

# Negotiating Identity: Black Female Identity Construction in a Predominantly-White Suburban Context

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*"I'm convinced you cultivated your sense of self-love as an embryo somehow knowing you'd need it later on, reach in, it's there, tucked away, it's there, use it, it's there—in a world that doesn't see you" -Nayyirah Waheed*

This study was engendered by my own academic experience in United States public schools as well as my childhood in segregated predominantly-White neighborhoods. I attended a predominantly-White elementary school where I distinctly remember various incidents involving racism and sexism. This research questions what resources Black girls with virtually no physical access to the Black community are using to conceptualize Blackness and further their own identity as Black girls. The girls involved in this study do have access to a myriad of popular media images of Blackness and Black femaleness as well as the ideas of Blackness and culture in their own families and homes, but limited access to Black communities and spaces of communal socialization. The questions addressed in this study are: (1) what are Black middle

school girls' perceptions about schooling in a predominantly-White environment? (2) how does Black middle school girls' identity construction affect their academic and social decisions? and (3) how do Black girl's race, class and gender identity interact in this predominantly-White environment?

While some studies review the topic of Black girl achievement and experience from an asset oriented perspective (Brock, 2005; Brown, 2009; Evans-Winter, 2005; Rollock, 2007), there is still a dearth in the research. Research indicates that school structure and community may influence socialization practices as well as academic orientation of students (Carter, 2008; Diamond, Lewis & Gordon, 2007; Graham & Anderson, 2008; Stanlaw & Peshkin, 1988). Thus, it is imperative to study Black girls in various social and academic contexts to fully understand the complexity of the axis



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of oppression, class, race and gender, they experience. There are few studies done on Black girls in predominantly-White suburban environments (Banks, 2005; Carter, 2008; Proweller, 2005), and those that are generally focus on private schools or girls who have been bused to high income suburban environments from other areas (Holland, 2013; Proweller, 2005). However, the practices of upper/middle class suburban Black girls have much to reveal about what strategies or tools Black girls use to persist, when they have a range of resources.

How Black girls experience an oppressive educational system, mass media representations, and daily pressures of racism and sexism has been shown to vary by environment (Holland, 2013; Proweller, 1998; Rollock, 2007). Research must acknowledge this precarious position and the variation in the experiences of Black girls in order to adequately address needs and inform policy around Black girl achievement, as the need for attention to Black girls and Black girls' education has been demonstrated.

Bowser (2007) and Pattillo-McCoy (1999) refer to the paradox of the Black middle class because of the interplay of privilege and vulnerability. Noting that members of the Black middle class occupy a very marginal space, both studies noting that the relationship and proximity of Black middle class neighborhoods to lower-income areas makes them vulnerable to similar experiences of residents of poverty stricken areas. Thus, the designation as middle class does not mitigate issues of race experienced by the impoverished community. These studies point to the importance of the intersection of race, class and gender. This work takes a closer look into the experiences of Black girls who are integrated in White communities and the impacts of residential isolation.

This is a multiple-case study that employed an intersectional theoretical framework to analyze data. The study involves five individual cases of Black teenage girls who each live and attend school in a predominantly White suburban area. This multiple-case study is exploratory as it is used to explore what can be learned from these girls' experiences. This qualitative approach focuses on illuminating how these Black girls experience their environment and the educational and social repercussions of their marginalization. This work examines participant's experiences consistently defending themselves against prominent stereotypes as well as defending their competence to their classmates and educators. Previous research focuses on deficiencies and pathologies of Black girls aimed at controlling or managing female reproduction fail to recognize the multitude of structural stressors that negatively affect Black females. Thus, reform efforts and the multitude of programs aimed at improving educational outcomes for this group are not adequate as they do not consider the assemblage of issues confronting these girls. Grounded in Black feminism, this work is a political act that seeks to uncover knowledge that can impact the lived reality of these girls and in this sense is not neutral (Collins, 2000).

