and tangible way. As a result, I felt that early conversations with teachers were littered with attempts to say the "right" thing about the young women, so as not to offend me by speaking ill of students who I held in high regard. As the year went on, and I spent time with the school staff during the school day and after school at staff meetings as a near equal, I felt as though these kinds of moves decreased in frequency. As the school staff learned that I wanted to have authentic interactions with them, and that supporting the young women did not mean I was anti-adults, the relationships with them deepened and I believe their engagement with me became more sincere. The formal interviews and the majority of conversations and field notes I draw upon here, were held midway through the school year where we had more well-established relationships.

In this chapter, I argue that the teachers imagined their Black girls in two main ways: (a) as explosive—indicated through the use of the imagery of bombs when referring to their emotional (in)stability, and (b) as rebellious—indicated through the teachers' perceptions that Black girls were trying to disrupt authority relations within the school through their physical movements, insubordinate behaviors, and attempts to use me to circumvent school rules.

Framing the Conversation: Candace and the "Jekyll and Hyde" Thing

I begin the analysis with an excerpt from a field note in October 2015. It reads:

Before heading out of the RC to roam the hallways, Mr. Ferguson said, "you should hear what they said about Candace during the staff meeting". I asked, what did they say about "my Candace", as I dramatically took a step back and placed my hand over my heart to add a soap opera level emphasis. He recounted that Mrs. Simpson said things basically that would make him think that Candace was a "bad person" if he did not know her

personally. He could not remember exactly what words she used. He stated that he

wondered why she would say Candace's name and not just say a student who she was

having problems with. He felt as though her comments would "undoubtedly poison other

people's perceptions of Candace", which was an "unfair thing to do to". I asked if

anyone stood up for Candace and he said that Mrs. Taylor finally told Mrs. Simpson that

maybe she should talk to other teachers and see what was going on in their classrooms

because Candace was "doing well" in her other classes.

This field note revealed a conversation between Mr. Ferguson, the director of the Restorative Justice Center (RC) and me. In it, he recounted an incident that occurred during a recent staff meeting that I could not attend. He always made a point to fill me in when I missed a meeting and this day was no different. To his dismay, he shared that during this particular meeting, one of the 9th grade teachers began to openly and publicly speak about Candace, one of my favorite Black girls in the school (because her playful personality complimented mine), and with whom I worked very closely in *RISE*. He expressed that though he could not remember the exact words she used, Mrs. Simpson spoke in ways that would leave him, and likely others, thinking that Candace was a bad person if they did not know otherwise. Although he could not remember the specific details, it was likely that Mrs. Simpson was equating an unwanted action with being a "bad" person. Unlike White students, whose bad behavior wasn't taken as an indication that they were bad people, Mr. Ferguson knew that this would not be the case for a Black student and was concerned about the power of this view to taint how other teachers, who did not know Candace as well, would view her. As our conversation came to a close, I inquired if any of the 18 teachers who also worked with Candace, stood up to defend the student who I knew was not a bad person. Mr. Ferguson responded that eventually Mrs. Taylor stepped up to put an end to the smearing by

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suggesting that Mrs. Simpson go talk to others who did not have those same problems with Candace.

I remember leaving the RC after this conversation and thinking to myself that Mrs. Taylor's response was not quite the defense of Candace's character that I had hoped for. It was disheartening to hear that she had been spoken of in this manner in the presence of the principal, teachers, and the entire support staff. Despite being disheartened, I was not surprised. Even though I had only officially been conducting my study for two months, I had already been in JHS long enough to know that many teachers were like Mrs. Simpson and did not always imagine the Black girls in positive ways.

A snippet from my interview with Mr. Chase, a 9th grade history teacher, provides a compelling frame for the conversation about how Black girls' were imagined within JHS. I had asked Mr. Chase to generally describe the Black girls with whom he worked. He offered the following:

Candace, I've had her two years now. I had her last year too. She can be a super sweetheart… I'd say there's kind of a Jekyll and Hyde thing going on. Sometimes, Candace can be about as sweet, and as patient, and as respectful as you could possibly imagine a student being, and then on the other hand, I mean just really verbally abusive, and disrespectful, and you know what I mean. And she'll – so there's a switch that is flipped, and they can kind of go back and forth, right, as demonstrated by her. I saw it with Jana. I saw it with Dominique last – two years ago, so that's my first thing that comes to mind, just how volatile. It happens to be too that the Candace's stand out, but on a day-to-day sort of general basis, do African-American girls – like what stands out about African-American girls compared to other girls, I don't know if there's that…Kiki

stands out. Yeah, I mean I can't think of anything that stands out that much, as much as

just the volatility –that stands out that much.

Mr. Chase began his statement with a reference to the fictional story, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* written by Robert Stevenson in 1886. As the story goes, Henry Jekyll is a well-to-do professor who endures a constant internal battle between good and evil, which becomes personified through his dueling personalities. While "good" is reflected in his everyday persona as Dr. Jekyll, "evil" is reflected in his alter ego Mr. Hyde—a smaller, younger, cruel, remorseless, mysterious, and violent version of Jekyll. Jekyll uses Mr. Hyde as a disguise in order to be able to act upon urges that would be unseemly for someone of his age and stature in society. When Jekyll takes a backseat to Hyde, he no longer cares about friends, respect, love, and wealth. Thus, Hyde functions as the embodiment of Jekyll's heinous inner desires. As time goes on in the story, Jekyll slowly loses the ability to strategically control the extent to which Hyde surfaces. As a result, he experiences a destructive emotional instability and nearly unpredictable, dangerous nature.

The imagery of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is powerful, particularly as a way to describe an adolescent Black girl. At its core, the story is about an individual facing immense inner emotional struggles about who he wants to be. This struggle—a battle between a more or less good self and more or less evil self—manifests itself in his life in erratic ways that often result in chaos, destruction, and ultimately murder. In the end, good loses and evil wins as Hyde becomes the stronger, dominating, ever present personality. Based on the arc of the story, applying the metaphor of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to Black girls' identities, adultified the young women[29] and posits three main points:

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[29] This is similar to the adultification narratives we see around Black boys that position them as adults from a very young age (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ferguson, 2001)

(1) An existential battle was being waged within Black girls' bodies between dueling good and evil personalities;

(2) Black girls lack control over how and when these personalities surface; and

(3) Ultimately, the personality that dominated would be the one characterized by evil desires to shun morality, notions of respect, and societal conventions.

Mr. Chase's comments revealed all three points. Using Candace as an example, he asserted that she had good qualities—she could be a "sweetheart", "patient", and as "respectful as any student could be". However he also emphasized that she could exhibit qualities that were quite the opposite of this seemingly positive demeanor. He described her as "really verbally abusive" and "disrespectful". Next he described the shift between the two different personalities as one that was as quick and complete as flipping on a light switch. He suggested that this switch had no particular rhyme or reason that guided the manner in which it oscillates between on and off. Finally, he situated the predominance of Black girls' "evil" nature by suggesting that nothing about them stood out as much as their emotional volatility and abilities to perpetuate violence against others. He suggested the strength of his assertions by listing the names of several other Black girls whom he perceived to fit the description.

In reviewing conversations I had with teachers and staff about Black girls, though they did not use the framing of Jekyll and Hyde as with Mr. Chase, they *did* position their identities in ways that were accordant with the metaphor. It is important to note that within Mr. Chase's statement, he included the phrase "you know what I mean". As will be evident in the interview excerpts shared below, other teachers made similar rhetorical moves such "you know" or ended a phrase with the word "right". Sometimes they inserted laughter into the interviews in questionable ways. Though one could argue these rhetorical moves were simply a figure of

speech, I experienced it as an explicit attempt to co-opt me into agreeing with whatever was being expressed; as if in that moment the two of us were on the same team and "against" the Black girls in some way.

Tick, Tick, Tick: Black Girls as Emotionally Unpredictable and Volatile Bombs

One of the most enduring images from the Jekyll and Hyde metaphor is of an individual with a dangerous emotional instability that could, and often did, result in the display of a vicious demeanor and lashing out. Like Mr. Chase, school officials across JHS suggested that Black girls were emotionally unstable, unpredictable, and volatile. They did so by describing the young women using imagery related to a bomb. School officials frequently described Black girls as being "set off", "blowing up" and "exploding" within their interactions with their teachers—all characteristics that call forth the image of a bomb. Taken literally, a bomb is a weapon used to cause deep damage to the surrounding area in which it is implanted. It can go from relatively harmless, to incredibly dangerous within seconds of being activated. I saw this characterization of Black girls in many of my observations. For example:

> *Later on in the day Mr. Ferguson asked me to talk with Candace because Mrs. Fitzgerald approached him saying that she had been on her phone several times [during class] and had been overheard cursing loud enough at Allen [her boyfriend] for her to hear. She expressed that she wanted to approach her about it without there being a big blow up.*
> *–FN 8*

In this first example, Mrs. Fitzgerald desired to strategize with Mr. Ferguson and me around ways to engage with Candace regarding inappropriate phone use and her use of curse words. She fully anticipated that if she approached her without our assistance (and expertise), Candace would likely "blow up" and display negative behavior. Though in approaching us for help, Mrs.

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Fitzgerald indicated that on some level she believed Candace was capable of interacting in ways other than blowing up, her help seeking behaviors nonetheless demonstrated how ripe the image of volatility was in her mind. On another day in the field, I engaged in the following conversation with Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Chase, and Mr. Ferguson around a group of Black girls whose schedule had been switched to accommodate their need to make up credits. The field note reads as follows:

> *Mrs. Taylor explained to me that Anastasia, Candace, and Jana, were originally put into different [advisory periods] that were mixed in with the ninth graders. She felt that was not a good idea and had partnered with Mr. Chase to talk with the counselor about moving them to their own special classroom with students who were also 10th-graders but only had 9th-grade level credits. As this point, Mr. Chase chimed into the conversation and expressed that he thought moving them was going to be a problem because they had already seen their schedules. Turning his attention to Mr. Ferguson and me and stated that he wanted to prevent them from "blowing up". Mrs. Taylor immediately commented, "You know they will, it's them". While I remained quiet, Mr. Ferguson suggested that it was a fair concern to raise given whom we were talking about. –FN, 3*

In this example, the expectation of volatile behavior was explicit through Mr. Chase's initial comment that the young women were likely to "blow up", Mrs. Taylor's response certifying that it was almost a given to happen given who they were dealing with, and in Mr. Ferguson's validation of their statement. While Mr. Chase and Mrs. Taylor seemed convinced that it would be a near guaranteed response, Mr. Ferguson's validation appeared to acknowledge their concerns while still providing room to consider alternative actions. He did not agree that it

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would happen but did not suggest it was an unreasonable thought either. Although I was surprised by his validations of their statement, I understood the need to play politics within the school and wondered if that was what motivated his affirmations of their concerns, rather than a belief that they were predictably volatile. Unfortunately, the demands of the day did not allow me to follow up and confirm that this was the case. My own silence during the conversation was partially due to my pondering why the young women would become upset over being provided an opportunity intended to help them advance. The fact that the teachers seemed so convinced that it would be a problem, caused me to wonder if they knew something about what they were doing needed to be altered. As they spoke, I questioned to myself if, given my observation that they knew something was wrong about their plan, I should try to guide the conversation to talk about ways to enact a new plan rather than proceed with it as it was. While later into my time in the field, I would have undoubtedly spoken up, this was the first day of school and I was in no position to steer the conversation in that direction.

In a conversation with Mr. Bryant, he also used the imagery of a bomb to characterize the Black girls with whom he worked. He stated:

> *I'll tell you what. That's one thing I have learned is they [Black girls] are – when you see that they're not having it, it's best just to chill out and be like, "Oh, yeah, I get it." Once you do that a couple times, they'll start to come around because it does not do any good to push them because they will go – they will go off.*

Mr. Bryant stated that a critical skill he learned he needed to possess when working with Black girls was not to "push" them into something they had determined they did not want to do. He suggested that if he did, it would certainly cause them to "go off". When he made these comments during the interview, his eyes were opened wide and he shook his head from side to

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side as if he was remembering specific situations where they had went off. His non-verbal language told me that when he used the term "go off" he was describing an intense negative interaction. Though his notion of pushing them beyond their desires would suggest that there were clear actions that precipitated the negative emotions and behaviors that the young women displayed, Mr. Bryant seemed focused on only describing Black girls' capacity to easily erupt into deleterious behavior, rather than on considering the reasons that may have triggered it. It became very clear that he did not consider there to be any predictable trigger that would cause their reactions based on a later comment in his interview where he stated *"sometimes, anger management gets in their way…[they] just automatically flip out."*

When the teachers described Black girls using bomb-like characteristics, they vividly depicted a perception of volatility amongst the young women. It portrayed their personalities as centered around explosiveness, aggression, impulsion, and damage to others. What's important to note, is that the young women were not imagined as just any kind of bomb; they were constructed as ticking time bombs. The teachers imagined that they were always ready to explode. This was evident in the way that they identified sub-traits amongst the young women that they believed constituted the "ticking". In other words, the teachers identified characteristics they believed were the measured and subtle build up to an impending explosion. In their estimation, Black girls' bad attitudes and unresolved anger were two major modes of "ticking" that they saw on a day-to-day basis. These demeanors could signal a blow up was imminent, and would most definitely be displayed when it was occurring. Implicitly, the notion that the girls ticking time bombs suggested a belief that their behavior could be measured on a scale of intensity. While the worst on the scale was instances of the young women engaging in verbal altercations with their teachers, as what Mr. Chase hinted at in his characterization of the young

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women as verbally abusive, the other end of the scale was characterized by less dramatic "explosions" that were more likely to occur on a day-to-day basis. Though these daily explosions were not the most intense that explosions could get, when the teachers discussed them the sentiment that the young women engaged in a way that was unnecessarily negative, aggressive, and unpleasant was still present.

Ticking Through Negative Attitudes

Some of the teachers suggested that the ticking bomb was evident through the negativity that Black girls displayed in their attitudes. Mrs. Mann, the Spanish teacher, talked about this in her discussion of their perceived attitude swings. She stated early on in her interview that though many Black girls had the capacity to be polite, they had a hard time "*maintaining their niceness*". When I asked her to elaborate, she stated:

> *Um, their attitudes – they have attitude swings that are huge. Hmm. It's a little bit of a teenage kind of thing, but I see them heightened with African Americans. Sometimes they are not as able to show as much self-control.*

For, Mrs. Mann Black girls' difficulty with maintaining a consistently pleasant attitude was because they had "huge" attitude swings. It was unclear at that moment how she was defining pleasant, but given later comments in her interview, it seemed she believed the young women were pleasant when they used a quiet tone of voice and non-combative words[30]. Even though she suggested that typical teenage processes could be the cause of their negative attitudes, she immediately conveyed a belief that the process was magnified amongst Black girls, and was much worse than in other young women. She positioned her Black girls as unable to engage in the "typical" teenage process of developing self-awareness that would regulate the nature of the

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[30] Of course this raises the question of who has the power to define and judge what is considered a "pleasant" attitude to adopt.

swinging on a day-to-day basis. In advancing this claim, she situated their range of emotion as beyond the boundaries of "normal" teenage emotions.

I wanted to get a better understanding of the types of behaviors and/or demeanors that Mrs. Mann used to characterize Black girls as having "huge attitude swings". When asked to say more about this characterization, she responded:

Well, one of them – well, you saw when Aundra started listening to music and was just

jamming and dancing in front of the computer and she could not come out of it.

Mrs. Mann was referring to a situation where I observed Aundra (10th grade, Black girl) vigorously dancing (with primarily her upper body) while seated at her desk during the middle of class. As she listened to music through her headphones, she animatedly rocked from side to side and bounced up and down, as though she was in her own little world. Mrs. Mann approached her and verbally requested that she focus on her work, but Aundra continued to groove and did not acknowledge her presence. Though Mrs. Mann was adamant that Aundra could hear her and was intentionally ignoring her as way to avoid being held responsible for the work she needed to complete, it was unclear to me if she could actually hear her and was intentionally ignoring her. When I walked up to her, the music was so loud that I could clearly hear what she was listening too without using the headphones. I too tried to verbally get her attention and was unsuccessful. It took me putting my face nearly directly in front of hers to get her attention. Mrs. Mann used this as an example to suggest that Aundra seemed fine earlier in the class period (i.e. cooperative, ready to engage with her) but had, without warning, shut her out and had began doing what I had observed. She suggested that this situation displayed the typical mood swings that Black girls had in the way that Aundra went from being compliant with classroom norms, to seemingly "checked out" and "disruptive". She provided another example to illustrate her point that the

Black girls' emotions could not be predicted and but would easily turn from one extreme to the other. This time, she described a young woman who she perceived to be insubordinate on one day and seemingly cooperative the next. She shared:

> *I had another student also who was not feeling like doing a test and left the room. And she did not talk to me or talk to Mr. Ferguson. She came the following day, said sorry, and took the test. But that day, there was nowhere – she was not going to do anything.*

Mr. Richards also talked about Black girls' attitudes as a more subtle, lower level explosion that he encountered when working with them, particularly as he attempted to address misbehavior. He stated:

> *So, with my younger students, um, I have a hard time getting them actually focused, and then when, on occasion when I do approach them about putting the phone away or, you know, not talking to the person next to them, um, I do occasionally get kinda like this sorta attitude of like, you know, like, "You know, hey, could you put your phone away?" It does not go away. "Hey, could you put"—"I heard you the first time!" It's like—whoa! Okay, you know?*

In his experience, Black girls adopted an "attitude" in response to his verbal requests refrain from off task behavior and to re-engage with the lesson at hand. From his perspective, the attitude was characterized through sharp speaking and a snappish demeanor. Through the way Mr. Richards described himself as having to pause and take a step back in those conversations, as indicated through is use of the term "whoa", it was evident that he felt their attitude was extremely abrasive and threatening.

Mr. Bryant, the 10th grade history teacher, advanced the notion of Black girls' attitudes as a constant ticking when he shared his perceptions that their moods were highly temperamental

from day-to-day. During his interview, Mr. Bryant described himself as having a sarcastic, playful teaching style. He maintained that at his previous school, where the student population was less demographically diverse, the kids loved the way he interacted with them. However, he had learned that his style did not often work with Black girls at JHS because he could not predict what he would "get" from them from day to day. He stated the following:

> *You know, that's my key. I guess that is what my point is. [Black girls are] different from each day. Some days, you can kind of be with them on that level and they're cool, and other days, you don't know what happened. Obviously, it's not me. Right? But something happened to where they're just not playing.*

Mr. Bryant suggested that he was not able to be playful all the time with his Black girls because of the uncertain nature of their attitudes from day-to-day. He declared that in his experience, they could easily change from being level and cool to something that was diametrically opposed— possibly irrational and hot headed. He appeared to be oblivious as to what caused them to shift so abruptly, except the fact that he was confident it had nothing to do with him. In his confidence that it was "obviously" not his doing, he demonstrated a perception that whatever initiated the transformation had everything to do with the young women themselves.

Ticking Through Unrelenting Anger

Another way teachers talked about the lower level explosions that they witnessed in their day-to-day interactions was their characterization of their Black girls as in a state of unrelenting anger toward their teachers, peers, and in some cases, what seemed like life itself. By this, I mean that teachers positioned Black girls as perpetually mad, annoyed, enraged, and impassioned. They felt as though Black girls took these feelings out on them even when they had

done nothing to elicit the emotions. Importantly, they talked about their feelings of anger as if it were immutable and unlikely to shift no matter what they said or did.

During the interview with Mrs. Mahoney, the characterization of the young women as unrelentingly angry emerged when we discussed the types of strategies she employed to get through challenging situations. She shared:

> *Again, it kinda depends on the kid, because I know what—like, with a Dior or a Kiki, I just kinda back off because I think I would just get anger… Sometimes it gets bad enough that I have to call for Mr. Ferguson or Dr. Campbell [the interim principal]. That happened with—actually, it was between Sharonda and Greg. No, Sharonda and Dominique a few weeks ago.*

Mrs. Mahoney recounted that the strategies she employed were dependent on the particular student because with some, namely four Black girls, she expected that their response would simply be rooted in anger. She suggested that with those particular students she would sometimes chose not to deal with them and "back off". In expecting them to be coming from a place of anger, Mrs. Mahoney believed that she would be unable to achieve any meaningful progress towards resolution with these students without the assistance of other staff members. A critical point is that she did not suggest what their anger was in relation to, but nevertheless positioned it as something she was confident would emerge when she worked with these students.

The notion that Black girls were perpetually angry also emerged during interactions I recorded in my field notes. In one particular instance, I was in the RC in between restorative meetings when Mr. Chase, the 9th grade history teacher, stuck his head into the room to let me

know his perspective about an incident that had just occurred with a 10th grade, Black girl in his class named Chloe. He stated:

> *"I just wanted to let you know that Chloe just walked out of class. (Me: With no pass?) No pass just walked out. I'm just here trying to tell you my side of things. I asked her to remove her headgear and she got [pretty] upset. She says that no one (makes faint air quotes) else makes her take it off. But she is sitting at a table next to Greg and I am **always** (his emphasis) bugging him about his hood. So…(shrugged, the thought remains incomplete. I got the feeling he was trying to convey the idea that if he bugs Greg he has to bug everyone about it). I told her, I wasn't trying to harass her or anything, but she was still upset and refused to take it off. I told her I was gonna call her dad because I know, you know, (slight pause) that would motivate her. Maybe she's having a bad day (began to walk toward door). Maybe she hates me, I don't know. I'm still going to call her dad (now he was fully outside of the doorway of the RC). I'm not going to be the inconsistent, unfair, whatever teacher" –FN 16*

Mr. Chase described the situation as one where he felt Chloe's commitment to being angry when she was asked to remove her headgear (which I later learned was headphones), precipitated her negative engagement with him. He recounted that when he asked her remove the gear, much like he does for other students in that class when they were wearing something that was not allowed, she got "pretty upset". In realizing that she may have felt that he was singling her out, he suggested that he tried to deescalate the situation by affirming that his intent was not to harass her and make her feel targeted. However, he quickly ruled that out because her anger did not shift after he made that statement and she was remained committed to being angry with him for making the request in the first place. He ultimately decided that he did not know why she

demonstrated such intense anger toward him even when he had explained there were no intentions to single her out. In the end, he seemed to settle on that fact that he would not have an answer and that being an object of her unjustified anger was simply a price he was willing to pay for his commitment to fairness and consistency for all students.

Ms. Rose, a 9th grade English teacher, suggested that one of the few challenges she had with Black girls was that they often aimed unjustified anger toward her within their interactions. Prior to the quote I share below, I had asked Ms. Rose about the perception that because she was so well liked by the students, she did not have any problems working with them. She quickly denied the truth of such a statement and stated:

> *I've definitely had my challenges. I don't know, like Anastasia would not respond to me the first year. She'd get really angry with me...and it's – you get frustrated sometimes, like I lose my cool 'cause at some point it does become personal, like oh my gosh, like why are you yelling at me? Get out.*

Despite generally having a good relationship with Black girls, and much to her frustration, Ms. Rose described finding herself, at times, to be the object of their explosive behavior. Using Anastasia as an example, she suggested that at times she would get yelled at and would wonder to herself why it was happening. Her statement about getting frustrated and failing in her efforts to not take things personally, positioned the explosive behavior, and the anger that drove it, as likely having little to do with her, but having everything to do with something else that could not be identified. Although she tried to not let this kind of behavior "get to her", she maintained that she could not help but get frustrated at times by the mistreatment she experienced when the girls decided they would blow up. Unfortunately, when she did lose her cool it resulted in their

elimination from the classroom as indicated through her admission that sometimes she responded to their yelling by telling them to "get out".

Only the resident social worker, Mrs. Henry, offered nuance when unpacking the Black girls' perceived emotional volatility. She stated in her interview:

I think also part of the culture of teenage girls, especially African American teenage girls, is that it's not okay to show your weakness. So they're dealing with internal conflicts and conflicts externally, and it comes out as anger, when really it's just hurt inside. But they are not allowed to show that vulnerability as easily as maybe the White population who it's socially acceptable to share vulnerable feelings...I don't think it's socially acceptable in the Black community for females. And so it comes out as anger, but there's still, underneath the anger, there's still that raw hurt struggles that anybody else has. It's just that it comes out differently because of the cultural norms. I think that's something else that our students here struggle with in the schools. So that's kind of...

Though she too suggested that Black girls were likely to be angry very often, she provided an explanation that demonstrated she wanted to complicate the way their anger was understood. Her comments revealed that she did not position their anger as an immutable thing that they just carried with them because they wanted to, but as something that was intimately shaped by lived experiences and cultural norms that made it hard for them to express themselves so that their feelings would not turn into anger in the first place[31]. Ultimately, though she may have agreed with the other school officials about Black girls as being angry, she also positioned them as

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[31] Scholars have discussed how Black women are often socialized to portray an image of survival and strength. This often prevents them from "expressing their inner desires and needs, psychological distress, and depressive or anxiety symptoms and from seeking counseling or psychological services" (Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2004, pg. 430). Commonly referred to as the "super woman" or "strong Black woman" stereotype, Black women create a façade of self esteem, confidence, and self sufficiency while shunning the support they may need to address the hurt, anger, fear, and loneliness they really feel inside (Wallace, 1990; Watson-Singleton, 2017). Ultimately, women who endorse this stereotype are more likely to experience mental and physical health challenges (Donovan & West, 2015; Stanton, Jerald, Ward, & Avery, 2017; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016; Watson & Hunter, 2016)

hurting children who were vulnerable and had trouble communicating and processing that vulnerability. None of the teachers who were responsible for working with these young women on a daily basis offered such a complex rendering of their emotions and manners of interacting.

Black Girls are Rebellious

As though imagining Black girls as bombs was not bad enough, the teachers evidenced another construction of the young women in line with the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde metaphor introduced earlier. As a respected doctor, Jekyll was expected to maintain a certain level of respectability and decorum within his daily interactions with others. Hyde was a particularly desired personality for Jekyll to adopt because it allowed him to rebel against the socially induced restraints of respectability and indulge in impulses that he was typically forced to ignore. In many ways, the teachers in JHS characterized Black girls as possessing a desire to rebel, much like Dr. Jekyll, against the established order of the school. This perceived desire to go against the rules and policies that were in place, was particularly problematic for the teachers because they believed in their capacity to sustain an environment conducive to learning. Rather than imagining learning as a dynamic process of gaining knowledge through instruction, studying, and experience, the teachers imagined it as a function of the students' ability to abide by the school's rules and regulations[32]. The notion that Black girls were rebellious was evident in the teachers' labeling of them as: (a) inappropriately striving for control, and (b) as master manipulators.

Inappropriately Striving for Control

Many teachers suggested that Black girls attempted to gain control over school spaces in a way that was inappropriate given their student status. The teachers believed that there were

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[32] This characterization of learning as primarily tied to students' abilities to adhere to school norms minimizes the significance of other factors that would likely impact how students learned in JHS including: the school and classroom culture, teacher quality and various teaching styles, rigor of the curriculum, functionality of technology, and interaction with discipline policies, amongst others.

particular roles that students and teachers had, namely that students should do what they are told, when they were told, with no questions asked. They believed that the young women tried to did not act in accordance with their role in order to gain power and influence within their classroom spaces. Many teachers perceived Black girls' actions as direct attempts to undermine their authority and the general learning experience that JHS was trying to provide. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this line of thought not only constructed a social identity for the young women, but also played an integral role in their being positioned as the "less than ideal" (and less than human) student at JHS.

Mrs. Mann, the Spanish teacher, simply stated in her interview that she believed Black girls had a "problem with authority figures" when it came to how they interacted with adults in the building. Mrs. Fitzgerald, the art teacher, she stated the following in response to a question about what challenges Black girls faced at the school:

> *Challenges that they face at this school are knowing and honoring and respecting what acceptable behavior looks like in a professional environment. I don't think they know about you know kind of code switching or a behavior or language…. Which you know it's not just with those particular girls. There's other subsets too that have that issue. You know respecting the space, respecting the environment in such a way that - I think it has a lot to do with control. That they're trying to get some control over something that maybe they don't have control over. So they're trying to control their environment here. I don't know. Just guesses.*

In answering the question about what challenges Black girls face, Mrs. Fitzgerald's answer could be boiled down to one word: themselves. She suggested that the young women did not know how to "honor" the behavioral norms of the "professional" environment of school. She used their

lack of code switching in their behavior and language as evidence. Her comments implied that, whether intentional or not, the young women's ways of being outside of school were incompatible with the "professionalism" she perceived school spaces to require (the presence, or lack thereof of professionalism on the part of the teachers in JHS will be examined in chapters 8-10 as we explore the micro-interactions between Black girls and their teachers). Though she notes that this may be happening with other subpopulations in the school, she did not offer who those people were, and continued to describe why it constituted a challenge primarily for the Black girls. As she continued her interview, her statements suggested a belief that the proper code switching behavior for school would have been for the young women to accept a position characterized by limited power and control. She perceived their behavior and language to be unprofessional precisely because they refuse to accept this position and were intentionally interacting in ways they knew would disrupt the "appropriate" power structure of the school.

One area that was particularly frustrating for the teachers was how the young women moved throughout the building. The teachers believed that they moved within and between classes as they wished rather than in accordance with expectations. Teachers often lamented that Black girls used their feet as a misguided way to take control within the school. By this, I mean that the teachers felt as though Black girls did not want to be told when and where they could be someplace, and wanted to be in charge of their whereabouts at all times even when they were clearly supposed to be in class and under the teachers' watch. The teachers perceived their desire to control their whereabouts as a direct challenge to their authority because they, as adults in the school, should have had the power to dictate the comings and goings of the students. Again here, as we saw with Mrs. Simpson's characterization of Candace as "bad" in the opening ways, the

fact that the young women were doing something undesirable became conflated with their being undesirable people.

This feeling was evident when teachers talked about the propensity for Black girls to enter and exit their classes without securing proper permission. For example, Mr. Richards, the math specialist, described the Black girls in his classes as "standoffish" because he perceived they felt as though they could come to class whenever they pleased. He stated, that they *"usually, you know, kinda, 'I get here when I feel like getting' here.'"*

Ms. Kemp, a math teacher, also touched on the Black girls' rebellious nature as particularly evident in their coming and goings. In her interview, she stated:

> *So I'm thinking about my eleventh grade group. And I've had them now for two years. So again, with that group being the core, like again, if they are all doing one thing, like wandering around the hallways and coming ten minutes late to class, and they all wander in ten minutes late to class, I have a hard time tackling that with all of them because it's just like, "What are you doing?" And they see no problem with that because they're all together and it's like this force in numbers, or whatever.*

Ms. Kemp suggested that her Black girls had a group culture that promoted cohesion in behavior, whether in line or against school rules. She described their group cohesion as creating a sense of power from a "force in numbers", particularly in the moments when they were choosing fall in line against the school roles. Rather than actually doing the right thing, she suggested that their large group gave them enough (wo)manpower to make the behavior appear legitimate. I found that to be an interesting statement because it seemed to say more about her than it did about them. Being tardy to class was being tardy to class regardless of if it was one student or ten. Ms. Kemp's comments suggested that through processes of her own, *she* became intimidated at the

prospect of having to deal with a group of Black girls' and that it was a case where the girls were intentionally trying to create fear and force her into submission. As the interview continued, she appeared to confirm my suspicions that the real problem was that she felt intimidated. She expressed that she had a difficult time trying to re-establish control precisely because of their bomb-like nature that was discussed prior. She shared:

> So I kind of get some attitude from them, too, whenever it's like, "Okay. You are ten minutes late. What are you doing?" So that, I have a really hard time with that because I don't want a negative experience with those ladies. So sometimes I just ignore it. But then the issue compounds, so it becomes, I don't know. There can be attitudes like really quickly... And oftentimes I find myself, for whatever reason, not wanting to engage in that with that group because I know it's such a big deal that causes such negative interactions and attitudes. And then it's just all bad. [Laughter]

Ms. Kemp expressed that in the moments when the girls were actively rebelling, their explosive personalities became an impediment to her abilities to re-establish control—control over their bodies that may have been problematic to begin with. She found their "attitudes" so difficult to manage that she was apprehensive in even dealing with them. Importantly, her comment revealed that she would often choose to let their perceived rebellious actions go unchecked because she fully expected negativity to be present in the way they would interact with her.

The teachers desired to have control over when Black girls entered and exited the classroom at all times. Even when the teacher offered to send the young woman to the RC, if she left prior to the final directive to go, it was viewed as highly problematic and used to further support the characterization that Black girls were unable to follow expectations. For example, one day I observed this happen between Mr. Chase and Bebe, a 9th grade student, when she

came to work in the RC. While we were working, she needed to get her computer and headed toward her classroom to retrieve it. On the way, Mr. Chase stopped her as if to question her about her whereabouts. I interceded that I gave her permission to go get the computer. He expressed, with a shake of his head that *"she just walked out on her own to go to the RC"*. I relayed what she told me about him telling her to go to the RC if she did not want to go to class. He admitted that he did say that, but emphasized that *"she left before there was any written documentation, so she essentially just walked out"* (FN 27). In this instance, despite the fact that he had offered her a choice in going to the RC in lieu of being in class, he got frustrated by the fact that she went before there was proper paperwork and viewed it as an act of insubordination.

Not only did teachers take issue with how the young women oriented themselves towards arriving to class, they also felt that even once they got there they still would not relinquish the "control" they believed they should have over their whereabouts. In my interview with Mrs. Mahoney, the reading specialist, she recounted her struggles with getting the young women to do something in class. She recounted:

> *You know, and I still have it where, like, "Okay, let's do this, and let's, we need to move over here," and nobody moves…you know? [Laughter] So there's definitely still some respect issues or, "I'm just gonna do whatever the heck I wanna do." There's some of that attitude, too, that's more prevalent than I would like to see. I don't know. I'm gonna sound old, but it's like, "I would've never said that to a teacher! I would've never done that!" But—that was a different—different time. [Laughter]*

Mrs. Mahoney's comments revealed that the young women willfully decided to do whatever they wanted to do as opposed to what they are being asked to do and exhibited an attitude while doing it. Unlike the other teachers discussed prior, she framed their acts of rebellion in terms of respect.

She suggested that not doing what they were asked to do, when they were asked to do it, and developing an attitude over being asked to do something, was a disrespectful and inappropriate way to interact with a teacher. This was evident her shock and her statement that she would never have talked to or interacted with her teacher the way that they spoke and interacted with her. Her concluding comment that it was a different time relayed her feelings that most others who grew up in the era she did would likely have shared her perspective. As the interview continued, Mrs. Mahoney clearly situated this unwillingness to let her, as the teacher, be in control as a trait present amongst majority of the Black girls, even the ones she believed she had productive relationships with. She commented:

> *Yeah. I mean, I get the attitude sometimes, and even the girls like Jana, who I feel like I*
> *have a good relationship with, sometimes if I get a little bit more direct with her as far as,*
> *like, "Do this, do that"—"Mrs. Mahoney! Blah blah!"…You know, she'll be like—she'll*
> *just get that attitude right away.*

Mrs. Mahoney began her statement with situating Jana's (10th grade, *RISE* member) inappropriate sense of control again through a fictional attitude she adopted—one that unsurprisingly led to a negative interaction. Within the hypothetical situation, Jana was imagined to immediately fail to comply with a directive through an expression of verbal discontent. Mrs. Mahoney stated that, much to her surprise, she witnessed girls act like Jana even when she thought she had a good relationship with them. In advancing this thought, Mrs. Mahoney situated their lack of compliance as independent of her own personal actions because if it did indeed depend on her, it would not have been present amongst those with whom she worked with well.

Ms. Kemp also talked about Black girls' lack of desire to go along with the established program when they were in class. Talking about Arlene, an 11th grade student with slightly

below average achievement and a member of the original *RISE* group, she stated that, "*And she'll like ask to go to the bathroom and I say no. Like there are two people out. Like there's ten minutes left in class. And she'll just leave…so she just does what she wants*." In this example, Ms. Kemp described as situation where even after being told no, Arlene still continued to do what she wanted to do. Though Ms. Kemp's story does not provide answers to the questions I would have as to why she was denied the opportunity to use the restroom—was her class held right after lunch so students were expected to have already went? What was the basis for this informal rule about only two people being out at time? Was there valid reason to assume she really was not going to use the bathroom? —Her example nevertheless reveals the frustration the teachers had around Black girls' perceived desires to possess a level of control that met or exceeded that of teachers.

Master Manipulators

A particularly interesting way the teachers imagined the girls to attempt to gain control within the school was positioning them as master manipulators. The teachers characterized the young women as being intentionally deceptive in order to get what they wanted—primarily to engage in behaviors that were out of line with school rules and norms, and to disengage from the work occurring in their classrooms. Importantly, the object of their manipulation was primarily the RC and I. While there were times when the young women would attempt to get me to sign off on a pass that said they were working with me when they were not actually doing so, or to advocate for them in an instance that would extremely distort the reality of the situation, I never obliged. As a former high school student myself, and having the close relationships with the students that I did, I could recognize when they were attempting to misuse our relationship. I was skillful enough to put a stop to their attempts in a manner that was firm, but still reassuring that I

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wanted a relationship with them. In these moments, I would make sure they understood that I wanted our relationship to be one where neither of us felt taken advantage of, so that they would not take my refusal to accommodate their requests as a rejection of their overall desires for support. In other words, game recognizes game. As such, at no point during the study did I personally feel as though the young women manipulated me into doing anything. However, the teachers were adamant that I was being manipulated because I did not really "know" the young women and what they were capable of. The fact that the teachers believed that the young women were so clever and cunning that they could outsmart me, a 27 year old woman pursuing a PhD degree and a history of working with teenagers, spoke to their commitment to this negative image of the young women.

I observed the construction of Black girls as manipulative in very explicit ways. For example, in February 2016, in a conversation with Mr. Roberts, the math specialist, he stated that Dior (9th grade, low achieving) used the RC to get out of doing what she did not want to do—i.e. classwork. He believed that although she needed the kind of socio-emotional support that we provided, he did not believe she was always genuine in her desire to use the services. Mrs. Simpson felt a similar way about Candace as evident during an observation from October. The fieldnote reads:

> *As I was sitting in the art classroom watching BeBe do her work and providing*
> *assistance when needed, Mrs. Simpson came up to me and knelt near my chair. I turned*
> *my body to her to give her my attention. She asked me if I saw something. Not sure what*
> *she was talking about, I quickly glanced around and asked what she was referring to. As*
> *she leaned in for emphasis, she whispered, as if gossiping, "Did you see that Candace*
> *came in 20 minutes late and then asked for a pass to go to the bathroom?" I had not*

noticed anything and shook my head as to indicate such. I noted that I knew she was a

little late because she had been doing some work in the RC after class had already

begun. Almost instantly, she vigorously shook her head in defiance of my reasoning. She

*stated that she was "**always** doing this". She emphasized her point by suggesting that*

Candace was always doing anything to get out of class, including being in the RC to do

work. At this point, she began to speak aloud as though she was talking to herself and I

was no longer there. She lamented that Candace had already been "20 minutes late to

class" and should have "already gone to the bathroom". But no, if she were to say that

to her, she would "certainly blow up". As she made her last point, she rolled her eyes to

add to the dramatics of what she was saying. Returning from her soliloquy, she added to

me that she "did not know what to do" because Candace was "prone to blow up" and

she "could not handle her continued outbursts". She noted that Candace had gone to the

bathroom (said in a drawn out, sarcastic tone that suggested she did not believe that was

where she really was) and had been gone for a long time already. I responded that if she

was not back in 5 minutes I'd go to check on what was going on. Candace returned

before I needed to go find her.

In this situation Mrs. Simpson wanted to disrupt my positive perceptions of Candace by situating

her behaviors as manipulative. She perceived Candace to be using the RC, and the bathroom, as

a means of disengaging with the work in the classroom. While I can acknowledge that on

occasion Mrs. Simpson was right about Candace's desire to avoid work, I also knew that much

of the time it was because she was repeating the class and was planning on submitting the work

she had done last year[33]. Furthermore, a large portion of the time she spent with us in the RC was

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[33] Although this might seem like a terrible strategy it was actually not a bad idea. She was not redoing the class because the quality of the work she completed last year was low, she was repeating because she did not complete

productive work time. When I threw out the idea that Candace had been in the RC for some time

doing some school work early in the class period, Mrs. Simpson immediately denied that as a

legitimate way of making sense of her tardiness by suggesting that she always attempted to find

ways to get out of being in class, and the bathroom trips and RC were two of the ways she did it.

Through her tone and expressions, it was clear to me that this frustrated her. She said these

things to me as if she was revealing some secret that I had been in the dark about. Within her

monologue to herself she employed the "bomb" imagery as she suggested that she would be

unable to address the manipulation because Candace would have one of her routine "blow ups"

when approached. Though Candace was being compliant by asking, and receiving, a pass for the

bathroom, Mrs. Simpson seemed to twist her doing so into a negative action based on it being

intended to support a misplaced desire to be disengaged from her schoolwork. Rather than

believe she was actually in the RC doing work or that she actually had to use the restroom, she

was solely focused on *when* she asked for the pass in the first place as an indication of planned

deception.

The construction of Black girls as manipulative of the RC was also evident in an

interaction I observed between the principal and three Black girls (all 10th grade, *RISE* members)

in February 2016. I observed:

> *I was sitting in the RC with Jana, Trina, and Demetria. It was almost the end of the day.*
>
> *Principal Styles walked in. Jana had heard that the students in a neighboring school*
>
> *district got more time off for vacation than the students in JHS and asked him why that*
>
> *was the case. Within his explanation he said that it was because the students at JHS "did*
>
> *not go to class" so they needed "more time to catch up". He mentioned that by being in*

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enough of assignments to pass. Essentially she just needed to do more of the high quality work she had been doing
the previous year.

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the RC now, and not in class, they were "contributing to the problem". In fact, he said

they were "taking advantage" of their substitute teacher right now by being in the RC

with me. The girls expressed shock and confusion as to what he meant by his comments.

He explained that because the substitute did not "know any better" in terms of how the

RC worked, they had used that to be able to "get over on her". The girls, almost in

unison, dismissed his claims and offered reasons as to why they were there which

included to "work in a quieter environment" and to be able to "make up work they were

missing."

In this situation, Principal Styles characterized the young women as manipulating a

substitute teachers' lack of knowledge about school norms around the RC in order to gain a

legitimate pass to be in the center. Despite the girls' rebuttals that they were not taking advantage

of the teacher and had valid reasons for being in the RC—reasons that would support their

learning—Principal Styles remained steadfast in his belief that they had indeed been

manipulative in order to get the permission to be there. While I do not doubt that when they saw

there was a substitute, the young women quickly made up their minds that they would prefer to

be in the RC to work, I do not think they had to exploit their teacher in order to get permission. A

simple explanation of why they wanted to work in the RC, which they said they did in the

moment and did for Principal Styles, could have been enough for the teacher to oblige. Principal

Style's comments ignored the reality that students often came into the RC to get their work done

and *did* find it a more suitable space to work. It was not unimaginable that students would

request to come work in the RC because they did very often. Ultimately, because Principal Styles

believed the only way they could have secured permission to be there was through deception and

dishonesty, the girls were sent back to class and missed out on receiving some of the support, namely a quiet space to work, that the RC could have provided.

As mentioned prior, teachers believed the young women were manipulative in their use of both the RC and *RISE*. One day in the field in January 2016, I noted the following:

After RISE today BeBe came back into the RC stating she was late to class and was not being let in. I walked her back into the class and told her to have as seat while I talked to her teachers about her tardiness. I attempted to tell Ms. Rose why Bebe was late, but was directed to talk to Mr. Chase. When I approached him, I immediately apologized for her being late and explained that I dismissed the RISE group later than usual and did not leave them with much time to get to class on time. Before the words had finished coming out of my mouth, Mr. Chase shook his head in negation of what I was saying. At the time he was also loudly and aggressively crunching on baby carrots. His mouth was nearly filled to capacity, which made it necessary to act with much more emphasis than what was required in the moment. After chewing much of the carrot, he stated that RISE was not the reason she was late and that she needed to tell me the real reason. He intentionally said this loud enough for her to hear and threw a glance her way. When she did not answer, he continued to say that she went to get something when she was supposed to be in class and that she was misrepresenting herself to me. Still loud enough for her to hear, he turned toward me and said that he was not surprised by her behavior. I looked back and forth between the two of them at a loss for words. I reiterated that she was with me past the end of lunch and that I was sorry to have held her so long. Since she was already sitting in her seat and was no longer being denied entry into class, I figured that we could end the interaction there, and went back to the RC. Very soon after I got

back, Mr. Chase walked in and said that she still needed to get a pass from Principal

Styles to be let into the class. He was adamant that he did not want her to get off scot-free

after having pulled off a fast one on me.

In this excerpt, Mr. Chase clearly positioned Bebe as attempting to manipulate me into

explaining away her tardy. When I approached him to account for her whereabouts after the bell,

he immediately denied my explanation as it being *RISE* related. Instead, he maintained that she

had made a deliberate choice to be truant and was trying to use me to advocate for her to get

away with the behavior. As the facilitator of *RISE* I **knew** that we had run late. I acknowledge

that I did not walk her to class or observe if she really went to class immediately. However, in

the time that I let the young women out and when she returned, she would not have had much

time to go anywhere but to the class and back to the RC. Additionally, she did not ask me to have

the conversation with him; she simply told me she could not get into class and I took it upon

myself to walk her over and initiate the conversation. As was evident, my intentions were not to

apologize for Bebe and explain away her behavior, because I knew she was late. I was trying to

provide context as to how my actions directly impacted her ability to be on time. However, Mr.

Chase was not willing to accept that as the *real* reason she arrived late.

What added to the troubling nature of this interaction was that he purposively engaged in

the conversation with me in a loud volume so that Bebe would overhear. He wanted her to know

he thought she was manipulative. In fact, I felt as though his excessively loud speaking was an

implicit attempt to sabotage the relationship between Bebe and I had, by putting me in a position

where if I did not call him out for situating her as manipulative she may have felt as though I

betrayed her. This was an explicit power move on his part that could potentially have intimidated

Bebe or diminished her sense of agency. Fortunately when I went to talk to Bebe to ask her what

he was talking about and assure her that I believed in her honesty, I could see that his move had failed. She simply laughed and said, "I ain't paying him no attention. That man's crazy. He don't know what he talkin' bout".

Concluding Remarks

Within JHS, teachers described Black girls' socio-emotional identities in pejorative ways. They demonized the behaviors of the young women and positioned them as catastrophically negative. The girls' identities were presented as static traits, rather than socially constructed, malleable, and tied to specific contexts. The girls were only viewed as capable of interacting with others in ways that were harmful. Imagining them in this manner suggested that at worst they could not control negative emotions, and at best that they were intentionally enacting offensive and troublesome identities simply because they *wanted to*. The teachers' narratives gave me the impression that they believed the young women had an innate desire to be difficult and create problems for themselves and others. Most importantly, imagining these negative characterizations of the young women as inherent traits masked the prospect that they could be any other way. In fact, none of the constructions imagined them in affirming and positive ways. Rather, they situated what could have been natural displays of emotion into something destructive. As "ticking time bombs" the teachers viewed the young women as highly unstable beings and insinuated that they need to be prepared for an explosion at any given time, regardless of the situation, or girl they were working with. The teachers fully expected that volatility would be present in their everyday actions and thus, acted toward the girls in certain ways that were detrimental to their learning.

Importantly, the teachers' characterizations of the Black girls' identities subjected them to adultifying narratives. On the one hand the girls were acknowledged as the teenagers they were (and dealing with all that goes along with that), but yet on the other hand they were situated as savvy, manipulative, power-hungry people who were trying to "take over" the school. This contradiction highlighted how the teachers were unable to view the girls as the children[34] that they were, which ultimately minimized their need for protection, support, and nurturing that was likely afforded to other students whose identity, as children, were not denied them.

This raises an important set of questions—How were the Black girls supposed to be supported in learning, if the very adults who were supposed to care about them and teach them were afraid of them, angry at them, and disturbed by any show of emotion big or small? How does a teacher prepare to teach a Black girl if they imagine she is unpredictable and unstable? Can they anticipate her needs in a productive way? If her needs are not met, who or what is held responsible? Whereas the focus in this current chapter has been on how teachers imagined Black girls' dispositional traits in ways that impinged upon the young women's ability to establish productive relationships and successfully socially integrate into the classroom, the next chapter will reveal, the teachers did not imagine the Black girls' academic identities in more productive ways. In fact, they built upon the pejorative notions embedded in the socio-emotional characterizations in situating the girls' academic identities. As a result, the questions that I raised about preparing to teach the young women, anticipating their needs, and locating a source if the needs were not met, were not questions that the teachers were likely to consider. Although when it came to the academic side, the teachers could identify strengths amongst Black girls, the

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[34] Scholars argue that Black boyhood and girlhood are rendered unimaginable given discourse that positions them as older beyond their years and that dehumanizes them. This inability to see Black girls and boys as children contributes to notions that they need less protection, nurturing, support, and comfort, in and out of school spaces (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017; Dumas & Nelson, 2016)

potential of these strengths to facilitate academic success became marginalized in relation to a

larger set of deficit framings. Ultimately, the young women's academic identities were imagined

as so problematic that the teachers situated them as the source of their own academic

underperformance.

Chapter VI

Black Girls are Smart, but…: The Construction of Black Girls' Academic Identities

In this chapter I examine how teachers at JHS talked about Black girls' academic identities. For the purposes of this study, I define academic identity as comprised of two core areas: (a) academic attributes and (b) socio-emotional characteristics. The first core area refers to the capacity of students to perform academically and to demonstrate tangible skills and sets of knowledge that promote success in the subject area in which they are working—i.e. the ability to multiply variables in an algebra class or engage in close reading of a text in an English class. In theory, academic success is made possible if these skills and sets of knowledge are acted upon in productive ways. As such, the second core area, socio-emotional characteristics, refers to the behaviors and orientations that support the students' ability to "cash in" on the academic capital represented by their skills and sets of knowledge. This second core area consists of the generally accepted attributes of a "good" learner as well as teachers' perceptions of students' constructions of themselves as learners. While the attributes of a "good" learner consists of qualities like the ability to think critically, establish connections amongst topics, and engage in applied problem solving, the perceptions of students' demonstrations of themselves as learner includes their dispositions (i.e. ability to be focused, motivation), attitudes (i.e. orientation toward or valuation of school), and engagement (i.e. asking questions, preparing for an exam, completing assignments). As this chapter proceeds, I will demonstrate that though I conceptualized academic

identity as comprised of both cognitive and dispositional dimensions, when it came to Black girls at JHS, teachers were narrowly focused on the dispositional.

Framing the Conversation

As a way to begin the conversation about how Black girls' identities were imagined within JHS, I want to share the following field note that details an encounter between a Black female student, Candace, and her English teacher, Ms. Smith. Ms. Smith had worked at JHS for a few years and had a very positive reputation amongst both students and staff. Her former students talked about her as a teacher who pushed them very hard because she cared. The field note reads as follows:

Candace came in [to the RC] to talk about how she felt like she wanted to "give up [on school]" because when her parents asked about her grades, and ultimately saw them, they said "mean things" to her that "hurt [her] feelings". She told me that it was "hard" for her to do well when her parents "did not support" her and only gave her "attention" when she did "bad things". She began to cry as her long, wavy hair fell from her shoulders and slowly covered her face. She quickly wiped away the tears and did not let them fall down her cheeks. With a deep exhale of breath and look of exhaustion, she expressed that all she "wanted to do" was to "make them proud".

After a few minutes of comforting her, I walked her to class. When we got there, I called out to her teacher, Ms. Smith, to come outside of the classroom. She promptly walked over and greeted us. I expressed that Candace had been having a bad day because she was trying to work against the voices that were telling her that she was a "failure" and that she "was not going to make it". At this point I turned to Candace and told her that she was "smart, intelligent, and beautiful". At first, Ms. Smith looked taken

aback. However, she quickly said, "Yes Candace, you are definitely those things". Ms.

