The Development Of Black Girl Critical Literacies Of Race, Gender, And Class In Independent Schools: Awareness, Agency, & Emotion

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The Development Of Black Girl Critical Literacies Of Race, Gender, And Class In Independent Schools: Awareness, Agency, & Emotion

Abstract
This dissertation analyzes the agency that adolescent Black girls in independent schools use to craft their identities, and describes the particular competencies that they enact as they navigate encounters of race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status within their daily school lives. Through the adoption of developmental, feminist, and critical pedagogy frameworks, this phenomenological study employs a grounded theory methodology and presents an emergent theory that describes the phenomenon of “Black girl critical literacies” when situated in the context of elite, predominantly White independent schools. I define Black girl critical literacies as the phenomenon in which Black girls use particular competencies to recognize, process, and respond to messages that they receive connected to their status as Black adolescent females in U.S. society while simultaneously crafting their own sense of their Black girl identities.

Using weekly discussion groups grounded in critical feminist pedagogy and one-on-one interviews as the main sources of data, this dissertation serves two purposes: 1) it identifies and explores four different components that contribute to the development of Black girl critical literacies in independent schools: school culture, a developing critical consciousness, emotional literacy, and agency and activism; and 2) it analyzes how Black girls communicate the components of Black girl critical literacies to each other. The findings from this study contribute to the fields of education and gender studies and the disciplines of psychology, and sociology by offering a perspective on adolescent development, identity formation, and curriculum development that is infused with feminist and critical pedagogy frameworks.

Specific to education, the dissertation findings contribute to the literature on how to support students of color in independent schools, and point to how affinity group spaces can function as places for the critical consciousness development of adolescents. From a psychological perspective, the findings from this project deepen the literature on adolescent development and particularly highlight the identity development and construction of Black girls. In the sociological tradition and connected to the field of gender studies, my research contributes to the emerging field of Black girlhood studies by presenting how social structures of race, gender, and class function within particular sociocultural contexts.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK GIRL CRITICAL LITERACIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS: AWARENESS, AGENCY, & EMOTION

Charlotte Jacobs

A DISSERTATION

In

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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK GIRL CRITICAL LITERACIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS: AWARENESS, AGENCY, & EMOTION

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I dedicate this work to the girls who were a part of the Black Girl Project. I am forever grateful for the faith and trust you had in me to share your stories with the world, and for your unwavering dedication to supporting the Black girl and Black woman community. You are my sheroes.

In memory of Beverly Faye Canzater Jacobs, a woman whose fierce love, unconditional support, and never ending cheerleading for me to pursue my passions and my dreams made me the woman that I am today. I love you, Mom.
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I truly feel blessed to be loved so well and by so many people.
ABSTRACT

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK GIRL CRITICAL LITERACIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS: AWARENESS, AGENCY, & EMOTION

Charlotte Jacobs
Howard C. Stevenson

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I want the school to realize that we are all different and that we all don’t think, act and behave the same way. I feel like the school generalizes us way to too much and forgets that even though we are a group of girls of the same ethnicity, we all have different views and opinions. Like everyone else WE ARE INDIVIDUALS! Also, we aren’t always trying to portray the stereotype of the “Angry Black Women”. Just like everyone else we get angry too! Especially when the school doesn’t understand why we fight so hard for the certain liberties that should be given to us, such as an African American history course. I hope to see more Black faces in the school’s publications. We are rarely in the school magazine or on the website. Although there are not many of us black girls in the school, we still exist. I REALLY want to see a Black girl on the cover of the school magazine!—

Kathryn’, Grade 11, Girls’ College Prep School

Kathryn, an 11th grader at Girls’ College Prep, arrived at her elite predominantly White, all-girls school in 5th grade after previously having attended an elementary school in her neighborhood that was predominantly students of color. Like many schools in highly populated urban areas in the U.S., Kathryn’s school, while doing its best to serve its students, was sorely underfunded, had teachers that ranged in the proficiency and quality of their teaching (AAPF, 2015; NWLC, 2014). Beyond elementary school, the quality of education that Kathryn would receive in terms of course offerings and extracurricular experiences was questionable (AAPF, 2015; NWLC, 2014). These circumstances led Kathryn and her mother, the head of a single-parent household, to search for educational alternatives. Kathryn gained admission to Girls’ College Prep by being recruited for an academic enrichment program that identifies talented students of color who attend under-resourced public schools. As part of the program, Kathryn enrolled in a summer enrichment program and a Saturday enrichment program during the

1 In order to protect the identity of participants in this study, I use pseudonyms for all participants.
2 This school name and all other school names referenced in this dissertation are pseudonyms, and are not reflective of any schools that potentially have this name.
school year, the purpose of which was to prepare students for the academic and cultural worlds of independent schools.

Kathryn’s statement above reflects the complexities of race, gender, and class that Black girls who attend school in privileged predominantly White spaces navigate on a daily basis. Kathryn’s description of not being seen as an individual, of having negative stereotypes attached to her emotional expression, and the paradox of being hypervisible and invisible at the same time speaks to the marginalized status of Black girls in independent schools. At the same time, Kathryn’s reflection serves as a call to action and recognition on the part of her peers, teachers, and administrators at her school. In this vignette, Kathryn’s critique is an astute assessment of how power and privilege manifest in school culture and through interpersonal interactions in relation to Black girl identity and status. Kathryn’s ability to analyze her school experience at both a micro- and macro-level in terms of power, privilege, and identity, and her response to the messages is a phenomenon that I conceptualize as Black girl critical literacies (BGCL).

The focus of this phenomenological dissertation is to analyze both the process and skills that are a part of BGCL for Black girls who attend independent schools. I define BGCL as the phenomenon in which Black girls use particular competencies to recognize,

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3 Similar to Richardson (2013), I intentionally capitalize the word “Black” when referring to Black people as a way to “reference political and ethnic designation, on par with African American, which is not lower case” (p. 339). I also have decided to use the term “Black” when referring to the girls who are the focus of this dissertation. Although “Black” is a term that is often attributed to race, and not ethnicity, Blauner (1992) points out that as a result of the legacy of racism within the U.S., “Black Americans” form both a race and an ethnic group—an ethnic group being defined as “a group that shares a belief in its common past” and a group whose members “hold a set of common memories that make them feel that their customs, culture, and outlook are distinctive” (p. 7). I also intentionally use the term “Black” to be more inclusive of those who may not particularly identify as “African-American”, yet feel that they identify under the larger umbrella of the term “Black”.

process, and respond to messages that they receive connected to their status as Black adolescent females in U.S. society while simultaneously crafting their own sense of their Black girl identities.

The Macro Context: The Invisibility of Black Girls in Education Research

In a broad context, the premise of this study stems from the phenomenon that Black girls in the U.S. continue to be an underresearched population in the social sciences, especially within the field of education (Evans-Winters, 2005; Henry, 1998; Mirza, 1992; Smith, 1982; Ward & Robinson, 2006). Recent reports such as *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls* (NWLC, 2014) and *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* (AAPF, 2015), books such as *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (Morris, 2016), and the recent #LetHerLearn campaign highlight how a lack of focused data and attention on Black girls is causing us to overlook how they are increasingly becoming targets of excessive school disciplinary policies, sexual abuse and violence, and lack access to quality mental health services.

Additionally, events such as the 2015 video of a 16 year-old Black girl being slammed to the ground by a school resource officer while in class at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina, and the 2014 incident where Kiera Wilmot was arrested and threatened with school expulsion for her science project accidentally exploding (the charges were later dropped and she was allowed back in school) demonstrate the need for

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researchers, policymakers, and educators alike to focus more attention on Black girls’ experiences in school.

In social science research, much of the information about the status of Black girls in education has often been subsumed under the larger monolithic categories of Black youth or adolescent girls (Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Henry, 1998), neglecting the nuances of the particular experiences of Black girls. The status of Black girls in the U.S. education system reflects a position that is complex, nuanced, and often overshadowed by an assumption that Black girls are “doing ok” because overall trends in their academic achievement and outcomes outpace those of their Black male peers, who are viewed as being the subpopulation of youth that is most in crisis (Ferguson, 2001; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). It is true that Black girls are enrolling in higher education programs and institutions at higher rates than all other sub-populations of students (NWLC, 2014), and that they are more likely to aspire to be leaders and rate themselves more highly on leadership skills and ability compared to White girls (NWLC, 2014). Yet, when one compares the educational attainment of Black girls to other girl populations, we find that in almost all states the high school graduation rate for Black girls is significantly lower than that of White girls and the national average for all girls (Editorial Projects in Education, 2010), and that Black girls are “retained” of “held back” a grade at a rate of 21%, which is twice as high as the number for girls overall (Ross, et al., 2012). Additionally, when Black girls do pursue a post-secondary degree, they are less likely to enroll in four-year higher education institutions and have lower completion rates than other girl populations who enroll (NCES, 2006).
The discrepancy between the comparatively high rate of Black girls enrolling in higher education institutions but then not attaining a degree speaks to a faulty pipeline issue in the K-12 arena where Black girls are graduating from high school, but are not college or career ready. Black girls are less likely to have access to quality instruction and curricula that will prepare them for post-secondary education and high earning careers (NWLC, 2014). In fact, according to NAEP 2013 data, 63% of U.S. high school Black girls scored “below Basic” in math and 39% of U.S. high school Black girls scored “below Basic” in reading. Additionally, Black girls who attend schools that disproportionately serve students of color have less access to higher-level math and science courses, and are often taught by teachers who are unqualified (NWLC, 2014).

Another growing trend in the K-12 arena concerning Black girls is their growing presence in the school-to-prison pipeline due to zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools and schools’ increased use of punitive rather than restorative responses to address situations of conflict (AAPF, 2015; Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017; Morris, 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights 2012-13 school data, the suspension rate of Black girls is 6 times the suspension rate of White girls, higher than any other sub-population of girls, and higher than the suspension rates of White, Asian, and Latino boys. Additionally, even though Black girls are 16% of the total U.S. female student population, they represent nearly one-third of all female school-based arrests and more than one-third of all girls referred to law enforcement (Morris, 2016). One way in which the school-to-prison pipeline functions differently for Black girls in comparison to Black boys is that Black girls are often targets of sexual harassment and bullying while at
school (AAPF, 2015; NWLC, 2014). The zero-tolerance discipline policies and the failure of schools to intervene effectively on Black girls’ behalf places Black girls in situations where they either have to endure the harassment or risk harsh disciplinary measures when they choose to defend themselves (AAPF, 2015).

The effects of schools’ increased harsh disciplinary tactics leads to what Morris (2016) describes as the criminalization of Black girls and a phenomenon where Black girls are “pushed out” of school rather than “dropping out.” The term “push out” focuses on how school practices, policies, and systems can work to undermine the success of Black girls in schools by endorsing either a hyper vigilance of Black girls’ behavior and bodies, rendering them completely invisible in daily school life, or neglecting the realities of Black girls’ lives outside of school such as having family caretaking responsibilities or jobs. As a result, Black girls can feel disconnected and unsupported in school, which can lead to a decision to leave school in favor of finding social, emotional, and financial support in other places and spaces. Black girls are not “dropping out” of school, but rather it is the lack of school support and attention that pushes them out (AAPF, 2015; Morris, 2016).
This dissertation explores the experiences of Black girls who attend elite predominantly White independent schools, a sub-population of Black girls whose academic, social, and emotional experiences in school remain even farther outside of the academic conversation focusing on Black girls and education. In response to the aforementioned educational experiences of and outcomes for Black girls who attend U.S. public schools, a growing trend of educational choice among Black parents is that they are searching for educational alternatives to traditional public schools (Slaughter-Defoe, Stevenson, Arrington, & Johnson, 2012). Independent schools, known for their access to resources (Arrington & Stevenson, 2012), promotion of rigorous curriculum (Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012), and prestigious alumni career trajectories and leadership networks (Karabel, 2005; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2003), serve as a viable option for many Black parents who view education as the key to social mobility in U.S. society (Arrington & Stevenson, 2012).

While independent schools are touted as sites of social mobility, they are also institutions whose historical roots are grounded in the ideology of social, financial, and racial exclusion and inaccessibility (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Speede-Franklin, 2015).

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6 Independent schools, according to the National Association of Independent Schools, the accrediting body for over 1,400 independent schools in the U.S., are “non-profit private schools that are independent in philosophy: each is driven by a unique mission. They are also independent in the way they are managed and financed: each is governed by independent board of trustees and each is primarily supported through tuition payments and charitable contributions. They are accountable to their communities and are accredited by state-approving accrediting bodies” (NAIS website, 2015).
Though these schools have become increasingly diverse, the reality is that as of the 2015-16 school year, the average student population comprised of roughly 6.5% African-American, 5.3% Latino, 8.2% Asian American, 7.7% Multiracial American, 0.6% Native American, 3.6% Pacific Islander, 2.1% Middle Eastern, and 65.3% European American students (NAIS Facts at a Glance, 2015). In terms of socioeconomic diversity, the average tuition of NAIS member schools was $20,173 per year for day schools and between $40,098 and $51,800 for boarding schools. Relatedly, an average of 24.1% of students who attend independent schools receive financial assistance from the school (NAIS Facts at a Glance, 2015).

This dissertation studies the experiences of Black girls--students who do not embody the average demographics of an independent school. I argue that the racial, gender, and sometimes socioeconomic identities of Black girls who attend independent schools classifies them as a racialized and gendered “other” (hooks, 1990) within their elite predominantly White school environment, and that this “othered” status leads to the development of particular strategies that support them in processing encounters of race, gender, and class in relation to the crafting of their adolescent Black female identities.

The “othered” status of Black girls in independent schools exists not only at the level of school population demographics, but also is reflected more broadly in the lack of attention that scholars have dedicated to researching their particular experiences. Similar to the trend of social science research concerning Black girls in education, the experiences of Black girls in independent schools are often subsumed under research that describes the general experiences of Black youth who attend independent schools.
(Arrington & Stevenson, 2012; Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012; Slaughter & Johnson, 1988). The limited research that does explore the experiences of Black girls in independent schools tends to focus on the influence of the school environment on the girls (Alexander-Snow, 1999; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; White, 2013), creating a situation where Black girls are solely receivers of messages related to race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, ignoring the agency that Black girls have in constructing their own sense of identity.

The seminal works of Slaughter & Johnson (1988) and Cary (1991), and the ethnographic studies of Alexander-Snow (1999) and Horvat & Antonio (1999) offer a picture where Black girls are often the “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986) their elite, predominantly White schools. In this circumstance, Black girls’ intersecting identities of being Black, female, and of differing socioeconomic backgrounds often push them to the margins of academic and social circles in their daily school environments. Yet, even as outsiders, paradoxically, Black girls still have access to a privileged world of resources and networks that are not open to many people. Common themes of Black girls’ academic, social, and emotional experiences in independent schools seem to persist throughout time and across different types of independent schools (boarding vs. day, single-sex vs. coed, rural vs. urban). Academically, Black girls often experience microaggressions in the form of teachers and peers questioning their academic abilities.

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7 Though I will discuss the educational experiences of Black girls in independent schools in more detail in Chapter 3, I conduct a brief review here.
8 Sue, et al. (2007) define microaggressions as as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).
by assuming that they received admission to the school solely through affirmative action-related policies, and not by merit (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; White, 2013). Relatedly, Black girls in this study and in other research studies described experiences where their teachers either expressed surprise or doubted that they were capable of being successful in honors and advanced courses (White, 2013).

In the social arena, the overall experience for Black girls is a narrative of constantly trying to fit into a school culture that was not made for them. From their schools, which serve as sites of societal reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), they receive messages that their identities of race, gender, and often class intersect to exclude them from what is valued in society—they are not boys, they do not follow White feminine beauty standards of having straight hair, light skin, and thin figures, and their class status could also place them outside of middle-class norms (Hill, 2002; Jones, 2015; Ward, 1990). In juxtaposition to their status as being outside of the norm, the literature also reflects how Black girls are often only valued socially because they are seen as being “cool” by their White peers and as experts on Black culture and slang—often stemming from the assumption that all Black girls live in the “ghetto” or the “hood” (Alexander-Snow, 1999; White, 2013). In response to their “outsider” status in relation to their White peers, the literature also shows how Black girls in independent schools often create their own affinity groups, whether formally or informally, as a way to find sources of affirmation, understanding, and solidarity (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010; White, 2013).
Emotionally, Black girls in independent schools, similar to Black girls in public schools, often experience a policing and management of their emotions by administrators, teachers, and peers (Chase, 2008; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Scholars have found that often educators hold a particular bias that Black girls need more social correction than other student sub-populations, and therefore their behaviors and actions fall under intense scrutiny because they do not resemble accepted institutional norms, which usually stem from a White normative frame (AAPF, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; Gibson, 2015; Morris, 2007). Growing research on Black girls’ experiences in school shows that Black girls in various types of school, be it predominantly students of color or predominantly White, frequently are viewed by their teachers and administrators as loud, unruly, disrespectful, and unmanageable, when often the situation was that Black girls were attempting to express their opinions and needs (AAPF, 2015; Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016).

The purpose of this dissertation is to illuminate the contemporary issues that Black girls in independent school experience. The Black girls who attend independent schools today are those who are growing up in an era where the production, sharing, and consumption of information is at their fingertips through a constant connection to the articles, blogs, thought pieces, and posts on social media. Additionally, Black girls in independent schools today are attending school in a society where the income gap between men and women and between people of color and White people persists (NWLC, 2015), where the opportunity gap in education continues to widen (AAPF 2015;
Gorski, 2013; NWLC, 2014) and where we witnessed our first biracial president who had two Black daughters who attend independent schools.

In contrast to the literature that positions Black girls solely as victims and recipients of racism, sexism, and classism, the aim of this dissertation is to employ an asset-based perspective to highlight the awareness and agency that Black girls bring to their experiences through the development of skills known as Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL).

**Researcher Assumptions & Research Questions**

My research questions for this project are guided by the underlying assumptions and beliefs that I carry with me as a researcher:

- **My principles as a Black feminist researcher.** As a Black feminist, the goal of my research is to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, particularly those of Black girls and women. I hold a feminist standpoint (Fine, 1992, 1994; Reinharz, 1992) in that I aim to employ research methods that flatten the “researcher/participant” and “expert/novice” hierarchy and acknowledge that the participants are the experts of their experiences.

- **Black girls have experiences that are qualitatively unique from other demographic groups.** Following the critical feminist theories of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and critical race feminism (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wing, 2000), I believe that the intersection of being young, Black, and female in U.S. society creates a
circumstance in which Black girls experience society in a way that is qualitatively different from the social, emotional, and academic experiences of other demographic groups. This means that in order to strive for an equitable society, we must pay attention to what the experiences of Black girls are, and what are the societal conditions that lead to those experiences occurring.

- **Black girls have agency.** I believe that as much as Black girls are taking in the messages from the world around them, they also have the ability to analyze and critique those messages as well as actively construct their own sense of identity. Too often research frames Black girls as being the victims of society rather than focusing on how resilient, strong, and smart they are (Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015; Evans-Winters, 2005; Gaunt, 2006).

- **Developing a critical awareness is key to the vision of an equitable and just society.** In order for change to occur in our society that will push it to be a place that is more equitable for Black girls and women, all people need to develop a critical awareness that pushes them question the way that power and privilege works in our society (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 2003).

These beliefs and assumptions inform the following **research questions:**

1. What do Black girl critical literacies look like in the context of predominantly White independent schools?
   - How do Black girl critical literacies function in the daily school lives of Black girls who attend independent schools?
1. How do Black girl critical literacies interact with the construction of Black female identities?

2. How does an enrichment curriculum grounded in critical feminist theories and emancipatory pedagogies influence the different components of Black girl critical literacies within an independent school context?

3. How do adolescent Black girls in the independent school setting articulate the components of Black girl critical literacies to other Black girls?

**Overview of Methods and Key Concepts**

**Methods**

This phenomenological dissertation study employed a grounded theory methodology in order to capture Black girls’ experiences and related analyses of their experience of racial, gendered, and classed encounters in independent schools. In order to answer my research questions, I primarily drew on the data from observations from weekly discussion groups that I facilitated. Because my intention was not only to document the girls’ understandings, but also to support their positive development, the content of the discussion groups was decidedly grounded in feminist theories and critical pedagogies. After each audio and video recorded session, I produced field notes and researcher reflections to track my thoughts around an emergent theory. I also administered pre- and post- questionnaires and conducted individual interviews with the participants in order to understand how descriptive factors such as socioeconomic status,
years attending an independent school, and racial demographics of their neighborhood influenced the participants’ recognition and understanding of different encounters.

**Key Concepts**

**Critical and social literacies.** As a way to better understand the experiences of marginalized groups around encounters of racism, sexism, and classism, some scholars have begun to expand the definitions of literacy and reading to move beyond the text and situate literacies and the act of reading within the worlds of psychology and education, describing them as a set of skills and abilities in which people recognize, process, and respond to experiences in their lives related to different facets of their identities such as race (Stevenson, 2014), socioeconomic status (Gorski, 2013), and the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender (Richardson, 2003). I draw on Howard Stevenson’s (2014) work on racial literacy to inform my conceptualization of Black girl critical literacies. Grounded in the field of psychology, Stevenson situates the phenomenon of racial literacy in the literatures of racial/ethnic socialization, stress and coping, stereotype threat, and physiological reactions to racial conflict. Stevenson defines racial literacy as “the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful encounters through the competent demonstration of intellectual, behavioral, and emotional skills of decoding and reducing racial stress during racial conflicts” (p. 115). The phenomenon of racial literacy serves as a touch point through which to explore the specific skills and strategies Black girls employ as part of their critical literacies.

Additionally, Richardson’s (2003) work on the origin, development, and embodiment of Black literacies is particularly relevant to the discussion of an emergent
theory around Black girl critical literacies. Richardson describes a Black female literacy as “ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society” (p. 77). Following the social literacy tradition, Richardson highlights how the language and literacy practices that Black females enact are a result of their being socialized in a world that values particular forms of race, gender, and class, while marginalizing others. Richardson points out that the specific social constructions of the Black female experience such as the generalized role of Black women as “nurturers and protectors,” the value of autonomy and independence in the Black community, and the discovery that Black females are marked as racial and sexual objects to a greater degree than their White peers all influence the literacies, knowledge, and ways of being that Black women develop in order to navigate their worlds.

By drawing on the literature that highlights this emerging approach towards conceptualizing literacy, I have developed the concept “Black Girl Critical Literacies,” (BGCL) which I define as the set of competencies which Black girls use to recognize, process, and respond to messages that they receive connected to their status as Black females in U.S. society while simultaneously crafting their own sense of their Black girl identities. My decision to develop the concept of BGCL to study the experiences of Black girls in independent schools speaks to a focus not only on what their experiences are, but also how Black girls understand and process their experiences.

The concept of illiteracy. Since this dissertation identifies and describes the components BCGL, it is worthwhile to also think about the concept of illiteracy. Giroux
(1983) offers an initial discussion point of illiteracy by defining the phenomenon as “the functional inability or refusal of middle- and upper-class persons to read the world and their lives in a critical and historically relational way” (p. 12). Using this definition, illiteracy in the context of this study translates to a Black girl’s lack of awareness or knowledge of how her status in society, her interactions with others, and her sources of knowledge are all situated within historical, societal, political, and institutional contexts. In short, illiteracy is a lack of critical consciousness-- a lack of the ability to critically view the ways in which society functions and the status of the Black female within it.

Another component of illiteracy is captured by Freire and Macedo’s (1987) discussion of literacy. They state that “a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction” (p. 159). Friere and Macedo’s definition of literacy highlight the praxis or social transformational aspect of literacy in that knowing how to read the world means that one uses that knowledge to deconstruct systems of power and privilege. In the context of this dissertation, illiteracy can also take the form of a lack of action on the part of Black girls to transform their worlds, particularly in the independent school context. It is not enough that they can view the world with a critical eye, but rather their behaviors should work to make their worlds more equitable spaces in terms of power and social relations.

**Critical consciousness.** My understanding of critical consciousness draws on Freire’s (1970) theory of “conscientização” (p. 35) or critical consciousness, which holds that critical consciousness development involves a growing awareness and analysis of the power relations that exist within social relationships and societal structures. Additionally,
my perspective of critical consciousness stems from Collins’ (2000) theory of “Black woman standpoint” (p. 29), which highlights how Black women in the U.S. learn to develop a particular way of seeing the world as a result of their interlocking oppressive identities. For Black girls, the development of a growing critical consciousness means not only developing an awareness of how power and social relations in the U.S. influence their marginalized societal status, but also how they engage in what Freire (1970) refers to as “praxis” (p. 125)—a cycle of reflection and action that leads towards the disruption and dismantling of oppressive systems.

At the root of Black girls’ critical consciousness is the notion of resistance. In order to engage in praxis, Black girls must resist the dominant and negative images in society that undervalue their intelligence, beauty, and capacity for action. Robinson & Ward’s (1991) work with adolescent Black girls presents two different strategies of resistance that Black girls employ—one being “resistance for survival” (p. 89) and the other being “resistance for liberation” (p. 89). The difference between these two strategies is that resistance for survival focus on short-term and crisis-related strategies, while resistance for liberation strategies promote a critical analysis of a situation in order to strategize how to best resolve or cope with the encounter. For Black girls, part of their critical consciousness development involves developing an awareness of which strategies to use when, and how to best respond to a situation to get the results that they want.

Agency & activism. In conceptualizing agency and activism, I draw on the sociological perspective of agency (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992), which views agency as the capacity of an individual to have “some degree of control over the social relations in
which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree” (Sewell, 1992, p. 20). The key principles undergirding the capacity for agency are individuals’ desire, their ability to form intentions, and their ability to act creatively (Sewell, 1992). BGCL draws on the principles of agency by pointing to how Black girls act creatively by defining what it means to be young, Black, and female on their own terms rather than uncritically accepting what society tells them that they are.

Additionally, sociologists place individual agency in relation to the existence and reproduction of “social systems” or “structures” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17), by following the idea that it is individual agency that produces new structures, while at the same time upholds particular structures in place—the duality of structure and agency. Sewell (1992), in particular highlights the transformative aspect of agency in that individuals all bring with them different forms of knowledge or “schemas” (p. 20) dependent upon historical and cultural contexts that allow them to navigate through their daily lives. The transformative potential of agency lies in the ability of individuals to transpose their schemas and apply them to different contexts. The agency and activism element of BGCL speaks to both the potential of Black girls to disrupt the institutional structures of racism, sexism, and classism through their critical knowledge (schemas) of the workings of society in relation to their Black female identities, and also the ability of Black girls to develop new structures which move towards the equity of Black girls in U.S. society.

**Emotional literacy.** My conceptualization of emotional literacy draws on the literature of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) as well as the psychological
perspectives of literacy. Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade (2008) define emotional intelligence as “the ability to carry out accurate reasoning about emotions and the ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge to enhance thought” (p. 511).

Drawing on Stevenson’s (2014) work on racial literacy, in which a central aspect of literacy entails “the competent demonstration of intellectual, behavioral, and emotional skills of decoding and reducing racial stress during racial conflicts” (p. 115), I hold that emotional literacy is an interactive process that involves not only recognizing one’s own emotions and the emotions of others, but also having larger understanding of how those emotions influence the outcomes of different interpersonal encounters. For Black girls, emotional literacy is a particularly important skill to have. In a society where the emotions of Black girls and women are consistently misread as being angry and aggressive (Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016), and where Black girls are often socialized to not fully express their emotions (Ward, 2007; Way, 1998), Black girls must learn how to recognize and process their own emotions in order to optimize their development. Additionally, being the member of a marginalized group in the U.S. also requires that Black girls learn how to read the emotions of others during an encounter in order to successfully and safely navigate through different interpersonal experiences.

**Scholarly and Practical Purpose and Significance**

My dissertation contributes to the fields of education and gender studies and the disciplines of psychology, and sociology by offering a perspective on adolescent
development, identity formation, and curriculum development that is infused with feminist and critical pedagogy frameworks. Specific to education, my research contributes to the literature on how to support the development of Black girls’ critical literacies in independent schools through the implementation of a curriculum that has its roots in critical feminist and critical pedagogy frameworks. Additionally, this dissertation suggests how affinity group spaces can function as places for the critical consciousness development of adolescents.

From a psychological perspective, the findings from this project deepen the literature on adolescent development and critical literacies and particularly highlights the identity development and construction of Black girls. Currently, the research on racial literacy has primarily focused on developing the racial literacy of Black male youth and their racial encounters in schools (Stevenson, 2014). My dissertation adds a gendered lens to racial literacy by exploring how racial literacy skills as well as the other literacies of Black girls are influenced by their different social locations in society and status in their schools.

In the sociological tradition and connected to the field of gender studies, my research contributes to the emerging field of Black girlhood studies (Brown, 2009, 2013; Evans-Winters 2005; Winn, 2010) by presenting how the social structures of race, gender, class, function within particular sociocultural contexts.

A practical implication of this dissertation in that it presents a process of empowerment for Black girls by describing how they enact control and agency in situations and contexts in which they are generally ignored or disempowered. By
adopting a systematic process of recognizing and processing experiences of injustice related to their race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, Black girls demonstrate the capacity to navigate their school lives on their own terms. The findings from this dissertation also serve as an instructive springboard for youth workers, educators, and schools that are interested in knowing how to better support the identity formation and critical consciousness development of Black girls. Through targeted collaborations with different youth programs and schools, the curriculum in advisory and affinity group spaces in schools could be further refined to take into account the different elements of Black girl critical literacies as a way to further support Black girls during adolescence.

**Dissertation Chapter Structure**

In order to situate theoretically situate my study of Black girl critical literacies in independent schools, I present the guiding frameworks of the study, which draw on developmental, critical feminist, and pedagogical perspectives (Chapter 2). I then contextualize my study within the literature by focusing on bodies of research connected to adolescent development, school culture, and emotional literacy (Chapter 3). In this review, I specifically focus on how parents, schools, and society function as socialization agents by communicating what norms, values, and expectations are particularly important for Black girls to adopt in order to be successful members of society. In Chapter 4, I present how my researcher beliefs, guiding frameworks, and review of the literature combine to create a conceptual framework and methodology of how to study BGCL using a grounded theory analysis. In the next three chapters of the dissertation, I present
my findings of the different elements that comprise a preliminary theory of Black girl critical literacies: *a developing critical consciousness* (Chapter 5), *emotional literacy* (Chapter 6), and *agency and activism* (Chapter 7). In Chapter 8, I explore the integrated aspect of Black girl critical literacies by presenting how the BGCL components interrelate with one another to form a unified theory. Lastly, this dissertation closes with overall conclusions, the scholarly implications of BGCL as a preliminary theory, and practical implications for how independent schools can better support the developmental and educational needs of Black girls.
CHAPTER 2: GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

Section 1: Developmental Frameworks

The ecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 1999) guide my developmental theoretical approaches for this dissertation. The ecological systems theory of human development serves as a way to contextualize the experiences and interactions that adolescent Black girls have within the independent school context through emphasizing the ways in which different levels of society are interconnected and influence the ways in which adolescent Black girls read their worlds and how they are read by others. PVEST adds another dimension to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model by focusing on how an understanding of cultural norms and expectations within particular contexts influence how she processes her experiences in relation to her perception of her identity, and how those processes have implications for her life course outcomes. Taken together, these two models create a framework to understand how Black girls’ identity development is a combination of individual meaning making processes and the internalization of messages that exist in context at the individual, community, and societal levels.

Ecological systems theory of human development. Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model of human development is grounded in the idea that human development is a result of the “progressive accommodation between a growing human organism and its immediate environment, and the way in which this relation is
mediated by forces emanating from more remote regions in the physical and social milieu” (p. 13). Specifically, Bronfenbrenner conceptualizes the environments through which people navigate as “a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3), so that people are influenced not only by their most immediate environments (e.g. school or home), but also the interactions of these environments, and the aggregate of the different structures which come together to form a culture or subculture of a particular society. As part of his model, Bronfenbrenner argues that “development” is a “person’s evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his relation to it, as well as the person’s growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties” (p. 9).

I draw on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model to use as a developmental frame for my conceptual framework because of its simultaneous focus on various intersecting and interrelated environments in a person’s life and how the interaction of these environments influence an individual’s development. In the case of this dissertation, Bronfenbrenner’s model calls attention to the fact that the particular encounters (or, using Bronfenbrenner’s term, points of development) Black girls experience in their independent school environments around race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status are a result of the interactions of the structures within the various environments to which the girls belong, starting from the macro-level of society to the meso-level of their schools, parents, and home communities to the micro-level of the interactions that they have with other Black girls. Bronfenbrenner’s model also helps to contextualize the ways in which Black girls develop and enact their Black girl critical literacies. How Black girls understand and read
these different inter-nested environments in terms of power relations influence the ways in which they choose to engage with different aspects (media, people, ideologies, etc.) of these environments.

**Phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST).**

Conceptually, the PVEST model integrates Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model of human development with a phenomenological approach to analyze how an individual’s understanding of societal norms and expectations interacts with her identity development and self-perception meaning making processes, particularly during the time of adolescence. Additionally, PVEST draws on symbolic interactionist perspectives (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934), psychoanalytic views (Erickson, 1963; Sullivan, 1947), resilience theories (Anthony 1987; Werner, 1989), and highlights the relationship that exists between culture and context (Boykin, 1986; Chestang, 1972; Ogbu, 1985; Trueba, 1988) (Spencer, 1999). PVEST employs a phenomenological approach by holding that it is not only the experience, but how one perceives her experience in different cultural contexts that influences how she perceives herself (Spencer et al., 1997). One goal of PVEST is to trace how those perceptions, or meaning making processes, influence an individual’s identity development and self-perception, and how an aspect of an individual’s meaning making process of their experiences includes developing coping methods and “corrective problem-solving strategies” (Spencer et al., 1997, p. 817).