## Literature Review

While there has been overwhelming scholarly attention focused on the achievement gap and issues of class and cultural factors (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2009; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) including cultural deficiencies (Jensen, 1969; Payne, 2008; Payne & Evans, 1995; Ravitch, 1990), and access to resources (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner,



experiences of Black students who do have seemingly equal access to resources. However, data indicate that even in well-resourced schools Black students are still the lowest achievers, with lower college going rates and lower participation in advanced courses (Darity et. al 2001, Klopfenstein, 2005, Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). Various studies have cited the gap in performance of Black and White students in well-resourced high performing schools (Diette, 2011; Paige & Witty, 2010; Sandy & Duncan, 2010). Ferguson (2002) found that the “gap” between affluent Black and White students was even higher or larger than that of lower socio-economic status Black and White students.

The normative discussion of the Black/White achievement gap is hampered with deficit-based ideology about Black student underachievement or capabilities. Some investigations of the underachievement of Black students generally concentrate on the experiences of inner-city students and have noted structural issues and inequalities with school resources and cultural differences (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Oakes & Saunders, 2004; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). However, the current literature on urban Black identity development does not take into account the diversity of the Black experience including that of suburban Black students.

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Davis and Welcher (2013) found that race remains an enduring obstacle to educational equity for poor as well as non-poor Blacks. Thus, more research is needed to understand the experiences of middle and upper middle class Blacks in high achieving schools that contribute to inequitable educational outcomes. In a post-racial America it is important to investigate the interplay of class and race. While moves against affirmative action policies in California (Proposition 209) and Michigan indicate a belief in a post-racial America, others argue that class does little to lessen the impact of race or racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Feagin, 1991; Feagin & O’Brien, 2010; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Hughes & Thomas, 1998). This stance has been dubbed the “Race matters” argument (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1998; West, 1993). Lacy (2004) found that middle class Blacks engage in “strategic assimilation” navigating the pressures of racism using Black socialization practices. Venturing from the discussion of resources, this study focuses on the often unspoken or un/underaddressed ways that Black children, specifically girls are being underserved.

Aside from the deficit-oriented literature on Black students as a whole, there is a specific “gaze” from the larger culture that describes Black adolescent girlhood in terms of promiscuous sexuality and deviant behaviors (Tolman & Higgins, 1996). Thus, Black girls are seen as students who have to overcome both race and sex, characteristics that make them inherently inferior. Women and girls are often the target of blame for the community in the overwhelming focus on unfit or uneducated, often welfare or teenage mothers. This rhetoric of the unfit teen mother allows girls to be seen only in terms of reproduction and population control, reducing individuals to simply numbers (Hendrixson, 2002).



Numbers are then used to incite moral panic around an issue overwhelmingly associated with Black and Latino girls.

The idea of support for marginalized students has often been explored for students in urban contexts (Darling-Hammond, Noguera, Cobb & Meier, 2007; Oakes & Saunders, 2004), but this present study has implications for theory and practice as it explores the experiences and needs of Black suburban middle school girls as well. Specifically, in high achieving schools Black students are still struggling with achievement and access as they are less likely to be enrolled in advanced courses which affects their academic self-concept and college enrollment prospects (Darity et al., 2001). Diette's (2012) study of North Carolina middle schools found:

“(1) Black students are underrepresented in Algebra 1 in essentially all schools in North Carolina; (2) the largest disparities occur in schools that are highly integrated while the disparities are reduced in schools that are either large majority White or large majority non-White; (3) schools with a larger share of White teachers are related to larger disparities between Black and White students; (4) the marginal effects of racial composition on the relative disparity in enrollment are significantly larger for Black females than Black males” (p. 322).

These results speak directly to the need for further research on the experiences of Black students in predominantly-White suburban schools as they are often highly capable students with resources including

science labs, latest technology and fully equipped libraries, who are either overlooked or discriminated against in school. It is imperative to research the experiences of Black girls as they are marginalized both as Black students and as women, operating under a stigma of inferiority about both. This study investigates how identity formation, in a predominantly-White context, affects the academic choices and outcomes of Black middle-school girls. Interrupting the conversation on resources and program access, this study probes further to understand if Black teenage girls in predominantly-White communities are being underserved or isolated in other areas or ways that may affect the supposed achievement gap.