Smith then asked if this was "coming from something within the class" and Candace

shook her head and said "no". Upon Candace's answer, Ms. Smith asked where the

"negative voices" were coming from to which Candace answered her "parents". Ms.

Smith threw her head back and let out a heavy sigh of air. She then said, "that's tough—

I'm sorry that you are hearing that." She reinforced my perception of Candace as

intelligent by expressing that she believed she was "smart and very capable of doing well

in the class" because she was a "good writer". I asked if Candace could do her work in

the RC, given her stressful day, and Ms. Smith replied that "it would be possible" today

because of the way the assignment was set up. She added, "Generally students would be

more successful if they were in the class to get the notes". She expressed that she

understood if Candace would be more comfortable with me in the RC today given the

circumstances, but that she would "very much love" to have her in the class if possible.

Ms. Smith then provided Candace with the instructions of how to take down the notes and

told her that she would instruct her on how to save it after the lesson was over so as not

to interrupt what Mr. Bryant was currently doing. At this point, Candace decided to stay

in the class and walked inside toward a seat. Ms. Smith stayed after Candace had left and

expressed how she had heard "not so good things about Candace" from last year, but

over the last week she had shown herself to be "smart and a good writer". She said that,

"unfortunately", she was "impressed that Candace could write in full sentences because

many students [were] not able to do that in this school". She lamented the fact that the

"negativity" was coming from Candace's parents. I thanked her for her positivity in the

interaction with Candace and made my way back to the RC. –FN 13

I share this particular field note because it simultaneously illustrates what did <u>and</u> did not occur on a regular basis within JHS when it came to interactions around Black girls' academic identities. In this field note, Ms. Smith did two things that were rare amongst teachers in JHS: one, she verbally expressed an unfettered belief that Candace was a highly capable student, and two, she said all of it in the presence of Candace herself. As I will demonstrate in more detail below, what <u>did not</u> often happen in JHS was for teachers to compliment and affirm Black girls' academic identities like Ms. Smith did. Instead, what often occurred was that teachers engaged in a line of thought that suggested that Black girls had what I call *conditional intelligence*. By this, I mean they put forth the notion that Black girls were smart *but,* or notions that they would be successful *if* they could manage their dispositions and orientations toward focusing on their work.

Within this interaction, Ms. Smith did not suggest that Candace was conditionally intelligent. In fact, she conveyed a belief that Candace had strength in both core areas of academic identity. She conveyed an understanding of Candace's academic attributes when she expressed that Candace was particularly skilled at writing because that was a tangible resource necessary for success in her English classroom. In fact, Ms. Smith seemed particularly concerned by the possibility that Candace could have been getting messages to the contrary from within her classroom context. Though it was clear that Ms. Smith believed the most successful students were typically those who were in the classroom to receive all of the instruction first hand, the fact that she provided the instructions to Candace to complete on her own, and was willing to let her work in the RC, suggested that she believed Candace possessed the dispositions of a learner that would enable her to complete her work independent of the classroom, and still be successful. Later, Ms. Smith explained that Candace impressed her largely because she was able to display

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basic level skills within a student body that largely could not, which, in my eyes, tempered her compliments a bit. Importantly, however, she did not share this when Candace was present and only communicated to her a belief that she could be successful at JHS using her existing academic skills and behaviors.

Importantly this interaction highlights how, on occasion, I was able to facilitate opportunities for teachers to be able to move beyond notions of Black girls as conditionally intelligent. Within this interaction, Ms. Smith did not spontaneously begin to speak positively about Candace. Even as a teacher with a reputation for caring about students, providing these constructive comments to Candace was not a natural occurrence. I paved the way for their interaction through my initial affirmations of Candace as smart, intelligent, and beautiful. As indicated in the field note, Ms. Smith initially looked taken aback, as if what I was saying was unexpected, and as though she needed to think about what her next move should be. I do not highlight this initial reaction in order to suggest that the comments she ultimately made to Candace about her academic skills were not genuine; I believed in that moment (and still do to this day), that Ms. Smith was giving a sincere compliment during that exchange. However, I know that she had never expressed these sentiments to Candace before (based on a conversation I had with Candace after their interaction), and I do not know if she would have in that moment had I not set the tone for such an interaction to occur. By following the tone that I set, Ms. Smith was able to affirm Candace's academic identity such that she was eventually convinced that the classroom would be a productive space for her, and decided to stay even though she had the opportunity to do otherwise.

Characterizations of Black Girls' Academic Strengths

Interactions like what I had with Ms. Smith were rare as many of my conversations in which both teachers and students were present were brief and problem oriented—teachers presented me with a behavior problem and wanted me to provide them with a solution that would fix it. However, the more formal nature of the interviews provided me an opportunity to intentionally engage with them in a way that would teach me more about how Black girls were imagined when it came to their academics. Because they rarely offered spontaneous comments related to Black girls' academic identities, I tried to create opportunities for them to speak on this aspect of the young women's experiences like what I did for Ms. Smith. For the interviews, I constructed a protocol in which I explicitly asked them to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses with respect to both the academic attributes and the socio-emotional dimensions of academic identity. To my surprise, the school officials were unable, or lacked the desire, to hold a conversation specifically about the academic attributes inherent within Black girls' academic identities. When explicitly asked to speak to this area, none of them provided answers that spoke to the tangible skills and sets of knowledge that I identified as the first core area in my definition of an academic identity. Rather, they all provided answers that would be categorized as speaking to the ways the Black girls demonstrated themselves as learners—i.e. the socio-emotional characteristics.

I begin with how the school officials discussed the academic strengths of Black girls. Interestingly, many teachers seemed to have difficulty in coming up with ways to answer this question as indicated by longer than usual pauses before answering and increased verbal cues (i.e. um, uh, nervous laughter) that indicated a loss for words. In responding to a question about academic strengths, Mrs. Mahoney, the reading specialist, described Black girls' abilities to think deeply as one. She stated:

I think that when I can have small group conversations or one on one conversation, I can

have some very deep conversations, some very—there's a lot of thinking going on.

There's a lot of, they can verbalize a lot of things that I had no idea was up there.

In her response, Mrs. Mahoney highlighted her experiences working with Black girls that were capable of engaging in deep thinking that was verbalized when asked to share. Interestingly, based on her statement that she had "no idea" what was going on in their heads, it appeared that the depth with which they were able to speak about their coursework took her by surprise. Even in her attempt to provide a compliment, it is evident that her primary assumption about the girls is that during class time they could not, or choosing not to think substantively when engaging in academic tasks.

Mr. Richards, the math specialist, also shared his impression that Black girls' thinking abilities served as strength. In his interview, he indicated that he was impressed with their ability to quickly establish connections between ideas. Specifically, he noted the following:

But it's really, you know, me giving a student a kernel of an idea and them really running

with it and going, "Oh, wait, well, then how does that apply here, and then what about

this?" And they really tend to kinda branch out quickly from an initial thought and really

start looking for other connections, and so—that's definitely [a] strength that I see.

Mr. Bryant, the 10th grade history teacher, similarly felt that his Black girls were particularly adept at creating connections between class material and their lives—which he took as evidence of strong thinking. He believed that the young women, "*[had] a really good ability to see things – to connect things to their world.*" He believed that the ability to link ideas and concepts from their coursework with their out of school lives aided in their ability to have things

"*make more sense*" to them. He felt that it would eventually take them a long way towards developing other critical abilities.

However, the majority of the teachers and support staff interviewed quickly veered from academic attributes to the strengths that captured the socio-emotional side of Black girls' academic identities. On top of their abilities as thinkers, the school officials also suggested that one of the strengths that Black girls had was their resilient nature. They characterized the young women as continually putting forth effort when it came to their coursework and engagement in school, despite great challenging situations at home (and though not stated, as indicated in previous chapters, incredibly stressful and problematic conditions at school). Mrs. Macer, a support staff member, stated in her interview:

> *Well, they're very, very resilient. They really do. They try really hard. They work really hard…so I mean they're resilient little kids, and they are hard-working kids, and they find ways. They're trying is what I mean. They are trying really hard to succeed. So that is what I notice, that they are not quitting; they try. With all that stuff stacked against them, they still keep on going…they're tough little boogers.*

Mrs. Macer labeled the Black girls she worked with "resilient little kids" by asserting that even in the midst of challenges that would normally prove to be difficult for a young student to overcome, they continued to exert high levels of effort. Their designation as "little kids" is interesting given that the pendulum had swung so far on toward positioning them as adults in the characterizations of their socio-emotional identities. She suggested that they had a strong work ethic that did not allow them to give in or quit even when the odds were not in their favor and circumstances seemed stacked against them. In a rare show of affection from school staff, she

referred to them as "tough little boogers" and appeared to take some pride in their level of perseverance.

Mr. Clark, a math teacher, shared a similar perspective about their strengths being how hard they tried to be successful. He was one of the only teachers to require little prompting to speak on the positive aspects of Black girls' academic identities. In fact, he was the only teacher who said that some of his "best" students were Black girls. As his interview preceded it was clear however, that "best" did not necessarily equate with high achievement. In his interview he stated:

> *Well, I think just really going after the answers, really trying to understand it even if they struggle. Just really diving into it. I had a conversation about a student with the speech pathologist; I think is what her job is...She's like I don't know how she's doing so well. Like, she's got some deficits that are serious. But she's just going for it and she's really trying, like, so hard. She pulls off a B because of it. She definitely has some deficits. You ask her to describe something sometimes and she just totally misses the mark, but she's got fantastic work on her page. And I think, you know, it's that one student, but I think I see that a lot*

Mr. Clark shared the example of one particular student who, despite "serious deficits" (which I will talk about in the next section) nevertheless maintained above average grades. He correlated her grades directly with the incredible amount of effort she put in. Although she was described as often "missing the mark" when asked to verbally explain something—which may in part be related to her need for speech pathology—he maintained that her submitted work evidenced how hard she was working. Mr. Clark maintained that though she was just one student, in his experience, there was a pattern of resilience that he often witnessed amongst the Black girls at JHS.

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Ms. Kemp, a math teacher, also commented that even in the midst of low academic performance, Black girls demonstrated a wiliness to work hard. She stated:

And that hard working aspect comes in a lot because they'll do poorly, like a D or an F or a C, and want to retake it, which is great. So they're hard workers that will cause them, then, to be able to like get quality grades, or like quality like content understanding because they'll like try to make things up, which is good.

In this case, Black girls' work ethic was demonstrated through an unwillingness to let a failing grade stand as it was, by availing themselves to opportunities to fix it.

When their effort was not enough and they could not do it on their own, school officials suggested that Black girls were very up front with their teachers about getting the support they felt they needed. The word "self-advocate" was commonly used to describe this particular set of actions. They suggested that the girls who advocated for themselves knew what support they needed and were not afraid to go after it. This included identifying areas of concern, asking questions, and making requests of their teachers for additional support. Mrs. Fitzgerald, the art teacher, named "self-advocacy" among her list of top three strengths along with "prior knowledge" and "exposure to different things". Mrs. Mann, the foreign language teacher, also named "self-advocacy" as strength. During her interview she recounted a story about being surprised by the success of a student she had, "despite her socioeconomic limitations". She stated that the young woman was successful primarily because she advocated for her to receive "extracurricular opportunities" that would "supplement her learning" and help "prepare her for college." Mrs. Mann spoke of this young woman as being a part of the group of Black girls who were "*very clear about what they want and demand it*". It must be stated that it is highly

problematic that Mrs. Mann seemed to assume that someone with modest socioeconomic origins is by default positioned to not be academically successful[35].

Finally, Mr. Clark shared his view that Black girls' self-advocacy was a strength. He suggested that a part of working hard for them was actively seeking out the support they needed to be successful. He stated:

I think they're definitely willing to advocate for themselves…Yeah. I mean I'd say that would be, like, the strongest thing is just the advocating for themselves. Like, when I'm thinking about third hour with Jasmine and Tiana and Dominique, they're like, now come over here and help me, like. [Laughter] So they're really trying hard to be successful and looking to get what they need and really reaching out for it I feel like.

Despite the hope that these positive characterizations of the young women's academic identities engendered, it was unlikely that the young women would ever be able to deploy them in a productive fashion because these presumably positive characteristics, were often converted into negative traits elsewhere in the school officials' own discourse, or situated negatively by others. That is, the very qualities that many teachers struggled to acknowledge as strengths rarely remained so in an unfettered way because they were ultimately undercut by other suggested negative dispositional traits amongst the young women. Even having attempted to facilitate opportunities for them to characterize Black girls' academic identities in a positive and productive manners, the school officials' narratives ultimately failed to substantially validate and affirm the young women's academic strengths and focused nearly exclusively on their weaknesses.

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[35] Scholars have explicated how teachers often hold lower expectations for students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Landsmen, 2004; Rist, 1970). This literature suggests that these low expectations sustain, and in some ways exacerbated, the magnitude of the opportunity and achievement gaps we see between students of color and White students (Carter & Welner, 2013; Milner, 2010; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010).

Characterizations of Black Girls' Academic Weaknesses

After short conversations about the academic strengths they associated with the girls in their school, I prompted the school officials to speak about the weaknesses they saw. While they had experienced some difficulty in coming up with suitable answers that would affirm the young women as possessing a set of advantageous skills and dispositions, when it came to the areas in which the young women struggled, there was no shortage of answers. At first, when the school officials offered reasons why they believed Black girls underperformed, it seemed as though they wanted to make sure that I knew, that they knew, that there was obviously a diversity of performance amongst the group of students, and that they could not be speaking about everyone in their commentary. I mention this because it was a different approach than how they characterized Black girls' social and emotional behavior as described in Chapter five. In those conversations, they seemed more comfortable with making sweeping claims that lacked nuance. For example, in her interview Mrs. Taylor, an elective teacher, stated:

> So there's a full gamut. You have some of them that are academically sound, they know what they want to do, they have the drive, they move forward, their grades are fine. You have others that when they fall behind because of family issues, medical issues, childcare issues. They're ready to give up.

Mrs. Taylor acknowledged that there were Black girls who were succeeding at JHS. She described them as knowing what they wanted and having the drive necessary to get the work done—i.e. being a self advocate. However, she also described another set of students within this population who did not have the same drive because they seemed ready to give up on their schoolwork in the midst of tough situations—i.e. lacking the resiliency that others viewed as a strength. Importantly, her reasoning did not situate the girls as innately unable to do academic

work, nor suggested that they did not value their education. Instead, she implied that the less successful Black girls likely had drive, like their peers who were more successful, but life situations did not allow their drive to be actualized. There were many teachers whose comments, like Mrs. Taylor's, expressed the sentiment that the achievement patterns amongst Black girls at JHS were varied—communicating implicitly that there was an even mix of both high and low achieving Black girls. However, both they and I knew that a majority of the young Black women at JHS were underperforming as per their grade point averages and standardized test scores. Thus, in speaking about Black girls' who were lower performing, the teachers were talking about a majority of the population, despite their discursive attempts to suggest otherwise.

In speaking about their underperformance, like with their discussions of Black girls' academic strengths, few of the teachers focused on Black girls' academic attributes. Amongst the few, there were general statements that suggested that the girls lacked essential academic competencies. In his interview Mr. Chase, a history teacher, stated this fact simply and succinctly when he said, "*there are some serious deficiencies…those are real. They are really far behind.*" Mrs. Macer, a support specialist for students with individual education plans and disabilities, stated in her interview that she believed that a lot of the young women had a "*lack of an academic foundation that would allow them to be able to easily complete credits in high school.*" While Mr. Chase and Mrs. Macer did not state what exactly the deficiencies were, Mrs. Fitzgerald went into more specifics about what she believed they were when she stated, "*Low reading levels, low math levels, low reasoning levels, inability to think critically*". Though Mrs. Fitzgerald came the closest to naming tangible skills that were likely impacting the way the young women performed, none of the teachers mentioned here, or the school officials in general, provided detailed assessments of Black girls' academic incompetency.

Furthermore, evident within Mrs. Fitzgerald's comments was a lack of consideration of the structural inequalities that may have led to these individual level deficits. This inability to identify institutional inequalities while at the same time listing deficits was apparent in nearly all of the interviews with the school officials. Interestingly, they *could* identify perceived problems within the structure of the students' families and communities, often referred to as factors "beyond" the students' control. In addition to pathologizing the Black girls, they were pathologizing their families and communities too[36]. I say this because all evidence suggests that they did not know the young women well enough to have access to the intimate knowledge that would support major claims about their out of school lives. Mrs. Macer stated:

> *There are some issues usually at home. I don't know what they are all the time. Sometimes I do. But there's always some kind. Either there's a financial issue, which is very heavy on the kids. Or there are family issues going on, or like sometimes it's homelessness kind of like moving around a lot, a lot of pressure on the kids. So I notice that, and that affects here in all areas.*

Mrs. Macer, imagined that some young women experienced pressures emerging from family situations, such as homelessness or financial insecurity that negatively impacted their ability to perform academically. Mrs. Mann, the foreign language instructor, recounted a similar perspective in her interview. When asked why she believed the Black girls were struggling to be academically successful, she responded:

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[36] The pathologizing of Black families and communities has a history that dates back to slavery where slaveholders intentionally prevented the formation of strong familial bonds amongst the slaves (Staples, 1971). In the 1960's the Moyhinan report argued that the educational failure amongst Black children could be directly tied to the deviant, mother-headed Black family with an absentee father, which ensured the intergenerational transfer of poverty (Berger & Simon, 1974; Gans, 2011). Within the last decades, scholars have implicitly argued that Black families do not provide their children with the tools necessary for academic success through discussion of their challenges in creating productive school/home partnerships (see:Lareau & Horvat, 1999) and perceptions of a dearth of academic, cultural, and social capital (Kaljmin & Kraaykamp, 1996; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Yosso, 2005)

I think that they also need resources to help them with their home lives because it affects

them a lot. There are lots of things going on at home that affect the way they learn and

the way they can behave in school. Like having sick parents, having to take care of

siblings and things like that...affect them.

Mrs. Mann articulated feeling as though the Black girls' familial responsibilities constituted a

block that impacted the way they learned and behaved in school. Ms. Rose also spoke about the

detrimental effect of students' home lives on their academics. She noted:

And so you see some students that – some of the girls that struggle at home or have issues

that they feel comfortable here. So it's like their safe place, because I'm pretty sure Dior

only comes to school 'cause she wants to be here and be out of her house. Which is a

powerful thing if you think about it, the fact that she wants to be here.

Ms. Rose expressed her perception that some of her Black girls experienced school as a safe

place away from difficult issues and struggles at home. Though she does not go into any specific

details about the exact nature of the issues they face, her comments about Dior's desire to be at

the school as "powerful" suggests that the issues were significant. Ms. Rose's perspectives

implied that she, and likely other teachers, had no idea how the Black girls' actually felt about

school and how the teachers' constant pathologizing and negativity impacted them.

Ultimately however, the interviews and informal conversations revealed that the school

officials believed Black girls' primary academic weaknesses, which could explain their under

performance at JHS, was that they adopted problematic dispositions and orientations toward

school. When it came to their academic identities, teachers focused on the socio-emotional

aspects and argued that Black girls were: (a) mismatched with the NDN model and lacked

discipline in their scholarly demeanors, (b) disengaged, and (c) academically insecure. As

alluded to previously, the teachers demonstrated inconsistencies in the ways they spoke about the Black girls' academic identities. For example, on one hand they were deep thinkers and hard workers and on the other they were not focused or engaged in school. Throughout the discussion that follows, I will highlight these inconsistencies as a preface to an argument about how teachers were unable to attend to Black girls' academic identities in a whole and coherent way that would have allowed them to intervene and facilitate greater success.

Black Girls are Not NDN Kids: Mismatch with the NDN Model at JHS

An overwhelming majority of the school officials talked about Black girls in a way that suggested problems emerged because they were not a good fit for JHS, particularly given the influence of NDN. Initially, when teachers spoke about this fit between JHS and Black girls, it appeared as though they were leveraging a critique of the NDN model and not the students themselves. As indicated in Chapter four, JHS was a partner school in the New Design Networks of schools. This partnership was intended to assist schools in their efforts to re-design their structure to incorporate greater levels of innovation. As such, there were many departures from the traditional educational model that you would expect to see in a public high school—i.e. classes were cross disciplinary, team-taught, and project based. All courses were structured to utilize a one-to-one computing system and an online classroom hub.

When teachers spoke about a potential mismatch between the young Black women and the school, I first believed it was these aspects they found problematic. This was because they indicated that Black girls' dispositions were inconsistent with norms of "good" NDN student, they couched it between statements that *all* students were likely to experience challenges within a project based, technology rich environment. However, it was difficult for me to believe that they were sincere in their beliefs that *all* students would experience these challenges because

they only ever used Black students when citing examples of a potential mismatch with the model, and quite often, Black girls specifically. If, in fact, *all* students were struggling with the model, why were they only identifying Black students as the examples of mismatch?

Within their interviews, it quickly became apparent that teachers had few issues with the model itself, which is ironic because they were experiencing difficulties with implementing it with fidelity. It became increasingly clear that their statements about the mismatch between NDN and Black girls was primarily a means of situating the girls as uniquely lacking what it took to be successful within this particular school environment. While none of the teachers explicitly spoke of the young women as mismatched with JHS as a whole, they did position Black girls' as lacking a fit with many of the key components of the NDN model that constituted a large part of their learning experience—i.e. self-drive, discipline, collaboration, effective use of technology, and independence.

General statements about mismatch with NDN model

Teachers made general statements about Black girls' as mismatched with the NDN model. Mrs. Mahoney was one of the teachers who felt Black girls lacked the abilities to fit wit the NDN model. Having asked why she thought the achievement patterns of Black girls in the school trended downwards, she suggested that JHS required students to engage with their learning in a way that was not what she saw from Black girls. She stated:

> *Because, like, a lot of New Design Network is coming up with your own ideas, coming up with, "Oh, I need to know that, so I need to advocate for myself and research that. I need to come up with my own questions. I need to teach myself that." So I think, overall, James High—the kind of kid that would do the best here is a motivated, self-disciplined kid that's really into learning. Well, that's not a huge percentage of kids in the whole nation*

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that are really suited for that. So I do think that it's hard, because they want—a lot of

times, they wanna be spoon-fed answers, and they're not spoon-fed answers here. They're

supposed to be exploring on their own, so.

According to Mrs. Mahoney, NDN schools worked best for students who readily engaged in the

independent exploration of ideas. In her estimation, Black girls wanted to be given answers. She

suggested that the type of student that did well in a school like JHS, was one who had intrinsic

motivation, self-discipline, and a love for learning. She maintained that many children were not

suited for this kind of work and that Black girls were no exception. However, given the fact that

a small group of students within JHS were doing well, which she was keenly aware of, the model

was not problematic for all students—just her Black female ones. Interestingly, Mrs. Mahoney

had elsewhere in her interview suggested one of the strengths she saw amongst her Black girls

was their ability to be deep thinkers. I would think that the ability to think deeply about a topic

would indicate at some level that a student was "into learning", and in fact did not desire to be

spoon-fed because they had the capacity to come up with their own ideas independently.

Mr. Chase also spoke about a mismatch between the Black girls' learning styles and the

NDN disposition as crucial to making sense of the achievement trends within the group. During

our interview, I inquired if he felt Black girls had a harder time doing well at JHS. He

responded:

Do I think they have a harder time at JHS specifically? Yeah, JHS requires – like you're

meant to learn – one of the goals of JHS is to build the skill of collaboration, of time

management, of how to operate, and all these little skills that sort of transfer into how do

you operate in a workplace or whatever. Right? And that's hard for a lot of kids, a lot of

freshmen, when you have a computer, and when you're sitting at tables looking at each

other. And because – I don't know – Black girls are, generally speaking, much more

outgoing and communicative, then it kind of, well, sets them up in a way. That freshman

year is going to be tough. Learning that you can't talk all the time, you can't be off-task

all the time, you can't buddy up with your buddies around you all the time, or get

absorbed in this cool piece of technology that's going to distract you. I guess it's just

managing yourself. Managing your responsibilities is a bigger chore here than it is

maybe at any other school I've ever been at and given the freedoms they have.

Mr. Chase asserted his belief that Black girls *did* have a harder time doing well at JHS because they experienced difficulties exhibiting the skill set that JHS required—namely, that they were frequently off task, easily distracted by their technology, came into school wanting to over overly social and "talk all the time" rather than be fully engaged in their coursework. Oddly, his claim was that because Black girls were more social they were not setup to succeed in a system that required high levels of collaboration. In fact, their outgoing and communicative nature is likely an asset in such a setting as qualities of this kind were necessary for good collaboration. Even more interesting, Mr. Chase described this particular skill set—collaboration, time management, knowing how to operate technology—as a goal students were to reach whereas other teachers, such as Mrs. Mahoney whom we just heard from, treated this set of skills as if they were a prerequisite for being a student at JHS. In either case, however, Black girls were perceived to come up short. Ultimately, Mr. Chase settled on their biggest academic challenge as being that they were unable to manage themselves and their responsibilities, which were imagined as critically important skills for students to have at JHS.

While thus far I have evidenced teacher statements that spoke in general terms about how Black girls were mismatched with the NDN model, I will now turn to the specific aspects of the model they suggested they girls struggled with.

Mismatch 1: Black girls are not suited for the project based model

Mrs. Mann suggested that the project-based model employed at JHS, a key component of the NDN model, was a problem for Black girls. In her estimation, they lacked the particular organizational skills necessary for successful participation in project-based work. She revealed this perspective when asked what the biggest challenges were for Black girls within JHS. She responded:

> *With the groups I'm working right now, it could be organizational skills, how especially with the kind of work that we are doing, which is project-based learning, they have trouble organizing their work so that they can be completed successfully in time*

Mrs. Fitzgerald also articulated a belief that Black girls performed less well in JHS because they lacked the necessary skill set required for project-based learning. While Mrs. Mann pointed to organizational skills, Mrs. Fitzgerald pointed to more dispositional traits as driving the incompatibility. She stated:

> *Well, you know the project-based learning is based on more independence and taking ownership. And that might be a hindrance to somebody that does not have that work ethic, that drive, that impetus, that desire...It's a new experience for - you know most of our freshman struggle with it...No matter what.*

Mrs. Fitzgerald was one of the teachers who attempted to temper the evaluation of Black girls by suggesting that their mismatch could be due to the fact that they were undergoing an experience that all students went through. Yet, she was obviously responding to a question that

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asked about the specific concerns she had about *Black girls*. In her estimation, a successful

student within a project-based learning classroom had to demonstrate independence and the

ability to take ownership. She contended that from her experience, Black girls did not have these

qualities. She perceived them to lack work ethic, drive, and a desire to complete their work—

qualities other teachers suggested were their strength. Importantly, akin to the pathologizing of

Black families and communities that was shared earlier, she believed they did not have these

skills because their value system was not one that held academic success in high regard.

Mismatch 2: Black girls are minimalist in their work

Another way that teachers suggested that Black girls could not accommodate the NDN

norms was through their comments about the minimal effort they put toward completing their

work. Even when teachers acknowledged that Black girls were turning in assignments, which

could at some level indicate successful engagement with the NDN model, they complained about

the *quality* of the work being turned in. The teachers stated that they often observed the young

women to adopt a minimalist attitude toward their work, which meant that their assignments

were often perceived as not meeting expectations. Mr. Richards, the math specialist, made this

point through a story about his students who were content to just be done with their work even

when it was obviously incorrect. He shared the story in the following manner:

> *Even to get into like a little bit of a specific thing here—with math, like, just kind of a*
>
> *general number sense of just, I think a lot of students are happy to kind of, "Alright, these*
>
> *are the steps I'm supposed to do, there's an answer, I've plugged it into the calculator—*
>
> *done."...But does that answer make sense? You know? And that's often another step that,*
>
> *you know, is skipped over is—you know, you've got each—I'm trying to think of a really*

good example off the top of my head...But like, this bag of potato chips is five ounces, and

it sells for $1.50, so how much does it cost per ounce? "Oh, well, $200.00."

***Alaina**: Oh, my gosh. [Laughter]*

***Richards**: Okay, you divided the wrong way, right? But they're just like, "Oh, got the*

answer—done."

His example highlighted an illustration where student with whom he worked (who can assume is

a Black girl based on the nature of the question) presented him with an answer to a question that

he believed should have immediately stuck out to her as wrong. While given his mathematical

expertise, he could quickly figure out what happened that led to the wrong answer, he felt that

the student was (a) obviously not engaged with the work because logically the answer could not

have been that high, and (b) was not interested in doing the work to figure out what went wrong

out of her desire to be done and move on. He suggested that this student, and others like her,

lacked the initiative to interrogate their answers to make sure it made sense and fit the problem

they were asked to solve. In conveying his perception of the interaction, he excluded the prospect

that this might have been evidence of the students' mathematical misunderstanding which would

have been consistent with earlier comments that the girls lacked a strong academic foundation.

Mr. Bryant also suggested that Black girls were minimalists (to a fault) when it came to

completing their work. When asked about some of the academic challenges he felt his Black girls

faced, the following exchange occurred:

Not knowing what a good assignment looks like, [they will] just say, "Well, I did it," and

not read the rubric or not understand what I was asking them to do. Sometimes, students

think just turning something in that they did it and it's 100-percent, so not understanding

quality.

Alaina: Okay. How do you think that this compares to other students in the school?

Bryant: I think that other students aren't necessarily only proud of themselves for turning something in. They realize it has to be good as well. Okay, it's not just, "I turned it in," like Dominique, and Candace and the other students. The girls will come to me and say, "I turned such-and-such in," and then you look at it and you're like, "Yeah, you submitted something, but this isn't –" sometimes, it's not even the right assignment.

Mr. Bryant felt that the Black girls in his classes were not aware that their work lacked the level of quality that he expected from his students. He suggested that the students simply turned something in and expected it to be enough to earn them a good grade without having thoroughly interrogated the instructions, or having considered how it would be assessed. In comparing this disposition to other students in the school, he suggested that his Black girls took pride in simply turning something in, while other students were likely to be more proud of the *content* of what they turned in. At no point did he consider that they young women were putting forth their best effort given the resources at their disposal.

Mismatch 3: Black girls are "Selfish"

Teachers also characterized Black girls as mismatched with the NDN model because they perceived them to be "selfish" and adopt an individualistic orientation. Remember, collaboration was central to way that JHS was supposed to operate. In many ways, this characterization as selfish was connected to the notion of Black girls as rebellious and wanting to follow their own desires, rather than go along with the established patterns or routines. When asked to speak on why more Black girls were not amongst the highest achievers in the school, Mr. Bryant, a history teacher, we heard from above, suggested that Black girls encountered academic difficulties because they adopted orientations that were focused purely on themselves, rather than

considering the needs of others. This comment was interesting considering how the teachers

were constructing identities for Black girls that suggested *they*, themselves were not considering

the young women's needs. He believed their selfishness conflicted with the group-based learning

model. He asserted:

> *So what I think gets in their way is they're not meeting teachers, and sometimes their*
>
> *fellow students, halfway. It's all, "I want. I want." It's, "What's for me? What's for me?*
>
> *What's for me?" It's very selfish, emotional behavior in a lot of cases where they're not*
>
> *realizing there are two people in the room or there are 30 people in the room. A lot of*
>
> *times, it's just – I mean that's the teenage mind too, right, like, "I'm the center of the*
>
> *universe." That gets in their way a lot.*

Mr. Bryant stated that Black girls were self-centered and focused only on what their needs were.

His comments implied that not being able to consider the needs of other key people in their

classroom spaces—teachers and peers—was detrimental to their ability to be successful at JHS,

though he never exactly stated why. Within his comments he did attempt to acknowledge that the

young women's egotistical nature could be developmental and a phase common to adolescents.

However, that did not negate the fact that it was the quality that stood out to him the most when

discussing the challenges particular to the young Black women with whom he worked with. The

fact that he thought enough to mention it, and position it as something that "gets in their way a

lot" suggested a deeper belief that when happening with Black girls it was more than simply a

teenage process.

Mrs. Fitzgerald shared similar views about Black girls' selfishness during her interview.

When asked to describe a challenge she encountered when working with them, she suggested

that a big one was their "demanding" nature in which she was expected to be immediately available to respond to their requests at all times. She noted:

> *[Black girls are] demanding of attention…you know I had an incident with her [Dior] yesterday where she sent an e-mail. She finished something that was late. She sent an e-mail that said, not please, just "grade my essay". And I responded saying you know, I'm not sure what essay you're referring to, but, you know, in future e-mails please try to be more professional, more respectful, or something like that. And she came back to me and said, I received this e-mail from you where you say that I always send disrespectful - I said, no. I did not say always. So it's kind of like you know that demanding - there's kind of a demanding theme in a lot of 'em.*

Mrs. Fitzgerald perceived Black girls' to be selfish in nature because they were overly greedy in regards to taking up their teachers' time. Using an interaction with Dior, a 9th grade student, as an example, she suggested that Black girls had little regard for anything other than their personal needs. From Fitzgerald's perspective, the lack of salutation in Dior's email not only demonstrated the negative attitude and means of interacting that was often attributed to Black girls (as discussed in Chapter five), it also meant that Dior was not considering the many tasks that she (in her role of teacher) had going on outside of grading her assignments. She perceived the email and follow up conversation from Dior to indicate that she was narrowly focused on what she wanted—her late work graded—and nothing else, because she could not even be bothered to be "respectful" in her communication, an implicit nod to Dior's break with the conventions of proper femininity. Moreover she felt Dior was unwilling to listen and communicate around the particular assignment that was driving the confusion. Her frustration with Dior's desire to get her grade back also appeared driven by what she felt like was

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unreasonable, or even inappropriate, expectations for how she should structure her time around student feedback. Importantly, Mrs. Fitzgerald failed to entertain other prospective reasons for the brevity and tone of Dior's communication. Possibly, Dior was unaware of the norms of email etiquette and was simply communicating with her teacher in the way that she imagined was best. Interestingly, Mrs. Fitzgerald was one of the teachers who named "self-advocacy" as strength amongst Black girls. In fact, it was one of her top three traits. Yet here, she reduces Dior's self-advocacy of approaching her and wanting personalized assistance and information regarding her grades, to selfishness and disrespect.

Mrs. Mann also characterized Black girls selfish because they were too demanding within her interview. When I asked her what some of the challenges she faced in working with the Black girls, she responded:

> *Sometimes their self-advocacy, it's too much for me. Like, sometimes they – especially the ones that want to get really good grades, um, want to do it without, like, okay, demand too much from me to be re-grading assignments or grading assignments that were late.*

As with Mrs. Fitzgerald, there was a tipping point for Mrs. Mann in which the self-advocacy turned from positive to negative. At some point in her interview, Mrs. Mann had situated self-advocacy as strength. Interestingly, here however, she converted this strength into a negative quality. Rather than view the young women's attempts to secure the opportunities and resources necessary for success in a positive light, she positioned it as becoming a nuisance of sorts when it led to their requests for information related to assignments and grading. She appeared to be overwhelmed by her estimation that it was simply "too much" for her. Though her comments evidenced a belief (to some extent) that some Black girls desired to do well in school, what good would that desire be if situated within a classroom context where it was perceived as selfish

behavior? It is highly likely that the teachers were getting emails from other students—yet they never talk about those requests as a problem. Instead, they remained fixated on their frustration and frankly distain toward Black girls, who as students, were deserving of their support with respect to their learning.

Black Girls are Not Engaged

Teachers also suggested that Black girls were very disconnected from the academic environment. In some ways this disconnect was spoken of as a disinterest in the academic happenings at the school, while at other times it was situated as driven by a lack of self confidence and hope for the future. I will discuss each in turn.

First source of disengagement: Black girls are "Drama Queens"

A very prominent theme amongst the teachers was that some Black girls, whether academically capable or not, were not focused on their schoolwork and were disengaged. Some teachers suggested that the disinterest in school was driven by the perceptions that the things they were learning were not going to be useful. For example, Mrs. Mann, the Spanish teacher suggested that Black girls, when compared to White girls, had a high "affective filter" that meant they were opposed to learning a foreign language for no reason other than not being interested in learning it. She stated:

> *And they [White girls] are not as opposed on learning a foreign language...we talk a lot about what the affective filter is, like if you have a very thick affective filter, you don't even allow language to permeate into you and acquire it. So like if you have a down attitude like, " I don't need this," you are not going to be able to acquire the language. If you have a lower affective filter, you get the language. It's easy for you – for the language to go through you and acquire it. And I think that that's what I see. [Black girls'] affective filter is way higher. They – I guess because they don't need – they don't*

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see the need or most of them are not motivated into learning a foreign language, whereas

the White students – not the White – the non-African American students that I have do not

have that affective filter so high.

While I could not locate any scholarship that could assist me in acquiring a better understanding

of the "affective filter", from Mrs. Mann's comments, it seemed that she defined it as a

resistance to learning based on evaluations of the knowledge's usefulness for future endeavors.

From her perspective, Black girls were not motivated to learn Spanish because they could not

readily identify a purpose beyond high school credits. This is interesting because Mrs. Mann did

not share if she made any explicit efforts to help them see the relevance of learning a second

language, which intimates that she positioned it as their responsibility.

However, many *more* teachers perceived them to be disinterested because they chose to

invest their energy and time into the social side of school, specifically in creating and

perpetuating "drama". When I spoke with Mrs. Taylor and asked what she felt the biggest

challenges for Black girls were in the school, she immediately noted it was school drama. She

stated,

Way too much girl and guy drama. Way too much. If we only had that magic touch to get

them to focus on their academics and their education and not the my guy's looking at this

girl and this girl's looking at that guy, because the bottom line is they all have to be

responsible for themselves in their life and… No one's gonna take care of you. You have

to take care of yourself. What does that look like intellectually? What does that look like

for your future career? And they're just so into the, "Oh, my boo's gonna take care of

me." [Laughs]

She suggested that Black girls could not focus on their studies because they too easily got pulled into situations revolving around a dating relationship. She interpreted this as detrimental to their current studies; she also believed it reflected a general orientation toward their education as a whole. In her mind, Black girls did not put the girl/guy drama aside in order to focus on their education because they believed that they would eventually end up in a relationship where their significant other took care of them and their education would not be important. Thus, rather than invest in building responsibility for their own lives, they invested in their relationships with boys out of a misguided belief that these relationships would do them more good than school would in the long run[37]. Interestingly, these men who would take care of them were situated as no more than a miscellaneous "boo" in Mrs. Taylor's mind. She made no indications as to the status of their relationship (i.e. boyfriend, fiancé, husband), nor to the career the men would hold that enabled them to financially support a significant other.

Mr. Bryant suggested that many of the Black girls came to school with the primary goal of being involved in the non-academic happenings of the school. He commented:

I think too many of them come here and that's their main thing. I'm going to go either be part of drama, stir drama up, I'm going to go stop drama because I'm going to be the bigger person, "I'm just trying to stop drama," it's drama, drama, drama, drama. They walk in and drama, drama, drama, drama, drama.

For him, whether it was starting or stopping it, the girls were overly invested in drama in a manner that was detrimental to their academic performance. When I probed him to speak further on the nature of the drama and why it was such a problem, he offered the following:

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[37] This characterization of the young women mimicked the stereotype of Black women as a "gold digger" whose primary ambition in life was to secure a man to take care of her (Ross & Coleman, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2003)

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I don't know. I mean I never tried to get that much into it because I can't help it. All I would do would be to make fun of it, so I don't want to – I mean but I've heard, "No, you won't believe what he said about you," and, "So-and-so is doing this and that," and, "Well, I've got to go talk to so-and-so because there's about to be some drama," and, "I've got to go talk to Mr. Ferguson because there's about to be some stuff going on." It could be about a various amount of things, but they pay more attention to that. It's like their own little reality TV show here. And you try to teach them history, or government, or econ, and – you know it's not every day, and it's not the majority of students, but it is a lot. There are a handful of students in this building who don't have the grades they should have because they're allowed to be in drama, and that's the bottom line...And you've seen it. Every day... And maybe they're avoiding their work by doing it. Maybe, if we were not allowing drama, then they'd be just acting out, and swearing, and doing whatever else.

In this snippet of his interview, Mr. Bryant lamented the difficulty of teaching students whose attention he believed was pulled so strongly in a direction away from the actual subject they were supposed to be learning. Remember, he was one of the teachers who believed that the girls' connectedness to their lives was a positive asset. It is unclear how he determined when thinking about what was going on in their lives became too much, or when it is just enough. Although he stated that the majority of Black girls were not overly engaged in drama, he nevertheless maintained that there were a lot of students who fell into this category, and obviously, enough of them to stand out to him as a concern. Importantly, he identifies the specific group of students he is talking about as those who end up in the RC with me when he commented "you see it". This was another explicit attempt to situate him and I on one side, and the girls on the other—a frequently used rhetorical tactic that I highlighted at the start of the

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previous chapter. Interestingly, at one point he suggested that if the girls were using school drama as an excuse not to do their work it was because teachers and other school officials allowed them to do so. This line of thought had potential to shift some of the responsibility away from the girls themselves and toward the teachers and other school officials who created a school context in which this type of behavior was possible. However, he ultimately undercut this idea when he adopted a "if it was not this it would be something else" attitude by suggesting that even if the teachers did not allow it, the girls would find some other destructive behavior to put in its place.

Mr. Clark also perceived Black girls' involvement in school drama to be a major impediment to their long-term school success. When asked what Black girls' biggest challenges were in JHS, he answered, "*just the drama I think, I mean it's the biggest challenge of any high school girl, but again I think I see more and louder [laughs] drama.*" Mr. Clark argued that school drama was typically a problem for any teenage girl, but that for Black girls there was a higher frequency in incidents, and that it was "louder", which was likely a code word for more visible[38]. When I pressed him to help me understand how the drama that Black girls engaged in differed from what he would consider normative teenage behavior, he provided the following explanation:

> *Yeah. Its kind of I'm upset with her and so I can't even be in the same room with her. I'll get that a lot. Like, can I go to the RC? I can't even be in here today. Well, why? Because so-and-so said this. That's not a big deal [laughs]. But it's ruined their day and they can't even be in here and learn today. Whereas, I feel like other girls might just kind of pout and sit in their desk and be upset...Write an angry text and cyber bully or something.*
>
> **Alaina:** *Not these girls? They're not –*

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[38] See: Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2005, 2007.

Clark: Not explode… It's like when they do drama, they do it big. It's not just I'm upset today. It's I'm upset and coming at this girl.

Mr. Clark suggested that the way Black girls engaged in school drama was different than what he believed was typical for two main reasons. First he intimated that the drama began for insignificant reasons such as a matter of something trivial that someone said about them, much like the he said/she said that Mr. Bryant mentioned. He suggested that insignificant comments got turned into big deals that altered the trajectory of their entire learning for the day because they refused to even be in the same space as their adversaries. Second, Black girls did drama differently because rather than internalize their feelings or engage in passive aggressive behaviors, such as texting and online harassment (which, in fact, were highly destructive ways of handling tensions with peers and should not have been considered a viable alternative), he described the girls as "explode[ing]" as means of expressing their feelings and attempting to avenge themselves. He described this as doing it "big" rather than the alternative of pouting to themselves. Here again is a teacher invoking bomb imagery; this time their perceived explosiveness was not only destructive socially, but impinged directly on their prospects for academic success. Mr. Clark's statements at this point were interesting given the fact that he had positioned Black girls as among his "best" students and really "hard workers". Being a drama queen who is distracted by the social happenings of the school and being a hard worker seem to be contradictory identities.

Finally, Mr. Chase also contributed to the construction of Black girls as drama queens. In his interview he stated:

There's plenty of smart African-American girls, but their grades might not indicate so, and unfortunately, grades are the main way we measure. It's the main currency,

right?...Yeah. Like Candace is whip smart, man, like, man. I thought that even last year,

you know, like she could do some stuff... But I mean the kids of color always have

underperformed, boys, girls, whatever. This year, I'd say – I don't know. Is there like a

drama element that I haven't seen before that distracts them? I don't know, maybe. Was it

like that last year?... Their test scores are – and their grades – usually aren't on par with

what they probably could do.

Mr. Chase, in suggesting that Black girls were conditionally intelligent, maintained that though they were smart, their involvement with drama prevented their academic performance from matching up with their academic capabilities. Though he perceived Candace to be "whip smart", he also believed she, and other Black girls' more generally, undermined their intelligence by being distracted by the "drama element".

Second source of disengagement: Black girls are insecure and despondent

In addition to characterizing Black girls as disengaged because of their involvement in peer drama, teachers also situated their disengagement as driven by deeper, internal processes. They suggested that in the immediate school context, Black girls lacked confidence in regards to their academic skills, which in turn, contributed to a despondent demeanor toward their future prospects—whether proximal (the next day or next week) or distal (remaining years in high school or life after graduation). This directly contrasted with the words of some of the school officials, like Ms. Kemp, who previously suggested that Black girls' were hard workers, and Mrs. Macer and Mrs. Mann who believed they were extremely resilient. In advancing this line of argument the teachers again pathologized the girls as having something wrong with them rather than situate structural inequalities as significant.

Mrs. Mann, the foreign language teacher, explicitly connected Black girls' perceived difficulty participating in certain class activities, with a lack of confidence. She stated:

And some of them, they just do not want – like one thing that I have found is, like, it's harder for girls to participate orally in the activities. I don't know if there's some kind of lack of confidence in them…that's the one thing that I can pinpoint.

Mr. Clark and I got on the topic of Black girls' confidence when he responded to the question about what he perceived to be Black girls' academic weaknesses. He shared:

It's so hard to say is, like, specifically, African-American girls. I'm not really sure…Maybe confidence and just, like, you have it. You know how to do this. You don't need my help.

Alaina*: Uh-huh. And this is just you think in the area of math or just kind of the overall kind of self-confidence in just believing that you can do well in school?*

Clark*: Yeah. Maybe that academic, it would extend to that. All I know is math, but I could see that academically just overall.*

Although he struggled with answering the question, Mr. Clark eventually provided a response that expressed his feelings that Black girls' weakness was that they needed to be reaffirmed that they were capable of doing something independently by relying on their own set of knowledge and skills rather than their teacher's. While he acknowledged that as a math teacher he had the most knowledge surrounding how students oriented themselves around math, he nevertheless projected that this was a mindset they likely adopted across the board. As his interview continued he suggested that this lack of confidence, though based in their academics, went much deeper by offering the following:

I think, and again this is just, like, my perspective, just, like, to be validated in a more meaningful way. They need to know that they are valuable for who they are as a person and not their achievements and not what they look like, not who their friends are, but just a dignity that's deep-rooted. And I think that's like you can diss me. I don't care what you think [laughs]. It does not matter.

Mr. Clark stated that what Black girls were really looking for was a sense of value that was not rooted in the status wrought from high achievement or certain social circles, but rather a deeper, more meaningful sense of value. In this respect, Mr. Clark was right. As Chapters 8-10 will most clearly reveal, by and large Black girls did not feel that their teachers valued them in this deeper, more meaningful way.

Many times, as a result of their perceived insecurities about their academic skills, teachers characterized Black girls as despondent and hopeless toward the future. When asked to explain why so many of the Black girls were underperforming, Mrs. Mahoney stated in her interview:

I think its attitude. I think it's, probably at the very, very root of it is a confidence issue of, "I don't think I can do this" or "It's not important to me" or "I don't see a future in education for myself." And so then I think, so that's kind of at the core, and then that comes out as, "Well, I'm just gonna act like I don't care, because of one of those reasons. I don't think I can, or I don't think it's important."

She continued on to provide a more specific example that referenced, Jana, with a Black girls with whom she and I had worked closely with. Mrs. Mahoney noted:

You know, one time I had said something to Jana about going to college, and she looked at me like—like that had never even crossed her mind that that was a possibility for

her...And I can imagine, you know, if I was not thinking that I was gonna do much more

than this, that I would not really care, either, so...

For Mahoney, Black girls possessed a low confidence in their ability to be successful in school across the long haul. She claimed that this lack of certainty about their ability to be successful within educational institutions got articulated into an "I don't care" stance when really, it was not how the young women truly felt. Though she did not provide any insight into what she believed their true feelings were, her comments implied that in actuality they did care about their education and wanted to do well, but their lack of confidence got in the way. Her specific example of Jana demonstrated an instance where she believed her expectations about college not being "a possibility for her" directly created her disengagement with her schoolwork. What Mrs. Mahoney failed to consider however, was the potential for Jana's stance to be an act of self-preservation. Given my work with her, she was likely protecting herself from future hurt and disappointment if things did not work out at planned, as things often did not go right in her life.

In my interview with Mr. Chase, we spoke about some of the challenges he associated with the Black girls he taught. Although, he had difficulty with the question, he eventually stumbled upon the following response that touched on the issue of confidence and ultimately complacency:

Again, it's sort of like that way that the vocal minority stands out, so I don't know. It's

hard to generalize here, but the ones that stand out, like a Kiki, Kiki is – she kind of has

given up. So there's like this complacency. It's almost like this nihilism or something.

There's just sort of a hopelessness like, "I'm so far behind," and that just sort of

exacerbates the off-task, non-norm following behavior or whatever.

For Mr. Chase, the Black girls that stood out were like Kiki, a student who he believed had given up because she lagged so far behind where she should have been. He suggested that she embodied a sort of emptiness when it came to her schoolwork and had stopped believing that she could do anything to affect change in the trajectory of her educational journey. In describing her situation as somewhat "nihilistic", he intimated that Kiki saw school as meaningless and lacking value. He suggested that these hopeless feelings caused her, and other Black girls like her, to adopt a complacent stance toward their work, which only magnified their propensity to engage in problematic behaviors.

Mr. Clark similarly used Kiki as a referent for talking about the propensity for Black girls to become despondent when he discussed about how easily it seemed for them to give up. He stated:

> We had that conversation [about mentally checking out] actually. She said it's easier – in so many words, she said it's easier to put my head down than to try to understand this –
>
> **Alaina**: Oh, it's tough.
>
> **Clark:** which is true. I mean –Uh-huh. And it is really, really hard. Like, she's in a better place. She's doing really well now in math class, because the math is what she needs. It's at a level that she's at. And so this was just over her head….And if you are over your head, you're like puh

Mr. Clark suggested that when she could not grasp the material being discussed, Kiki simply gave up and felt it was easier not to exert any effort. While it seemed that he could acknowledge that the instruction was likely outside of her zone of proximal development[39], he nevertheless seemed to want her to continue to push past the confusion.

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[39] See: Vygotski (1987)

Mrs. Fitzgerald also shared a perspective suggesting that the young women adopted attitudes marked by a dismal, lethargic outlook toward the future. She suggested that the girls were stuck in a place mentally where they did not believe that they would ever be able to acquire the necessary skills to achieve highly. She stated:

[Black girls have a] kind of fixed mindset. I guess I would kind of go back to the other group [her older students], that they have more of a growth mindset. And the other ones have more of a fixed mindset. I can't do this, therefore I won't.

Mrs. Fitzgerald, maintained that rather than believe that with effort they could get smarter, when the girls sensed that they did not have the ability to do something, they decided to refrain from even attempting to do it. Her comments about their possessing a fixed mindset implied that these young woman fundamentally believed that they did not have the skills to do the work, and would not be able to acquire them because they had an either you have them or you don't type of orientation.

Concluding remarks

While speaking to the school officials in JHS, no one gave me the impression that they believed that Black girls were fundamentally less intelligent than other students in the school. However, much like with the way they characterized Black girls' dispositions and inclinations in the social realm, it was clear that the teachers felt that their academic identities were rooted in an intersecting web of problematic dispositions. It was not that the teachers never imagined their Black girls in positive ways. They did offer academic strengths when prompted. However, the longer the teachers spoke, the potential of these strengths became increasingly marginalized in relation to a larger set of deficit framings. In this manner, even their academic weaknesses were reduced to larger set of dispositional problems, which placed the burden of any

underperformance directly on the young women themselves. It was as though they believed the ability to "do school" was something that the young women should have known how to do and that they could not be held responsible for the girls' lack of knowledge in that area[40].