While these processes typically happen in response to one particular moment, Spencer and her colleagues explore how these processes and self-perceptions can become
stable over time if an individual finds herself within the same cultural context throughout her life course. Related to the focus of this dissertation, the independent school environment serves as the cultural context to which the study participants must learn to adapt. Spencer holds that the self-perceptions that become stable over time then have the impact of influencing one’s thoughts, behavior, and actions. In detail, one’s self-perception can influence “whether one uses or downplays certain abilities, emphasizes or draws attention away from certain physical attributes, adopts or suppresses certain behaviors, engages or shies away from certain activities” (Spencer et al., 1997, p. 817-8).

In particular, the PVEST model explores how the interaction between one’s self-perception and one’s awareness of how others view her (a “self-other appraisal process”) leads to stress, and how youth cope with and respond to that stress (p. 819). Spencer et al. (1997) identify two different types of coping responses that occur when in stressful situations, one set of reactions are reactive coping methods, and the other are stable coping methods. Reactive coping methods are divided into two different categories: those that are maladaptive and those that are adaptive in relation to the experience of stress. The overall impact of these coping mechanisms is that they contribute to positive outcomes such as resiliency or competency in a particular area, or negative outcomes such as lowered self-esteem or disengagement in different areas of one’s life.

Most of Spencer’s and her colleagues PVEST work has focused on the experiences and self-perceptions of Black youth in urban and inner-city contexts. The PVEST model has been used to explore the impact of female teacher expectations for Black male students on the learning attitudes of Black adolescents (Spencer et al., 1997),
the concept of “Acting White” in relation to academic self-perception and achievement (Spencer et al., 2001), the school adjustment processes of Black male adolescents (Spencer, 1999), and the coping responses of Black youth (Spencer et al., 2003).

Drawing on PVEST as a framework for exploring BGCL in independent schools is useful in that it not only highlights the interplay of culture and context in identity formation at a broad level, but also examines the particular individual behaviors and beliefs that individuals engage in as a response to stressful experiences. For Black girls who attend independent schools, PVEST provides a lens through which to understand the particular skills and competencies that Black girls develop in response to the interactions that they experience in their independent school environment, and how these competencies are related to their individual identity formation as adolescent Black girls.

Section 2: Critical Feminist Frameworks

For the purpose of this dissertation, I employ the theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989; 2000) to create a guiding theoretical and methodological critical feminist framework for how the experiences of Black girls can be privileged and analyzed with the goal of promoting social change for Black girls in U.S. society. Intersectionality upholds the perspective that each individual in society is comprised of an intersection of identities tied to societal structures of oppression and domination, and that these intersections create unique experiences for individuals as a result of the multiple contexts in which they live. Black feminist thought builds upon the concept of intersectionality by highlighting the specific knowledge and
collective experiences that Black women and girls possess as a result of their intersecting identities, and emphasizes the resilience and sources of resistance that a Black female consciousness (an awareness of the status of Black females in relation to systems of power in the U.S.) affords.

**Intersectionality.** Though the concept of intersectionality began with a focus on the unique identity of Black women in U.S. society (Crenshaw, 1989), it is a concept that highlights the ways in which all individuals in society possess multiple identities tied to structures of domination and oppression that influence their status in society and the ways in which they experience the world. Maria Root’s (1999) work on the identities and experiences of multiracial people highlights the critical theory foundations of intersectionality in that it seeks to push back against and question the essentialist nature of identity construction in society. By calling on the social constructionist argument that identities are “socially constructed, fluid, and multidimensional” (Mahalingham, 2008, p. 369), Root highlights the potential functions of hybrid identities:

Naming a hybrid identity is an empowering act because it challenges the purity and authenticity claims of monolithic essentialist identities. It also brings into focus the centrality of Whiteness in discourses about identity. Hybrid identities challenge the monolithic, essentialist notions of identity, and the hegemony of Whiteness and the Eurocentric constructions of the Other. The cognitive and emotional impact of contact with the Other could be stressful and anxiety provoking. (Root, 1999, as cited in Mahalingam, 2008, p. 369)

Root’s (1999) description of the potential power of adopting hybrid identities as a theoretical and analytical stance, calls attention to the two-pronged form of analysis that intersectionality theory provides. One prong of analysis is that intersectionality theory critiques the structure of power and privilege in U.S society by highlighting how the
intersection of identities of individuals affords them a particular social location in society. The other prong of analysis of intersectionality is that it focuses on the experiences of those individuals whose identities make them marginalized persons in society.

In addressing the first prong of intersectionality, Mahalingam (2008) characterizes the focus of the theory as the “interplay between person and social location, with particular emphasis on power relations among various social locations” (p. 45, as cited in Cole, 2009, p. 173). Additionally, Nash (2008) points out that intersectionality serves as a tool of analysis of the larger problematic practices in our society by stating that “Intersectionality, the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity” (p. 2). In order to enact the critical stance that intersectionality theory provides, Cole (2009) pushes researchers to contextualize the experiences of individuals and groups by understanding where they stand in relation to one another in terms of historical, political, and cultural contexts. Doing so, Cole (2009) argues, then allows researchers to have a more contextualized understanding of the experiences and actions of their participants rather than focusing on how these occurrences depart from the norms that are established by dominant groups in society (citing Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003).

Related to the focus of this dissertation, this first prong of intersectionality is particularly relevant given that the participants of my study are adolescent Black girls who attend elite predominantly White independent schools. The “interplay” of power relations and social locations within my project has historical as well as societal roots.
The fact that elite independent schools historically were places of exclusion along race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic lines creates a potential tension between practices and policies that contribute to the overall culture of these schools and the presence of Black girls in these spaces. While current practices and policies may have been updated since they were first developed, they still have the potential to be exclusive or insensitive to the experiences of Black girls. The societal interplay of power relations and social locations is evident in the situation wherein Black girls, who continue to have a lowered status in the U.S., are attending schools that are part of a privileged space in society. As a researcher, I was particularly cognizant of how the interaction between the various power relations and social locations present in the experiences of Black girls in independent schools served to contextualize the ways in which the participants thought, processed, and acted in different situations.

The second prong of intersectionality theory is that the concept serves as a tool of analysis for the experiences of marginalized groups, especially women of color. As a critical theory, intersectionality “subverts race/gender binaries in the service of theorizing identity in a more complex fashion” (Nash, 2008, p. 2), and “seeks to demonstrate the racial variation(s) within gender and the gendered variation(s) within race through its attention to subjects whose identities contest race-or-gender categorizations” (Nash, 2008, p. 2). Following these principles, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) holds that Black women’s experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides. Yet the continued insistence that Black women’s demands and needs be filtered through categorical analyses that completely obscure their experiences guarantees that their needs will seldom be addressed. (p. 149)
As a tool of analysis and research method, intersectionality theory insists that researchers privilege the voices of marginalized groups so that they can fully articulate their experiences and their needs. Nash (2008) captures this perspective by stating, “For intersectional theorists, marginalized subjects have an epistemic advantage, a particular perspective that scholars should consider, if not adopt, when crafting a normative vision of a just society” (p. 3). In this reflection, Nash (2008) highlights the unique knowledge that marginalized groups have about their own particular experiences. Instead of aiming to capture the experiences of Black women through the experiences of Black people in general or through the experiences of women in general, the unique knowledge of Black women should come from their own experiences.

A critique of intersectionality theory is that through its reliance or focus on Black women as the models of intersectionality, the theory does not distance itself enough from Black feminist thought (Nash, 2008). The key ideas of Black feminist thought will be discussed in the next section, but at this point I argue that intersectionality broadens the scope of the study on the intersection of identity presented in Black feminist thought in that intersectionality can be used to push back against the monolithic view of the Black female identity. The theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality do not limit it to only serving the study of the intersection of race and gender, but rather prompt researchers, scholars, and educators to consider how the intersection of various socially significant identities that are connected to structures of power and status create a unique experience for those who are in possession of those identities.
Specific to this dissertation, the concept of intersectionality is useful in not only thinking about how the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender contribute to the experiences and understandings of my participants, but also how other social identifiers such as socioeconomic status and number of years attending elite independent schools contribute to how the participants view themselves, how they are viewed by others, and how they navigate their school environments.

**Black feminist thought.** Black feminist thought aligns with the broader objectives of critical social theory in that its goal is to work towards the justice and empowerment of U.S. Black women and for other groups that are similarly oppressed within our society (Collins, 2000). The key principle of Black feminist thought is that the economic, political, and social status of Black women in society provides them with a unique set of experiences that give them a viewpoint that is distinct from other member groups (Collins, 1989).

Black feminist thought brings to the forefront the fact that Black women have survived a legacy of oppressions as result of their status in society. They have experienced economic oppression through their relegation to “service” positions such as maids, nannies, and cooks; political oppression in that historically Black women were not allowed to vote and were excluded from public office, and currently do not receive equitable treatment in the justice system; and ideological oppression through the negative images of Black women such as the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Baby Mama that have been perpetuated through institutional structures in society (Collins, 2000). These different oppressive structures come together to create a system of social control over
Black women that keeps them in a subordinate position in society (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought argues that as a result of these continual oppressive experiences, Black women develop a distinct “Black feminist consciousness” about their position in society (Collins, 1989, p. 748). The aim of Black feminist thought is to use this Black feminist consciousness to encourage the development of a collective identity for Black women that creates a self-definition that differs from the identity that is placed on them by the dominant group (Collins, 1989).

In working towards the creation of a collective identity for Black women, Black feminist thought is quick to point out that there is no homogeneous Black woman standpoint whose experiences serve as the norm for all Black women, but rather, what exists is the Black women’s collective standpoint that outlines the different responses that Black women make to common challenges they experience as a result of being Black women in U.S. society (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought encourages Black women to value and trust their knowledge base, which is created as a result of their common experiences and responses to their experiences (Collins, 1989). This knowledge base is comprised of “general knowledge that helps U.S. Black women survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment” (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Black feminist thought particularly values the knowledge base of Black women because it firmly believes that “As members of a subordinate group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for their devalued status denies them the protections that white skin, maleness, and wealth confer” (Collins, 1989, p. 759).
In relation to the focus of this paper, Black feminist thought is a particularly useful tool in which to analyze the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of Black girls in the independent school environment. As presented in Chapter 1, interactions within school communities are often reflective of the values and beliefs of dominant society. In taking a Black feminist stance, I analyzed the interactions that my participants had within their school communities in relation to the historical, political, economic, and social roles and statuses that Black women and girls have traditionally had in U.S. society. Additionally, Black feminist theory provided a way to explore in detail how the knowledge base and Black feminist consciousness of Black women is both transferred to and created by Black girls.

The uniting principle of the two critical feminist theories of intersectionality and Black feminist thought is that they highlight the significance of the role that the intersection of societal identities plays in creating a unique way in which individuals understand, experience, and are situated in the world in which they live. As a result of these unique experiences, these theories argue that those who belong to certain identity groups (particularly those identity groups that are often marginalized in society) possess a certain kind of knowledge that often goes against and purposefully questions the dominant narratives of society. My preliminary theory of Black girl critical literacies in independent schools incorporates these perspectives by using them as a lens through which to view the ways in which adolescent Black girls in independent schools analyze and understand their experiences around race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic
status, and also how they construct their black female identities as a result of their processing of their experiences.

**Section 3: Pedagogical Frameworks**

One of the questions that I explore through in this dissertation is the way in which BGCL is communicated between Black girls. One area where this transfer of knowledge took place was through the daily conversations that Black girls had with each other. Another space where the communication of BGCL occurred was between Black women role models and Black girls. I employed the use of critical pedagogy frameworks in this dissertation in order to analyze the objectives, process, and elements that are part of the sharing of Black girl critical literacies between Black girls and women within the space of regular girls’ group meetings.

**Critical pedagogy.** Critical pedagogy takes the stance that schools can simultaneously be sites of oppression and dominance as well as places of liberation and empowerment. Since schools are “part of the interaction context between individual and society” (McLaren, 2003, p. 193), they are places where social inequality is reproduced on an individual level through the interactions that occur between the members of a school community and on an institutional level through the practices and policies that form the fabric of schools’ daily workings (McLaren, 2003; Weil, 1998). On the other hand, critical theorists support the view that if the right questions are asked, and the appropriate perspectives taken, schools can also be places where manifestations of social inequality can be called into question and dismantled. From this perspective, critical
theorists believe that “education should be a transformative activity aimed at self-production through an understanding of inequitable power and social relations” (Weil, 1998, p. 26).

When critiquing the institutional and social influence of schools, critical theorists situate critical pedagogy within the societal principles of politics, culture, and economics. The critical perspective of these societal principles lead to a particular assumption that critical theorists follow about the knowledge that is produced in schools. Knowledge produced in schools, according to critical theorists, is a “social construction deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations” (McLaren, 2003, p. 196), meaning that much of what is taught in schools, what students learn, and what is valued as knowledge is tied to the inequitable workings of our society. In response, critical pedagogy analyzes how and why knowledge is produced in the way that it is in our society, and why certain forms of knowledge are valued by the dominant culture while others are not. In relation to the focus of this dissertation, this critical stance of knowledge production takes the form of a critical consciousness that Black girls possess through BGCL so that they can analyze and critique the worlds through which they navigate in terms of power, privilege, and knowledge.

In addition to questioning the forms of knowledge in produced in schools, critical pedagogy also promotes the development and implementation of emancipatory knowledge as a way to deconstruct the notions of power and privilege present in the knowledge valued by the dominant culture. Specifically, emancipatory knowledge “aims at creating the conditions under which irrationality, domination, and oppression can be
overcome and transformed through deliberative, collective action” (McLaren, 2003, p. 197). Scholars’ discussions of critical pedagogy describe how these conditions can be met through both classroom structure as well as curriculum content.

On a structural level, critical pedagogy emphasizes the flattening of the traditional hierarchal teacher-student relationship to one where there is a mutual reciprocity and value of knowledge sharing between students and teachers (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1999). Schor (1999) further describes the nuances of the teacher-student relationship within a critical pedagogical framework in this way:

Critical teaching is not a one-way development, not ‘something done for students or to them’ for their own good (Freire, 1989, p. 34). It’s not a paternal campaign of clever teachers against defenseless students. Rather, a critical process is driven and justified by mutuality. (p. 10)

Shor’s description suggests a student-teacher relationship in which teachers understand that students bring their own knowledge to the classroom, and that both teachers and students have something to gain from a mutual and equitable sharing of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

My enactment of my role as facilitator (rather than teacher or instructor) of the girls’ groups where BGCL was the focus stemmed from the non-hierarchal perspective of critical pedagogy. Though I will describe my role as facilitator in more detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, it is important to note that I intentionally approached the girls’ groups from the position of a learner-facilitator. In doing so, I learned as much from the participants in my group as they learned from me. Part of what I learned through the facilitating the girls’ groups is what happened in a particular space where the focus is
BGCL and an intergenerational insider-outsider relationship existed between my participants and me (detailed further in Chapters 4 and 8).

In the area of curriculum content, critical pedagogy holds that the larger goal of a curriculum should be “developing in students a critical stance in relation to content” which is accomplished through “students’ gaining access to and facility with the language and literacy tools they need to be both critical and creative, problem posers and problem solvers, social analysts and social agents” (Janks, 2010, p. 23). Thus, the curriculum that I developed and used during the girls’ group meeting sessions was anchored by activities, discussion questions, and exercises grounded in critical feminist and critical literacy theories that facilitated the development of the Black girls’ critical stance about their status within their independent school context as well as their own adolescent Black female identity construction.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature that is most relevant to the focus of my dissertation. As my research questions focus on what Black girl critical literacies (BGCL) look like in elite predominantly White school spaces, its influence on Black girl identity construction, and how Black girls communicate BGCL to each other, this review examines the following three bodies of literature:

1) The period of adolescence and Black girl identity development through socialization

2) Independent school culture and Black girl identity development

3) Girls’ agency and activism

When reviewing the literature connected to adolescent development, I specifically focus on how adolescence functions as a developmental stage in which a maturity in the capacity for abstract thinking leads to identity development and a growing critical awareness of how society functions. In this review, I specifically highlight the racial and gender socialization experiences that the majority of Black girls’ experience in connection with their identity development.

In my review of the literature on school culture, I focus on how school culture functions as another source of socialization for Black girls by reinforcing dominant cultural norms and expectations. I specifically explore how the independent school culture serves to marginalize Black girls and is reflected in their academic, social, and emotional experiences at school.
The literature review on girls’ agency and activism serves to highlight how the research literature has conceptualized girls’ activism and their sources of agency, and where Black girls are situated within that literature. To that end, I present a discussion of the emerging field of Black girlhood studies, which serves to highlight the agency, resilience, creativity, and celebration of Black girls.

**Section 1: The Period of Adolescence: Black Girl Identity Development through Socialization**

This dissertation is situated within the period of adolescence because it is a developmental stage that researchers and scholars point to as time when youth actively engage in the construction of their identities with a growing level of awareness that is not present at younger ages (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Since young people during adolescence display the growing capability to master abstract thought, they are at a place where they not only begin to become more aware of how they identify themselves, but also how they are viewed by others (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Spencer (1999) describes the tasks that adolescents must accomplish below:

The teen years are an unusually vulnerable period, even when accompanied by supportive conditions. The potential for abstract thought makes the sensitivities to others’ opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and assessments particularly daunting and potentially devastating for social relationships, identity processes, and schooling outcomes. In and of itself, the adolescent period for all youths is a particularly salient time for critical aspects of self re-organization (see Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). The rapidity and complexity of self-organization occurring at this time should be viewed as somewhat phenomenal. This perhaps explains why identity formation takes root at this stage as a virtual ‘safety net.’ (p. 48)
Spencer’s (1999) description speaks to the general consensus that most developmental theorists and researchers come to in that the fundamental goal of adolescence is to achieve a stable sense of one’s identity. Young people develop their identities in response to a variety of external sources such as peers, family members, school practices and policies, and the media. These sources all function as components of socialization, which Arrington & Stevenson (2012, citing Pelissier, 1991, p. 81) define as “the acquisition and reproduction of ways of being in the world”. Taking this definition into account, what most Black girls experience as they navigate between their worlds of family and community, peers, and school is a clash between what their parents (particularly their mothers) have taught them about how to navigate the world as a Black girl, and what other entities value as important in being good daughters, caring friends, and successful students.

Related to the focus of this dissertation, I take the stance that the “safety net” for the identity formation of adolescent Black girls in independent schools is strengthened through their development of the skills and processes that come together to create Black girl critical literacies. In order to better understand the messages that adolescent Black girls receive broadly about race and gender, the rest of this section will explore the literature on the racial and gender development and socialization of adolescent Black girls. Another objective of this review is to illustrate how BGCL can work as a supportive phenomenon that encourages adolescent Black girls to process and critique the various aspects of their racial and gender socialization within the context of independent schools.
Black Girl Identity Formation Through Racial Socialization

Perspectives on racial socialization. Stevenson (2014) defines racial/ethnic socialization (R/ES) as “the sum total of verbal and nonverbal communication from families, society, and communities that define the rules for interpreting racial/ethnic conflict, progress, and resolution” (p. 114). Stevenson makes a distinction between the two major approaches in which the literature around racial/ethnic socialization (R/ES) tends to fall: legacy racial socialization and literacy racial socialization. Legacy racial socialization is characterized by the investigation of the retrospective messages that parents communicated to their children, as well as the past messages that youth may have received from other outside socializing agents such as their schools and communities. As a whole, most of the research literature about the R/ES of youth of color focuses on how parents “experience and talk about discrimination and racism, and how they teach their children how to manage those situations” (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 748). Researchers have found that parental R/ES functions not only to educate youth of color about within and between group relations within U.S. society, but also serves as buffer to negative and potentially psychologically damaging experiences through the promotion of a sense of racial/ethnic pride by teaching children about their history and culture (Deloach et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2006; Johnson, 1988; Thompson, et al., 2013).

Literacy socialization, on the other hand, is newer to the research field and is characterized as a more proactive approach in comparison to legacy racial socialization. Literacy socialization focuses on the skills and effective coping strategies that youth can develop to “skillfully and flexibly respond to insult and seek support within different
contexts (home, school, neighborhood)” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 118). My preliminary theory of Black girl critical literacies is grounded in and builds upon this conceptualization of literacy by specifically focusing on the types of strategies and skills that adolescent Black girls develop in relation to their being young Black female students at elite independent schools.

The racial socialization of adolescent Black girls. During the period of adolescence, the key questions that arise for Black youth regarding their racial identity are “Who am I? Who can I be? What does it mean to be a member of my racial group?” (Phinney, 1989). Ward (1990) specifically points out that working to answer these questions is a particularly challenging task for Black adolescents in that they “must create and assert an identity that is self-defined while surrounded by other people’s competing efforts to impose on them their own definitions of racial identity and status” (p. 121). Though the questions of racial identity are particularly salient during the time of adolescence, Black girls begin to receive messages about their comparative racial identity and status at young age through the presence of constant socializing agents in their lives (parents, communities, schools, media, etc.) (Stevenson, 1998, 2003). In a society in which the status of Black women and girls is consistently undervalued due to the intersection of their race and gender, Black parents are intentional in ensuring that their daughters are socialized with traits of “assertiveness, willfulness, and independence” (Lewis, 1975) as a way to combat the negative encounters that they will most likely experience throughout their lifetimes.
Ward (1996) argues that Black parenting is inherently a “political act” and that “addressing racism and sexism in an open and forthright manner is essential to building psychological health in African American children” (p. 93). Ward’s research with Black girls reveals that many Black parents have intentional conversations with their daughters to teach them to resist the prevalent negative stereotypes associated with being Black and female. One resistance strategy that Ward describes is how Black mothers engage in “truth telling” with their daughters: “the intent of the ‘harsh critique’ is ‘to tell it like it is,’ to dismantle futile idealism, unmask illusions, and ultimately strengthen character” (p. 94). This “truth telling” has also been described by some girls as having a particular “attitude,” which is “a way of forcefully expressing themselves. While it may be considered inappropriate, ineffective, or rude at times, such confident articulations force people to listen and take their thoughts and feelings seriously” (Way, 1998, p. 89).

Robinson and Ward (1991) also characterize two distinct forms of resistance that Black girls typically display as a result of their focused racial socialization: “resistance for survival” and “resistance for liberation.” “Resistance for survival” offers short-term solutions for how to cope with and understand situations of racism and discrimination. The strategies employed in the “resistance for survival” approach can take the form of making decisions based purely on emotion rather than a close examination of the underlying factors of the racist or discriminatory experience (Robinson & Ward, 1991). “Resistance for liberation” strategies, on the other hand, fall under Stevenson’s (2014) definition literacy socialization, in that they provide “solutions that serve to empower African American females through confirmation of positive self-conceptions, as well as
strengthening connections to the broader African American community” (Robinson & Ward, 1991, as cited in Ward, 1996, p. 95). The focus of “resistance for liberation” is that it encourages Black girls to critically examine and affirm themselves and their status in society in safe and supportive environments, known as “homespaces” (Ward, 1996).

The benefits and influence of positive R/ES experiences for Black adolescent girls cannot be overstated. Researchers have discovered that those Black girls who have higher levels of ethnic identity are found to perform better in school and have better social relations with friends (Belgrave, 2009; Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, & West-Bey, 2009; Hughes et al., 2006). Additionally, AAUW’s (1991, 1992) study of adolescent girls in the U.S. found that Black girls had higher levels of self-esteem and were able to maintain these high levels throughout adolescence compared to their Latina and White female peers, suggesting that the R/ES of Black girls may be a significant contributor to their high self-esteem, a finding echoed by other researchers as well (Neblett, et al., 2008).

The research literature on R/ES in connection with Black girls’ development highlights the importance of the influence of socializing factors not only on their general well-being, but also on their sense of self. Though most of the literature on the racial socialization of Black youth has not addressed the way in which the intersecting identity of gender may factor into the racial identity development process (Spencer, 1997, 1999, 2001), there is a growing area of research that points to the ways in which Black girls may specifically be socialized that is different from their Black male counterparts (Cox, 2015; Love, 2012; Ward, 1996; 2007). As a way to consider this idea further, the next
section of this literature review will analyze the gender identity development and socialization of adolescent Black girls.

**Black Girl Identity Formation Through Gender Socialization**

Adolescence is a critical period for gender identity development because this is the time period in which youth are trying to determine what is and will be expected of them as adults, particularly in terms of the behaviors they will be expected to perform around a certain gender identity (Basow & Rubin, 1999). Youth develop gender role beliefs about how men and women are supposed to think, feel, and act through the socialization processes that occur as they receive messages around gender from their parents, teachers, friends, the media, and the larger society (Belgrave, 2009). The importance of these gender role beliefs is that they affect how individuals behave and the choices that they make (Belgrave, 2009). West & Zimmerman (1987) describe this process as “doing gender” and as a phenomenon that is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (p. 126). Gender scholars have come to characterize “doing gender” as a way in which individuals “socially achieve and continue to manage a gendered identity” (Williams, 2002, p. 30).

Schools are places where these gender identity beliefs are upheld and reinforced through what Kessler, Ashenden, O'Connell, & Dowsett (1985) describe as “gender regimes.” Gender regimes are “patterns of processes that construct varying forms of masculinity and femininity, array them hierarchically in terms of power and prestige, and create sexual divisions of labor within schools” (p. 184, as cited in Grant, 1992, p. 93). As will be described in the next part of this section, Black girls not only have to learn
particular ways of doing gender according to the definitions of larger society, but also their race and gender intersect to position them at a specific status location within the gender regimes present in their schools.

**Gender roles, beliefs, and socialization experiences of Black girls.** Phoenix (1997) points out that for Black youth an important part of gender identity development is “learning that Black people and White people occupy different structural positions and therefore have qualitatively different experiences around gender” (p. 63). For Black girls, much of their experience around gender identity development stems from the lack of congruency between the dominant standards of femininity and beauty in the U.S. and the ways in which Black girls tend to embody behaviors and appearances that are counter to the dominant standards. Fordham (1993) describes this phenomenon in detail:

> In America, white womanhood is often defined as a cultural universal. Yet, the moral superiority of white womanhood is rarely explicitly verbalized in the academy. Indeed, it is most often labeled “femaleness” minus the white referent. Nonetheless, white and middle class are the “hidden transcript[s]” (J. Scott 1990) of femaleness, the womanhood invariably and historically celebrated in academe. In striking contrast, black womanhood is often presented as the anti-thesis of white women's lives, the slur or “the nothingness” (see Christian, 1990; Walker, 1982) that men and other women use to perpetuate and control the image of the “good girl” and by extension the good woman. (p. 4)

Though Fordham’s description is calling attention to the status of Black women within the academy in higher education settings, her point that White women (and girls) exist as the cultural norm that defines what is “good”, and therefore Black women (and girls) are

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in the position of what is “bad”, is relevant to this discussion of the gender identity development of Black girls.

When Black girls are represented in society, they are generally depicted in the following manner:

The media’s most frequent representation of a young black woman is a teenage mother, who is usually presented as a low-income future welfare recipient with minimal education and few skills to bring to the workplace. She is sexually irresponsible and easily manipulated by men in her life. Solely responsible for her plight, it is her fault and her fault alone that her future options are so limited. (Ward, 1990, p. 143)

Noting that Ward’s findings date back to over twenty years ago, a more contemporary analysis in *Essence* Magazine’s “Images of Black Women in Media” study (Walton, 2013) demonstrates that many of the Black woman stereotypes persist. In the study, in which 1,200 women were asked to keep journals about the images that they saw of Black women depicted in the media, the images that appeared the most frequently were those of “Gold Diggers,” “Modern Jezebels,” “Baby Mamas,” “Uneducated Sisters,” “Rachet Women,” “Angry Black Women,” “Mean Black Girls,” “Unhealthy Black Women,” and “Black Barbies”—images that are not far from Ward’s (1990) description. Consequently, positive images of Black women such as “Young Phenoms,” “Real Beauties,” “Individualists,” “Community Heroines,” “Girls Next Door,” and “Modern Matriarchs” also appeared, and study concluded that these are the images that are not represented enough in the media.

In light of the devalued status of Black women in society, the negative portrayals of Black women in the media, and the incongruence between the femininity and beauty
standards of White women and those of Black women, research points to the fact that upon entering adolescence Black girls can experience a “cultural dissonance” in which they begin to understand that not only are they devalued by society because of their race, but also because of their gender (Stevens, 1999). Researchers focusing on the gender socialization of Black girls have found that Black mothers and Black women role models intentionally attempt to socialize Black girls in ways that are counter to the dominant norms as a way to protect them from the potential psychological damage as a result of repeated exposure to negative messages and images (Belgrave, 2009; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007; Ward, 1990).

One way in which Black girls’ socialization is counter to that of dominant gender norms is that they have generally been found to be “androgynous” in their gender role identity rather than traditionally feminine or masculine (Ashcraft & Belgrave, 2004; Way, 1995). Belgrave (2009) describes the “androgynous” gender beliefs of Black girls as meaning that they possess both high masculine beliefs (being “independent, assertive, willing to take risks, a leader, and decisive” (p.18)) and high feminine beliefs (being “emotional, attentive, caring, cooperative, and helpful” (p. 18)). This androgynous gender role identity of Black girls has been found to be particularly advantageous for them in that Black girls who have this type of gender role identity tend to have higher self-esteem, a higher sense of ethnic identity, and are less likely to participate in risky drug use and sexual behaviors (Belgrave, 2009).

Other research highlights the contradictory messages that Black girls receive from their parents in that they are taught to be strong, assertive, hard-working, and key
contributors to their community, yet they are also taught the importance of being nurturing and of being respectful of and submissive to White authority in order to succeed in life (Hill, 2002). Morris (2016) points out how the contradictory nature of these messages create a situation where Black girls are required to “participate in identity politics that marginalize them or place them into polarizing categories: they are either ‘good’ girls or ‘ghetto’ girls who behave in ways that exacerbate stereotypes about Black femininity” (p. 10).

In schools, because Black girls often embody androgynous gender role beliefs, their behaviors frequently do not conform to traditional gender expectations and norms, which may cause teachers and administrators to respond more harshly to what they perceive as Black girls’ negative behaviors (Morris, 2016). In his study on the experiences of Black girls in school, Morris (2007) found that teachers described Black girls’ behavior as being, “loud, defiant, and precocious” and that Black girls were more likely to be reprimanded for their “unladylike” behavior compared to their White and Latina peers. Morris (2007) also found that Black girls’ willingness to speak up and question school policies and practices also led teachers and administrators in their school to view them as constant threats to authority. Morris (2016) points out how this perspective of viewing Black girls as “irate,” “insubordinate,” “disrespectful,” “uncooperative,” or “uncontrollable” fails to take into account how Black girls are actually using their voices to critically analyze and respond to encounters of injustice, discrimination, and oppression. Instead of being seen as leaders and thinkers, Black girls often receive negative feedback from teachers when they voice their opinions in the
classroom. Researchers have found that this constant policing of their behaviors can lead Black girls to silence themselves and/or disengage from school (AAPF, 2015; Fordham, 1991; Grant, 1992).

The gender identity development of Black girls follows a path in which the commitment to specific gender identities, beliefs, and roles are nested within the larger social, political, and historical status of Black women in U.S. society. In response, Black girls are socialized to take on an androgynous gender identity role, which gives them the ability to carve out their own definitions of femininity that work to keep their needs, experiences, and voices amplified in a society that consistently works to devalue and silence them. The next section of the literature review shifts the focus from the research about the socialization Black girls in the general sense to explore how school culture influences the socialization of Black girls who attend independent schools.

Section 2: Independent School Culture and Black Girl Identity Development

Historically, independent schools, or “elite private schools” have had the image of being institutions that tout an “academic, financial, and social inaccessibility” to most of the U.S. population (Speede-Franklin, 1988, p. 21). Building on this idea, Swalwell (2013) defines elite education as “the schooling that children experience and expect as one of the benefits granted them by their membership in a privileged social group” (p. 10). Swalwell also goes on to comment that a quick review of the small area of research that focuses on elite schools paint a picture of successful independent school students as those who “embrace hierarchies, ignore structural inequalities, and demonstrate
egalitarianism and politeness on the surface with a streak of independence and competitiveness just below” (p. 11).

In contrast, independent schools define themselves as “non-profit private schools that are independent in philosophy: each is driven by a unique mission. They are also independent in the way they are managed and financed: each is governed by independent board of trustees and each is primarily supported through tuition payments and charitable contributions. They are accountable to their communities and are accredited by state-approving accrediting bodies” (NAIS website, 2015). The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), the accrediting organization for the majority of independent schools in the U.S., challenges the images of its member schools as institutions of inaccessibility by incorporating the principle of “equity” into its general mission statement. NAIS goes on to define equity as “serving all students equally well” (NAIS website, 2012), and classifies the term as one of the four pillars of the organization’s values. Additionally, the *NAIS Principles of Good Practice in Equity and Justice* (2012) details the practices that its member schools should engage in with the goal of creating and sustaining “diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all” (NAIS website, 2012). While these statements and descriptions serve as guideposts for the vision of NAIS, as of the 2015-16 school year, the average student population at an NAIS member school comprised of roughly 6.5% African-American, 5.3% Latino, 8.2% Asian American, 7.7% Multiracial American, 0.6% Native American, 3.6% Pacific Islander, 2.1% Middle Eastern, and 65.3% European American students (NAIS Facts at a Glance, 2015). In terms of socioeconomic
diversity, the average tuition of NAIS member schools was $20,173 per year for day schools and between $40,098 and $51,800 for boarding schools. Relatedly, an average of 24.1% of students who attend independent schools receive financial assistance from the school (NAIS Facts at a Glance, 2015).