Drawing upon identity work like Murrell (2009), who uses situated-mediated identity theory to explain that educational attainment is “much less a matter of an individual’s disidentification with school and more a matter of the school context’s disidentification with the student” (Murrell, 2009, p. 97), this work further explores identity formation and academic self-concept among Black middle school girls in a predominantly-White environment to assess the need for possible structural and emotional supports.



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## Methodology

This is a multiple-case study that employed an intersectional theoretical framework to analyze data. This framework recognizes that girls navigate issues of race, class and gender simultaneously (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). While both Black girls and boys suffer from a deficit approach to education, girls occupy an especially precarious position as they are seen as the producers of this community (Burman, 1995). Their position as future mothers of these deviant children and their own “sexual deviance” marks their bodies in specific ways. In this position Black girls are both hypervisible and invisible, with the control of their Black bodies and reproduction being top priority and programs and their voices rarely if ever heard (Brown, 2009). Addressing both issues of racism and sexism, this research uncovers ways that Black girls’ middle/upper middle class status mitigates issues of racism and sexism in predominantly-White contexts.

The study examined five individual cases of Black teenage girls who each live and attend school in a predominantly-White suburban area. This multiple-case study is exploratory, as it is used to explore what can be learned from these girls’ experiences about the interplay of class and race. A case study design was used to illuminate the girls’ perceptions and what decisions girls were making, how they make decisions based on those perceptions and how their academic decisions are affected (Schramm, 1971). To ensure validity I used informant review, conducting follow-up interviews in which each participant verified the details of the transcripts. After individual cases were analyzed, codes were used to reveal general commonalities among cases (Yin, 2003). Codes, as well as interview and observation notes, were used to

develop a profile for each participant then conducted a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify main themes (Patton, 2002).

An intersectional analysis using Black Feminist theory is required as the data illustrated issues of class, gender and race in the girls’ lives (Collins, 1999). Class, gender, and race are inextricably interrelated, requiring an examination of the dynamics of difference and sameness (Cho et al., 2013). Black feminist theory argues for the analysis of Black women’s experience coping with the matrix of racism, classism, and sexism understanding race does not exist without class nor class without race or sex. I analyze how modes of power that affect each girl’s identity development operate in the context of structures of inequity (Crenshaw, 1989). These interviews point to the way racial power aligned with class privilege are normalized in predominantly-White settings, as a reflection of hegemony in the larger society.

This study employed counter-storytelling, where girls are given a platform to share their experiences from their own perspectives. Counter-storytelling recognizes that the experiences and knowledge of people of color is genuine and critical to their understanding and urges scholars to analyze race as theorists maintain that racism is normal in U.S. society (Delgado, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1998) explains, “The primary reason, then, that stories, or narratives, are deemed important among CRT scholars is that they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming “objectivity” of positivist perspectives” (p. 11). This study uses counter-storytelling to illuminate ways that Black middle school girls in predominantly-White environments experience the environment and navigate obstacles of racism, sexism and classism.



The group of participants was selected through telephone appeals after being suggested by other girls in their friendship group. The initial participant, Ariel, I knew during my time in Charlotte, working in childcare and I had met all participants in some form before I began my research. After girls and their parents accepted my invitation to participate in the study, I spent time in each of their homes conducting four interviews. The girls live in the same neighborhood, but were all interviewed individually. Parents were not invited to participate in interviews, but were told that the results of the study would be shared with them when the research was concluded. I wanted girls to be as comfortable as possible sharing information about their experience in schools, although they were aware parents would be able to read the results of the study with the pseudonyms they were assigned. The most difficulty came from coordinating schedules with middle and high school girls. Many interviews were rescheduled because of athletic or social obligations that had been forgotten. As my time in the area was limited two participants' interviews were limited to three, two had four and one had five. There were also a few interruptions during interviews from siblings or parents; however, these distractions allowed me to observe daily life and interactions in the girls' households.