Importantly, when assessing the young women's underperformance, the teachers did not speak about any of the tangible skills that young women possessed that would have contributed to their academic (under) performance within their various classes. In focusing only on the dispositional parts of students' academic identities, the teachers were missing the opportunity to be able to identify the most immediate ways to increase the girls' academic performance. Though attitudes, behaviors, and dispositions are critical components of an academic identity, subject area knowledge and skills are essential for these areas to serve as an academic resource. The teachers did not discuss the specific learning needs of the young women during our conversations to the extent that I was unsure if they could identify areas where they could use their professional knowledge to intervene for individual Black girls.

Taken together, the socio-emotional and academic renderings of Black girls, situated the young women as "problems" that warranted control and significant change. On the one hand, teachers were unable to get the young women to adapt to the behavioral norms that they felt are appropriate to JHS. On the other hand, they were also unable to cultivate the dispositions that would support the very achievement that they, as teachers, were responsible for producing. In both areas, they were failing. Given the dire need to improve the achievement at JHS because of their classification as a "concern school", the principal had made clear that there was no room for this kind of failure. As I will discuss in the next chapter, in the midst of being overwhelmed with the "problem" that Black girls presented, the RC (and me within it) took on a role that was not

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[40] Delpit (2006) talk about teachers' responsibilities to do more than teach content, but ensure that students have the skills they need to successfully navigate their schools

anticipated. I will return to the conversation that was begun in Chapter 4 about how the teachers struggled in their capacity to enact restorative justice practices. I argue that the new role that the RC took on said much about how the young Black women were more profoundly imagined in the school.

Chapter VII

"I Just Send Them to You": The Construction of Black Feminine Identities Through the

RC

Overview

As Chapter five and six demonstrated, the teachers situated the Black girls as problems within the JHS context. Though they situated the girls as problems, *they did not situate themselves as part of the problem or as problem solvers*; instead I, along with Mr. Ferguson, became treated as the primary staff responsible for responding to their needs, both socio-emotional and academic. While the previous chapters, demonstrated the conscious articulations of who they thought the girls were, I argue in this chapter that their use of the RC was a particularly critical space in further understanding the way the identities and capacities of Black girls were imagined. I will discuss how the near exclusive referrals of Black girls to the RC and the reasons that accompanied these referrals as communicated within the official paperwork, constructed a particular image of Black feminine identities. In other words, given that the RC had become a part of the disciplinary regime in JHS, what they wanted the RC to do *with* the Black girls (or done *to* them) spoke to what they thought o*f them.* Within this discussion, it will become evident that the teachers at JHS did not feel capable of intervening in the lives of these young women, or even wanted to, in the roles they assumed as teachers.

When I interviewed the teachers and staff at JHS, I routinely asked them to identify the challenges they felt Black girls faced within the school. After they did so, my follow-up question

typically inquired about what support was available to the girls to meet the challenges. While there was variation in the list of challenges that the teachers articulated the young women faced, the answers I received as to the available supports were less varied. Overwhelmingly, the teachers' answer was one simple word: you. Take that in; *I, as a volunteer, was identified as the primary support for Black girls at JHS.* For example, Mrs. Mann answered stated this in her interview:

> *I don't know. Something that I've noticed is that when their grades go down, they get in a rut and they don't know how to get out of it by themselves. They need sometimes someone else to advocate for them to see how they can get on track. I think that they also need resources to help them with their home lives because it affects them a lot. There's lots of things going on at home that affect the way they learn and the way they can behave in school...Like having sick parents, having to take care of siblings and things like that...are things that affect them.*
>
> ***Alaina****: Okay. Right. And so when they get in this rut, who typically helps them out?*
>
> ***Mann****: You. [Laughter]...you are helping them out.*

Mr. Clark answered in a similar way.

> ***Alaina:*** *Yeah. Do you have support in trying to support the girls?*
>
> ***Clark****: Well, you [laughs].*
>
> ***Alaina****: Gosh.*
>
> ***Clark****: I just send them to you. No.*
>
> ***Alaina****: Yeah. Give them to us. Give them to us (said sarcastically)*
>
> ***Clark****: Yeah. No. I really think you guys are doing a really [good job]*

Admittedly, when teachers identified me as the primary support, I was a bit surprised. I had imagined that when I asked this question I would get answers detailing how the teachers themselves supported the young women, or even some of the institutional resources[41] that were leveraged to support their needs. That turned out to be wishful thinking. Though I was only a volunteer in the school, the teachers had come to view me as one of the few, and in some cases only, source of support available to Black girls. Looking back on notes and reflecting from my time in the field, it should come as no surprise that the teachers would identify me in such a manner. Their overreliance on the RC, and me as a significant provider of services within the RC, should have clued me into this long before the interviews.

Black Girls' Overrepresentation in the RC

As mentioned in Chapter four, the teachers struggled in implementing restorative justice practices in JHS as evidenced by four main indicators. First, rather than utilize RC referral forms that encouraged the use of restorative practices to deescalate a situation and identify key components of what happened, the teachers continued to utilize official discipline forms when sending the young women to the space. In doing this, they continued to focus on labeling misbehavior rather than on creating opportunities to rebuild community. A second related indication was that at times teachers failed to use any form at all when they desired to use our services. They treated Mr. Ferguson and me like we were security, and often asked us to remove young women from class. Thirdly, despite the fact that the model hinged on the use of restorative meetings between teachers and students to identify harm to the community and repair relationships, over half of the referrals to the RC did not culminate in a restorative meeting. And finally, most pertinent to the current discussion in this chapter, is that though Black students

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[41] The school support staff (i.e. counselor, social worker) was more likely than the teachers to identify themselves as support given the roles they adopted. However, a majority of them also identified me as a support as well and situated me as part of their "team".

were only 60% of the school population, they made up 95% of the referrals to the RC, with

Black girls comprising nearly 85% of the total referrals throughout the school.

The overrepresentation of Black girls referred to the RC, particularly given the fact that

the teachers had turned it into a disciplinary space for them, in and of itself constructed meaning

around who they imagined the young women were. Their large number of referrals reinforced

the notions that Black girls were problem students whose behaviors were misaligned with school

norms in ways that other students' behaviors were not. Their frequent referrals positioned their

behavior as needing to be corrected. It communicated a message to the young women that as a

group, they were unable to exhibit the "proper" behaviors of a student in JHS without

intervention. The teachers' referrals of the girls to the RC, particularly without participation in

the restorative conferences, or any real plan to take responsibility for their part in the situation,

did the work of pointing a finger at the girls and communicating the messages that *you alone* are

responsible for what happened and that *you alone* need to be the one to reflect and adjust your

behavior rather than the institution.

If we think about what the RC was intended to do, primarily its goal to maintain the

health of the school community, overpopulating the space with Black girls had even more severe

implications for how they were positioned within JHS. Their constant referrals to the center

suggested that teachers positioned their behavior as disruptive and harmful to the well being of

the entire school community. It meant that they were imagined to lack respect for the wellbeing

of others who may be directly or indirectly impacted by their actions. It positioned them as

repeat "offenders" of the code of conduct that was intended to bring peace and harmony to the

school, and as the primary group of students who commit the "crime" of disturbing the peace.

Importantly, its use as a nearly exclusive Black space, as the other 15% of referrals were

primarily Black boys, had racial implications. It was a visible representation of the positioning of Black students as problems to be dealt with within the JHS context.

There were also racial implications in their turning to Mr. Ferguson and me for their primary support. While they could illuminate and draw upon the professional experiences of Mr. Ferguson as a justification for their reliance on him for support in supporting the Black girls, situating *me* as the primary support for Black girls clearly could not be founded in any professional preparation. I did not have any talent professionally to be able to intervene, yet they relied on me very heavily to address any problems they had with Black girls. What would lead them to believe that I would be more capable than them, who at some point had been trained as professionals to work with young people? The only reason that stands to make sense as to why they thought that I would be capable of doing what they could not, was because of the identities I shared with the young women, particularly my race and gender. Because I was a Black women I was imagined as able to effectively work with young Black women. Although I happened to be able to productively work with them and was able to create opportunities for them that the teachers could not, as I will show you as this chapter proceeds, the teachers did not have any referent that would have alerted them to these capacities.

In positioning me as the primary person who could support the girls, the teachers conveyed the message that they were incapable of supporting the young women's needs and that a Black person, more specifically a Black woman, needed to step in. Their actions unintentionally reinforced the young women's perceptions that their teachers did not like Black girls as a group and were racist. As the next chapter will explore in more depth, their use of the RC in this manner likely contributed to the hyper sensitivity that the Black girls exhibited during

their micro-interactions and played a large role in the decisions the young women made around how they would enact their identities.

Overall, the overrepresentation of Black girls in a place that had become situated as a disciplinary space was an issue because it situated Black girls as a problem. In this next section, I will examine in more detail the reasons that underlied their overrepresentation and highlight the micro-interactions that constructed the rendering of the young women as problems. By micro-interactions I refer to the interactions that occur between teachers and students within the classroom contexts[42]. In detailing these micro-interactions, it will become very clear that the teachers struggled to work with their Black girls on a very basic level.

Reasons for RC Referrals

As stated prior, on a typical day, nearly all of the students we serviced in the RC were Black girls. Table 8 provides a snapshot of the referrals we saw in a two-week period between late October to early November. Table 9 provides information as to the method of referral to indicate how many of those visits resulted from students being sent to us versus students coming over by their own choosing. The relatively high incidence of students referring themselves to the RC demonstrated the intensity of their desires to escape their classroom environments. When coupled with the high rates of teacher-initiated referrals, the self-referrals raise questions about the toxicity of the classroom environment.

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[42] See: Cummins (1997)

Table 8: RC Referrals Over a Two Week Period

Reason for Visit	Number of Students
Altercation	5
Disengaged from class	3
Disrespect toward school official	4
Disrupting Class	3
Electronics use	3
Emotional support	3
Feeling unwell	1
Tension with teacher	4
Preferred to work in the RC	1
Refused to work in assigned group	4
Total	31

Table 9: Method of Referral

Type	Count
Self Referred	12
Verbal Referral	11
Written Referral	8
Grand Total	31

The snapshot of a two-week time span, provides insight into typical reasons that the young women were referred to us. While the RC was intended to deal with altercations and instances of gross disrespect (though what constituted disrespect varied greatly in the minds of the school official), the space was being used to deal with young women whose behaviors had been labeled as disrupting class, inappropriate use of technology (most likely a cell phone), and refusing to sit in their group. The instances where students were feeling unwell, needed emotional support, or simply preferred to work in the RC were categorized as self-referrals. Outside of the self referrals, the use of the RC to address these basic level indiscretions demonstrated the teachers' limited capacity to work with Black girls at best or their unwillingness to do so. These were things that should not have required the teachers to call upon the advanced level restorative justice practices that Mr. Ferguson and I offered. Teachers *should*

have been equipped to deal with these types of behavioral infractions using classroom

management strategies, or the lower level classroom based restorative practices that were shared

at the start of the year[43].

The fact that they were being sent to the RC for these trivial reasons was problematic

because it is unimaginable to think that Black girls were the *only* students in the school who

engaged in this kind of misbehavior during class time. In fact, on several occasions I observed

classroom sessions where other students were engaging in the same behaviors that would easily

result in a referral to the RC if a young Black woman had enacted them. For example, in field

note 33, I observed an instance of a young man interrupting a lesson/activity. He was creating a

beat by banging his hands on the table, yet when his teacher was made aware of it, it did not

result in an RC referral. Ironically, I was sitting in and observing the classroom session because

Jana (10th grade, *RISE* member) wanted me to see for myself how her teacher gave preferential

treatment to all the other students, other than Black girls, in the class. The observation was as

follows:

> *I was in Mrs. Fitzgerald's classroom sitting at a table with four desks pushed together.*
>
> *Anastasia, Jana, and two Black boys were sitting in each of the desks. The girls were next*
>
> *to each other and seated across from the boys. Mrs. Fitzgerald was going over the sides*
>
> *of the brain and how each allowed you to work a different way. One of the young men*
>
> *began to bang his hands on the table in order to make a beat. Every now and then he*
>
> *added lyrics to the beat. Anastasia asked the boy to be quiet. He ignored her request and*
>
> *kept banging. She then asked Mrs. Fitzgerald for assistance in making him stop banging.*

---

[43] However, scholars have demonstrated that overwhelmingly teachers do not employ these types of strategies when it comes to Black students and are quick to default to excluding students from the classroom—to the principal's office or elsewhere—when they are perceived to misbehave (Ferguson, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Diamond, 2015)

Mrs. Fitzgerald responded, "I can't control everyone's sounds" and walked in a

direction away from the table. Anastasia rolled her eyes and said, "ughh I swear she is

so annoying" referring to Mrs. Fitzgerald. In the end, I walked over to where the young

man was sitting to see if I could get him back on track with his work. I politely asked that

he not make beats during class. He said okay and stopped making the beats, though he

turned around in his seat and began talking to someone else instead of get back to work

on his assignment. Jana turned to me and said, "did you do what I told you to do?"

referring to her request that I observe what happens in class and how the Black girls

were treated. Anastasia chimed in and said, "Now you see". I nodded my head and told

them that I was indeed observing what was happening and that we would talk about it

after class ended.

In this instance, Mrs. Fitzgerald walked close enough to hear the young man making his beat,

and rather than address his behavior for the disruption that it was, simply responded as though

there was nothing she could do to "control his sounds". In this instance, she made no effort to

control the young man and desired for Anastasia to figure out her own solution. Her response

would have been reasonable if Anastasia was upset that the boy was coughing or breathing

loudly because those would have been bodily sounds that had to be expressed and should not be

subject to control. However, she easily could have (and should have) asked the young man, like I

ended up doing, to refrain from making noises not associated with a necessary bodily function,

during class.

Only singling out Black girls for infractions that all students in the class were likely to be

engaged in, marginalized them and suggested that there was something particularly heinous and

problematic about the way they engaged with school when compared to their peers. Furthermore,

it reinforced the idea that something was wrong with them because they, and only *they*, were the ones being reprimanded for not properly engaging in school. The young women knew there was inequity in how students were disciplined in JHS. It raised questions for them, and me, why was a Black girl's off task behavior was identified as a such a problem when it was not so for other students?

Analysis of the forms and/or conversations that accompanied the Black girls when they were referred to the RC, suggested that simple indiscretions (i.e. phone use, not sitting in a group) were viewed as problematic for Black girls precisely because of the ways that teachers imagined them—i.e. emotionally volatile, perpetually angry, mismatched with JHS. This was evident in the ways that teachers labeled their behavior when using the official discipline forms and in their desired outcomes of the restorative process as indicated on the RC specific referral forms. These areas demonstrated that teachers relied on the pejorative conceptions as a way to frame the girls' behavior. These negative conceptions meant that teachers could not ignore their behavior, like what was likely happening with other students, because it was the manifestation of something larger within the young woman. When a Black girl was caught using her phone, it was the manifestation of her desire to be resistant, it was evidence that she did not care about her education, and it was her embodiment of an inappropriate negative attitude. As such it *had* to be dealt with because it was a direct challenge to the power and control to which the teachers were clinging so tight. As I will discuss next, the fact that the young women were in the RC for reasons that I believed were trivial was not the biggest issue, the biggest problem was that these trivial indiscretions were labeled and treated as major violations of the school code of conduct.

Teachers' Characterization of the Incidents that Occurred

Analysis of the documentation and verbal descriptions of incidents offered in lieu of a form, characterized the young women in ways that aligned with the ways the Black girls were characterized in chapters five and six. As a reminder, though we had created specific RC forms for use in the RC, teachers vacillated between using these forms and the official discipline referral form. These forms can be viewed in Appendix E. In order to protect the identities of the students and teachers, all of the forms I use in the analysis have been redacted. Every form or conversation I discuss below was used to accompany a Black girl who had been referred to the RC.

The image of Black girls as rebellious was highly present within the referrals to the RC. Within the documents, it was most readily apparent in the frequency in which they were labeled as "insubordinate", which by definition suggested that they were not submitting to authority and being disobedient. A visit from Mr. Clark to the RC one day, poignantly demonstrates the propensity to describe Black girls' behavior as insubordinate. The observation was as follows:

> *Mr. Clark came into the RC with a referral for Dior (9th grade student). The referral was written on an official discipline referral form. On the form, the box for insubordination/unruly contact is checked. In the open ended part it reads that she "refuses to put away technology". As he hands the form over to Mr. Ferguson he says in a joking manner with a chuckle, "Should I just make a photocopy for tomorrow?"—FN 58*

Though not funny at all, Mr. Clark tried to be sarcastic in his statement that he fully expected to need to write up Dior for insubordination the next day. Sadly through these comments, he revealed his had low expectations for her behavior—she wouldn't even have a chance in this

class. I could not help but think back to this conversation later on when Dior stated that in Mr. Clark's class she got in trouble for something as small as "steppin' on a bug".

The first sample referral form is for a young woman who was written up for "insubordination/unruly conduct" for what the teacher stated was a lack of compliance with the phone policy, an unauthorized departure from class, and her disruption of another class. During one of the times the teacher verbally provided a "pass" to the RC, the notion of Black girls' rebelliousness was evident. The exchange was as follows:

> *Mr. Ferguson and I were walking back to the RC from conducting a restorative meeting*
>
> *between Shawn [Black boy] and his teacher. Mrs. Simpson walked up to talk to the two of*
>
> *us and stopped us dead in our tracks.*
>
> **Simpson**: *Can you help? I have student who is refusing to leave the class? It's Anastasia*
>
> **Ferguson:** *(stopped walking and looked over at me with a slight smile on his face)*
>
> **Simpson**: *(directing her full attention toward me) Oh, so you are the one to go to?*
>
> **Alaina**: *Yes, I'm the one (said sarcastically)*
>
> **Simpson**: *She's refusing to leave the class.*
>
> **Alaina:** *Why is she being asked to leave?*
>
> **Simpson**: *(pause—taken aback by my question it seems) Well she is being very rude. Mrs.*
>
> *Fitzgerald told her to put her phone away several times and she refused, and then she*
>
> *was asked to leave and she would not. Then she started cursing under her breath, you*
>
> *know. You know she will deny it if you ask. –FN, 11*

Within this interaction, Mr. Ferguson clearly played into my emerging role as the person to "go to" when it came to supporting the Black girls through his glance in my direction and smirk. As evident in the conversation that ensued between Mrs. Simpson, and me her primary desire was to

have Anastasia removed from class because she was refusing to leave on her own. When I asked Mrs. Simpson why Anastasia had to be removed, she appeared confused as to why I would ask such a question; as if it was ludicrous to question the need to remove Anastasia from the learning environment. Though the phone use was cited as the reason she could no longer stay in class, it seemed as though her comportment when approached about it was the bigger issue because she was perceived as "rude" and not immediately complying with the order to cease using her phone. In detailing the insubordination (the word that would have likely been used had an actual form accompanied the visit) Mrs. Simpson invoked the imagery of Black girls as persistently negative in their demeanors. Again, as with other teachers, she made a rhetorical move at the end that attempted to woo me into agreeing with her perspective.

The image of Black girls as disengaged was also highly present within the referrals to the RC. The second form is a referral for a young woman who the teacher described as not in her seat during instruction and instead talking to her peers. While these actions could have been perceived in a different way—i.e. the young woman was seeking or providing assistance concerning the work being given—absent knowing why she was talking, her teacher perceived her actions in a less than productive way. Her teacher took her actions to indicate a lack of desire to be a part of the class community because she was not abiding by the classroom rules that seemed to be that you needed to be in your assigned seat and refrain from talking during instruction—this seems clearly at odds with the problem based learning that was supposed to be going on within JHS. Though the teacher appeared to be referring the student given a concern over her lack of engagement academically, the comments alternatively reveal a frustration with the her disregard for the classroom norms. Moreover, on the form, the space allotted for this teacher to explain what steps were taken to address their concern, was empty. As such there is no

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reason to believe that the teacher interacted in any way with the student to confirm the assumptions embedded in the designations put forth on the form.

I also saw teachers characterizing Black girls as disengaged in the verbal referrals as well. In a field note from November, I recount an incident where Mr. Richards called upon me to assist him with a young woman who he assumed to be disengaged because she refused to take a diagnostic exam. The situation, as Mr. Richards explained it, was that Bebe (a 9th grade student) "*was refusing to take a diagnostic [test] one that [would] let him know what areas she [was] struggling in*". He explained that "*she did not want to take it a while ago because she was tired*", however, on the current day when he approached her to take it, she still did not want to despite "*looking more awake*". He recounted that he left her with a volunteer person who was facilitating the tests thinking that she would just get to work, but 20 minutes later the volunteer came back and said that she was flat out refusing to take it. He lamented that he knew it was "*something else going on*" and that it was not that she was tired. Within his narration of the situation, Mr. Richards situated Bebe as disengaged and mimicked the language of those who believed that Black girls' disengagement was precipitated by insecurities, family problems, or flawed value systems. Though he did not say it directly, his comments implied that Bebe's behavior surrounding the exam was potentially driven by feelings of insecurity rather than by feelings of fatigue. If Bebe indeed did feel as though she would not perform well on the test, then other actions could have been take to better help her feel supported and reminded of the significance of the test, rather than putting her through the restorative process as if she was engaging in "bad" behavior.

In addition to reinforcing the characterizations discussed in earlier chapters, the referrals to the RC evidenced a clearer, more distinct, construction of Black girls as *disrespectful*. Though

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the notion that the young women were unpleasant and intentionally acting in harmful ways was embedded in the construction of them as "bombs", the RC referrals—both written and oral—made it extremely clear that the teachers felt the young women held little regard for them as individuals in the role of a teacher. Labeling their behavior as disrespectful suggested that beyond perceiving the young women's actions as personal flaws, the teachers felt personally insulted and offended by their actions.

For example, the third form displays a referral for a young woman who was perceived as being "insubordinate". Within the open ended description, the teacher listed four seemingly separate infractions including "electronic use", "disregard for class norms", and "disrespect" (I could not decipher the fourth). Because disrespect was listed at the end, it could be interpreted that the teacher perceived all of the other misbehavior as building up to this. Figure 5 displays another referral form that situated a Black female student as disrespectful. In this case, the teacher provided a more lengthy account of what happened. She recounted that the young women was "disrespectful" because of the way she responded when she was approached about her inappropriate dress code, as well as her lack of engagement with class. Though it initially appeared that the primary concern was with the young women's lack of engagement and dress code violations, it was clear that learning about "respect" was the primary focus as indicated in the portion of the form that ask for desired outcomes. Finally, I share a referral (the fourth form) from an incident where a young woman was characterized as disrespectful when the teacher attempted to redirect her during class and she refused to alter her behavior. While the former referral demonstrated that the way Black girls' spoke was perceived as disrespect, this referral provided no specific information that could help us understand what specific actions or demeanors constituted disrespectful behavior.

And it was not just the referrals that constructed the women as disrespectful. Sometimes when the teachers verbally talked us through incidents, they constructed girls as disrespectful. For example in Fieldnote 16, I documented an interaction that occurred when Mrs. Fitzgerald walked over to the RC with Bebe. She stated:

"What I just told BeBe was that, and I talked to her mom last night. That she is off task and really disrespectful to me. I brought her here today because I talked to her mom yesterday and did not see any difference today in terms of the behavior".

Again with this example there was little information provided in her statement that would really help us to understand the actual behaviors underlying what constituted disrespect.

Over all, the teachers used the RC to further present Black girls' identities as negative and problematic within the JHS context. Though all students were observed engaging in the types of misbehaviors that landed Black girls in the RC, only they were singled out for sanctions. While it seemed as though other students' use of technology, lack of focus within class, and conversations with peers, was ignored, overlooked, couched as simply "teenage" behavior or at the very least dealt with by the teacher in a way that did not end in exclusion from the classroom, when Black girls enacted the same behaviors it constituted "insubordination", "disruption", and "disrespect".

Teachers' Expected Outcomes of Restorative Process

The teachers were not always explicit about what exactly they wanted us to do with the young women. Whereas with traditional discipline policies, sending a student to the office meant a conversation with the principal that was likely to end in detention, suspension, or expulsion, there was no automatic set of "consequences" that were embedded in a visit to the RC. It was not

intended to be that kind of space. Obviously they wanted us to address the situation that led the referral to the RC, but after that there were few other explicit expectations from the teachers.

Examining the forms that accompanied the young women's visits provides a bit of insight into what teachers constructed as the goals of an RC visit for Black girls. For example, in Figure 4, the teacher denoted that the desired goal was for the young women to leave the restorative process with a better understanding of respect. When Mr. Clark talked about the RC in his interview, he implicitly stated what he conceived of as the goal. He stated:

> *It's like if I send them to you, I know that they're gonna come back happier and more*
>
> *intact mentally, less angry, you know?*
>
> **Alaina***: Yeah. Yeah. That's our goal.*
>
> **Clark***: I see it. I really do.*

In Mr. Clark's mind, the overall goal of sending the young women to the RC was to shift their perceived constant anger. Though he did not indicate what he believed were the processes that would enable that to happen, he was nevertheless confident that we would be able to do it.

During a meeting with the entire 9th grade team, Mrs. Fitzgerald provided some insight into a specific area she desired help in when it came to Anastasia. She stated:

> *And what I notice a difference in her this year is that she does something with the*
>
> *information you give her. But what I also notice is that when she is in the room, she is*
>
> *commenting on every sound, smell, everything about anyone that is around her. She will*
>
> *be like "will you stop tapping that pencil", "I don't want to be around you with bad*
>
> *breath", all of that stuff. And so...I need help with making her feel comfortable around*
>
> *other people. –FN 35*

While Mrs. Fitzgerald began the statement in a positive way by acknowledging a productive change in Anastasia's academic behaviors, it appeared as though the change was not enough to make up for her perceived inability to focus solely on the academic content. As such, she desired for the RC to help her feel "comfortable" around other people. This was an interesting request because one could imagine that these behaviors could indicate more of how she preferred her work environment rather than a lack of comfort.

However, as the larger sample of forms demonstrated, most often we got no sense of what the teachers desired the outcome to be. As such, it could only be assumed that they simply wanted the girls to recognize the errors of their ways and return to class with the understanding that what they did constituted misbehavior worthy of being excluded from the class.

The RC in Reality

In the midst of the teachers' misuse of the space, Mr. Ferguson and I had to face the reality that the RC was not functioning as planned for; we faced a dilemma. As Mr. Ferguson put it, we could either spend our time trying to get the teachers to understand how to properly engage with restorative practice and the RC, or we could do something with all of these Black students who were getting "jammed up"[44]. We both believed that it was no coincidence that nearly all of the students who were referred to the RC were Black and felt it was a manifestation of the larger racial injustices that occurred between White and Black people[45]. In the end, though we did consistently work to try to help teachers better enact restorative practices, we largely focused on

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[44] When Mr. Ferguson said "jammed up" he was referring to his perception that they were being unfairly disciplined.

[45] On several occasions, Mr. Ferguson likened the teachers referring the Black students to the RC to be like "driving while Black" where the police stopped Black people just because they were Black. He also frequently likened the school rules to that of Black codes that had been instituted post slavery to keep Black people in subordinate positions.

the latter option because we felt it was more in line with our social justice orientation to help the children. We intentionally transformed the restorative work that occurred in the center to encompass more than just responding to instances of classroom misbehavior. We knew that the teachers were sending the Black students to us to be "fixed", and we decided that we would "fix" them in a way that pushed back against the injustice and inequality they experienced.

Though the teachers imagined the young women in pejorative ways and intended to use the RC to rid them of these negative characteristics, in reality, the RC functioned as an affirming community space for the Black students in which they could feel they were deeply cared for because: (a) they were allowed to reconstruct their academic and social identities in ways that opposed the negative characterizations that teachers held of them, and (b) they were allowed to freely express their opinions of their schooling experiences without fear of retribution. Operating the center in this manner allowed us to get to know them in way that the teachers did not. The remainder of this chapter will explore in greater detail the specific culture we created within the RC and the identities the young women enacted within them.

Reconstruction of Academic Identities

Black students were commonly sent to the RC for reasons that included breaking classroom rules (i.e. eating in class, tardiness, not being in assigned seat, using electronics inappropriately), being "disruptive" (i.e. talking during the lesson, distracting others with electronics), being insubordinate (i.e. refusing to follow the rules, not following directives), having negative interactions with others (i.e. yelling or cursing at peers or teachers, name calling, teasing), and appearing disengaged with class activities. As a part of our restorative meetings, we routinely incorporated these teacher characterizations of the incident into the conversation as a means of helping the student to understand the varying perspectives that often exist around a

singular incident. In many of these meetings the students expressed feelings that they wanted to do their work and be engaged in class. However, they felt as though they were prevented from doing so because their teachers did not adequately support them. The students expressed feeling like at times, their teachers held their pasts of not wanting to do their work against them, and intentionally ignored their needs. They could acknowledge that in the past, whether in the last year or the last month, they had not been focused on their studies and had been troublesome students, but that in the present they were attempting to change those behaviors.

In the reimagining of the RC, we intentionally created a space that would not treat Black students as though they were opposed to working hard in school, no matter what story their academic and disciplinary records told. We assumed that every student cared about their grades, wanted to achieve high academic performance, had what it took to be successful at JHS. We tried our best to offer resources within the RC that would support their success. One way we showed them we wanted to be a resource for them was by talking with the students about the incidents that occurred that got them sent to the RC in the first place (phase 1 of the restorative process), and then encouraging them to stay with us once the meetings ended so that they could have some study time in a quiet environment and make up some of the work they had missed since being out of class. This was possible because on many occasions it was easy for the students to know what the class was working on, even in their absence, given the online Sonar platform (a rare component of the NDN model that became advantageous to us). It also worked because on other occasions there would be students from the same class in the RC, which enabled the formation of a small working group where the students could support one another in completing assignments for the class.

Not only did we present the RC to the students as an academic resource because it could be a quiet workspace away from the distractions and tensions that had brought them to the RC in the first place, as the students worked, Mr. Ferguson and I presented ourselves as human resources available to assist them. I helped students with English, math, history, and even, on occasion, Spanish. However, there were occasions where Mr. Ferguson and I could not provide assistance because we just did not have enough context around what students' were doing in class or did not have the background content knowledge to understand the assignment. In these cases, we did our best to secure other resources that would be helpful to us trying to help the students. Sometimes we would go directly to the teacher and ask for assistance. For example, I remember on one occasion I struggled to help a young woman with a math procedure (which was not my best subject in high school). I ended up going to her teacher to re-learn how to do it so I could, in turn, reteach the young women how to do it. While sometimes a short conversation with a teacher was all that was necessary, in other instances, we would pull in the experts, the reading or math specialists, to come in and provide some one-on-one assistance. For example, I noted the following interaction in a Fieldnote from January:

> *Jana came into the RC crying. When I asked what was going on, she explained that there was a test in Ms. Dennis'[math] class and she did not know how to do it. She said that she talked to Ms. Dennis and "tried to tell her" that she "don't know how to do the problems" because "she was not explaining it right". She said that she told her that she "was not going to take a test if she did not know what to do", but Ms. Dennis kept telling her that she "needed to just take the test". At this point Jana turned to Anastasia, who was working in the RC and as tears welled up in her eyes stated, "I'm not dumb! I just don't understand it the way that the stuff gets explained". In response, Anastasia agreed*

with her and said she felt the "same way"...Anastasia said that she knew how to do it

because Mr. Ferguson helped her, so she would try to help Jana. I also offered my help

as well as Mr. Ferguson's when he was scheduled to return to the RC around 1:30. I also

went and grabbed Mr. Roberts, the math specialist, to see if he could be of any

assistance.

This example highlighted a situation in which Jana was frustrated with her teacher because she wanted to perform well on an exam, but did not feel she had the resources and assistance necessary to do so. As evident through Jana's proclamation to Anastasia, if she did not perform well in the exam, it would not have been because of innate incapability or a lack of desire to perform well. She was confident in her intelligence and declared that she was not "dumb"; she was frustrated, to the point of tears, by the fact that her teacher did not understand that she was not being given the instruction that would enable her to harness her capabilities productively. By coming to the RC, she was able to find the academic support that she perceived as missing in her classroom. She was able to link up with a student who had the potential to help her understand the concepts, as well as draw upon my assistance and that of the math specialist to advance her understanding of the concepts she struggled to understand.

In addition to these work sessions that typically occurred after a restorative meeting, we situated the RC as an academic resource because Black students could come to us to get support in creating and sustaining more comprehensive plans to raise their achievement. These plans included short term action items like making up work and preparing for upcoming exams, but also included long term action items like preparing them to advocate for summer school classes or enrollment in the credit recovery program. For example, Mr. Ferguson and I worked very closely in this capacity with Sharonda, an 11th grade student who was struggling to pass all of

her classes and did not have higher than a 10% in any of them. She was chronically truant and when she was in school, often struggled to catch up on her work and separate herself from peer distractions. She loved to dye her hair in bright colors, which attracted a lot of negative attention from other Black girls who felt it was not "cute". As a result, she was often in the RC to resolve conflicts with her peers. Mr. Ferguson had known her for some time and suggested that she had been a higher achieving student before all of the distractions. One day, when she was in the RC working, Mr. Ferguson and I sat her down and he expressed his concern about her grades. He stated that we *"knew she could do better"* and that we wanted to *"support her"* if she was *"willing to accept our help"*. Sharonda responded that she *"did not like her grades being so low"* and that the issues with her peers were *"impacting her focus"*. She also stated that she was *"struggling"* with the content of the courses and *"[did] not know where to begin in figuring it out."* Mr. Ferguson acknowledged her desire to do better and created a short-term plan to help her improve. As a first step, he directed her to some resources within the school on the internet that would help her to understand the content. He encouraged her to talk to her teacher before or after school (which meant she needed to actually show up to school) or to make an appointment with the math specialist; if she needed help communicating with them and establishing a relationship either he or myself would accompany her. If *"all else failed",* he told her to *"come see us"* when she needed help and we would do our best to assist her. Using Sonar, he went through all of her classes and identified the missing work that was having the biggest impact on her grades. As he spoke, she took notes and created a timeline of when she would get each assignment done over the next couple of weeks. Together, we decided that with permission, she would come into the RC for the last period of the day to receive some one-on-one support around assignments she was struggling to complete. Not only would this help her complete her missing

work, it would also create space between her and her rivals who were in that class. Before the meeting ended, we decided we would check in within two weeks to assess how the plan was working.

Once plans were established, Mr. Ferguson and myself would check in with the student and continually encourage them to stick with it. If they were kicked of class and sent the RC, we would remind the student that regardless of what had happened to bring them to us, we could and should, use the time as an opportunity to work towards the goals we had set. We knew the students hated feeling like someone was on their back all of the time and so we tried to communicate to the students, like with Sharonda, that the only reason we followed up on the plans we made was we wanted them to be successful. A few weeks after we created the plan for Sharonda, she came by the RC and thanked me for our assistance thus far. She stated, *"Thank you for pushing me to do my work and [helping me to] realize that it was time to stop playing around. I did not think I would be able to raise my grades in such a short time."* I told her she was "very welcome" and reminded her that she did all the work on her own. Again, she thanked me for encouraging her. As she prepared to leave the RC, she stopped and with a huge smile that radiated immense satisfaction, she mentioned that she passed the test she just took. I nodded my head in approval and stated "that's what I'm talking about!" She left the room, taking the smile with her.

Importantly, as the end of Sharonda's story demonstrated, we wanted to support the students by celebrating their academic successes—something the teachers did not seem to do without prompting. We did so both privately in our meetings with them, but also publicly through declarations to whomever was in the room at the time, through written messages on the large whiteboard in the RC, or by letting other adults, including their teachers, know when we

saw them. We celebrated the success of one student, Jacklyn one day in February. Jacklyn was an 11th grade student who was in the midst of turning her grades around. The interaction occurred in the following manner:

Jacklyn came into Mr. Ferguson's office today and asked him to pull up her grades. She excitedly showed us her two A+ grades. She was very excited about it and explained that even in the classes where her grades still seemed low, they were not because her teachers were going to grade her work soon. I expressed that I was so proud of her for raising her grades and asked her how she was getting them up... Mr. Ferguson jumped in and told her that her grades were very good and that he wanted her to keep doing a great job. She said okay and proceeded to sing and dance her way out of the RC. –FN, 64

As Jacklyn's story demonstrates, the students were encouraged to share with us the details of their successes. When they did, we affirmed that we knew they were capable of achieving what they had achieved. Her reaction demonstrated just how excited the students were when they reached some of their academic goals and we wanted to share in that excitement with them. We believed this would encourage them to continue putting forth efforts and affirm their confidence and expectations of success. In another example, one day in March, Mr. Ferguson brought me into the RC from the hallway to alert me of the academic success of Stephanie, a 9th grade student who was occasionally referred to the RC and had been struggling to pass her classes. I noted in my fieldnotes:

While I was talking to Chloe (10th grade, Black girl) out in the hallway, Mr. Ferguson came out of the RC with a giggling Stephanie. He said to me "oh man you have to see this." With a look of skepticism, I asked him to see what, and he responded "her grades." As we walked to his office I turned to her and asked what they were. She responded,

"Well, see, I was playing around last term getting D's and F's. I was not focused. I was letting my friends distract me. But now I'm not gonna do that anymore." As I nodded my head and told her "that's what's up", I looked over at Mr. Ferguson. He winked one eye, and we had a shared understanding that he had already met with her and had helped her come to these conclusions. She continued on to say that she began to "focus" and then her grades "improved". When we arrived at the office, Mr. Ferguson showed me her grades on his computer. She had all A's and B's! I congratulated her by saying "alright now" and asked for a high five. She laughed at my request (because it was a lame thing to do in her eyes) but smiled so hard I could see most of her teeth. Stephanie was usually too cool for such a big smile. She shook her head and lightly tapped her hand to mine. With a slight chuckle she said that she "had to get serious" because her mom "took her phone away" and she "wanted it back". We all burst into laughter. –FN, 68

Though the students acted shy and as though the celebrations embarrassed them, like Stephanie did with my high five, the smiles on their faces stated otherwise. Stephanie's story highlighted another critical piece to our work in the RC. In the process of supporting the students' development of positive academic identities, we also supported their ability to reconstruct themselves socio-emotionally. Like Stephanie, many of the students who were referred to the RC could acknowledge that the self they had presented in a past interactions with teachers had not been a productive self. During our meetings however, they often expressed struggling to get their teachers to accept this new self. Within the RC, we attempted to recognize whatever new self they wanted to be. If they said they were no longer a person who was distracted by their friends, we accepted that as the new them with no questions asked. When Stephanie described the changes she had made, I did not remind her of things she had done in the

past or express skepticism around her ability to be able to fully enact this new version of herself. The phrase "that's what's up" is slang within the Black community for "I fully understand and agree with you" and "I am excited about the idea or suggestion proposed." Whereas the students felt that their teachers struggled to accept that new academic selves that they wanted to be, in the RC we accepted them, even with only the slightest bit of change as evidence, and were excited to see how it altered their experiences within the school. Overall, through the academic support we offered to students in the RC, we created a space for them to reconstruct their academic identities in positive and productive ways.

Reconstruction of Social Identities

Much like the academic support, the RC was a space that provided Black students with the opportunity to productively work on the non-academic selves that they enacted within JHS. As was discussed in the previous chapters, when it came to Black girls, teachers imagined that they had negative traits that they carried with them into schools. As such, they treated the young women as if though changing their behavior was impossible and unimaginable. They would not let them be redeemed. Over time, the repeated referrals of Black girls with the same labels of "disrespectful", "defiant", and "insubordinate" confirmed to me that the line between describing behavior and labeling students' identities had become blurry amongst the teachers.

As a means of disrupting the labeling that was going on through the misuse of the RC, Mr. Ferguson and I made intentional efforts to offer opportunities for the students to mature in their ways of enacting their identities within JHS. We wanted them to understand that we believed they could enact their identities in a different more productive ways if they were displeased with how they currently expressed themselves. We did this by using our restorative meetings to highlight the ways that they were not inherently negative, difficult, or angry people.

We emphasized that even though sometimes they may have reacted in ways that were negative, they could learn how to make the choice to thoughtfully respond in difficult circumstances, rather than quickly react based simply on emotions. For example, one day when Candace and a Black boy were in the RC, both following verbal altercations with their teachers, Mr. Ferguson attempted to encourage them to be more intentional in their actions. He wrote the words "feelings" and "actions" on the board, and did the following:

> *He asked them if the "words were the same" and both of them said "no". He asked "what the difference was", and Candace said "one causes the other". He responded "whoa" (drawn out, as if some enlightenment had come to him). He said that was "why we kept seeing them in here under these circumstances (i.e. kicked out of class by a teachers)". He stated, "One does not cause the other." Next he wrote "decisions" on the board. He said to them, "we have feelings and we decide what kind of actions we are going to take based on those feelings. So because you are angry does not mean that you are going to do something stupid; we decide to do something stupid when we are angry. It's the lack of judgment. And does the anger make it worse? Absolutely. But being angry does not cause us to make bad decisions or being angry does not cause us to act badly. There is a decision, whether it is conscious or unconscious, that occurs and the good thing is that we can learn to manage those decisions." –FN 89*

In his mini lesson, Mr. Ferguson acknowledged their right to feel angry and attempted to help them understand that the problematic enactment of their identities stemmed not from the feeling of anger itself, but from how they were choosing to express their anger. His lesson was an attempt to show them that they could learn to enact their identities in different ways that would allow them to act upon the feelings they had in more productive ways. As evidenced within this
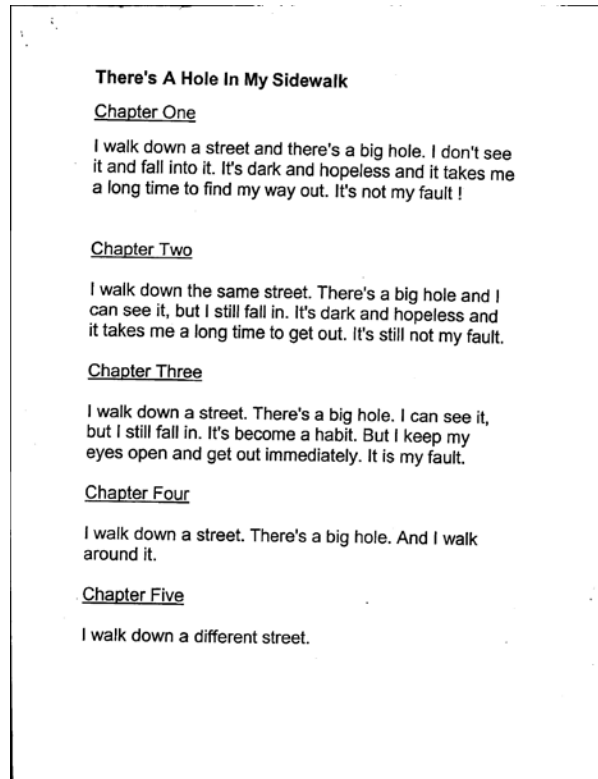
lesson, we were trying to instill in them that when the opportunity came for them to react differently, they had the potential to do so, and change was possible. Through our affirmations of their capacity to enact a different identity, we were trying to offer them the possibility of a second chance and redemption.

Mr. Ferguson was a big time storyteller and sometimes used that as means to help the students learn different ways of interacting. One of his favorite stories to use was "There's a Hole in My Sidewalk" which can be viewed in Appendix D or Figure 6. The story recounts five days in the life of the narrator. As the story goes, on day one the narrator walks down the street, does not see a hole, steps in it, and falls in. The hole is a dark, hopeless space that is difficult to get out of. In this instance, the narrator does not believe it is her fault. The next day, the narrator walks down the same street, sees the hole, but still falls in. Again as she ends up in the dark and hopeless hole and struggles to get out, she does not believe it is not her fault. Day three; same hole and same fall because it had become habit. This time however, the narrator identifies that it is her fault that she keeps falling. On day four, she walks down the street, sees the hole, and walks around it. On day five, the narrator chooses to walk down a completely different street.

Mr. Ferguson liked to use this story to create a metaphor about what was happening in the micro-interactions between the students and teachers in JHS. In the metaphor the students were the narrator and the interactions with their teachers that led to frequent referrals to the RC, were the "holes". In establishing the connections between the students and the story, Mr. Ferguson always made clear to emphasize that he knew they did not have control over the fact that there was a big hole in a sidewalk they had to walk by so frequently—i.e. the biased teachers they were working with. However, he also emphasized that the narrator realized that she had to do something different if she did not want to continue to end up in the dark and hopeless place

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inside the hole because it was not going anywhere. In school terms, he would convey that they were being taught by teachers who were likely judging them, misinterpreting their behavior, and setting them up for failure. However, he advised the students that they had to learn to be able to recognize when they were reaching their limits and negative reaction was eminent, so they could choose a different plan of action that would not result in an RC referral. He emphasized that it was not fair that this was the situation but that it was a necessary skill for them to build as they navigated schools and other institutions where White people were in power. He always highlighted that it took the narrator five days to really get to the point where she had a handle on what was going on. He did this to help them the students see that change would not be immediate, but was certainly possible, if they continued to be sincere in their desires to change. While this was one particularly powerful resource that he used, Mr. Ferguson used many other handouts like this to support the re-development of the students' social identities.

Figure 1: There's a Hole in My Sidewalk

There's A Hole In My Sidewalk

Chapter One

I walk down a street and there's a big hole. I don't see it and fall into it. It's dark and hopeless and it takes me a long time to find my way out. It's not my fault !

Chapter Two

I walk down the same street. There's a big hole and I can see it, but I still fall in. It's dark and hopeless and it takes me a long time to get out. It's still not my fault.

Chapter Three

I walk down a street. There's a big hole. I can see it, but I still fall in. It's become a habit. But I keep my eyes open and get out immediately. It is my fault.

Chapter Four

I walk down a street. There's a big hole. And I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down a different street.

Even if our efforts did not always translate into great shifts within the behaviors of the students who were frequently sent to the RC, I do believe that our willingness to see them as students who were capable of being something other than the negative selves that teachers imagined, was not lost. Students appreciated, and valued, the opportunity to be viewed as individuals who were capable of change. Importantly, if nothing else, it contributed to a level of comfort when engaging in critical conversations about their school experiences, because there was no fear that we would conflate their negative opinions about school with them being negative people overall.

Critical Conversations About Black Girls' School Experiences

Mr. Ferguson and I knew that the inequalities that were happening within JHS were visible to the students[46]. We respected their right to form, and advance, an opinion on what was happening in their school lives. As such, in the RC, we encouraged them to use the space to talk about what was happening in their classes and relationships with teachers. During these conversations, we welcomed critiques about school policies, practices, and teachers, and did not force the students to filter them in any kind of way. Though the students could not use derogatory language as they shared their feelings, outside of that, they had the freedom to express whatever opinion they had without fear of being told they were wrong for having it, or for how they expressed it. Typically, these conversations were held around the big wooden table within the RC or at the smaller desks within the room where we could sit eye to eye and with minimal furniture between us. In these conversations, we did not shy away from issues of race and found ways to interrogate why and how it mattered. When appropriate, during these conversations we encouraged students to establish connections between what was happening between the White teachers and the Black students in their school, and what was happening between the White and Black people on a local and national level. We discussed differences in power, privilege, and access that White and Black people had, both historically and contemporarily. Sometimes we used these conversations as a means of prepping students to talk to their teachers about their concerns.

In order to demonstrate what these critical conversations with students looked like, I share a lengthy example from an interaction with Trina in Appendix F. Trina was a 10th grade, high achieving student. She was also an active member of *RISE*. Despite her academic success, she found herself dealing with some of the very same problems as the lower achieving young

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[46] There is a body of literature that makes evident that Black students are aware of, and can clearly articulate, the presence of racism and discrimination within their schools (Akom, 2003; Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Neal-Jackson, 2018; O'Connor, 1996; Wun, 2016)

women whose narratives will be highlighted in the next chapter. I share this interaction at length because it demonstrates with rich detail how Mr. Ferguson and I conducted conversations where students shared their feelings about school. I also provide this example because in it, Trina shares many of the sentiments that other Black girls at JHS shared throughout the course of my time in the school. These themes included feeling unknown and uncared for by their teachers, unfairly targeted for discipline, negatively labeled, constantly disrespected, and academically neglected (and in some cases specifically sabotaged). Evident within the conversation with Trina, was that we did push students' thinking around troubling situations in an effort to help them be critical in what they were saying. Our aim in doing this was not to disprove their perceptions or get them to accept the idea that they were wrong, but to help them develop their capacity engage in critical thought around the implicit rules that governed institutions where power differentials were at play. We also wanted the young women to be able to process the situation in a way that would help them devise a plan for navigating it.

As we made these important shifts in the nature of our work, the RC became extremely busy. While teachers kept sending the students to us in high volume because they saw glimpses of the results of our "fixing" them, students actively wanted to be in the space. This is not to imply that the students wanted to be kicked out of their classrooms. They wanted to be in the environment we had created, and wanted to receive the support that we offered. On occasion, students would convey they had tried to get sent to the RC by engaging in some problematic behavior on purpose. In these instances we encouraged the student to simply ask to see us or come by during breaks in the day because we did no want them to have to intentionally break the rules in order to get time with us.

Although the official school policy was that students needed to be referred to the RC by their teacher, nearly ⅓ of the students began to come to the center through a self-referral process. They used these self-referrals to get academic help, vent about problematic classroom situations or environments, discuss personal things relating to life out of school, or to just joke around. Mr. Ferguson and I met with students all day long; some days I could not even put my bags down before I was being called on to deal with a student. Other days, I barely had time for bathroom and food breaks—both of which were very important to me as my pregnancy progressed. On the days that I was not there, I received phone calls on my cellular phone from students asking where I was and requesting that I come up to the school to assist them.

It is important to note that the RC was not a place that did not have rules. Technically, the rules that applied to the entire school applied to the RC as well. Though our norms in the RC were shaped by these official rules—no cursing or foul language, no romantic fraternizing, no fighting, no threatening—in reality, there were only a few formal rules in the space. One was that a student needed to be there with a pass from their teacher or having communicated with them about their whereabouts. This rule was in place because we knew that the teachers were preoccupied with controlling the students' movements and were extremely frustrated when students did not let them know about their whereabouts. The teachers would state that they focused on where the students were so heavily because they were legally responsible for them during the class period and if there was some kind of an emergency they needed to, at a minimum, know where all of their students were. However, based on evidence shared earlier, we know it was more about control.

We always asked every student upon their arrival to the center to produce some written evidence that their teacher had sent them there or knew they were there. The students hated this

rule, but the abided by it. For example, one day in January, I noted the following interaction when Candace found herself having to abide by the rule of checking in with her teachers before spending time in the RC. I wrote:

> *At the start of the 4th block I was in the RC and Candace walked in. I asked her if she checked in with her class and she said "no". She continued on to state that she had not checked in because whenever she "[went] in there he always got something irritating to say like 'my part time student' ". Her body language, particularly her pursed lips and slumped shoulders, conveyed to me that she was irritated by the idea that I was going to make her go check in. I re-explained to her why we had the policy that students had to check in, and she responded with a whiny "no", like a child appealing to her mother for just one more hour of playtime before bed. I responded with "Sorry, but you have to go check in." With a huff of air she left the RC, dragging her bag behind her and with her laptop dangling on her side. –FN, 48*

Though Candace did not want to check in with her teacher, she did as she was asked and returned with a pass. In an interaction in March, I observed Mr. Ferguson enforcing the rule in the following manner:

> *At the end of lunch, Mr. Ferguson walked outside of the RC and closed the door to monitor the passing period. Within seconds, a small crowd of Black students rushed up to him asking to come in. He waved his hand, shook his head, and yelled out to everyone standing near the door in a loud, thunderous voice (that was quite forceful) that they needed to "go to class first". As some physically tried to push past him to get inside the RC, he reiterated that they were not going to get inside. The students pleaded. I focused on Shanell and Jo, two of the Black girls who were in the front. As they repeated over and*

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over, "C'mon Mr. Ferguson", he continued to sternly tell them "NO". Shanell, leaning

on the south side of the lockers, said adamantly she was "not going anywhere". Mr.