Though independent schools may no longer function as bastions of inaccessibility whose education is reserved solely for the children of the elite, the current demographic composition of independent schools still reflects that these schools have populations whose majority are White and relatively affluent students. This dissertation studies the experiences of those students who do not fulfill the average demographics of an independent school. By sheer virtue of being in the racial (and often financial) minority in independent schools, the study findings show how the experiences of adolescent Black girls in elite independent schools are qualitatively different from those of their White peers as well as their Black male counterparts. What does it mean to be in a place of privilege and yet still not be a full-fledged and recognized member of the privileged group?

The Status of Research on Independent Schools

Concerning research on independent schools, the question often arises of what value lies in studying students in elite spaces when arguably they have an added academic and social (and often financial) advantage over the average public school student. The three arguments that surface in response are that 1) studying students who attend elite schools contributes to crafting a broader and more detailed picture of the scope of PK-12 education in the U.S. (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2010), 2)
studying this student population is important within the larger societal context of the 
widening economic gap of the 21st century and the resegregation of school populations by 
race and class (Swalwell, 2013), and 3) it is important to study students who attend elite 
schools because they will mostly likely be the people who are in positions of power in the 
future, therefore it is important to uncover what they are learning in school and what their 
developing attitudes towards society are (Swalwell, 2013).

Related to the third argument, Swalwell points out that most of the research on 
independent schools, while providing a snapshot of school life in these institutions, has 
not focused on the ways that these schools reinforce and perpetuate the social, economic, 
and cultural divisions that exist in society. Swalwell goes on to argue that, “Studying 
privileged students’ schooling helps to demystify the assumption that privileged schools 
are inherently good and in no need of change” (p. 12). Following this idea, Swalwell 
frames the decision to study independent schools as an opportunity to work towards 
dismantling the reproduction in societal inequality by focusing on a broader spectrum of 
youth, and not just those who are poor. Similar to arguments that have been made about 
only studying students of color using a deficit-focused orientation, Swalwel (citing 
Bonnett (1996) and Brantlinger (2003)) states: “Focusing only on the marginalized risks 
making the privileged an ‘unchanging and unproblematic location (Bonnett, 1996) or 
what Brantlinger (2003) refers to as the ‘unstudied but positively imagined control group 
against whom Others are favorably compared’ (p. 10)” (p. 12).
The Tensions of Opening Independent Schools to Black Students

Though Swalwell’s (2013) general description of the area of research on independent schools rings true, there is a history of researchers who have focused on issues of race, class, and social reproduction when studying the experiences of students of color in independent schools. Specifically, these researchers have highlighted the challenges that students of color experience when navigating the independent school world in terms of race and class (Arrington & Stevenson, 2012; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Gaztambide-Fernandez & DiAquoi, 2010; Howard, 2008; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003), academics (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012; White, 2013), and how Black parents select and prepare their children to attend elite schools (Brewster, Stephenson, & Beard, 2013; Howard, 2008; Slaughter & Johnson, 1988; Stevenson & Arrington, 2012).

The presence of Black students in independent schools began with school desegregation efforts in the 1950s. The opening of the doors of elite institutions to Black students provided another alternative for Black parents who were searching for opportunities for quality education for their children. Speede-Franklin (1988) cites three imperatives that drove (and I contend, still drive) independent schools to recruit students of color during the time period of 1955-1980: a moral imperative, an economic imperative, and demographic shifts of the U.S. school-aged population.

The moral imperative is based on the idea that the privileged class has a moral obligation to help those who are disadvantaged or in poverty through charitable work. In the view of some independent schools, providing quality education to Black students is
the solution to addressing some of the broader problems of inequality in our society (Speede-Franklin, 1988). While this goal is admirable, it is also short-sighted in its potential for meaningful impact and change. By taking this stance, independent schools take on a paternalistic role in which they view their beliefs, ideologies, and practices as being a source of uplift for underprivileged youth. Related to Swalwell’s (2013) earlier argument, rather than creating sustainable change, the moral imperative perspective serves to reproduce societal inequality by requiring students to adapt to the “habitus” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) or ways of being of independent schools instead of using the presence of a new population of students as a source of innovation and progress.

The economic imperative and demographic shifts of the U.S. school-aged population both highlight the ways in which independent schools are driven to maintain their edge as viable educational options for young people. The economic imperative suggests that independent schools worked to maintain a relatively racially diverse student population in order to avoid the possibility of losing their tax-exempt status (something that was particularly relevant during the 1970s) (Speede-Franklin, 1988). Relatedly, the demographic shifts in the U.S. school-aged population require that in order for independent schools to maintain their enrollment, or even expand, they must reach out to students of color to complete their student body population (Speede-Franklin, 1988). Both of these imperatives follow a utilitarian perspective, where the presence of students of color is viewed as a way to augment the student population for economic and business security.
In response to the growing interest of independent schools in recruiting students of color, minority student recruitment programs such as A Better Chance and Prep for Prep emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a way to identify exceptional students of color and then help prepare them for the independent school life (Zwiegenhaft & Domhoff, 1991). Although these programs sought students who were “gifted and talented” (Speede-Franklin, 1988, p. 24), the reality was that these students were still required to take remedial classes as a way to transition into independent schools, suggesting that “even the best minority student was somehow inadequate to compete in the independent school setting” (Speede-Franklin, 1988, p. 24). Current research builds on this idea by finding that Black students, particularly those coming from public schools, often experience “academic angst and a sense of failure” (Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012, p. 95) when first attending independent schools because of the overwhelming access to resources (such as small student-teacher ratios, the latest technology, and a variety of extracurricular activities) that their peers have enjoyed and benefited from for years, and to which they are first being introduced (Arrington & Stevenson, 2012).

In addition to the pressure that Black students experience to adjust to the academic standards of independent schools, researchers have found that there is also an unspoken expectation that Black students will adapt to the hidden curriculum of power and privilege systems present in these elite institutions. Speede-Franklin (1988) describes this phenomenon succinctly when looking retrospectively at the status of Black students in independent schools. She states, “Black students were there to change and differences were to be abandoned and overcome if the students were to be successful” (p. 25).
Similarly, researchers have commented on how Black students attending independent schools become acutely aware of their “two-ness” (Gaztambide-Fernandez & DiAquoi, 2010, p. 57) and their status as “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986; Howard, 2008) in which they come to understand that “while they are a part of this privileged world, they realize that they are also a world apart.” (Gaztambide-Fernandez & DiAquoi, 2010, p. 57). In their Success of African American Students (SAAS) study, Arrington and Stevenson (2006/2011) found that when they surveyed and interviewed Black students who attended independent schools, the root of these feelings of alienation and isolation was often due to negative experiences related to race. Cooper and Datnow (2000) found that Black students who attend independent schools bring with them fears of “acting White,” and appearing as “wanna-bes” or “sellouts” to their Black family members and friends when they attempt to become friends with students at school who are outside of their race (p. 188).

When locating this issue within the specific independent school environment, Gaztambide-Fernandez and DiAquoi (2010) point out that the status of students of color within the social world of independent schools is unique in that they undergo the experience of “having to construct an identification in relationship to racial labels. Whether and to what extent they choose to embrace or reject the racial labels imposed on them, all of them must contend with this ‘fact’” (p. 61). When Black students enter the doorways of their elite independent schools, they are forced to contend with the stereotypes that their White peers and teachers may place on them such as Black students being “anti-intellectuals” (Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012, p. 100) and the fact that the
school only recruited Black students to fulfill diversity efforts that are rooted in economics and politics rather than equity and social justice (Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012).

The three main imperatives of moral concern, economic competition, and demographic shifts that have historically driven the recruitment of students of color in independent schools are not only important because they reflect the past (and potentially current) motives that have guided diversity initiatives in independent schools, but also because their legacy is present in the practices and policies that contribute to certain aspects of the environments in independent schools that can make students of color feel isolated and unsure of their status within the schools.

**Sources of support for Black students in independent schools.** Another area of research concerning the experiences of Black students in independent schools focuses on the sources of support that lead Black students to demonstrate an overall resilience in spite of the potentially negative academic, social, and emotional experiences that they encounter on a daily basis. In general, research studies point to the development of a strong positive racial/ethnic identity as one of the key protective factors contributing to the high self-esteem and academic motivation of students of color (Kiang et al., 2006; Rowley et al., 1998; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, & Fine, 2002). Specific to Black students who attend independent schools, researchers have found that the formation of peer support networks and the intentional racial socialization of Black parents builds the positive racial/ethnic identity of Black youth. In their study of the peer networks of Black students in independent schools, Datnow and Cooper (1997) found
that both informal and formal Black peer groups served as spaces that helped students cope with feelings of alienation. Informal Black peer groups that took the shape of eating at the same table during lunch or hanging out after school worked to foster academic success and reaffirm racial identity, while the formal Black peer groups such as affinity groups and clubs helped Black students to combat their feelings of being outsiders (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; White, 2013).

Black families also contribute to the ongoing development of the positive racial/ethnic identity of Black youth in that they intentionally socialize their children in a way that will prepare them “to deal with his or her doubly marginalized status at the independent school” (Cooper & Datnow, 2000, p. 189, citing Cookson & Persell, 1985). Arrington and Stevenson (2012) found when they conducted focus groups of Black parents whose children were attending independent schools that the parents incorporated racial/ethnic socialization strategies that included 1) an awareness of independent schools as racially socializing environments, 2) teaching their children racial coping and agency strategies, and 3) using the development of racial/ethnic identity as a buffer for negative events through actions of protection and affirmation.

The review of literature in this section provided a broad overview of the history of independent schools in relation to their interest in and recruitment of students of color that stemmed from historical, economic, and social trends. The literature review also presented a snapshot of the academic, social, and emotional experiences of Black students who attend independent schools. While this review of research is informative, it is limited in its scope of pointing to where and how the experiences of Black boys and
girls within independent schools differ. While it is true that the experiences of Black youth in independent schools may converge as a result of Black students falling under the general racial label of “Black,” it is also true that the presence of gender adds another layer as to how Black students experience independent school life. The fact that the experiences of Black girls and Black boys in independent schools may be qualitatively different is an area of research that needs continued exploration. The following section in this literature review serves as a way to situate this dissertation in the conversation by presenting an overview of the research that highlights the experiences of Black girls in independent schools.

**Black Girls’ Experiences within Independent Schools: Triumphs and Challenges**

Although the research on the particular experiences of Black girls in independent schools is limited, Horvat and Antonio’s (1999) ethnographic study of Black girls who attend an elite day school and their acquisition of elite school habitus, Alexander-Snow’s (1999) qualitative study of two Black girls who attended an elite boarding school and then moved on to attend a traditionally White university, Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi’s (2010) qualitative study of how students of color who attend an elite boarding school negotiate boundaries of race/ethnicity and class, and White’s (2013) mixed methods study of the experiences of Black girls in all-girl independent schools serve as the touchstones from which I paint broad strokes in order to create a picture of the experiences of Black girls in independent schools. The first element that these studies have in common (with the exception of White (2013)) is that they focus on Black girls who are in middle-to-late adolescence (either in high school or transitioning to college),
which perhaps may explain why the findings from these studies speak to the themes of the struggles of fitting in and feeling uncertainty about their status in the academic and social worlds of their elite schools. Second, these studies highlight what Horvat and Antonio (1999) term of “symbolic violence” (p. 320, adopted from Bourdieu (1979)) to describe the status of Black girls in independent schools. In this context, symbolic violence manifests itself in that Black girls feel pressured to adopt a habitus (Bourdieu, 1979) that aligns with the habitus of their elite, predominantly White independent school. The rest of this section will explore in more detail what the phenomenon of symbolic violence looks like for Black girls in the independent school environment.

**Academic experiences.** Similar to the research findings about Black students’ experiences in independent schools, Horvat and Antonio (1999) found that Black girls also are confronted with assumptions from other students that the only reason that Black girls are accepted to their schools is because of their institution’s commitment to fulfilling diversity and affirmative action-related quotas. This assumption, whether it is outwardly spoken or is an idea that is part of the ether of the daily school environment, has the potential to undermine the success of Black girls by calling their academic prowess into question from the day that they enter the classroom. White (2014) found that the participants in her study described experiences where they were often treated in stereotypic ways indicating others’ assumptions that Black girls were not academically skilled.

The devaluing of Black girls’ academic skills within the independent school context continues with their marginalized status in the classroom. Through interviews
with her participants, Alexander-Snow (1999) found that Black girls had learned that they had to fight for respect in the classroom concerning the curriculum by being strong and vocal. Alexander-Snow and Chase (2008) both found that in order to gain more representation in the material that they were studying, Black girls had to continually question the curriculum and its lack of diversity.

Another role that Black girls play in the classroom, and sometimes within the larger school culture is that that they become the experts or educators concerning “the Black perspective” (Alexander-Snow, 1999, p. 111). Whenever racial matters arose in class (or in the case of boarding schools, in the dorms), participants in Alexander-Snow’s (1999) and Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi’s (2010) studies described how faculty members and students alike turned to Black girls to provide answers and advice concerning issues about race and socioeconomic status. Similarly, White (2013) found that when the topics of racism, slavery, and the U.S. Civil War were brought up in class discussions, the Black girls in the classroom were “singled out” to offer their perspective on the assumption that it represented the perspective of all Black people. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) describes this phenomenon as the fact that Black girls become “the curriculum of diversity” (p. 166) versus contributing to a curriculum of diversity. The danger of only valuing Black girls as experts because of their racial/ethnic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds is that this perspective is limiting in terms of all of the assets that Black girls bring to the independent school environment, and serves to reinforce the stereotype that all Black girls who attend independent schools are coming from the same set of experiences. Rather than viewing Black girls as a group of diverse individuals,
independent schools often fall into the trap of communicating to Black girls and all other students in the school community that Black girls belong to one large homogenous group.

**Social/emotional experiences.** The theme that arises repeatedly concerning the social/emotional experiences of Black girls in independent schools is how their “habitus” or ways of being are inconsistent with the habitus of the independent school environment (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Horvat and Antonio found that Black girls had to learn the habitus of the independent schools that they were attending while the habitus of other students was already aligned with that of the school. The adoption of the independent school habitus for Black girls often means a trade-off in terms of feeling like they have to leave aspects of their identity (particularly those connected with race) behind when they enter the doors of the school. This takes the form of Black girls consciously changing parts of who they are while in school such as feeling the need to talk a certain way, changing the types of music they listen to, and “surrendering their sense of racial pride and belonging as a part of their effort to navigate life at a school where their racial heritage did not appear to be acknowledged or valued” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 334). Horvat and Antonio point out that the symbolic violence that is a part of the school lives of Black girls in independent schools exists in the fact that even though Black girls are making the decision to change aspects of themselves, they are doing so because they have never felt a sense of comfort or belonging in their elite school environment. Similar to the research findings about the academic experiences of Black girls in independent schools, early on Black girls receive the message that they do not fit into the typical independent school student profile, and are continually viewed as outsiders.
In spite of their feelings of not fitting or completely belonging to the academic and social worlds of their independent schools, Black girls show resilience and take pride in their outsider status as providing them with experiences that are “normal and part of life in the real world” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 337). Researchers find that Black girls and their parents tend to view the negative experiences around race and gender as developing a “tool kit” in which they learn

Notions of their ‘place’ in predominantly white society; specific strategies they can employ to exist in society, such as their learned ability to alter their identities to suit the present environment; and a newfound sense of efficacy gained, for many, through the dictating of their own paths to their futures for the first time via the college choice process. (p. 337)

The Black female participants in Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi’s (2010) study echoed these findings by describing how for them attending boarding school has been “a lesson in negotiating multiple worlds and learning when to activate [their] different selves” (p. 66) and learning how to develop a “fluency to negotiate spaces defined by whiteness” (p. 63). These findings underscore the tightrope that Black girls must walk as a part of their independent school experience. In order to be successful in these institutions whose educational environments historically have been rooted in ideologies of exclusivity, privilege, and whiteness, Black girls have to learn how to negotiate their Black female status, which often involves them altering aspects of themselves in order to conform to the habitus of elite schools so that they can achieve the future payoff of advancing academically and socially in society.

Additionally, other researchers point out that another source of solidarity, resilience, and community for Black girls in independent schools is the presence of other
Black girls and women (Chase, 2008; White, 2013). Through the existence of both formal (affinity group, cultural clubs, etc.) and informal (lunch table, before and after school, etc.) gathering spaces in school, Black girls carved places for themselves where they could feel validated in their experiences, valued for their presence, and felt like they belonged at their schools.

The review of literature above not only described the historical, social, and political context of Black girls’ enrollment in and experiences of independent schools, but also illustrated some of the strategies Black girls employ when navigating through the different aspects of independent school life. In describing and analyzing BGCL, this dissertation not only identifies the strategies that Black girls in independent schools use, but also focuses on the process of how they understand and interpret their independent school environment in relation to their Black female identities. Central to BGCL is examining how Black girls employ a sense of agency in order to process their experiences and subsequently define their own identities for themselves. For Black girls in independent schools, demonstrating their agency could also serve as form of activism in that they are resisting the dominant narratives present in their school culture that uphold particular standards of behavior, beauty, and ways of being that may marginalize Black girls. In this vein, the following section provides a review of the literature on girls’ agency and activism with the goal of presenting how Black girls are situated within this body of research and its connections to my preliminary theory of Black girl critical literacies.
Section 3: Girls’ Agency and Activism

Research on Girls’ Activism: Work at the Margins

The literature on girls’ agency and activism is typically situated within the larger fields of girls’ studies (Harris, 2008; Kearney, 2009) or within the body of research focused on youth movements (Altbach, 1989; Klatch, 1999). Overall trends in both of these areas of research have led to a situation in which the scholarship on girls’ activism remains an area that is underresearched in the social sciences. Girls’ studies is a relatively new field of study that emerged in the early 1990s in response to the trend that social science research historically had focused on the fact that girls would eventually become women, and not on girlhood itself (Kearny, 2009). Brown and Gilligan’s (1992) seminal text *Meeting at the Crossroads* served as a starting point for research that honed in on the period of adolescence and girls’ psychological, social, and emotional experiences as they exited childhood and moved into their teenage years. Since that text, the majority of the research in girls’ studies has focused on girls’ self-esteem (Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1994), sexual behavior (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994, 2009), peer relationships (Simmons, 2002; Wiseman, 2002) and identity formation (Bettie, 2003; Denner & Guzman, 2006). While some of the research in the area of girls’ studies has highlighted how girls demonstrate agency through their resistance to gender norms and expectations (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009; Driscoll, 2002; LeBlanc, 1999), there is still a lack of research that looks into girls’ resistance within the context of politics and larger sociopolitical contexts (Taft, 2011).
The research literature that focuses on youth movements excludes girls in similar ways. In youth movement literature, the defining characteristics that serve as lenses for analysis are often age and race (Braungart, 1984; Muñoz, 1989; Springer, 1999). The primacy of age and race as the central descriptive factors of youth movement research leaves the significance of gender outside of the conversation. Relatedly, in terms of age, the majority of youth movement literature focuses on the experiences of movements on college campuses, therefore leaving out the activism work of young girls and teenage girls.

That being said, there is a growing body of research that is dedicated to understanding the intersection of girlhood, agency, and activism. In their reviews and research on girls’ activism, girls’ studies scholars Taft (2011) and Brown (2016) describe three overarching perspectives that tend to frame girls’ activism literature: empowerment, leadership development, and “girl-fueled” activism (Brown, 2016; p. 30). Empowerment, Taft (2011) states, focuses on “a process by which girls learn to develop their own personal power, in particular, the power to make choices and construct their own individual identities” (p. 28). While this approach is valuable in that it focuses on girls’ positive development, it primarily focuses on girls improving or developing as individuals rather than their potential contributions to a larger collective focused on social change (Taft, 2011). Taft (2011) also critiques the empowerment perspective by describing how the girls’ empowerment discourse adopts a deficit-oriented stance by tending to focus on how girls are “victims” of certain experiences, cultures, and limitations rather than leveraging the strengths and skills that girls already have.
Brown (2016) presents a similar critique of the leadership development perspective of girls’ activism. In her experiences of working with various girls’ organizations, Brown found that they used the descriptor of “girls’ leadership program” (p. 28) as a proxy for preparing girls how to fit in, how to “lean in,” and how to “get a seat at the table” (p. 28)—all methods that focus on preparing girls to work within an already existing system that continues to marginalize girls from varying social locations. In contrast, Brown (2016) presents the notion of girl-fueled activism, which offers “the opportunity to identify a problem, work in coalition, leverage allies and energize people, think critically, listen well, speak up, stand up, and take calculated risks” (p. 28).

While the field of girls’ studies and the particular research focus on girls’ activism continues to expand, it is still an area of research that could benefit from a more intentional intersectional approach. Such a perspective would incorporate the voices and experiences of girls of color, non-cis girls, girls of different abilities, and of varying sexual identities. One way that the field of girls’ studies has moved in this direction is through the emergence of research in the area of Black girlhood studies.

The Rise of Black Girlhood Studies

Though the study of Black girls in the social sciences is not entirely new with the seminal works of Ladner’s (1971) Tomorrow’s Tomorrow and Ward’s (1990; 1996; 2007) prolific research focusing on Black girls, the recent emergence of the field of Black girlhood studies represents a shift in the scholarship by placing the experiences of Black girls in the center rather than at the margins of research and scholarship, which has often been the case in girls’ studies and other social science research. A defining characteristic
Black girlhood scholarship is its asset-based orientation towards researching Black girls rather than the deficit-oriented literature that has dominated the research on girls of color for decades. The emergence of research studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s that highlight the skills, knowledge, agency, and resilience of girls of color reflect a changing orientation towards the study of Black girls and Black girlhood (Belgrave, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Ward, 1996; Way, 1998).

The concept and initial emergence of Black girlhood is credited to the short stories of Black female writer Toni Cade Bambara (1980, 1982), and in recent times scholars, researchers, and activists have taken up the concept and applied it to both research and practice-based arenas. Under the Black girlhood studies umbrella exists the growing field of hip-hop feminist pedagogy (Brown, 2009; Love, 2012), which exists as a marriage between Black feminism, critical pedagogy, and hip-hop studies. Going beyond the theoretical, Brown & Kwakye (2012) describe hip hop feminism as a perspective that “seeks to examine the multiple, contested, and complex ways women of color—particularly Black women and girls—negotiate decision making, employ rhetoric of self-esteem, and oppose punitive social policies in the contexts of of their everyday lives” (p. 5). Other Black girlhood studies research follows a similar stance of examining how Black girls use agency and critical awareness to resist oppressive systems and policies in schools (Evans-Winters, 2011; Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017), juvenile justice facilities (Morris, 2016; Winn, 2010), in homeless shelters (Cox, 2015), and through their games and dance (Gaunt, 2006).
As a pedagogical and methodological framework, Black girlhood emphasizes the agency, creativity, and resistance of Black girls (Brown, 2013). As most of the literature focusing on girls’ activism either focuses on the work of White middle-class girls, or presents a whitewashed picture of girls’ activism (Brown, 2016), Brown (2013) draws on Bambara’s (1980, 1982) descriptions of the elements of Black girlhood to create an attuned framework for researchers and adult allies who work with Black girls. Using the findings from her qualitative study working with a girls’ group for adolescent Black girls as a guide, Brown (2013) developed five principles that describe the Black girlhood framework:

- Articulate visionary Black girlhood as a meaningful practice
- Showcase Black girl inventiveness of form and content
- Expand our vision of Black girlhood beyond identity
- Sense radical courage and interdependence
- Honor praxis, the analytical insight that comes only by way of consistent action and reflection (p. 3)

Another element of Brown’s Black girlhood framework is that it can be used as an organizing framework in order to encourage and move Black girls towards the collective action of critiquing their status in U.S. society. While there is a significant amount of literature that chronicles Black female activism including their work in the abolitionist movement (Logan, 1999; Yee, 1992), the Civil Rights movement (Anderson-Bricker, 1999), and the rise of Black Feminism (Collins, 1989; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Roth, 1999) and Womanism (Collins, 1996; Phillips, 2006), it follows the common trend of looking at the activist work of college-aged and adult women, and not teenage girls. The Black girlhood framework suggests not only that we should focus on the activist work of Black girls, but also an approach to adopt when doing so:
Black girlhood as an organizing framework allows for a repertoire of self-determined Black girl knowledge that may be used to improve practice inside of the very spaces that organize Black girls. Black girlhood as an organizing framework is a sound that moves us closer toward interrogating how the state works in and through us, challenging institutions that do not see us even when we are present, and practicing love. (Brown, 2013, p. 211)

The importance of Brown’s (2013) description is that it emphasizes the presence and importance of the knowledge that Black girls possess, and also focuses on Black girls as agents rather than objects within the systems of power within our society. Brown’s Black girlhood framework articulates the potential for Black girls to come together to create change when they take a critical stance towards the ways in which they are situated in society, degraded, and often times ignored.

One goal of this dissertation is to build on Brown’s (2013) Black girlhood framework through my description and analysis of Black girl critical literacies by showing how BGCL embodies the five principles of Black girlhood. Through examining the ways in which Black girls in elite independent schools read their environments and daily interactions, this dissertation highlights the skills and process that they use to craft the worlds through which they navigate, and illustrates how BGCL contributes to a broader definition of the notion of identity and agency of Black girls.

Conclusion

The research on Black girls who attend independent schools, while limited, provides potential a starting point for the direction of future research in order to better recognize and serve the needs of adolescent Black girls. This review highlighted how the
racial and gendered socialization of Black girls, particularly during the period of adolescence, is powerful in shaping how they understand and process their experiences as Black girls. While this literature review highlights the academic and social challenges that Black girls experience in independent schools as a result of the intersection of their racial, gender, and often socioeconomic identities, an element that is missing from this research is a description of how Black girls assert their own agency in constructing their identities within the independent school environment. The research conducted by Alexander-Snow (1999), Horvat & Antonio (1999), Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquoi (2010), and White (2013) focuses on the influence of the independent school environment on Black girls rather than exploring how Black girls actively craft and construct their own identities within the independent school context that is suggestive of agency, awareness, and confidence instead of victimhood.

The majority of the literature that exists in the emergent field of Black girlhood studies (Brown, 2013; Evans-Winters, 2005; Love, 2012; Ward, 1996) focuses on adolescent Black girls in urban contexts and describes how Black girls employ strategies of resistance, resilience, and identity creation in order to successfully navigate and overcome the matrices of domination that exist in their lives as a result of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Similar work needs to be done within the context of elite education. How do Black girls who function as daily “outsiders within” their independent schools resist and question the negative messages that they receive both overtly and subtly from teachers and peers? Where do their sources of resilience come from and what does resilience look like for Black girls in this space? And lastly, how do Black girls in
these spaces construct their own identities while being constantly bombarded with the ways in which others attempt to define them?

This dissertation hinges on the assumption that the research on Black girls, while growing, tends to focus on Black girls as passive objects rather than active agents of their worlds. As illustrated in this literature review, one area of literature about the experiences of Black girls in education employs theoretical frameworks that focus on the parental socialization of Black girls along the lines of race and gender as a psychological and emotional protective strategy in response to their devalued status in U.S. society. Another area of research focuses on the socialization of Black girls within their school environments, using theories of social and educational reproduction.

An area of research that has yet to be explored is the connection between how Black girls construct, navigate, and read their worlds within the context of the socializing messages that they receive from their parents, home communities, and their school environment. This is particularly true for Black girls who attend elite predominantly White independent schools. By using the developmental, critical feminist, and pedagogical frames presented in Chapter 2, this dissertation contributes to the literature on adolescent identity development, school culture, and Black girlhood by exploring the ways in which adolescent Black girls read and construct their worlds along the lines of race, gender, and socioeconomic status within the context of their elite school environments.
CHAPTER 4: METHODS & METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will present my conceptual framework and corresponding research methodology, a grounded theory approach within the context of a phenomenological study, to explain how I identified the emergence of the central components of Black girl critical literacies (BGCL) when situated within independent schools. First, I will synthesize my conceptual framework-- the rationale and objectives of my study; where my study is situated intellectually and conceptually; my beliefs, assumptions, and researcher identity; the theories I am using to guide my study; and how my study is situated in the literature (Maxwell, 2005; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Next, I will review the context and participants of the study, detailing the demographics of the research sites and the study participants. Following that, I will describe my methods in terms of data collection and data analysis. Lastly, I will present how the BGCL components of a developing critical consciousness, emotional literacy, agency and activism, and school culture emerged as a result of my data analysis.

Section 1: Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the work of Ravitch and Riggan (2012), I take the stance that conceptual frameworks are “a way of linking of linking all of the elements of the research process: researcher disposition, interest, and positionality; literature; and theory and methods” (p.6). In the previous chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) I presented different parts of my conceptual framework by introducing the rationale for why studying the academic, emotional, and social experiences of adolescent Black girls is
important by contextualizing the marginalized status of Black girls in society as well as in
education research (Chapter 1). I also introduced how theories of development
(adolescent development and developing literacies), critical feminist lenses
(intersectionality and Black feminist thought), and pedagogical frames (critical pedagogy) can support the understanding of Black girls’ experiences in schools, their
corresponding identity development, and Black girls’ own interpretations of their
schooling experience (Chapter 2). Lastly, I presented a review of the literature that
discussed how socializing messages from family, the media, and school culture
influences the identity development of Black girls in independent schools, and how a
sense of agency and activism can support how Black girls recognize, understand, and
process encounters of race, gender, and class (Chapter 3).

The goal of this section is to synthesize all of the elements of my conceptual
framework to present an empirically-derived preliminary theory to understand how
critical literacies operate within the specific population of Black girls who attend
independent schools. In this section I will first present my preliminary theory of what
BGCL look like in independent schools by describing each component of the model and
how they are related to one another. As a part of presenting each component, I will
provide an example from my data in order to fully illustrate how the component
specifically speaks the experience of Black girls who attend independent schools. Then, I
will present my rationales for the methodological lenses and approaches I used as well as
my researcher identity and positionality, and the assumptions that framed my research
study.
Black Girl Critical Literacies in Schools: Key Components and Their Relationships

Using my theoretical framework, review of the literature, and initial data analysis as guides, I have developed a preliminary that describes the key components of Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL) in schools and how these concepts relate to each other. Further analysis led me to refine this preliminary theory and more closely examine the relationships between the different BGCL components, which I will present in Chapter 8 of the dissertation. These are all components that I hold that school professionals need to consider in order to support the success of Black girls in independent schools. The graphic below illustrates how I conceptualize how BGCL functions in independent schools:

Figure 4.1 Preliminary Theory of Black Girl Critical Literacies in Independent Schools

**BGCL component: the school culture.** In this theory, the context of school culture functions as the overarching landscape in which BGCL takes place. I found that
the majority of what the study participants thought, said, and expressed could be understood as being mediated through the context of their school culture, which were elite predominantly White spaces. As the graphic illustrates, school culture mediates each element of the BGCL action/interaction cycle, which in turn influences the entire process of BGCL. According to Loughridge & Tarantino (2005) school culture can be understood as comprised of the following elements: Heroes & Heroines; Communication Network; Rites and Rituals; Lore and Myths; Rules, Rewards, and Sanctions; and Physical Environment. These components of school culture all influence the raced, gendered, and classed experiences that Black girls have in schools by communicating messages to them of what ways of thinking, being, and feeling are valued in the school, who belongs and who is excluded from the school culture, and what power dynamics exist within the school space.

Additionally, because schools often take on the role as sites of societal reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), they often reinforce and transmit messages about the broader societal norms of which values, ideals, beliefs, and forms of knowledge are legitimate and which are not (Hurn, 1978). In the case of Black girls, there is the potential for different aspects of the school culture to reinforce and reproduce the marginalized status that they currently hold in U.S. society. In the case of BGCL, it is important that school leaders and teachers examine what messages Black girls are exposed to in their daily school lives, how they interpret these messages, and how these messages serve to reinforce a particular status that Black girls may hold in their schools.
Another aspect of Figure 4.1 is how school culture itself can influence the emotional literacy, actions, and awareness of Black girls. The double arrows between school culture and the components of BGCL reflect the reciprocal relationship between the school and its students, with the context of school culture having a larger influence on Black girls than Black girls being able to influence the independent school culture.

The action/interaction cycle of the components of BGCL. The core of the BGCL phenomenon occurs within action/interaction cycle (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) where the social and psychological processes of BGCL interact with and react to one another. The three elements of the BGCL action/interaction cycle, a developing critical consciousness; emotional literacy; and agency and activism, each feed into one another to reflect that BGCL is an ongoing and flexible process that functions in response to the encounters that Black girls experience in independent schools. Central to the functioning of this action/interaction cycle is that it can begin at any point of the cycle with the overall outcome from the cycle remaining the same in terms of how a Black girl chooses to respond to an encounter of race, gender, or class while in school.