## Data Collection

From November 2013 to February 2014, I collected data on five middle and early high school girls in a large southern metropolitan city. Data for this multiple-case study (Schram, 2006) was collected over a period of four months using qualitative methods including interviews, visual methods, and participant observation. For the purposes of this paper, I used only the interview data in order to

address the significant commonalities among participants. I conducted both semi-structured interviews with each girl three to five times over the course of my study. Each interview was transcribed and coded using the grounded theory data analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In this analysis, I initially used open coding going line-by-line and breaking down data into parts, comparing the similarities and differences of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the open coding portion, I initially pawed through the data to see what kind of themes stood out, highlighting words and concepts as I went along. Sandelowski (2000) observes that analysis of texts begins with proofreading the material and simply underlining key phrases. Similarly, Ryan and Bernard (2003) refers to this method as the ocular scan method, or eyeballing. Because this is a multiple-case study, it was important for me to make comparisons between paragraphs and across informants. This required the compare and contrast approach to coding, which is used to decide the ways that texts are similar or different from each other (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) also refer to this method as the "constant comparison method" as it happens throughout the coding process. I employed this method during the entire open coding process. Lastly, during the open-coding portion, I used a word-based technique called key-words-in-context (KWIC) method, where I read the text noting words that were used a lot (key words), and then analyzed the context of which the word was used to begin identifying broad themes. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note "in this technique, researchers identify key words and then systematically search the corpus of the text to find all instances of that word or phrase" (p. 88).

Next, I conducted focused coding, where I

used them to synthesize and conceptualize data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As noted by Goulding (1998), conceptualizing is the process of grouping similar items according to some defined properties and giving the items a name that stands for that common link. In conceptualizing, “we reduce large amounts of data to smaller, more manageable pieces of data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 121). The themes developed are reflective of commonalities among each participant.

There was no dropout in the study as consent was given for five girls that participated until the completion of the work. All interviews were open-ended semi-structured interviews. In drafting a protocol for each case I created interview questions; however, those questions changed as the actual interview revealed new directions for the research. Interviewing girls in their homes gave context to the work, while conducting these interviews separate from parents gave participants a platform to voice their daily truths allowing for more in depth conversation.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select five participants from a majority White neighborhood and school. A neighborhood and school cluster in a predominantly-White area was identified, and Black teenage girls that were both residents of the neighborhood and a student at the selected schools were asked to participate. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant as well as the neighborhood and school to ensure anonymity. All five girls are residents of a predominantly-White community and attended the local predominantly-White middle school or high school. Of the participants four were in eighth grade and one was in tenth grade. The girls range in age from 13 years old

to 15 years old. Each student self-identified as Black and was born in the United States; however there was diversity in cultural background with two students having parents from Africa and one from the Caribbean. Participants belong to varying family structures including two parents, single parent and extended family structures. All information included was self-reported by participants.



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## Reflexivity

Throughout the study, I was careful to consider my subjectivities and to be conscious of how they might affect the work. As a Black female who grew up in a similar area and socio-economic conditions as the participants, part of the subjectivity I bring to the research is my sense of racial identity and class privilege, which may not be shared by the girls. To ensure I did not project my own feelings or make unfair assumptions I consistently asked for clarification from each participant throughout the interview and used follow up interviews to receive confirmation of my analysis to ensure their stories were accurately represented. I also feel my racial background and gender were key factors in my ability to gain access to participants as both parents and students may have felt more comfortable discussing sensitive topics with me. Throughout my study with the girls these thoughts are reflected in my daily journal entries.

## Findings

### Kendall

Throughout our discussions, Kendall briefly mentioned various issues in school although she showed some inability to name the source of racial or class injustices. For example, when asked about what changes she would make to her school, Kendall noted that she would like to attend a school with more Black people and indicated that she would like for more Black teachers to teach advanced classes. She also noted that she did not personally experience racism in school, "I would just change the fact that there would be more Black or minority teachers teaching honors classes." However, when I probed further as to why she would like more Black teachers for her advanced courses or more Black students she indicates that they would create a more equitable or fair environment. Kendall went further to give an example of unfair treatment she felt both she and her friends had experienced because of their race, explaining that "umm yea in like 6<sup>th</sup> grade my math teacher, Ms. Cane, I felt like she singled out umm some of my friends and I because she didn't help us as much as she helped other students and she didn't show us the same attitude as she did towards other people-- the White people."