Ferguson remained steadfast in his no's and she eventually let out a heavy exhale of

breath. She turned up her nose and lips in a look of disgust, and rolled her eyes. Jo

grabbed her arm and told her it was time to go and they disappeared around the corner.

–FN, 68

The second rule was that students could not engage in any behaviors that meant the room

was no longer conducive for the studying or restorative meetings that needed to take place in the

space. Although we allowed the students to listen to music and talk to their peers as they worked,

it had to be at a level where it was not distracting to themselves or others. Generally, students

knew that if they were going to listen to music they needed to use headphones, and that if they

were going to talk they needed to use an "inside" voice. Although the students may not have

liked the rules, they were consistently applied to everyone who utilized the space. The students

knew about them when they entered into the RC and yet kept coming back. Though the rules

were tested at times, they were generally respected. It was a rare, rare occurrence for a student to

be kicked out of the RC for misbehavior.

Overall, in the midst of what could have been a disaster for Black students and another

space where inequality was reproduced, the RC was able to function as a space where they could

imagine themselves in productive ways and be genuinely cared about. Within the RC, *RISE*

became a specific space for Black girls to have this experience.

RISE

I saw *RISE* as an opportunity to translate the larger work we were doing in the RC, into

something specifically focused on Black girls. Mr. Ferguson and I both did not want the RC to

be experienced as a negative place given a perception that students who were sent there were somehow in "trouble". Though the requests from teachers and administrators had been for me to help the girls learn to be "ladies" and understand the "right" way to behave in school, I had an immediate aversion to the idea that the Black girls were somehow deficient in their ability to be feminine. As I thought about what form *RISE* would take, I knew I had a different perspective on the girls, and was not willing to facilitate a group in the manner they were asking of me. I thought about all of the meetings I had had with them thus far where they expressed feeling misunderstood, disrespected, and uncared for. I felt as though they did not need another space where they were being told what to do and how to behave. Instead, they needed a space where they could be themselves—whatever that meant. Of course the adult and researcher in me, wanted to use the space to help them navigate their contexts more productively and effectively, and to have serious conversations about the inequalities they were experiencing at JHS and in life beyond the school walls. However, it was extremely important to me that it first and foremost be a space where they could let their guards down and really experience a freedom that was not present in other spaces in the school. I imagined it would be a space for and by young Black women. I did not share this new vision with any of the school officials. Only Mr. Ferguson and I talked at length about the group would *really* do.

The name of the group was inspired by Maya Angelou's poem *Still I Rise* in which she wrote:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise...

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...Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

...I rise

I rise

I rise.

This poem spoke to me because the words could encourage the Black girls to use their feelings as a motivating force to be confident and successful in whatever it was they wanted to do. When the group actually began meeting I shared the poem with them and explained how I felt it would guide the work we were doing. The young women seemed receptive and inspired.

Prior to the start of the group, I developed the following slogan with input from a few of the student I worked with regularly:

<u>AS YOUNG WOMEN ON THE R.I.S.E. :</u>

*we,   **R**ESPECT ourselves and others*

*we,   **I**GNORE the negativity and the distractions that try to keep us from*

*   reaching our goals,*

*we are,   **S**ERIOUS about our education because with it we will succeed, and*

*we are,   **E**MPOWERED to make a positive impact in our own lives and on those*

*   in our communities*

I also distributed a flyer to advertise the group to the Black girls in the school, which is in Appendix B.

Over time, the group attendance fluctuated. Please see Table 5 (in Chapter 3) for a list of most of the young women who participated in *RISE* during the two years that it was held. During the first iteration there were a solid 5 core members but another set of 4-5 young women who came in and out. The second year the attendance varied from 8-18, but toward the end of the year there was had consistent 8 solid members who attended every meeting, 3-5 whose attendance varied, and 3-5 who began the year with the group but stopped attending before the year was out (for reasons including changing schools, interpersonal drama with another member, and diminished interest). Regardless of the level of attendance, *RISE* functioned as a space that allowed me to see the young women enact their identities in productive ways that stood in stark opposition to the imaginations teachers held. Though I did not know this as the time, making the priority of *RISE* to focus on creating a culture of freedom, turned out to be one of the best decisions that I made within the research because it allowed me to get to know some of the Black girls, both *RISE* and non-*RISE* affiliated, in a way I would not have otherwise.

Figure 2: Brainstorm of RISE Activities

Art +Crafts
Cosmetology
Music
Kik Group
Sweaters
Dance
PotLuck
Exercise
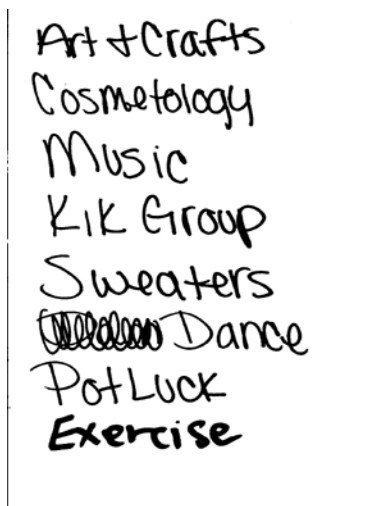
I created a culture of freedom by responding to the girls' desire to co-facilitate the group. While there were times when I was invited to lead group discussions that would explicitly advance my research goals, their desire to facilitate, and the activities that followed, taught me about their orientations toward school, relationships with teachers, challenges they faced, and so much more. Their desire to lead the group showed me that they had the qualities of leaders. They were able to come up with ideas, figure out the resources they needed to support those ideas, and implement the activities when the time came. This showed me that they could be responsible because they knew that I would not be planning anything for that day and it would be on them if the group was left without an activity to complete. This type of process aligned with the goals that exist within problem-based learning environments[47] that should have been happening in JHS on a regular basis. Figure 7 displays some of the ideas they came up with for potential *RISE* meetings.

A typical *RISE* session began with casual conversation while the girls ate lunch. This was an opportunity for them to personally update the group on the latest that was happening in their lives. Often times the conversations centered on the gossip that was circulating the school, the who's who of dating, or the latest news story in pop culture. My pregnancy was also a frequent topic of discussion as many of the girls were curious about what being pregnant was like, how the baby was developing, and my experience being cared for by a midwife. After lunch was over, the group would circle up and a student facilitator would ask a check in question—i.e. how are things going, highs and lows of the week so far, if you could use one word to describe how you are feeling right now what would it be, best movie you have seen recently, etc. Next, we would proceed to engage in a topic-oriented discussion or activity.

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[47] See: Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Savery & Duffy, 1996

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When facilitating the group the young women often chose to engage in fun activities where they were able to act silly, make noise, and move freely about the RC. I was often surprised by how much they just wanted to move and sometimes roughhouse with one another like what you would imagine would be of interest to boys. One day they engaged in a very spirited game of keep away from me as I attempted to grab a volleyball that they were kicking around the group in the midst of our discussion. One of the activities they <u>loved</u> to engage in, that was perfect for their desires to be silly and move around, was a singing competition game that I had introduced at the beginning of the year as an icebreaker. The game was played by first breaking the larger group up into two teams. Each team would be presented with the same word and they would have three minutes to come up with as many song lyrics as they could think of that contained the word. After three minutes were up, each team would rally back and forth singing and performing the songs they had chosen, making sure to use the identified word during the performance and that no song was repeated. This occurred until one team ran out of songs to sing. For example, if the word was "baby", Team A might sing the lyrics to Sir Mix A Lot's "Baby Got Back" and Team B might respond with lyrics from Usher's "There Goes My Baby". Team A may then respond with lyrics from Justin Beiber's "Baby, Baby, Baby", and then Team B may discover they are out of songs which ends the round and gives Team A the win. The girls asked to play this game on several occasions and even set up their own *RISE* meeting on a day when I was not at the school in order to play.

Though on the surface this may seem like just a silly game, it taught me a great deal about who the girls were. First, it showed me that in the midst of the intense frustrations and sadness that accompanied many of their interactions with their teachers, these girls were really silly and cheerful at heart. Rather than force them to act like the "ladies" and adults that the

teachers wanted them to be, this game allowed them to fulfill their youthful desires to be playful and unrestrained. Though there were no rules as to how they were to perform the songs and they could have simply talk-sang them, they wound up doing all out performances. They hopped on chairs, danced across the room, pretended to serenade other group members, and did a number of things to explicitly make themselves and their peers laugh. When they played this game, other students would press their heads against the window and peer in the room, seemingly curious about what was going on because the amount of energy in the room was ridiculous (in the best way possible). Secondly, because it was a group activity, I saw that they were able to work cooperatively with their peers. They worked together to come up with the song list and performance ideas in ways that would enable them to secure a win for that round. They did this with no problems. Thirdly, these performances showcased their creativity as they found new and exciting ways to enact the various meanings that a single word could have in different songs and contexts.

But it was not always fun and games. Quite often, the young women decided to engage in whole group discussions. The discussions ranged in topic including hair care, dating and relationships, future goals, health and wellness, reality TV, standards of beauty, and current events. For example, one day the young women discussed the death of a 15-year old Black girl from Denver, Colorado who died following an attack from a group of students, while other students stood around, watched, and recorded the incident. During the conversation about this tragedy, the young women discussed the ethics of "jumping" someone, the culture of filming fights and turning it into entertainment, and the consequences the aggressors should face. They compared the situation to fights that had happened between girls in JHS and considered the larger reasons young women had interpersonal conflict. During this conversation, I participated

as member of the group and did little facilitating. This demonstrated their ability to independently engage in focused discussions.

Though the topics were left open to their choosing, many of the times the discussions (without any prompting from me) were focused on issues directly related to their school experiences. For example, toward the end of the first semester when rumors were swirling about the possibility of JHS being moved into the main high school so that the current building could be turned into an alternative high school for students who were missing their credits, the group decided to forgo any planned activities and instead engage in a conversation about what each of them knew about the potential school move, how it would affect the students at JHS, and what they needed to do to ensure they were not left behind. Below I provide a short portion of the conversation:

> **Anastasia**: *Well if they are going to make 100 people leave, then there isn't going to be a lot of people left, it's only like 200 of us anyway. That means that we are definitely not going to be here.*

> **Aundra**: *Yea it's not going to be a lot of us here. But in all honesty, the school closing might be what JHS needs. You know it was supposed to be a secluded school.*

> **Candace**: *Well why don't they just take out the students who are not getting their credits? Instead of closing the whole school down?*

> **Alaina:** *Well, they may just move JHS into a wing in the Main High School and so it would technically still be JHS and they would not be really closing it down.*

> **Aundra:** *Okay! (seemingly said with excitement)*

> **Demetria**: *No-kay. I don't like those kids (Aundra: yea me either). I don't think that's good.*

Aundra: Why would they take kids out to put them in the main school, just to spend more money to provide kids with what we already have over here now?

Anastasia: So basically ya'll, we can't get no F's this quarter or we gonna be in the alternative school.

Nadine: Well you just can't have an F at the end of the semester because the two grades from the quarters will average out.

Aundra: So what does a B and C average out to be?...I'm trying to figure out what grades I need to get so I can be alright.

On another occasion, the young women engaged in a discussion about the results of the monthly Superintendent challenge where he would ask a question and students could email him their responses. He would share out some of the answers in a future email. In this particular one, he had challenged the students from both the main high school and JHS, to think about ways to improve student experiences in the district. When he shared out the answers, one of them was to make the high schools single sex in order to increase student focus. When the young women came into the RC for *RISE* on the day this email was released, they were excited to talk about the possibility of this happening and share their opinions on how it would or would not address the issue of students lacking focus. For nearly 30 minutes, the girls went back and forth expressing opinions that were both for and against single sex schools. As they engaged in this discussion, they vacillated between thoughts about what would motivate students at JHS specifically, and what they felt like were universal needs of teenagers.

The young women's choice to have discussions about their school experiences showed me that they were (a) engaged and (b) willing to participate in the exchange of ideas with their peers—again, a critical component of the NDN project based model. The topics they choice

demonstrated that they had a deep desire to critically examine their school experiences and share their opinions about them. During these conversations, the young women were able to clearly articulate their ideas in ways that highlighted their central ideas in a manner that their peers and I could understand. As they expressed their opinions during these conversations, they supported them with evidence to demonstrate that they were doing more than simply complaining about how things were; they were offering on opinion based on the facts of their reality. Importantly, as they offered critiques, they also offered solutions to address the problems they identified.

The girls also used the space to further their academic goals. For example, toward the end of the year they held an impromptu study jam to prepare for the Navigator exam. This exam was significant because it determined what students would be eligible to become dually enrolled at the community college during their junior and senior year. I had known nothing about this exam until many of the young women arrived to the RC for our *RISE* meeting appearing stressed about something and uncharacteristically lethargic. When I inquired what was wrong, I got the following information:

> *Latrice stated that she felt that she "was not going to pass [the exam]" because she had done a practice test earlier in the day and did not pass. Melody also felt "nervous" because she had not "done well" on the practice exam either. She felt that some of the questions were "tricky", and that she had not been given the preparation for the test that she needed to be successful. One by one, sometimes talking over each other with a rushed excitement to share, the girls lamented that it was not fair that they had not been given the adequate preparation for the test. I asked the group to explain what activities they had done to prepare. Melody answered first and said they were supposed to get some kind of notice about it before it happened but they did not. Someone stated that they had*

been doing warm-ups everyday, but that they were not really going through the answers

in a detailed way that would prepare them for the test. Candace chimed in and shared

that because her connections class [an advisory class] was so behind, they had not done

anything at all. She expressed that she "hoped" her "good test taking skills" would come

in handy. When I asked what those skills were, she responded "reading the questions and

looking at the options to see what is realistic or not"...I asked the group if they felt

slighted that they did not get time to practice. There was a resounding chorus of "yes".

After this conversation, as a group, the girls decided to use the time that was left in *RISE* to go

over some of the practice questions to see if I could help them develop strategies for finding the

right answer. We set up a large workstation around the wooden table and began to work through

some of the questions. In general, the questions required the young women to change grammar

or vocabulary within a sentence to make it more "correct". The students took turns sharing their

answers and rationale for each question before I explained how I would approach the question.

When applicable, I tried to share the general rules about grammar that led me to choose the

answers that I did (i.e. the purpose of a comma versus a semicolon). Their desires to spend their

lunch time studying on this day, and the other times that they did so, demonstrated that they

cared about how they performed in school, and a willingness to be proactive in securing the

resources to support the academic achievement they desired. It demonstrated that they were

confident in their ability to achieve highly if matched with the right kinds of supports. Though

this was an informal learning environment, it demonstrated to me that they were capable of

focusing on something academic in nature. They were able to work together and independently

in ways that did not disrupt the greater learning space, and respected the knowledge that I had to

offer them in regards to the exam questions and strategies.

When I did introduce my own activities, I tried to do things that I thought was responsive to the types of activities that they had shown interest in. For example, because they liked the performance aspect of the singing game, when I wanted to learn about their perceptions of how teachers treated students based upon race, I did so by having them act out different scenarios based on if a White student was doing it versus a Black girl. While the example I am about to show deals with a situation that occurred in the hallway, other scenarios asked the young women to simulate how they felt treatment in the classroom differed for students of different races as well. In one scenario, the prompt was to act out a White student being in the hallway without a pass versus a Black girl being in the hallway without a pass. The students enacted part one of the scenario as follows: White student (generically named Timmy) is walking in the imaginary hallway. A school official approaches Timmy and says politely, "Excuse me can I see your pass?" Timmy responds to the school official in a whiny voice, "I don't have one". The school official smiles and pats Timmy on the shoulder. They state, "That's okay, just get to class" and let Timmy walk by them. They each continue to walk in the direction they were coming from, without another word (end of scene). Next, the young women acted out what would happen if it was a Black girl in the hall without a pass. The scenario went as follows: Black girl (generically named Tasha) is walking down the imaginary hallway. A school official comes up to Tasha and aggressively asks, "Where are you going?" Tasha responds, "To the bathroom." The school official, in the same aggressive tone, says "Let me see your pass", and nearly immediately begins to pat her down, presumably in a search for the pass. Tasha yanks her body away from the school official and calmly says, "I don't have one, but my teacher said I could go". She continues to attempt to walk toward the bathroom. The school official blocks her path and begins to physically turn her body in the other direction. Tasha tries to break free of their grip, as she asks

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"What are you doing" and repeats "I'm going to the bathroom". The school official responds, "No you are going to the office." Tasha exclaims, "No I'm not", to which the school official yells "Suspended" (end of scene[48]).

  After the performances, the girls participated in a debrief about the themes that surfaced across the scenes that were shared. With the scenario I just shared, the young women highlighted that the White student got away with not having a pass easily while the Black girl got suspended. They commented on how nicely the school official spoke to the White student and how the Black girl was already assumed to be doing something wrong even before she was approached. They noted the potential of the White students' whiny voice to impact the interaction while the Black girl was like to be perceived as having an attitude when she was answering the questions. They stated how the White student was able to go back to class while the Black girl was not. They expressed pride in the way she verbally resisted being told she was going to the office and felt that Timmy would not have known what to do if he were in that situation. I noted the way the pat down reminded me of a police interaction and how physical the situation with the Black female student was as opposed to the White male student. This caused the girls to discuss the ways they felt the both the students' privacy and right to personal space was violated during their interaction—the school official patting the White student on the shoulder and then patting down the Black girl. During the debrief conversations about the scenarios, the young women were raising their hands and waiting to be called on (though that was not a particular norm in our space), were building upon previous comments of their peers, and were gracious in giving the floor to others. As they deconstructed the various skits their insightful comments about the specific actions and discourse within the interaction demonstrated that they were engaged with

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[48] This scene highlights the pattern of negative interactions between Black students and school officials in schools where they are subject to heightened surveillance and punitive punishment (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda Lei, 2003; Morris, 2016; Morris, 2005, 2007; Murphy, Acosta, Kenned-Lewis, 2013; Wun, 2016)

the activity. Often, their comments were sprinkled with short narratives about how something

like what had been depicted had happened to them, which showed they were making connections

between the activity and their own personal experiences.

Given that the young women liked to have the opportunity to express, with authority,

who they imagined themselves to be, when I wanted to know what they believed the differences

were between how they imagined themselves and how their teachers imagined them, I had them

do an art project. In this project they outlined their bodies, split them down the middle, and on

one side wrote adjectives that emerged from how they defined themselves, and on the other side

ones that they attributed to external definitions of their identities. See Figures 8-11 for examples

from the project.

Figure 3: Sample body outline

Figure 4: Sample body outline

Figure 5: Sample body outline

Figure 6: Sample body outline

I share examples of the types of activities I introduced, and the responses to them, to demonstrate that contrary to common perceptions in the school, the young women I knew were not "anti" adult authority. In many instances, I was met with little pushback about these activities. Many of the young women were excited to do them and completed them with little complaints, partially because of my efforts to construct them in a way that matched their interests

and drew upon their existing funds of knowledge[49]. In the moments that I was invited to control the group space, they were willing to go along with my established plan of action. And when they were not, because there were certainly times they did not want to do what I had suggested, it was not a drag out, blow out, type of deal. Case in point, when I introduced the body drawing activity, three of the girls were not interested. I said okay and did not push it, and they quietly sat in a corner while the other girls worked. Halfway into the project one of the girls decided to join the others in completing it. When it came time to present the drawings, one of the others who did not participate in the actual drawing, actively listened and even shared some impromptu thoughts of what she would have written down if she had done the assignment. I garnered this peaceful reaction from them because I respected their right to choose activities and topics as the co-facilitators of the group, and in turn they respected mine.

I want to close this chapter with an artifact from the girls who participated in *RISE* during the pilot year. That year, I tasked them with coming up with a final project that would tie up the year that we spent together. They decided they wanted to make a music video. Instead of creating a new song, they wanted to rewrite the lyrics to a popular song circulating the radio at the time, "Trap Queen" by Fetty Wap. I display the lyrics to each song side by side in Figure 12.

Figure 7: Comparison of Trap Queen and RISE Queen lyrics

Trap Queen Lyrics (Artist: Fetty Wap)	RISE Queen Lyrics (Artist: Participants in RISE)
I'm like hey, wassup, hello Seen yo pretty ass soon as you came in the door	I'm like hey wassup hello See a rise girl She just came through the door

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[49] See: Gay, 2010; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2014

I just wanna chill,
got a sack for us to roll
Married to the money
introduced her to my stove
Showed her how to whip it
now she remix it for low
She my trap queen
let her hit the bando
We be counting up
watch how far them bands go
We just selling dope,
talking matching lambos
Got 50 60 grams prob 100 grams
though
Man I swear I love her,
how she work that damn pole
Hit the strip club
we be letting bands go
Everybody hating
we just call them fans though
In love with the money
I ain't never letting go

And I get high with my baby
I just left the mall I'm getting fly with my
baby,
yeahh
And I get right with my baby
I be in the kitchen
cooking pies with my baby,
yeahh
And I get right with my baby
I just left the mall
I'm getting fly with my baby,
yeahh
And I get right with my baby
I be in the kitchen
cooking pies with my baby,
yeahh

I hit the strip with my trap queen
'Cause all we know is bands
I might just snatch up a Rari
And buy my boo a Lambo
I might just snatch
up a necklace

She just want to learn
Trying to see them grades grow
She always on that laptop
Looking up [Sonar]
Show her how to work it
Now she on the honor roll
4.0
now she dual enrolled
She on the college campus
Got them boys saying whoa
Cuz she set high goals
Off to college she go
Got 50, 60, grand in scholarship money
though
Man I swear I love her,
how she self controlled
She always hit the library
trynna to let her knowledge grow
Got Everybody hating,
she just call them fans though
In love with the grades
hope they never get low

And I get good grades with my ladies
We aint playin games, we getting A's in our
classes
Yeah
I just left the school with my ladies
In them study groups
we ain't foolin' with them boys
No
I have a good time with my ladies
We fly in our teens,
fine, & educated
Yeah
And I get good grades with my ladies
We ain't playin' games
we getting A's in our classes
Yeah

I hit the hall with my ladies
Cause you know we always ready
I just might a snatch my computer
and buy My girls some textbooks
I just might snatch
them some bracelets

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Drop a couple on a ring	To show my girls some love
She ain't want it for nothin'	They ain't wanting for nothing
Because I got her everything	Cause with her friends she got it all

I share this activity because it is particularly powerful in illustrating how they girls imagined themselves differently than how the teachers did, all the while still holding an affinity to their race and class identities (as evident through their redevelopment of the Trap Queen into a *RISE* Queen). While the trap queen was a woman who was all about securing money for her lover by helping him manufacture drugs, the *RISE* queen was all about successfully securing scholarship money to further her education. While the trap queen was focused purely on her lover and his desires, the *RISE* queen was focused on her personal success and that of the women around her. Though she had the boys "saying whoa", she did not lose her focus on her educational goals and valued the relationships she had with her girlfriends. While the trap queen was in many ways controlled by her man, the *RISE* queen was in charge of her own actions and was described as "self-controlled". Importantly, the *RISE* Queen was a stellar student, who got A's, was college bound, could teach her peers the information they did not know, and desired for her knowledge to continue to grow. Throughout their version of the song, the girls revealed visions of themselves that the school kept denying. Given how deeply entrenched the negative images of them were, the teachers did not allow them to enact these different, more productive, identities. This revamped song represented the symbolic tension I was working through in unpacking how it was that the school imagined the young women, and how the young women, in turn, navigated these imaginations.

Concluding Thoughts

Within JHS, school officials constructed identities for Black girls that positioned them as emotionally unpredictable, unstable, and volatile. Teachers imagined that they were rebellious

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based on perceptions that they were bossy, striving for control in inappropriate ways, and were manipulating me to get what they wanted (i.e. circumvent the school rules). Teachers also suggested that Black girls had a particular attitude that made them unpleasant to be around and difficult to work with. They imagined that this "Black girl attitude" was driven by an entrenched anger that was placed onto teachers even though it had little to actually do with them. When speaking about their academic identities, the school officials imagined that Black girls had potential. After all, every student had the opportunity to learn at JHS. However, when addressing the reality that Black girls were the amongst the lowest achieving students in the school, they articulated feeling that their intelligence was conditional. They suggested that the young women's problematic dispositions prevented their own potential from being realized. They situated them as mismatched with the NDN model of instruction, insecure in their academic abilities, and embodying dispositions that were inherently contrary to a positive academic identity. Finally, through their (mis)use of the RC the young women were positioned as disrespectful to the teachers in their role as a teacher, and as the only students in JHS whose behavior required correction.

While I discussed all of the constructions separately, in reality, they operated simultaneously in constructing an identity for Black girls at JHS. Consider the following snippet of the interview with Mrs. Mann, the Spanish teacher, where she seamlessly weaved together many of the themes I have highlighted including emotional unpredictability, anger, conditional intelligence, lack of engagement, and the presence of a "Black girl attitude". She stated:

> *Yep. Candace, she's a roller coaster...And like, she can have either – she has, like, a love/hate relationship with me and it fluctuates and it goes – like praise with her is something that works marvelously and she is an extremely intelligent person. The*

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problem is that she is not in school and when she is in school, she is somewhere else that

is not inside the classroom. So she does not get her work finished...And it's such a pity

because she is such a smart lady...And her attitude, it's jeopardizing being successful in

high school. And later on in life.

Also consider an example from Ms. Rose as she attempted to explain the low performance of

Dior. She shared:

I mean her academics are really low 'cause she's – she does not care at this point 'cause

she's so focused on everything else... and angry and all of that, that she's not ready, but

when she does her stuff she does fairly well, given that she's missed like three-quarters of

the year – in work, in paying attention and all that. So she'll try when she wants to.

In characterizing her low achievement, Ms. Rose simultaneously constructed Dior as lacking

engagement, perpetually angry, and striving for control.

However, these very same young women who were characterized as so inherently

negative, were productive and positive in the interactions I had with them in the RC and *RISE*.

These spaces[50] functioned as platforms that allowed the young women to enact identities that the

teachers did not see. This was because we utilized them to support their academic pursuits,

affirm their identities positively, acknowledge their capacity to mature, and provide them with

space to express opinions without retribution. As the examples I have shared demonstrate,

because the young women were different when they were with me, they were not inherently the

people their teachers made them out to be and that the context they were in was likely driving the

enactments of their identities. The teachers failed to realize that the way the young women

enacted their identities in the classroom was the result of an interplay between various factors

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[50] Scholars have written about the utility of culturally responsive spaces like the RC and *RISE* in addressing Black girls' verbally aggressive behavior—see Aston, Graves, McGoey, Lovelace, & Townsend, 2018.

embedded within the classroom context and not simply the manifestation of an inherent, static identity[51]. The different contexts they were in provided them with opportunities to enact their identities in different ways. Unfortunately, the classroom contexts primarily supported them in enacting their identities to in the ways the supported the teachers' pejorative imaginations.

In the chapters to come, I will present you with cases of three Black girls and how I made sense of their navigation of the teacher constructions and the constructions we made of them in the RC and *RISE*. Anastasia, Dominique, and Candace were chosen for three primary reasons: (a) they represented key illustrative examples of the girls who were consistently referred to the RC, (b) were used as examples when teachers referred to the imagined problematic identities that Black girls enacted, and (c) they evidenced varying levels of participation in *RISE*. While Candace was a full time member of *RISE*, Anastasia was only a part time member, and Dominique was not a member at all. Though both the RC and *RISE* were used as platforms to create different opportunities for the girls, they did different things because of the fact that the RC was premised upon disciplinary interactions, while *RISE* was based in student empowerment. As such, the interactions I had with the young women in these spaces varied in depth and scope. Thus, not only will I provide insight into what I knew about these girls from their frequent presence in the RC, but when available, I will also provide a window into who they were through their *RISE* interactions. In comparing the teacher-based and RC and *RISE*-based constructions, we get to see a much more complicated rendering of who these girls were and how, in fact, the teacher and the practices of JHS sometimes incited the very qualities that they criticized. Said another way, sometimes the very behaviors and orientations that teachers attributed to Black girls were produced within the micro-interactions they had with the students, and were not predisposed traits at all. Within each of the girls' stories, I begin with a description of the sense I

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[51] See: McCarthy Moje, 2002; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009; Norton, 2006; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995

made of their identities given our interactions within the RC and *RISE* (if applicable). I then present examples in which teachers and school staff called forth particular ways of being given the micro-interactions that occurred. Within each interaction, I highlight how the girls' reactions align with the themes I presented in Chapters five through seven.

As you read the narratives, it is productive to think about the girls using the metaphor of "canaries in the coal mine". For those unfamiliar, in the early 20th century, canaries would be sent into coalmines as an early warning system that could alert miners to the presence of toxic gases such as carbon monoxide or methane. Canaries were ideal for this job because they were more sensitive than the miners. The gases would kill the birds before affecting the miners, thus allowing them time to escape or put on protective gear. This metaphor is productive for thinking about how Black girls navigated JHS. As you will see, their reactions within micro-interactions with their teachers were not always the typical responses that you would expect from students. The young women displayed a range of reactions, some very extreme, that at times even caught me off guard because it was not what I expected to see given the events that had preceded. However, it cannot be lost that these young women, like the canaries, were extremely vulnerable within JHS—they were, on average, the lowest performers in the school and were being taught by White teachers (whom many believed were racist) who had a limited capacity to work with them given their racialized gender identity. As such, the notion of them as "canaries" is fitting because their responses in many ways spoke to their high level of sensitivity given their vulnerable positioning within the school. It is also a productive metaphor because the canaries were sent in with the purpose of warning the miners about the presence of a toxic environment. As canaries, we can view the young women as being the temperature gauges of their classroom and larger school environments. Their responses within their interactions with school officials

help to raise questions about the classroom environments that they find themselves in. While there is a trend within the existing literature on focusing on the girls themselves to try to figure out what about *them* makes extreme reactions possible, in this current project I ask, what do their responses tell us about their particular *environments* that might single a problem? I will return to this question in the final chapter.

Given that the analysis was structured according to a Black feminist perspective[52], in sharing the stories of the Black girls, I privilege the narratives they tell as real and authoritative descriptions of their experiences. While some of the examples share will capture an incident from multiple perspectives, others are solely from the girls' perspective. While there may be questions as to the extent to which the girls were making up parts of the story, engaging in hyperbolic reports of teacher actions and interactions, or failing to include pivotal pieces of the story that may have contributed to how I understood the situation, I argue that their stories are constructed in ways that demonstrated how they understood their reality, and should be respected as such. How the young women experienced the situation constitutes an important reality that should not be de-legitimized. As such, I stand by my decision to foreground their interpretations.

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[52] See: Hill-Collins, 2000; King, 1988; Neal-Jackson, 2018

Chapter VIII

The Production of Problematic Identity Performances: Anastasia

Getting to Know Anastasia

Anastasia was a 10th grade student. She had deep chocolate skin and an average build. She stood at around 5'4", though if you asked her she would say she was much taller—mainly to make it clear that I was the shortest person in the room. She typically wore her hair in a mid shoulder length straight or wavy weave of various colors from blonde, to red, to jet black. She took much pride in her hair and could often be found walking around with a comb or brush in her hand. Otherwise, she might be found somewhere with a hair straightener attempting to re-straighten some of her natural hair that had not been covered by the weave. Around midway through the first semester, she began to express to me that she wanted to own her own salon, which I thought was a perfect fit for her based on the pride she took in how her hair was styled. Anastasia typically dressed casually in skinny pants or jeans, an oversized jacket or sweater, and a pair of trendy sneakers or leather boots when the weather was cold.

When I first got to JHS in 2014, I was warned about Anastasia. When teachers spoke about the challenging Black girls who needed my help, she was at the top of the list. In an early informal conversation with the school counselor at the time, Ms. Conrad, Anastasia was discussed as an unwise choice of friend for another Black girl because of her presumably toxic nature. The field note reads as follows:

Today I had a conversation with Ms. Conrad. At first we were making small talk about
how our days were going and our experiences in our respective PhD programs (she
recently had begun working on her PhD at a different school). At some point, the
conversation turned to how the students were doing, and she mentioned that she wanted
to get Shelly away from Anastasia because she thought that she would be able to better
think for herself if they terminated their friendship. She recounted that she gave Shelly a
book to read that she hopes will make her think about herself and who she was choosing
as her friends. With a chuckle she recounted that she often had to tell Anastasia that even
though she [Anastasia] did not like her, she would continue to love Anastasia and pray
for her regardless. She stated that Anastasia did not want to accept that it did not matter
if she liked her or not because she was the adult in the situation. With another chuckle
she stated that when Anastasia repeatedly told her she "did not like her", she simply
responded with "too bad." (November, 2014)

In this conversation, Ms. Conrad suggested that Anastasia's negativity was so bad that it was like

a virus she did not want to infect another student. She stated that Anastasia made it very clear

that she did not like her and was unwilling to accept her help even though she had professed

wanting nothing more than to help her and make her school life easier.

When I first started volunteering in the RC, I personally experienced some of the

resistance of which Ms. Conrad spoke. Anastasia did not immediately embrace me as the other

young women did. While the tentativeness that other students displayed in their first

conversations with me faded within the first 2-3 weeks of my visits to the school, Anastasia kept

her distance from me for the first couple of months that I volunteered in JHS. Based on what I

had been told about her, I did not expect her to ever come around. However, as time went on,

there were signs that she did desire to develop a relationship with me. Besides responding to my good morning greetings and questions of how she was doing, the first major sign that she was warming up to a relationship with me was an interest she took in decorating my makeshift office space. About two months into my work in the RC, I had set up a workspace along one wall of the room, which included a table and chair near an outlet. After witnessing me sit there on many occasions, she inquired why I did not have a "real office." I reminded her that I was just a volunteer so I was not allocated one. She seemed to think it was unfair that I did not have a space of my own, and asked if I would be interested in her "decorating" the space so it could "look better" and appear "more official." We spent about 3 weeks going back and forth on a plan as she continually came up with new ideas to "beautify" the space every time I saw her. Some of her ideas were simple—get a real desk and chair (as opposed to using one of the student desks and chairs that were in there), put pictures up of myself and my family, and set up a name tag so people would know that it was my desk. Other ideas were more complicated and unlikely to enacted—painting the wall behind the desk my favorite color, erecting a fake wall between my space and the rest of the RC, and even kicking Mr. Ferguson out his office so I could occupy it. Although the project was never completed, the conversations about it served as a near constant form of communication between the two of us that I felt was her way of getting to know me and testing out our developing relationship.

Although I cannot mark the exact point where we became "friends", I did note at the end of the year feeling that our relationship had grown from our initial meeting. In a field note from June, 2014, I wrote:

> When I first came in the school today I called Mr. Ferguson to come let me in through the
>
> back door. As I entered, Anastasia greeted me by asking why I *"did not come through the*

front door." As I scrambled to provide a reason as to why I was circumventing a rule that

I enforced so heavily, she stared at me with big, round, disbelieving eyes. As I rolled out

an excuse, she shook her head and with sarcasm stated that I did not "need to be coming

in the back door when I should be coming through the front". It seemed as though she

was trying to imitate the way that I often told students to come in the front door of the

school and refused to let them in through the side door (which was a direct entrance to

the RC). As I rolled my eyes and continued into the office to put my belongings down, I

thought about how far we had come to where she was laughing and being playful with

me. The girl who was once described as the untouchable, was now someone who I could

clearly see was not as aggressive as everyone thought.

In this note I reflected not only on the relationship we had developed, but also the ways the

relationship made me question who the school officials' accounts had made her out to be.

Once our "friendship" was established, Anastasia began to visit *RISE*. Though there were

some days that she would opt not to attend *RISE*, the majority of the time she was in attendance.

During *RISE,* Anastasia actively participated in the full range of activities. For example, during

the first iteration of the group, she helped to come up with the lyrics for our "*RISE* Queen" song

and during the second year she was always willing to play the singing competition game

mentioned in Chapter 7. In fact, she was one of the girls to lobby for groups to get added points

if they did dance performances in addition to singing. Not only did she engage with the fun

activities within the group that I led, she also stepped up during the year to co-facilitate a session

where the girls taught each other a dance routine from the cheerleading and dance squad.

Anastasia actively participated in discussions, even if she did not necessarily have the

desire to lead them. One day before a *RISE* meeting, a group of students, including Anastasia,

were talking with me when the subject of Raven Symone came up. Raven, a child actress turned talk show host, had been in the news recently for a comment she made about how employers had every right to discriminate against people with names like "Watermelondrea". Anastasia made some very insightful comments during this conversation about it being "wrong" for Raven to say that because people could not choose the name they were given and that it did not mean they were less capable of doing the job than other people. When the group met later that day, I asked her to recap our conversation for the group members. As all of the members of *RISE* sat in a circle, the interaction went as follows:

Alaina: Oh! This is the perfect time. Anastasia can you explain for the group what we were talking about at the table earlier?

Anastasia: Jana and Candace was right there too! (laughter from group)

Alaina: Yea, but you were making some good comments

Anastasia: I forgot. (Laughter from group)

Candace: She hates being called out.

Alaina: Okay, okay.

Candace: We were talking about how Raven Symone talked about how she would never hire someone whose name was "Watermelondrea".

Multiple girls speaking at once: "I would", "What kind of name is that", "I would not"

Candace: But I mean, do you have a choice in what you are named?

Anastasia: You can change your name for 50 dollars. (Laughter from group). You just have to go up to the courthouse.

Aundra: Don't you have to be a certain age?

Anastasia: Nope my mom can go up there and do it. She did for my sister's name.

Even though she was initially put off by my invitation to lead the conversation, she nevertheless participated after Candace opened it up. The portion I shared revealed her initial engagement, which was to offer a counter to Candace's point (ironically, a point she had made earlier) that you can indeed change your name if you do not like it. As the conversation continued, she engaged on an even deeper level by talking about her own name and how it was likely perceived by others. Though the teachers imagined her to be disagreeable, Anastasia's participation in *RISE* demonstrated that she *could* get along with others, peers and a adult authority figure, in productive ways.

During the study, Anastasia was in the 10th grade by age, but technically only had enough credits to qualify her for the 9th grade. As such, at the start of the year she was placed in a special course for students who had failed the previous year. As soon as she found out about her placement, she decided that she wanted this year to go differently. She could not stomach staying in JHS for longer than she absolutely had to. With the help of myself, Mr. Ferguson, and Principal Styles, she developed a short term plan for keeping up with her grades and a more long term plan for making up the credits she missed through credit recovery courses and summer school. She wanted the plan to also include receiving academic support from me. When she mentioned including me in the plan, I jokingly reminded her about the previous year. Last year, she had also wanted my help, but when I tried to set up some norms and expectations around how we would work together she decided I was "doing too much". She was adamant that she had changed from the previous year and really valued the help that I could provide. In order to create some accountability, I asked her to write a paragraph for me detailing what she wanted to come of our time together, and how specifically she wanted me to help her. To my surprise, she completed the paragraph within one day. Refer to Figure 13 for the note she wrote.
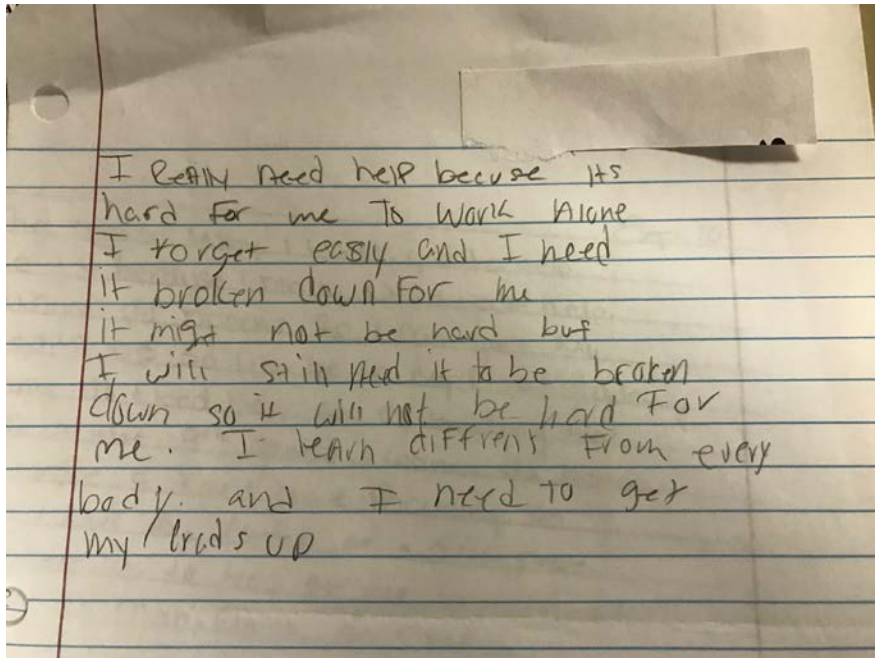
247

Figure 8:
Anastasia's note

I wrote about the moment she gave me the note in a Fieldnote from September 2015. The note reads as follows:

> At this point during the day, I was in the front office engaging in a conversation with
>
> Coach (Black man) and Ms. Collins (Black woman), the secretary. While we were talking
>
> Jana (10th grade), Shanice (9th grade) and Anastasia walked into the office. I greeted
>
> them all with a hey and Anastasia immediately asked me if she could give me her
>
> paragraph. I took a step back and excitedly said, "You did the paragraph?!" She smiled
>
> while looking down into her bag, a smile that was only slightly large enough to see her
>
> braces peeking from beneath her lips. She responded, "Yea, but Shanice did not." I
>
> expressed to her that I was glad that she was "being about her business this year" (i.e.
>
> following through on her commitments) and quickly told Shanice she still had time to
>
> complete her paragraph if she wanted to. I expressed to Anastasia that I was so proud of
>
> her; so proud that I had to make an announcement to everyone in the office. I got the
>
> attention of everyone as a coy smile escaped Anastasia's lips and she quietly, but not

convincingly, asked me not to share. I continued with my announcement. I told everyone

in the office that she said she wanted to work with me to get her grades up and back on

track, so I asked her to write me a paragraph explaining what she hoped to get from

working with me. I continued to say, that she was so committed to getting her work done

that she wrote the paragraph in one day! I walked over to where she was standing with a

huge smile on her face and gave her a side hug. I told her I how proud I was of her. Ms.

Collins, in a cheerful tone, expressed how good it was that she submitted her work.

Though Anastasia pretended to be shy and as though she did not want me to broadcast what she

had done, the coyness that turned into a huge smile on her face let me know that she was proud

of herself and really appreciated the announcement. Her reaction also let me know that it felt

good to her to get recognized for her academic achievements—big or small. Furthermore, it is

important to note that in the midst of giving her academic praise, I also connected with her on a

physical level through a side hug. Although many of the teachers imagined her as nearly

unapproachable due to a "negative" attitude, here I was able to share a warm moment of

friendship and tender compassion with her, with ease.

Though she wanted to make a positive change in her academic performance, she was

excluded from nearly all of her classes and a frequent flyer to the RC. Nearly everyday she was

sent out, or walked out, from her classes. We held several restorative meetings with Anastasia,

some with her teachers present, that resulted in no real change in the frequency with which she

visited the RC. From her perspective, she constantly ended up in the RC because her teachers

failed to meet her academic needs, while her teachers believed she was difficult to work with

because she just did not want to be in class. Given her frequency in the RC, Anastasia was one of

the students that benefited from the fact that Mr. Ferguson and I had decided to intentionally

transform the RC into a space where students could receive academic support in addition to support around behavior. By mid semester, when Anastasia was sent to the RC, it was typical for us to discuss the situation that led to her referral, but no longer attempt to restore with the goal of her going back to class. Instead, once she had vented and we had deconstructed the situation, we would instruct her to begin working on whatever assignments she needed to complete. She often received tutoring from Mr. Ferguson or myself when we were available to provide assistance. When she was in the RC during these moments, she was very studious. While sometimes she listened to music, an activity that technically went against the rules of the school, other times she did not. When other students were in the RC, I did observe moments when she would engage with them in conversations, silly behaviors, or could otherwise be distracted, when prompted to get back to work she would do as requested with minimal or no verbally aggressive feedback.

The academic sessions she had in the RC, provided me with another opportunity to see how important her academic performance was to her. She was extremely happy and proud when she had high grades. I noted the following in my fieldnotes:

While I was in the RC doing the usual work of talking to different students, picking up loose items from off the floor and on desks, and preparing to get some notes jotted down, I walked up near the big wooden table where Anastasia was sitting. Her computer was open and she appeared to be doing work. When I approached her, she immediately turned her body toward me and asked, "You see my grades?" I could tell she was excited to ask me about them from the cheeriness in her voice. Though she attempted to withhold a smile, the curved edges of her lips alerted me that she desperately wanted to let one out. She eagerly waited for my response with a bit of impatience. I quickly thought back

to what her grades were when I had last checked and tried to match her excitement. I

said, "Yes! I was going to say something to you about them. They are great! All high B's.

Heck, you can get all A's this semester!" Finally, a small smiled arrived but left as

quickly as it had come. She turned her body back to the computer for a quick second and

then looked back at me. She stated, "I want to. Except in Mrs. Taylor's class. What the

heck is a 'P'? When my mom looks at my grades she don't be knowing what a "P"

means." I let out a small laugh and suggested that maybe it meant pass but I was not

sure. I offered to figure out what it meant. I congratulated her once more on her good

grades and then encouraged her to get back to work.

As demonstrated in this interaction she was eager for me to see her grades. Although it was not

spoken, she wanted to receive acknowledgement surrounding how high they were and how they

differed dramatically from what she had previously achieved. She was *proud*. From the tone of

her voice, to the near inability for me to get a comment out of my mouth noting that I had seen

them, her pride in how she was currently achieving was palpable. This indicated to me just how

much getting good grades meant to her. Not just for the long-term benefits, but also for the good

feelings it gave her about herself as a student at JHS, a place where at some point she was not

sure she could succeed. By the end of the semester she passed all of her classes (primarily with

B's) for the first time in her entire high school career. Though I cannot say with certainty that it

was because of her work in the RC, I know that her time spent with us had some influence on

that outcome.

Beyond providing academic support, Anastasia's frequent visits to the RC provided the

opportunity learn more about her personality. One thing I learned was that though her smiles

were hard to come by, she could be quite friendly and embody a jovial and joking

demeanor. For example, because all of the students I worked with knew how important being

Black was to me, they often looked for ways to point out when I was being "White" or

exaggerate the moments when I was a embodying a Blackness with which they were unfamiliar.

Anastasia was one of those students who would often make a joke out of my Blackness in order

to get me to react. In her opinion, my hair, skin tone, manner of speaking, and food preferences

were clear giveaways that I was not the Black woman I claimed to be. As such, she took every

opportunity she could to let me know that she could see through the act. One such opportunity

occurred in December 2015. I noted the following:

> *Today while I was sitting in the RC with Anastasia and Jana, we engaged in yet another*
>
> *conversation about my perceived lack of true Blackness. When I had first arrived at the*
>
> *RC for the morning, Jana whispered to Anastasia that I was not Black. She said it slightly*
>
> *above a whisper so that she knew I could hear, but that it could still be paraded as a*
>
> *pseudo secret. Knowing that they usually said this to me to get a reaction, I decided to*
>
> *pretend like I did not hear her. Just like she had done, I did not acknowledge it directly,*
>
> *but let out a loud "hmmm" so she knew it was in reaction to her comment. After I placed*
>
> *my belongings in Mr. Ferguson's office, I joined them at the big wooden table. They were*
>
> *mid conversation when I sat down and I did not interrupt. However, shortly after I sat*
>
> *down, Jana again stated that I was "not Black"—seemingly out of nowhere. With a look*
>
> *of fake confusion on my face, Jana responded that I "did not eat fried chicken" so I*
>
> *"could not be really Black". I shook my head, rolled my eyes, and asked why this had to*
>
> *keep coming up. Anastasia jumped into the conversation and stated that she had a grey*
>
> *knit sweater like the one I had on today. She continued on to say that today I "actually*
>
> *had on one Black thing", which was the elastic headband I was wearing to hold back any*

hair that was too short to be held in tight by my ponytail holder. With a smirk on her

face, and laughter escaping her lips to where she could barely get out her words, she

joked that in fact my ponytail was "ratchet", so I was "definitely Black today." I

immediately clapped back (i.e. retorted) by saying that nothing about my ponytail was

ratchet, which caused both Anastasia and Jana to erupt into deeper laughter. While

laughing Anastasia began to imitate me and described how I shook my head, pointed my

finger, and swung my ponytail. It was an extremely exaggerated imitation of what had

just occurred, but I could not help but smile because of how much fun they were having

with imitating me performing my Blackness. After letting Anastasia get a kick out of

imitating me, I stated in a holier-than-thou voice that my Blackness did not reside in the

things they were talking about, and that I was so secure in my Black identity that what

they said and their imitations had little effect on me. Jana and Anastasia ignored my

comments and began to go back and forth providing reasons why I was not Black which

included me not eating dressing on Thanksgiving and choosing to drink tea instead of

coffee. I fake talked over them and again asserted my confidence in my Black identity.

In this instance we see Anastasia, Jana, and I enjoying a friendly interaction where the two girls

made a joke about me and imitated my actions. Even in making fun of me, Anastasia's vibe was

positive and she was good-natured. The joke did not escalate into anything that I would deem

harmful or rude but remained playful throughout. Within that moment, I could not help but share

in the joy that she was feeling about poking "holes" in my performance of Blackness even

though it was at my expense. Her exaggerated imitations of me were a reminder of her youth

because like most high school students, she took joy at making me, an adult representative of the

school, react in a way that showed more of my personal rather than professional demeanor.

During her time in the RC, I also learned that she was not afraid to stand up for things or people she valued, which was often mistaken as aggression or anger. One thing that was for certain was that she would go to bat for the people she cared about if they needed her to, or even when they did not. I experienced this first hand as indicated in the Fieldnote excerpt below:

Today we had a group of ninth graders from Mr. Clark's class come in to get a chance to learn about the RC. One of the activities we did was a hot seat activity where Mr. Ferguson and myself would stand in the middle of the circle and allow the students to fire off questions about any topic (within reason). While we were facilitating the game, I noticed that not all of the students were participating. I looked over at Anastasia and she appeared to be talking to her peers. She seemed very bothered by them based on her facial expression and the way she had her body turned away from their direction. After the activity was over, I went to her to tell her that I saw her "cutting up". I asked why she was not participating. Instantly, she expressed that she had not been cutting up, she had been defending me. Confused I asked why she felt she needed to do that. She explained that while I was in the hot seat, some of the people near her were pointing to my shoes and saying "what are those". When she saw them doing this, she responded to them, "what you got on". Jana chimed in at this point and added that Anastasia had yelled out to them to tell them to be quiet if they were not going to participate in the activity.

In this situation, Anastasia felt she needed to stick up for me when she saw that students were making comments about the shoes I was wearing, which were non-name brand, tan, moccasin-like flats. When I saw her talking to her peers and turned outward from the circle during the activity I assumed she had initiated the interaction. However, I could not imagine a reason why tension would exist between her and these students when they had had minimal time to interact

while in the RC. When I approached her, our conversation revealed a picture I had been unable to see. She was not in fact spontaneously off task and creating unnecessary tension between her and her peers. Instead, she was attempting to defend me against people she felt were mistreating and disrespecting me. Overtime, I learned that what often was read to be aggression, like in this case, was really passion and protection over the things, or people, she cared about.