BGCL component: a developing critical consciousness. Drawing on the work of Freire (1970) this component of BGCL describes the growing awareness that Black girls have about how social relations and identities operate within the larger context of power relations, and how they as individuals and as a group are situated within those contexts. Particular to the construction of their identities as Black adolescent girls, critical consciousness takes the form of the understanding that Black girls have about what it means to possess the intersectional identity of being Black girls in their elite
predominantly White school environment as well as in U.S. society, a development of what Collins (2000) describes as a “Black women’s consciousness” (p. 112). In the example below, during a whole group discussion, Adrienne, an 11th grader, comments on the privilege that the White students at her school have about not having to talk about race, while race and racism are part of ongoing conversations that Black girls have with each other in her school:

Wait. I wish you'd talk with your friends about racism and discrimination against black people. Hashtag all we talk about. It's sad. We shouldn't have to talk about it all the time. That shouldn't be the only thing we talk about. Yes, we talk about other stuff. Silly stuff, but it's majority this. Because this is our every day and the fact that we have to deal with it here, where I spend exactly 12 hours out of a 24-hour day.

An element of this developing critical consciousness is not only the awareness that Black girls have about how power and privilege operate in society, but also how the Black girls use that awareness to analyze and critique their experiences. The extent to which the girls critique the traditions, racial demographics, and practices in their schools serve as examples of the interaction between the components of the development of critical consciousness and school culture.

As Figure 4.1 shows, the component of a developing critical consciousness also interacts with the other BGCL components in a reciprocal way. The level of awareness that Black girls have about their social location in their school and in society can lead to experiencing certain emotions and/or cause girls to exert their agency result in different forms of action.

**BGCL component: emotional literacy.** Stemming from the literature on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), the component of emotional literacy operates on
both an internal and external level. On an internal level, this component describes the awareness that Black girls have of their own emotions and the decisions they make to display those emotions. Being able to trace the origins of their emotions during a particular encounter and developing the skills to regulate their emotions is critical to an emerging literacy about one’s own emotions.

On an external level, similar to critical consciousness, this component reflects Black girls’ awareness of how their emotions might be viewed by others because of the stereotypes associated with Black females. Emotional literacy also requires that Black girls are able to read others’ emotions. This aspect of emotional literacy is particularly important as Black girls make decisions about when and how to respond to encounters of race, gender, and class within the context of their school culture, which has its own rules and norms about which emotions are allowed to be made visible and how they are allowed to be enacted. In the example below from an individual interview, Tanya, a 12th grader, reflects on her emotions around anger when she was younger:

I know I’ve matured a lot. Even if it’s just in high school it’s sort of like I’ve matured a lot because in freshman year, huh, I was like a ticking time bomb, like I was bad, bad… it was the littlest things could just set me off like my temp – yeah, that’s – my temper in ninth grade was terrible. I [sigh] would like, little things, like you bump into me and don’t want to say excuse me, like that – I would just go off, I could be going off for days… I just remember like 9th grade just wasn’t my – my time when like, I just wasn’t like mature enough, but then I’m in ninth grade like I’m 15, 14 – 15 years old, like I wasn’t – I didn’t understand that I can't just go off at any time like I just can't do that, and that I like, had to control myself, but now, I’m a lot better… Yeah, I still get like angry but less, like little – like it’s little things affecting me when I was in ninth grade, but like now the little things oh, it is okay, I guess like, move on, even some of the big things like after a few days or like I don’t – see I don’t snap anymore as much as I do – did. But like after like a day or two, I’m over it. Like before I could be on that topic for like a week, two weeks a month, and now like a day, I give it a day and a half, I’m over
it. It is what it is like, life goes on. No one is ever going to stop me from doing anything, like – hum, yeah I was crazy you know, Tanya’s a crazy little child.

Tanya’s assessment of her past behavior of being similar to a “ticking time bomb” and how she learned over the years that she could not “just go off at any time” illustrates her developing emotional literacy around feelings and displays of anger. Following the tenets of emotional literacy, Tanya displays her own emotional literacy on an internal level by identifying her feelings of anger and how she chose to communicate those feelings to others. Though she does not describe the external factors in detail, Tanya’s reflection of how she came to understand that she had to find more effective ways of expressing her anger in order to not have any one “stop me from doing anything” demonstrates her awareness of how others may have reacted to her anger.

**BGCL component: agency and activism.** The agency and activism component builds on the concepts of critical consciousness and awareness by illustrating how the critical awareness of a situation influences the decisions and actions that Black girls make when involved in encounters around race, gender, and class. In particular, this component describes the agency that Black girls use to define themselves in the face of being defined by others on a daily basis, as well as the methods that Black girls use to advocate for themselves and for the equity of Black girls and women. In an excerpt from an individual interview below, Renée, a 12th grader, describes how taking on the identity of a feminist means not tolerating sexist comments from her peers or her friends:

But I think yeah, as we’ve grown now that we just learned not to tolerate like such actions like you know that’s not acceptable, and it’s not acceptable here. And um, you know like – like I guess like just women in general, like, I think have to like, take that stand and um, just be verbal, like if something makes you uncomfortable like you need to say something because I sure will, like I will not tolerate that
kind of talk. And um, I think this year like being in Gender [referring to her class on gender], like, that’s also like empowered so many like, women, and I don’t know there’s been like talk about that because I remember joining it [her class on gender], and my friend would be like, “Oh my god, you’re going to be like one of those annoying feminists,” and I was like, “Whoa, like what are you talking about?” And I’m like, “You know, do you know the definition of feminism?” [Laughs]

In this excerpt, Renée demonstrates both agency and activism by explaining how she will no longer stay quiet when encountering talk and ideas that she thinks are sexist.

Renée displays agency through choosing to identify as a feminist, something that is not always viewed as a favorable characteristic by her peers. In choosing to be a feminist, Renée also aligns herself with a tradition of activism supporting equality between men and women.

As Figure 4.1 illustrates, Black girls’ agency and activism are influenced by their recognition of their emotions and how those emotions contribute towards action/inaction. Similarly, the development of critical consciousness influences how Black girls recognize and understand raced/gendered/classed encounters and the methods they choose to achieve a particular goal focused on self-definition, resistance, or creating change.

Another aspect of this graphic is that it shows how the context of school culture and the component of agency and activism interact, with agency and activism having the potential to shift or change aspects of school culture, by raising awareness of the experiences of Black girls in the school. In the other direction, school culture functions as either a source of promotion or constraint by determining the extent to which Black girls are allowed to express their agency and what forms of activism are deemed appropriate within the school culture.
The influence of the researcher. Outside of the action-interaction cycle, but still a part of the BGCL phenomenon within the context of this study is the role that I played throughout my time with the participants. Taking a feminist (hooks, 2000) and critical pedagogical (McLaren, 2003) stance, I positioned the girls as experts of their own lived experiences so that our relationship took on a bidirectional exchange with each of us serving as teachers and students at different points of our meetings. Throughout the project I shifted between the roles of researcher, educator/facilitator, and ally—all roles that influence the development of BGCL. As a researcher, I administered pre-and post-questionnaires, developed a curriculum, and conducted interviews that all addressed themes of feminism, racism, sexism, and classism. As an educator/facilitator, I led weekly discussion groups where the girls discussed their experiences in their school related to being Black females, and during those sessions I often offered up my own stories as a way to contextualize their experiences. As an ally, I offered comments that validated the girls’ thinking and assessment of their experiences and asked pointed questions that helped the girls to conceptualize their ideas for activism in their schools. Taken together, the work that I did as a researcher, educator/facilitator, and ally all functioned as an intervention on the development of BGCL throughout this study.

The reciprocal nature between my role as researcher and BGCL is evident in how the girls’ descriptions and displays of their emotions, their assessment and critiques of their school culture, and the ways they enacted agency, resistance, and self-definition all gave me insight into their worlds. As an outsider, I had a limited understanding of the daily lives of Black adolescent females who attend independent schools. The knowledge
that the girls shared with me caused me to reflect on my own identities and the critical literacies that I hold as a Black woman of a different generation. In a research sense, the girls’ actions connected to their BGCL also influenced how I approached the project as a researcher, so that what topic I chose to present in the next girls’ group meeting or what follow up questions I included as part of my interview protocols were in response to what the girls had shared previously.

A Guiding Research Methodology: A Phenomenological Study Using Grounded Theory Analysis

A rationale for a phenomenological approach. I describe my dissertation as a phenomenological study following a grounded theory methodology and analysis. Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as one that “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 57). In particular, the goal of a phenomenological study is to develop a multi-faceted description that highlights “what” the participants experienced as part of the phenomenon and “how” they the experienced the phenomenon (p. 58). The phenomenological aspect of this study provides a contemporary perspective of the key issues that Black girls in elite, predominantly White independent schools encounter related to the structures of race, gender, and class. Additionally, my objective is to describe how Black girls navigate these encounters with the goal of providing insights as to how Black girls and independent school leaders can mitigate these issues so that Black girls can thrive.

A rationale for a grounded theory methodology. The grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a useful methodological approach for this study
because BGCL is an emerging theory that I aim to describe in detail and illustrate how it serves as a framework to explain how Black girls use critical lenses to analyze their experiences within the independent school setting. In using a grounded theory methodology, I hold onto the idea that the phenomenon of BGCL is something that occurs across populations of Black girls and is not only unique to Black girls who attend school in privileged places. While my dissertation study takes place in two different independent schools, I argue that many of the encounters that the girls in my study experienced could potentially occur in other education environments as well, because regardless of the educational environment, Black girls still inhabit a social status that requires them to navigate through and respond to dominant patterns of power and privilege that often leave them at the margins.

Who Am I?: Researcher Identity, Positionality, and Assumptions

 Researcher identity and positionality. My social location as a middle-class Black woman who attended a diverse suburban public high school, elite predominantly White institutions for post-secondary education, and taught at an elite predominantly White independent school, informs my beliefs surrounding Black girls and education, particularly those who are attending predominantly White independent schools. My experience as a 7th grade teacher at a predominantly White elite independent school also influences the way that I approach, understand, and interact with Black female adolescents. I look for the strengths, resilience, and authentic wisdom that Black girls emanate as they go throughout their daily lives rather than focusing on how their
differences from the dominant norms of society are evidence of social and character
detriments.

My researcher identity first and foremost stems from my identity as a Black feminist who is dedicated to pursuing social, political, and economic equity for Black girls and women. The foundation of my general research agenda focusing on Black girls is to use my position as a researcher and advocate of Black girls and women to spotlight the issues, challenges, and successes of Black girls, and hopefully influence educational programming and policy decisions as a result. My identity as a Black feminist researcher not only influences the focus and objectives of my research study, but also my approach towards my research methodology. One assumption of endarkened feminist epistemology that grounds my overall positionality as a researcher is the belief that “research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose” (Dillard, 2000, p. 674). In explaining this assumption in more detail, Dillard points out the centrality of relationships and emotions when conducting research in that the relationship between the researcher and her participants should be one based on reciprocity and empathy. In this dissertation project, I developed relationships with the participants in the girls’ groups that were based on honesty, openness, and reciprocity. As the participants shared their stories and experiences with me, I offered my own stories as a way to place myself in a similar position of vulnerability and candidness as my participants.

Following in the tradition of feminist research, the practice of reflexivity is central to my work. Feminist researchers Fine and Sirin (2007) suggest that the key question for reflective and reflexive researchers to keep in mind is “How do you think
about the relationship between you, your work, the audiences you’re speaking to, and the participants you’re working with?’” (cited in Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 69).

Additionally, the theoretical concept of endarkened feminist epistemology also challenges researchers to engage in thoughtful and purposeful reflexivity throughout the research process to ensure that they can be as faithful to their participants as possible when collecting and re(presenting) (Gibson & Brown, 2009) the data (Dillard, 2000).

Reflexivity required that I not only reflect on my own personal experiences and biases in relation to the focus of my research study, but also that I thought about how I communicated the narratives that emerged throughout the research process.

From my education and teaching experiences, I firmly believe in the power of the presence of Black females as role models for Black girls. Ward (1996), as a result of her research focusing on Black families and girls, highlights how the presence of Black females in the lives of young Black girls is important to their identity development and sense of self. I also believe in the power of Black girls having their own space so that they can learn from one another and learn that they are not alone in experiencing the challenges of navigating through systems and institutions that were not made with Black girls in mind (Gibson, 2015; Jones, 2015). As mentioned previously, I follow the belief that it is important for Black girls to have a “homespace,” a place where they can feel free to be themselves and mutually enjoy the company of each other, which is why the creation and implementation of a Black girls group was central to my dissertation study.

In this section I presented a synthesis of my conceptual framework in which the different components of my study rationale, literature review, theoretical framework,
researcher identity and beliefs, and methodology all came together to serve as a conceptual foundation for my preliminary theory of Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL). In this section I presented a general overview of the BGCL components (*school culture, emotional literacy, a developing critical consciousness, and agency and activism*) as way to explain the factors of the different critical lenses that Black girls in independent schools use to navigate encounters of race, gender, and class.

**Section 2: Contexts and Participants**

**Who Are These Girls?: An Introduction of the Research Sites and Study Participants**

**Research Sites**

This project included two school sites—one site was a predominantly White elite all-girls independent school, and the other site was a predominantly White elite co-ed independent school. The schools are situated about two miles away from one another and are located in suburbs just outside of an urban center the northeastern part of the United States.

**School site #1—Girls college preparatory school**10 (*GCP*). This school was founded in the mid-1800s with the mission of providing a space where girls could thrive through the learning of a traditional curriculum that would make them eligible for admittance to a post-secondary institution (*Girls College Prep website*). The school is a PreK-12 school, with an upper school student body population of 289 students. The

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10 In order to protect the confidentiality of the schools, the names of both schools are pseudonyms.
school website states that students of color comprise 20% of the total student body population of roughly 700 students. There was no specific information for what percentage of students identify as Black. The annual tuition for the upper school is about $33,000 and 23% of student the student population receives some form of financial assistance. In terms of diversity initiatives, the school has a director of diversity, has a list of diversity initiatives in which the school is engaged, and also has several diversity-related student clubs in the upper school (Girls College Prep website). The school also houses a research center that promotes research and initiatives focusing on the lives and education of girls.

**School site #2—Grace school.** This school was founded in the late 1800s as an all-girls school dedicated to the education of girls and women, and became a co-ed school in the early 1970s (Grace School website). The school is a PreK-12 school, with an upper school student body population of 354 students. According to the school website, students of color comprise 20% of the total student body population, which is a little over 800 students. There was no specific information about how many students identify as Black. The annual tuition for the upper school is a little over $33,000 and 27% of the student body receives financial assistance. The school’s director of community life oversees the diversity initiatives in the school, of which there are community, student, and parent organizations focused on diversity (Grace School website).

**The Study Participants**

**Girls college preparatory school (GCP).** There were 9 girls who attended GCP who regularly attended the weekly discussion group sessions, 4 girls later completed
individual interviews. Below is the demographic information of the girls based on their responses to the demographic questions on the introductory questionnaire.

**Race/ethnicity.** All of the girls identify as Black (which was a requirement for participation in the study), but when asked to describe their racial/ethnic background in their own words, about half of them included other ethnicities in addition to African-American, suggesting that there are nuanced ways in which the girls identify themselves, and possibly different experiences/viewpoints related to how they see the world as a result of their racial/ethnic orientation.

**Grade level.** The grade level breakdown of the group was fairly even with 3 girls in the 10th grade, 4 girls in the 11th grade, and 2 girls in the 12th grade. There were no 9th graders in the group.

**Years attending GCP and past schools.** A little more than 50% of the group had attended GCP for 1-3 years which meant that given their age, they mostly likely entered GCP in high school, and about 30% of the group has attended GCP for more than 7 years, which, depending on who you are talking to, would classify them as “lifers,” meaning that the majority of their schooling experience has been at GCP. Of those girls who have attended other schools, about half of them have attended other private schools (independent and religiously-affiliated) and a third attended public schools.

**Level of education of parents/guardians.** In this response all of the participants described their mother’s level of education, and only about half of the participants gave responses for their father’s level of education. 44% of the participant’s mothers hold a graduate/professional degree, 22% are college graduates, 22% have some college
education, and 11% have a high school-level education. Of those that gave a response for their fathers, all of the fathers hold a graduate or professional degree.

**Level of academic achievement.** The participants in this study were mostly high-achievers—44% said they get mostly As, 44% said they get mostly Bs and a few As, and 11% said they get mostly Bs.

**Level of friendship diversity and where friends are.** Most of the participants (89%) said that most of their friends were in GCP. The breakdown of friendship group diversity reflects that most of the girls’ friendship groups were predominantly Black, with only one participant having more White friends than Black friends. Two of the participants had relatively diverse friend groups that include other races besides Black and White. Considering the overall demographics of the upper school, where there are 24 Black girls out of a school of 180 students, the fact that most of the participants in the study have predominantly Black friend groups reflects the insular nature of Black girl friend groups at the school.

**Extracurricular activity participation.** All of the study participants are members of the school’s Black student union, and couple of girls are also involved in theater, student government, and choir.

**Level of neighborhood diversity.** The level of diversity of the neighborhoods where the participants lived varied, with some of the girls living in predominantly White (where the percentage of White people is more than 60%) or all-White neighborhoods, and some living in predominantly Black neighborhoods, and some living in neighborhoods that are fairly diverse (I gave the designation of “relatively diverse”
neighborhoods to those neighborhoods where there were no more than 50% of a particular race/ethnicity in the neighborhood).

**Grace school.** There were 20 girls at Grace who regularly attended the weekly discussion group sessions that were a part of the Black Girl Project. 15 of the girls completed the questionnaires and 9 participated in individual interviews. Below is the demographic information of the girls based on their responses to the demographic questions on the introductory questionnaire.

**Race/ethnicity.** All of the girls self-identified as either “Black” or “African-American” (which was a requirement for participating in the study). There was one student who also included “a third indian” as part of how she described her race/ethnicity. There was another student who described herself as “Haitian-African-American.” Though these responses were not as varied as those from the GCP questionnaire, they still suggest that there are variations in how the girls identify themselves beyond being Black or African-American.

**Grade level.** There was a fairly even representation of participants in terms of grade level. There were three 9th graders, five 10th graders, two 11th graders, and five 12th graders.

**Years attending Grace and past schools.** Over 50% of the participants had attended Grace School for more than 7 years, meaning that they have been at the school at least since 5th grade or younger. 25% of the group had attended Grace School for 4-6 years, and another 25% of the group had attended Grace for 1-3 years. In the group as a whole, 5 students would be considered “lifers,” meaning that they have attended Grace at
least since kindergarten. For those participants who had not attended Grace for their entire school careers, they attended a mix of independent schools, parochial schools, and varying types of public schools (neighborhood schools and charter schools) in differing locations (urban and suburban schools). There were 2 participants who stood out from the sample in that they had attended all three categories of schools (independent, parochial, and public).

**Level of education of parents/guardians.** In this response, all but one of the participants shared information about both of their parents. In terms of the highest level of education completed, 70% of the participant’s mothers have a graduate or professional degree, 10% completed some college, and 20% have a high school diploma. 50% of the participant’s fathers have a graduate or professional degree, 10% completed some college, 30% have a high school diploma, and 10% completed some high school.

**Level of academic achievement.** Overall, the participants at Grace could be considered high achievers, with 33% stating that they get “Mostly A’s”, 40% reporting that they get “Mostly B’s and few A’s”, and 20% stating that they get “Mostly B’s”. 7% stated that they get “Mostly B’s and a few C’s.”

**Level of friendship diversity and where friends are.** The participant responses almost broke out evenly with a little more than half (57%) of the participant responses indicating that their friend groups are mostly Black, and with a little less than half (43%) of the participant responses indicating that their friend groups are relatively diverse. In terms of where their friends come from, 67% of the participants reported that most of their friends are in their school, 20% reported that their friend groups are in the “other”
category, with the open-ended responses being “teams outside of school” and “I played with them or met them through basketball.” 13% also reported that the majority of their friends are at their church.

**Extracurricular activity participation.** One-third of the girls reported that they participate in cultural clubs, which was the largest category represented. The rest of the participation in extra-curriculars varied, with others participating student government, choir, drama, debate teams, and “other.” 20% of the participants reported that they do not participate in extracurricular activities.

**Level of neighborhood diversity.** About 50% of the participants reported living in neighborhoods that were predominantly Black or people of color (60% or more of the population was Black or people of color). 27% live in neighborhoods that are relatively diverse (I gave the designation of “relatively diverse” neighborhoods to those neighborhoods where there were no more than 50% of a particular race/ethnicity in the neighborhood). 20% of the participants responded that the neighborhoods they live in are predominantly White.

**Where We Met: The Black Girl Project**

The focal point of the project took place within the context of a Black girls group that meet weekly for 30 to 50 minutes over a period of 16 weeks. The purpose of using a Black girls’ discussion group as the primary research context served to answer the following research questions and sub-questions:

*Research question: What do Black girl critical literacies look like in the context of predominantly White independent schools?*
How do Black girl critical literacies function in the daily school lives of Black girls who attend independent schools?

How does the phenomenon of Black girl critical literacies interact with the construction of the Black female identity?

Research question: How do adolescent Black girls in the independent school setting articulate the components of Black girl critical literacies to other Black girls?

In service of answering my research questions, I made the decision to use the discussion group format as the primary research context primarily because of the age of the participants. My aim with the group discussions was to make the participants feel more comfortable in talking about their experiences by asking them to reflect on questions beforehand and then share them in a group setting rather than answer questions in the moment in a one-on-one setting, which has the potential to be uncomfortable for youth (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Additionally, my goal was that the group discussions would take on the characteristics of focus groups in that the prompts that I asked participants to discuss in the group would be generative and lead to the discussion of other related topics (Patton, 2002), all of which I will considered worthy data. The method of group discussions in my study was distinct from the traditional focus group method in that the appeal of the ongoing group discussion method was their cumulative nature. I intentionally set up the scheduling of the group discussions to occur at regular intervals so that the content generated in each discussion session by the participants could serve as a source for continued discussion for the next discussion session. Focus groups, in contrast, are
typically conducted once during a study, for a certain period of time, and have a specific focus in mind, as their function is primarily that of a group interview rather than a discussion (Patton, 2002). In line with the goals of my project, I decided that conducting focus groups would not be a sufficient way to fully understand how the participants describe, communicate, and embody aspects of Black girl critical literacies.

The purpose of the Black girls’ group was two-fold: 1) it addressed the need for a “safe space” where Black girls could be comfortable to be themselves and express themselves freely, and 2) it served as a site of social transformation and change through the brainstorming and sharing of ideas of how the participants’ schools could be more supportive of the needs of Black girls. Following in the tradition of hooks (1990), Pastor and colleagues (1996), and Ward (1996), the safe space of the Black girls’ discussion groups took the form of what these scholars have defined as homeplaces or homespaces. Hooks traces the lineage of homeplaces to the tradition of Black women making homes as a place where “all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world” (p. 42). In their homes, Black women created spaces where Black people could affirm one another’s value, and through this affirmation, resist the negative images imposed on them by White people. To hooks, homeplaces serve as sites of resistance and liberation for Black people.

Similarly, Pastor et al. (1996) describe the potential of girls’ and women’s groups to serve as homeplaces where “young women can begin to learn how to transform their
isolated analyses and make the ‘personal political’ with profound opportunities for
development” (p. 30). Ward’s (1996) description of homespaces particularly focuses on
the places where Black children learn how to process and respond to situations of racism,
discrimination, and develop attitudes, values, and behaviors about their own racial/ethnic
group and larger society. Ward also views homespaces as sites of resistance in that
through their racial socialization, Black children are developing a “unique cultural and
political perspective—a perspective that stands against that which is perceived as unjust
and oppressive” (p. 87). Taken together, hooks’, Pastor et al.’s, and Ward’s descriptions
of homeplaces/homespaces all highlight the importance of marginalized groups having a
space where they not only can experience a positive sense of community away from the
oppression of dominant groups, but also can work together in developing a critical
perspective of society that would lead towards social change.

Related to the context of this research project, the creation of a homespace/place
was essential to encouraging the development of Black girls’ critical literacies and to
promoting their overall positive development. The fact that the participants in my
dissertation study were attending schools that were predominantly White and historically
had been places of racial and socioeconomic exclusion and dominance, highlighted the
need for a space where Black girls could have a sense of community, dignity, and respect,
and where they could critique their experiences as Black girls in their schools without
fear of reprisal or the devaluing of their ideas.

Another way to view the context of the Black girls’ group is by referring back to
the feminist tradition of creating consciousness-raising (CR) groups to explore issues of
racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Cross, Klein, Smith, & Smith, 1982). Though Cross, Klein, Smith, and Smith describe the specifics of how a CR group works for addressing issues of racism, their foundational principles and methods for the group can be transposed to address other forms of domination and oppression. Cross, et al. firmly believe that in order to make meaningful change, people must have a political understanding of systems of domination and oppression as well as a personal-political understanding of how those systems affect their daily lives in both the positive and negative sense. Therefore, CR groups employ the methods of personal sharing, risk taking, and involvement in order for participants to begin to discuss issues of oppression and then move to action.

The next section of this chapter describes the methods, activities, and exercises that I employed to encourage the participants to analyze the sociopolitical and historical contexts of dominance in which they live and attend school. With the overall goal being that the participants continued to develop a critical awareness of systems of power and privilege in U.S. society, the methods often required the participants to explore how they were personally affected by systems of privilege and oppression, and to imagine how they could begin to disrupt these systems and move towards the goal of social equity.

Section 3: Data Sources and Collection

The following section describes the sources and methods that I used to collect data at Grace School and Girls’ College Prep over a period of 16 weeks, and how these data sources are related to the research questions of the study.
Introductory and Closing Questionnaires

The introductory and closing questionnaires addressed the following research question and sub-questions:

Research question: What do Black girl critical literacies look like in the context of predominantly White independent schools?

- How do Black girl critical literacies function in the daily school lives of Black girls who attend independent schools?
- How does the phenomenon of Black girl critical literacies interact with the construction of the Black female identity?

The purpose of the questionnaires was two-fold in that they illustrated the variation of the participants in terms of demographics, life experiences, and understandings of what I consider to be some of the fundamental principles related to Black girl critical literacies such as oppression, feminism, racism, and classism (see Appendices A and B). In line with Creswell’s (2007) purposeful sampling strategy, all participants in the study completed the introductory questionnaire at our first meetings in January 2015. The introductory questionnaires asked the participants to list their age, grade, how many years they had attended their current school, and other schools that they had attended before their current school (if applicable). The introductory questionnaire asked participants to first describe their racial or ethnic background in an open-ended format, and then asked participants to identify the broader racial/ethnic categories to which they belonged according to the U.S. 2010 census categories. In order to assess the
relative socioeconomic statuses of the participant groups, the participants were asked to identify the highest level of education of their parents/guardians (Ensminger et al., 2000).

As a way to gauge the participants’ relative awareness of encounters involving race, gender, and socioeconomic status in their lives, I adapted items from Howard Stevenson’s Preventing Long-term Anger and Aggression in Youth (PLAAY) parent questionnaire (2012), which assesses parents’ levels of racial literacy and stress. In developing these items, I also drew on Paul Gorski’s (2013) four abilities of equity literacy to inform my broader thinking around how I was assessing the different literacies of the participants. The questionnaire items focused on the relative literacies of the participants asked them to reflect on their experiences with racism, sexism, and classism in their home and school communities, how often and with whom they talk about race, gender, and class, and also asked them to define the terms “feminism” and “oppression,” and asked them to respond to the prompt, “Do you believe that everyone in the U.S. has an equal opportunity to be successful?”

Although my initial intent with the introductory and closing questionnaires was to be able to perform a close comparison of the development of the participants’ literacies from the beginning of the project to the end, I became aware of the fact that I most likely would not be able to “quantify” the shifts in the participants’ thinking due to the relatively short amount of time the participants were involved with the project, and rather would only be able to describe some of the tentative shifts that I might be seeing. Therefore, the items in the closing questionnaire differed slightly from the items in the introductory questionnaire. In addition to asking the participants about their comfort...
levels and the frequency with which they talked about race, gender, and class, the closing questionnaire asked the participants to reflect on a more holistic level about their experiences in the Black girls’ group and what they were taking away from the group (see Appendix B). The closing questionnaire was administered at the last meeting with the participants in May 2015.

**An Emergent Curriculum Grounded in the Tenets of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Pedagogy**

The weekly girls’ discussion group curriculum addressed the following research question:

*Research question: How does an enrichment curriculum grounded in critical feminist theories and emancipatory pedagogies influence Black girl critical literacies within an independent school context?*

The curriculum was a combination of inductive and deductive components that reflected an emergent design framework (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). The curriculum was inductive in that I mostly relied on the ideas, thoughts, and questions of the participants to drive forward the content of the curriculum. It was deductive in the way that I used principles from Black feminist thought and critical pedagogy to develop a particular environment in which the discussions took place. The curricular content mainly fell into four categories, which are described in detail below:

**Introductory activities.** I used the first two to three sessions at each school site to establish an environment where the participants would feel comfortable and safe sharing their stories, and where reflection about themselves and what they were learning from
each other became a normative practice in each session. The first introductory activity, was the establishment of community norms for the group. In this activity I asked the girls to develop a list of strategies and commitments that they wanted to uphold during the group discussions as a way to make the discussion group space safe and productive for everyone (see Appendix C). Following feminist and critical pedagogical traditions, giving the girls the freedom to develop their own guidelines for communication and how they would interact with one another during each meeting also serve to democratize the space by disrupting the traditional student/teacher power relations that typically exist within school spaces and also ensure that everyone’s needs in the space could be met (Brown, 2016; Freire, 1970).

Another introductory activity was that each participant was asked to draw an identity map that represented the different aspects of her identity. As a social-psychology methodological tool, identity maps serve to illuminate the ways in which individuals view themselves, how they are positioned in society, and how they feel they are viewed by others (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Milgram et al., 1976). The purpose of the identity maps was to give the participants the opportunity to get to know one another on an intimate level. Though many of the girls had gone to school together for years, there were aspects of their identity or personality that they had not previously shared with others. Additionally, the identity maps served the purpose of fostering community among the participants by allowing them to see what aspects of their identities were common among each other, and where they were unique. Lastly, following the principles of Black feminist thought, creating the identity maps also created a situation in which the
participants were free to define themselves. Collins (2000) points out that due to the oppressive social status of Black women in the U.S., they are often defined by others, with unrealistic and untrue stereotypes and assumptions being applied to the group as a whole. The principles of Black feminist thought, however, uphold the power and agency that Black women, and in the case of this study, Black girls have of self-definition in the face of societal biases and oppression.

**Storytelling.** The method of storytelling was a central component of the enrichment curriculum implemented in the weekly discussion meetings. Storytelling served the purpose of encouraging the participants to reflect on and share their personal experiences related to encounters of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. My decision to incorporate storytelling as a part of the workshops was also reflective of the critical feminist roots of the curriculum. The tenet of Black feminist thought that emphasizes the special knowledge that Black women hold about their particular experience (Collins, 1989) and the expectation of critical feminist frameworks that women of color engage in praxis (Wing, 2000) makes storytelling an optimal method through which Black girls can communicate and critique their stories of oppression (Evans-Winters, 2005; Richardson, 2003). Additionally, storytelling provided a way for the participants to find a sense of community with one another through discovering where their experiences are similar, reflective of Collins’ (1989) theory of Black woman standpoint, and where their experiences diverge. Lastly, storytelling provided a way for me, as researcher and facilitator of the girls’ group, to connect to and establish trust with my participants. Following the feminist perspective of research, which seeks to disrupt the traditional
hierarchical researcher-participant relationship (Skeggs, 1994), sharing my own experiences with the girls in response to their stories placed me in a position in which I became a participant-researcher instead of solely a researcher.

**Media literacy.** Another component of the curriculum focused on the concept of media literacy, which questions how different forms of media construct, reproduce, and give meaning to “the ways that culture constructs a system of social differences, with hierarchies, exclusions, defamations, and sometimes legitimation of the dominant social groups’ power and domination” (Kellner, 1998, p. 5). The media literacy component of the curriculum built on the foundations of the introductory activities and storytelling by teaching participants how to both look for and critique elements of power and privilege that are present in different forms of media specifically related to how Black girls and women are depicted. To that end, I brought in videos and other forms of media that focused on issues of race, gender, and class related to Black girl identities. As I presented the media, I asked the girls to think about how the content was reflective (or not) of their lived experiences, what questions they had about the content and source of the media, and other ideas that the media raised for them in terms of power and privilege. As the project progressed, participants also brought in their own media to share with the group connected to the experiences of Black women and girls.

Another aspect of media literacy is that it also empowers youth by teaching them to learn how to intelligently consume and produce their own forms of media (Kellner, 1998; Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). Morrell and his colleagues (2013) point out that the power of developing media literacy in youth and teaching them how to
produce their own versions of media creates a situation in which they can create and share “competing narratives” (p. 17) of their own social experiences, which could potentially illustrate narratives that depart from those of the dominant culture in our society. During the workshops, the participants explored the idea of creating their own media in terms of brainstorming the actions they wanted to implement in their schools by developing a database with diversity resources, or creating a video about their experiences as Black girls at their school.