Kendall indicated that race in her school was inextricably tied to class. In her upper-middle class environment, Kendall experienced race in very specific classed ways. I noticed that throughout the interview she used the terms rich and White interchangeably. In terms of class, Kendall also remarks that she feels pressure in her school and goes further to say that another school with more of a diverse group of students would ease some of the pressure to have material items and fit the mold. However, as I asked further questions about class I noted that Kendall's issues were not only class related. While class was a

problem, Kendall specifically noted wanting more peers of the same race for comfort. I separated the class and race themes because Kendall indicated that issues with class were more related to pressure for material items, while her issues with race were related to beauty and image concerns. Finally, while Kendall mentions various areas of inequity and racism in her neighborhood and school she also noted that her peers do not often discuss issues of race.

### Ariel

Like Kendall, Ariel, a northern transplant attending the neighborhood high school, revealed a post-racial attitude, a belief that our society no longer has issues with racism, a strategy she uses to negotiate her marginal status as a Black girl in an overwhelmingly White environment. However, as our conversation began, her answers revealed that she has adopted this attitude as a way to deal with her marginalization because of race. In our initial interview, Ariel noted that cliques did exist but she wasn't sure how or why they formed, guessing that people just gravitated to each other because of similar interests. However, later on in the interview Ariel notes that the students also do form groups seemingly around racial lines stating, "they just don't feel like they need to experience other people." Ariel also explains that her group of friends is not aligned by race but more so by class interests; however, their class interests ensure them a space amongst the White group. Although she is Black, one friend is Latino and the other White. When asked how that happened, she goes on to say that they hang around the White group because she and her Latino friend can fit in with the White people, but her Latino and White friend cannot fit in with the Black people, because they do not share their interests. Ariel however does go back and forth between the Black and White groups, and shares similar interests with the Black



Interestingly, while Ariel notes enjoying or more so participating in activities with White rich kids such as bonfires or kickbacks in large country club homes with outdoor fire pits and movie rooms or activity rooms, she went on to say that she enjoyed her community in the Bronx more because it felt more like home and she was more comfortable, indicating that she is making the best out of her current situation but generally feels uncomfortable. When asked if there were times she felt isolated, Ariel very matter of factly responded “of course!” Ariel mentioned a specific experience in her marketing class where the class was discussing a political situation dealing with race and specifically singled her out as the only Black person in class, and thus the representative for the Black community, to discuss her reaction to the story. Ariel says she remarked “no comment” and noted she did not like the teacher singling her out.



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This situation highlights many teachers’ actions or feelings, which indicate racial issues should only be of consequence to “other” races or people. Ariel also mentioned that she feels particularly uncomfortable in her honors classes because she is the only Black student and situations like the one she described fuel her discomfort and marginalization. Additionally, being constantly silenced by shame or discomfort, affects academic experiences and outcomes because class participation is stifled as well as the relationship with the teacher which could possibly impede Ariel’s comfort with asking for any assistance. Ariel explained that this is a regular occurrence in most of her classes and she deals with other teachers the same way,

simply saying “no comment”. Although, when I specifically asked her about expressing her discomfort she said that she has stood up for herself in the past.

Ariel discussed preferring her geometry class because the teacher is Black. She feels that the teacher is nicer to her and although she is still the only Black student she does not feel singled out. Geometry is the only course that Ariel has with a non-White teacher. Ariel mentioned that she believed the few Black students that were in the school were in lower level classes “because they don’t want to do the work.” When I questioned her further about how students are placed she said you just sign up for them, although she noted these decisions could be discussed with guidance counselors. I asked her if she ever thought the guidance counselors were suggesting these lower level classes and she said she never thought about it. This example is an illustration of the personal or individual responsibility narrative that has dominated the discussion on Black “underachievement.” Like many, Ariel has bought into the narrative without considering any possible larger or structural issues, even the ones that affect her. This also indicates her inability to or discomfort in naming inequity.

While later in our conversation Ariel notes that most of the Black students that went to her school left last year for another high school, she does not readily relate the issues they experienced to her isolation in class. When I asked why the students left her school she said that “cause I guess they didn’t like the atmosphere, I guess they felt like they were being I don’t know like singled out.” She went on to say that she also felt singled out, “yea, like when I wear my scarves and stuff to school they always have to say something to me, but when the White girls wear their little scarves they don’t say anything they just walk around or like a bandana, it’s just really annoying.”