When working with Anastasia I learned that it was important that you speak to her kindly and directly, and not make assumptions about her or what she might be thinking. If you did not do this, she was likely to be very vocal about being misinterpreted and let you know of your misstep. I experienced this first hand during an interaction we had one day in the RC. It occurred as follows:

> Today while in the RC I had a conversation with Anastasia, Jana (10th grade), Shanice (9th grade), and Latrice (10th grade). When they initially walked into the RC, I was sitting by myself at the large wooden table. We exchanged hellos and they all grabbed a seat around me. Anastasia and Jana were sitting on either side of me, while Shanice and Latrice were seated directly across. While the conversation began with questions (from me) about their schedules, it eventually turned to mothering and children. Anastasia asked Latrice how old her mother was. Latrice responded with 36. Anastasia, with her eyes glued to her phone, commented that she "could not understand how other people's moms were like 46 or 49 and her mom was only in her 30's". I noticed that both girls shared the age of their mothers with an air of pride—like they could not fathom them being any older. Through pursed lips, Latrice recounted that the "40's" was what she thought of as "the elderly." At this point I decided this was a topic I could chime in on. With genuine shock, I repeated her phrase to no one in particular, 40's is the elderly?

The girls, almost in unison, responded "yes." I asked them how long they thought people lived. Jana responded that one woman in a neighboring community lived until she was in her 100's. Piggybacking off this comment, I stated that if people were living that long, then to me, the elderly years would be when you are 70 or 80. They unanimously disagreed. To further get a window into their thinking, I asked them when they planned on having kids. Jana quickly responded "never", while Latrice just looked to the ground and did not really provide an answer. Anastasia responded "when [she] got her own", like her "own house, job, and all of that." Shanice also quietly responded "never." Upon hearing her response, Anastasia immediately looked over at her and repeated "never?" To no one in particular she stated, "Anyone can get pregnant with boys sticking they thingy thing everywhere." The group burst into laughter, seemingly at the fact that she used the phrase "thingy thing" in front of me. She continued on to say, "YOU (referring to Shanice) could be pregnant next year!" Shanice's mouth dropped open in shock and there was resounding laughter amongst the group and comments playfully suggesting that it was wrong of Anastasia to make a joke like that. I chimed in and said, "don't put that on her". I continued to say that the only one should be getting pregnant was me because I was older and hoping to be married soon. Anastasia quickly corrected me and said, "any of us" could, because there were plenty of "15 year olds getting pregnant." At this point the girls began to list all of the girls they knew who were pregnant or had already had children who were their age. As they went through their list, I stated that I was glad it was not them because it a was probably difficult being a mom and trying to finish school, and hoped they would remain childless until after graduating at a minimum. I then stated that when I was their age, I was not thinking about sex. Anastasia

took immediate offense to my statement, and with a bit of disgust, stated that I was "like

her mother" when I said that. With increasing irritation she stated that she "hated when

people judged young girls like that." She continued on to say that "we (adults) had to

understand that [girls were] living in a different time" and as such would be "going

through different things." As I prepared to make my intentions clear about what I had

meant through my statement, she asked the others in the group how they were affected by

what I had said. Jana expressed that it "bothered her" when people "judged" teenage

girls, but that she did not think I "meant it any kind of way." Seizing the opportunity that

Jana had provide, I stated that I was not trying to judge her, but was just reflecting on my

own teenage years. At this point Anastasia had pulled her phone out and was intensely

staring at the screen. Without any eye contact she said "okay" and dismissed what I had

said. Jana expressed that she did feel "judged" when she heard people say that, as

though "thinking about sex as a teenager was a bad thing." Seeing that Anastasia was

still withdrawn from the conversation and seemingly upset with me for making the

comment that I had made, I let the conversation continue without me. After a little while,

I decided to make an analogy. I asked the three other girls at the table to think about all

of the times that I would compare their phones to the phone that I had when in high

school. I suggested that those comparisons were simply to point out the differences in our

experiences and not value judgments about them. Through unsuccessfully muffled laughs,

Shanice and Jana began to comment that my phone probably did not have internet, WIFI,

and that I probably had to pass actual notes because I could not text. I chuckled to myself

and admitted that the majority of what they were saying was true. After the laughter

subsided, I assured them again that I did not intend to judge them or make them feel

judged in any way, but that if comparisons between my teenage years and theirs made

them feel that that was happening, then I would not make the comparisons. After saying

this, there was a silence that fell over the group. I scanned them to try to gauge how they

responded to my assurances. Without warning, Latrice stated, "man, this is boring, this

school is boring." At this point Anastasia reengaged in the conversation and agreed that

it really was and began to talk to the other girls and me, about just how terrible her

classes were.

In this interaction, Anastasia felt that I had judged her when I mentioned that I had not been

thinking about sex when I was her age. In that moment, she quickly retorted back and

demonstrated her displeasure at my comment through her response that likened me in a negative

way to her mother. When I tried to clarify my statement she spoke over me and dismissed my

comments by saying "okay" and did not give me full attention by remaining tightly glued to her

phone.

In a situation like this, teachers may have viewed her reaction as problematic, indicative

of disrespect, and a manifestation of a negative attitude. However for me it never elevated to the

level of a problem for several reasons. First, I did not deny her right to express how she felt

about my statement. When she told me she was offended by it, I accepted that and did not

attempt to tell her that how she was feeling was wrong or misplaced. I accepted that her

comments were an expression of feelings she was entitled to have and it did not offend me that

she shared them unsolicited. Second, I did not take her response to my explanation of intent (i.e.

her lack of eye contact and dismissive tone) as a personal attack. Though I would have liked for

her to look at me when she was speaking to me, and did not feel great about being so quickly and

easily dismissed, I recognized that acting upon those feelings would be counterproductive to

healing the situation. Thirdly, I quickly realized that I needed to momentarily pause her communication with me. Her body language signaled that continuing to try to provide an explanation at that point would be pointless because she needed space. As such, I did not push her to continue talking with me. Instead, I interacted with the other young women at the table. Fourth, after I had let space develop between the two of us, I made another attempt to clarify my statement through a different avenue. Instead of getting upset and reprimanding her for responding to me in the way that she had or lecturing her about my good intentions, I decided to try to make my point and *demonstrate* the good intentions I had. Because the first way had not resonated with her, I tried again. Ultimately, this second attempt was a better way to position the comment I was trying to initially make. Lastly, what likely the most important in preventing the situation from escalating, was that I acknowledged my behavior as problematic and committed to behaving in a way that would not leave her feeling insulted or judged. Although at first she seemed ready to disengage with me completely, after all of the moves I made, we were able to continue engaging in conversation. The situation did not escalate, nor did I read her comments as a challenge, which would have likely occurred in her interactions with her teachers.

The Production of a Problematic Identity: A Review of Anastasia's Micro-Interactions
with School Officials

As the last field note excerpt demonstrated, during our interactions I saw some problematic and less than ideal behavior from Anastasia. However, given my more intimate interactions with her, I saw her perform her identity in productive ways that were unknown to school officials. In fact, I observed with my own eyes, how the very actions the teachers

criticized were not simply brought into class with her, but were a function of interactions between they had.

For example, Anastasia relayed a situation with her teacher where she felt pushed to act in an insubordinate manner. One of the major ways teachers described Black girls was as insubordinate and rebellious, particularly when it came to their coming and goings from class. This field note allows us to examine one such instance of an "unauthorized" exit, to better understand the motivations that drove the young women's class departures. It reads:

Anastasia walked into the RC and relayed the following story about her recent interaction with Mr. Chase. She explained that she had been attempting to get caught up on her work after her recent absence. She said that when she approached him, Mr. Chase's first question to her was why had she been "skipping class yesterday." He followed that up with the comment that she "must really want her grades to be low" because she had "not been in class doing her work." After a brief pause, Anastasia asked, out loud, how Mr. Chase "could bring himself to say that she was skipping when she was not." She explained that she told him she missed the day to "take care of some business", and he sarcastically wondered aloud "what business was more important than her grades". With a shake of her head, she stated that he "did not even know what was going on in her life to even say something like that." She recounted that at this point he mentioned that she had missed a test. When she asked him about taking it, he told her she had to "wait until the last five minutes of class to take it." As she recounted this part of the story her disbelief was palpable within her tone and on her face, which was screwed up and had a look portraying bewilderment and confusion. She recounted that he justified not allowing her to take the test by stating it was "Ms. Rose's day to teach" so he did not

have "control over when she could take it." He told her to ask Ms. Rose if she could take

the test any earlier than the end of class. Anastasia said she went to ask Ms. Rose about

the test who, in turn, stated that "because it was Mr. Chase's test", Anastasia needed to

"ask him about when she could retake it." With a heave of frustration Anastasia said that

*she went back to Mr. Chase who **once again** sent her back to Ms. Rose and vice versa.*

This all occurred while class was going on, which meant that she was getting behind on

the current work and still had no plan for taking the test she missed. She relayed feeling

like no one wanted to help her, so she walked out of the class.

The story Anastasia recounted in the field note above, detailed an incident where she approached her teacher to receive guidance on missing work after an absence. Within the interaction she encountered two problematic situations that ultimately caused her to feel as though she needed to exit the class without permission and forgo the guidance she had originally requested.

From her perspective, the first problem that caused her leave, occurred right when she approached Mr. Chase to inquire about the make up work. Before she could even get to requesting the assignments, she felt she was met with comments from him judging her about her commitment towards being academically successful. I got the impression that she felt Mr. Chase purposively mislabeled her excused absence as truancy with the intention to shame her and make her feel bad about not being in his class. Based on her physical demeanor, and the sentiments displayed through her rhetorical questioning of how he even brought himself to say that to her, it was clear that Anastasia felt disrespected by his labeling of her behavior as delinquent and intentionally neglectful of her responsibilities. While in the incident where she felt I judged her, I was able to de-escalate the situation by acknowledging my mistake in phrasing the comment in the way that I did; Anastasia made no mention of Mr. Chase making a similar kind of move.

The second situation that led to her unauthorized departure was a back and forth between the two teachers in the classroom. When Mr. Chase finally let Anastasia know she had missed a test, she became entangled between the teachers where neither one claimed responsibility for administering the exam. Anastasia recounted being sent back and forth between the two a total of *4 times* with neither of them making a decision as to who would ultimately provide with the access she was requesting.

In this situation, I did not have an opportunity to talk with Mr. Chase or Ms. Rose to get their version of events. One could imagine that Mr. Chase's initial comments to Anastasia may have been dipped in sarcasm that she did not catch on to, or that her recollection of the back and forth failed take into account the fact that class was currently going on, and both teachers were trying to balance instructional demands while figuring out a plan for her. Maybe that was not the best time for Anastasia to have approached them about makeup work, and lunchtime or passing period would have been better. However, if we take Anastasia at her word and rely on her recollection of the event, we have the opportunity to see how in fact the micro-interaction elicited insubordinate behavior from her.

What this field note reveals is that this act of insubordination was not premeditated. She entered into her classroom desiring to take ownership over her studies by inquiring about makeup work; a quality that teachers suggested JHS students needed and that Black girls specifically lacked (which made them mismatched with JHS). Ultimately, from Anastasia's accounting of the situation, she felt it necessary to leave the classroom due to the insults to her character and academic commitment, and the back and forth about the test. Her insubordination was driven by her unwillingness to remain in a place where she was told she was not committed to her studies in the midst of an act that demonstrated commitment. Furthermore, it was driven

by the perception that her teachers were dodging their responsibilities to help her when she requested it.

It is important to note that a part of what drove Anastasia to receive Mr. Chase's comments so negatively was his apparent disregard for what it took for her to be in school and put forth effort every single day that she was in attendance. Though Mr. Chase may have been making a comment about that one particular day she missed, Anastasia felt the comment minimized the enormity of the pressures she experienced in her life outside of school on a daily basis. Based on our regular communication, I knew that though she took one day off from school to deal with the pressures in her life relating to family, she dealt with the issues everyday and actively had to push past them to be productive[53]. A part of her frustration with him was that he did not acknowledge or respect this effort, and in fact, suggested the complete opposite. To be fair to Mr. Chase, I do not believe he knew the information that I did about her personal life that would have allowed him to know that any comment about a lack of effort was likely going to resonate negatively with her. However, questions like what he posed to her would undermine anyone's attempts to enact an academically responsible identity. It would have been one thing if he followed up those comments with offers of help or support, but said in isolation in the manner they were, made them simply appear to be statements of judgment. Though the decision to leave would put Anastasia behind in the current work the class was doing and meant that she still had no resolution in terms of making up the test, it *did* mean that in that moment she no longer had to continue being rejected by her teachers or remain in a classroom space where she felt insulted.

Anastasia recounted another time where she felt pushed to insubordination based on an interaction with Mrs. Fitzgerald. I noted the following in my field notes:

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[53] I am intentionally vague about what these family pressures were because I know that it was sensitive topic and a point of embarrassment for Anastasia. I want to honor the confidentiality to the fullest extent in this case.

Anastasia came into the RC to vent about a situation that happened recently. She felt Mrs. Fitzgerald would not help her after she missed a day of school due to her mother not wanting her there for "emotional reasons". She shared that she approached Mrs. Fitzgerald and asked her if she could help her with what she missed. She recounted that Mrs. Fitzgerald just stood there and said "wellll..." and stopped her sentence. She then shared that Mrs. Fitzgerald "got smart" with her and stated, "Well you did not come to class today" and asked if there was a "reason why she was not there to do the work." With a deep exhale of breath, Anastasia recounted that she wanted to say that she "did not come here for her to ask her all of this" because it was "not her business", but decided against it. Instead, she said that she reminded Mrs. Fitzgerald that she came to see about getting help with what she missed during her absence. She said that at this point Mrs. Fitzgerald told her that "right now they were working on new stuff." With audible irritation, Anastasia said that she told her that she was "not there to ask about the current assignments" but "wanted to know her missing assignments so she could get to those." She recounted that Mrs. Fitzgerald again said a long drawn out, "Oh wellllllll..."At this point, she stated that she told Mrs. Fitzgerald never mind and left the class because she did not want to get into it with her and argue over this work. I asked if Mrs. Fitzgerald ever gave her the assignments and she responded "no." –FN, 46

Much like what we saw with Mr. Chase, the situation was around a missed class/makeup work. Again, Anastasia took offense at how her teacher reacted to her requests for assistance. From her account, when she attempted to get assistance from Mrs. Fitzgerald surrounding her missing work, she was met with hesitation as evidenced through a drawn out "well" response, and a statement emphasizing the fact that she had missed a day where they did new material. *Three*

separate times Anastasia stated that she requested to know what she needed to do in order to make up the work she missed, and was met each time with hesitation or a tangential or unrelated comment. Throughout each separate request, Anastasia could feel her anger and frustrations rising, and had to actively resist the urge to react in a way that could be perceived as intentionally disrespectful. When she felt herself losing control of her ability to remain patient and kind with Mrs. Fitzgerald, she ultimately made the decision that she no longer wanted to engage in the conversation or be in the classroom space and left. As she explained it, the interaction with Mrs. Fitzgerald had escalated her frustration to a point where if she stayed she would have surely "gotten into it" with her and engaged in an "argument", which was not what she desired to come from the interaction. In the end, she felt leaving the classroom was the best way for her to remain respectful given the situation.

As with the first example with Mr. Chase, we only have Anastasia's version of this event. We do not know if there were other instructional demands that Mrs. Fitzgerald was attending to that were competing for her attention. Nor do we know if her questions/comments were intended to be a part of a series that had Anastasia stayed in the conversation, would have made it evident that she was trying to be helpful and not deliberately withhold assistance. Obviously, Anastasia's depiction of Mrs. Fitzgerald as "getting smart" with her is subjective and could be viewed as an inappropriate comment for a student to make. Additionally, some might question her belief that her teacher asking about an absence was overstepping a boundary as Anastasia perceived it. However, much like with Mr. Chase, based on what she shared with me in the RC during the large amount of time she spent there, I knew that the two of them did not have a deep pre-existing relationship to where Anastasia would feel comfortable with Mrs. Fitzgerald knowing

information about her personal life. As such, it is understandable that asking about an absence was crossing the line within their relationship.

Using the version of events that we do have, presents another situation where Anastasia felt forced to act insubordinately because of a pattern of her teachers' negative and unhelpful reactions to her request for help. While she had entered the class with every intention to engage in a productive fashion, she felt forced to leave her classrooms and the critical academic resources that it could provide. Her departure from the classroom, and ultimately missing out on an opportunity to do the work she had missed, was not because she wanted to buck the system. Instead, her departure was motivated by the interaction with her teacher that left her feeling pushed to the edge of civilized communication. She instinctively desired to protect herself before she was beyond her capacity to control her actions. She knew that if she allowed herself to get to that point, a more negative interaction would ensue and she would have to deal with larger consequences. We know that not getting the work she missed *was* a large consequence in and of itself, but in some ways it may have been the lesser of two evils.

Thus far I have discussed situations where only Anastasia's perspective was provided. In both cases, there was no chance for the teachers who were involved to counter her narrative. We do not know how they would explain the situation and if some of the way the story was told favored Anastasia in ways that were unfair to them and their intentions. We don't know whether, if they had the opportunity to speak on the situation, they would view it differently. Although these types of questions do the legitimizing work that I stated I will not do to the young women, I will provide you with examples that illustrate that these problematic interactions are not just in their heads. However, as the next example demonstrates, Anastasia's peers could corroborate her

perspectives of the mistreatment she described experiencing in her interactions with her teachers. The fieldnote reads:

I was sitting in the RC when Anastasia and Shanice walked in. They stated:

Anastasia*: Ms. Simpson don't know how to explain things.*

Shanice*: Anastasia already told her she needs things broken down for her.*

Anastasia*: I like Mrs. Fitzgerald better because she explains things better.*

I asked what was going on in class that resulted in them being here in the RC with me. They alternated turns describing the situation. They recounted that they were working on an assignment where they were supposed to be drawing a lipstick factory or something like that. They were confused as to what they were supposed to be doing and so they looked it up online and began to draw a factory line creating different colors of cosmetic lipstick. When they asked Mrs. Simpson about it, they did not get any help but were later told they were doing it wrong. That was when they got up and walked out and came to the RC. After they explained what had happened, I empathized with them about how frustrating that must have been and offered to go back into class with them to see what I could do to help.

When we got to the class I had them take a seat at their desks while I went to talk to Mrs. Simpson to see if I could get some guidance on the assignment. When I approached her, and explained that the girls had just visited me in the RC confused about what their assignment was and saying they were not being helped, she acted as though their anger was misplaced and they were angry with her for no reason. She stated that she had explained the assignment during class and quickly ran through what it was for me. She seemed irritated and confused that they did not ask her for help rather than

coming to me (which I found to be interesting considering the fact she did not even know

they were gone). With a shoulder shrug and a sideways eye glance she appeared to

decide she would not linger on it and walked away from me to (what looked like to me)

monitor the room. From what I gathered, the assignment was to draw a cell production

factory that detailed how cells created protein. She is unsure where the young women got

lipstick. –FN, 14

In this situation I was dealing with frustrated students and a teacher who seemed to view their frustrations as not legitimate by treating them as if they were angry for anger's sake. As Anastasia recounted, she asked for assistance and did not receive it. After attempting to do the assignment, she was told it was incorrect which only heightened her frustration. Part of what made her frustrated was that she had communicated with Mrs. Simpson about her learning style and still was not taught in a way that met those expressed needs. Her peer, Shanice, affirmed that she had communicated with her teacher around these needs so we know that it is not just Anastasia saying she had communicated them. Anastasia expected, and rightfully so, that if she had explained what kind of instruction she needed, that her teacher would act in accordance and respect those needs.

What is critically important to highlight, beyond Anastasia's frustration, was how her teacher, interpreted the situation. One of the prevalent images of Black girls in JHS was that they often displayed unrelenting anger toward their teachers and were mad simply to be mad. When I approached Mrs. Simpson to ask about the assignment, she labeled their demeanors and feelings as anger right off the bat. She immediately began to provide reasoning for why they were unjustified in their feelings by accounting for what she had done—which from her perspective seemed to be all the right things. She responded to their feelings of irritation, with irritation of

her own and sarcastic confusion. Ultimately, she decided that she would move on from it without a resolution of any kind. Even when I, as an adult, suggested that it was frustration they were feelings rather than misplaced anger, it was apparent that she was not willing to grant their feelings any kind of legitimacy. Their perceived "anger", was legitimate because they had not gotten help they had requested for an assignment that they were obviously very confused about—as indicated by the fact that they were attempting to draw a lipstick factory which had nothing to do with the biology concept they were working on. Rather than consider this possibility, Mrs. Simpson immediately cast their feelings off as trivial and did not put in the effort, beyond explaining to me what the assignment was, to figure out a solution.

This was not the only time that an interaction with a teacher provoked anger and frustration within Anastasia. I witnessed it myself in observations of her interactions with her teachers. To make this point evident, I draw upon an observation from September 2015, where I was able to observe how Mr. Chase called forth a less productive identity performance during his micro-interactions with Anastasia. I observed the following:

> *I went into Mr. Chase and Ms. Rose's class to tell Anastasia that she could come to the RC if she still wanted to, because the meeting being conducted in the RC was done. When I entered the class, she was sitting with her head down on the desk and the computer screen was dark as if it had timed out. She was sitting all by herself and faced away from the majority of her class members. However, her seat was directly facing the screen where the work was happening. Off to the side I saw her phone sitting on the charger. She was motionless. When I approached her, I tapped her shoulder gently, but she did not immediately respond. After about 30 seconds she adjusted her head, but did not lift it up to talk. I whispered that it was me and that I was coming by to tell her that she could*

come to the RC if she still wanted to work in there. At my voice she lifted up her head and began to sit up. At this sign of readiness to engage with me, I asked if she still had a pass to come and she said "yes" because she was not "doing anything in class". I looked around at her teacher who was talking to the entire class and said something to the extent that there seemed to be something going on. She replied that she "did not know what they were doing" because Mr. Chase "did not break it down for her" and she had gotten "lost".

Pausing here in the narrative I want to highlight that at this point, Anastasia seemed to be the hopeless, insecure student that the teachers suggested Black girls were. She was disengaged with the lesson as indicated by her physical demeanor and blacked out computer screen. She may have remained like that had I not entered the class. The field note picked up after an earlier exchange with Anastasia where she had asked to come into the RC to get her work done. We had a restorative meeting planned for that time so I told her that after the meeting, if there was still time in class and she had an active pass, I would come get her. At that point, she was not overly excited to go to class, but said she would go and try to engage. However, when I entered the classroom I did not see her engaging as she suggested she would. Ironically, when I talked to her, she expressed that her disengagement was caused by the very reason had not wanted to go to her class in the first place—because her teacher did not break the concepts down and she often found herself lost during the lesson. This explanation about her academic needs being unmet, did not align with the images the teachers constructed of Black girls as disengaged because they don't believe in their own potential or care about their education.

Though I was not present during the beginning of class to observe first hand what happened that made Anastasia feel like Mr. Chase had ignored her needs, the interactions that

followed our conversation very clearly revealed several issues with how Mr. Chase interacted with her that provided a window into why she may have believed he did not desire to support her academically. As a reminder, teachers often spoke passionately about how Black girls were disagreeable and hard to work with. This interaction provides a window into how it is that orientation may be facilitated by the teachers' actions. The field note documented the following:

> *Alaina: Let's see if I can figure out what is going on so I can help you*
>
> *Anastasia: (twists in her seat) Mr. Chase can you help me? (Mr. Chase is with another student and does not acknowledge her question. Anastasia breathes out a hard breath of air and I believe she is projecting the feeling of frustration that he did not respond to her immediately. She might be feeling like he is rejecting her)*
>
> *Alaina: Wait one second (Mr. Chase walks away from that student) Ask him now!*
>
> *Anastasia: Mr. Chase can you explain to me what the push and pull factors are?*
>
> *Chase: Push is ones that would take you away from home and pull would bring you in.*
>
> *Anastasia: So what am I supposed to be doing?*
>
> *Chase: Well unfortunately Anastasia (Mr. Chase moves from a standing position to a kneeling one; this is all said in a patronizing tone) you don't have a partner because you chose to sit by yourself. You are supposed to be talking with your partner and each doing one of these and then discussing.*
>
> *Alaina: Well (to Anastasia) do you want to rejoin your group to do the work?*
>
> *Chase: To that point, if I see you sitting alone I have to regroup the class—I have to move on and keep on going with the class. So you don't really have a group to work with. You chose to sit by yourself.*

Anastasia: (breaking eye contact with Mr. Chase) I did not ask you for all of that. Can you just explain to me what I need to be doing?

Chase: You need to be using your notes to write down the push and pull factors.

Anastasia: Where should the notes be? Where do I write the answers down?

Chase: I prefer them to be in your Google docs because the plan is for the notes to all be in one spot (as Mr. Chase said this he stood up and began to walk away to talk to another student as Anastasia pointed to something on her computer screen for clarification. He walked away before she could finish her question).

Within this snippet of the interaction, Mr. Chase did seem as though he was ready to provide some support to Anastasia. When he saw her hand was raised, he came over and appeared willing to respond to her questions/comments. However, even with what may have been good intentions, the interaction unfolded in a manner that ultimately evoked a negative interaction between himself and Anastasia. Although he initially answered her question about defining push and pull factors, when she followed up with an inquiry into exactly what she should be doing with the information, he responded with a mini-lecture about how she would not be able to complete the assignment due to *her* choice of seat. While it was a fair statement to make on Mr. Chase's part given that he likely asked the students to pair up, and Anastasia chose not to do so, in that moment the statement did not answer her question about how to complete the assignment. Instead, it appeared to be his attempt to make clear that it was her decision, and not his that led her to the dilemma she was in. Feeling it was odd that he ended his mini-lecture with no indication as to how she would be able to complete the assignment, and as though she would never be able to do so, I offered up what seemed to be an obvious solution that she re-join her group. He immediately rejected it as impossible because he would not be going out of his way to

do extra work to accommodate a change in her decision. His response indicated that because she had been unwilling to comply when she first arrived to class by not joining her assigned group, that now *he* was unwilling to figure out a solution to her problem even though it would provide her with access to the main activity of the day. Because the assignment was dependent on the peer interaction, his unwillingness to find a way for her to work with a peer meant that there was no way for her to complete the assignment as it was intended. Ultimately, Mr. Chase never provided her with instructions as to how she would complete the assignment but positioned it as her responsibility to figure out a way. Moreover as the interaction winded down, he seemed distracted and failed to address Anastasia's last question.

In order to keep Anastasia from putting her head back down and disengaging from the class, I decided I would be her partner for the assignment so she could participate in an exchange of ideas with a "peer". Though she stated that she wanted to leave to go to the RC immediately following this interaction, I advocated for us to stay in the classroom, at least for the moment, so we could make sure we knew what was going on. She remained adamant that she needed to leave and so I instructed her to get the instructions for the rest of the classwork so that I could know what was going on. She called Ms. Rose over and the following ensued:

> *Anastasia told Ms. Rose that I was going to be her partner for the assignment.*
> *She explained that she had been looking at Sonar and was confused by the last part of the*
> *assignment. Ms. Rose attempted to figure out what was next but came to the conclusion*
> *that she did not really know. She asked Anastasia to hold on for a little bit because Mr.*
> *Chase would be providing directions for the whole class soon. She reiterated that she*
> *would try to figure it out and walked away.*

While Anastasia and I started to work, she determined that she needed Ms. Rose again. She raised her hand. Mr. Chase, who was soliciting answers from students, says to her "hit me, what you got?" This seemed to be his way of opening up the floor for her to share an answer. In a barely audible voice she said, "I want Ms. Rose". Not hearing her, Mr. Chase said, "Just stretching?". I interceded and said she wanted Ms. Rose and he nodded and moved on. Ms. Rose came over immediately. Anastasia asked again about the next steps and Ms. Rose again did not have a clear answer. However, she encouraged her to take down the information Mr. Chase was sharing with the class so she would not get further behind. She showed her how to make a table for the notes (a tool meant to help with the peer exchange). During the interaction, Ms. Rose pulled up a chair to talk with Anastasia and was seated at her level. She was patient and calm in her responses. She gave Anastasia her full attention as if no one else was in the room. She was hands on, and when Anastasia did not get something, she actively helped her work through it by walking her through the steps and pointing to areas on the screen where Anastasia could find the tools or information she needed. She offered suggestions about things, shared how she would do it, but never lectured her or mentioned that she was behind because of her own actions like Mr. Chase did.

When Ms. Rose came over to assist Anastasia, we saw a different way of interacting. Even though she did not have all of the information on the task at hand because it was not her instruction day, she did her best to help Anastasia complete the work. Not only did she bring herself to Anastasia's level, but also was patient and calm in her tone. My notes indicated a strong feeling that the interaction was much different than what had occurred between her Mr.

Chase based on how Anastasia responded to Ms. Rose's directions. As the class continued, I noted:

> Anastasia began to take the notes down in the newly created chart she made with Ms. Rose's help. At first, she was slowly typing with one hand and one finger just pecking at the board. Then, she began to speed up writing the notes but also adding her own ideas to the list of pull factors (the question was what might make you want to leave home. Anastasia's answers including gun violence, fights in school, and need more food stamps). I complimented her growing list and stated that she should share them with the class since Mr. Chase was asking for volunteers. She said that he "did not want anymore" and I began to raise my hand to get his attention. She told me to stop with a huge smile—I could see all of her braces. After time passed, she called on Mr. Chase to help her understand the final part of the assignment. Ms. Rose was in the area and joined the conversation.

> > **Anastasia:** *Can you explain the sentences?*
> >
> > **Chase**: *(confused look on his face as he stood hovering above her)*
> >
> > **Anastasia**: *Can you explain the sentences thing you put in [Sonar]?*
> >
> > **Chase:** *(heavy breath out) Can you show me what you are talking about?*
> >
> > **Rose**: *She is talking about the sentence starters at the end of the assignment. She is going to go to the RC in a little bit. (took a seat next to Anastasia with her personal computer open. She skimmed the questions along with Anastasia)*
> >
> > **Chase:** *(confused, seems a little lost for words, kneeled next to Anastasia) Okay did anything happen today to make you want to go to the RC? I'm just trying to understand.*

Anastasia: (eyes locked on her computer, slow response) I already talked to the principal and he said I can go whenever I want.

Chase: Okay I just need to know if this is going to be some recurring thing that is happening (stood up; began to explain what the sentence starters were and where they were located. Anastasia did not understand the instruction he was providing. I can feel the frustration between them growing).

Anastasia: You're still not helping me. Ms. Rose can you tell me what he's talking about?

Alaina: What exactly aren't you understanding about the sentence starters?

Anastasia: (pulled up the document on her computer)

Chase: There they are right there (walked away)

At this point, I read the instructions and tried to explain to her what my understanding of what the assignment was as he walked away—FN 10

In this fieldnote excerpt, we see that after Anastasia began to grasp the assignment at hand she got excited about it. She found herself barely able to type as fast as the ideas were coming to her. Although she did not want to share her ideas with the entire class, I could tell she was excited about what she had come up with based on her display of a rare smile. However, the excitement she had about this final part of the assignment quickly dissipated given the interaction that occurred next between her and Mr. Chase.

During their interaction she again asked Mr. Chase for help with completing the assignment. To be fair to him, the class as a whole was not yet at that part of the assignment and he may have had more elaborate plans for explaining the assignment in detail later in the class session. Anastasia's request for directions came early so he may not have been prepared to

explain the assignment at the point when she asked, and she may not have had the background information necessary to understand what the assignment was asking for. However, Mr. Chase had the opportunity to act differently than he did. When she requested information about the final part of the assignment she was met with irritation nearly immediately as evidenced through his deep exhale of breath. After making the same request twice, he feigned to not understand what she was referring to until Ms. Rose asked the question for her. Though he could have legitimately been confused about what she was asking, given that he had created the assignment, I am inclined to believe he had more of an idea about what she was talking about than he let on and was simply pretending not to know out of his own personal frustrations. At that point, rather than provide her with the information she was requesting, he began to try to investigate why she was leaving—which had everything to do with their earlier interaction where he was not helpful to her (a concern she had raised time and time again). Though he attempted to explain what and where the sentence starters were, Anastasia did not fully grasp the information and continued to feel like he was not helping her. She tried to get help from Ms. Rose and I tried to get her to ask a more pointed question in order to assist Mr. Chase provide her with a better understanding of the assignment. This did not work and eventually Mr. Chase left Anastasia in a state of confusion and I had to try my best to understand the assignment and explain it to her. Ultimately, while at some point Anastasia had become excited and open to engaging with Mr. Chase's lesson, the manner in which he interacted with her caused that excitement and engagement to dissipate to the point where frustrations on both ends ran high.

Concluding Remarks

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Unlike the vast majority of the young women I interacted with while at JHS, Anastasia did not immediately welcome me into her life with open arms. She was a naturally guarded person and needed time to get to know me, and I her. Slowly, over time, we worked hard to find a comfortable space where we both felt mutual trust. We learned what the other needed to feel respected in the relationship and acted in accordance. The analysis of Anastasia's interactions with her teachers makes me wonder if they had taken the time, and done the work that I did, to arrive at a place of mutual trust and respect with her. While I got to know Anastasia as a student who had a deep desire to be academically successful, her teachers constantly questioned her commitment to school. Moreover, though I saw just how much she pushed through her challenges both in and out of school, to get to a place where she could be productive, her teachers interpreted her actions as that of a student who was disengaged and disconnected. The Anastasia I came to know was playful, cooperative, and agreeable beneath her tough exterior. Yet, all her teachers seemed to see was the toughness, which they co-constructed, that precipitated negative assumptions about her dispositions and demeanors. From the first time I met Anastasia, I could tell that she marched to the beat of her own drum. While I was able to catch the rhythm and dance along, the analysis revealed that her teachers were not.

Chapter IX

The Production of Problematic Identity Performances: Dominique

Getting to Know Dominique

Dominique was an 11th grade student. She had a butter pecan skin tone and a stocky build. We often joked that she was not more than 5'5" on a good day. She enjoyed sports, basketball in particular, and was a former JV team member. Wherever Dominique was, a basketball was not too far away. Her love of the sport translated into a near constant desire to be bouncing, kicking, twirling on one finger, or holding a basketball. Over the course of the year, we engaged in several short one-on-one basketball sessions within the RC where I attempted to demonstrate my ability to "shake her" as an opponent (i.e. maneuver my way into a clear path to shoot the ball). Although she always laughed at my lack of skill, and the fact that I was doing all of this while extremely pregnant, she loved to challenge me and I never backed down. Though Dominique was not exactly sure what she wanted to do when she got out of school, she knew she wanted it to be sports related.

She had coarse dark brown hair that was often styled in two cornrows down the back of her head. Sometimes she would take the braids out during the course of the school day and let her hair be its big, wild, self. I tended to believe that she did this because it garnered a lot of comments from her peers, and exaggerated reactions from me about why she would want to walk around like that. Dominique hung out with a smaller group of friends and did not seem desire

validation from her peers in the ways that other young women in the school did. Nonetheless, she was well known and generally well liked.

She typically donned clothing that was loose fitting and looked very comfortable—boot cut jeans or sweats, a unisex cut t-shirt and an oversized hoodie or zip up jacket. One of her most favorite hoodies to wear featured a scantily clad Marilyn Monroe with nearly exposed breasts superimposed onto an American flag. Whenever she wore this sweatshirt she made sure to parade around in front of me because she knew I did not think it was an appropriate shirt to wear to school. Because her cornrows were not always freshly braided, she nearly always wore her hood tied tightly around her face. While it made her head appear to be bald and wrinkly along the sides, she could care less as long as no one had to see her hair in its less than pristine state. Given that headwear was against the dress code, Dominique had frequent interactions with school staff where they tried to get her to abide by the code (which she never did).

Dominique and I checked in on a near daily basis. Although I did not request that she do this, it became our routine. These conversations would be updates on her classes and grades, complaints about her teachers, or explanations of a discipline incident that had occurred because she wanted me to hear her version of events before the official documentation got to me. Although she was an 11th grader in age and years in school, she had experienced some trouble early in her high school career, and had many credits to make up. During the first year that I was at JHS she did not seem to be aware of just how far behind she was, but by the official year of data collection she had a renewed sense of purpose regarding her schoolwork. She was actively engaging in an online program that would help her make up her credits quickly during the school year and potentially graduate closer to on time. In fact, through the online program she successfully completed three whole classes that she needed to make up. Not only did Dominique

buckle down on the online credit recovery courses, she was also committed to staying on top of her work in her current classes. On several occasions when I would arrive to the RC during second hour, I would find her in the room projecting video onto the wall and zoned into an assignment.

Comparing what I knew of Dominique from the year prior to the official start of the study to the current year, see seemed as though she genuinely wanted to maintain good grades throughout the duration of her time let at JHS. I knew this not only because of her frequent check-ins with me about her progress, but also based on how she reacted to situations within her classroom where she felt her efforts to progress were being slowed by her peers and/or teachers. One day the following interaction occurred:

> *Dominique came into the RC stating that she could not stand her math class, and that "they" were irritating. Confused, I asked her what happened. She stated that they (referring to the entire class) were doing a test review and she was giving answers, but the other students were just staring at the teacher wide-eyed...She said that Ms. Eckle would write things on the board and "no one" would even be "paying attention" except her and her table (of two other Black girls). She stated that they other kids would just be looking at her dumb. She reiterated that her class was stupid and she hated it.*

In this case, though she liked math, she felt like her class was not a space that nurtured her interests in mathematics well enough. This irritated her because she was not getting the opportunity to really get the challenging work that she knew she could handle and that she felt she deserved. Rather than be in a class of like-minded peers who also wanted to be challenges, she had the impression that she was the only one who knew what was going on.

Though we talked nearly every day, Dominique would not officially join *RISE*. She always stated that the whole group dynamic was not "her thing" because it was probably just "girls talking about boys and drama". Even when I explained to her that this was not the case, she still was not interested. Given our relationship outside of the group space, I did not push it. She only participated in the *RISE* sessions that were heavily unstructured such as when I created a game for the young women to play that would reveal the gender of my baby and when I hosted a going away party for myself. Despite not wanting to be apart of the group, it became routine for Dominique to eat lunch with the members of *RISE* in the RC and then have to be playfully kicked out so the official group activities could start. Every time she was asked to leave the room by a peer, or myself she did so peacefully and nearly immediately. I never had any trouble getting her to provide the private space that the group needed.

During her check-ins with me, we also talked about her life outside of school. I learned that Dominique came from a female dominated household where either her mother or grandmother was present. She had much younger siblings, between 1 ½ and 3 years of age and enjoyed showing me videos and pictures of them whenever she captured a cute moment. Although she always prefaced the interaction with how much they "got on her nerves" it was obvious how much joy they brought to her life and how much she loved being around them. Dominique had one of the best smiles of any of the students I worked with at JHS. It was the kind that made you want to smile back because it was so big and it looked like every muscle in her face was being used to convey happiness. She often smiled the most when talking about her siblings.

She also smiled a ton when she was making fun of me and my Blackness. Like Anastasia, who loved to comment on the ways my embodiment of Blackness was misaligned with her

version of what it should be, Dominique also found my performance of Blackness to be quite entertaining. For Dominique, the way I spoke was the most hilarious thing to her. Her perspective is enclosed in the following excerpt from a fieldnote:

While I was walking the hallways, I wandered into Mrs. Shaw's (the credit recovery teacher) room where I saw Alisha (11th grade), Dominique and Arlene (11th grade) sitting at a table near the door. It was towards the end of the day and the class was nearly empty. I could not locate where Mrs. Shaw was. When I got to their table, I asked them what they were working on. After eye rolls and a failure to acknowledge the original question, Arlene asked me about the baby and if I knew the gender. At that point in time I did not know and could only share my prediction that it would be a boy. Dominique shared that she thought it would be a boy too. At this point, Alisha touched my hand and commented that we needed to be talking about the "rock" on my finger, referring to my engagement ring. Arlene asked to see it up close and I brought my hand closer to her face. While she and Alisha examined my ring, and made comments about how pretty it was and how much it blinged, Alisha's music from her phone accidently started up. I was not familiar with the song but within the small snippet that played before she could stop it, I heard the word "fuck" very clearly multiple times. My reaction was a shocked "oh my goodness". This caused Dominique to erupt into uncontrollable laughter. Confused as to what was so funny, I repeatedly asked Dominique what was going on. When she took a break to get some air, she imitated me saying "oh my goodness" several times. She burst into another round of laughter. At this point I was chuckling myself because of how much joy she was getting out of this, but still maintained that I was confused as to what was so funny. Finally she stated she was laughing because I "was so White". With a

look of shock and immediate refusal to accept her estimation, I asked why I what I did

that was so White. Through another round of imitation and laughter she stated it was

because of how I said "oh my goodness", which was "not what Black people [said]"

when they were shocked or surprised.

Her joking about the way I spoke did not upset me. I had heard the narrative about my "talking White" for years and years and no longer took offense. Instead, I allowed these moments to occur as a means of creating a friendly rapport between the two of us that would provide more insight into just who Dominique was. Through these interactions I learned she was a goofball. She loved to laugh—particularly if it was at the expense of somebody else. Her peers knew her as a jokester and she took pride in making jokes like that one I shared above, and would do so at any opportunity that presented itself. While I did not mind being the butt of her joke, sometimes her teachers did. Though this is purely speculative, I felt that the teachers took the jokes far more personal than I did.

I also saw her playfulness emerge in her interactions with Mr. Ferguson. Over the course of the study she often referred to him as her "dad" and was fiercely protective of him as if he was really her father. She would make sure no one talked bad about him, disrespected the RC, or took up too much of his time (because of course the better way to spend it would have been on her). This fierce protection of Mr. Ferguson will be evidenced in the first Fieldnote in the next section. Mr. Ferguson and Dominique lived very close to one another and he would often share stories with me about how he drive around the neighborhood on the weekend and see her around the corner playing ball or cutting up with friends. Besides during the school day, they spent time together attending basketball games at a local college where Mr. Ferguson's son worked. While at these games, they would try to find ways to embarrass the other one so there was a story to tell

me the next time I saw them. The two of them joked constantly, which really brought out her playful side. For example, I observed the following in December 2015:

> *Today I got a good look into Dominique's playful relationship through her interaction with Mr. Ferguson within the RC. While Dominique was standing toward the middle of the room with her friend Arlene, Mr. Ferguson walked by and purposely bumped her shoulder. She exaggerated the impact of the bump, looked semi-shocked, and immediately responded with a comment about his baldhead and a joke about his height. Mr. Ferguson countered her insult with a threat to beat both Dominique and Arlene up, to which they scoffed and erupted into massive laughter. One of them responded that he could not beat them up because he was an old man, which only caused their laughing to increase. He then began to tease Dominique about her excitement about hearing back from some of the basketball players on the team they frequently watched. Together they laughed about him" trying to put her business out" there. Dominique laughed, along with him, and acknowledged that a few of them had hit her up on Instagram and she was very excited. When Mr. Ferguson turned his attention to Arlene and attempted to demonstrate how she would act goo-goo eyed at the players while at the game, she suggested that she was going to have to fight him for making fun of her. While she began to step up to him, Mr. Ferguson stepped back up to both of them and pretended like he was about to hit them to see how far they would flinch. They both ducked a little and Mr. Ferguson chuckled as he left the classroom.*

Despite the many enjoyable experiences Mr. Ferguson and I had with Dominique, she was still one of the most highly referred students to the RC for restoration following some

incident of perceived inappropriate behavior or interactions with a teacher. It was unsettling to me that the Dominique that I knew was not the Dominique who was reflected within the discipline or RC referrals. In fact, I often expressed to Dominique that I was baffled by the fact that none of these types of interactions occurred when she was in the RC. I was at a loss for why her relationships with her teachers were so troubled. Her response was always a smile and a deep shrug of the shoulders. As I analyzed her visits to the RC it became readily apparent that in many of these cases, the way Dominique presented herself in the situation was a byproduct of what occurred within her interactions with her teachers.

The Production of a Problematic Identity: A Review of Dominique's Micro-Interactions with School Officials

I first examine an interaction that occurred in March, 2016. The fieldnote reads:

Dominique came to talk to me as soon as I arrived to the RC mid-morning. She was bouncing her basketball like usual and had another one under her arm. She recounted that in the lunchroom the school staff let them shoot around until it was time to go in. She stated that Mr. Ferguson was usually there for her to return the ball before she went to class, but today he was not there. She continued on to say that when she realized she could not drop the ball off, she went to class and arrived about "one minute late". When she went inside the room next door (to her classroom where half of the class met) to get her book bag, she heard some students gossiping about money that two other students had exchanged and she commented that it "looked like counterfeit money". She maintained that she did not say it loudly but that Mr. Bryant called her out for being "disruptive". With an air of disbelief, she asserted that he was "tripping because

people" other than her were also "late". Continuing on with the story she described grabbing her book bag and having trouble keeping hold of both of the balls to the point where she lost them. A male student somehow got both of the basketballs and tried to toss one back to her, but because of how her book bag was positioned and her arm injury, she was unable to catch it. At this point, she stated that Mr. Bryant came up, intercepted the ball her peer had thrown, and proceeded to throw it outside of the classroom into an open field. With palpable frustration she stated, "First he was complaining about how we were late but then gonna go and throw threw the ball like that. Really?" She recounted that he "laughed" at her reaction and made "no effort to go outside" to retrieve it. Instead, she ended up going outside to retrieve the ball herself because it belonged to Mr. Ferguson and she knew he expected her to return it. In sharing her feelings on the situation, she described Mr. Bryant as "childish" because he threw it "all the way in the field in front of the whole class", and "did not even say anything" to the other student who was the one who had thrown the ball across the room in the first place.

When she came back into the classroom from getting the ball, she said she thought about doing something to Mr. Bryant, but did not. He tried to say something to her but she said she just told him to "shut the fuck up talking to her" over and over again. Eventually, he wrote her up and sent her to the RC. Upon leaving the classroom she recounted that several teachers and staff attempted to talk to her and they were all met with "fuck you" as well. She was adamant that even though she was getting suspended she "did not care" that she spoke to him that way because if she "had done something disrespectful like that to him (i.e. throwing balls out the door) [she] would have gotten expelled, but he just got to get away with it".

*I empathized with Dominique about how petty it was of him to throw the ball and she corrected me and said, "it was not petty, it was stupid". In that moment, she seemed to think back again on how the situation occurred. She recounted that it took her "a minute" (slang for quite some time) to get the ball from out of the field. She said that while she was ready to move on when she got back to the classroom, it was clear that Mr. Bryant was not because that was when he started to try to "talk to her again". She recounted that that was the moment that "caused [her] to start cussing him out". She relayed to me that I had to "look at it from her perspective"; she had come into class and "did not do anything to him but yet he took her stuff, which was really Mr. Ferguson's stuff, and threw it outside." Again, she lamented just how "childish" and frustrating it was to her. As if an aside, she pondered aloud that she almost felt like he was trying to "make [her] say something to him that would lead to her getting suspended or expelled".
–FN, 30*

A common way for teachers that Black girls were characterized in JHS was as disrespectful to convey their feelings that the young women interacted with and spoke to their teachers in an inappropriate manner. While it seemed they believed that their "disrespect" was simply a matter of inherent nature to interact in this manner, this situation between Dominique and Mr. Bryant illuminates a more complicated dynamic in which she was triggered to act undesirably.

While the discipline referral form labeled Dominique as disrespectful through her repeated use of the word "fuck", Dominique recounted a situation in which her actions were in direct reaction to the disrespect her teacher initially showed her. As she recounted in her narration of the incident, the problems first began when she perceived Mr. Bryant to label her in a manner that she deemed inaccurate and unfair. She felt that calling her "disruptive" was not

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warranted because she in fact did not make her comment loudly enough to actually interrupt anything that was going on in the classroom. She described his actions as indicative of someone who was "trippin", a term that indicated she felt he was unjustly taking his personal frustration out on her and not actually dealing with the truth of her actions in the moment. This initial interaction between her and Mr. Bryant set the foundation for the remainder of what happened.

Following what Dominique perceived as an incorrect labeling of her behavior, she then reported feeling disrespected by Mr. Bryant's decision to take the basketball and throw it out of the room. She felt it was a childish and immature move to mishandle her property in that manner. Property that actually belonged to her "dad", Mr. Ferguson, which only added insult to injury. The decision to mistreat her property infuriated her because she felt like she would never get away with doing something like that. But yet Mr. Bryant would not have to face any consequences for his poor choice of actions. She was even more perturbed by the fact that he was not even remorseful as indicated when he did not go outside to retrieve the ball or apologize. While Mr. Bryant may have thought he was being funny or playful, a point I will elaborate on later, Dominique found nothing to be funny. When he saw that she was not laughing, he could have made amends but he did not. What's more, Dominique was particularly upset by the fact that she was unfairly targeted. While both her and another student had the basketballs, Mr. Bryant only chose to mess with her. While it might have been that he simply picked the ball that was closest to where he was standing, she read this as a direct attempt to embarrass her. If in fact he had thrown the other ball, or even both balls out of the classroom, Dominique would still probably have been upset because she perceived it as mistreatment of Mr. Ferguson's property, however she would not have perceived it as a personal attack on her. After all of this had happened, and Dominique returned from retrieving her ball, her frustrations were extremely

high. Though she had thoughts about doing something physically to Mr. Bryant given her level of anger, she initially resolved herself not to react. However, when he tried to speak to her, as though he was not in the wrong, she unable to restrain her anger. As she made her way to the RC her frustration was at such a high level that any teacher she saw in the hallway was met with a similar reaction.

Given this context, we see that Dominique's "outburst" was not some random act of verbal violence. She was not simply shouting "fuck you" because she desired to insult her teacher. Despite the way she ultimately responded to her teacher's actions, it cannot be ignore that Dominique initially tried to be responsible in her initial desire to return the ball and attempted to control her anger. Questions can be raised of course, about Dominique's skills of diplomacy. Responding to her teacher with profanity was not the best choice particularly because it was against the school rules and would likely leave her with a suspension, as we saw was the case. However, we can clearly see that her reaction was triggered by the way she felt her teacher disrespectfully treated her first.

In the interview I had with Mr. Bryant, he talked about this very incident and admitted, for the most part, to doing just what Dominique said he had done. While he did admit that he was being childish, his version of what happened positioned his actions as playful and innocuous, rather than disrespectful. He suggested that the problem was with the fact that students at JHS, like Dominique, could not process his playfulness and overreacted in situations like this. He stated:

> *A fresh example. So, we moved the start of the school day from 7:25 to 7:30. Part of that*
>
> *was for the busses that the end of the day, but we thought, "Well, maybe a byproduct of*
>
> *that was more kids will start getting here on time." But now, all they've done is they've*

moved their arrival back five minutes ...which is okay, and I've told them, "As long as, when you come into my class late, you sit down quietly." And I've told that to Dominique five times this school year. Today, she came in. I'm over there next-door. I have them quiet. I'm explaining what we're doing for the day. She came in to talk to someone, dribbling a basketball as I'm teaching. So, obviously, my professional, "Don't – please, don't do that, it's not – hasn't worked. So, in a way, I kind of got down to her level and I stole the ball from her as she was dribbling it, picked it up, and then I opened this backdoor and I rolled the ball out as far as I could out the back door and I kept teaching...And now, you would think that she might get a chuckle out of that, and, "Oh, wow. He's right. I came in five minutes late." Now, she's all mad and growling at me and was in my next class and told me to stop looking at her and, "Don't look at me. Don't talk to me." So, it did not go as well as I'd hoped it would go.

In his accounting of the incident, Mr. Bryant talked about making a deliberate decision to address the situation by getting "down to her level" rather than act in accordance with his professional inclinations to politely ask her to cease bouncing the ball. He justified his decision with the fact that he had encouraged Dominique to do the right thing on several other occasions in class and had not yet seen the results he was looking for. Though in his account she was dribbling the ball and had not simply been trying to retrieve it from a classmate, both accounts align at the crucial point where he somehow captured the ball and threw it out of the classroom. He fully expected in that moment (based on his prior teaching experiences), that she would react to his actions with an appreciation for his creative method of punishing her for being late and disrupting the class. However, when he sat for the interview he could acknowledge that she did not appreciate his approach. He stated:

Yeah, no, you're right. I think the kids who come here – sometimes I call this building the Land of the Misfits, and that's what this building has turned into, and it's – it does not mean that they're academically any better than the ones over there [the main high school]. It's just this place is more emotionally safe. And so, that could be part of it is I'm dealing with more emotionally fragile students, and so maybe, they take me as a bully rather than just taking me as I'm joking around or sometimes, I use sarcasm and like I did with Dominique today, so I don't scream and yell at them and say, "What are you doing walking into my class five minutes late dribbling a God damn basketball? Are you out of your ever-loving mind?"