**Action-oriented work.** The action component of the workshops was oriented around the Black feminist and critical pedagogy tenets of praxis. Both theories hold that the first step in being critical is being able to notice how power plays out in social relations and interactions in society (Collins, 2000; McLaren, 2003). The second step of being critical is engaging in some sort of action that works to dismantle inequitable and oppressive structures (Wing, 1996). Throughout the time we met, I presented examples of different forms of activism that particularly addressed stereotypes and biases that people hold about race, gender, class, and age. By showing the girls spoken word performances, mini-documentaries, and photographs related to actions against power and privilege that were made by people their own age or only a little bit older, my goal was to have the girls brainstorm about actions they could take in their own school.

The last part of the action curriculum was aiming to implement some of the actions that they brainstormed. Throughout the weekly discussion groups, I included discussion question prompts that encouraged the participants to think about concrete
action steps, had each group keep track of their ideas as they came up with them, and then refine their plans as the sessions progressed (see Appendix C).

**Researcher as facilitator.** The ways in which I took on my role as facilitator influenced how my relationships developed with my participants as well as the kinds of narratives that emerged throughout the research process. My attitude towards my role as facilitator stemmed from Black feminist Russell’s (1982) description of what teachers of Black women should aspire to in the classroom:

> The role of the teacher? Making the process conscious, the content significant. Want to know, yourself, how the problems in the stories got resolved. Learn what daily survival wisdom these women have. Care. Don’t let it stop at commiseration. Try to help them generalize from the specifics. Raise issues of who and what they continually have to bump up against on the life-road they’ve planned for themselves. (p. 197)

As a facilitator of the girls’ group, I aimed to be conscious of the fact that my goal was not only to get to know my participants and their stories, but also to leverage their experiences as sources of collective social action. By aligning myself with a feminist stance, I used my role as a facilitator not in a hierarchical sense, but rather embraced my identity as someone whose role was to provide the necessary space and the structures for the Black girls in the study to become actors and agents in discovering and reflecting on certain aspects of their identity rather than being passive objects of study (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007). In my role as facilitator, I aimed to “work the hyphen” (Fine, 1994) of being a Black female, a researcher, and potential role model, knowing that my status guided the ways in which I interacted with my participants and processed the events that occurred within the girls group sessions.
Participant Interviews

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the participants’ experiences with encounters of race, gender, and socioeconomic status, I attempted to interview as many of the participants as I could. The method of interviewing provided me with “access to the observations of others” (Weiss, 1994, p. 1) in that, as an outsider, I was not immediately familiar with the social landscape of the school sites, details of school cultures and norms, and the particular social location and status that Black girls occupied in their school. I interviewed 17 participants (4 from Girls College Prep and 13 from Grace School) for 50-60 minutes using a semi-structured interview protocol in order to have some commonality across the different interviews, and at the same time make space for following up on responses and stories that emerged in the interview (Seidman, 2013; Weiss, 1994).

The interview protocol not only asked participants to describe their experiences of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in their school, but also asked the participants to analyze the encounters in relation to power and privilege (See Appendix D). In this way, the interviews served as another data source through which I could identify each participant’s level of awareness related to issues of inequity, and also understand how the participants saw themselves in relation to their status in their schools.

Researcher Field Notes and Reflections

Other sources of data for this project were my own reflections, thoughts, and questions that emerged as I served in the facilitator role for the group discussions and as an interviewer. Following the principles of feminist research, it is important for the
researcher to recognize the “inter-relatedness of researcher and participant, and multiple ways of knowing” (Olesen, 2007, p. 422). Additionally, the researcher intentionally places herself “within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative” (Creswell, 2007, p. 26). By consistently recording my reactions, reflections, and ongoing questions after each workshop session and participant interview in the form of field notes and researcher journal entries, I engaged in a form a reflexivity (Patton, 2002) that not only helped me to think about my relationship with my participants, but also consider my own positionality and social location in relation to what the participants discussed during our group discussions and workshops.

Section 4: Methodology & Data Analysis

Tracing the Emerging Components of BGCL Using a Grounded Theory

Methodology

True to the grounded theory method of data analysis, I analyzed my data throughout the data collection period in an ongoing process that then evolved into a more focused analysis of the data once data collection was complete. During the data collection process, I engaged in the “constant comparative method” (Strauss & Corbin, 1988, p. 159), wherein I consistently wrote reflective memos following each discussion session and interview about the patterns and trends that I saw emerging in relation to my research questions. These initial reflections developed into the broader categories, which later served to become the core categories describing Black girl critical literacies. Corbin and
Strauss (2015) define core categories as “more abstract terms that denote the major theme that a group of basic-level concepts are pointing to” (p. 76). The core categories for this study are: “Emotions,” “A Developing Critical Consciousness,” “Agency and Activism,” “School Culture,” and “Role of the Researcher.”

The building blocks for these core categories emerged from my first round of coding/analysis and second round of analysis using an “open coding” method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I used a combination of inductive and deductive coding when applying codes to the data, though the majority of the codes were inductive and “in vivo” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) codes. The deductive codes came from the literature of the theories that I used as a part of my theoretical framework (for example the “self-definition” code stemming from the principles of Black feminist thought and the “resistance” code coming from Ward’s (1996) work analyzing the resistance strategies of Black girls). There were a total of 92 codes. As I engaged in the first round of coding, I would periodically write memos that captured how I was defining the codes and how certain codes appeared to relate to each other. By the end of the first round of coding, I had a complete list of codes, how they were organized under the larger five categories that had emerged from the beginning of data analysis, and my working definitions for each of the codes (see Appendix E for list of codes and definitions).

In the third round of analysis, I focused on analyzing the developing relationships between the codes by clustering codes together that spoke to a particular pattern, trend, or theme that worked to explain what phenomenon were occurring under the larger categories I mentioned above. These second-level codes, also known as axial codes
(Ravich & Carl, 2016) or pattern codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) emerged from clustering the open codes together according different characteristics, and then analyzing how the characteristic clusters spoke to particular theme or phenomenon. I used the characteristics of “emotions,” “actions,” and “descriptors,” to describe the different facets of the larger core categories of “Emotions,” “A Developing Critical Consciousness,” “Agency and Activism,” “School Culture,” and “Role of the Researcher.” I then looked across the code clusters to see how they related to each other to describe a theme or phenomenon (also known as an axial code) of the core category. Taken together, the axial codes allowed me to create a multidimensional picture of each of the core categories.

The next step in the process was to develop a working narrative for how the relationships between the axial codes and the core categories were represented in the actual data. Using the Axial Codes Table as a guide, I pulled the excerpts that I had coded in Dedoose that aligned with a particular axial code or phenomenon and then read across the emotion, action, and descriptor excerpts to develop an understanding how a particular axial code functions within a larger core category. For example, when I wanted to look at the “different flavors of agency and activism (positive),” I pulled all of the emotion codes, action codes, and descriptor codes associated with that theme and then analyzed the all of the emotion codes together, and then memoed about my observations. I then did the same with the action codes and descriptor codes, and then brought the memos together to look across the categories to fully understand each theme and develop an axial code memo to describe each theme/phenomenon. Lastly, I read across the axial code
memos to develop a multi-layered description, or narrative of each core category (in this example the core category was “Agency & Activism”).

**The Emergence of the Black Girl Critical Literacies Components**

**Tracing the emergence of critical consciousness and awareness.** The *critical consciousness* strand first emerged during the introductory work that I did with the girls. At the first session, I had the girls complete an introductory questionnaire that asked the girls to assess whether they had ever experienced encounters of racism, sexism, or classism, how comfortable they feel talking about these issues (very hard, hard, in the middle, easy, very easy), and how often they talk about these issues with their families and friends (not at all, a little, somewhat, a lot, all of the time) (See Appendix A). The girls’ responses to these questions gave me a general sense of how aware each girl may have been about issues of racism, sexism, and classism, and what their sources of critical consciousness development might be.

As a part of the introductory work, the girls also completed and shared identity maps where they reflected on which parts of their identity they had included on their maps, which parts of their identity they had not included, and the situations that made some aspects of their identity stand out more than others. Some of the themes related to critical consciousness that emerged from the maps and the girls’ explanations were what it meant to be a Black girl in different spaces (school, home, community), how they thought that others saw them versus how they define themselves, and what their future goals were.
The introductory work of the questionnaires, identity maps, and complementary discussions that we had in our weekly group meetings illuminated themes of looking for community, awareness of the status of Black girls and women, and influence of school culture--themes that spoke to how the girls were interpreting the worlds that they lived in. Through these introductory activities I also began to notice that the level of awareness the girls had around racism, sexism, classism, and privilege varied by different degrees. As will be illustrated in Chapter 5, some girls had a working vocabulary of terms and concepts related to issues of power and difference while others were just beginning to discover the social and societal significance of racial, gendered, and socioeconomic identities.

On a structural level, critical consciousness and awareness emerged through the particular functioning of the weekly discussion groups. The girls seemed to just want a place where they could sit and talk about their experiences and issues that they cared about. In this way, the discussion groups took on the role of being consciousness-raising spaces. Much like the homespaces (Ward, 1996) or homeplaces (Pastor, et al., 2007) described in other girls’ group research, the weekly discussion groups became a place where all of us involved took on the role of educating each other.

The themes that emerged alongside the critical consciousness and awareness strand spoke to how the girls were assessing the status of Black girls and women in the U.S., their critiques of their school in relation to their status as Black girls, how they were defining and describing racism, sexism, and classism, what messages and sources seemed to be influencing their awareness and interpretation of particular situations. These themes
later became codes that I would apply to the data for a richer understanding of how critical consciousness and awareness was a part of BGCL.

**Tracing the girls’ emotional literacy.** The *emotional literacy* of the girls was a theme that emerged over time throughout our meetings together. Initially, I made note of the different emotions that the girls expressed during each discussion group session, which later became individual codes for my data. The girls often displayed a range of emotions throughout the discussion sessions, whether it was relaxation, appreciation, and humor that was a part of them enjoying each other’s company in having their own designated space, or if it was confusion, hurt, and annoyance when telling their own stories about their experiences at school, home, or in their home communities. On an individual level, I was able to see how the girls described their emotions when sharing their stories, and then notice the body language that they displayed while recounting their experiences, and how their body language aligned (or was misaligned) with what they were saying. On a group level, I looked to see how the girls responded to one another—what their reactions were to each other’s experiences and ideas, and how they interpreted the emotions that their peers were displaying.

Another aspect of emotional literacy that emerged was how the girls interpreted their emotions in connection with their personalities. Both in their individual interviews and when the girls created and shared their identity maps with the whole group, a theme that emerged was how the girls saw certain emotions as central to who they were such as being “angry,” “sad,” or “confused.” During certain points in their lives the girls talked
about how these emotions were particularly palpable in how they were experiencing their lives and their interactions with others.

On a broader and more structural level, the emotional literacy theme emerged in the way that the girls reflected on the emotions of White students and faculty members in their school in relation to different encounters that they experienced. The girls talked about times where their emotions were misread by their peers and teachers—often in ways that they were viewed as being overly aggressive or angry. The girls’ awareness of the emotions of others also appeared around the topic of “discomfort” and the debates that they had about the line between where discomfort can be used as a learning tool and where it becomes unsafe and unhealthy. These discussions also carried over into some of the girls’ hypervigilance about how their initiatives would make White students and teachers feel, and whether that was something that needed to be taken into consideration as they moved forward with their plans.

**Tracing the emergence of agency & activism.** At its most basic level, the theme of how the participants displayed agency was in their decision to become participants in this research study and attend the weekly discussion sessions. The weekly discussion sessions were not part of a class, but rather occurred during the participants’ extracurricular periods. At Grace School, the Black Girl Project met during an activity period when other school clubs and organizations usually met, and at GCP the participants met during their lunch period. The decision of the girls to commit to this project on a weekly basis in lieu of engaging in other activities or spending time with
their friends, and also being cognizant of the fact that not all Black girls who were in their school were a part of the project demonstrated a certain level of agency.

Within the first few meeting sessions, the girls also demonstrated their agency in the way that they took ownership of crafting the weekly discussion session meetings into their own space. Towards the beginning of the project, my intention was to bring in planned lessons and Powerpoint presentations that would address issues related to feminism, the cycle of oppression, racism, and classism. As the project progressed, I realized that the girls were not particularly excited about the formalized structure of the discussion sessions that I had planned. Instead, where I saw the girls most active and engaged was when they were sitting and talking with each other about topics that they cared about. In response to the girls’ disengagement/engagement, I shifted my thinking about my curriculum from “what the girls need to know” to “what do the girls want to know?” During this time and continuing the rest of the time that we met together, the agency broadly took the shape of the different forms of decision-making that the girls engaged. On a smaller scale, their decision-making was reflected in their decisions to bring their own media to the group, their taking charge of gathering and reminding girls to come to the meetings, and their taking action to want to meet in a group with each other outside of the discussion group so they could continue to discuss the topics that were raised in the weekly discussion group. On a larger scale, the girls displayed their decision-making through all of the choices and strategies they wanted to take up as part of activism in their school.
The emergence of how the girls engaged in activism was something that appeared after we had met together for about a month. During that first month of meeting together, the weekly discussions revolved around the participants’ experiences as Black girls at their school. As we moved into the second month, the girls’ conversations began to shift from simply explaining their experiences to questioning why their experiences seemed to be unique to them as Black girls in their school, and how they could begin to think about creating change in their school communities. At Grace School, the girls’ activism took the shape of the girls making the decision to create a Black Student Union as a way to push forth some of the other ideas that they had for school change, including advocating for the creation of an African-American history course, and setting up a mentorship program with Black girls in the lower school. At GCP, the girls also developed plans for what they wanted to see change at their school, including the development of an African-American history course, and the potential of creating a database of diversity resources that students and teachers could access. At both schools, the activism theme also emerged in the ways that the girls strategized about identifying and developing relationships with adult allies who would support them in their work of developing organizations and initiatives that would support Black girls in school.

The codes that I developed when noting the emergence of the *agency and activism* theme all speak to how the girls displayed agency in defining themselves, the decision-making that the girls made, and how they strategized around taking action in their schools.
Tracing the emergence of school culture as context. The influence of school culture as an emerging factor contributing to BGCL largely revolved around the existence and structure of the girls’ group discussion sessions. In the introductory sessions and in the questionnaires the girls often reflected on how they joined the group as a way to find community with other Black girls in their school. At the time, Grace School did not have any active affinity groups on campus for Black students, let alone Black girls. Though the girls at GCP did have an active Black Student Union, the girls in the group talked about how the girls group as a part of the Black Girl Project provided a more intimate space for them to come together and talk about their experiences. The introductory questionnaires also revealed the girls’ perceptions of their school culture in terms of the relative racial demographics in the school, if they had ever experienced encounters of racism, sexism, and classism in school, and how often their teachers discuss issues of racism, sexism, and classism as part of their curriculum.

Central to the girls’ assessment of their school culture were their experiences with microaggressions as a result of their being Black girls in an elite, predominantly White space. On a micro-level, they described one-on-one interactions that they had with peers and teachers where it was clearly communicated that they were being “othered” in some way. On a macro-level, the girls talked about school policies and administrative decisions that did not fully meet, and sometimes went against structures that would directly support Black girls.

Another aspect of school culture that emerged from the girls’ discussions was how the Black student community exists within the larger elite predominantly White
school culture. At Grace, the girls’ discussions of the Black community centered on which girls decided to become a part of the group and which girls did not, and around the divides between the Black students along socioeconomic and gender lines. At GCP, the presence of the Black Student Union as a somewhat institutionalized organization within the school sometimes engendered an “us vs. them” dynamic within the school.

The codes that I developed that spoke to school culture highlighted the general status of Black girls in their schools, the roles that they play within their school culture, and the orientation of the school sites around diversity.

**Trustworthiness of the Data Analysis**

Following the critical stance that I have employed throughout my dissertation project, I use the term “trustworthiness” to refer to the “validity” of a study as a way to move away from the positivistic connotations of the term “validity.” Additionally, the critical perspective “holds that researchers should uncover the hidden assumptions about how narrative accounts are constructed, read, and interpreted” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). When discussing the different methods that researchers use to validate their findings, Creswell and Miller (2000) explain how validity methods stem from the lens of the researcher, the lens of the participants, and the lens of those who are outside of the study such as readers and reviewers.

As a researcher, I understood that I served as an interpreter of the stories and experiences of the participants in my study. Knowing that, I approached my data through the lens of middle-class Black female who has been in elite predominantly White environments for most of her educational and professional career, creates an “insider
outsider” (Fine, 1994) status in which I had experiences and challenges similar to my participants around race/ethnicity, gender, and class, but that ultimately, my experiences still remained outside of their own present day narratives inside their particular school environments. In considering how I approached interpreting and sharing the stories of my participants, my goal was to not be what Fine (1992) describes as a “ventriloquist” researcher who speaks for or over her participants. Instead, my aim was (and is) that my interpretations and (re)presentations of my participants’ experiences amplify their voices, describe their experiences from their perspectives as much as possible, and facilitate the attention that outsiders pay to their stories.

In my role as a researcher, the trustworthiness of my analyses stemmed from my constant engagement in researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). By identifying and reflecting on my beliefs and biases stemming from my personal experiences and my role as a researcher throughout the research process, my researcher memos served as a place for me to record not only where my thinking during data collection could be biased, but also where my interpretations of the data could also be biased as I engaged in data analysis.

When considering the lens of the participants, I relied on the collaborative methods with the participants that I employed throughout the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I incorporated the perspectives of my participants throughout the research study and during the data analysis process by sending them transcripts, memos, and draft excerpts of my dissertation in order to gain their feedback on whether my interpretations and findings accurately reflected their experiences.
Lastly, I used the methods of peer review to address the lens of those who are external to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I sought the feedback of my dissertation committee members, scholars knowledgeable about my research focus on Black girls in independent schools, and fellow doctoral student colleagues who helped me to clarify and review the different aspects of my research methods and analysis.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations of this study include the fact that the time I spent with the study participants was relatively short in terms of being able to track the development of BGCL in relation to the curriculum material that leveraged critical feminist perspectives and critical pedagogy. A longitudinal study would better capture how the girls’ thinking and subsequent behaviors progressed over time. Another limitation of the study was the small number of participants from which my findings emerged. Due to the average racial and gendered demographics within independent schools, Black students typically only make up 6.5% of the student populations at independent schools, and one can surmise that Black girls would be an even smaller percentage of the population. In order to make the findings of this study more generalizable, a future study would need to include a greater number of schools so as to learn from a larger participant pool of adolescent Black girls.
CHAPTER 5: ELEMENTS OF BLACK GIRL CRITICAL LITERACIES—A DEVELOPING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

A developing critical consciousness is a key component of Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL). As reviewed in the literature, for Black girls in particular, a central component of critical consciousness is developing a healthy and effective resistance to the oppressed status of Black girls and women in the U.S. According to Ward (2007), Mansbridge & Morris (2001), and hooks (1992) that resistance often takes the form of developing a mindset that is in opposition to the dominant narratives in U.S. society. In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” hooks (1992) presents the idea of the “oppositional gaze” as a way for people in subordinate positions to resist the dominant images and messages that communicate their devalued status. Specifically, hooks describes “the gaze” as

A site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that “looks” to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (p. 116)

Developing an oppositional gaze is especially important for adolescent Black girls who continue to grow up in an environment in which Black girls and women are continually relegated to the role of “the Other” (hooks, 1992, p. 95) in society. As “the Other,” Black girls historically and currently possess a “status as outsiders [that] becomes the point from which other groups define their normality” (Collins, 2000, p. 77).
In this chapter I focus on the formation of a Black girl discussion group as an example of an in-school curricular intervention that supports the oppositional gaze and critical consciousness development among a group of adolescent Black girls. I draw on what I learned from the participants in my discussion group to illustrate what a developing critical consciousness of adolescent Black girls looks like when they are engaged with a curriculum whose theoretical and ideological roots lie in racial and gender socialization, Black feminist thought, and critical pedagogy. The first section of this chapter will explore how the elements of school culture in elite predominantly White institutions influence Black girls’ developing critical consciousness. Next, I will present how Black girls within independent schools influence each other’s critical consciousness development. Lastly, I will focus specifically on how the discussion groups served as an intervention to promote the participants’ critical consciousness development.

Section 1: The Influence of School Culture on the Developing Critical Consciousness of Black Girls

School culture is comprised of the various policies, norms, traditions, and expectations that communicate to students what ways of thinking, being, and communicating are accepted and valued, and those which are not (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Hurn, 1978; Loughridge & Tarantino, 2005). In independent schools in particular, scholars have found that the consistent reinforcement of school culture elements by school administrators and teachers serves the purpose of creating a particular sense of community, belonging, and excellence in these schools (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993;
Johnson, 1990). As a result, the daily activities that occur in school, whether intentionally or unintentionally, influence students’ thinking about power relations, values, and beliefs (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; McLaren, 1994). For Black girls in independent schools, critical consciousness development is particularly meaningful given their marginalized status in society and often in their schools. This section presents how the school cultures of Grace and GCP played a role in influencing how the study participants understood issues of race, gender, and class in relation to their developing Black girl identities.

**An Analysis of the Grace and GCP Landscapes Focusing on Race, Gender, & Class**

In order to better understand how the participants viewed and understood their school culture in relation to race, gender, and class, I asked the participants to respond to an introductory questionnaire that asked them to reflect on their own experiences with race, gender, and class in their lives (both inside and outside of school) and their assessment of how aspects of these social identifiers manifest themselves in schools. In the sub-sections below I summarize the trends that emerged in relation to the culture at each school site.

**Reflections on race and racism.**

Table 5.1

_Race and Racism at Grace School_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Have you ever had any experience of racist acts against you?”</td>
<td>Yes (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If yes, where did this incident occur? (check all that apply)</td>
<td>My Neighborhood (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My School (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Places (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Family/At Home (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2

Race and Racism at GCP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Have you ever had any experience of racist acts against you?”</td>
<td>Yes (90%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If yes, where did this incident occur? (check all that apply)</td>
<td>My Neighborhood (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My School (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Places (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Family/At Home (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to racist experiences you may have?</td>
<td>Very Comfortable (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Middle (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncomfortable (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Uncomfortable (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) In general, teachers at GCP School talk about race…</td>
<td>Never (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Frequently (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Time (0%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The experiences of the participants at GCP and Grace School seemed fairly aligned with one another, however, there was a difference between schools as to where the incidents were happening. For the girls at GCP, most of the time those experiences of
racism happened at school, and for Grace School, 42% of the time the acts of racism occurred at school, with more of the incidents happening in public places such as the mall, grocery store, park, etc. One way to look at this information is to assume that there are more racist incidents happening at GCP, which could or could not be true. Another way to interpret this information is that the girls at GCP and Grace could have different definitions of racism and/or different levels of awareness of when racist incidents are happening, thereby explaining the relatively high number at GCP. And yet another way to interpret this data is where the girls spend their time outside of school, and whether they are in places where racist incidents would be more or less likely to occur.

When girls from both schools were asked how comfortable they felt responding to racist incidents, about half of the responses were “in the middle,” there were a smattering of responses on the scale ranging from “very uncomfortable” to “very comfortable.” These responses could be reflective of how Black parents often socialize their children around race. Scholars point out that most Black parents engage in a form of racial/ethnic socialization of their children in which they intentionally prepare them for future experiences of racism and discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006; Stevenson, 1995; Thomas & Speight, 1999). This socialization often takes the form of having conversations with their children about different racial barriers that exist in the U.S. (Neblett et al, 2008).

However, the “racial barriers” form of racial socialization is less common among Black parents compared to “cultural socialization”—those practices that include teaching young people about their heritage and history and instills cultural or ethnic pride (Hughes et al, 2006). Particular to Black girls, researchers have found that Black mothers often
socialize their daughters to be independent, yet by learning about the realities of power and privilege in the U.S., they also learn how to respect forms of (often White) authority (Costigan, Cauce, & Etchison, 2007; Hill, 2002). The findings above could reflect that even though the study participants may have conversations with their parents about race, the conversations are not usually oriented about how to respond to racism and discrimination.

When asked to estimate how often they feel that their teachers talk about race, most of the responses from both schools were either “occasionally” or “somewhat frequently,” with a few participants answering “never.” None of the girls answered “all of the time.” When asked how often they had seen and/or heard stereotypes about Black people at their school, most of the participants answered “somewhat frequently” or “all of the time,” signaling their awareness of stereotypes about Black people and how hearing about or being the recipient of those stereotypes are a typical part of their school life.

**Reflections on sexism and gender discrimination.**

Table 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexism &amp; Gender Discrimination at Grace School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Have you ever had any experience of sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) acts against you?”</td>
<td>Yes (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If yes, where did this incident occur?</td>
<td>My Neighborhood (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(check all that apply)</td>
<td>My School (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Places (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Family/At Home (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to sexist experiences you may have?</td>
<td>Very Comfortable (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Middle (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncomfortable (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Very Uncomfortable (7%)

4) In general, teachers at Grace School talk about gender…

Never (7%)
Occasionally (47%)
Somewhat Frequently (33%)
All of the Time (13%)

5) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about women and girls at Grace School…

Never (7%)
Occasionally (53%)
Somewhat Frequently (40%)
All of the Time (0%)

Table 5.4

Sexism & Gender Discrimination at GCP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1) “Have you ever had any experience of sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) acts against you?” | Yes (60%)
No (40%) |
| 2) If yes, where did this incident occur? (check all that apply)         | My Neighborhood (0%)
My School (50%)
Public Places (83%)
With Family/At Home (17%) |
| 3) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to sexist experiences you may have? | Very Comfortable (34%)
Comfortable (25%)
In the Middle (38%)
Uncomfortable (0%)
Very Uncomfortable (0%) |
| 4) In general, teachers at GCP School talk about gender…                | Never (0%)
Occasionally (10%)
Somewhat Frequently (20%)
All of the Time (70%) |
| 5) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about women and girls at GCP…   | Never (50%)
Occasionally (30%)
Somewhat Frequently (0%)
All of the Time (20%) |

In contrast to the alignment of responses between GCP and Grace related to race, the girls’ experiences around perceptions of sexism and gender discrimination differed greatly. At Grace School, the majority of the girls had not experienced sexism, while the
majority of the GCP participants had. For the participants at both schools, their experiences with sexism largely happened in public places such as the mall, grocery store, or park, which is not surprising given the prevalence of cat-calling and street harassment of girls and women in the U.S. (Davis, 1993; Stop Street Harassment, 2014). However, the respondents from GCP stated that 30% of the time their experiences with sexism occurred at school. When asked about how comfortable they felt responding to sexist incidents, the responses from the Grace participants showed that most of them were comfortable doing so, while at GCP the responses were evenly split between “very comfortable,” “comfortable,” and “in the middle.” The responses from the participants at Grace could potentially be explained by the fact that at Grace there is an elective class that is offered that focuses on gender, where students openly talk and learn about gender and sexism. At least three of the girls in the discussion group from Grace were taking that elective.

When asked how often teachers in their school talk about gender, the participants from Grace mostly responded “occasionally” or “somewhat frequently,” with the few who took the class on gender responding “all of the time.” At GCP over half of the participants said “all of the time,” with the remaining participants saying “somewhat frequently” and “occasionally”. The responses at GCP could be due to the fact that GCP is an all-girls school and that the gendered identity of being female permeates almost every aspect of school culture. In response to whether they had seen or heard stereotypes about women and girls at their school, most of the students at Grace said “occasionally” or “somewhat frequently,” with only a small number saying “never.” In contrast, over
half of the girls at GCP said “never,” with 30% “occasionally,” and 20% said “all of the time.” The differences in responses between Grace School and GCP could be due to the fact that Grace School is a co-ed school, thereby potentially making it a place where encounters with stereotypes about gender would be more likely to happen than at GCP.

**Reflections on classism and discrimination against low-income people.**

Table 5.5

*Classism at Grace School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Have you ever had any experience of classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) acts against you?”</td>
<td>Yes (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (73%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If yes, where did this incident occur?</td>
<td>My Neighborhood (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My School (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Places (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Family/At Home (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to classist experiences you may have?</td>
<td>Very Comfortable (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Middle (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncomfortable (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Uncomfortable (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) In general, teachers at Grace School talk about socioeconomic/class issues…</td>
<td>Never (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Frequently (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Time (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about low-income people at Grace School…</td>
<td>Never (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Frequently (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Time (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classism at GCP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Have you ever had any experience of classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) acts against you?</td>
<td>Yes (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) If yes, where did this incident occur? (check all that apply)</td>
<td>My Neighborhood (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My School (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Places (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Family/At Home (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to classist experiences you may have?</td>
<td>Very Comfortable (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Middle (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncomfortable (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Uncomfortable (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) In general, teachers at GCP talk about socioeconomic/class issues…</td>
<td>Never (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Frequently (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Time (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about low-income people at GCP…</td>
<td>Never (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasionally (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat Frequently (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Time (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ responses about their school culture related to class and socioeconomic status was also a place where the two schools seemed to diverge. When the participants were asked to reflect on whether that had ever experienced any classist acts or discrimination against low-income people, Grace School and GCP appeared to be polar opposites, with the majority of the participants at Grace saying “no” and the majority of the GCP girls saying “yes.” For both groups, when these incidents of classism did occur, 60-70% of the time the incidents were happening in school. While I am not sure what the exact socioeconomic status demographics are at each school, the difference
between the GCP and the Grace responses could be explained in several different ways. One interpretation could be the potential difference in levels of affluence at each school, and the participants’ socioeconomic status relative to that affluence, with the participants at Grace overall coming from a higher socioeconomic background compared to the participants from GCP. Another interpretation could be that the participants at GCP have a greater awareness of encounters and interactions involving class and socioeconomic status based on discussions that they might have with each other, at school, or at home with their families.

When the Grace School girls were asked if the teachers at their school talk about issues related to socioeconomic status, there was a spectrum of responses ranging from “somewhat frequently” to “occasionally” to “never.” At GCP, the responses were clustered around “occasionally” and “never.” When asked if they had seen or heard stereotypes about low-income people at their school, most of the participants said “occasionally,” with other responses pointing to “somewhat frequently” (20%) and “all the time” (13%). What these responses point to in relation with the earlier question about whether they had experienced incidents of classism is that even though the girls at Grace may not have experienced classism (27% said yes), they do see it happening in their school community. At GCP there were a range of answers, with 10% saying “all of the time,” 40% saying “somewhat frequently,” 30% saying “occasionally,” and 10% saying “never.”

The girls’ responses to the questionnaires offer some insight into the orientations of their school culture around race, gender, and class. Although Grace School and GCP
have distinct school cultures, the focus of my dissertation project was to capture BGCL, and I found that the findings are common across both schools. In the remainder of this chapter (and subsequent chapters in this dissertation) I will present blended descriptions of how BGCL happens in both schools. The following sections will focus on how school culture influences the developing critical consciousness of Black girls. The main findings that emerged focused on how the girls felt positioned as members both inside and outside of their school community and the tensions that they experienced of feeling grateful for the opportunity to be attending their school while still feeling excluded from its community.

Feeling Inside, Yet Outside of the School Community

The paradox of students of color experiencing a tension between feeling as though they are members of their elite predominantly White schools, while at the same time receiving messages that they are not true insiders is a phenomenon that has been well documented by scholars who study school life at independent schools (Cookson & Persell, 1991; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010; Horvat & Antonio, 1999). In their qualitative study exploring the experiences of students of color at an elite boarding school, Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi (2010) describe the student experience as being “a part and apart” (p. 57), in her memoir of her time as a student at St. Paul’s School, Cary (1991) noted that to go to the newly co-ed school (at the time) as a Black girl was “to be in their world, but not of it” (p. 59), and in their study of elite schools Cookson & Persell (1991) draw on Collins’ (1986) metaphor of the “outsiders within” to describe the experiences of Black students in elite schools.
Adrienne, an 11th grader at GCP, captures the phenomenon of feeling like an “outsider within” in her reflection below:

For a very long time GCP’s approach to the “Black girl problem” has been to ignore it and it’ll go away. Capitalizing on the fact that we are a minority in order to be able to nod their heads and wag their fingers and say “Oh that’s terrible” about all of the injustices against us at GCP, hoping that then we’d stay quiet…We really just want to know that we, although the minority, are an important part of this community. And acknowledging and taking our concerns seriously is the first part of that, but the action is what’s missing.

For Black girls, the “outsiders within” phenomenon is particularly nuanced because of their intersecting identities. Their status as outsiders is connected to the fact that elite independent schools have in their histories excluded anyone who was not White, male, Christian, affluent, and heterosexual, leaving a legacy of traditions and practices that signal to Black girls that their raced, gendered, and sometimes socioeconomic and sexual orientation identities are outside of the school culture norm.

Though scholars of elite and independent schools have studied different aspects of school life for Black girls (Alexander-Snow, 1999; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010) and larger divides in the Black community (Chase, 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010) their analyses often position Black girls or students of color as passive recipients of these experiences. In contrast, my objective for this section is to highlight how Black girls critically, recognize, process, and respond to the messages that permeate their school culture.