## Layla

Layla was the only one of my interviewees to indicate that she does not see race as a factor in her life. In fact she stated that her school experience is not affected by race noting, “my race doesn’t determine how smart I am or my ability to learn.” Layla seemed to use her race as motivation to be better than or different from stereotypes; however, she did not name or describe the actual stereotype she was distancing herself from. Also, struggling with issues of naming, Layla reported that while people socialized according to race, including herself, race is never discussed among family or friends because it simply “doesn’t come up”. In fact, throughout the interview Layla rarely used racial terms instead opting to use neighborhood codes that indicate both race and class. When describing a group of White students she characterized them as “people who live in the country club” rather than White. This also indicates the importance of class, as this is the most privileged neighborhood in the area.

In addition, unlike the other girls Layla indicated that she enjoyed her classes. She said that she had a friend in every class, so she felt comfortable. When I asked her whether she had ever felt uncomfortable or isolated in any class, Layla said “yea like one time when I had an elective and there were like none of my friends in there and no one I could talk to, so I didn’t really talk to anyone in that class.” Layla further explained that she had nothing to discuss with the students because they had nothing in common. Layla’s experience or level of comfort is telling as she is in the lower level or “regular” academic track. Her experience there, surrounded by a diverse group of students, versus the girls in the upper track is telling of the impact of diversity or peer support in the classroom. The level of comfort

experienced in these courses may be impetus for her to stay in these classes rather than venture into advanced classes where she could risk the same isolation she felt in the elective she took.

Layla’s commentary on the atmosphere in her school and community also seemed to negate the possibility of a post-racial society as she explained that the students were more so tolerant of each other as racial groups than comfortable. Similar to Kendall’s comments on “being friends with anyone who would be friends with her,” Layla stated that she would speak to people and they would speak to her and while they may not have anything against her she knew they would just never be friends. This statement suggests that while there may not be any racial slurs being hurled, it is because the borders or lines have been set (in silence) and Black students know not to cross them, not to step out of the margins. Layla stated that race does not play a part in her daily life, but went on to explain the ways she navigates issues of race that are present. While Layla experiences racial tension and has developed strategies to cope, she demonstrates an inability to verbally identify these struggles.

## Michelle

Likewise, Michelle indicated struggling with attempting to be a member of the “in crowd” or accepting her place in the margins stating “people in my class aren’t really accepting of me, I’ve tried to be friends but they’re not my friends.” She went on to say that this sometimes affected her work noting “some girls don’t have a problem with me, but it’s still not like we are gonna do partner work and you’re the one that’s gonna be chosen first or you’re the one that I’ll do the project or the assignment with.” However, Michelle felt her experience in school was much



group and White popular group) and are more free to talk to White girls.” She explains that it is different for guys and for Black girls as she shares “a lot of Caucasians feel that we are ratchet, ignorant and over the top.” Here Michelle indicates that Black males and females experience both daily school life and relationships differently. She feels that she has to negate a stereotype specific to Black girls.

Like the other girls, Michelle reported having had only one experience with a Black teacher in her middle school career. She feels that course was a better experience because the teacher had rules that she respected and felt she gave the appropriate punishments for students. Michelle mentioned feeling that many of her White teachers do not give deserved punishments to students and cited an ongoing issue in her Spanish course. She explains that as the only Black student in this course she does not have any friends in the class and further isolating is her decision to wear natural or curly hair. She goes further “I wear my hair in a ponytail, and this boy is like ummm excuse me can you move your afro? I can’t see and the whole class bursts out laughing.” Michelle explained that “can you move your afro” is now an ongoing joke in that classroom, which the students receive no recourse for. She noted that the teacher may say something to quiet down the class, but it does not go further than that. When asked how she deals with situations like this Michelle stated that her mother told her to “make them feel small” by acting unaffected. Michelle states that she feels the White students in her school expect her to act “a certain way and they expect the Black people to be really like mean and grumpy and like really like ignorant and obnoxious but they expect you to act a certain way and say certain things, they don’t want you to be

sophisticated or polite or anything that’s not what their expectation is.”