While he stated earlier that the problem was that Dominique was not able to be playful with him, his statements here revealed how he really felt about the incident—which was that she was being overly sensitive because she was an "emotionally fragile" student. While he believed his actions were a better alternative to yelling and screaming at students when they engaged in misbehavior, he also articulated the possibility that the students may view them as that of a bully. Despite, being able to acknowledge that he did not think Dominique saw the humor in his actions that he intended to display, a part of him knew that her "fuck you's" were the result of her displeasure at what he did and not some random outburst. Nevertheless he wrote her up as if her actions toward him had occurred in isolation and were unprovoked. Instead, he seemed more comfortable blaming her reactions on her perceived emotionally fragile state and ignoring the role that his actions played.

This was not the only time where I observed a teacher fail to acknowledge how their interactions with Dominique elicited the "disruption" that occurred. On another day I observed the following:

Toward the end of the day, I met with Dominique regarding an incident that happened

in Mr. Clark's class that led to a RC referral. From her perspective, Candace and her

group mates were presenting when Caleb, a male student in the class, began laughing

and making noises. When Candace asked if something was funny, he made a smart

remark, which Dominique said "irritated her." At that point, she recounted that she

intervened and started talking about his grades and lack of credits to shift the focus from

the comments he was making about Candace. Mr. Clark, who had remained quiet up

until that moment instantly told her to leave for disrupting the class.

As Dominique recounted, one of her friends was giving a presentation when a male peer began

to interrupt her through commenting and noises. Mr. Clark did not stop him and so Dominique

decided to step in so her friend could continue on with her presentation unbothered. She chose to

insult the young man by talking about his grades and lack of credits, in an attempt to embarrass

him (which was obviously not the best way to address the situation). It was at that point that Mr.

Clark stepped in to handle the situation by immediately calling Dominique out for being

inappropriate and forcing her to leave the class.

Later, I spoke to Mr. Clark about what happened. In his version of events, he did not

mention Candace's presentation nor the young man's interruptions. Instead, he focused solely on

what Dominique said to the male peer. He shared:

After school Mr. Clark came into the RC to talk about the situation that had occurred

with Dominique. He wanted us to help him workshop a solution. He pondered aloud if it

would be okay to ask Dominique to "apologize to the entire class", or at least to him, for

"interrupting the learning that was going on" and "messing with the dynamics of the

class". Mr. Clark explained that his reason behind wanting a public apology was that

"something needed to be done to communicate expectations for behaviors and acknowledge her disruption". He continued on to state that although he did not want to "bully her", he felt that in that moment "she was being a bully" to that young man. Mr. Ferguson shared that he thought it would be good for the apology to be a class wide thing (if it happened) because he knew she held some influence over other students and it could be good for them to see. After taking a minute to weigh his options, Mr. Clark came to the conclusion that she would have to apologize to him and he would "ask her to do it in front of the class, but not make it mandatory". He wanted to use her to "set an example of the expectations" for the class space. Mr. Ferguson commented that he thought it was fair and suggested that the jokes that students made about each other could very well apply to themselves because they are all in a similar situation where they were missing credits. He felt that Dominique was acting out of frustration at the fact that even though she had more credits than the young man in incident, within the official records she was labeled a 10th grader while he was labeled as an 11th grader. –FN 63

Mr. Clark dissected the incident differently than Dominique. Within the conversation between him and Mr. Ferguson, the following conclusions were reached: (a) that she was both a bully and a leader and that she was (b) frustrated with her academic standing and likely taking it out on others. Mr. Clark perceived her actions as an attempt to emotionally harm or intimidate her peer for the purpose of making him feel bad, as bullies do. As a snippet from Mr. Clark's interview will demonstrate below, he *did* overhear the young man interrupting Candace's presentation, yet did not accept Dominique's explanation that her actions were an effort to protect her friend. He characterized her behavior negatively and seemingly set aside the good intentions that undergirded them. In desiring a public apology, for this behavior, Mr. Clark recognized her

capacity to be a leader in the classroom, for good or for bad. He seemed to believe that a public apology would be able to set the tone for the remainder of the class and discourage students' misbehaviors. Interestingly, Mr. Ferguson seemed to side with him when it came to the public apology. Though it may have appeared that he was agreeing to the negative characterizations of her as a bully, my sense was that his agreement was more in line with her capacity to lead to her peers toward positive engagement with school given the influence she had outside of the classroom. While Mr. Clark was content with labeling her a bully, Mr. Ferguson tried to find other reasons that may have motivated her behavior and suggested that it could have to do with her dissatisfaction at the lack of consistency in how the official records positioned students' academic standing when they were missing credits. Though Mr. Ferguson did not deny that Dominique had acted negatively towards the young man, his explanation attempted to rationalize her behaviors in a way that Mr. Clark's labeling did not. Mr. Clark's reasoning completely ignored any motivations for her behavior that would suggest she was not acting with intentional malice. In fact, Mr. Clark was so rooted in his belief that she was acting as a bully through her aggressive and rude behavior, that it justified him engaging in bullying behavior himself. Although he claimed he did not want to do it, he felt as though he had to as a means of retribution for the young man involved in the interaction and that it was his professional obligation to "set the expectations".

Mr. Clark also touched on this situation within his interview, which was held some time after the interaction had occurred. He stated:

I remember there was one day Dominique just felt like she needed to stick up for Candace and just really cussed somebody out in the middle of class. It's like hold on. We have a really good relationship, me and Dominique...We have a really good understanding. And

she just totally walked over class and just was, like, out there. And she's like, well, she felt

like she had to do it. She had to stick up for her friend. And it's like –And I see that a lot

of just, like, well, I had to. It's like no, you did not. You have a choice [laughs]. And this

was a bad one. Like, why did you make this choice?... And I guess, like I was saying, I see

that a lot of just like if you say that to me again, I'm gonna fight you. And so it's just kind

of the culture of, like, I have to stick up for myself. That's, you know, again, [what you

would see with African American] boys, but I still feel like there's that culture of I need to

look tough [amongst African American girls]. I need to look like I have it together. And if

you cut me down, I have to cut you back harder... It can be anything if they cut them

down and they have to kind of stick up for it. And I'd say it's kind of the same. I mean you

see more of the fights in the hallway, but you still see explosiveness in the classroom of

like, Dominique just cussing him out.

This time when he discussed the incident he acknowledged that he was aware that Dominique

was attempting to stick up for Candace when another student in the class had said something she

did not like. He expressed that he was surprised by her actions because he expected greater

respect for his classroom given their "good" relationship. He described her choice to stick up for

Candace as a bad choice that was made possible because she was embedded in a Black

adolescent peer culture where both girls and boys felt they needed to appear tough in front of

their friends and make it known through public displays that they are not going to tolerate any

challenges. He suggested this "tough" culture meant that when Black girls were challenged, it

was cause for immediate retaliation, most often in the form of explosive physical and verbal

aggression, which was what he saw in the way Dominique had interacted with her peer. His

theory of a tough Black adolescent peer culture both pathologized the Black identity and situated

Black girls (in general) as unfeminine because they were engaged in masculine displays of bravado.

Taking both perspectives on what happened into consideration, we can see that Dominique's actions were a *reaction* to Mr. Clark's *inaction*. While Clark talked about her disruption as a manifestation of her personal inadequacies and tendency to blow up, he failed to recognize the ways that his actions—or lack thereof in this case—created the conditions by which the disruption was made possible. She was called to act in the manner that she did out of need to protect her friend. Dominique had a close relationship with Candace and was not going to allow the young man to continue giggling and making comments during the presentation. She felt it was fully acceptable for her to try to put her peer in his place so that he, and the other students he was communicating with, would not continue being disrespectful. From Dominique's perspective, had Mr. Clark stood up for her friend in the first place she would not have had to do what she did. And in fact, you could view her actions as an effort to improve the classroom environment into a space where all the students were able to present their work uninterrupted. Though she enacted her agency in a way that made a bad situation worse by engaging with the young man in a disrespectful way, her intentions were in the right place. While Mr. Clark felt there was another choice that Dominique could have made, she did not feel there was because there were no indications that he would step up himself and defend her friend. Thus, in this case Mr. Clark elicited the "disruption" because he was not proactive in advocating for a respectful presentation environment.

Finally, I provide an example of a situation that occurred outside of the classroom. In this example, Dominique had come into Mr. Ferguson's office to retrieve her belongings and a basketball for the weekend. Remember, Dominique was a frequent flyer to the RC so it was not

unusual for her to leave personal belongings in the office. In fact Mr. Ferguson and I often joked

that she left items there in order to have a reason to come to the RC frequently during the day.

However what should have been a mundane, non-special interaction of Dominique coming into

the RC to retrieve her belongings, turned out to be anything but. The fieldnote reads:

It was late afternoon, almost near the end of the school day. Dominique walked into Mr.

Ferguson's office and said that she needed to talk to Mr. Styles and wondered if Mr.

Ferguson could help her find out where he was. Dr. Campbell (interim principal), who

was sitting behind the door, did not acknowledge her with a greeting but immediately

said that "she [was] going to have to have a talk with him because if he continued to see

her walking around the hallways as much as he had been, he would be giving her some

time away from the school". The way he began to speak without so much as saying hello

first suggested that he had just been waiting on an opportunity to say this to her and that

since she was mentioning the other principal, he may as well insert his own "Principal"

concerns. As he said this, Dominique screwed up her face up in disgust and confusion.

After a short pause, and looking around the office (Mr. Ferguson, myself, and another

student were seated in there alongside Dr. Campbell) she calmly said to him that she had

"not even been in school so how could he say that she had been walking around the

hallways". As she said this she continued to move in deeper into the office toward her

belongings. She seemed as though she was not going to let what he said so and was

mentally moving on. Dr. Campbell did not back down and reiterated that if he "continued

to see her in the hallway he would be giving her consequences". At that moment, I could

see that Dominique was becoming increasingly irritated as her face scrunched up again

and she let out heavy exhales of breath. I tried to intervene quickly, and had planned to

say "Well, why don't we talk about this next week", but I only got out the "well why"

before Dominique blurted out to him in an elevated voice, "why are you even talking to

me?" She began to talk to no one in particular and said that she did not even "like him"

and that when she walked in, she was "not even talking to him so he shouldn't have even

been talking to her". Dr. Campbell responded by saying, "well we were all in here"

when she walked in. Again, not talking to anyone in particular she cut him off and stated

loudly that she "just came in there to get her stuff". She then asked Jana to hand her, her

stuff because he just "irritated her with that". –FN 90

If we skip to the end of the incident we saw a Dominique who had just been "disrespectful" to

the Principal by JHS standards, through what and how she spoke to him. In JHS when teachers

described the kind of disrespectful behavior rampant amongst Black girls, they talked about the

very actions that Dominique had just exhibited: (1) elevated tone when speaking, (2) refusing to

direct comments about the adult to the adult themself, and (3) attempting to "control" the adult

by dictating when they could or could not speak. During the incident, I wanted to intervene

because I saw that Dominique's patience was running low and she would not be able to maintain

her cool demeanor much longer. Though I did not know how she would respond to his continued

threats of punishment and can see her chosen method as making the problem worse, it is evident

that her reaction was in response to several moves that Dr. Campbell made.

As she usually did, she came to the office to speak to Mr. Ferguson, this time about a

conversation she needed to have with the former principal, and to pick up the basketball that she

typically took home over the weekend. When she entered into the office where Mr. Ferguson,

Dr. Campbell, and I were seated, and made her need to have a conversation with former

Principal Styles known, Dr. Campbell immediately began to chastise her for something she did

not agree with, and threatened her with suspension. Her near instant visceral reaction of screwing up her face, was an immediate indication that she was caught off guard with this reproach and not appreciative of the accusation. However, her first response to him was a question about how he could possibly say that she was always in the halls given her recent absences from school. She seemed confused as to why he began to admonish her for her behavior without any conversation to even confirm that they had a common understanding of what he was alleging was occurring. Though annoyed, she seemed ready to let it go and not linger on it, but Dr. Campbell persisted with his threats. When he stood firm in his statements that she would receive "consequences" even after she had calmly explained that they were not warranted, her irritation became palpable and it was clear she was highly offended by his threats of suspension and by the way he had come at her with these threats when she had not even engaged him in conversation in the first place. It was at that point, the second iteration that she would be receiving some consequences that her response turned from calm to confrontational.

While she did not always go directly to class after a lunch or passing period, based on my observations she was not one of the frequent hallway lingerers. Because she did so much work in the RC, she did often travel back and forth between the RC and class to get instructions, supplies, or to turn in work. Remember, this year Dominique had really turned things around in terms of getting her work done, making up her credits, and generally being more focused in school. She had a renewed energy toward making sure she could graduate on time, or as close to on time as possible. We had had many conversations about what she needed to do in order to reach her goals, and I often stressed that being suspended and missing class time was not an option. Knowing how we had positioned suspension as potentially catastrophic to her grades and plans for achievement, I believe the threat from Dr. Campbell about her having to spend some

time away from school was perceived as a direct threat to her ability to be able to continue to make progress on her work. For this reason, she could not maintain her calmness for longer than she did.

This interaction did not have to go the way that it did. Dominique did not come into the RC with the desire to speak to Dr. Campbell in a confrontational way or to have the tense interaction that occurred. She simply wanted to talk to her "Dad" and retrieve her belongings. However, it happened because of two critical actions on the part of Dr. Campbell. One, her he ambushed her when she entered the office without so much as saying hello. There were other times that he could have approached her about her behavior, but to tell her that she would be suspended if he continued to see her out of class in front of other people (including a student) was not a good way to broach the topic. Secondly, without a prior private conversation about her hallway behavior, Dr. Campbell's comments appeared to Dominique as acts of pre-judging her commitment to school and assuming bad intentions—a feeling that many Black girls in JHS shared and were frustrated by. In feeling like Dr. Campbell has set out to tell her how he felt about her, who can blame her for doing the same when she told how much she disliked him.

Concluding Remarks

When I think about Dominique, what comes to mind first is her wide, infectious smile and laugh. However, if I were to ask her teachers, another set of qualities would likely be expressed. While in my presence she was funny, playful, mild tempered, and caring, within the micro-interactions that I shared with you, her teachers presented her as anything but. In fact, while Mr. Bryant perverted her caring nature into an oversensitivity, Mr. Clark suggested that she was indeed a bully who did not care about hurting someone else's feelings if it meant protecting a friend. As our interactions revealed, Dominique was committed to having a better

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academic year than her previous ones. She cared enough about her grades to come check in with me about them, without my asking, and she put in real work as evidenced by the fact that midway into the first semester she had already passed one of her credit recovery classes. Yet, her teachers imagined that she lacked focus and desired to be disengaged from school through misinterpretations of possession of basketball and presence in the hallways. Like Anastasia, Dominique tried refrain from interacting with her teachers in a way she knew would be problematic because she could clearly articulate what the consequences would be. However, her teachers imagined her in ways that suggested that when angry or frustrated, she lacked the ability to respond rather than simply react. Ultimately, despite her best efforts, under the pressures inherent in her micro-interactions with school officials, Dominique was unable to consistently enact her identity in the productive way that I knew she was capable of.

Chapter X

The Production of Problematic Identity Performances: Candace

Getting to Know Candace

Candace was the very first student I met when I arrived at JHS. She took to me almost instantly, and during our first conversation opened up about what was going on in school and at home. She was the student who made me want to learn more about how to effectively engage in restorative practices and to be more intentional in the support I provided to students because I did not want her, or any other student's, trust in me to be in vain.

Candace was about 5'2" with a slim build. She had deep brown skin with small facial features—almond shaped eyes, thin lips, and a button nose. We often joked about how small her ears were particularly when she pretended like she did not hear something I was saying. Though she had naturally brown eyes, she liked to wear color contacts. Her favorite color to wear was grey, which over time really grew to compliment her very well.

She typically wore her hair in a long and wavy weave down to her mid-back. She was very good friends with Anastasia, and was often preoccupied with making sure her hair was in place much like Anastasia was. She took a lot of pride in how her hair was styled from day to day and felt better about herself when her hair was the way she wanted it to be. Her clothing was a mixture of styles. Sometimes she wore crop tops, fitted t-shirts, or a shirt with slits up the side, while other times her small frame was drowned out in oversized sweaters. Candace was slightly obsessed with her figure and often talked about wanting to be "thicker".

Much like Anastasia, Candace was a 10th grade student by years in high school, but credit wise a 9th grader. While other students who were behind in their credits lacked some of the foundational skills that were critical to success in their coursework, Candace's test scores demonstrated that she was at grade level with the majority of her skills. Much like Anastasia, she too desired to be more academically successful in her classes so that she could graduate on time and not be high school longer than necessary. Despite her desire for greater achievement, Candace was one of the RC's frequent flyers. She spent a considerable amount of her time in the center workshopping issues with her behavior, but would also just come work in the RC because she found the space more amenable to her needs. She expressed that she liked the RC because there was not "someone always on her back", she could listen to music, and she could easily ask Mr. Ferguson or myself for the assistance that she needed.

Candace was an active co-facilitator of *RISE*. On the very first day that *RISE* met, she was tasked with opening the meeting and sharing the purpose of the group. I gave her full control over the means by which to do this. When the time came, I sat to the side of the group and observed the following:

> *Today was the first meeting of RISE. The group was sitting in a "U" formation with the open side facing the whiteboard. In the middle of the opening, close to the white board, there is a lone desk upon which Candace was seated. She had one leg bent in the shape of a triangle that pointed to the side wall, while the other leg dangled freely. There were about 15 young women in the room. Candace asked for everyone's attention. Once it quieted down, she began to speak.*
>
> *Candace: RISE is a space for us to engage in activities and conversations that matter to us. For example who watch Love and Hip Hop? (She put her hand up in the air as an*

example of how students were to provide their response. She scanned the room and

noticed Tiana did not have her hand up.) You don't watch Love and Hip Hop? What show

do you watch? (Students start to chime in with the shows they watch. They spoke over

each other. As they shared, Candace's eyes followed the sound of the voices. Once they

shared the titles of the shows they watched, she returned to Tiana and through her stare

invited her to take back control of the floor.)

Tiana: *Well sometimes, but that really isn't my thing.*

Candace: *Okay (taking back over the conversation) we can talk about that [Love and Hip*

Hop] here. Like we can talk about it, but we also gotta talk about what lessons we

learned. Like when Miles told Amber he was gay? What lesson did you learn from that?"

(paused briefly for someone to answer, looked out into the group)

Young woman in attendance*: That some people really take that seriously, like...(At this*

point the group erupted into several smaller conversations at once, where a few girls

were asking which franchise of Love and Hip Hop was the best while another set were

commenting on being gay versus bisexual)

Candace: *(in a voice loud enough to be heard over the side conversations) and another*

*thing, RISE is led by us. Alaina is going to be here to facilitate, but it's led **by us** (with*

emphasis). Whatever ya'll want to talk about, whatever activities ya'll wanna do, we

gonna do. Ya'll like that? (chorus of yea's) Who's still interested?

In this opening day activity, she was very positive and established an order to the space. She was

inviting to others' comments, even when they were said out of turn, and welcoming of her peers'

ideas. She demonstrated a keen understanding of how to facilitate a large group conversation

through the way she scanned the room, paused after asking questions, and tried to draw

connections to the students' likes and interests. She actively listened to her peers' comments, built upon them with statements of her own, and provided an opportunity for all members of the group to speak. Given her success on day one, she became the regular person responsible for gathering the young women after they had eaten their lunch and coming up with an opening activity for the day. Some of the prompts she used were, "How is your day going and what are you doing this weekend" and "If you could rate your day on a scale of 1-10 what would you say and why".

Even when she was not the one facilitating the group, Candace continued to be involved in the activities. During the discussion of the activity where the young women were tasked with acting out scenarios as they would occur if the students were Black or White, Candace brought in a critical perspective that went beyond the examples themselves and tried to help the others draw deeper connections. She wanted to make the point that all of the skits had groups that were comprised of all Black students or all White students. She stated that in some cases, friend groups in JHS were mixed race and that in those instances she still felt that Black students would be at a disadvantage. At first, her peers questioned her perspective and suggested that it wasn't true. They felt that the White students would be treated like the Black ones and they would all be in trouble. Candace did not back down and provided them with anecdotal evidence such as the time she saw the principal calling out the Black boys in the cafeteria and letting the White ones get off the hook, and the time within her connection classes where only the Black students (primarily girls) would get referrals despite everyone else acting up. After sharing these stories, many of her peers were able to see where she was coming from and ultimately agreed with her. Within this interaction she was able to introduce a new perspective that allowed her peers to extend their own thinking on the subject.

Typically when asked to complete a project in *RISE*, she did so with little complaints. Even when she was not entirely thrilled with the activity, she completed it anyway. This will become important as we will later learn that one area of frustration between Candace and her teachers was her frequent requests for modifications of given assignment. One project that she was less than thrilled to complete in *RISE* was the body outline where the young women traced their bodies so that they could draw a line down the middle and write words on one side that captured how they viewed themselves, and words the other side that captured how they felt others viewed them (this was described in greater detail in Chapter 4). When I introduced the activity, Candace nearly immediately stated that she did not want to do it. I did not fight her on it and told her to have a seat off to the side at the big wooden table with the two other girls who also did not want to participate. Once she and the others had sat down, I immersed myself in helping other students and left them alone. About 15 minutes later, Candace decided that changed her mind and wanted to take part in the activity. By the end of the activity she as so engaged in it that she was one of the few students who volunteered to present their answers to the group when I asked people to share. Though there had been no room, or time, to trace her body given the late start, she drew a heart on a large piece of paper, split it down the middle and listed the following for how she felt about herself: big heart, not understood, weird, loving, caring, and tall (which really showcased her sense of humor because she knew she was short). On the opposite side she listed: bad attitude, don't care at all, weird, funny, short, and smart mouth. While some characteristics appeared on both sides, which could indicate that in some ways she felt others perceived her in a way that matched her perception of herself, there were other characteristics that were completely opposite.

One of the mismatches between her conception of herself and that of others, was that she did not "care at all". I observed her passion for her education on many occasions. For example, one day in September 2015 she walked into the RC to talk through an issue she was having with her peers regarding how she was orienting herself toward school. I observed the following:

While I was sitting at the big wooden table in the RC taking down some notes, Candace came in. She reported that she had not been sent here for any particular reason, but had asked and received permission to come. She pulled up a stool to the table and while I closed up what I was working on, she began to talk. She expressed that she felt she was being "held back" in her connections course because a lot of the students in there "did not take things seriously". She lamented that they thought "everything was a joke" when it was not. She suggested that while they were still unable to see the importance of "turning their life around" in terms of school, she had come to the realization of how important it was for her to "do better". As such needed to "keep focused" on her goals and "stop playing around" like they were. She paused and thought to herself for a moment. As her brows furrowed, she looked from side to side. With a shrug of her shoulders, she expressed that she felt her peers were "mad at her" for making a decision to focus and did not understand why because she was "doing the right thing" for her. She emphasized that she told them they could do the right thing to (i.e. focusing on their school work) and they just chose not to do it.

Within this interaction I learned some critical things about Candace's orientation to school. I saw that she could acknowledge that in the past she had not been taking school as seriously as she needed to. However, in this moment, she articulated her commitment to school and being academically successful moving forward. She desired to experience a higher level of academic

rigor than what she was currently experiencing and felt it was largely due to the large group of students in her class who were not committed to doing better in school. She labeled her commitment and renewed focus in school as the "right thing" to do and planned to stick to it even if it meant that her peers would be angry with her, and refuse to accept her new orientation toward school.

Other times I knew just how much she cared about her academics through her expressions of frustration when something in her classes did not happen the way she expected it to. For example, I observed her frustrations one day in October, 2015. The fieldnote reads:

I walked back into the RC after handling a problem in the hallway and Candace was sitting in Mr. Ferguson's office. She was slumped in her chair with her eyes downcast. She held her phone in hand though she was not using it. When I first walked in, I looked at her and then at Mr. Ferguson but neither said anything. Candace remained staring blankly at nothing in particular on the floor. Based on her posture and silence, I got the feeling that she was unhappy about something but I did not have enough information to figure out exactly what happened. After a minute or so of silence, I walked over to Mr. Ferguson to try to figure out what was going on. He was looking at her academic profile on Sonar. As soon as I began to lean in to see what her reports were, Candace blurted out that she did not "understand" how she went from "an A to 12% overnight" [I later understood the situation to be that her teachers had added in assignments but not the corresponding grades, which made it appear as though she had "0" points out of the total]. She explained that she had just checked yesterday, had an A in her class, and had turned in all of her work, but now she was somehow at a 12%. As she recounted this, she spit the words out so fast and terse it was evident that her inability to fathom a legitimate

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reason for her grade to all of a sudden dip so low, pushed her to the edge of

disappointment and anger.

What this situation demonstrated about Candace was how deeply impacted she could be by her level of academic performance. She cared enough about her grades to check them and remain aware of what they were on a daily basis. She *also* cared enough about them to be disappointed when she saw something that was not up to par with the expectations she held about herself. It was the deep level of care that led her to react the way she did during that interaction.

Besides feeling that her teachers viewed her as not caring at all, Candace's *RISE* body outline also revealed her perception that she was viewed as having a bad attitude. The Candace I got to know during our times in the RC and *RISE* could not accurately be described in that manner. I would agree with Candace's description of herself as playful. One day we had the following interaction:

Candace came in to say hi. She was wearing a black shirt with slits up the sides that

revealed her torso and parts of her stomach depending on the angle. I circled around

where she stood and jokingly said, "Oooo that shirt is against the code of conduct". She

laughed and said that "whatever" she wore was considered out of conduct. In fact, she

suggested that when it came to her she could walk in with a "completely appropriate"

sleeveless shirt on and they (the school staff) would look at her and say, "biiiiiitch is that

a shoulder?" We busted into laughter.

In this instance, Candace turned perceived inequity around student dress into a joke. Her comedic efforts were evident when she exaggerated the beginning of the word "bitch" such that it resembled the way reality TV characters say the word to demonstrate surprise and disapproval. She used her joke to make light of a hypothetical interaction and suggest that school officials in

JHS were prone to making a big deal out of something trivial, like her shoulder being exposed. She demonstrated the ability to be lighthearted in the midst of serious and actual inequities, which some students would not have been able to do.

Candace's body activity also demonstrated her belief that her teachers thought she had a "smart mouth", meaning that she had a tendency to speak in disrespectful ways. Our interactions allowed me to see that she could articulate how to interact with her teachers in a way that went along with school norms, even if she did not always act accordingly. I documented the following interaction in a fieldnote:

Later on in the day Mr. Ferguson asked me to talk with Candace because Mrs. Fitzgerald approached him saying that she had been on her phone several times and had been overheard cursing loud enough at Allen for her to hear. Mrs. Fitzgerald expressed that she wanted to approach her about it without there being a big blow up. I asked Mr. Ferguson about what the plan should be and he instructed me to: "(1) pull her out of class, (2) remind her of the conversation we just had (about school expectations and norms), and (3) ask her to help me develop a plan moving forward by asking her the question—what should a teacher do when the student has their phone out? How should the teacher approach that student?" Lastly, he told me to "do my thing" with a pat on the back and a laugh. I said okay and pulled Candace out of class.

When I got to the class, Candace was cutting a poster board that appeared to be a project. When I asked if she would come into the RC to talk to me for a bit, she quickly followed. She asked me if she was in trouble and I responded that she was never in trouble when she was speaking to me. Once we got into the RC and grabbed chairs, I reminded her of the conversation we had about the school norms and expectations. I then

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asked her to help me out with something and raised the question about how teachers

should approach students when they had broken a rule, for example using their phone.

Her response what that she would want them to "not talk down to her like she was on a

different lower level", and for them to be "understanding of why she had her phone out if

she was using it". She then shared that she only had her phone out during this first week

of school so she could talk to her mom about something important. She recounted that

while Mrs. Simpson seemed to understand that, Mrs. Fitzgerald did not. I then asked her

how a student should respond to a teacher if they were asked to put the phone away in the

manner that she just described. Without hesitation she responded, "Put the phone away".

She continued on to share that sometimes when a student did not respond in that way it

was "not about the teachers' actions, it was about the day the student was having". She

recounted that last year if she was having a bad day she would "take it out on the

teacher" and be "ready to snap", but that she had "matured this year" and was

"choosing to not" act that way. I acknowledged that that was a very mature response. I

then told her that I had inside knowledge that Mrs. Fitzgerald may approach her about

her phone use pretty soon, and that she should keep in mind what we had just discussed.

She said okay and went back to class.

In the situation, Candace clearly articulated knowledge of what school officials would position as

the "correct" way to interact with a teacher when it came to behavioral correction. Her response

was that when asked to put your phone away, students should put it away. However, importantly

she also revealed how teachers should interact with their students that would encourage such an

immediate compliant response. Critically, within her explanation of the correct way to respond it

was evident that she was aware of her emotions from day to day and even year to year. She

acknowledged that last year she had days where she would react to teachers' requests in an improper manner that had little to do with the teachers themselves. While in some ways this supported the teachers' notion that Black girls took their anger out on the teachers when it was not warranted, it demonstrated that it was not their default setting and something they could not control. Her comments revealed that, in fact, she was aware when these moments had occurred and could have done something about them back then but lacked the desire she currently had to change them. Overall, this interaction demonstrated that Candace was well aware of the norms of interaction within JHS and was prepared to respect them as long as teachers did the same.

Despite her knowledge of how to interact with teachers in accordance to the school rules, Candace often found herself in confrontations with her teachers and making visits to the RC for some kind of behavioral misconduct. Many times these incidents were described as her blowing up. Below, I describe one such incident where teachers may have described her actions as that of a "blow up". I wrote:

After observing the hallway for some time, I headed back into the RC. I had a meeting at 12 back at the University, and only had about 20 minutes until I would need to leave to make it on time. When I walked into the RC, Candace was sitting on the far left side of the U erasing something on a white piece of paper. I walked over to greet her, and could instantly hear that she was sniffling. Standing about a desk's length away, I asked her if she was crying and if something was wrong. She did not answer. I stepped in closer to where she was and in a quieter whisper said that I knew she could hear me. I asked again what was going on because she had just been okay an hour ago and now she was crying. At this point, I noticed that there was a fresh tear mark on her paper. She sniffled, but still did not respond. At that point, I determined that she needed space so I told her that

when she was ready to talk about it I would be there. I straightened my body and

prepared to walk away. Before I could take a step, she spoke. She said, "no matter what

[she did] it was not good enough". With increasing levels of energy, she continued on to

say, that "no matter how hard [she] worked it did not matter because [her] grades would

never be better". I asked her to show me the grades that she was talking about. She

opened up her computer and her grades were already pulled up. We began to go through

what was missing for each of the classes. As I pointed to the items that were marked as

missing, she explained why she had not done them or questioned why it was marked that

way because she was confident that she had turned that particular assignment in. After

going through about five items, without warning. she slammed her computer shut, pushed

it toward me, leapt from her seat, and walked out of the RC. I sat there stunned with my

heart beating fast. What happened? After a couple minutes of trying to think about what I

may have said to her or did that would have caused her to react that way, I decided to see

if I could find her to ask. Eventually, I found her in the bathroom, sitting in a corner

crying. I crouched down to her level, took her into my arms, and hugged her close to my

body. I told her over and over that it was going to be okay and I would be there for her to

help her through it. We rocked back and forth. After a few minutes lifted her head up and

wiped her eyes. I made a joke about how I really loved her to be crouching with her on

the dirty bathroom floor. We both chuckled and I invited her to come back with me to the

RC so we could continue our work.

While other teachers were likely to have used this as situation to support the idea that she was

prone to unpredictable displays of emotions, I did not view it that way. Though I too was caught

off guard by her actions and could not immediately see what caused her to be so upset in that

moment, it did not take long for me to conclude that her actions were likely a reflection of her feelings regarding her academic standing. I also recognized that her actions of pushing the computer toward me and leaving during the middle of our conversation were not acts of intentional disrespect toward me. She did these things because she was frustrated and that it was simply how it manifested itself in that moment. Although I may not have personally reacted the way, it was not my situation to react in. Rather than focus on the manner in which she left and abandoned our conversation, I recognized that my role was to support her and focus on the reasons she may have left in the first place. I did that when I found her in the bathroom and handled it in the best way that I knew how. I acknowledge that the average teacher has many more students and may be limited in their capacity to respond to every student like how I responded to Candace. However, what every teacher should have time for is the few seconds it took me to reflect on what happened and consider deeper issues (including personal behavior) that may be driving their students' behavior beyond a lack of control over their emotions or desire to be disrespectful.

Although many would say it is not good practice to have favorite students, Candace was one of my favorites. I enjoyed being around her and thought very highly of her. As she came in and out of the RC for various reasons, it troubled me that the young women I knew to be such a joy was having so much difficulty in her relationships with teachers and staff. Much like with Dominique, it was unsettling to me that the Candace I knew and loved was not the Candace that was reflected within conversations I had with teachers and staff or the discipline or RC referrals. Narratives from teachers and RC documents constructed an image of Candace that suggested she was apathetic and disengaged from school, disrespectful, emotionally unstable and aggressive, impolite, and rebellious. Taking a closer look at her visits to the RC, and the situations that

precipitated them, revealed that in many of these cases, Candace's enactment of her identity was intimately tied to the ways in which school officials interacted with her.

The Production of a Problematic Identity: A Review of Candace's Micro-Interactions with School Officials

In order to illuminate how school officials produced a problematic identity for Candace to adopt, I begin with a situation that occurred within the first days of the school year. In this field note excerpt, Candace recounted an incident that occurred between her and the school counselor, Mrs. Jones, regarding her schedule of classes. The fieldnote recounted the following:

For my last RC visit of the day I saw Candace. She walked into the RC and back to Mr. Ferguson's room and knocked on the door. As she opened it I said, "Hey how are you doing?" She responded "not good" and I asked what was going on. She expressed, "I just came in here to talk because I don't know why I am here". I asked her to take a seat because I felt like we were going to be in the office for a while. She began to talk about how Mrs. Jones had been "too busy" to help her, but that Principal Style had told her to go there. I interrupted her and said, "before we go too far, you came in here and said you don't know why you are here, and I want you to answer for yourself why you are here". She responded, "I'm talking about in the school". I responded, "I'm talking about why are you involved in your education period." She responded, "I know that I'm getting my education to get money because if I want to make money I need to go to school, but I'm talking about why am I in this school that is so disorganized. It's so irritating and frustrating."

She went on to explain that earlier she went to Mrs. Jones' office and was told that she was not doing the schedules today. Candace stated that she responded, "Are you serious?" loudly and with great emphasis, which caused Principal Styles came out of his office and asked her what was going on. She explained to him that he told her to come by tomorrow (which was today) because that was when Mrs. Jones would be doing the new schedules. As she explained this to him, Principal Styles told her that he did not tell her to do that. With a look of disbelief, she expressed that that was "exactly" what he said. She looked to me for confirmation of that statement (being that I sat in on the meeting, I knew that he told her to do that). She continued on with the story and said that Mrs. Jones told her that because Principal Styles did not tell her to come to her at that time, she was just going to have to wait until she got around to fixing her schedule. At this point Candace said that she was so "frustrated and irritated" that it made her "not even want to be at the school". She said she had asked herself "over and over" why she was "even at school if this was how she was going to be treated". She continued on to say that "all of this was happening on top of the fact that she was irritated, sad, and wanted to cry because she had heard what was going on with her credits". Again, she stated that she just "did not know why she was in school".

I began to talk to her about how it was only day two and things were still a mess. I acknowledged that it was irritating and frustrating. I also acknowledged that things should have been prepared for her on day one. I told her that it was not right or fair that it was not ready. I began to explain that there had been a lot of turnover within the school with the large change in the teaching staff and leadership, and that in fact, the counselor only got her job two weeks before school started. I expressed to her that a lot

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of students were in a position where their schedules and other things were messed up and needed to be fixed, and suggested that maybe it was not a personal thing. Candace responded, "How can I not take it personal? Everyday that they are messing up these schedules and I'm not in the classroom where I need to be, is messing with my graduation." She began to tell me how her friend Jana (10th grade, Black girl) was in a similar situation but got all of her stuff figured out already. She explained that Jana was going to stay in the ninth grade classes except for one and would do all tenth grade classes the next term before starting her recovery classes. She wondered why they had not worked her schedule out the same way.

In short, the Candace that sat in front of me displayed what the teachers characterized as the hopelessness that was inherent in Black girls' academic identities. As a reminder, teachers believed that Black girls were apathetic within school because they did not believe enough in themselves to push for academic success. In many ways, Candace seemed to be demonstrating this identity. When she first began her conversation with me, she questioned why she was in school. As the conversation continued, she expressed that she was frustrated and irritated to the point where she did not want to be in the school and that she just wanted to cry. Prior to this day, Candace had discussed her plans for this academic year, which included academic performance that far superseded the previous years' dismal grades and credits. However, here she was in the RC questioning *if* she would be able to reach her goals, particularly if she remained a JHS student where school officials were content to "mess with her graduation". Given the many conversations that we had previously had about the role education would play in helping her attain her life goals, and the excitement she had displayed about the potential for this new school year to be an opportunity to rectify past mistakes and failure, this pessimistic attitude was out of

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place. As she recounted the day's events, I learned that her feelings of hopelessness surrounding her academics were manifested as a result of her interactions with Mrs. Jones, the counselor and Principal Styles.

Her hopeless demeanor stemmed from two micro-interactions that occurred within the larger situation of getting her schedule fixed. The first interaction was with Mrs. Jones. She recounted that when she approached Mrs. Jones about her schedule, she was simply told that it was not the right day to address her issues. This immediate dismissal frustrated Candace because Mrs. Jones did not seem to take her request seriously, and did not appear to acknowledge that without a correct schedule she was wasting precious time that was needed to get her grades and credits back in order. The second micro-interaction was the exchange between herself and Principal Styles where he failed to take responsibility for giving her the incorrect instructions that led her to Mrs. Jones' office in the first place. As the field notes indicated, I was at the meeting where Candace initially opened up to Principal Styles about her frustrations with her incomplete schedule. I heard him tell her to visit Mrs. Jones first thing in the morning to get it fixed. However, when the morning came and Candace was told that she was not asking at the appropriate time, Principal Styles denied that he provided her with these instructions, and stood by idly while Mrs. Jones used *his denial* to justify her lack of attention to correcting Candace's schedule. Candace took this as evidence that the school was disorganized and that she would have a difficult time being academically successful here.

Candace perceived these two interactions as a personal attack against her as a student because other students in the school, including those who were in a similar situation credit wise, had proper schedules. Somehow *she* was allowed to remain without a proper schedule and could not understand why. Thankfully, Candace pushed back when I tried to tell her not take it

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personally. She reminded me that it had to be personal. She had every right to be upset that she, and not other students, did not have a working schedule. Because she cared about graduating and making up her credits, she had to take this as a threat to her personal success because it was obvious that her attempts to get back on track were being stifled by school officials who failed to assist her. As Candace processed the incident, and shared her feelings about the futility of getting an education at JHS, it was clear that her despondency was primarily driven by the actions of her counselor—who quickly dismissed her requests without any resolution—and the actions of her Principal who backtracked on the instructions he originally gave her and offered no support in resolving the issue when those instructions proved to be bad. By the time Candace came to me in the RC, her feelings of frustration had turned into the hopelessness that she demonstrated throughout our conversation. Given that Candace was already in a particularly vulnerable position given her missing credits and was already teetering the line between being hopeful and hopeless about her ability to get back on track, moments like these inclined her to feel despair rather than confidence.

I analyzed another interaction, this time with Mr. Chase, in which similar feelings of hopelessness and disengagement were produced within Candace. The interaction was as follows:

While I was in Mr. Ferguson's office catching up with him about how the day was going so far, Candace walked into the RC and sat at one of the tables. When she sat down, she turned her body sideways away from the desks, placed her arms in her lap, and laid her head in one of her hands. She used the other hand to lethargically scroll on her phone. After about 2 minutes, I walked out and asked her what was going on because her energy seemed low. She reported that Mr. Chase "got mad" because she did not want to sit in "the group that he assigned her to" and told her to come in here because she was "not

cooperating". I asked for more information. She explained that he was changing the assigned seating so that the students in the class could "get to know more people". When he directed her to a seat, she recounted that she tried to tell him that she had already sat with those people before. At the same time that she was telling him this, she said that a girl walked into the room. She suggested to Mr. Chase that he place this young women, where he had originally had placed her. After making this suggestion, Mr. Chase told her she needed to go talk to who she had came into class with (as in me) to prevent further consequences. She recounted that she asked if she could just sit in a seat by herself since she had already sat with those group members, and he repeated to her that she needed to go talk to me before she got involved with any more serious consequences. That was when she came in to the RC. A bit confused, I asked her how she had spoke to him when making the requests and she responded that it was much like how she sounded now, which was a soft non-elevated tone. With a forlorn look and no eye contact, she said that she needed to "change schools" and that it "does not matter anymore." She said that it was "hard" to look at her grades and see that she was "in the exact same place" that she was last year. I expressed to her that she was doing so much better than last year. With a look of disbelief she responded, "how? I am failing". She lamented that the old ninth grade teachers, Mr. Chase, Mrs. Fitzgerald, and Mrs. Simpson, still "treated her like she was the person from last year". She expressed that "no matter what" she did, whatever she "changed about herself", from how she spoke to how she reacted to their requests, "none of it worked" so "why should she even try". She said that sometimes she just "wanted to give up because seeing those F's really hurt her". At this point she began to wipe tears from her eyes. She expressed that she "was embarrassed by her grades" and

that when she "got those grades it made her think of her dad and his expectations that

she would fail"...She stated that she "wished she had some control over them keeping her

in the past" in terms of her behavior. She stated that her getting "sent out of the class for

petty reasons", like this situation, were "negatively impacting" her. With a sigh of

resignation, she stated that Mr. Chase was "simply out to get her" and "did not want her

to be successful". –FN, 15

In this Fieldnote, Candace recounted a situation where her teacher, Mr. Chase, claimed to be

switching up the class seating in order to allow students to experience working with a new set of

peers. When Candace realized that she was in a group with students she had already worked

with, she stated that she attempted to advocate placement in another group so that she could have

the experience Mr. Chase claimed he wanted students to have. In her recounting of the incident,

she attempted to offer a solution where she would be placed in a different group and another

young women be put in the original group that he had placed her in. However, rather than view

her actions in light of her intent to simple work with another group like Mr. Chase had intended,

Candace maintained that he grew upset with her and began to speak of consequences.

We do not have Mr. Chase's perspective on this situation and thus do not have any

additional information on how the events unfolded that would allow us to better understand his

motivations for sending Candace to the RC to be restored. However, based on what we know

about how teachers characterized Black girls, I conjecture that he likely sent her out for one, or

all three, of the following reasons. One, given the perception of Black girls as bossy and striving

to be in control, he may have received her comments about her seating assignment as a challenge

to his authority. While Candace could clearly articulate why she was hesitant to sit in the seat

that she was being directed to, Mr. Chase may not have accepted her reasoning as valid. Second,

even if he did not take issue with what she said (i.e. her reasoning), given the perception of Black girls as having an attitude, he may not have liked the *way* she said what she said. Because many issues arouse with the young women pertaining to how they communicated their feelings, I made sure to ask Candace how she spoke to him during the interaction. From her perspective, she asked the question in a non-confrontational way using a quiet and soft voice, but that may not have been Mr. Chase's experience of the interaction. Thirdly, Mr. Chase may have determined that she was being resistant to the group work entirely through her suggestion towards the end of the conversation that she sit by herself in her own group. Teachers commonly used Black girls' apprehensions to group work as evidence that they were mismatched with JHS' learning model and were often looking for ways to rebel against it. Though Candace recounted mentioning sitting solo only after Mr. Chase failed to acknowledge her proposal for a group configuration that would more deeply align with the learning experience he wanted students to have, it may have been possible that he interpreted her actions as an attempt to be resistant rather than a genuine interest in making the situation work. Furthermore, at that point he may have been frustrated by Candace's request for *another* accommodation. As evidenced in earlier examples, Candace was not shy about negotiating for what she felt like was the right thing to do. To a teacher with a load of over 50 students to manage, the continued requests for modifications to the expressed instructions were likely, and understandably so, frustrating. Though all of these reasons are speculative, what is fact is that an interaction between the two of them occurred to where he did ultimately deem something about her response to him as inappropriate and worthy of her exclusion from the class. The critical piece to focus on is not why he sent her out but what happened after he did.

While in the RC in this instance, Candace embodied the hopelessness that teachers had attributed to Black girls during their interviews with me. As she was overcome with emotion and tears spilling from her eyes, Candace talked about giving up and not wanting to try in school anymore. She suggested that there was no reason for her to continue to put forth effort because nothing mattered anymore. No matter what she did, she felt it would not translate into the academic success she desired and so her efforts were in vain. Her comments revealed that she felt hopeless and wanted to give up for two main reasons. One, seeing failing grades on her progress reports was a highly discouraging experience for her. Looking at an "F" made her reflect on her relationship with her father (which was all over the place) and the low expectations he had for her success. In that moment, they also made her feel as though she was not making progress which meant that she would not be able to prove him wrong like she really wanted to. This made her feel like her efforts were in vain and that it might just be better to stop trying altogether.

The second reason that drove her feelings of hopelessness was directly tied to the interaction she had with Mr. Chase that left her feeling as though her teachers were not allowing her to evolve into the mature young woman who did not have behavior issues and who was academically successful. As she recounted the story, she recognized that she had engaged in some problematic behavior in the past, but wanted to move forward from those behaviors and felt that she could not because her teachers were not willing to allow her to evolve. As the situation with Mr. Chase revealed, even when she was going along with the program and trying to act in accordance to his wishes, which was behavior that was different from how she would have interacted with him the previous year, he still treated her as though she was doing something wrong and kicked her out of class. She reasoned that if he, and other teachers,

continued to hold her back like this, it would continue to result in her removal from class for petty reasons and negatively impact her grades. She recognized that she did not have any power over their perceptions of her and could do nothing to change them beyond what she was already doing. What she did have control over however, was whether she would make the choice to continue to put forth effort and be denied the benefits that should accrue. Though a decision to stop all of her efforts to advance, both behaviorally and academically, would ultimately be counterproductive, it would save her from feeling the disappointment that she was currently feeling in that moment.

While both of the examples regarding the development of an academic identity characterized by despondency and hopelessness were largely driven by Candace's retelling of the events that occurred, I want to provide an example of an interaction where we have the teacher's perspective to place alongside her version of what happened. In this case, I present how a "disrespectful" identity, so commonly spoke of amongst Black girls, was triggered through her interaction with Mr. Clark. In this example, Mr. Clark used the school discipline form to indicate her behavior, which provides an opportunity to examine how it was that he perceived the event to occur. I acknowledge that there are limitations to using the form as a way of garnering a teachers' perspective, because it is highly likely that instructional demands circumscribed Mr. Clark's ability to write the narrative as fully as he would have liked. However, teachers know that the information on these forms becomes a part of the students' official records and as such, should be filled out with a certain level of attention and specificity. Thus, though discipline referrals only allow for brief statements, they are written with the most important details (from the teacher's perspective) that capture the event.

On this particular day, Mr. Ferguson filled me in on a situation that had occurred between Mr. Clark and Candace that resulted in her suspension for two days. I recounted in a field note what Mr. Clark had written on the referral:

> *I learned from Mr. Ferguson that Mr. Clark wrote Candace up using the official discipline form. I inquired about what Mr. Clark said had happened. Mr. Ferguson recounted that on the discipline form, he checked the box citing that she had been "insubordinate" and "disrespectful". The qualitative portion of the form relayed the situation as the following: "Candace was instructed to focus on classwork but refused by arguing and cursing, and generally just being disrespectful".*

If we only considered this document, which is usually what happens in schools, we would likely consider Candace's behaviors as inappropriate for school, and see little fault with Mr. Clark's decision to write her up. After all, he appeared to be a teacher doing what a teacher was supposed to do—encourage students to do their classwork as a critical component of learning. However, when I talked with Candace about what happened, I gained some insight into the context in which her behaviors emerged that allowed me to understand and rationalize her behavior, even if it was problematic in some areas. The exchange was as follows:

> *Candace was suspended for two days based off an incident that happened in Mr. Clark's class. In the story she recounted, she was talking to Dominique about how she "never got her full points on her assignments" when Mr. Clark said that he "did not like the way that she was talking to him". She recounted that she told him that she was "talking to Dominique, and not him", so she did not "see a problem". She attempted to get back to her conversation with Dominique but said that Mr. Clark continued to "press her" and said "with an attitude" that he "did not like the way she was talking **about** him". She*

responded to him that she "did not see her father anywhere in the classroom and because she was not 5 or 2 (the age of his children)" and that "there was no one in the room that he should be talking to like he was talking to [her]". She recounted that at this point he told her sternly that she "better stop" what she was saying or else he would "write her up". She stated that she told him that he could not write her up because she "did not do anything wrong"; all she said was that "she never gets her points". She recounted that at this point, she got "extremely upset" and "began telling him about himself" because what he was "threatening" to do to her "was not fair". She was not even talking to him! As she recounted this story she was seated on the floor in the RC near the back exit door. There were tears streaming down her face and she sat with her legs pulled into her chest and her arms crossed over her knees. She was staring straight ahead as if she was speaking to the wall across the room.

While I sat with Candace and listened to her version of events, Mr. Ferguson came out of his office and asked what had happened. She ran through the story again and he responded that she had to be able to react differently when she was angry. He acknowledged that she had a right to her feelings, but also maintained that she had to get to a point where she could control it better and not let this happen. Shaking her head and letting her legs extend out straight, she expressed in a tone of exasperation that in the beginning she was "not even talking to the way she is now" (i.e. in an elevated tone). She was adamant that she only got to this point after Mr. Clark approached her and started "talking to her like she was his daughter or something." At this point, because there were other students in the RC, we moved into Mr. Ferguson's office to continue the

conversation. Mr. Ferguson and I began to try to deconstruct the hidden factors that led to the situation that occurred.

>*Alaina: I know we cannot change what has already happened, but what I think Mr. Ferguson is trying to get you see and what might be helpful, you can decide if it is or not, is what some of the factors are that led to the suspension.*
>
>*Candace: (said through crying) It's just that he's not giving me all of my points. It's just that he's not grading me on all my points. That's it.*
>
>*Alaina: What about what he's saying you said to him? I do not doubt that you did not yell and scream at him initially because if that had happened then it would have been all over school (i.e. treated like gossip). So I do not think that you yelled and screamed. I think, and he even said it himself, that he probably did not like what was being said about him.*
>
>*Candace: But I did not say anything ABOUT him. I said something ABOUT my grades. I said I never get my full points. No matter how many points it is, I'm not getting all of them.*
>
>***Someone came into the office and pulled Mr. Ferguson away interrupting the conversation slightly. Just Candace and I remained***
>
>*Alaina: This is not fair and I am not gonna say that it is, but it seems like what flipped the switch is when you felt like he was talking to you like you were his kid. That made you make the comment about him not being your daddy. I think that is what made him mad because he did not like being talked to like that, in addition to what you were saying about your grades.*
>
>*Candace: But he isn't supposed to talk to me like that.*

> *Alaina: Absolutely not.*
>
> *Candace: Just as much as I'm not supposed to yell, scream, and curse at him, he isn't supposed to talk to me like that.*

The exchange I had with Candace and Mr. Ferguson revealed critical aspects of the interaction that the discipline referral had not. In the conversation, Candace revealed that she was reacting to what she perceived to be disrespectful behavior perpetuated on her teacher's end prior to anything she said or did. While Mr. Clark maintained that he had approached Candace in an effort to refocus on her work, which is plausible because she was talking to Dominique during class time and it is not unusual for teachers to attempt to reestablish focus by physically entering the area where the student is, from Candace's perspective his prerogative seemed to be personal in nature and serve no academic purpose. The second moment in which she felt disrespected was when Mr. Clark confronted her about the conversation she was having with an attitude. She suggested that he approached her about it in a way that was flippant and impolite. In requesting that she not talk to or about him in a particular manner, he made her feel as though she was being treated like one of his children. This was wholly unacceptable to her as indicated through her comment that her father was not in the room. This comment suggested that she perceived his tone of voice as inappropriate for a teacher and only acceptable in the context of a parent/child relationship. The last way she felt disrespected was in the way he threatened her with consequences of some sort when she had not done anything to warrant them, much like we saw with Dominique. Given the disrespect Mr. Clark put her through, Candace perceived her actions toward him—telling him that she was not his child and cursing at him—as simply returning the disrespect he had already shown to her.