School policies. One way in which the study participants experienced the “outsider within” phenomenon is through their experiences with biased or non-inclusive school policies. The dress code policies at both GCP and Grace were examples of how
issues of race, gender, and class intersect within the schools lives of Black girls at independent schools. At Grace School, the student dress code dictates that students are not allowed to wear tank-tops, athletic shorts, sweat pants, or denim of any kind. At the time of this study, the most recent conversations about the dress code centered around whether or not girls could wear leggings and still be within the dress code policy of the school. In my interview with Jennifer, a 10th grader at Grace who was also a “lifer,” she explained how her issues with the dress code were larger than being allowed to wear leggings or not:

**Jennifer:** Yeah, and now we can wear them [leggings] because the girls are ready to have just a revolt because like it was getting too cold to wear dresses like at end of fall, and then like not everyone – and then another thing was they changed our dress code, like you can't wear colored denim, we’re not supposed to. So like everyone had to rebuy clothes, and it’s like a financial thing too, like, you can't keep buying clothes if you’re going to keep changing the dress code. So some people just got mad and like, ‘I’m going to wear what I want.’… And it’s – I feel like it’s against girls, like we were told we can't wear uh, spaghetti straps or shorts, but you’re not teaching boys to not sexualize us. So I feel like you should be telling the boy, ‘Control yourself, uh, don’t rape her, or do anything to make her uncomfortable; do your school work.’ I feel like that’s what we should teach boys, not ‘Girls cover your bodies because it’s going to make boys uncomfortable,’ that’s how I feel, so yeah it’s a big one, uh the dress code here.

**Charlotte:** That’s cool. So have you ever been – have you ever done anything to kind of push back against the dress code or to question it?

**Jennifer:** Um, no because I’m a female and on top of that I’m a black female, so I’m very – I’m like regarded not – not as highly here, I have to be careful of what I do and how I dress. But like, aside from wearing leggings, I don’t really go out of dress code too much. I haven’t revolted against the dress code like some of these girls, like I saw denim shorts today. I was like, “Wow!” [laughs]

Similar to Jennifer’s experience, the girls at GCP were also critical about how their dress code was non-inclusive. At GCP, the students all wear uniforms. In the upper
school, the uniforms are a plaid kilt and a collared shirt. Students may also wear cardigans of a certain color, school “spirit gear,” and leggings or school sweatpants under their kilts. During their discussion about their school uniforms, the girls pointed out how the uniforms were not made for all body types, particularly how the kilts were made to be worn at their waists, but because the overall length of the kilt is rather short combined with the curvier body types of some of the participants, wearing their uniform is not something that is particularly comfortable for them.

Additionally, the girls critiqued how GCP presents the school uniform as a way to have all students at the school feel equal to one another in terms of socioeconomic status, but how indicators of socioeconomic status were in all areas of the school culture, including the school uniforms:

**Melanie:** So, they'll say, you know, "We have a uniform and one of our main reasons for that is because we don't—you know, we want to discourage judging based on socioeconomic status, but girls still…

**Kendra:** Ok, but your kilts are like $60, $100.

**Melanie:** Blue linen leggings. You can tell the ones who have money.

**Tasha:** There's a way to differentiate. Like, we can wear what shoes we want. Like, I mean, everyone wears sneakers, but then there's girls that, "I wear flats every day." … You can just tell … Besides the uniform, there's other ways to tell.

Jennifer’s and the GCP girls’ perspectives on the school dress codes weave together the sub-theme of being an “outsider within” with the larger finding of how school culture influences the critical consciousness of Black girls around race, class, and gender. In Jennifer’s reflection, her analysis of the school’s reinforcement of gender norms by policing specific items of clothing that girls are not allowed to wear because they would
distract the boys, and her awareness of how she does not have the same latitude to resist the dress code as a Black girl in her school, points to a growing critical consciousness of what it means to be Black and female in her school, and in larger society. As an “outsider within” Jennifer knows that she is not able to do the same things as White girls at her school without some sort of disciplinary action. The GCP girls’ experiences of having to wear school uniforms that are made to only fit certain body types, and the fallacy of school uniforms as a socioeconomic equalizer illustrate the outsider status that some of them may feel, particularly those who have curvier body types or who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Similar to Jennifer, the GCP girls’ critiques speak to a developing critical consciousness about who does and does not belong in their school, stemming from the identifiers of race and class.

**Code switching.** Another aspect of Black girls’ experiences within their schools that heightens their awareness of their status as “outsiders within” is the experience of or feeling pressure to “code switch.” Scotton & Ury (1977) describe code switching as “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction” (p. 7). In the case of the study participants, code switching took the form of switching between “Black English” and “Standard English” (Koch, Gross, & Kolts, 2001, p. 29). Code switching reflects a form of *a developing critical consciousness* in that some of the participants realize that there is a certain way of speaking and being that is more accepted at their school versus that of their home communities, and in order to fit in and feel valued, they make the conscious decision to adapt to the environment around them. For some of the participants, code switching was something that they had grown accustomed
to doing over time based on the amount of time they had been attending an independent school, and for others, the phenomenon of code switching was something that they were newly beginning to explore:

**Karla:** I kinda have like, a question or statement. So like, the majority of like the people I hang around with are like the White people that are in my classes, and so like, I'm cool with them, we're always joking around, I'm always talking to them. And then sometimes, I switch from sounding, like, my Grace School voice, and then my home voice, and then sometimes, they're like, "Oh, Karla, why are you talking like that?" and I'm just like “What do you mean?” and they're like, "Oh, you changed your voice" and I was like, "What are you talking about?" And they're like, "Oh you're doing it again!" and I was like...I just don't understand what they mean...Like, how is it possible for someone to change, like change their voices?

**Jackie:** I think it's very possible, because when you're around who you're comfortable with, you speak a certain way. And when you're around people like--like personally I speak the same way around everybody because like I said, I was around white people my whole life, I live around white people, like that's just how I speak. But if you come from a different part, you live in a different part, and you talk to people differently than you would talk to a white person if you're not as comfortable, they're gonna notice, when you're around people you're really comfortable with, they're gonna notice if you switch your voice. You know, not switch your voice, but you just talk differently around certain people than others because you're more comfortable.

Karla’s questions to the group demonstrate a growing critical consciousness in response to others’ comments about her use of code switching. Jackie’s explanation of code switching speaks to the ways in which the girls were trying to figure out how to fit in with different groups of people, some who they might be familiar or “comfortable” with, and others with whom they might not feel so comfortable.

Many of the girls describe code switching as having “two different identities,” “two different accents,” or “two different languages” that they learn to adopt in order to navigate what they see as two different worlds:
Jennifer: Yeah. I mean like I’ve heard people like call me “white girl” and all these other stuff because I’m educated and I don’t speak like you know – I speak like I’ve read a book before. So I – but like for a long time, I would have to like – I would be ashamed almost of like the education that I had because when I’m at home I wanted to hang out my friends in [name of predominantly Black neighborhood in the city], I feel like they wouldn’t accept me for what I knew, and I knew right from wrong, and like, you know, I just have a better education in that sense, and I feel like they won’t accept me, they will feel like I wasn’t a part of them anymore, and it would feel like – I feel like I was better than them, and that wasn’t the case because I still came from the same street.

So I don’t know, in a sense like I had to speak like two different languages almost – you know you had to put aside like speaking properly, and kind of like remember like where you came from before you came to Grace. And that’s hard to do, and it’s hard to – I think now because I’ve been here for so long, I’ve learned how to combine them. But you know it’s like you have to accept you, that’s my main thing. And if that’s not you, that’s not you, that’s okay, you just have to – your main thing is to get a diploma and go to college, that’s why you’re here. So what everyone else says is side chatter. So that’s – yeah.

Similar to Jennifer’s experience, other girls in the study described situations where family members started calling them “White girl” once they began attending independent schools, how the peers from their neighborhood schools called them “traitors,” and how people in their neighborhoods accused them of wanting to be better than everyone else. These experiences reflect how some of the study participants not only had to balance the “outsiders within” phenomenon in their independent school environment, but also in their home communities. As Jennifer’s comment illustrates, one way that study participants reconciled the negative messages that they received as “outsiders within” in both contexts was to focus on the larger opportunities that they could benefit from by attending an elite school.

As the girls describe code switching, there is a tension that emerges where some of the girls position the dominant ways of of speaking and being that they see in their
schools as being better than the ways that they communicate outside of school. In her description of code switching, Sheena, a 10th grader, describes talking in the dominant narrative as talking “properly”:

Ok, well, like I came to Grace School in, well, the 5th grade. So when I came, I, like I went to charter school in like, [city name]. So my way of speaking wasn't the same as like everyone else's in Grace School, but, I started to like, adapt to-- I learned to speak proper. It's really like speaking White, it's speaking proper.

Sheena’s explanation of equating talking “properly” with talking “White” speaks to the ways in which schools serve as sites of societal reproduction, whereby the valued norms and beliefs in society are transmitted to students through the feedback they receive on a daily basis (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In Sheena’s case, similar to the experiences of some Black girls who transition into elite spaces (Alexander-Snow, 1999; Horvat & Antonio, 1999), her initial interactions with her peers and her teachers let her know that her way of speaking was different from what the norm was at Grace School, and Sheena, wanting to fit in, adjusted her speech accordingly.

**Friend group selections.** Another theme that emerged that captures the “outsiders within” phenomenon is the significant divide that the girls talked about extensively in our discussion groups, which was between different friend groups at school, that often fell along lines of perceived class/socioeconomic status, and of homogenous vs. interracial groupings. In terms of socioeconomic status, the divide emerged between the Black students who lived in the suburbs and Black students who lived in the city. The girls talked about how assumptions about members of both groups were always present, with the assumption that students from the city are “ghetto,” are
more concerned with socializing than academics, and are only at the school because of athletics; and the assumption that students from the suburbs are “bougie,” “oreos,” and not authentically “Black.”

In her interview, Krystal, a 12th grader, who lives in the city and began attending Grace School in middle school, described the differences between students from the city and students from the suburbs in terms of having a particular knowledge about how the world works. Krystal stated that students from the suburbs do not know how to “handle themselves,” while city students learn a different way of living and know how to navigate different situations. Krystal also talked about how students from the suburbs do not seem to have a sense of loyalty. She pointed to her experiences on the basketball team where girls from the suburbs seemed to think about themselves and their needs as individuals over the collective needs of the team, something that Krystal did not understand. On a related note, Krystal talked about how there are certain Black students from the suburbs who decided not to join the Black girls’ group, and how she did not understand that either, and she felt like they should be supportive of a Black woman doing things for Black girls and women. Krystal describes her reaction to Black girls not wanting to join the group in this way:

Like even if I didn’t – even if I didn’t uh – didn’t know what we were talking about, or even like cared, I would still go just for the simple fact that it’s for us, and it’s a Black female like doing it. See that’s the type of like not – that’s the loyalty of support that they don’t have, but will support anything one of them White kids though – like that’s what I’m saying, they don’t get it, but want to be down so bad.
The examples from Krystal’s interview seem to highlight her growing critical consciousness about the significance of being loyal to a larger Black female community as a way of finding sources of support and affirmation. In another light, Krystal’s assessment of Black girls from the suburbs at her also reflects a developing critical consciousness that still entails a somewhat narrow perspective of racial identity development (Cross, Parham, Helms, 1991; Tatum, 1997) and other forces that may explain why particular Black girls are not a part of a united Black girl community at Grace School.

Renée, on the other hand, a 12th grader who was also from the city and began Grace School in the 5th grade, describes how perceived class or socioeconomic status is only part of what influences the divide between city students and students from the suburbs:

I think it’s always difficult when you – like when you come here [to Grace School] and um, I know like the freshman girls will attest to this, like it’s really hard to find your like little – your little spot, like where you feel like you belong. So I know like – so there is this thing at Grace, and it’s like a lot of um, the certain Black kids like hang out in [teacher’s name]’s room, right? So it’s like – usually like the basketball people um, like the freshman because you know they see like a lot of Black people there and they’re like, ‘Oh, I’m Black, there’s someone I can you know go – just like a place where I belong to.’ And I think, you know a lot of the people who um – like a lot of just other people like they don’t go there, like I’m almost never in there. You know I feel like you just have to find your like little path and I know that I’ve gotten a lot of stuff, like from the past like few years like because I know there’s like kind of like two tables [in the lunchroom] that are like for the Black kids, and um, like I’ll hang out with my friends who, you know some of them are White. So I’ll hang out with you know the White kids, they [the Black students] are like, ‘Oh, you never sit with us, oh like you know you’re like whatever whatever, you’re like leaving us, trading us for the White people.’ And I’m just like, ‘Guys, like we’re too old.’ Like, ‘Come on now’ like and you know, it’s just to each his own, like just be where you want to be.
Renée’s comments illustrate how divides in the Black community stem from an assumption that all Black students should be together, and primarily hang out with each other and not White students. Renée’s push back against the pressures to be a part of the Black student community in a particular way, and her decision to define her relationships and herself in her own way are an example of not only how Renée is displaying a developing critical consciousness, but also agency in choosing who she wants to be friends with even in the face of criticism. Renée is intentional about forging connections to people who she feels she can develop meaningful and positive relationships with, regardless of their skin color.

This section illustrated how different aspects of school culture function to influence the critical consciousness development of Black girls in terms of their understandings of norms around race, gender, and class. Particular to Black girls in independent schools, they often have to navigate how to “fit in” to a school culture that stems from historical roots of exclusion and privilege, leaving them to experience an “outsiders within” phenomenon. In this finding, the study participants showed that central to their critical consciousness development is their ability to question school policies and practices that leave them at the margins.

Section 2: The Influence of Black Girls on the Developing Critical Consciousness of Black Girls

This section highlights a key objective of Black girls’ developing critical consciousness, which is figuring out how to navigate the school and larger U.S. society as
Black girls who will one day mature into being Black women. The underlying strategy of a developing critical consciousness is one of resistance. Robinson and Ward (1991) discuss two different resistance strategies that Black girls tend to display—resistance for survival and resistance for liberation. Resistance for liberation not only captures the overt actions of resistance that the girls engage in, but also indicates a particular mindset that Black girls come to adopt, what hooks (1992) defines as an “oppositional gaze.” In the sub-sections below, I describe how Black girls work to develop this oppositional gaze, particularly within the context of attending independent schools, and also how they work to communicate and pass on the gaze to other Black girls.

**Reflecting on Where They’ve Been and Where They Are**

This sub-theme focuses on how the developing critical consciousness of Black girls shifts over time based on the different experiences that they have that cause them to think differently about their status and position as Black girls in their schools and in U.S. society. A significant aspect of this sub-theme is how Black girls’ growing critical consciousness takes the form of resistance to the dominant narratives, images, norms, and expectations of Black women and girls that are prevalent in our society, and how this growing awareness occurs alongside their cognitive development and maturation.

**Lower school to middle school.** For the study participants, the transition from lower school to middle school seemed to be a particularly influential time where they began to be aware of how they were different from their White peers. Specifically, characteristics related to hair, body shape and size, and skin color in relation to that of White girls were what the girls talked about most in the study. When thinking about their
experiences in lower school, the girls often reflected on the fact that there were so few Black students, let alone Black girls when they were in lower school—some of them described being the only Black student or one of two Black students in their entire grade for most of lower school. That being said, the girls described how in lower school they were often unaware of their differences, or if they did notice that they were different (as a result of their White classmates rubbing their skin or touching their hair), it often did not hold any meaning for them—they were still proud and confident of being Black girls. However, in many of their interviews, the girls talked about how increasing comments about their hair and skin color as they got older made them more self-conscious and question why they looked the way that they did. Kendra, an 11th grader at GCP, describes her lower school to middle school experience in this way:

I think going here [GCP] has shaped how—who I am as a Black person, and it’s definitely made me more aware of things happening, and because I have such a good support group of like, other Black girls, um, it’s made me more confident in who I am because I know definitely in lower school I was like, really confident like, I always wore my hair naturally, then in middle school I’d be like—it became more aware I was like, all right, like, I said, ‘Mom like I have to get my hair straightened, like how that’s how everyone’s like hair is.’

And like so always had my hair straight. And then it ended up damaging my hair, I had to like cut six inches of it off and be like in tears like, just they’re cutting it off and I’m like, ‘No, like I bet you could save it like they always like everyone wears their like this,’ and then mom was like, ‘You’re not everyone’ [laughs]. So um, freshman year… like late freshman year and then like early sophomore is like when I really started embracing my natural hair again and like wearing it out.

Kendra’s response reflects how as her growing awareness of her difference emerged in middle school, the confidence that she had in herself in lower school seemed to disappear. In connection with the larger finding of how Black girls are influencing the
developing critical consciousness of other Black girls, the two groups of people that Kendra identifies as helping her to gain her confidence back once she entered high school were her mother and her group of Black girl friends at GCP. By surrounding herself with people who supported her, Kendra was able to embrace wearing her hair natural again and her confidence in herself.

**Middle school to high school.** For many of the participants, middle school was where their awareness of their racial identity became particularly salient. Due to the fact that middle school was one of the entry points for new students, this is when the student population increased in the number of Black students, making race a particularly defining and meaningful characteristic. To go from being the only one or two in your grade to having twice that number of Black girls or students was significant. Additionally, transitioning from the lower school to the upper school also meant an increased number of Black students overall with whom they would come in contact. New Black students entering the school left such an impression that often the girls who were “lifers,” meaning they had been at either Grace or GCP since pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten, that they could recall in which grade each of the Black students entered the school.

Another result of the increased number of Black students in middle school was that it caused some of the study participants to become aware of the fact that they had navigated their school lives (and often times social lives) primarily with White students, and they became self-conscious of not being “Black enough.” Tanya, a 12th grader at Grace school described her middle school transition in this way:

…. seventh grade is when like race came in. It’s like, oh, I don’t have any Black friends, I’m not Black enough, like you’re – and I would go home – like that’s
what I would face in school and it was like, ‘Oh, you’re a White girl,’ like from
the Black kids that were in eighth grade or ninth grade. ‘Oh, you’re not Black
enough like you don’t have any Black friends, how could you come here just like
not have Black friends?’ I was like, ‘Well, that was never a big thing for me
growing up.’

In response to the pressure of feeling as though she did not measure up to a particular
standard of what it meant to be Black, Tanya described how when she was in seventh
grade she spent most of her time after school and the weekends watching “Black movies”
so she could understand the references and jokes that other Black students made, and
ultimately fit in. Tanya’s experience reflects the larger finding of how Black girls
influence the critical consciousness development of other Black girls in the way that the
messages that Tanya received from older Black students (some of which were girls)
heightened her awareness of her racial identity and also introduced her to
new definitions
of what it meant to be Black, and how Black students expected other Black students to
operate (by sticking together) in independent schools.

Standing Loud & Proud

This theme focuses on how Black girls have the potential to influence the
critical consciousness of other Black girls by adopting a particular mindset about the
status and image of Black girls and women in the U.S. This mindset is in opposition
to dominant narratives that Black girls experience daily around gender norms, beauty
standards, and academic expectations. The theme of Black girls standing “loud and
proud” emerged in two different ways in my study—one was primarily through the
advice that they would give one another in the group discussions or through public
forums. The other was through their work of imagining of how things could be different for Black girls.

The advice that the girls gave each other in relation to the theme of “standing loud and proud” often revolved around Black girls choosing to embrace the power of self-definition, and by doing so, they are standing up for who they are rather than what others tell them they are. On an interpersonal level, the advice focused on speaking up and pushing back when they had experienced microaggressions such as being called by the wrong name or when a faculty member wrongly assumed that one of them was on the basketball team. On a broader level, the girls’ advice focused on standing together as a collective Black girl community against negative images and assumptions. An example of this call for a unified community is from a discussion that the girls at Grace School had about the labels of “bitches and hos” in relation to Black girls and women:

The girls discuss how they don’t like being called bitches and hos, and how it’s especially pervasive in the Black community. Though they don’t actually say the term “sexism,” they talk about how girls calling each other bitches and hos then makes guys think that it’s ok to call other girls bitches and hos. Tanya also makes the connection that girls calling themselves bitches and hos is connected to their own lowered self-esteem. The theme that Tanya keeps returning to throughout this discussion is the idea that Black girls need to stick together and hold each other up because no one else will. But there’s an interesting tension that arose in this discussion with the girls then setting up a distinction between them and “those other girls” who seem to fulfill the “bitches & hos” stereotype and like that image…The girls are grappling with how to label themselves vs. how they are labeled by others. (Researcher Field Notes, April 2, 2015).

The girls’ discussion about pushing back against being labeled “bitches and hos” and Tanya’s recommendation that they all need to “stick together” illustrates how Black
girls influence the critical consciousness development of other Black girls through discussions where they are able to analyze issues together, offer their opinions and ideas, and as a result, contribute to the growing critical consciousness of all involved. This example also reflects the tension that emerges from learning how to be proud in defining oneself. In this discussion, the way that the girls define themselves as Black girls is by excluding other Black girls who on some level are not like them. At the same time that they are discussing “holding each other up,” they are also putting down some Black girls, and subscribing to some of the very assumptions that they are aiming to resist.

Another way that the girls displayed the “Standing Loud and Proud” theme was through their imagining of how the experiences of Black girls could be different. In doing so, the girls often traced their own critical consciousness development and what they wish they had learned earlier and how their perspectives had changed over time. The girls often referred to “how I used to be back then,” and how much more “aware” of things they were currently, particularly pertaining to what it means to “fit in” at a predominantly White independent school. Many of the girls came to the conclusion that their goal now was to be true to themselves and to “just be who you are.” Jennifer, a 10th grader, and a lifer at Grace School had this reflection during her interview:

Jennifer: Now because I’m kind of aware, I think it [messages she receives from the media, family, and school about being a Black girl] doesn’t affect me quite as much, and I think you know me now being 16, I have more confidence than when I was like 11 or 12. And I always thought, ‘Oh, I need to be like, light skinned and have straighter hair,’ so I was always straightening my hair, and like during the summer I didn’t want to go outside like for fear of tanning and stuff like that. And I think now when I see those messages I’m like, ‘Wow! That’s a shame that we teach the young Black girls not to love themselves right from when they were young’ so that they grow up, especially if they’re in, like White communities, going to a school like I am, it’s like I don’t know, it’s kind of even more pressure
to be perfect, to be like what you aren’t in a sense. So perfect being White but [laughs]–

**Charlotte:** Yeah, which you can never be you know.

**Jennifer:** Yeah, which you can't be, so I think it’s all just like acceptance of yourself.

Jennifer’s tracing of her thoughts and feelings about her racial identity from when she was 11 to how she thinks about herself now illustrate a developing critical consciousness in that she now resists the idea that being White is perfect, and that there is something wrong with having darker skin and kinky hair. Jennifer’s analysis of the influence of her school environment on her self-image also reflects her her awareness of how messages of dominant norms around race, gender, and beauty get communicated to all students, whether they are part of the subordinate group or not. Lastly, Jennifer’s reflection about how it’s “a shame that we teach the young Black girls not to love themselves right from when they were young” is indicative of how the growing critical consciousness of Black girls can influence the critical consciousness of other Black girls in that Jennifer now has a particular mindset when it comes to what she thinks Black girls should know about themselves, which is that they are absolutely fine just the way they are.

Tanya, a 12<sup>th</sup> grader and a lifer at Grace, had a similar perspective in that her imaginings for Black girls centered on how they should take charge of defining themselves rather than letting others influence their self-image and what they are capable of accomplishing:
I would just like wish that like Black girls who...don’t get the same I guess, ...upbringing, or...support that I have or something, like, I just wish they would know that they are better than what they are told. Like, if you’re told – like you are told you can't do anything, I would think. There are girls who are told they can’t do something and they believe that, and I just wish that like girls out here like they are just – if they are told they can't do something, I would want them to like try to prove someone wrong...When someone tells you not – that you can’t do something, to use that as a motivation to do that or to do something bigger than that, to just use everything. Every negative thing that someone says to you or does to you to use that as a motivation to become something better. Because I know me younger like I – if someone told me I couldn’t do something – I’m like “okay”, that’s the end of it. But now I know that that’s not the end of it, like that’s...no one else has a last say on what you can and cannot do except for you. And I just wish that everyone, like Black girls everywhere just knew that they can do or become anything they want to become.

The shift in the study participants’ thinking around their racial identity, moving from an unawareness, to a raised awareness of difference and responding to the pressure to fit in, to embracing their racial identity traces the path that many identity scholars describe when working with adolescents (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Early adolescence is time period where prime importance is placed on fitting in, and as adolescents mature into late adolescence, the notion of fitting in becomes less important (Chase, 2008). As the girls in the study reflected on how they thought about their racial identity in lower school versus middle school versus their current status as high school students, they often arrived at a place where embracing their identities and being true to themselves was more important than trying to be like everyone else around them. In order to come to this conclusion, the girls engaged in what Ward (2007) describes as “narratives of resistance” (p. 244) that highlight how Black girls interpreted and understood their own racial socialization “in their own words and on their own terms” (p. 244). Ward found that these types of narratives communicated “the importance of
resistance to the psychological and social well-being of Black children and youth” (p. 244). Jennifer’s and Tanya’s comments function to create a protective buffer against the negative messages that Black girls experience by focusing on overcoming the negative messages to embrace the brilliance, intelligence, and strength of Black girls.

The theme of Black girls influencing the developing critical consciousness of other Black girls follows a tradition of Black women taking on the responsibility of socializing their peers, daughters, nieces in particular ways by communicating to them the realities what it means to be a Black girl or women within a particular context (Castigan, Cauce, & Etchison, 2007; Ward, 2007). The circumstance of a lack of older Black female teachers or administrators in independent schools who can serve as role models and mentors, combined with the fact that many Black girls may not have mothers or other family members with previous experiences in independent schools, creates a situation where Black girls often take on the task on themselves of being mentors to other Black girls, and often function in the role of knowledge producers for each other.

Conclusion

The BGCL component of a developing critical consciousness illustrates how Black girls demonstrate their understandings of how the structures of race, gender, and class operate in relation to their status as Black girls in U.S. society and in their independent schools. This chapter focused on the influence of school culture and of other Black girls on Black girls’ developing awareness. School culture, which is comprised of
traditions, policies, and practices that reinforce dominant societal norms, often place Black girls on the margins of the school community.

In independent schools, which are typically elite and predominantly White spaces, Black girls often experience the phenomenon of being “outsiders within” the school community. As “insiders,” Black girls have access to the opportunities and resources for which independent schools are known. Yet, an “outsider” status is communicated to Black girls through the differentiated enforcement of school policies, and the fact that many Black girls feel pressure to code switch and to maintain close friendships with their peers in the Black community as a way to somehow fit into their school community. For Black girls, having to alter their appearance, speech, and behaviors means learning that often they are not able to come to school as their full selves.

However, the influence of Black girls on the critical consciousness development of other Black girls provides an avenue through which Black girls can begin to resist their outsider status by choosing to fully embrace who they are as Black girls. The transition from lower school to middle school to high school reflects the story of Black girls first internalizing damaging messages of the lowered status of Black girls and women to a gradual awakening and adoption of pride of their Black girl identities. This chapter shows the importance of Black girls having the space and time to come together and reflect on how they see themselves, and the opportunity to share their hopes and visions for future Black girls with each other.
In this chapter I will present how the study participants enacted elements of the BGCL component of emotional literacy. My conceptualization of emotional literacy draws on the literature of emotional intelligence as well as the psychological perspectives of literacy. In particular, I use Goleman’s (1995) key components of emotional intelligence to explain the emotional landscapes of the study participants which describe knowing, expressing, and accepting one’s emotions. Drawing on Stevenson’s (2014) concept of racial literacy, I emphasize the fact emotional literacy is not simply about recognizing emotions, but also having a broader understanding of how emotions influence interpersonal interactions. For Black girls in particular, an added layer of their emotional literacy is connected to the reality oftentimes the emotions of Black girls and women are distorted, exaggerated, and perverted to create stereotypes and images of Black women as emotionally unstable, angry, and hypersexual (Evan-Winters & GGE, 2017; Morris, 2016). As Black girls, they must not only navigate their own emotions, and the emotions of others, but also the negative perceptions tied to Black girl emotions.

Spencer’s (1995) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) model is also a helpful lens through which to understand how Black girls understand their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Part of Spencer’s model focuses on self-appraisal—the manner in which adolescents view themselves is dependent on outside contextual factors such as race and gender expectations, discrimination, and other forms of oppression. When these factors are largely negative,
they cause a threat to one’s psychosocial identity and well-being, leading adolescents to develop and display coping mechanisms that to resolve the psychological harm. This chapter explores not only how the study participants recognized or understood certain emotions as a part of emotional literacy, but also how they responded, and what coping methods they often employed to reduce the psychological dissonance they often experienced as Black girls in elite predominantly White schools.

Section 1: Recognizing One’s Emotions: Making a Choice Between Expression and Suppression

This sub-finding focused on how the girls demonstrated the emotional literacy skill of “recognizing one’s emotions” through attempting to maintain a balance of how they viewed and defined themselves with an awareness of how they wanted to be viewed by others. As part of the Black Girl Project curriculum, the identity mapping and sharing activity gave the study participants an opportunity to reflect on different aspects of their identities. Related to this finding, several of the girls added emotional descriptors as a part of their identity maps. The descriptors, combined with their subsequent explanations, tended to fall into two different areas: 1) the expression of their emotions, and 2) the suppression of their emotions.

Emotional Expression

The main themes that emerged from how the girls made sense of how they expressed their emotions was captured in our debriefing sessions of the identity maps where I asked the girls to describe what it was like to create and share their identity maps.
In response to this question, the girls described that “it wasn’t easy” and that they experienced conflicting feelings about describing, and in a sense, expressing themselves:

**Alexis:** It's not easy.

**Charlotte:** It's not easy? Why? Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Alexis:** I think it's hard to describe yourself, either like-- I feel like you're either going to be too hard on yourself, or you're gonna be, like, too, not like cocky-ish, I guess, but that's-- you know like when teachers have you do, like, self-evaluations and stuff, on like projects and presentations, like you never really feel comfortable. Well, personally I never feel comfortable doing them because I really don't know how I am. I feel like it's a lot easier for someone else to describe me than for you to describe yourself.

**Charlotte:** Thank you. Yeah?

**Ariel:** I found myself starting, almost like, doubting that I could do it, and then like started saying things that I thought other people viewed me as, and then once I started getting into it, I was like, "Ok, this is how I see myself." But then it just wasn't, a good-- it just wasn't-- I dunno. It wasn't all positive, so, it kind of made me feel upset. Just a little bit.

As Alexis and Ariel describe above, the experience of choosing how to express themselves was an emotional process in which they use the emotional literacy skills of recognizing how they are feeling in the moment and whether to express those emotions for others to hear.

Based on the girls’ responses, their recognition of their emotions and the decision of whether or not to express them often depended on contextual factors such as the stimulus or source of the emotion, what the specific emotions were, and what the broader context of the encounter was. For example, during her one-on-one interview, Jennifer, a 10th grader at Grace, described ongoing experiences with one of her teachers where she felt she was being treated unfairly. In one particular instance, Jennifer recalled where she
rewrote an assignment four times and still received a “C” on her final assignment. When I asked Jennifer what emotions she felt during that incident, she responded,

> Emotionally I feel like first very attacked and like well, of course like my feelings are hurt and, I’m like ‘what do you mean?’ And then like I’m kind of angry, I’m like, ‘You’re ignorant; like you don’t even understand.’ And then I go to the feeling of feeling sorry for them, like I’m sorry that you feel that way because like it’s just so dumb.

Though Jennifer never expressed her emotions to her teacher, as a part of emotional literacy, she was able correctly identify her emotions and express them, if only to herself.

Contextually, Jennifer’s decision not to communicate her emotions to her teacher stemmed from her recognition of the unequal power dynamic that existed between her and her teacher, with her teacher having the power to influence her academic trajectory.

In other examples, study participants also described different ways that context influenced how they navigated emotional expression in that some of them were more “out there” with their feelings when they felt out of place or slighted by their peers, while others recognized their feelings of frustration and then channeled them into purposeful questioning of their peers as a way to resolve a particular situation. In these experiences, the fact that conflict arose with their peers allowed some girls to feel that they could be more expressive with their emotions without fear of being severely penalized, while other girls chose to communicate their emotions to their peers in a less confrontational manner that was more comfortable for them. Both approaches reflect a form of emotional literacy with the girls recognizing and then acting on their emotions.
Emotional Suppression

The theme of emotional suppression stemmed from how some of the study participants described hiding their feelings in some way. In sharing their identity maps and talking with the girls in one-on-one interviews, the impetus for suppression was often feelings of embarrassment or not being sure that their emotions were appropriate according to others. In their identity maps one participant described “separating herself from people,” and another participant wrote that one of the things that describes her is “shutting people out.” This same participant wrote that she is known for “over exaggerating” and “taking things too seriously” --sentiments that communicate that she believes she is overreacting to certain experiences. Relatedly, other participants described themselves as being afraid to show that they were “sensitive” and whether it was okay for them for consistently “taking things to heart.”

Similarly, another participant described herself as having “an attitude,” being “rude” and “having a temper,” to which she often tries to “make sure I’m…appropriate” because she feels like people are judging her. These participants reflect the tensions that arise when Black girls are working to describe their own emotions while at the same time they are fighting the internalization of societal messages about what forms of emotional expression are acceptable according to racial, gendered, and societal norms.

Another pattern that emerged along the theme of emotional suppression was puzzling through how to move from a place where they were continually suppressing their emotions to figuring out how to communicate their emotions to others in a way that
they would feel supported. Tanya, a 12th grader and a lifer at Grace School, described her emotional trajectory from middle school to high school in this way:

I hated middle school so much. I just hated everyone. Like that – those three years were like living hell, like, I just hated everything about middle school. And it’s like, I don’t know, like, keeping things bottled up like those three years…ninth grade it was so different. Like, it was so much free, like you were just free…so everything just [snaps] the little things, like set everything off. Oh, then I just like – maybe I got it all out of my system, or like I just – I may well like talk about things more like I just maybe I’m able to like communicate with other people about different situations better than I was.