Mainly finding fault with teachers and administrators for lack of support, Michelle said the main thing she would change about her school would be to increase diversity among teachers and administrators. For this reason she is avoiding the local high school instead applying for an early college



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program. As the youngest of four sisters she feels her mother is aware of the increased racial issues at the high school and would like to avoid them with her. However, currently Michelle is supported by her group of Black girl friends that she describes as “different” and girls who “don’t care about what other people think.”

## Discussion

The commonalities found among each girl include class and race related marginalization, resistance to marginalizing norms, resistance to stereotypes, post-racial beliefs, difficulty naming inequity and dis-identification with the larger Black community. In this study I found that school perception differed somewhat by academic track, in turn possibly affecting the academic decisions or desires of the girls. While all girls reveal general marginalization in school, girls that participated in the upper-track or advanced courses indicated a heightened sense of marginalization and need for peer

The data collected demonstrated that the girls accept the margin as the norm agreeing to their place as the “other” and on occasion feigning “Whiteness” to fit in with their White peers. Also, they retain very little authority in “choosing” friends or friendships and simply are forced to allow the relationships to choose them because essentially they are what is “left over.” These results support Davis and Welcher’s (2013) findings that class does not mitigate issues of racism and difference.

Also, participants’ experiences reassert the validity of Black feminist theory assertion that Black women experience a matrix of oppression dealing with sexism, classism and racism. Girls exhibit a struggle to navigate classist and racist pressures, but also note feeling their experience is very different from Black boys in the same environment. The participants illustrate the consistent presence of racism and importance of race in their environment. To develop strategies to improve the academic and social experiences of these girls the endemic nature of racism to structures, including schools, must be addressed.

Each participant developed strategies to deal with their racial difference and marginalization, indicating that their race and gender contributed to a daily struggle intensifying the school experience. Further, the participants indicate that the heightened class distinctions in their school as the girls all noted that there was an upper-tier of the school occupied by students identified as super rich or “country clubbers.” However, this study complicates simple understandings of simple racial difference as participants associated issues of race with specific issues of image, beauty, teacher treatment, class selection and friendship, and issues of class with extra-curricular activities and worth. While the girl’s

middle class status does not reflect the particular type of vulnerability that Bowser (2007) and Patillo-McCoy (1999) suggest in reference to the interplay of privilege and vulnerability, peer isolation and adult (racism) characterized their experience as Black girls in a predominantly-White suburban community.

Participants exhibited a need for critical education that will help them deconstruct issues that confront them including racism and classism amongst others. A critical education would give them the resources to understand why they may be isolated in advanced courses or why they feel administrators target them or teachers single them out. The ability to think critically could also give them the agency to defend themselves and confront inequity to make the space more comfortable for them.

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

The results of the study indicate that research and policies addressing the achievement gap must be race specific as race is a specific disadvantage point for the girls, even in their upper middle class position. Often the discussion of disadvantage is reserved for lower socioeconomic status African Americans; however, this work illustrates the racial inequities present regardless of class position and can be intensified by class. These results are specifically pertinent to this Southeastern school district as race specific policies have been dismantled in the past two decades leaving students in extremely segregated schools, stranding middle and upper middle class African American students in isolating predominantly-White suburban enclaves (Smith, 2004). This research indicates areas for research including tracking practices in predominantly-White public schools, teacher perceptions of African American children in

teacher experiences in predominantly-White schools, school hiring practices, teacher preparation programs and school disciplinary policies.

While some of the girls tried to adopt a raceless or post-racial identity by avoiding discussions of race and negotiating majority spaces thus fitting in, their difficulties, including being singled out by administrators and teachers and experiences of racism, negate the idea of a post-racial society and illustrate what race and ignoring racism is doing in these girls' lives. Particular to these girls is the interplay of class and race as they are members of the upper-middle class yet they still experience life at the "bottom." Race, class and sex or gender has a serious effect on the girls' educational outcomes as the navigation of the various structural hierarchies and stereotypes about Black people are an additional obstacle for these girls. Negotiating this "in the middle" identity creates a more complex middle school experience for these girls and has important implications for their self-concept and academic trajectory.

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