I want to mention a few notes here about Candace's interpretation of what happened. First, at no point do I think that anyone, adult or adolescent, should operate according to a "you did this to me so I will do it to you mentality". However, it cannot be lost that she is still an adolescent and has not yet reached the maturity level to understand this critical way of interacting in the world (something I will discuss in the last chapter). As Mr. Ferguson pointed out, she would eventually have to learn more productive ways to *respond* to others who she perceived as mistreating her but at this point in time she did not have the skills. Second, a part of what made Candace feel disrespected was the way in which she felt like Mr. Clark was talking down to her like she was one of his children and not a student he was teaching. She did not want to be told what to do when it came to the topic of her grades. In this respect, I have to agree with her that talking about her grades in and of itself should not be problematic. In this case, Mr. Clark may have been taking her comments about her grades and her lack of satisfaction with the evaluation process more personally than he should have been. Her expression of dissatisfaction about the process of how her assignments were grades should not have automatically been equated with ill will toward the person behind the grading. However, even in recognizing Candace's feelings as legitimate, she made a questionable decision when she discussed them in the middle of Mr. Clark's class because it could too easily be interpreted as a lack of engagement with class, as is what Mr. Clark conveyed on his referral sheet. Though Candace would likely disagree, talking to her peer in the midst of class going on about something not related to the current assignment did mean that she was not fully focused on her work at hand.

In examining the larger context in which Candace's actions occurred we can see that there was a dialectic going on. Though we don't know how Candace's conversation proceeded— i.e. the volume in which she was speaking, the tone, where her body was in the room, etc.—we

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know that whatever it was brought Mr. Clark into her space. Even though her actions set the stage for the negative interaction that followed, Mr. Clark's decision to interrupt the conversation and accuse her of bad mouthing him in a tone that she felt was age inappropriate, created the opportunity for Candace react in an explosive way. It was evident that Candace did not begin to negatively interact with Mr. Clark without reason or out of a natural inclination to do so. What Mr. Clark's perspective, by way of the discipline form, did not reveal, was the ways in which she was triggered to action by more than simply being asked to focus.

Not only did Candace's interactions with teachers and other school officials highlight the ways that the identities of Black girls as hopeless and disrespectful become called forth through interactions with teachers and other school officials, she was also involved in interactions that provide a window into the production of Black girls as emotionally volatile and unstable. In the example I share next, Candace and Mrs. Fitzgerald became embroiled in a tense interaction regarding phone use. The field note reads:

> *I was standing outside of the RC hanging a sign on the whiteboard about RISE starting up next week. Candace was standing outside talking with Shanell (9th grade, Black girl). When I got out there Shanell walked inside of the RC but Candace hung out behind. We exchanged good mornings and I asked her how she was doing. She explained that she "was not doing too well". I asked if it was about Allen (her boyfriend) and she responded, it was a "bit of everything". While I kept working on my signs, we talked about ways to deal with a breakup, the importance of eating breakfast (because a part of "everything" was her not feeling physically well), and joked about my terrible handwriting. After about 10-12 minutes, Mrs. Simpson came out of her classroom and walked toward us. Candace noticed her before she got close and mentioned her name to*

me in a bit of a "oh here she comes to bother me" tone. When Mrs. Simpson was within earshot, she asked Candace if she was ready to come back to class. Candace whispered to me that she "did not feel like going back", but that she would in order to "keep the peace" with her teachers. She began to gather her stuff (phone and headphones) from off the top of the locker, and headed toward class with Mrs. Simpson.

About 5 minutes later I was still standing outside of the RC working on the signs and the board announcement. When I turned to my left, I saw Candace walking towards me. The classroom door slammed behind her and I could see her mouth moving, but could not hear a word she was saying. Shortly after the door slammed, Mrs. Fitzgerald came out of the room, calmly and quietly, with a paper in her hand. At this point, as Candace was still walking towards me, I clearly heard her say, "Why can't people just leave me alone?" She launched her water bottle onto the floor and it slid in my direction. When she got a little closer to where I did not have to yell for her to hear me, I asked her what was going on. In a booming voice, she stated, "I just got fucking kicked out". At this point she threw her backpack to the ground, which also slid in my direction. When she got near her locker, she slammed her computer on top. Mrs. Fitzgerald tried to say something to her to which Candace did not respond. I asked Candace if she wanted to sit in the RC, and she quickly replied, "No, I'm ready to go home". She continued to walk past the door of the RC and into the commons area. There was a lone chair along the north side of the wall and she sat in it and rested her head in her hands. She slowly rocked back and forth. Mrs. Fitzgerald had stopped walking along the lockers where Candace slammed her computer and where I was working on my signs. She seemed to be

filling out a RC form, so I did not say anything to her and continued to pretend to work on my signs to see what was about to happen.

About 2-3 minutes later, Mrs. Fitzgerald walked over to Candace and grabbed a chair to pull up beside her. I made the decision not to go over immediately to give them a chance to restore amongst themselves, but near instantly, Mrs. Taylor came up to me and asked, "Is Candace safe?" I looked over at the two of them and Candace, now with her body bent over in her lap with her chin in her hands, made direct eye contact with me and stared into my eyes. Her face was blank. Mrs. Taylor stated that she knew that Mrs. Fitzgerald had good intentions, but was concerned with Candace's emotional safety. It seemed that Mrs. Taylor wanted me to go over and stand with them very badly, so I agreed to walk over and make sure their conversation remained healthy for Candace. As I looked back over at Candace she was still staring in my direction from the top of her eyelids.

When I walked over to where they were standing Mrs. Fitzgerald was facing Candace (her body was toward the west side of the commons) while Candace was facing the south side. There were tears streaming down her face. She was shaking her head and saying, "I don't want your help. I don't want anyone's help". Mrs. Fitzgerald responded saying something in a sound slightly above a whisper that I could not make out. However, I did hear Candace respond, "Can you just leave me alone?" In between sobs, she looked at her phone briefly and then rested her eyes on the floor. I asked if I could make a suggestion that she sit in the RC so people would not keep on asking her if they could help and that way she would not continue to be bothered. I asked if she would like

to sit in the RC. She nodded ever so slightly and stood up. She briskly walked over to her bag and water bottle on the floor, picked them up, and went inside.

After this, Mrs. Fitzgerald began to write on her RC referral again. I gave her a little bit more time to finish and when I saw that she was writing the date in, I asked what happened. I explained that she had just been out there with me and was fine. Mrs. Simpson had come to get her and, although she was not the most excited, she willingly went in. I told her I was trying to understand what happened in that short time. The following conversation occurred:

Fitzgerald: It's the phone….it's always the phone.

Alaina: So you just asked for her phone and then this happened?

Fitzgerald: Yes. Unfortunately she has lied to me a lot in the past. She says that she was texting her mom, but if she was out here then why did not she do it then (shrugs as if to say common sense right)? When I looked at her phone, I saw an image so I don't know if I believe her. This is another instance where we are walking on eggshells with her and I don't want to have to do this. Another reason she is mad is because another student, Ashley (12th grade, Black girl), was outside of the class talking about what seemed to be talent show talk. I did not go out there to see why she was outside because I had some decisions to make. She is holding that against me and Mrs. Simpson because she thinks that we always check for her.

Alaina: So she is feeling like she is being treated unfairly?

Fitzgerald: Yes. But she does not know that we have already confiscated 4 phones this period. She did not see that, but she thinks it's just her. I don't want to walk

on eggshells and would like to talk about it but I don't know if she is stable

enough.

I thanked her for her side of the story and left to go check on Candace. Candace and I spent the first part of the meeting letting her cry it out and calm down. When she could talk without tears streaming, I recounted what Mrs. Fitzgerald had said happened and asked her what her version of events that made her blow up. She immediately rebutted my statement and stated, "I did not [blow up]. I went back in class and I texted my mom to tell her that I was not feeling good. Mrs. Fitzgerald came by and told me to put my phone away and so I said okay. I took my headphones and pulled them apart so that they would not get tangled and I had my phone in my lap. Then I unplugged them and started to wrap them around the phone and that's when she came by and said she was going to write me a pass to the RC because I'm not supposed to have my phone. I said to her that I was putting my phone away and she said that she was still going to write me a pass to go to the RC because I was not supposed to have my phone out. That's when I got up and walked out."

In short, the incident I observed here was Candace leaving her classroom, unauthorized, in a state of heightened frustration. From Mrs. Fitzgerald's account, the blow up—the language she used on the RC referral—was the result of Candace simply being asked to hand over her phone for confiscation because using it during class time was against the rules. In trying to help me understand why asking for the phone alone caused her to walk out of class and erupt into the behavior I saw in the hallway, she positioned Candace as a liar. It appeared to me that she was suggesting that Candace's statement that she was using it to correspond with her mother was an attempt to manipulate the phone rule. Mrs. Fitzgerald believed that Candace knew she was being

dishonest, and was ultimately upset that the dishonesty would not get her what she wanted in this case. Mrs. Fitzgerald used my comments at the beginning of our conversation about Mrs. Simpson coming to retrieve her, to further support her perception that Candace was lying. She suggested that if she *really* needed to talk to her mother, she could have done so while she was out in the hallway with me because she had ample time. She further claimed that she could see an image on the phone that persuaded her of the untruth of Candace's statements about talking to her mother.

Mrs. Fitzgerald also suggested that the blow up and departure from class emerged out of Candace's observations of her treatment compared to what other students were allowed to do. When she told me this, I reframed it and suggested that possibly she felt as though she was being mistreated. Mrs. Fitzgerald acknowledged the potential for that to be the case, but denied it as a rational way of thinking by stating that she and Mrs. Simpson had already confiscated a large amount of phones in that one class alone so they clearly were treating her "fairly". To this point, she suggested that Candace's perspective that they were only checking for her was simply inaccurate. Twice during her comments, she used the phrase "walking on eggshells". This conveyed a belief that she had to exhibit extreme caution in what she said or did when around Candace. In this particular context, it situated Candace's reaction as unwarranted and unnecessary as a response to something so trivial as asking for a phone. It seemed as though she believed that asking for the phone should not have elicited the reaction that I just saw. In the end, she reasoned that this was a "blow up" that demonstrated Candace's volatility and emotional instability. She suggested that she would not be able to talk with her about the situation in order to resolve it because she could not guarantee that Candace would be "stable enough" to talk with her without another reaction like what I just saw. Ultimately, Mrs. Fitzgerald turned in an RC

referral that maintained that Candace left the class without the proper authority and proceeded "blow up" through cursing and inappropriate behavior in the hallway.

When I talked to Candace about what happened, she was adamant that I not characterize her behavior as "blowing up" because it suggested the she did not have reason for being frustrated and upset. She was adamant that what I saw in the hallway was a reaction, albeit very extreme, to how Mrs. Fitzgerald treated her in within the classroom. She described the same incident differently, though it did center on the phone. From Candace, we learned that like what Mrs. Fitzgerald said, she was asked to put her phone away. Though Mrs. Fitzgerald mentioned a back and forth about her mom, Candace did not. She recounted that she said okay and began the process of putting the phone away. However, as she did this, she was approached by Mrs. Fitzgerald again who, seemingly out of nowhere, began the process of kicking her out of the class by telling her she was being sent to the RC. Confused, Candace said that she reiterated that she was putting the phone away, but that Mrs. Fitzgerald was determined nonetheless to give her a referral and remove her from the classroom. This part of the story was not included in Mrs. Fitzgerald's accounting. In her account, Candace had simply grabbed her belongings and left the classroom without reason.

As is evident, the interaction was framed very differently according to the two perspectives, though the common denominator was the phone. While Mrs. Fitzgerald believed that Candace's behavior was not triggered by anything she did personally, but was a manifestation of her lying ways and propensity to blow up at any and everything regardless of the reality of the situation, Candace identified very clearly that the reason she reacted the way she did was *because of* Mrs. Fitzgerald's actions. She felt she was given a directive but yet was being threatened with being kicked out of class before she could even finish following through.

Unlike Mrs. Fitzgerald, who suggested that if anything caused the reaction it had to do with something internal to Candace, Candace's comments revealed that it was the act of Mrs. Fitzgerald not giving her the chance to get in accordance with the rule and then prematurely kicking her out as though she was being incompliant, that drove the behavior I saw. She left the class because it was unfair for her to be treated that way and she wouldn't stand for it. Mrs. Taylor's comments implicitly supported Candace's concerns about her interactions with Mrs. Fitzgerald. In expressing concern over Candace's emotional safety, she revealed that she perceived something toxic about their interactions that warranted my immediate intervention. Overall, in this interaction, though Mrs. Fitzgerald suggested that there was not a reasonable trigger for Candace's behavior, Candace could clearly articulate that Mrs. Fitzgerald's actions were the motivation for departing class in the manner that she had.

This interaction with Mrs. Fitzgerald was not the only time teachers talked about Candace as blowing up and being emotionally volatile. I observed this characterization within an interaction with Mr. Chase in February. The background to this situation was that Candace had shown me that her grade was extremely low in her class and she was confused as to why. After we looked at the breakdown of her grades we noticed a zero for a quiz grade that she had been unable to take. I encouraged her to follow up with her teacher to see about taking it so her grade would improve. I went to check in on her to see how the conversation had gone and learned that she had been kicked out of class. The field note reads as follows:

> *I was looking inside Mr. Chase's classroom to check on Candace. Mr. Chase came up*
>
> *behind me and asked if I was looking for someone and I said yes, Candace. He said that*
>
> *she came into class and then "exploded". He said this as he leaned against the ledge*
>
> *with his keys in hand. He recounted that she "slammed doors and was just "really,*

really, really, really, really, rude in her tone and actions". He expressed that she started
"cussing at them" and that "basically she verbally assaulted" them. He stated "I mean
this is just like last year. She sets a very bad example for these students". I expressed my
confusion at her acting this way and he responded, with a slight chuckle, "I don't know
human psychology but I will say that anything triggers her". He recounted that he wrote
her up and that she was probably in the office now. I thanked him and turned toward the
RC.

In this excerpt, Mr. Chase described Candace in line with the prominent characterizations of
Black girls as emotionally unpredictable and volatile. He suggested that she simply came into
class and "exploded" through her actions and words. At no point did he provide reasoning as to
why this happened, which left me utterly confused and baffled. He described the explosion as
manifesting itself through extremely rude and verbally abusive behavior. Not only was the
behavior unbecoming for her, he lamented that it was powerful enough to set a negative example
for the other students. In trying to consider what precipitated this behavior, he resigned himself
to the belief that anything would trigger her and that he would need an advanced psychology
degree to figure out the root of her outbursts.

In actuality, Mr. Chase really did not need an advanced degree because the answer was
right there in front of him. *He* was the trigger for her actions. In a later conversation with Ms.
Rose, and later on with Candace herself, I learned that Candace did not simply enter class and
erupt into the behaviors that Mr. Chase described. She was, in fact, reacting to comments Mr.
Chase made and his less than enthusiastic orientation toward helping her retake a quiz. My
conversation with Ms. Rose was as follows:

While I was waiting for Candace to be done in the office, Ms. Rose [Mr. Chase's teaching partner in the class in which the incident took place] *came in and asked if Candace was with me because she was looking to talk to her. I said that she was before the incident but that she was in the principal's office now. Ms. Rose began to talk about what happened. She recounted that Candace came up to Mr. Chase and asked him about the quiz they took on Friday, reminding him that her computer was broken. Ms. Rose stated she remembered Candace working on the quiz on a mac computer in the commons, but that she was not aware that she never got a chance to finish it. She recounted that Candace asked Mr. Chase if he put in zeros in for the quiz and he said yes, but that he had also put a comment on it that they could retake it if they did not have a grade. She stated that after his comment, Candace blew up. She stated that when Candace first came up to him she was frustrated but not angry. But that when Mr. Chase said something to her about putting a comment on the quiz grades, that was what flipped the switch and she began cursing at him and kind of "going off".*

As Ms. Rose relayed, Candace's behavior was a direct reaction to the interaction she had with Mr. Chase around a quiz that she was unable to take. Though Ms. Rose could not account for the exact words between the two that would help us understand what about the interaction was particularly triggering for Candace, her comment provided the perspective of an observer who could, and did, attest to the fact that something happened that precipitated Candace's behavior and that it was not just a random outburst. Though Ms. Rose's choice of the term "blowing up" would likely have resonated negatively with Candace for the ways that it masked the normal emotions of irritation and frustration that were at the root of the outburst, she nevertheless astutely highlighted the clear shift in Candace's behavior as a reaction to Mr.

Chase's comments. She observed that although Candace may have been frustrated by the situation from the start, she did not begin to curse and yell at Mr. Chase until he made the statements around commenting on the quiz grades.

In order to understand what exactly triggered Candace, we can turn to her version of the events. The fieldnote reads:

> At this point Ferguson who had come to sit in on the conversation between Ms. Rose and myself, went to get Candace. When she got in the room she sat across from Ms. Rose. When Mr. Ferguson asked her what happened, she shared that she did not know why Ms. Rose did not tell Mr. Chase, if he did not already know, that her computer was broken and that she could not access her computer. Ms. Rose shared that she did not realize that Mr. Chase did not know. She did know that he did comment on the quiz that the students could retake it. Candace, clearly frustrated as indicated by her stumbling over her words, breaking eye contact, and flailing her arms, expressed that one, she "did not have a computer to check the comments", and two she "did not get a notification from Sonar when there were comments" so why did he not "just email them to her because she checked that everyday". She expressed that it made her "upset" that they "kept talking about the comments as though that was the reason she had gotten a zero when her computer had been broken".

As Candace recounted what happened, we learned that she was reacting to feeling frustrated about several things that occurred during their interaction. First, Candace was frustrated that both of her teachers, particularly the one responsible for administering the quiz, did not know the status of her computer. Ms. Rose acknowledged that she knew that Candace's computer was broken and as such, Candace believed she should have told Mr. Chase about it so they could

have been on the same page. It was baffling to her that her teachers did not communicate about something so important as this. In her mind, if Ms. Rose knew then Mr. Chase should have known, and to that I have to agree. What made their lack of knowledge about her computer so frustrating was that they continued to make it appear as though it was her fault and that she was simply lacking on her responsibilities as a student. Had they known about the computer issues, as they should have, then it would have been obvious that even if Mr. Chase did make a comment she would not have been able to access it. She was frustrated that they continued to put forth an image of her as lacking responsibility for her grades, but failed to acknowledge the fact that she was prevented from doing that because of a lack of access to a key piece of technology. Second, her frustration was rooted in Mr. Chase's use of the comment platform that often did not work for her. She wondered why he did not simply send a class email, which she checked everyday on her phone and computer (when it worked). Although we can't be sure, it seemed that her frustration in this area had to do with previous communication with her teachers where she alerted them that she could not get notifications from the system. Yet in this case, he continued to use it anyways knowing she would not receive the information. It seemed as though there was reason for him to know that the information would not be received by her if sent through that medium, with or without a working computer.

So while Mr. Chase suggested that the "explosion" from Candace boiled down to an inability to control her emotions and a propensity to lash out at others without reason, both Ms. Rose and Candace put forth narratives that revealed how, in fact, his actions in one way or another incited what occurred.

Concluding Remarks

As the micro-interactions that I have shared revealed, the Candace I knew and loved *dearly*, was not the Candace that the teachers interacted with. While I knew her to be passionate about her schoolwork and focused on her goal of graduating on time, the teachers saw a young woman who did not want to engage with JHS in a way that would produce academic success. They saw a young woman who was disengaged during lessons and when approached to be redirected, deflected by acting inappropriately. As the co-facilitator of *RISE*, Candace was a leader who knew how to establish order in a space and guide her peers through productive conversations and activities. Yet, within her micro-interactions with her teachers she was described as disturbing the order and creating chaos. Though Dominique was a close second, Candace reacted to her teachers and situations that happened in school in the most extreme ways—both positive and negative. While I observed first hand her capacity express her anger through yelling and cursing, I also observed her vulnerability in the ways that she sulked and cried over grades that were lower than she expected, as well as her ability to be cheerful, joking, and positive. I knew that she was capable of enacting her identity in the way the teachers described. But I also knew that when she and I interacted outside of the presence of the teachers, in a context that specifically crafted to honor who she was and support her socially and academically, I never saw the volatility.

Across all three of the young women's narratives, we see that the selves that I knew based on my interactions with them in *RISE* and the RC, were not always the selves they enacted within their interactions with their teachers. On the surface, the young women displayed the characteristics that were a part of the pejorative characterizations that teachers espoused in creating the picture of what Black feminine identities at JHS were like. While their behaviors in some cases left much to be desired, what the teachers seemed to be unaware of, and what my

analysis revealed, was that their actions were not without reason. As I will discuss in the final chapter, these behaviors emerged as a response to a specific set of triggers and moves made by their teachers, and raise important questions about the work of teaching, particularly across racial boundaries.

Chapter XI

Discussion and Implications

Currently, scholarly inquiry on the gendered school experiences of African American students has been heavily focused on that of Black boys, leaving the experiences of Black girls largely un-interrogated. While the popular and academic conversations paint pictures of Black girls as universally resilient and high achieving, growing evidence suggests a dire need to complicate the narrative. Within the existing literature about young Black women in schools, scholars have examined the identities they bring into schools with them, as shaped by familial and community forces (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992; Hubbard, 2005; Fordham, 1999), and how schools, through institutional agents and policies, *react* and *respond* to them (Blake et al., 2011; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2005, 2007; Wunn, 2016). Very few inquiries have focused on the active role schools play in constructing and producing Black feminine identities for young women in ways that matter for their school experiences and academic opportunities. Consequently, this dissertation set out to: (a) analyze how schools *actively* construct Black feminine identities through their policies, practices, and norms of interactions; (b) examine what these constructions mean for Black girls' academic opportunities and orientations toward school; and (c) explore how Black girls interpret and respond to school based constructions of their identities. Drawing upon Black feminist thought, I assumed that schools, as social institutions, would not be immune to recreating the prevailing negative images of Black women that are promulgated in the US to sustain and rationalize racism and sexism.

In order to explore these questions, I became deeply embedded in James High School (JHS), a small predominantly Black urban school for two years. I spent over 600+ hours in JHS as a participant observer which culminated in: (a) 100+ field notes capturing observations of Black girls and school official as well as informal conversations about the school experiences of Black girls; (b) transcripts of 18 interviews with teachers and school staff; (c) 20+ hours of video and audio footage from *RISE* (a women's empowerment group I co-facilitated with student participants); (d) observations and artifacts from the Restorative Justice Center (RC) including referrals, resources in support of restorative practices, and transcripts of restorative meetings; and (e) documents constituting the print culture of the school including flyers, notices sent home, and official school policies. Through this engagement, I learned about the construction of Black feminine identities from Black girls and school officials.

The analysis revealed that Black girls were imagined in pejorative and unproductive ways in JHS. The school officials often depicted Black girls as "bomb-like" in their demeanors and interactions with others. While at times the bomb-like behavior was manifest in extreme "blow ups" that were characterized by volatile, aggressive verbal confrontations, the teachers believed that the young women were constantly ticking toward an explosion. The school officials suggested that their everyday actions demonstrated a state of constant, unrelenting misplaced anger. Positioning the Black girls as emotionally volatile and unstable in their socio-emotional demeanors, led to the teachers often avoiding substantial interactions with them. Instead they resorted to sending them to the RC. When teachers opted to engage Black girls, they focused their attention on addressing the girls' perceived emotional mismanagement, rather than on supporting them academically. From the teachers' perspective, the young women's inability to

manage their emotions was a critical factor in their strained relationships and academic underperformance.

Furthermore, the school officials imagined the young women as rebellious and attempting to gain control within JHS that was incommensurate with their position as students. They suggested that when Black girls were denied the control they desired, they intentionally acted in ways that were difficult, combative, and manipulative. Positioning the young women as rebellious, and as manipulators of me in particular, allowed for the teachers to question the young women's need for the support provided by the RC. This created a Catch-22. While they talked about the value of the work the RC did in meeting a critical need within the Black female student population, their actions indicated that they also held a belief that Mr. Ferguson and I, were pawns in a larger effort on the part of the young women to be noncompliant. Situating them as manipulators perverted the Black girls' help seeking behaviors and enabled them to view their requests to receive support from the RC as nothing more than a strategic move to secure control. As a result, in many cases Black girls were denied access to the assistance they needed to address their "issues" with emotional management and non-compliance. While the teachers did not want to allow them to use the resources available in the RC and by implication reward their perceived manipulation, they *also* did not want, or even know how to, resolve for themselves the challenges Black girls faced.

Much like with the way they characterized Black girls' dispositions and inclinations in the social realm, school official felt that the young women's academic identities were rooted in an intersecting web of problematic dispositions that were the source of their underperformance. The school officials suggested that the young women "lacked" the attributes of a "good" student in nearly every area—i.e. they lacked focus, motivation to succeed, engagement with class

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activities, organization, and the ability to work with others. By singularly focusing on the dispositions of Black girls, and not their tangible academic skills and strengths, the teachers blocked a view of them as whole students. Although some of these school officials identified Black girls as having "potential" to demonstrate higher academic performance than what they were currently displaying, overall, they provided no indication as to what academic competencies supported this imagined potential, or how it would be utilized to increase their performance. This was because any academic strengths that the school officials identified were perverted into a weakness or otherwise undermined elsewhere within their own discourse or in discourse from other school officials. Moreover, even within conversations explicitly about Black girls' academic identities, the teachers seemed unable to make sense of them as individual learners, which had consequences for teachers' potential to intervene academically to support Black girls' academic success. If the teachers did not know what the specific academic needs and attributes of the young women were as individual learners, they could do nothing to attend to them. Even if Black girls somehow desired to align their identities with the idealized vision of femininity that teachers positioned as the foundation of a productive academic identities that alone would not have driven their performance higher. The teachers needed to be able to support the girls' acquisition of disciplinary skills and knowledge and they did not seem poised to do so (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Thus, their preoccupation with the girls' perceived negative dispositions (on both the social-emotional and academic side) prevented a view of them as students and as learners—statuses to which all students are deserving.

What Kind of "Bombs" are Black Girls?: The Triggers That Set Them Off

These constructions of the young women were extremely problematic in and of themselves, but become even more so when it became clear that the school officials imagined

these demeanors and dispositions as the Black girls' inherent way of being. Given the fact that bombs are extremely sensitive to changes in their surrounding environment, using the imagery of a bomb could have been a productive way for the teachers and school staff to identify their own actions as critical to the way the young women enacted their identities. The bomb-like imagery could have signaled the importance of carefully examining the context in which the Black girls were situated as a key factor in the way they performed their identity. However, the teachers and school staff spoke of the young women's identities as though they were static and comprised of inherent traits that they brought into school with them as a result of their cultural and familial background. They believed that Black girls' identities were established long before the girls were students at JHS and as such, they had no role in the explosive manner in which they were enacted.

In positioning the explosive behaviors as inherent traits within the girls, the school officials failed to recognize a set of clearly identifiable triggers that set the stage for the young women to enact their identities in the manner that they did. While the officials were busy characterizing the girls as self-ignited bombs that exploded due to processes of "natural" combustion, analysis revealed that the young women were most likely to "blow up" when their teachers engaged with them in disrespectful ways and challenged to their personal and academic identities. As I detail the specific triggers below, I emphasize exemplars from Anastasia, Dominique, and Candace's narratives.

Trigger One: Interactional Dynamics

In some cases, the young women were triggered by feelings that their teachers were intentionally disrespecting them. Disrespect was perceived through actions such as: unwanted physical touches like taps on the shoulders to get their attention, a lack of eye contact when speaking, a failure to physically interact with them on the same level (i.e. student sitting and

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teacher standing), being in their personal space in a way that felt menacing, controlling, and invasive (i.e. hovering around their desk during class for no apparent reason, and mishandling their personal property). We saw this with Anastasia during her interaction with Mr. Chase and Ms. Rose. While Ms. Rose sat next to Anastasia and instructed her by demonstrating how to complete tasks, Mr. Chase remained standing and gazed in the direction of other students. In Dominique's case, we saw how Mr. Bryant's treatment of the basketballs signaled to her a high level of disrespect and disregard for her feelings. We also saw this trigger evident in the way Candace felt that Mr. Clark intentionally invaded her space to create a problem.

A key part of interacting with the young women was verbal communication, which was an area where many felt disrespected and triggered. Within verbal communication the young women felt disrespected when their teachers spoke in an elevated, dismissive, or patronizing tone, and when they made irrelevant and unnecessary comments that were insulting. The young women were particularly triggered when the comments that described their behavior and demeanors contradicted images they held of themselves. We saw this in Anastasia's interactions with Mr. Chase given her frustration when he made comments insinuating that she was not committed to her education. Though he may not have known, I knew that she put immense efforts towards being present everyday, both physically and mentally. We also saw verbal triggers within Dominique's interaction with Dr. Campbell. She felt particularly angry that he accused her of truancy and hurled threats of punishment and "consequences" when she knew that she had not done anything wrong. This trigger was also evident in Candace's reaction to the way Mr. Clark approached her when he wanted to address how she was talking about her grades.

Overall, when it came to interactional dynamics, both physical and verbal, the young women were triggered when they felt that their teachers were not operating according to the

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golden rule of treating and respecting their students how they themselves want to be treated and respected.

Trigger Two: Perceived Differential Treatment

In many cases, the young women were also triggered by perceived differential treatment, particularly in the area of behavioral monitoring and correction. When the young women felt they were being targeted and ambushed by their teachers, they hopped into defense mode and reacted in a way that they felt would address the unfair treatment, even if it was ultimately unproductive. The young women were astutely aware that there were different rules at JHS for different people in the school based on race and status (i.e. student versus staff) and were unwilling to accept the differential treatment quietly. Though they experienced the RC as an enjoyable space, they recognized that the frequency with which they were sent there did not match with the reality of student misbehavior in their classrooms. Though other students engaged in a similar set of behaviors, they did not face the same penalties as Black girls. Not only did they feel they were unfairly targeted for behavioral correction, the girls also felt they were treated differently when it came to their attempts to address their differential treatment. We saw this as per Candace's assessment of her interaction with Mr. Clark around her grades in that she felt another student who did not look like her would have been able to freely talk about their grades without it being a problem. We also saw this at work with Dominique as per her assessment during her interaction with Mr. Bryant and the basketballs in how she felt particularly singled out when he threw her basketballs out of the room. We also saw this in her interaction with Dr. Campbell in how offended she was by his immediate desire to give her consequences for being in the hallway without so much as confirming that she was actually loitering.

Trigger Three: Pre-Established Orientations

In other cases, the young women were triggered when they felt that their teachers relied on their history of interactions and created assumptions about what any future interactions would be like. They felt that when their teachers did this, they disregarded the person they had, or were trying to, become. The girls were extremely frustrated that they were unable to reconstruct their academic and social selves in productive ways that matched their new, more mature mindsets. They felt this way when their teachers were slow to help them during class, were unwilling to accommodate reasonable academic requests, assumed negative intent in their behaviors, and perverted their positive help-seeking behaviors and agentic orientations into something negative. We saw this trigger most clearly with Candace as she expressed her feelings that Mr. Chase kept treating her like she was the same person from the prior year, but also in Anastasia's frustration with two blocked efforts to procure make-up work on account of her teachers' assumption that she had been willfully and intentionally missing their classes.

Trigger Four: Academic Neglect

Lastly, Black girls in JHS were triggered to act explosively when they perceived their teachers lacked the desire to provide them with academic support and care that was needed, and deserved, for them to attain academic success. As in the quote from Candace in the first chapter, some girls felt that their teachers were intentionally trying to sabotage them by not providing them with adequate support. They took as evidence, the moments when teachers did not maintain a productive classroom work environment, use instructional techniques that matched their learning styles, provide additional assistance when requested, grade their work in a timely manner, provide them with access to makeup work, or speak to them in a way that evidenced a belief in their capacity to be successful. When the young women felt that their teachers were not attending to their academic needs or responding to their requests for help, it pushed them to act in ways that may have been outside of the normative "student" identity (driven by the NDN

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model) that had been established at JHS. We saw this feeling of academic neglect surface in Anastasia's interaction with Mrs. Simpson around the "lipstick" factory assignment where she had requested assistance but yet ended up completing the assignment incorrectly. We saw this with Dominique when she felt called to act on behalf of Candace when Mr. Clark failed to ensure that she was able to present her work without inappropriate interruptions from peers. We also saw this trigger in action with Candace in the difficult interactions she had with the principal and the counselor around fixing her schedule.

Bombs and the Importance of Context

At this point, one might ask, how do I know that the Black girls were in fact being triggered to enact their identities in the manner that they did? I know that they were triggered because in my role as restorative liaison within the RC and leadership of *RISE*, I was able to create opportunities for them to enact their identities in ways that were not consistent with the school officials' imaginations. I do not deny that the girls with whom I worked were capable of enacting their identities in ways that aligned with the teacher-produced characterizations. On occasion, I witnessed extreme displays of negative emotions and aggression. I had interactions with girls who were intensely angry and frustrated with their teachers and who, in that moment, had no desire to comply with classroom policies. However, the interactions I had with them outside of dealing with their relationships with their teachers showed me that they were *also* capable of enacting their identities in ways that contradicted the teachers' constructions. The traits that the teachers believed were inherent qualities, in fact, were not. This raises an important question: what drove the way Black girls enacted their identities?

Given that the school officials and I were working with the same young women, the context they were in becomes critical in understanding what motivated their decisions around the

enactment of their identities. Sociocultural theory helps us to understand that choices around identity performance are not unconstrained. In fact, they are a response, whether conscious or not, to the relational dynamics and stimuli embedded within the contexts in which individuals find themselves (Nasir, McLaughlin & Jones, 2009; Penuel & Wretsch, 1994). What the analysis revealed, is that the institutional context, whether for good or for bad, was driving the inclination around the choices the young women made when it came to enacting their identities. For the girls in my study, when the context was "right", they enacted their identities such they were charming, easy going, funny individuals. By the "right" context, I mean a context that: supported them in reconstructing their academic and social identities to represent a more mature and focused engagement within school; treated them with respect, subjected them to a consistent set of rules; allowed them to speak about their school experiences openly and honestly without the threat of retribution; allowed them to be silly and joyful; and affirmed the blessings and adversities that define the realities of living in a Black body in US society. Under these conditions, which were present in the RC and *RISE*, they were more likely to perform their identities in ways that were pleasant and productive. Within these spaces, the young women were a pleasure to be around. They were cheerful, laid back, and had a sense of humor about nearly everything. They were courteous and able to work collaboratively with their peers to complete group activities and projects. They demonstrated their leadership abilities both in facilitating the activities within *RISE* for their peers, but also in taking ownership of their own academic lives. They were confident in their ability to be successful and passionate about turning their academic performance around.

However, when the girls were in the "wrong" contexts where they felt disrespected, they enacted their identities in less productive ways. When they were in classrooms where teachers

consistently mistreated them, both physically and verbally, and subjected them to lower

expectations and higher amounts of exclusion, they became less pleasant to be around. When

they felt that they were in contexts that challenged their humanity by perverting their academic

strengths into weaknesses, and demonized even valid displays of emotion, they were not apt to

enact their identities in the way they did in the RC and *RISE*. Instead, the young women "blew

up" and responded with anger, aggression, a lack of engagement with their courses, and non-

compliance. Though these responses were maladaptive and did little, if anything at all, to

promote and support their academic success, it likely did help the girls to protect their sense of

self-worth and autonomy within that space (Robinson & Ward, 1991).

"Bomb-like" Behavior as a Protective Mechanism: Black Girls' Search for Respect

  The counterproductive mechanisms that the Black girls utilized to respond to the

disrespect within their contexts, have primarily been discussed within scholarship that ties the

developmental needs literature with Black boys' display of hyper masculinity within schools.

Scholars of adolescent development help us to understand that all adolescents have a need to feel

respected and valued by others. They argue that during adolescence, young people search for

validation and acceptance as they pursue a deeper sense of personal identity (Cunningham,

Swanson, & Hayes; 2013). Scholars examining Black boys' school experiences have most

substantially documented how this developmental need of adolescents gets articulated through

their discussions of hyper masculinity as a coping mechanism amongst the young men. This

literature argues that Black boys experience high levels of racism and discrimination from the

very beginning moment of their lives, which contributes to a particular vulnerability in their need

for recognition, and leads to a hypersensitivity within contexts that devalue and disrespect them

(Cassidy & Stevenson, 2008; Cunningham, et al., 2013). Scholars argue that when Black boys

find themselves in high stress contexts where they are mistreated and subjected to disparaging

comments about their identities, they cope with their feelings of anger by exhibiting hyper

masculine facades characterized by aggression, feigned invincibility, callousness, and non-

compliance (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2008; Cunningham, et al., 2013; Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani,

& Seaton, 2004; Thomas & Stevenson, 2003). Spencer, Fegeley, Harpalani, and Seaton (2004)

maintain that this particular reaction to high stress environments is a form of "reactive coping" in

which the young men act in the moment without consideration of the costs of their actions, rather

than thoughtfully and purposely employing problem solving skills. Though these authors state

that reactive coping may in the long run lead to increased encounters with the very stressors from

which they are seeking relief, Thomas and Stevenson (2003) maintain that the display of hyper

masculine attitudes become one way for the young men to "mollify [the] social maltreatment"

and "preserve feelings of self-worth and self-respect" (Thomas & Stevenson, 2003, p. 172).

These authors suggest that it is the young men's way of evoking respect from others when they

feel as though it cannot be achieved as effectively through other orientations or courses of action.

Overall, this literature posits that when considering the developmental period of adolescence,

Black male students resist being dehumanized in ways that result in behaviors that may not

necessarily facilitate a productive academic outcome, but nevertheless self-protective and self-

concept promoting.

Implicitly, this literature suggests Black boys' anger and subsequent displays of

aggression, are due to a *particular* need for respect and recognition given their gender identity.

However, the Black girls in JHS also developed feelings of anger in response to feeling devalued

and disrespected, that manifested in aggressive and noncompliant behavior. This raises questions

about the interpretation of a need for respect and recognition amongst Black youth as gendered

and uniquely contributing to Black *boys'* counterproductive behaviors in school. Though there

are undoubtedly nuanced differences in the manner in which young Black men and women construct the notion of respect, and what they will take as evidence of its presence, it is clear that within JHS, Black girls were also driven by a need to be recognized in one form or another. As the young women recounted the frustrations and tensions that emerged within the relationships they had with teachers and other school officials, they made it clear that a paramount concern was not being afforded the respect they felt they were owed. Thus, it stands to reason that when Black youth to engage in aggressive responses within school, it is less about gender than it is about a human need to be respected, which is consistent with the developmental literature cited earlier. What *does* become gendered is how school officials frame and respond to this need when present in Black boys versus Black girls.

Respect is a Human Need: The Role of Deference and Respect in Traditional Teaching Identities

Not only did the girls' behaviors demonstrate a human need for recognition and respect, the other significant finding of this study is that the teachers were unable to see that the young women were triggered by their actions because they themselves were preoccupied with maintaining a teaching identity that was centered on deference to authority, and the very respect they were not giving to the young women. By all evidence, the teachers were committed to Freire's (1968) notion of the traditional teacher identity that he positioned as likely to emerge within societies—like the US—that were organized along varied lines of oppression. Though his construction is 50 years old, it still most accurately describes the way the professional teaching identity is imagined amongst teachers within the US, and by implication, the extent to which student behaviors must evidence deference to the person within the position. Freire wrote that teachers traditionally see their role as one where:

(a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;

(b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;

(c) the teacher talks and the students listen — meekly;

(d) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

(e) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;

(f) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it.

Within Freire's construct, the teacher expects to be bestowed with automatic, unearned respect for their knowledge and for their position as the leader of the classroom space. The student's place was to be passive and compliant at all times. If the student was not, they would be subjected to disciplinary sanctions at the teacher's will. At no point is the student's perspective, learning needs, or preferences as important as their ability to be compliant with the teacher's wishes.

Analysis of the RC referrals revealed that a Freirean teaching identity rooted in student compliance was operating within JHS. Roughly 75% of the referrals to the RC were because teachers perceived Black girls to engage with them in ways that demonstrated noncompliance with the established classroom order. This was evidenced within the open-ended space on the referral forms that accompanied the girls during their visits, when the teachers overwhelmingly indicated that the reason for their referral was because the girls were being "insubordinate" and "disrespectful". These categories were culturally coded and clearly situated a lack of compliance as the primary issue rather than possible other concerns relating to safety or the learning environment, which also could have been addressed within the RC. The teachers labeled the girls insubordinate and disrespectful when they engaged in minor misbehavior, such as unsanctioned

use of electronics, tardiness, and talking during the lesson, or when they engaged in more serious misbehavior such as a verbal altercation with the teacher. The range of possible behaviors that were read as insubordinate when Black girls engaged in them (but not so when other students did), demonstrated the intensity in which teachers expected Black girls to defer to their authority.

Analysis of formal and informal conversations with the teachers also revealed the way a Freirean teaching identity was at work within JHS. During these conversations, many teachers felt like Mrs. Mahoney (see Chapter five), when she stated that she could not imagine treating her old K-12 teachers, the way the Black girls treated her. Just like in the Freirean model, the teachers in JHS expected students to accept the existing authority relations where the teacher did the teaching and the students did the learning via content and strategies that the teacher deemed appropriate. Students were expected to accept the content and teaching strategies as is and request no changes. This was evidenced given the frustration teachers expressed when the young women refused to accept their presumably powerless position and actively looked for ways to undermine them to gain control in the classroom. They became bothered and defensive when Black girls expressed opinions that intimated that their teaching strategies were ineffective and unable to meet their needs as students. Moreover, they problematized the agency that Black girls asserted which signaled their desire for them to remain in a powerless position, even if it meant they would not have access to the critical academic resources they were attempting to secure. Also evident within conversations with teachers was that they expected students to be meek and unassuming in their interactions. This was clear given the ways they situated Black girls' displays of emotion as problematic because it was highly visible and aggressive in nature. Additionally, the conversations revealed that the teachers held tight to the Freirean notion that students were to accept that it was the teacher's right to discipline students when they failed to

comply. This was evident in their expression of frustration over Black girls' "explosive" reactions to what they believed were reasonable disciplinary consequences given noncompliant behavior. Overall, what might be the most significant way the teachers in JHS embodied the Freirean model of teaching identity was that in expecting Black girls to be compliant, they minimized the importance of their perspectives, learning needs, and preferences. Because they embodied a Frierean-like teaching identity, the teachers in JHS became so focused on compliance and respect from students that they did not consider the potential of their own behaviors to serve as a trigger for Black girls' less productive enactments of their identities.

Black Girls' Disrespect as Threatening: The Intersection of Race and Gender

Importantly, during classroom observations within JHS, I observed other students engaging in similar ways to Black girls. Yet, their behaviors were not acknowledged as noncompliant and they were not dismissed from the classroom as often as were the Black girls. It seemed as though there was something about the Black girls that was particularly troubling to the teachers that contributed to their experiencing a higher level of offense when the girls did not assent to them in the ways they perceived to be automatic given their position as a teacher. One reason for this heightened level of offense may be that the Black girls failed to adhere to the mainstream, middle class, White feminine standards that the teachers may have expected them to embody. Scholars have long revealed how White, feminine norms become embedded within teachers' visions of the ideal student, male or female, despite the fact that they are culturally biased (Blake, et al., 2011; Fordham, 1993; Morris 2007). While boys, are imagined to be incorrigible and obstinate by nature, young women are supposed to embody a femininity whereby they are compliant, polite, responsive to direction, and amenable to influence (Hill-Collins, 2000). Feminine "norms" suggest that a girl will adopt a passive demeanor, refrain from voicing strong opinions, and defer to existing authority relations—all qualities the teachers

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expected of students given their Frierean teaching identities. Thus, in JHS, while boys (Black and White) were positioned to receive a pass if they acted in ways that did not meet the teachers' expectations of compliance, Black girls, by virtue of their gender, were positioned as fully capable of engaging with their teachers in ways that met their desires for respect and deference.

Although on some level, the teachers' heightened expectations for the level of deference that Black girls would display within their interactions recognized their female gender, overall their characterizations of the young women's socio-emotional identities positioned them as not feminine or women at all. This was most evident when Mr. Chase compared them to the fictional character of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a male trope, which situated them as monster and inhuman. This simultaneous exclusion from femininity and humanity is something that may be unique to their experiences as Black girls. For example, in Ferguson's (2002) study on the school experiences of Black boys in an urban elementary school, teachers often suggested that the boys were engaging in some problematic, altered form of masculinity. To some extent, they treated masculinity as if it operated according to a scale of sorts. Even if it was ultimately perverted, by keeping it in the realm of masculinity, the young men were still afforded some level of recognition as men. The teachers in JHS however, appeared to want to exclude the Black girls from the category of feminine altogether by problematizing the aspects of their womanhood that conflicted with the White, middle-class, feminine norms they were likely most familiar with. This designation of the young women as not women, had implications for the ways their academic identities were conceived of. positioning Black girls as not feminine also helped to position them as less than ideal students.

Ultimately, because the teachers assented to a definition of teaching identity where compliance was key, when the Black girls were perceived to enact their identities in a manner

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that did not demonstrate a desire to be compliant, the teachers felt their status (as teaching professionals) was threatened. Scholars have highlighted the ways teachers articulate feeling physically threatened by Black boys' noncompliance. When it came to Black girls' noncompliant behaviors in JHS, the teachers felt threat regarding the safety of their *position,* rather than their *person*. Rather than viewing the girls' actions as just "bad behavior", they processed their behavior as an intentional assault on their positionality as a teaching professional. I acknowledge that part of what could have been driving this particular threat around Black girls was their underperformance and the intense institutional pressure the teachers were under to raise student achievement. This likely heightened the teachers' desires, to be respected in their role because they imagined the only way students would achieve greater success was if they adhered to the academic plan their teachers, as professionals, had created. Even in the midst of acknowledging this however, the fact is that other students were underperforming and engaging in noncompliant behavior but did not elicit this same threat to the teachers' professional status as what occurred with Black girls.

As a result of feeling particularly threatened in their position, the teachers became solely focused on reducing the threat that Black girls posed more than they focused on supporting the young women's academic pursuits. As was evident in the narratives from the Black girls, in teachers' attempts to reestablish the respect they felt *they* were owed, they engaged in actions that the girls interpreted as failing to provide the respect *they*, as students, deserved. The teachers' laser focus on getting compliance and respect from Black girls ultimately set the stage for the negative micro-interactions that occurred. Unfortunately, the teachers did not recognize that the respect they so desperately wanted to see from Black girls was not present because they were unable to recognize it as a fundamental human need.

In situating the significance of their failure to recognize the impact of their actions as triggers for Black girls, I return to the question I asked at the end of Chapter 7: What do these Black girls' responses to their teachers tell us about the classroom environments that some find themselves in? In referring back to the metaphor of the canary in the mine, the short answer is that these classroom environments are in some way toxic. Many of the Black girls with whom I worked, but not all, were in the most vulnerable position in the school because they were underperforming yet were over-disciplined. Thus, they were canary-like in their unique ability to reveal the potential dysfunction and harm that was occurring in the mine (i.e. their classrooms) because they had sensitivities to the environment and how it was structured that others who were not in as vulnerable position would have had. Given their vulnerabilities, Black girls' extreme reactions became the first evidence that the teaching dispositions and strategies, that are often taken for granted, need to be revisited. Their reactions suggested that maybe what was happening that precipitated these micro-interactions was not good for any student, and with time, would affect even the most invincible student who had not yet been affected. Unfortunately, in the absence of students acting out in protest against these teaching dispositions and strategies who were not as vulnerable, and already situated as a problem, the inherent assumptions within the teaching identities that the teachers brought to bear in their interpretations and constructions of Black feminine identities became normalized and unquestioned.

Implications

Research Implications

This study revealed several implications for how, and what, we research regarding Black girls in US schools.

Methodological Implications

In speaking to how we conduct research focused on illuminating the experiences of Black girls, this study highlighted several promising methodological strategies, tools, and orientations that enhanced my ability to assess their complex realities. One particular methodological strategy was listening to the young women "speak" on their school experiences through multiple endeavors rather than relying on the traditional interview format. Admittedly, my initial plan was to rely primarily on individual semi-structured interviews as the primary data source for garnering the girls' experiences. Fortunately, that did not work out and I was forced to imagine and invest in other mechanisms that would facilitate their ability to communicate what was happening within their school lives on a daily basis. Ultimately, I utilized dialogue, group discussion, and artistic endeavors such as musical art, improvisational theatre, and visual art, as a means for the young women to express their perceptions of their relationships with school officials, and their school experiences more generally. Given that young people are not often given the opportunity to express themselves and their vantage on their experiences, the use of multiple mechanisms provided the girls with different opportunities to communicate their perspectives in a variety of ways. While the dialogues and discussion allowed the young women to verbally speak about their experiences as individuals while also drawing connections with members of the group, the artistic endeavors provided the opportunity to move beyond the verbal and express themselves through material and kinesthetic forms. In many ways the artistic endeavors allowed the girls' experiences to come alive; things that were difficult to convey in words in response to a question, were captured in drawings, reenactments of situations, facial expressions, and body language. This helped me to understand their experiences in more elaborate ways than what would have been conveyed in a single, or possibly even a series of, interviews structured according to the traditional question/answer

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format. Thus, as researchers design studies intended to capture the perceptions of Black girls on their school experiences, they should consider incorporating multiple opportunities for the young women to express their perceptions. While this recommendation may appear to some to be a call for triangulation, it is less about securing complementary perspectives on one issue as it is about utilizing varied tools to elucidate the dynamics of perspectives within a single individual or group of participants.

When deciding what type of opportunities I would provide to Black girls to express their perspectives, I utilized a methodological tool I conceptualize as culturally responsive data collection. In the earlier conversation where I recommended scholars provide multiple opportunities to the young women to express themselves, I did not reveal how I came to understand which particular opportunities would be useful. This is critical information because the process of determining what opportunities you use is just as important as the opportunities themselves. Not every project with a group of Black girls will benefit from the use of creative, artistic endeavors as a means of data collection (though I believe many might). In my case, after scrapping the plans for interviews, and deciding to allow *RISE* to take whatever form the girls wanted it to take, I carefully observed their facilitation of the space. I looked for the type of activities they were creating, listened to how they asked questions during discussions, and focused on how they typically engaged with one another. I used this information as a means of learning, from the girls themselves, what types of activities sparked their interests and were the most successful at drawing out their perspectives. Based on this information I determined that utilizing the artistic endeavors could replicate their facilitation of the group in a way that would also enhance the data collection. I had no idea that skits and reenactments would be such a useful tool with this *particular* group of young women until I had been involved with them and

had investigated their own facilitation of group spaces. I am not arguing that any one of the methods I used were novel; what I am arguing is the importance of learning about the specific group of students you are studying and employing methods that match their interests and preferred forms of expression. Though scholars often talk about culturally responsive teaching within the classroom (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014) it is rare that we talk about culturally responsive research within educational spaces. The current study demonstrates the value that can be gained when scholars conduct research that is responsive to their particular participants. Similar to culturally responsive teaching, I argue that culturally responsive data collection takes into account who the students are and uses their cultural frames as the starting point.