And I mean – like I have people here who like support me and I’m able to go and just talk to them about what’s going on in my life and like what problems I’m having, and I’m just – I don’t have to like sit and think about it all to myself.

Though Tanya and the other participants in this section display skills of emotional literacy by recognizing and making sense of their own emotions, they also demonstrate how their emotional literacy skills are limited in that they make the choice to suppress their emotions. As a coping mechanism, suppressing one’s emotions could lead to more challenges rather than productive development.

The girls’ decision to either express or suppress their emotions demonstrates a form of what Spencer (2003) terms a “reactive coping method” (p. 182). These coping methods can either be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the circumstances, with adaptive coping methods leading to “good health, positive relationships, and high self-esteem” (p. 182), and maladaptive coping methods leading to “poor health, incarceration, and self-destructive behaviors” (p. 182). In the case of the study participants, emotional expression gave them the opportunity to make sense of their emotions and then respond in a way that would align with who they believed themselves to be. Emotional suppression, on the other hand, functioned as a way for the participants to distance
themselves not only from their emotions, but also from certain aspects of their identities that they felt were not valued or good. By engaging in maladaptive coping mechanisms, these study participants were moving away from rather than towards the goal of achieving an authentic sense of self, which is one of the primary functions of adolescence.

Section 2: Recognizing the Emotions of Others: The Tensions of Discomfort

In this sub-finding, the emotional literacy skill of “recognizing the emotions of others” was oriented around how the participants understood how their encounters with others related to race, gender, and class stemmed from others’ emotions around these topics. Much of the girls’ discussions and interviews homed in on the concept of “safe spaces.” In his review of the use of the metaphor “safe space” or “safe place” in educational contexts, Rom (1996) points out that educators and scholars often use the term with an assumption that those in the audience all have a common understanding and definition of “safe space.” Rom comes to the conclusion that in general, the idea of “safe space” revolves around four different assumptions: 1) we are all isolated; 2) our isolation is both physical and psychic; 3) we can become less isolated by expressing our diverse individuality; and 4) students thrive in a classroom in which individuality is freely expressed (p. 404). Part of the tension that emerged between the study participants and their experiences within Grace and GCP was a result of Black girls and White peers, teachers, and administrators each having a different conceptualization of “safe spaces.” In addition to the concept of “safe spaces,” the emotional states of “comfort” and
“discomfort” emerged as central to the girls’ understandings as to why their schools struggled to create spaces that were safe for all students and not simply those who were members of the dominant group. This sub-finding illustrates how the study participants employed skills of emotional literacy to better contextualize their experiences at school.

**School Culture: Defining “Safe Spaces”**

This theme highlights how the participants’ expectation of their school as a “safe space” differed from how their schools seemed to define “safe spaces.” Based on the girls’ assessment, their schools’ approach towards creating a “safe space” means maintaining a particular “culture of niceness” (Evans, 2012; Hoo, 2004) by only having superficial discussions about difference, or maintaining a general silence about difference in favor of focusing on everyone being a part of the same larger school community. The participants, on the other hand, identified safe spaces as being places or having a school culture that promotes students and teachers talking about issues and not just “skating over” them, and in doing so, everyone is “working to understand where the other is coming from.” Patricia, a 9th grader at Grace, described her vision for what she would want to have happen at Grace particularly when issues of race emerge in class discussions:

> I want people to feel like they [her White classmates] can still say what they want to say with me there, like I don’t want people to feel like they’re tiptoeing around everything because there’s a Black person there. But, like, at the same time I think they need to see, like, view the Black perspective on all these issues because…they don’t understand how – what it’s like to be Black like every day.

In contrast with their vision of safe spaces, the participants described their schools as “sensitive,” “timid,” “worried,” and “afraid.” Many of their discussions focused on
what their schools needed to do in order to move towards a culture that was safe for everyone. In the example below, the girls at Grace School were having a discussion about an upper school assembly that they had attended where a Black male speaker talked about the legacy of race and racism in the U.S. and its connection to current events such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. As the discussion progressed, the girls analyzed the school culture at Grace in relation to having conversations about these issues. Renée, a 12th grader, offered these points:

My main issue with Grace is just that I think it’s just like, too afraid. Like, it--like, we don’t tackle certain subjects that we need to tackle, and like, everyone is just so timid and so worried about everything, and I think like, you’re supposed to be uncomfortable at certain things. Like, you’re not supposed to be comfortable when you talk about like, Ferguson or something. Even when we had that like, the speaker come in…I mean like, he had good points…and you know when we came back to advisory just to talk about it, and everything, they [White students in her advisory] were like, ‘Oh, it just made me uncomfortable’ like, you know, and it’s just like we take that and then we’re just like, ‘Ok, we’re going to shut everything down.’ We should press into it—‘Why did it make you uncomfortable?’ you know, like… ‘it made you uncomfortable, but it could have made someone else feel, like, comfortable’ or everything like that. But it’s just like ‘no’, as soon as you say ‘I’m uncomfortable’ it just ends it, and I think that’s the main problem, is that we’re not kind of looking to everyone as a community.

Renée’s reflection not only highlights what she thinks the school should do to foster a more inclusive community (by “pressing” into those who are resistant), but also demonstrates her skills of emotional literacy, in which she is able to point to how the prevailing emotions of fear and discomfort in the school community stifle productive discussions.

Other examples of where the girls’ ideas of safe spaces reflected an emotional literacy connected to school culture emerged when they were planning school-based
events. When a group of the study participants from GCP planned a Privilege Walk activity for their school’s Intersectionality Week, and when the girls at Grace brainstormed about a Little Buddies event that would connect Black girls in the Upper School with Black girls in the Lower School, the conversations surrounding these events often led to an analysis of the predicted comfort or discomfort of the activity or program participants. The Privilege Walk discussion was a part of a planning meeting that the Intersectionality Week committee (a mixture of Black and White girls) hosted during one of my observations. As the girls discussed the idea for the Privilege Walk, the concern arose about how the activity could make some people feel uncomfortable because participation required that one visually shows how she has been privileged/targeted depending on her social location. Because the activity is cumulative in nature, at the end of it those who are more privileged are closer to the front of the room, and those who are less privileged are at the back of the room. The girls’ conversation centered around the fact that if the participants were asked to do the activity according to their actual experiences that they might “feel bad” or “uncomfortable” about where they were. By the end of the discussion, the committee had not decided whether they wanted to do the activity.

Similarly, when the girls at Grace discussed whether they wanted to move forward with plans for designing a Little Buddies program where the Black girls in the Upper School would have lunch with or do after school activities with Black girls in the Lower School, the issue was that they were worried that the Black girls would feel “very uncomfortable” for being “singled out.” The conversation progressed with some of the
girls reflecting on their own experiences of being 1 of 2 or the only Black girl in their grade in Lower School, and how while they may have noticed that they were the only one, drawing more attention to it could make the situation worse. Tanya, a 12th grader and a lifer made this point: “As bad as it might be to be the only kid, that’s something you can be okay with every day. Once a week, being singled out for being Black and having to meet with another Black kid, that is very uncomfortable.”

Both the discussions of the Privilege Walk and the Little Buddies program demonstrate how Black girls are using skills of emotional literacy to imagine the feelings of others, particularly around where people experience discomfort. Similar to the other examples presented in this section, much of the emotional literacy that they display is connected to their understanding of their school’s culture in terms of how their schools define what the characteristics of safe spaces are. This theme reveals how the girls work to resolve their own definitions and conceptualizations of safe spaces, which often entailed pushing members of the school community to consistently talk about issues of diversity and equity, with the schools’ definitions which often revolved around silence. As a result, being “safe” becomes equated with making sure that everyone is comfortable. But schools are not really “safe” spaces if there are students who feel like they cannot fully express their thoughts, opinions, and emotions on a regular basis out of fear of being stereotyped, or worse, ignored. In these privileged spaces, one of the ways that “privilege” manifests itself is that there is a privilege in not having to feel uncomfortable, and in not having to authentically think about and discuss difference. The result is that what is a safe space for some is not a safe space for all.
The Classroom: Discomfort as a Part of the Learning Process

Similar to the “School Culture: Defining ‘Safe Spaces’” theme, this theme also captured the multiple perspectives that the girls had about opportunities for and experiences of encounters of comfort and discomfort around race, gender, and class. Many of the experiences of discomfort that the girls described focused on discussions, debates, and materials that were presented in the classroom, and whether discomfort could be a source of learning or an act of “symbolic violence”\textsuperscript{11} (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 80). While the girls discussed several topics in relation to this theme, one topic that dominated the others centered around the use of the N-word in class (such as reading The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass) and whether it was an opportunity to discuss controversial and tough issues, or whether it created a situation where certain students felt psychologically and emotionally targeted. As a part of this theme, the girls also discussed the role of teachers in contributing to the emotional environment of the classroom.

Discomfort as a barrier to learning. In this sub-theme the girls’ opinions about whether the classroom was a place where people should feel uncomfortable demonstrated a blend of emotional literacy skills that focused on recognizing their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. The girls’ key argument about not having the N-word being fully said as a part of class discussions was that hearing the word, particularly hearing White students say the word, created a climate where the classroom was not only

\textsuperscript{11} Bourdieu describes “symbolic violence” as “the power to impose (and even inculcate) instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality, which are arbitrary but not recognized as such” (p. 80).
uncomfortable, but also unsafe for them as Black girls in the room. The girls described situations where they felt “targeted” and experienced a “visceral reaction” when they heard the N-word being read aloud. The girls also described feeling so incensed by the word that they could no longer concentrate on what was happening in the classroom, and often looked for excuses to leave so that they would not have to endure stares or uncomfortable laughter from their White peers. While much of their reasoning for not having the N-word in classrooms stemmed from their recognition of their own emotions, the study participants’ thinking also extended to how other Black girls would feel if they were in classrooms where the N-word was used. Adrienne, an 11th grader at GCP, explains her opinion below:

I think, like, it's really a matter of safety is my biggest concern for colored girls hearing these derogatory words. Because like, there’s, there are times when hearing that word come out of a white person's mouth makes you…like, you sit up a little straighter, and you're… and it's like a visceral reaction. Maybe it's just me…

The girls’ reading of the emotions of others extended beyond other Black girls in that they also took into account how White students in their classes might feel uncomfortable with the N-word being used in class. In being aware of the discomfort that White students, or all students in the class might experience around reading the N-word aloud, the study participants also talked about how they felt a certain responsibility to make sure that things went well in the classroom when the N-word became the topic of discussion. Kathryn, an 11th grader at GCP described how when she was in class, she felt like she and the two other Black girls in the class should have “took more of a stand with…who was going to say it [the N-word] in class and who wasn’t.” In her perspective,
having the Black girls take charge of the situation and create the rules in the classroom about the reading of the N-word would serve to make everyone more comfortable because the Black girls would have gotten to share their perspective, and the other students would have clear directions around the use of the word. In another situation, Renée, a 12th grader at Grace School described how she would take the role of being “that person who steps up and and tries to, like, ease everyone” when a passage to read aloud that contained the N-word came up in her English class. Similar to Kathryn’s statement, Renée’s experience shows how Black girls’ read of others’ emotions, particularly emotions of discomfort, led them to either think about or enact ways of taking control of the situation so that everyone in the room would feel comfortable.

**Discomfort as an opportunity for learning.** In this sub-theme, the girls’ perspectives focused on encouraging discomfort in the classroom as a pathway to learning did not solely focus on the N-word, but also on other “controversial topics” that could be brought into classroom discussions. In relation to the N-word, some of the study participants held the viewpoint that one of the purposes of the saying the N-word in the context of class material was to make people feel uncomfortable, and that feelings of discomfort could be the starting point for exploring the word in more depth. Along these lines, some of the girls pointed out that not using the N-word in class discussions, but rather using substitutes like “Negro,” “N,” and “Brother” takes away the experience of feeling certain emotions, and therefore a moment of learning is wasted. In one of our group discussions, Alexis, a 12th grader at Grace described the phenomenon in this way:

...I feel like avoiding it [the N-word] is, as much as they're [the teachers] trying to not have racism in it, and have not feel like people are uncomfortable, I feel like if
in the beginning of the course if they just flat out say, like, "These words are going to be said." Because I feel like using ... If you're reading over a book and it says the N-word and saying something like “N,” even like, someone said “brother,” when we are trying to figure out what were they going to say instead of it [the N-word] ... I feel like that just brings up too many problems.

The girls’ discussions focusing on the presence of other “controversial issues” in the classroom centered on the benefits mutual discomfort as a source of learning and a starting point for discussion. The idea of shared discomfort was particularly prominent at Grace School where the study participants had a meeting with two teachers who were in the midst of developing a history course based on race and ethnicity in the U.S. At the meeting, the teachers, one White woman and one Black man, presented a draft of their syllabus, brought in samples of the books students would read in class, and asked the girls for feedback about what they hoped the course would include in terms of content and teaching approach. In addition to the girls saying that the course should “talk about things that aren’t on the surface,” and not “botch the history to appease certain groups of people,” they advocated for teaching a “raw history; like, these are the facts” to ensure that learning would happen from all students in the room, particularly if that learning stemmed from discomfort.

Below, Alexis described how attaining a “mutual discomfort” in the classroom would support everyone in their learning:

Yeah. Personally, I feel that the only way to actually get the point across and to really educate people is if there is discomfort in the room, because I feel like all these topics are controversial and the only way that people are going to express their full opinion is if they know that they're not the only one that's going to be uncomfortable, so I feel that addressing topics that not only will make white people uncomfortable; doing, talking about things that make black people uncomfortable too because, personally, I'm not the most comfortable person,
talking about slavery and stuff, so even though that's making a white person feel like they're out of place talking about this type of stuff because that could have possibly been some of their ancestors, I feel that having black people in the room also talking about it and then talking about how uncomfortable this could make them or their feelings towards it or something like that could also be like an aid to a white person because of it's a mutual discomfort right there.

The girls who advocated for bringing discomfort into the classroom as a starting point for learning demonstrated multiple skills of emotional literacy by recognizing their own emotions in addition to the emotion of others. The girls’ reflections illustrated a divergence of opinion as to whether discomfort would stifle learning or stimulate it. Based on the girls’ assessment, the factor that seems to move the classroom from being “uncomfortable” to being “unsafe” is whether they, as Black girls, are the only people in the room who are uncomfortable (“unsafe”), or whether there is a sense of mutual discomfort in the classroom (“uncomfortable”) that could lead to productive conversations.

The role of the teacher and the pedagogy of discomfort. Regardless of if the girls were against or advocating for discomfort in the classroom, their comments often came back to the role of the teacher in facilitating these discussions. Concerning the N-word, the girls talked about how it was the teacher’s job to not only take a stance or present a forum for discussion about whether the word would be read in class, but also to present background information about the word. Kathryn, an 11th grader at GCP described her thoughts on teachers’ roles and the N-word in this way:

Yeah. So with Frederick Douglass, literally I just really wish that our teachers would, like, broaden people’s knowledge. Because I know a lot about like, slavery, but a lot of other people don't know, like, about slavery. So, I think that’s like, one of the major problems of people not knowing exactly where the word
comes from. Like, people know that the word is, like, not appropriate to use in certain, like, settings but they don’t really know everything that comes with that word.

Related to Kathryn’s point, the girls described classroom experiences where their teachers would either make a blanket statement about not using the word, or would put it to a vote from the class about whether or not they would read the word aloud without providing any contextual information beforehand. When it comes to discussing controversial topics in the classroom, the study participants’ experiences highlight the importance of teachers needing to develop their own emotional literacy skills. In doing so, teachers are able to recognize their own comfort levels and emotions when teaching topics such as the N-word as well as recognize the emotions of their students. Similar to Stevenson’s (2014) conceptualization of using tools of racial literacy to recognize the stress brought on by racial encounters, teachers need to develop emotional literacy as a tool to recognize the discomfort they may feel in teaching and discussing particular topics. Going through the experience of recognizing and processing their own emotions around controversial topics then makes teachers have a greater awareness and empathy for the emotions of their students.

Boler’s (1999) and Boler and Zembylas’s (2003) work on the pedagogy of discomfort speaks to the issues that the study participants raised about comfort and discomfort in the classroom as well as teachers’ roles in creating a classroom environment in which students can learn how to have authentic and open discussions about diversity, difference, and difficult topics. According to Boler and Zembylas, the
Pedagogy of discomfort urges students as well as educators to move outside of their comfort zones. Pedagogy of discomfort invites critical inquiry regarding cherished beliefs and assumptions, and also calls for students and educators to take responsibility and even action in the collective struggle for social justice. (p. 131)

Boler and Zembylas define “comfort zones” as “the inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of hegemony” (p. 111). In essence, the pedagogy of discomfort requires not only developing a critical approach towards viewing power and power relations in the world, but also an understanding that this type of learning also includes emotional work. Similar to how Alexis described the advantage of students experiencing a “mutual discomfort” in the classroom when discussing controversial topics, the pedagogy of discomfort requires that both those who are in privileged positions as well as those who are marginalized to consider how they participate in hegemonic practices through internalized beliefs.

Teachers then, must recognize that education and their classrooms will never be “fully objective, neutral, apolitical” (Boler & Zemblyas, 2003, p. 114) spaces, and that only by developing their own skills around emotional literacy will they be able to engage in a pedagogy of discomfort with their students that encourages cognitive as well as emotional learning.

Section 3: Developing a Multiple Consciousness: Reading Other’s Interpretations of Black Girls’ Emotions

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (2008/1903) W.E.B. Du Bois describes a “double consciousness” that Black people develop whereby they have an awareness both
of how they see themselves as Black people and of others’ (non-Black people) view Black people. This double consciousness influences the ways in which Black people in the U.S. navigate through their daily lives and interactions with others. Critical race feminist Wing (2000) proposes that for women of color, the experience is not one of a double consciousness, but rather a “multiple consciousness.” Wing describes “multiple consciousness” as “an awareness of oppression they face based simultaneously on their race/ethnicity and gender” (p. 1). The themes described in this section explain how Black girls display a multiple consciousness in understanding how others (non-Black and non-female) interpret Black girls’ emotions.

Making Sense of the “Angry Black Girls” Stereotype

This theme captures how the girls’ demonstrated their emotional literacy skills connected to being aware of others’ interpretations of Black girl emotions by analyzing the sources of the “angry Black girl” messages as well as their agency in unpacking the “angry Black girl” myth. On an interpersonal level, the girls described the phenomenon of experiencing a double-standard when it came to the feedback and messages they received about their behavior compared to other students who were not Black girls. At GCP, the girls had several discussions about experiences when they clearly felt that there was a double-standard happening at the school because they were Black or “colored” girls. Andrea, a 12th grader at GCP, talked about how her senior speech, which focused on the experiences of Black students in independent schools, had to be edited three times before she could share it, while a recent the op-ed piece in the school newspaper that the girls felt presented a biased and damaging perspective of the (sometimes) violent protests
against police brutality in Ferguson and Baltimore was clearly not reviewed or edited closely. The girls also talked about recent events at GCP involving the use of the N-word on social media, and how Black girls received harsher disciplinary actions than White girls who also had used the N-word. In the example below, Kendra, an 11th grader at GCP, describes the double-standard experience:

Um, I think our school--how I feel here is like that we are treated like so differently and like – I think we’re kind of held to like a higher standard in some things, like we should be like more understanding, like, of the White students if they don’t understand something about race. Or like if a White student like tweets something ignorant…or like the N-word or something, it’s like we have to be the ones that are like understanding and like, “They didn’t know better, and this or that.” But if like something happens to us and we’re like, if like, one of us tweets the N-word it’s like World War III and like someone was taken in front of like a board [the disciplinary board] and it’s called like “Black supremacy” and then like, what are you talking about because there’s like 2 percent of us in this entire school?

Andrea’s and Kendra’s experiences, as well as other encounters that the girls described reflected their awareness of the messages that their schools were communicating not only to them, but also to all students that the emotions of Black girls are dangerous and require a higher standard of scrutiny. This knowledge led Tanya, a 12th grader at Grace to conclude, “I think they [the school] tolerate us, but they don’t…Not encourage, but they don’t celebrate us.”

As the girls analyzed their school culture and how it reinforced the notion of the angry Black girl stereotype, the study participants also focused on resisting and unpacking the stereotype by articulating the belief that Black girls have the right to be angry. Tanya, a 12th grader from Grace School, connected Black girls’ right to feel angry to their lowered status in society:
I just think that is a stereotype that we’re angry, but I feel like… that we’re angry. But I feel like – and not that we have a reason to be angry, but we do. Like – because we’re…I guess we are the low-- like the lowest of the lowest…and I feel like we have a reason to be angry because we are not low. Like, we’re no worse than anything, like, anyone else. I just feel like there’s like White men, White women, Black men. Like we’re just the bottom. Who wants to be the bottom? Like, no one wants to be the bottom anything…We have a reason to be upset because people will think that we’re just – not nothing, but like, basically nothing, when we are so much more than that.

Even though the girls’ developing emotional literacy skills, and drawing on the findings of Chapter 5, their growing critical consciousness, supported their thinking in recognizing the larger issues at play around others’ understandings of Black girl emotions, their behavior was oftentimes affected by the messages in the air. Their awareness and experiences existing double standards around their behavior seemed to lead some of the study participants to develop a hypervigilant mindset when attending school.

**Developing a Mindset of Hypervigilance**

The theme of the study participants’ hypervigilance seemed to manifest in their beliefs and behavior in two ways—one was having a feeling that they were always under surveillance, and the other was how the girls monitored their own behaviors. In describing the experiences of Black students at Grace, Krystal, a 12th grader, commented how “We definitely stand out more because we’re a minority obviously. So you know, everything we do is being watched more than, you know, the other kids.” In line with that observation, throughout my study, different administrators at both schools were continually asking me and the study participants what we talked about in the group.
There was always a sense from those outside of the group that they needed to know what was going on.

Due to the fact that the study participants often felt like their behaviors were being scrutinized in more detail compared to that of other students, the girls talked about how they sometimes did not respond the way they wanted to in certain situations because they were afraid of aligning with or confirming the image of the “angry Black girl” in other people’s minds. The participants talked about moments where they experienced microaggressions from their peers and teachers, and rather than respond, they would either laugh uncomfortably, look to catch the eye of another Black girl who might be around in order to have their feelings validated, or simply walk away. The girls talked about engaging in these behaviors rather than confronting the person in the encounter because they did not want to be seen as “aggressive,” or suffer the “repercussions of being a Black person and being seen as X, Y, Z.”

The themes presented this section of the study participants’ awareness of the specter of the “angry Black girl” stereotype and their hypervigilance speak to the reality of many Black girls’ experiences in schools (regardless of school type as public or independent) where their behaviors are often policed by adults and peers who reinforce dominant norms and expectations. In their ethnographic studies that explored the experiences of Black girls in schools, both Fordham (1996) and Morris (2007) found that Black girls whose behavior more closely resembled that of White femininity—being quiet, docile, and obedient, were the ones who were the most successful in school. Those who fell outside of those normative behaviors by pushing back, asserting themselves, and
questioning authority were closely watched by teachers and administrators. Additionally, in their youth participatory action research project with adolescent Black girls from Girls for Gender Equity (GGE), Evan-Winters & GGE (2017) found that school policies and practices are often oriented around the notion that Black girls’ bodies and behaviors are “dangerous,” thereby upholding their practices of closer surveillance and scrutiny of Black girls.

Conclusion

The BGCL component of emotional literacy reflects how Black girls understand and respond to a landscape of emotions on the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels. For Black girls in independent schools, emotional literacy often requires balancing the recognition of their own emotions with an awareness of how others view Black girl emotions. This awareness pushes Black girls to develop a multiple consciousness that includes acknowledging the existence of the stereotypes surrounding Black girl emotions. This awareness often leads to Black girls feeling as though they have to make a decision about expressing or suppressing their emotions in order to avoid aligning with being viewed as being “too sensitive” or being the “angry Black girl.”

With BGCL being situated within the school context, school culture and classrooms become places where the notion of “safe spaces” is often translated into a debate between the emotions of comfort and discomfort, with the emotional safety of students from the dominant group being given priority over that of Black girls. Educators can push back against this normative standard and promote the emotional safety of all
students by engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort where educators and students alike are pushed to critically study how power relations function in society and are communicated through the daily workings of school life. A pedagogy of discomfort enhances the emotional literacy of all students and teachers, and could work to relieve Black girls of some of the emotion labor that they are forced to engage in on a daily basis.
In this chapter I will identify and trace the different strategies, perspectives, and tools that the participants in this study used to display their agency and activism around carving spaces for themselves in school cultures that are not always inclusive of their needs and identities as Black girls in elite predominantly White spaces. In defining agency and its relationship with activism, I draw on Brown’s (2016) definition of agency, which is the “capacity to use what they [girls] know from their own experiences to imagine creative solutions and to transform thoughts and strong emotions into meaningful action” (p. 96). Similar to Freire’s (1970) notion of praxis, this definition of agency highlights how authentic reflection on one’s experiences and the imagining of transformation logically leads to actions that attempt to create change. In relation to the theory of BGCL, Brown’s (2016) definition illustrates how agency and activism are dependent on girls’ critical awareness of their experiences and how those experiences often evoke strong emotions that influence the actions that girls choose to take. Similarly, the theory of BGCL in independent schools also holds that Black girls’ agency and activism within the context of their school environment occur in relation to the developing critical consciousness that Black girls have of their status as Black girls in their school and in society, and in light of the emotional experiences that Black girls encounter in their daily school lives.

Another central component of agency and activism for Black girls is the notion of resistance. As a result of their marginalized status in U.S. society, when Black girls
engage in activism, that work necessarily draws on beliefs and actions that will push back against, disrupt, and ultimately dismantle systems of oppression with the goal of creating a more equitable society. Throughout my work with the girls, I saw them resist in myriad ways—from talking amongst themselves and questioning why certain school policies seemed tone-deaf to their experiences, to making presentations to their classmates and faculty members about their experiences and advising where change needs to happen in school practices, to forming an organized student group that would serve the purpose of being an affinity space as well as a space for activism.

Across the different forms of resistance in which the girls engaged, a unifying thread that I saw running through them was the imagining and production of the counterstory or counternarrative. Drawing on the work of Solórzano & Yosso (2002), Harper and Davis III (2012) define the counternarrative as “a method of telling the stories of people who are often overlooked in the literature, and as a means by which to examine, critique, and counter majoritarian stories (or master narratives) composed about people of color” (p. 107). Hand-in-hand with the participants’ questioning and critiquing of their experiences as Black girls was a knowledge of and belief in how things are and could be different from what the dominant images, stories, and narratives about Black girls tell us we are like. As this chapter explores how the study participants display agency and engage in activism, the notion of resistance through the counternarrative will be an analytical thread that is woven throughout each section of the chapter.

Similar to the other analysis chapters in this dissertation, the findings in this chapter, while primarily displaying the BGCL component of agency & activism, also
illustrate how the BGCL elements are in constant overlap and relation with one another. This chapter will present and discuss the following three findings: 1) media as a vehicle for activism, 2) the importance of student voice when validating the experiences of Black girls and creating a supportive community, and 3) cultivating a space for Black girl activism.

Section 1: Media as a Vehicle for Activism

Due to the fact that the participants in this study are members of what scholars describe as the “Millennial Generation” (Bolton et al., 2013; Howe & Strauss, 2000), it should come as no surprise that media usage and social media are a central method of communication for them. The Millennial Generation is characterized by the fact that millennials are the first generation to have ever had access to “information communication technology” for their entire lives (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009, p. 472). In terms of activism, access to the internet, television, and radio become a landscape where models of activism and social critique abound (Gerbaudo, 2012; Joyce 2010). Many of the participants in the study talked about using social media platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and video sites such as YouTube to find news about current events. This finding captures not only how different forms and sources of media inform Black girls’ understanding of activism, but also how Black girls make use of and create their own media as a form of activism in communicating their own perspectives

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12 Excerpts from this section have been published in the article Jacobs, C.E. (2017). Developing the “oppositional gaze”: Using critical media pedagogy and black feminist thought to promote black girls’ identity development. The Journal of Negro Education, 85(3), 225-238.
about and experiences of being Black adolescent girls who attend elite, predominantly White independent schools. One lens I use to understand how media and activism intersected within the educational environment of the girls’ discussion groups is critical media literacy pedagogy (Kellner, 1998).

**Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy**

Drawing from the principles of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003), critical media literacy pedagogy questions how forms of media construct, reproduce, and give meaning to the ways in which power, privilege, and hierarchies based on social differences operate within U.S. culture (Kellner, 1998). In schools, critical media literacy pedagogy involves teaching students how to critically analyze the different components of media such as the strategies and methods that are employed in communicating messages to its audiences, and the biased representations, values, and ideologies that it promotes (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007). In addition to learning to be critics of the media, critical media literacy pedagogy also empowers youth to learn how to intelligently consume and produce their own forms of media (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2007; Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). Morrell and colleagues (2013) point out that the power of developing media literacy in youth and teaching them how to produce their own versions of media creates an opportunity for them to create and share “competing narratives” (p. 17) of their own social experiences, which could potentially illustrate life experiences and perspectives that depart from those of the dominant culture in our society. Such pedagogy, Morrell writes, embraces a theory of learning that holds that
learning must be active, authentic, participatory, and empowering (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013).

Using Morrell et al.’s (2013) framework, a critical media pedagogy that serves to empower adolescent Black girls encourages activism by creating opportunities for Black girls to analyze the messages they receive about race and gender from the worlds they navigate through such as their home, school, and peer communities. The pedagogy promotes authenticity by ensuring that all of the activities, discussions, and inquiries that Black girls have work towards their own liberation and the liberation of other oppressed groups. The participatory component of the pedagogy requires that Black girls not only learn from each other, but also have opportunities to learn from and about Black women in their community (both in the current and historical sense), who serve as role models for Black girls in developing their oppositional gaze. Lastly, the empowering element of this pedagogy for Black girls is that they are viewed as experts of their own experiences, their experiences are recognized as being valid, and their developing oppositional gaze creates a space for adolescent Black girls to define themselves on their own terms and work towards challenging the messages that they receive from dominant culture.

**Developing a Group Consciousness about the Status of Black Girls**

Midway through our weekly discussion group meetings, Candace, a 12th grader, at Grace, brought in a video that she wanted to share with the rest of the group. Until this point, I had primarily been the one who had brought in the media for the girls to analyze and critique. The video was a spoken word poem titled “F*ck I Look Like!” performed by Kai Davis (2012), a writer and performance artist who identifies as a queer woman of
color. In the video, Davis describes experiences of racial double standards in the classroom, being accused of “acting White,” and the importance of self-definition and standing up for her ideas. While the video was playing some of the girls were nodding, and snapping their fingers in agreement.

After watching the video, the girls in the room launched into a 45-minute discussion of their own experiences in their classes where they felt like they had to fight against the perception that Black students are only at the school to play sports, experiences of White students expressing surprise that there were Black students taking honors-level classes, and experiences of teachers and administrators questioning whether or not they should pursue honors-level classes. Throughout this discussion, girls in the group also made suggestions to others in the room about what they could do in the future to push back and question students, teachers, and the messages that they were getting that they were not smart or did not belong in a certain level class.

The showing of this video was a significant moment in the curriculum development of this research study. Once the girls in the group saw that it was okay to bring in examples of media that resonated with their experiences, the curriculum became co-constructive, with me still coming prepared with discussion questions and different video clips, but largely it was the girls who began to bring in videos, songs, and Tumbler posts to share and discuss with the group.

From my perspective, Candace’s request to show the video to the group serves as a form of activism, in that after viewing the video by herself, she decided that the contents and message of the video were something that needed to be shared in the whole
group of Black girls. She was introducing a particular perspective into the group that provided a snapshot of the experiences of a female of color in school. In turn, the content of the video created an empowering and participatory space in which the girls took up the examples that Davis presented and mapped those experiences onto their own personal interactions and encounters within the context of their own school. By asserting her own definition of who she is within the context of a school and larger society that seeks to define Black girls in specific deficit-oriented ways, Davis’ proclamation of self-definition throughout the video provides an illustration of how to enact an oppositional gaze and that seems to have been Candace’s intent in sharing the video with the group.

As we continued to hold our discussion sessions, media played a substantial role in promoting the group consciousness about the status of Black people in the U.S. in general, and Black girls and women in particular. In one particular discussion session at Grace School in April (about ¾ of the way through our total number of sessions), the discussion started with the girls watching a video from Fox News that one of the adult allies brought in, and then progressed to a discussion of other current events and topics based on news broadcasts and YouTube videos that the girls had seen. I describe the session below in an excerpt from my field notes:

…Tanya also talking about different things that she saw on Twitter that show how people are not naturally born racist, and how parents influence a lot of what children think about race and difference. She also talked about a post that she saw describing the White Privilege that was a part of the conversations about the Swiss Airlines crash in Germany, and how the conversation centered around the pilot being mentally ill rather than being a terrorist because he was White. They also then go on to talk about how the mass shooting perpetrators are often described in terms of mental illness and how if it were Black people doing that, then it would be a whole different story. Renée also brings up a YouTube video that she saw where a group of Black girls are going around campus and asking
mostly Black guys if they would date Black girls and they said no for a variety of reasons—most attaching to negative stereotypes about Black girls. They also talk about the show *Being Mary Jane* and how she’s a host of a fictional show that focuses on Black issues, particularly issues focusing on Black women. It was something that the girls seemed to relate to and was a starting point of discussion for them (Field Notes, April 2, 2015).