A third methodological tool that supported my ability to access the complexities of the young women's experiences, was the student, co-facilitated group, *RISE*. When the opportunity to create a group space for young Black women within JHS was first brought to me, my first reaction was to create a space that would explicitly further the goals of the project. As I thought about what the space would be, I imagined it in ways that would primarily serve as a site to further my research agenda as I had pre-determined it. Because I would be spending a lot of time facilitating this group, I initially thought that if it was not facilitated in a way that would explicitly meet my research needs, it would be "wasted time". However, as I reflected upon what I had learned about the young women's experiences, and the Black feminist thought that undergirded my work, I was reminded that it was critical for the research to first and foremost serve the needs of the young women in order to enact real change in their lives. It became clear to me that the group space was an opportunity to serve their needs in a real and tangible way that had to come before any research goal I had set. Thus, the primary focus of *RISE* became to create a space where the young women could let their guards down and experience a freedom that was

not present in other contexts in the school. The culture of freedom was established primarily by allowing them to co-facilitate the group. Though I helped to provide some of the structure, the girls largely determined what the space looked like, felt like, and what activities occurred. Conducting the group in this manner meant acknowledging that it may very well have ended up that the work of the group was only marginally relevant to my research questions. In the end, this decision around the purpose and facilitation of the group positively influenced the kind, and depth, of data I was able to collect.

Allowing the young women to control the activities of the group provided insight into what was on their minds when it came to their school lives that may not have surfaced during an interview where I led the conversation and had pre-imagined topics of interest. It provided me with an opportunity to observe how they demonstrated their identities in a space that was structured differently than their classrooms. Though I could not have anticipated it, it also increased their desires and motivations to participate in the study because they felt that they would be able to do so on their own terms. As this study demonstrated, the young women were often punished for their attempts to be autonomous and self-directed. As such, they felt they needed to be prepared to defend themselves at all times when interacting with adults in the school. The co-facilitation of the group allowed them to express their autonomy and self-direction, which increased their level of comfort in the space, and lowered some of guards they had put up within their interactions with other adults in the school. Because the group space provided them the chance to enact their autonomy as young women without any repercussions, they desired to consistently engage in the group space and provide insight into what was happening in their school lives.

Finally, what may be the most important methodological decision that supported my acquisition of data, from both school officials and students, was that I was upfront about my priority being to work in the best interest of the girls. When I entered JHS, my identity as a researcher included an explicit desire to use my position to actively work to better the experiences of Black girls. Though there is scholarly work that argues for researchers to take on an activist position in their work and consider ways to reduce the marginalization that the students in their studies experience (Few et al., 2003; Gitlin, 2014), it is often interpreted as actions that happen after the research is complete. That is the researcher conducts their research and primarily considers how justice can be served in the written document that details the findings and in how the results are shared with the participants. Rarely, are scholars encouraged to reflect on how they orient themselves in the field and use their position in real time to promote equity and justice for the students with whom they work, with the exception of the small group of scholars utilizing critical methods (Carspecken, 1996; Georgiou, & Carspecken, 2002; Madison, 2005). In this study, I did not wait until the end, after I had gotten what I needed, to think about justice; the research work happened as I intervened within the Black girls' inequitable experiences. This is not to say that this dissertation is an intervention study in disguise, because it is not. The point I want to make is that my prioritizing the needs of the young women, and actually making moves to address their inequity, positioned me in the field in such a way that filtered the types of information I received. Because both school officials and students could see in my actions that I really wanted to help the Black girls in the school, they in turn developed a deeper level of trust with me. When it came to the teachers, it led to their engaging with me as a professional partner rather than an outsider. This influenced the frequency in which we engaged in informal conversations, the type of information they shared, and their

willingness to allow me to observe their classrooms. With the students, this trust led to a sense of safety within their interactions with me that allowed them to open up about their experiences and view me as a supportive resource. The awareness of my desire to help increased the number of interactions I had with Black girls across grade and performance levels, the nature of the information I learned from them, and the success of *RISE* as a source of empowerment. While in that past I have used external rewards, such as food or money, as a way to motivate participants, there was something particularly powerful that the motivation of the participants was driven by their recognition of my genuine desire to help. Thus, as a means to cultivate more rigorous data collection, I encourage researchers working with Black girls and women specifically, but other marginalized groups of students more generally, to: (a) cultivate a genuine desire to combat injustice in schools and other educational spaces, and (b) to act upon this commitment during data collection.

Future Directions

This study revealed that the institution was highly agentic in constructing the inequities that Black girls were experiencing in JHS. Future research on their educational experiences should move beyond examinations of their experiences as simply a function of the identities that they bring into schools with them and how schools react and respond, toward a deeper examination of how their experiences are structured by institutional policies, practices, and the beliefs and actions of their agents. Schools are doing more than reacting and responding; they are creating and envisioning who students are and what they are capable of in ways that have implications for the student's academic and socio-emotional well being. More scholarly work should be conducted that explicitly focuses on examining the institutional contexts in which Black girls are embedded.

In addition, the findings from this study calls for a re-imagining of the ways teachers' position themselves relative to students and vice versa. The intensity of the negative characterizations that teachers held of Black girls seemed to result from their adoption of teaching identities that treated respect as sole property of the teacher, and feeling threatened in this imagined teacher identity when the girls would not defer. Though there is work on how teachers position students given their social identities and academic performance (Pringle, Brkich, Adams, West-Olatunii, C., & Archer-Banks, 2012; Sosa & Gomez, 2012; Yoon, 2008), research on the ways teachers position their own professional identities vis-a-vie how they position their students, is rare (see: Reeves, 2009, for an example on how one teacher negotiated his professional identity through his assignment of identity positions to his English Language Learners; Hyland, 2000, for an example of how White teachers imagined their role as teachers given how they positioned their Black students). This area is critical to explore because the positions teachers adopt carry not only character attributes, knowledge, and authority for themselves, but also, position students in ways that allow, limit, or deny their identities and rights as students (Sosa & Gomez, 2012). Future research should determine the factors that are critical to how teachers position their identity relative to the positions they assign Black girls and the role that this positioning plays in their disproportionate discipline and academic underperformance.

Practice Implications

Given the findings of the study, the most important question that remains is, how do we get school officials to interact with Black girls in ways that allow them to bring forth productive identities in schools?

First, this study made obvious that in order to improve the educational experiences of Black girls, school officials have to want to build their capacity around working with these young women. The school officials at JHS removed some Black girls from their class near instantly and demonstrated very limited efforts to solve the problems that emerged. While my assistance provided a short-term solution to the issues they were immediately facing, it was nothing more than a band-aid. Because the teachers rarely worked directly with the girls to solve problems, they were rarely in a position to build their capacity to work with them on the days I was not there, and in the future when I would no longer be volunteering in the school. While I was viewed as the expert, the school officials seemed content to remain novices. There is evidence that when teachers have a limited skillset to work with students who do not share their backgrounds, they cling to their implicit bias (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This was evident in JHS in the teachers' constructions of Black feminine identities that were reminiscent of the larger, negative societal narratives that are told within other social institutions. Though this bias may be unintentional, it is still harmful. Thus, if school officials desire to be able to call forth positive identities amongst Black girls, and ultimately reduce negative micro-interactions, they have to be willing to actively build their capacity to work with them on a one-on-one level.

Second, in building their capacity, it will be important for them to focus on forming relationships. I did not see the girls that the teachers often talked about. When the girls were with me, they did not yell, curse, or simply walk away from me or from a space I led. They were not aggressive in their tone or actions. In fact, they laughed, were tender hearted, respectful, followed my directions, and were pleasant to be around. I received a tremendous amount of joy from being around them. Despite beliefs to the contrary, I did not see these kinds of identity performances simply because I was a Black woman and shared a racial and gender identity with

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the girls. I actively worked to create relationships with them where I learned about their personal lives in and out of school, listened to their concerns, and did not judge or insult them for decisions they had made in the past. I established deep, mutually respectful connections that set the stage for them to enact their identities in positive. School officials, Black and White, should privilege these kinds of ways of engaging in relationship with their Black girls as a means of supporting them and encouraging positive enactments of their identities.

Thirdly, teachers have to ensure that they are engaging in their professional responsibilities to hold high expectations for the young women and teach them with rigor. Contrary to the narratives that the teachers espoused, the Black girls in JHS *wanted* to learn. They wanted to do well in their classes and receive their diploma because they believed in the power of education to secure them fulfilling adult lives. Teachers have a professional responsibility to respect and support their students' desires to learn and be academically successful. Teachers need to provide Black girls with rigorous work and expose them to the highest expectations (Delpit, 2006). They need to attend to the learning needs that Black girls identify and ensure that they are welcomed into, and not excluded from the classroom space, when they make pleas for academic support. Rather than feel as though they are being intentionally sabotaged, Black girls need to know that their teachers are willing to support them, academically and otherwise.

Fourth, a part of engaging their professional responsibilities means that school officials need to be able to recognize the roles that they are playing in producing the very identities they position as problematic. In the current study, given their lack of knowledge about young Black women, one might expect that the teachers in JHS would have been willing to acknowledge that they were probably making mistakes that impacted the micro-interactions that occurred.

However, they were not. Instead, the teachers shifted the entire blame for the situations on the Black girls themselves by creating narratives that positioned the negativity as a natural consequence of their dispositions and demeanors. Teachers cannot continually create narratives that leave out their actions, while simultaneously positioning the Black girls as the ones who continue to shoulder the weight of the negative interactions. There were several instances during this study when the teachers engaged in questionable behaviors that could easily be identified as unprofessional—Mrs. Taylor's dehumanization of Egypt by refusing to use her name (Chapter 4), Mrs. Simpson's bad mouthing of Candace during the staff meeting (Chapter 5), and Mr. Bryant's treatment of Dominique's personal property (Chapter 9). Even if the teachers had good intentions driving their actions, they have to be willing to interrogate their own practices and ask themselves "how did my behavior impact my student? What could I have done differently?" Good intentions don't preclude you from making decisions that negatively impact students (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

This ability to be self-reflective becomes increasingly important for school officials who work with adolescent youth who are in a critical period of development. Although the young women's reactions to situations were often maladaptive and demonstrated a need for them to develop better ways of processing their emotions and expressing their feelings, what cannot be lost is that these were teenagers who were works in progress. School officials cannot expect teenagers to have the complex skills of resolving interpersonal conflict that they posses as mature, trained professionals with high school in their rearview. It is foolish, and frankly unfair, to expect for the young women at 15, 16, or 17, to match the maturity level of school officials who may be 28, 38, 48, or beyond. Often times within these micro-interactions with the teachers and Black girls, I felt like I was the only adult caught between two kids. However, only the girls

had the right to be a kid *because they were kids*. The teachers on the other hand, had an obligation to respond within these interactions with adult level maturity, and many times they did not. Within these micro-interactions, rather than place blame, school officials need to teach the young women the skills they need to more productively navigate the situation utilizing patience, humility, compassion, and understanding. While the students learn these skills and practice using them, it is the school officials' professional obligations as an educator to be respectful of their growth; to acknowledge the fact that it will not be complete all at once and that there will be moments of giants leaps forward and several steps back. It is their professional responsibility to not act in ways that use students' growth against them and that fail to understand that growing in this manner is a process that *all* adolescents go through. It is their responsibility to assist them during this natural process, rather than penalize them. Simply put, school officials have a professional responsibility to be the bigger person.

Most importantly, White teachers (who comprise the majority of the US teaching force) and school support staff, have to be willing to address the "elephant in the room" when it comes to race. Within JHS, there was a palpable dissonance that resulted from the all White teaching staff and the Black students, because the staff seemed afraid to acknowledge the realities of how race mattered within their everyday interactions. While some teachers at various times made an effort to incorporate the history and experiences of Black people into their lessons, very little thought occurred amongst the teaching staff as a whole, about how the racial differences played out within their interactions. This led to misinterpretations of the students' dispositions and demeanors in ways that resulted in tense situations and an increased level of participation in the disciplinary regime. Ignoring racial differences will not make them go away. It is critical that all teachers, but White teachers most specifically (given the teacher-student divide), develop

cultural competencies in relation to Black students that would contribute to a deeper respect and knowledge of their culture. If someone is not willing to "get to know" Black students on a level that would support an understanding of the cultural foundation that undergirds their academic and socio-emotional identities, then teaching is not a suitable career for them.

Conclusion

Within the US, education is imagined as the key to securing the American dream of lifelong prosperity and happiness. However, this dissertation has revealed that Black girls are not experiencing equity when they walk through their school doors. Instead, they walk into toxic environments where the very people entrusted to teach them, position their identities, academic and otherwise, in ways that will only ensure the circumscription of their educational and life chances. Though these young women want to succeed and want to "win" in the game of education, the results are nearly fixed such that securing a victory is nearly impossible. As a Black educator, researcher, and mother of a young Black girl, I want better for Black girls and women because they deserve our best. Schools can do better, and they must. In conclusion, I hope this dissertation serves as a call to action for those with a stake in the schooling of Black girls and young women. Any system that marginalizes and discriminates against the most vulnerable of our population is flawed and must be fixed. It is time to focus on the needs of these girls and young women as a priority so that we can create school environments that actually support the learning and well being of all students.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RISE Insight Form

Name:_____

Please indicate your role in the school:

_____Teacher   _____Administration

_____Para-Professional   _____Support Services

_____ Other (Please indicate_____)

You are being asked to provide insight on what you think some of the academic and socio-emotional challenges are for African American girls in this school. Your responses will help me (Alaina Neal) to create a curriculum for an in-school support group for these young women called RISE. The goal of RISE is to help the young women develop strategies to more productively navigate their high school context so that they can be academically successful and demonstrate leadership at New Tech and in their communities. This group will accept students from all grade levels.

Below please indicate what you believe are the most pressing challenges within the African American female student population that you would hope RISE would address—please indicate if any of the challenges are grade specific.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Below, please identify any student(s) who you think would benefit from participating in the group. Please include (in brief) your rationale for nominating the student(s).

Student Name: _____

Why did you nominate this student?

_____
_____

Student Name: _____
Why did you nominate this student?

_____
_____

Student Name: _____
Why did you nominate this student?

_____
_____

Student Name: _____
Why did you nominate this student?

_____
_____
_____

THANK YOU!

APPENDIX B

RISE Flyer

RISE

FIRST MEETING OCTOBER 29TH IN THE RESTORATIVE CENTER!

RISE is an empowerment group for young Black women that meets once a week during lunch and connections. Members of the group will be offered a chance to engage in discussion and activities around their school experiences and out of school lives. This group is led BY the students, FOR the students.

- Are YOU a young Black woman at YNT?
- Do YOU want to be a part of network of young women supporting one ▮▮▮▮er to reach their academic and personal goals?
- Are YOU a creative and focused person who likes to have fun?

...Then check us out at our first meeting!

Questions? See Ms. Alaina Neal (or email her at alainanw@umich.edu)

APPENDIX C

Interview Guides

STUDENT INTERVIEW 1: THE PARTICIPANT'S BACKGROUND

This interview aims to capture background information about the participant that will establish a general frame around the context in which the participant is being raised and general perceptions regarding education, school, and their future.

    I.   Personal/familial background

        a. Tell me about your family?

        b. Who would you say is raising you?

        c. How would you describe your relationship with your family?

        d. What are the most important lessons you have learned from your family?

    II.   Perceptions regarding education, school, & future

        a. What do you think it means to make it in America?

        b. What do you want to do after graduating high school? What are your career goals?

        c. How will you make this (the answer to b) a reality?

        d. Do you have goals for the kind of family you envision having?

        e. Why did you select your current school?

        f. What do you like about your school?

        g. What don't you like about your school?

STUDENT INTERVIEW 2: PARTICIPANT'S IDENTITY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

This interview aims to capture the participant's views on themselves, their social identities, and the life experiences and interactions that have influenced the construction of these views. Through this interview I will ascertain the salience of race and gender in their lives generally as a precursor to the discussion in interview three about how it functions in their school experiences.

III. Personal identity

    a. How would you describe yourself?

    b. Why did you use these particular words to describe yourself?

    c. What do you think it means to be Black/African American?

    d. What do you think it means to be a/an Black/African American girl?

IV. Identity development

    a. Has anyone ever talked to you about what it is like to be Black in America?

    b. Has anyone ever talked to you about what is like to be a woman in America? A Black woman in particular?

    c. Has there ever been a time when being a Black girl has been more or less important to you?

    d. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of being a Black girl as compared to other young people (i.e. Black boy, other races)?

    e. What do you think is unique about Black people? Black girls?

    f. Do you think Black girls have a harder time doing well in school?

    g.   Do you think Black girls have a harder time "making it" in America?

STUDENT INTERVIEW 3: SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

This interview aims to capture the participants' current school experiences and peer relationships. Through this interview I will ascertain the students' evaluation of their engagement, description of their school climate, and factors influencing their various levels of success. This interview will draw upon information learned in the second interview and will ascertain how the students feel their social identities matter in their school lives.

I. School experiences

    a. How would you describe your school to a new student on their very first day?

    b. What is a typical day like for you in your school?

    c. How much time would you say you spend on your homework?

    d. Are you involved in any activities in school outside of your required work? Which ones?

    e. How well would you say you are doing in school? What kinds of grades do you get?

f. What do you like about your school?

g. What don't you like about your school? What could the school do to make your experience better?

h. Have you ever struggled in school? Who do you turn to when you need help?

i. How do you get along with school administration, faculty, and staff?

j. Do you think that students are treated differently in your school?

k. Do you think that you are treated differently in any ways because you are a Black girl?

II. Peer relationships

a. What do you look for in a friend?

b. Who are your closest friends in and outside of the school?

c. Has your friendship group changed over time?

d. How do you friends help you in school?

e. Are your friends ever a distraction?

f. Do you and your friends ever talk about what race?

g. What do you and your friends do for fun?

APPENDIX D

RC Resources

Restorative Center Referral

Student Name: _____ Teacher/Staff Name: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____ Grade Level: 9   10   11   12

Choose One: Self Referred   Teacher Referred   Incident #1_____ #2_____ #3_____

*Interventions attempted today by the Teacher/Staff **BEFORE** sending student to RC*

	Restorative Questions 1-4 asked to student or Did you use any of the 3R's prompts? (Reinforce, Remind, Redirect)		When is the Teacher/Staff available to hold the Restorative Session with the Student? Day:_____ Time:_____
	Did you follow the Student Behavior Management Process?		For 2nd and 3rd same issues, did you refer to PBIS for strategies? http://www.pbisworld.com/

Summarize what happened?

What are your hoping for from this process?

Figure 9: Front of RC referral

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Student Behavior Management Process

School-wide Rules/Expectations

Observe and identify problem behavior

Is the behavior Staff, Restorative Center or Administration managed?

Administration Managed → Send to the main office

Staff managed

Restorative Center

Use the Restorative Questions

Did the behavior change?

NO → Contact Parent and/or advisor for support

YES → Send student back to class: notice and reward

Did the behavior change?

YES → (back to Send student)

NO → **SEND TO RC!**

Staff	Restorative Center	Administration
• Failure to be in one's assigned place • Inappropriate language • Calling out • Teasing • Ethnic, racial, homophobic slurs • Refusal to work • Invading personal space • Lying/giving false information • Cheating • Minor disruption • Minor aggression- grabbing items, pushing past someone • Unsafe or rough play • Misusing property- throwing or damaging items • Sleeping • Tardiness • Not bringing materials to class • Not following directions • Not completing homework • Report for misbehavior for substitute • Minor inappropriate electronic use (computers, phone, etc)	• Throwing objects not considered dangerous • Excessive talking or outbursts • Direct refusal of authority • Disrupting the educational process of others • Repetitive inappropriate language directed toward classmates or out loud in class • Acting out or not seriously involved in classroom responsibilities • Repeatedly engaging in the staff and RC managed behaviors • Repetitive hats/hoodies with blatant disrespect to staff	• Fighting • Dress Code • Bullying/Harassment • Truancy • Profanity directed toward the teacher • Smoking • Theft • Drugs or drug paraphernalia • Weapons • Vandalism • Sexual Harassment • Throwing dangerous objects • Credible threats

1. Fill out the pass and send to Restorative Center.

Staff determines if student is eligible for restorative center (lost privilege, within behavior guidelines, etc) — NO

YES → Staff conferences with student, calls parent, emails advisor, & documents visit.

Is the student willing to accept responsibility?

YES → Brief re-entry conference with teacher/class and back to learning

NO →

Figure 10: Back of RC referral

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Figure 11: Front of restorative questions card

Figure 12: Back of restorative questions card

RESTORATION CONFERENCES

STAFF--Staff serve three very important roles in the process. They function as facilitator, mediator and final decision-maker. As the facilitator the staff finds facts, ascertains if offenders are willing to accept responsibility, brings the community together and provides the appropriate environment for the process.

As the mediator the staff encourages appropriate use of the process while maintaining safety and security. During this process particular focus is placed on addressing and protecting the victims. Also the staff makes sure community harm is addressed.

As the final decision-maker the staff approves or disapproves of the decision made by the community based on its feasibility and appropriateness. When a different decision is needed, staff helps to facilitate this process.

OFFENDERS--The offenders(s) speak first during the Conference, telling what they have done wrong and explaining how they did it. After accepting responsibility for their behavior the offender(s) listen to the community tell how they were harmed. The last step is to agree to and perform a mutually (all parties) accepted restorative action.

COMMUNITY-Group members who were not offenders or directly victimized are part of the community. They listen to offender(s) and victim(s) share what they have to say. They share the harm done to the community and they help to decide on the restorative action and help to make sure it is completed.

VICTIM – The victim, will be given the opportunity to share their experience and feelings, if they choose to do so.

Figure 13: Restoration conferences by role

RESTORATION CONFERENCES

In the Justice System "Restorative Justice" is a model that focuses on helping victims, healing the harm done to the community and preparing the offender to return as part of the community. "Retributive Justice" is a model that focuses on punishing the offender ad removing them from the community, but does not speak much to victim needs or harm done to the community.

Our community has many violent, repeat offenders in their care who are often restricted/removed from the community as punishment for their offenses and left unprepared for the reintegration process that must take place. The "Restoration Conference" is a model developed to provide offenders with an opportunity to practice:

1) Making amends
2) Listening to victims feelings
3) Repairing damage and helping others within a community
4) Practice showing empathy
5) Practice constructively expressing themselves while learning useful/acceptable behaviors
6) Practice resolving issues
7)

The 'Restoration Conference' is an alternative to traditional discipline practices. Restoration Conferences are used when the responsible parties are willing to admit to and accept responsibility for their harmful behavior(s).

The goals of the Conference are to teach participants:

1) How to share and listen to bad feelings, concerns and problems
2) How to manage problems in a productive and socially acceptable manner
3) How to be responsible and accountable for actions
4) How to show empathy
5) To develop self-respect, respect for others and for the community

The objectives of the Restoration Conference are to learn and practice:

1) Expressing concerns
2) Responding to 'negative' talk from others
3) Responding to accusations, negative situations and how to prevent fights
4) Responding to group pressure and how to help others
5) Develop and employ corrective Actions; responding to failures
6) Acting as a responsible, caring community member
7) Gain knowledge/life skills and generalize to future situations(discuss & role play possible future situations)

Figure 13: Restoration conferences in the justice system

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RESTORATION CONFERENCES

The Restoration Conference is an interactive process designed as an alternative problem solving model that has restoring victims and rebuilding the community as its primary focus. It is to be used by youth and staff in situations when the offenders accept responsibility for their behaviors and agree to use the format for repairing the harm they have done. Victims have an opportunity to be heard and have their needs addressed. The offenders listen to victims and the other members of the community discuss their feelings and the harm the offenders have done. Offenders also learn and practice appropriate replacement behaviors. The goals are to help restore the victims and community and to help the offenders learn acceptable behaviors and develop qualities that will help him to return as a productive accepted member of the community (group).

In cases where the rules and procedures of the program do not allow for this process or the offenders are unwilling to accept responsibility for their behavior then other alternatives are employed. The conferences (meetings) are set up to help parties work with each other in order to repair harm and rebuild relationships. The victims and other members of the community are essential to this process. The goals are for the victims to be heard, youths to learn the power of expressing feelings appropriately and to develop confidence and character through making amends for harmful behaviors. The community also benefits through participating in and assisting the process of restoring members who have been harmed or those who have harmed others.

In this process the staff functions as the mediator with the responsibilities of; fact finding to ascertain what are the concerns, if the offenders are willing to accept responsibility and then to utilize the process. Then they monitor the actual meeting (Restoration Conference) to see that the process is used properly. A priority in this process is making sure that victims receive assistance. This is in contrast to the typical priority of punishing the offenders. The second priority of note is restoring the safety of the community. The offenders are responsible to victims and the community for the harm done. The victims and community, as stakeholders, share responsibility for rebuilding the community as partners/participants in the conference and the remainder of the process. The offenders will become more competent and have a better understanding as a result of this experience. *Staff skill in promoting and facilitating efforts toward rebuilding relationships is essential to the success of the process*. This may be a significant paradigm shift for some and staff will need energy, knowledge, practice, and to be skilled at redirecting. Staff must have PATIENCE. There may be efforts by youth to manipulate the process in order to circumvent responsibility but staff should expect this and respond with appropriate responses for 'limit testing' behaviors; while resisting the temptation to drop the process.

It is important in this process that victims and community are listened to and assisted. It is also important that offenders benefit by developing enhanced understanding and improved competency. This is to be accomplished by having them listen to the victims and community, having them complete restitution tasks and having them learn and practice acceptable replacement behaviors.

It should be added that, in this process, the offenders suffer no loss of status but their energies are entirely focused on the process until it is complete. When the offenders complete their tasks in a satisfactory manner they return to full normal status and participation in the community.

Figure 15: The process of restoration conferences

Restoration Conferences

In the justice system Restorative Justice is a model that focuses on victims and the harm done to the community. The traditional model (retributive) focuses on punishing the offenders but does not speak to victim needs or harm done to the community.

The Restoration Conference is an interactive process designed as an alternative problem solving model that has rebuilding the community as its primary focus. It is to be used by youth and staff in situations when the offenders accept responsibility for their behaviors and agree to use the format for repairing the harm they have done. Victims have an opportunity to be heard and have their needs addressed. The offenders listen to victims and the other members of the community discuss their feelings and the harm the offenders have done. Offenders also learn and practice appropriate replacement behaviors. The goals are to help restore the victims and community and to help the offenders learn acceptable behaviors and develop qualities that will help him/her to return as a productive accepted member of the community (group).

The goals for those involved in the "Restoration Conference"

Victim	Opportunity to be heard
	Learn to express feelings appropriately
	Empowerment and restoration
Offender	Learn and practice appropriate behaviors
	Return as accepted and productive member of community
	Build confidence and character through making amends
Community	Reinforce community norms and values
	Support and acceptance for both victim and offender

Staff have three very important roles in the process:

1) **Facilitator** – Staff find facts, ascertain if offenders are willing to accept responsibility, brings the community together, and provides the appropriate environment for the process.

2) **Mediator** – Encourage appropriate use of the process while maintaining safety for everybody, particularly the victim. Staff must ensure that community harm is addressed.

3) **Final Decision Maker** – Staff must approve or disapprove of the decision made by the community based on its feasibility and appropriateness.

Figure 16: The goal of restorative conferences

R.E.S.T.O.R.E.

Responsibility   The offender begins the conference by giving a detailed account of all their harmful behaviors to the victim(s) and the community. The offender acknowledges wrongdoings and agrees to use the process to help victims, restore the community and develop new appropriate behaviors.

Explore   The victim(s) and other community members may ask the offender questions about the harmful behaviors.

Sharing   The victims and community share their feelings. Then the victims, community and offenders share details and agree on what harm/damage has been done.

Tasks   The victim and community members agree on specific restitution and future behaviors (corrected) for the offenders to perform, with staff approval.

Offender Initiative   The offender apologizes to the harmed parties and commits to completing the agreed upon tasks.

Repair   Restitution and new behaviors are completed by the offenders while being monitored by the community and staff for completeness and correctness.

Enter   Offenders are entered back into full participation in the community. This process involves no loss of status but offenders are completely focused on the process until it is complete.

Figure 17: Restore acronym

R.E.S.T.O.R.E.

R- RESPONSIBILITY- The offender(s) begin the conference by giving a detailed account of all their harmful behaviors to the victims and community. They acknowledge their wrongdoings and agree to use the process to help victims, restore the community and develop new appropriate behaviors.

E-EXPLORE-The victim(s) and other community members may ask the offender questions about their harmful thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

S-SHARING-The victims and community share their feelings. Then the victims, community and offenders share details and agree on what harm/damage has been done.

T-TASKS- The victims and community members agree on specific restitution and future behaviors (appropriate) for the offenders to perform, with staff approval.

O-OFFENDER INITIATIVE- The offender(s) apologize to the harmed parties and commits to completing the agreed upon tasks.

R- REPAIR- Restitution and new behaviors are completed by the offenders while being monitored by the victim, community and staff for completeness and correctness.

E- ENTER- Offenders are entered back into full participation in the community. Offenders are completely focused on the process until it is complete.

Figure 18: Restore acronym second version

R.E.P.A.I.R.

R-RESPONSIBILITY- Offender(s) begin the conference by explaining in detail their harmful behaviors to the community acknowledging their wrongdoings and agreeing to use this process to help the victims and restore the community.

E-EXPLORE- The victim(s) and community are provided an opportunity to share their feelings about the damages/harm done and they may ask questions of offender(s) to get an understanding of what has taken place.

P-PREPARATION-The victim(s), other community members and offenders describe the damages and harm done then reach an agreement on all things needing repair.

A-ALTERNATIVE-The victim(s), community members and offenders agree to a specific plan for restitution and correcting future behaviors so the offender(s) can make needed changes, all with staff approval.

I-INITIATIVE-The offender(s) apologize to the harmed parties, commits to completing the restitution tasks, then follows through on learning and practicing the selected alternative behaviors.

R- RETURN- Offender(s) complete repairs; and the community, along with the staff, monitors to see that the repairs are completed properly. After completion the offender is returned to full participation in the community. Offenders are completely focused on this process until it is complete.

Figure 19: Repair acronym

Responding to triggers

A trigger is something that makes us feel diminished, offended, threatened, stereotyped, discounted, or attacked. Triggers do not necessarily threaten our physical safety. We often feel psychologically threatened. We can be triggered on behalf of another social group; though we do not feel personally threatened, our sense of social justice feels violated. Triggers cause an emotional response. These emotions include hurt, confusion, anger, fear, surprise, or embarrassment. We respond to triggers in a variety of ways, some helpful and others not. Our goal in responding to triggers is to take care of ourselves and then decide how to respond most effectively. Some of these responses are effective and some are not. What responses we choose depend on our own inner resources and the dynamics of the situation. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive and is in no order of preference.

Leave: We physically remove ourselves from the triggering situation.
Avoidance: We avoid future encounters with and withdraw emotionally from triggering people/situations.
Silence: We do not respond to the triggering situation though we feel upset by it. We endure without saying or doing anything.
Release: We notice the trigger, but we choose to let it go. We do not feel the need to respond.
Attack: We respond with an intention to hurt whoever has triggered us.
Internalization: We take in the content of the trigger. We believe it to be true.
Rationalization: We convince ourselves that we misinterpreted the trigger, that the intention was not to hurt us, or that we are overreacting so that we can avoid saying anything about the trigger.
Confusion: We feel upset but are not clear about why we feel that way. We know we feel angry, hurt, or offended. We just don't know what to say or do about it.
Shock: We are caught off guard, unprepared to have been triggered and have a difficult time responding.
Name: We identify what is upsetting us to the triggering person or organization.
Discuss: We name the trigger and invite discussion about it with the triggering person or organization.
Confront: We name the trigger and demand that the offending behavior or policy be changed.
Surprise: We respond to the trigger in an unexpected way - e.g., with constructive humor.
Strategize: We work with others to develop an intervention to address the trigger in a larger context.
Misinterpretation: We feel on guard and expect to be triggered, so we misinterpret something someone says and are triggered by our misinterpretation, rather than by what was actually said.
Discretion: Because of dynamics in the situation (power differences, risk of physical violence or retribution, etc.) we decide that it is not in our best interest to respond to the trigger at that time, but we choose to address the trigger in some other way at another time.

Figure 20: Responding to triggers

Student Reflection and Action Plan

Name_____ Grade Level Circle One- 9 10 11 12   Date_____
Time_____ Teacher_____

The questions below are to help you think about what just happened and what can be done to resolve this situation and prevent future problems. Please answer honestly and thoughtfully; provide as much detail as possible.

Please share what happened that brought you to the Restorative Center

_____
_____
_____

What were you thinking at the time? _____
_____
_____

What did you want at the time and what have you thought about since coming to the RC?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Did the situation turn out the way you wanted it to? _____
Yes, because _____
_____

No, because _____
_____

Could I have gotten what I wanted by making a different choice? _____
Yes, I could have _____
_____

No, because _____
_____

What can I do differently so this won't happen again?
I could_____
I could _____
I could _____

What I will do in the future to prevent any more problems is: _____
_____
_____

A person who could help me do this is: _____
What that person can do to help is _____
_____

Figure 21: Student action plan

There's A Hole In My Sidewalk

<u>Chapter One</u>

I walk down a street and there's a big hole. I don't see it and fall into it. It's dark and hopeless and it takes me a long time to find my way out. It's not my fault !

<u>Chapter Two</u>

I walk down the same street. There's a big hole and I can see it, but I still fall in. It's dark and hopeless and it takes me a long time to get out. It's still not my fault.

<u>Chapter Three</u>

I walk down a street. There's a big hole. I can see it, but I still fall in. It's become a habit. But I keep my eyes open and get out immediately. It is my fault.

<u>Chapter Four</u>

I walk down a street. There's a big hole. And I walk around it.

<u>Chapter Five</u>

I walk down a different street.

Figure 22: Larger version of "There's a Hole in My Sidewalk" activity

APPENDIX E

Figure 23: Sample referral

(...ly that student's name on the form.)

GRADE ___9___

DATE ___1-12-16___

Conduct of Student

Level I or Level II	Conduct of Student	Level III
___ Bullying	☒ Insubordination/Unruly Conduct	___ Alcohol and Drugs
___ Cheating/Academic Misconduct	___ Leaving School w/o Permission	___ Arson (Starting a Fire)
___ Defacement of Property	___ Loitering	___ Extortion
___ Destruction of Property	___ Negligent/Improper Operation	___ False Fire Alarm or Bomb Thre
___ Disorderly Conduct	Motor Vehicle	Tampering with Fire Alarm
___ Failure to Serve Assigned Detention	___ Possession of Inappropriate	Alarm System
___ False Identification	Personal Property	___ Bomb Threat (6th grade or ab
___ Fighting	___ Profanity/Obscenity toward Students	___ Felony
___ Forgery	___ Profanity/Obscenity toward Staff	___ Fireworks
___ Fraud	___ Sexual Harassment (Level 1)	___ Interference with School
___ Gambling	___ Sexual Harassment (Level 2)	Authorities
___ Gang Activity	___ Smoking	___ Physical Assault Against
___ Harassment/Intimidation	___ Tardiness	Another Student
___ Hazing	___ Technology Abuse	___ Physical Assault Against a
___ Improper, Negligent of	___ Theft or Possession of Stolen Property	Member/Contractor
Reckless Operation of a Motor Vehicle	___ Threat/Coercion	___ Robbery
___ Inappropriate Displays of Affection	___ Trespassing	___ Sexual Assault
___ Inappropriate Dress and Grooming	___ Weapon Look-A-Like	___ Theft or Possession of Sto
___ Inappropriate Use of Electronic		Property
Communication Device		___ Verbal Threat Against an
		___ Weapons: Dangerous Ins
		___ Weapons: Dangerous W
		___ Weapons: Use of Legitim
		Tools as Weapons

Describe Student's Conduct:

Refusal to comply with electronics standards, walked out into Art room w/o permission & disrupted the class.

INDICATE PRIOR ACTION TAKEN BY TEACHER/STAFF TO RESOLVE PUPIL'S PROMBLEMS (Send to office with student)

___ Conference with Student	___ Conference with Teacher	___ Phone Call Home
___ Conference with Parent	___ Administrative Conference	___ Other Action Taken:

Teacher/Staff Signature: ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓   Date: ___1-12-16___

CHECK ACTION TAKEN BY ADMINISTRATOR BELOW

Guidance Procedures	Administrative Procedures	Disciplinary Procedures
_ Teacher-Student Conference	__ Administrator-Student Conference	__ After School Detention
_ Teacher-Parent Conference/Contact	__ Administrator-Parent Conference	__ Behavioral Probation
_ Teacher-Counselor Conference	__ Student Program Adjustment	__ Temporary Removal fror
_ Counselor-Student Conference	__ Referral to Student Services	__ Short-term Suspension
_ Counselor-Parent Conference	__ Referral to Restorative Center	__ Long-term Suspension
_ Intervention Plan	__ Student Services-Student/Parent Contact	__ Referral to District Liais

Revised 10/2015

Figure 24: Sample Referral

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GRADE 9

DATE 3-19-16

Level I or Level II	Conduct of Student	Level III
Bullying	X Insubordination/Unruly Conduct	Alcohol and Drugs
Cheating/Academic Misconduct	Leaving School w/o Permission	Arson (Starting a Fire)
Defacement of Property	Loitering	Extortion
Destruction of Property	Negligent/Improper Operation	False Fire Alarm or Bomb Threat,
Disorderly Conduct	Motor Vehicle	Tampering with Fire Alarm
Failure to Serve Assigned Detention	Possession of Inappropriate	Alarm System
False Identification	Personal Property	Bomb Threat (6th grade or above)
Fighting	Profanity/Obscenity toward Students	Felony
Forgery	Profanity/Obscenity toward Staff	Fireworks
Fraud	Sexual Harassment (Level 1)	Interference with School
Gambling	Sexual Harassment (Level 2)	Authorities
Gang Activity	Smoking	Physical Assault Against
Harassment/Intimidation	Tardiness	Another Student
Hazing	Technology Abuse	Physical Assault Against a Staff
Improper, Negligent of	Theft or Possession of Stolen Property	Member/Contractor
Reckless Operation of a Motor Vehicle	Threat/Coercion	Robbery
Inappropriate Displays of Affection	Trespassing	Sexual Assault
Inappropriate Dress and Grooming	Weapon Look-A-Like	Theft or Possession of Stolen
Inappropriate Use of Electronic		Property
Communication Device		Verbal Threat Against an Employee
		Weapons: Dangerous Instruments
		Weapons: Dangerous Weapons
		Weapons: Use of Legitimate
		Tools as Weapons

Describe Student's Conduct: Electronic use + coasts + general disregard for

class norms + disrupt/insubordination

INDICATE PRIOR ACTION TAKEN BY TEACHER/STAFF TO RESOLVE PUPIL'S PROBLEMS (Send to office with student)

Conference with Student	Conference with Teacher	Phone Call Home
Conference with Parent	Administrative Conference	Other Action Taken

Teacher/Staff Signature: [redacted]

3-19-16

CHECK ACTION TAKEN BY ADMINISTRATOR BELOW

Guidance Procedures	Administrative Procedures	Disciplinary Procedures
Teacher-Student Conference	Administrator-Student Conference	After School Detention
Teacher-Parent Conference/Contact	Administrator-Parent Conference	Behavioral Probation
Teacher-Counselor Conference	Student Program Adjustment	Temporary Removal from Class
Counselor-Student Conference	Referral to Student Services	Short-term Suspension
Counselor-Parent Conference	Referral to Restorative Center	Long-term Suspension
Intervention Plan	Student Services Student/Parent Contact	Referral to District Liaison Officer

Revised 10/2015

[redacted]

3/19/16

Figure 25: Sample Referral

Restorative Center Referral

Student Name: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ Teacher/Staff Name: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

Date: 9/24 Time: 9:15 Grade Level: (9) 10 11 12
(Choose One)

Choose One: Self Referred Teacher Referred Incident #1 ___X___ #2 _____ #3 _____

Interventions attempted today by the Teacher/Staff **BEFORE** sending student to RC

X Restorative Questions 1-4 asked to student or Did you use any of the 3R's prompts? (Reinforce, Remind, Redirect) _attempted_	When is the Teacher/Staff available to hold the Restorative Session with the Student? Day: _Friday_ Time: _1st hr. or before school_
Did you follow the Student Behavior Management Process? _referred_ ~~Referred~~ _to RC Staff_	For 2nd and 3rd same issues, did you refer to PBIS for strategies? http://www.pbisworld.com/

Summarize what happened?

▮▮▮▮▮▮ had her head on the table during class workshop. I touched her sketchbook to move it toward her. She said "Please don't touch me." She had set up and I noticed top was very low. I asked her to go in the hall to talk. She came but stood facing away from me. I attempted to talk to her about both issues but she responded disrespectfully. I took her to ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ she returned to class.

What are your hoping for from this process?

Restoration, respect.

Figure 27: Sample Referral

Example of a Critical Conversation with Trina

Alaina: Trina, come here for a second.

Trina: What I do?

Alaina: You know you would never be in trouble with me. But, I was shocked to get a report from your teacher this morning.

Trina: My first hour teacher?

Alaina: Yes.

Trina: Ugh. It is always her. She is always coming up to me saying I'm doing this and that but I am not obligated to have a relationship with her. Most of what happens isn't my fault. Did I get a referral?

Alaina: Well, it hasn't gotten to that point but clearly your teacher is at her wits end if she has reached out to us.

Trina: I don't care about that women

Alaina: You don't have to care about her as a person, but she is her teacher. Maybe she feels like her job is being impeded on and doesn't know what else to do

Trina: But it don't be just me. There's a lot of people in first hour who be on their phones. I don't even really text anyone during that hour because my boyfriend is in that class too. I don't have my headphones in or be on my phone anymore, but if she calls me out that early in the morning she can expect a response, simple as that.

Alaina: Why she would say that they are having are these problems then

Trina: Because she assumes things about the way I behave. She doesn't know me and doesn't realize that I am not obligated to talk to her about anything that does not pertain to school.

Alaina: So help me understand how her actions demonstrate that she doesn't know you? What does it look like?

Trina: She picks at me and is a bully. She constantly picks at me when she knows that I am going to yell at her. It looks like someone is coming for me constantly. I only give common levels of respect.

Alaina: So what a typical day look like?

Trina: I don't be on my phone anymore. The first time my teacher called herself yelling at me for the phone was a day I came in and had family stuff going on, so I had left her headphones in all day and didn't take them out. I was in class 15 minutes early so I normally have my headphones in and can't hear the bell over the music when it rings. I guess she got mad because she was talking to me and I couldn't hear her. She came up to me and touched my phone. I pulled it back (demonstrated for me a quick snatch of the phone) and asked her, why are you touching anything that belongs to me when you could have put your little hand up (to signal to her). I guess she felt I was rude because I snatched my phone back, but she had no reason to touch anything that belonged to me. She was like, I'm not gonna have this attitude with you. First off, you shouldn't touch my stuff, 2nd there are other ways to get my attention, and 3rd who you do you think you are yelling at me when I did nothing to you. She took it personally that I snatched my phone away, but she had no business touching in the first place and made it seem like that it was me who had the attitude. So after that happened I stopped talking to her for whole week. I feel like she set this up for herself. I am not going to participate in class when she just showed out in front of everyone and yelled at me when I didn't do anything. Every time I have a

reaction to something, she gets upset but she shouldn't provoke me if she knows that I am going to yell at her.

Alaina: The problem is in the moment to moment interactions.

Trina: Well she is stupid.

Alaina: You can have that opinion but you do understand that as a teacher, she has certain powers that she can use.

Trina: I don't care because I don't go to the [main] school. I know she be talking to Ms. Rose about me. Ms. Rose is actually understanding and doesn't provoke me. She understands that sometimes I don't want to talk.

Alaina: You don't have to care about your teacher as a person but she should care enough about herself as a person.

Trina: How can she butt into MY conversations and then get upset?

Alaina: Well should you be having side conversations in the classroom?

Trina: I'm gonna say what I want to say no one is gonna tell me I can't speak. It wasn't a side conversation (laughing because she knows the answer I am expecting to hear). It wasn't a side conversation because she should have given them the assignment directions correctly the first time and not after she had already done the assignment a different way. I wasn't going to redo the work when I had done it already.

Alaina: Trina, you can fight this, but the way you are fighting, you are guaranteed to lose. If you are okay losing then fine, but I don't think you want to lose. You can get suspended from both schools because of this.

Trina: Well if she wants to suspend me, her class can get dropped from my schedule.

Alaina: You need to find a way to work with her teacher as a teacher

Trina: I do not. I don't have any reason to talk to her. If we just don't talk, there won't be an issue.

Alaina: What if talking to her may be the best way to learn in that classroom?

Trina: Learning has nothing to do with it because my work gets done.

Alaina: If you think you can be academically successful without talking to your teacher then so be it, but if you need to talk with her to get the information you need, you have to talk to her. I don't want you to sacrifice your success over their personal problems.

Trina: Things won't work if she keeps provoking me. As soon as she talks to me, she yells at me.

Alaina: Why are you giving her much power over your emotions?

Trina: It isn't about power, it's about the fact that she is irritating. She just sits there and picks on me.

Alaina: It seems like power to me because this person can control how you react since you says that it's an automatic thing.

Trina: It's automatic because I hate her, simple as that.

Alaina: It seems like she is a puppet and her teacher is pulling her strings.

Trina: If she is gonna keep writing referrals every time I yell at her because she provoked me, there was no way in hell I am gonna deal with that. She puts the information on the referral sheet from her perspective and makes it seem like I am the bad person when I'm not... It's not my fault that she is a kiss ass and wants to follow the rules. She (her teacher) isn't going to sit there and provoke her saying that she has done this, that, and the other, when the same people are doing the same things over and over but yet all hell breaks loose when I do it. If I could have my first hour over here, I would have been done that.

Alaina: You have to find a way to navigate this situation. You have to find out what your triggers are.

Trina: There are no triggers, its just constant bullying. It's not my fault that she stands and listens to me talk to another student and then makes something out of it. I need to see this email (she walks into Mr. Ferguson's office to have him show her the email.)

Ferguson: Before I show you, what is your version?

Trina: I get provoked, simple as that...when the response isn't to my teacher's liking, I am the bad guy in the scenario.

Ferguson: You are way too intelligent for this. How old will you be on Monday? 15? 16?

Trina: 16

Ferguson: Hmm. (He tries to give a recap of the email)

Trina: I need the exact words. Please.

Ferguson: How's that gonna help?

Trina: I need to put myself in her perspective for 2 seconds.

Ferguson: Now that's a really great answer. Two seconds might not be long enough

Trina: Nope, nope, that's all I need.

Alaina: What you may want to think about, not now, but maybe sometimes today--

Trina: Please don't say apologize because it's not gonna happen

Alaina: No, no. You may want to be thinking about what your strategy will be for moving forward. I have offered you some suggestions but you have to think about how you are going to get through this so you can get past this. For YOU and not for her.

Ferguson: I hope you don't plan to let people who irritate you control you life, because if you do, then they got you.

Trina: (not fully paying attention to us; was still focused on the email) Who it was sent to? She only sent it to ya'll?

Ferguson: (reading the email) "My name is [teacher's name], I am an ELA teacher over at the main high school and Trina is in my first hour class. I am having an extremely difficult time with her and her behavior. She is extremely rude and disrespectful. It is getting to a point where I am thinking her coming over here is not working out. I have had several conversations with her about her behavior and attitude, can you help me with her.

Trina: Ooh I almost cussed. Who was that sent too? Who else was on that list

Ferguson: I can't see all of that. Remember, you said it was going to help you to take her perspective

Trina: Well now I can't because I'm pissed off. She blatantly lied!

Ferguson: Have you two had any conversations.

Trina: She [her teacher] is the one that is causing this behavior! No other teacher messes with me the way that she does, by constantly saying things to me to make me seem like I am legit the worst student in the classroom. There are kids failing her class, on their phones, cussing up a storm, but yet **I** get treated as if I am below **them**. What I do has nothing to do with my grades.

Ferguson: You know, I visit a lot of intelligent people in the county jail who don't fit into the rules that order society and wind up suffering the consequences. We (him and I) talk about struggling to fit into the order everyday, but if you give up the struggle to fit in and still be yourself, then you lose. I would be happy to come over and try to have a conversation about your teacher's expectations so you can be successful in the class. You remember that announcement that Principal Style made about the RC and what we are doing in here (referring to a speech he gave to the students about how the teachers were upset about how frequently they missed class to

be in the RC)? We could do exactly what you are doing and be upset at these peckerwoods who are upset and trying to run us in the ground because we are over here trying to help some Black kids that they don't care about or care for. These teachers are trying to run them out and we trying to help them get straightened out. I could have said that to the teachers, and from looking at kids' grades, it would have been the truth. But the truth was only going to get me more scrutiny and abuse. I am in it to win and you just haven't learned that yet. A lot of ya'll are still in it to prove you aren't a punk. The way that I prove I am not a punk is by not losing. So if kids come into the RC and their life gets better and they learn to deal with a crooked society, well then...I've been in the game a long time and I have played to lose and it isn't any fun. You are intelligent. You know feeling angry and acting angry are two different things.

Trina: My teacher doesn't even know all of the things that I go through to even get to the classroom. When she can clearly see that I am not in the mood for all of her shit but yet continues to do all of it, frustrates me… She (her teachers) sets herself up for failure like that. I try to avoid her at all costs but she always finds something to judge me about.

Ferguson: It probably will continue like that. So if she keeps doing what she does and you keep doing what you do, who is going to lose? (Trina is quiet and doesn't answer.) You are talking strong so come on. You added something important when you said that your teacher doesn't know what you have to go through before you gets there. That is very important and it's clear she isn't a resource to you right now and isn't offering her support and understanding. So you need to finds that somewhere else. When I get frustrated at the staff or kids, I come into the RC with Alaina.

Trina: Well I don't have that there. Ya'll aren't over there. (At this point she starts to cry. At the same time we both try to encourage her to use us as soon as she gets over here or text or email us.)

Ferguson: You don't have to be alone. I am asking you not to give up on herself. You think you are beating your teacher, but you are losing. It's okay that you have feelings and there is nothing weak about that. The people walking around here with the attitudes? I don't want you imitating that because you are special. Look at their lives, their grades don't look good like your and they are barely hanging onto school, and you have already been through that and don't want that anymore. You are at a very important point in your life, sweet 16. Sometimes it turns sour but it doesn't have too. You can take a look at it and say I have a choice in 1 of 4 directions: straight ahead, left turn take a little longer, or go right and explore and experience new things. You can be doing the things that I am doing. Has that ever crossed her mind? (Trina doesn't answer.) Why not? 15 years from now YOU can be sitting in that chair helping someone go through things that you are going through right now. But you have to get through first and you can't do that by giving up. Alaina and I will go over there first thing tomorrow morning and you will have someone. My parents used to come up to his schools and that let his teachers know that he had someone who had his back. And also that if he was acting up he had someone who would cut into his behind (said with laughter). You don't have to be by herself because we have your back. Some teachers will try to get over on kids because they don't think they have any support, and they will be like "oh they come from a broken home they ain't coming up here to do this or that".

Alaina: We have your back and your teacher will know that you aren't on your own.

Ferguson: But remember, when my parents came, there was an expectation on the teacher but on me too.

Trina: (sniffling and wiping her eyes) I want to have the meeting. (pause) As long as she doesn't

cut me off. (Mr. Ferguson and I chuckle at her comment and the meeting ends).

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