What my field notes capture is how central the media is to how the girls access information and understand their worlds and others’ opinions and perspectives of Black girls and women. Not only are the girls taking in information, but also as the excerpt illustrates, the weekly group discussions serve as a space where the girls can share that information with each other, thereby developing a shared group consciousness around issues of race, racism, privilege, and gender. Similar to the example of Candace above, the fact that Renée brings in her own media to show the group reflects a growing sense of agency and ownership of the group meetings.

**Black Girls Producing the Counternarrative**

I built on the girls’ growing awareness of the influence of images of Black girls in the media by following up on these videos a few weeks later with a video of a spoken word poem titled “Average Black Girl,” by Ernestine Johnson (2014). In the poem, Johnson describes the negative stereotypes society attributes to Black girls and women, and then critiques those stereotypes by holding up examples of historical Black women activists, freedom fighters, and heroines who spent their lives breaking barriers of race, gender, and class that society placed on them. My goal with showing Johnson’s poem was not only to provide the girls with another perspective of the experiences of Black
girls in the U.S., but also to show the girls how Black girls were creating their own media to provide a commentary about the status of Black girls and women in society.

The examples of the documentary and spoken word performances described in the vignettes above show how Black girls employ an oppositional gaze to create forms of media to resist the dominant negative messages that are communicated through websites, television shows, movies, music, magazines, books, blogs, and other types of media. Throughout our sessions, the girls brainstormed ideas of what it would be like to create their own media. One idea that arose was making a video where they would interview Black students about their experiences at their school. Another idea was to create a website that would serve as a database of resources about how to have effective conversations about issues of race, gender, and class, something that the girls saw lacking in their daily school experiences. Though these ideas did not come to fruition by the time our meetings ended, one example of the girls creating their own media was a poster that Cheryl, a 12th grader and lifer at Grace, created during one of our sessions, proclaiming that “Black Girls Rock” (Figure 7.1).
In the poster, Cheryl drew a Black girl with natural hair and hoop earrings, and in the figure’s hair are the affirming words “foundation,” “versatile,” “brilliant,” “empowered,” and “stunning”—all serving as a counternarrative to the words and phrases that are often used to describe Black girls and women. By producing their own media, Black girls not only help themselves by creating counternarratives of self-definition, strength, intelligence, and resilience, but also empower and educate other Black girls who will consume these alternate perspectives of the lives and experiences of Black girls and women.

Another example of how the study participants developed a counternarrative through creating media was through a presentation that some of the GCP participants gave to the faculty members at their school. The presentation was created by Melanie
(11th grade), Adrienne (11th grade), Nicole (10th grade), Lauren (11th grade), and two other Black girls who were not a part of the study as a way of sharing what they learned from participating in the Student Diversity Leadership Conference (SDLC), an annual conference sponsored by the National Association of Independent Schools. The girls described the conference as “three days of intense workshops based on identifiers—race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, ability, and religion” (GCP SDLC Presentation, November 2015). The theme for the conference the girls attended was “Police Brutality and the Advancement and Setbacks of African Americans Throughout History.” The charge for students who attend this conference (which has an attendance of about 1,600 students) is that they go back to their schools and share what they have learned with their school communities.

In the presentation, the girls gave an overview of what SDLC was, their experiences of being Black girls in larger U.S. society (Figure 7.2), and their particular experiences of being Black girls at GCP (Figure 7.3).
Figure 7.2. GCP SDLC Presentation, Twitter Response to the Shooting of Michael Brown

Figure 7.3. GCP SDLC Presentation, “A Day in the Life”

Figure 7.2 shows different Twitter posts that the girls found to illustrate the racist macro- and microaggressions that they encounter when searching for different twitter posts related to the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson in August 2014. The girls’ purpose of showing these images to the faculty was to make the point that these posts
were not unlike the thoughtless and harmful posts that they had seen White students at GCP make. Indeed, during one of our discussion group meetings, the girls talked about how they were the ones who often ended up getting into trouble with the school administration when they would try to push back against and question some of the Twitter and Facebook posts that their White classmates made that they thought reflected racist ideals. The girls’ decision to include similar Twitter posts in their presentation with the goal of educating their faculty members about their experiences serves as a counternarrative in that the girls are providing a snapshot of their worlds that is not typically discussed outside of their Black girl peer group. The fact that the participants are often bombarded with social media posts and articles that dehumanize, minimize, and misconstrue the actions of Black people, often from their White classmates, serves as a counternarrative to the innocent and blameless image of White students that seems dominant in GCP.

In a related vein, the girls use the powerpoint presentation to craft an authentic picture of what their experiences were as Black girls at GCP. Titled, “A Day in the Life,” (Figure 7.3) the girls used this slide to describe the different comments and questions that they had experienced or witnessed while attending GCP. This list was representative of different microaggressions connected to their racial and sexual orientation identities. This slide also displayed the cumulative effect of microaggressions, and how though the comments and questions may have been “micro” and seemingly innocuous in nature, having to hear statements like these all day and every day can be emotionally and psychologically harmful to its recipients, even if that is not the intent of the commenters.
Many of the microaggressions in the girls’ presentation speak to how the racial and gender identities of Black girls at GCP seem out of the norm, particularly Black girls’ hair, their choice of accessories (they all have a school uniform they wear), and the fact that they tend to spend time together as a group.

This slide, like the previous example, served as a counternarrative in that the girls chose to expose the frustrating and often harmful experiences that they regularly encountered as members of their school community. Rather than putting on a face that everything is fine, or putting their heads down and enduring the encounters, as is often expected of students of color in independent schools (Brown, 2012; Cary, 1991; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010), the participants used these slides and the remainder of their presentation to begin a conversation with their faculty members about how the school environment could change to be more aware and inclusive of Black girls’ needs.

**Section 2: Student Voice as a Way to Validate the Experiences of Black Girls and Move Towards a Supportive School Community**

This section focuses on how the participants in the study communicated their needs to the school community. The participants frequently demonstrated agency in using the platform of public speeches and presentations as a way to share their experiences as Black girl students at their school and about the status of Black women and girls in the U.S. The activism element of their work was demonstrated through the ways in which the participants incorporated a call to action in their presentations. Similar to the beliefs of
hooks (2000) and other critical scholars (Brown, 2013; Wing, 1996, 1997), it is not
enough to awaken people’s conscience and consciousness, but that a goal of awakening a
new awareness is to move people towards action that will create change. In the case of
the study participants, the changes that they were advocating for centered on how the
members of their school community—administrators, teachers, and students, could act
both individually and as part of a larger movement to make their schools more inclusive
and equitable spaces, particularly for Black girls.

In this section I will draw on three specific public presentations that different
study participants engaged in before, during, and after this study took place. In these
examples, the girls skillfully used school-sanctioned events to advocate for the changes
they wanted to see in their school and in the world by establishing themselves as experts
of their experience and by using their public presentations to begin to recruit allies for
their larger work.

Two of the public presentations are the community assembly speeches of Andrea
and Kendra, both seniors at GCP. Community assembly speeches are a requirement for
12th graders at GCP. The students are expected to give a 10-minute speech on any topic
of their choosing, and they work with two faculty advisors over a period of months to
develop a speech that they will give in front of the entire upper school community.
Andrea chose to focus her speech on the experiences of Black students at independent
schools (see Appendix F), and Kendra’s speech centered the current ongoing activism
movements that highlight the status of Black girls and women in the U.S. (see Appendix
G). For the third public presentation example, I return to the presentation that four of the GCP participants gave about what they learned from attending SDLC.

**Taking on the Role of the Expert**

One theme that emerged from my analysis of the public presentations in relation to student voice was the way that the presenters adopted the role of experts about their topics. They established their expertise primarily through two different strategies: drawing on personal experiences as evidence, and producing a counternarrative through the use of questioning.

**Drawing on personal experiences as evidence.** In both Andrea’s speech and the SDLC presentation, the girls incorporated personal experiences as a way to legitimize the importance of their presentations and to communicate a sense of urgency about the changes that they wanted to see happen in their school. Andrea opened her speech, “A Guest in a Strange House,” by purposely drawing attention to the fact that the speech will cover not only her experiences at GCP, but also the experiences of other Black students who attend independent schools:

This year commemorates the 60th anniversary of Brown vs. The Board of Education: the monumental supreme-court case that decided blacks deserve equal rights in the field of education. As we reflect on our past, it is important to question what is it like for black students in this space, in this time. By this space, I am referring to the type of elite educational environment where white is the majority and tuition is required to attend the school. Does this sound familiar? Good morning, my name is Andrea, and I truly believe that the unique journey of a black student at a prestigious mostly white school deserves to be highlighted. Since 7th grade, I have attended Girls’ College Prep, which is why I chose this topic: I want you all to understand how my personal experience has made me who I am today. Therefore, aside from exploring statistics, my research for this assembly has been internal: reflecting on my experience and comparing it with other Black students’ in nearby schools like ours. I interviewed students from [names two other local independent schools] and Girls’ College Prep. Although
In this excerpt, Andrea established herself as an expert by not only calling on her own experiences as a valid source of information about the experiences of Black students in independent schools, but also indicated that she conducted her own small research study in which she interviewed Black students at two other independent schools, and found that her and their experiences had similar themes. The effect of Andrea bringing in the stories of others works to counter the argument of “Well, that’s just your experience” that people from marginalized groups often encounter when they attempt to share their stories as a way to show larger trends and patterns of inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Throughout her speech, Andrea drew on her experience and the stories of other Black students to detail how Black students defined being Black versus the narrow definitions ascribed to them by their peers; microaggressions that she and her peers had experienced such as assuming that all Black students at independent schools are poor, and being looked to to offer the “Black perspective” in History and English classes; and the pressure to code switch in order to fit into “a strange house”— the independent school world being an environment where Black students do not always feel welcomed or included.

Similarly, Melanie, Adrienne, Nicole, and Lauren’s SDLC presentation also drew attention to their daily experiences around race, gender, and sexuality as Black girls at GCP. In the slide titled “A Day in the Life” (see Figure 7.3), the girls listed negative and insensitive comments that they had received about their hair, about race and racism in the
U.S., and about their general appearance. By choosing to put this slide early on in their presentation (it was the 3rd slide out of 14 slides), the girls attempted to make a personal connection with their audience (their teachers) by presenting themselves as evidence. The effect of this action is that it humanized the points that the girls made in their presentation. Drawing on personal experiences moved the argument away from a hypothetical incident or encounter to issues that existed within the walls of GCP.

In conceptualizing the power of stories to initiate awareness and change, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) point out that

…stories also serve a powerful additional function for minority communities. Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination; once named it can be combated…powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity. (p. 49)

Following the traditions of Black women activists who came before them, Andrea, Melanie, Adrienne, Nicole, and Lauren used their personal experiences of themselves and their Black peers as data. In doing so, they were articulating what Collins (1989) terms the “Black female standpoint” (p. 746), in which they articulated how “a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than the group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group” (p. 748). They held up their lived experiences as evidence of their realities both inside and outside of school and formed a counternarrative to the dominant ideas that Black girls and Black students in independent schools are “doing ok” (Brown, 2012; Cary, 1991; Gaztambide-Fernández & DiAquoi, 2010).
Producing a counternarrative through the use of questioning. A persuasive strategy that Kendra and Andrea both incorporated into their speeches was the use of rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions differ from typical questions in that their purpose is not to receive an answer from the recipient, but rather to assert a certain idea or point that is often the opposite of the question that is being posed (Han, 2002; Koshik, 2005). Within the context of this study, Kendra’s and Andrea’s use of questioning served as a form of resistance by introducing the suggestion of a counternarrative—the possibility that a narrative different from what is dominant exists.

Kendra’s speech, titled “#BlackGirlsMatter,” focused on the activism campaigns #BlackGirlsMatter, #SayHerName, and #WhyWeCantWait” and how they highlight the current status of girls and women of color in the U.S. in relation to societal and institutional systems, and their intersectional approach to seeking social justice. Putting the specific use of rhetorical questions aside for a moment, Kendra’s entire community assembly speech served as a form of resistance and provided a counternarrative to her audience by placing the spotlight on the experiences of Black girls and woman and questioning why they are being left out of conversations about equity and justice. Broadly, Kendra was resisting the invisible and silent status that Black girls and women have operated under in the U.S. for hundreds of years. Returning to the use of questioning as a way to present a counternarrative, in the example below, Kendra used rhetorical questions to highlight why a trend of Black girls leaving school at such an early age currently exists:

Notice earlier how I said pushout and not dropout? This is due to many Black girls leaving school before the legal “dropout” age of 16 years-old, with the
schools doing nothing to reach out to them. So what could be done? I believe that schools should begin to form protocols, the country can develop policy that ensures black girls never have to decide between familial obligations and their education; or being pushed out and into a jail cell. Remember the pledge of allegiance says justice for all, not some.

In this excerpt, Kendra’s use of rhetorical questions functioned as a way to teach her audience about the misleading narrative that Black girls simply drop out of school. Instead, Kendra emphasized the perspective of school pushout, which focuses on how different policies and practices in U.S. public education systematically sabotage the academic success of Black girls. Additionally, in this excerpt Kendra made use of the rhetorical question strategy to position herself as an expert by reminding the audience of terminology (“pushout” versus “dropout”) that she introduced earlier on her speech, terminology that her audience was likely unfamiliar with.

In another example, Kendra used rhetorical questioning to home in on the problematic nature of the undergirding principles of the “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative (2014) and how it leaves out girls of color:

For those who do not know what ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ is, it is an initiative launched by President Obama and the White House in February of 2014 to, ‘address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential.’ If we take a look at this statement, it says to ‘ensure all young people can reach their full potential.’ However, if we go back a couple words, we will see that it says ‘opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color.’ So where does this leave the women and girls of color? The ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ website tries to justify it by saying ‘boys of color are too often born into poverty and live with a single parent.’ Well, White House, wasn’t I born into the same single parent household as my African-American brother? Aren’t the Latina girls I know going to the same underfunded and practically useless schools as the Latino boys? There is a myth that women and girls of color are doing ‘all right’, however we most definitely are not.
In this example, Kendra used rhetorical questions to shed light on how Black and Latina girls are often living in conditions similar to those of Black and Latino boys, yet the boys’ experiences are what have received the most attention, publicity, and financial resources from researchers, educators, and philanthropists alike (AAPF, 2015). Kendra’s rhetorical question not only served as evidence to support her next point about the “myth that women and girls of color are doing ‘all right’,” but also hinted at the larger issue of pervasive sexism in U.S. society. Kendra followed on this theme by later posing the question, “Why aren’t Black women and girls who are killed by the police given the same attention as the men and boys?” In both of these examples, Kendra’s use of rhetorical questions placed her in the position of being the expert—she posed a question to which she knows the answer, and then used the remainder of her speech to answer that question for her audience.

In her senior speech, Andrea’s use of rhetorical questions had a similar effect, in that she presented other points of evidence to then lead up to the crux of her point, which she made through posing rhetorical questions to the audience of GCP students and teachers:

If you don’t believe me, and if you’re sitting in your seat thinking, ‘Andrea. Everyone knows black people don’t act that way,’ then consider comments like, ‘you aren’t really black on the inside’ or ‘I don’t think of you as black’ and even ‘you don’t sound black, you sound smart.’ All of these things, that are ironically meant as compliments, have been said by my friends and I who attend schools similar to ours. However, I want to accentuate the fact that not only have white people used these phrases, but it is common for black students to receive these comments from their black counterparts. This thinking process prompts a couple of questions. Firstly, why is the standard for black not excellence? When people think of black, why do they immediately revert to black stereotypes and not to the people who defy them?
In this example, similar to Kendra, Andrea’s use of rhetorical questioning served to present a counternarrative that is particularly personal for White and Black students by stating how the “compliments” that Black students receive from White students (and also from other Black students) are not actually sources of praise, but rather indicate a general perception of lowered standards for Black students. Another counternarrative that Andrea presented is the fact that not only White students commit these microaggressions—Black students are also guilty of perpetuating ideologies that stem from internalized racism.

In addition to the use of rhetorical questions as a mode through which to present counternarratives relative to the experiences of Black students and of girls and women of color, Kendra and Andrea skillfully used the mode of rhetorical questioning to name different phenomena that are not easily discussed in their school—sexism, racism, and their intersections. What Kendra and Andrea were doing through their speeches is a study in how they chose to articulate their points as Black girls while also being aware of how emotions and ideas tied to the concept of “White Fragility” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56) could make audience members defensive and dismissive of their arguments. Through the use of rhetorical questions, Kendra and Andrea were able to assert their positions in a tone of wondering rather than accusation.

Kendra’s and Andrea’s use of public speeches and the device of rhetorical questioning as a mode of persuasion points the legacy of Black women activists who came before them incorporating similar techniques. Women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and many others who used their pen and skills of oration to present a counternarrative of the gendered, raced, economic, and
political experiences of Black women during the time that they lived (Campbell, 1986; Royster, 2000). In particular, Andrea’s and Kendra’s use of rhetorical questioning echoes the tone of speeches such as Sojourner Truth’s (1851) “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech. Similar to Truth, Kendra and Andrea wove together their personal experiences and current trends in larger society with rhetorical questions as a way to engage in activism that placed the experiences of Black women and girls at the center rather than remaining in the margins.

**Seeking Allyship**

Another theme that emerged was that when the girls in the study used public platforms as mechanisms for change, they used assemblies and presentations to not only to share their experiences, but also to challenge their peers and teachers to become allies with them in making their school a more equitable space. In contrast to the skillful maneuvering involved in the use of rhetorical questions to convince their audiences of the validity of their arguments, when the girls presented their recommendations for the work that needed to be done by allies, they were direct and forthright. In the example below, Melanie, Adrienne, Nicole, and Lauren developed a “Check Yourself Checklist” (Figure 7.4) as a part of their presentation to their teachers about how to improve the GCP school environment for Black girls:
Through the eyes of the girls, allyship means above all taking responsibility for one’s actions. All of the recommendations included on the slide required individuals to engage in self-reflection, increase one’s self-awareness, and to no longer use ignorance as a shield for harmful actions.

Following this slide, the girls used the last two slides of the presentation to give the GCP faculty members the opportunity to engage in the work of allyship in the moment. The presenters asked the faculty members to reflect on the points of the presentation, questions they have, and what they want to learn more about. These slides included the questions, “What resonated most with you from this presentation and why?” “What would YOU like to hear more about?” and “Please write ideas that you have that will benefit the GCP community with your group.” This last part of the presentation illustrates how the presenters were seeking allies by asking the members of their school community to be a part of the change process.
While the SDLC presenter’s call for allyship focused on action primarily on an individual level, Kendra’s call for allyship in her community assembly speech spoke to the vision of her classmates becoming part of a larger movement:

Lastly, I will speak on the hashtag, #WhyWeCantWait. This is another hashtag created by the African American Policy Forum to applaud the White House for creating a program for men and boys of color, but to tell them that we will not wait for them to work with men and boys only to receive what remains. The trickle down policy did not work when it was called ‘Reaganomics’ and it is obviously not working now because black women and girls are still struggling. Most of us use social media, therefore I urge all of you [who do] to follow the hashtags #WhyWeCantWait and #SayHerName…It is critical that you begin to work towards being a better ally with your black classmates and women and girls like them across the nation. We are the catalyst for change in the country. We have the power to break the silence on racial injustices across this country. Thank you for taking up this work. I will leave with a quote from former Black Panther Party member Assata Shakur ‘It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other, and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.’

Similar to the SDLC presentation, Kendra asked her classmates to act on an individual level by following the hashtags of the #WhyWeCantWait and #SayHerName campaigns, but what Kendra did differently was that she also asked her classmates to recognize and become part of a larger sisterhood where if one girl or woman is suffering from an injustice, then it is their duty to fight alongside her to seek equity.

Reflecting on her work with an ongoing Black girls’ group, Brown (2013) states that being an ally to Black girls requires people “to think through new ways of relating to Black girls in a way that is healthy, respectful, and just” (p. 74), and that as allies we also need to take a critical look at ourselves and “confront our own collusion with the system” (p. 74). Both the SDLC presentation and Kendra’s speech reflect an awareness that in order for institutional change to occur within their schools and in society, they cannot be
the only ones calling for and invested in the examination of school (and larger U.S.)
policies, practices, and traditions. The girls asked their audiences to reflect on their
actions on an individual level, and then also to think about how they as a community
could work together to create change at the school and societal levels. From an activist
standpoint, the girls realized that in order for their school culture to be more inclusive,
and for larger-scale changes to occur around sexism and racism in the U.S., that it could
not simply be a small group of people doing the work, but that there needed to be an
establishment of a community of allies who are ready to do the work as well.

**Black Girls as Educators**

One tension that this section highlights is that absent of any other support or
dialogue, Black girls often are either put into or take on the role of educating others about
their experiences and about larger race relations within the U.S. In independent schools,
the “educator” role often takes the form of students of color serving as experts about the
experiences of their racial/ethnic group. In their qualitative study focusing on the
experiences of students of color at an elite boarding school, Gaztambide-Fernández and
DiAquo (2010) captured how Black girls are often in the educator position. The girls in
their study describe often being looked to by peers to explain different aspects of the
Black experience or answer any questions that their White peers might have about race.
While the girls in Gaztambide-Fernández and DiAquo’s study often found themselves
*placed in* the position of educators, in this study Kendra and Andrea seem to willingly
*take on* the educator role. Similar to Kendra and Andrea, in her ethnography of an elite
prep boarding school, Chase (2008) describes an instance in which Black girls used their
speeches during an MLK Day assembly as a platform to call out the “ignorance” and inequalities that they had experienced while on campus.

Much like the examples described above, in this study the motivation behind much of the activism that the girls engaged in within the context of their school seemed to have the goal of awakening the awareness of their peers and teachers about the experiences of inequity that existed within their school, particularly along lines of race and class. The girls used their own experiences as the vehicle to heighten awareness and inspire emotions that they hoped would cause their peers and teachers to care.

The tension that arises in Black girls adopting the role of educators is that they are continually expected to do the work of educating the dominant group, rather than the dominant group taking it upon themselves to develop a competence and awareness of power relations in the school and how they are complicit in Black girls feeling excluded from the school community. Additionally, while public forums such as presentations and community assemblies serve as spaces where Black girls can share and offer a perspective about their experiences, in terms of structural support, the schools in this study did not demonstrate that there were mechanisms for follow up conversations, action planning, or strategic development. Therefore, the reach of Black girls’ activism and awareness-raising could only go so far in terms of creating change in their school communities.
Section 3: Cultivating a Space for Black Girl Activism

This section builds from the previous section by describing ways in which schools can develop mechanisms and environments that nurture Black girls’ activism, and ultimately, positive school change. In her book *Powered by Girl: A Field Guide for Youth Activists* (2016), Brown reviews the different environmental structures, personnel, and guiding philosophies that must be in place in order for girls to successfully engage in activist work. At the core of Brown’s work is the belief that in order for girls to actualize their activist potential, their experiences, needs, and ideas need to be at the center of the work. Similarly, Brown’s (2013) conceptualization of cultivating Black girlhood as an “organizing practice of resistance and wellness” (p. 4) requires that the full humanity of Black girls—their lived experiences, their understandings, and their critiques be continually foregrounded in all of the activism work that is done with Black girls in mind.

The purpose of this section is to describe the different factors that emerged from my study that seemed to particularly engender the girls’ interest, motivation, and engagement in activism. The two factors that I will discuss are 1) creating an environment for Black girl activism, and 2) Black girls having the space and support to define the changes they want to create and how they will go about making those changes happen.

Creating an Environment for Black Girl Activism

In creating a space that supports the activism of Black girls, particularly Black girls who are attending schools that are predominantly White, elite, and are steeped in traditions that often communicate messages of exclusion and privilege, it is important to
examine the key components of an environment that helps Black girls to thrive. While facilitating the discussion groups at Grace and GCP, I found that three factors that nurtured the girls sense of activism were the girls being able to claim their own space, the girls having the freedom to define their community, and the impact that adult allies could have in supporting the girls in their change work.

**Black girls claiming their space.** One of the themes that stood out to me during this project was how the girls created a space for themselves that was positive, empowering, full of truth-telling, and most importantly, a space where they could completely be themselves, whether it was bragging about their prowess as an athlete, tentatively offering a theory to the group about something they had observed from personal experience, or joyfully digging into doughnuts throughout the discussion session, the girls had the freedom to unapologetically express who they were and what they thought.

At Grace School, the girls met in a space known as the “Board Room.” I describe the space in my field notes below:

We’re meeting in the Board Room, a formal meeting space dominated by a giant cherry wood round table in the middle. The whole room is paneled in warm cherry wood, and there's a fireplace along the south wall. Above the fireplace is a painting of the founders of the school—two White women. There is also a bust on the wall next to the painting-- not sure of who it is, but she’s also a White woman. There’s also a Keurig machine in the room-- this time the girls descended upon it and got coffee and tea. (Researcher field notes, January 15, 2015).

Ironically, though this space exuded many messages of wealth, privilege, and the historical exclusion of the school, the girls made themselves right at home in the space. Also, even though the room was located down the hallway from the Head of School’s
office and administrator offices were on either side of the room, as soon as the door closed, the girls made it their clubroom—talking and laughing as loudly and as freely as they wanted. In contrast, there were a couple of times where we had to meet in regular classrooms instead of the Board Room, and some of the girls commented on how they preferred to be in the Board Room rather than the classroom.

One characteristic that stood out about both discussion group spaces at Grace and at GCP was that the girls were intent on having a space that did not resemble their typical classroom environment. When in the role of facilitator during our first meeting session, one of the activities that I asked the girls to do was to develop a list of community norms that would serve as guidelines for how the girls wanted to communicate with one another and what they wanted their space to be like (see Figure 7.5 and Figure 7.6).

Figure 7.5. Grace Group Community Norms
These norms speak to the behaviors and characteristics that the girls valued in a space where they would be sharing experiences, ideas, and observations that were personal to them. Above all, “honesty,” “respect,” and “confidentiality” were the tenets that guided girls’ interactions in the discussion groups. Also, the themes of being willing to “hear people out,” and being supportive of each other spoke to an awareness that the girls had that they were coming from different as well as common experiences and perspectives. The community norms (in addition to other characteristics of the group) established an environment whereby at the end of our time together when the girls completed their wrap-up questionnaires, they wrote reflections such as Candace, who described how it was really hard for her to talk about race “unless I’m in a group like this.” Renée wrote how she felt “timid” and “shy” when the group first started meeting,
but that seeing other girls share made her more confident in wanting to share her thoughts. Cheryl reflected on how being in a room with other Black girls made her feel “very comfortable” and “at peace-- something I seldom feel in the Grace School environment,” and Tanya wrote that she “noticed that [she] was able express certain things that [she] can’t express every day in my classes.”

Another way in which the girls made the space their own was by shaping what the content of the discussion groups would be. Prior to beginning the discussion groups, I had developed a detailed scope and sequence of a discussion group curriculum complete with lesson plans that included powerpoint presentations, specific activities, and journaling prompts. Early on in the sessions the girls made it clear that they were not interested in a formally prescribed curriculum, but rather wanted to use the space primarily to talk about their experiences and strategize about change. Though the girls never told me outright that they did not want to do what I had planned according to my curriculum, they made it clear through their level of engagement during the session by either being completely silent, not making eye contact, or engaging in multiple side conversations rather than focusing on the central activity or point of discussion. In contrast, when they were engaged, the room came alive with them telling stories, laughing, and asking questions to me and to the room.

Below is a researcher reflection that I wrote following my fourth meeting with the girls at Grace School concerning my thoughts about the content of the discussion sessions:

One of the major takeaways for me from this session today was that I can’t make this group like school. It seems like the girls view it more like a club. Some girls
come one week, other girls come another week. I have a lesson plan in mind, but unlike when I was teaching, I don’t feel like I have the right to bulldoze ahead with the lesson. I’m in a position where I want this to be meaningful to the girls, especially because it is something that they’re doing on their own time, with no real incentives attached to it except for the free food…It’s very clear to me that the girls just want a time and place to talk. At the end of the session, Cheryl thanked me and talked about how coming to these meetings feels like going to therapy (Researcher Reflection, January 29, 2015).

Taking the lead from the girls meant that I often started the group discussions with the simple question, “What’s on your minds today?” This simple question opened the door for the girls to talk about the issues, questions, and events that were most important to them—a recent school assembly focused on diversity that missed the mark, frustrations around money and dating in relation to prom, the microaggressions they experienced in class, having to “switch it up” between their home communities and school communities. As the girls brought up different issues and topics, I made notes of places where I could bring in videos, powerpoints, and guided prompts in the future that I could use to deepen the discussions. In essence, I transformed from a facilitator or group leader to what Freire (1970) terms a “teacher-student” (p.80), where I shared the responsibility for the group going well with the girls, and where our learning existed in a reciprocal rather than hierarchal relationship.

The importance of setting up the opportunity for the girls to create their own norms for their discussion group and to have the freedom to design the content of the discussion meetings was significant in contributing to the girls feeling and taking ownership of their group in that the power was immediately placed in their hands of what they wanted for their space. One aspect of the hidden curriculum in schools is that the
lives of young people are often dictated by rules and policies that they have no say in creating, yet are expected to obey, thereby communicating to them who holds the power in schools (adults) and who does not (students) (Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2003; Weil, 1998). Taking this analysis a step further in respect to Black girls, schools, as sites of social reproduction are often places where Black girls are pushed to the margins because of assumptions surrounding their racial and gendered identities— that they are loud, aggressive, confrontational, and do not care about school (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016) leaving them without a voice or a sense of agency over their school lives. Jennifer, a 10th grader (and lifer) at Grace astutely noted this when she reflected that at Grace, “It’s mostly like white males telling you what you should and should not do, in this community.” Setting up structures and practices that communicate to Black girls that they have the right and power to take ownership of their space is one way to encourage Black girl activism.

**Black girls having the freedom to create their community.** As described in Chapter 5, Section 1: “The Influence of School Culture on the Developing Critical Consciousness of Black Girls,” for Black girls finding community in an elite predominantly White school can be complicated and filled with nuance. In the case of Grace School, though Black students had found a space to come together informally throughout the day in a teacher’s classroom, divides along gender and class lines made it a space where not all Black girls felt comfortable. Even though a functioning Black Student Union existed at GCP, it was an organization that was open to students of all
races/ethnicities, and the discussions and decision-making were often dominated by the older students in the group.

In contrast, in the girls’ discussion groups in this study, the divides that were present in their everyday school lives were downplayed or ignored in favor of the girls finding common ground with each other based on their experiences in school and larger society. The first factor that motivated the participants in relation to a sense of community was that they were looking for a way to be a part of and contribute to a supportive Black girl community. In a broader sense, some of the girls discussed in our first meetings about how their reasons for joining the project were to contribute to a larger vision of the Black or Black woman community by supporting the project. In her introductory questionnaire Diana, an 11th grader at Grace School, stated that her reason for joining was “to support a Black woman who is doing research to try to educate people.” By situating their membership in the Black Girl Project (and its work) within a context beyond their immediate group, the participants recognized how they were part of a larger community of girls and women of color who experienced systems of oppression at the intersection of race and gender.

On a more local level, the girls frequently commented that their reasons for joining the Black Girl Project or that one of their main takeaways was that they were able to form a stronger bond with some of the Black girls at their school through hearing each other’s experiences of being a Black girl in their school. Though the prevailing assumption at both GCP and Grace School was that the Black students or Black girls were always hanging together, the reality was that the relatively small number of Black
girls in each of the schools translated to there only being a handful of Black girls in each grade. Combine that fact with differing schedules, tracked classes, and varying extracurricular activities, the reality was that often Black girls across different grade levels or even tracked classes did not get the opportunity to get to know each other well. Many of the participants experienced the girls’ group as one of the few places where Black girls could get to know each other in a deep way, supported by the fact that the group was an established “safe place” and “no judge zone.” Krystal, a 12th grader at Grace remarked, “I felt like I was home. Once a week coming in there I was able to talk about what's been going on for the past few days.”

The second factor that motivated the girls’ formation of a community was that they viewed having a community of Black girls that were like-minded and action-oriented as a vehicle through which they could actually begin to make changes in their school community. As Nina, a 9th grader at Grace attested, her main reason for joining the Black Girl Project was “being in a community filled with Black Girls who are educated, driven, and want to make a change for Black girls like myself in independent schools.” The girls saw the group as a place where they could lay their experiences out on the table as data for where the work needed to be done to create change in their community that would have an impact not only in the immediate sense, but also would influence the school environment so that “the struggles that I go through now…future Black girls don’t have to endure the same” (Adrienne, 11th grade, GCP). The idea of Black girls finally “having a voice,” or a way to articulate their experiences was something that many of the girls mentioned in their reasons for wanting
to be a part of the Black Girl Project. Quite a few mentioned how it was refreshing that someone wanted to hear their stories and their opinions about their experiences within their schools and that their ideas would lead to action. A couple of the girls mentioned that they felt like too often the voices of Black girls were lost within the schools’ attempt to hear everyone’s voice, so that the voices of the majority group (White students) were heard more. Tasha, a 10th grader at GCP, put it this way,

I thought it would be cool to just be in a space where someone finally wanted to hear what we had to say. At GCP they always emphasize wanting our voices to be heard but they want ALL OF OUR VOICES heard and no one can be singled out and the more voices from one group, the more that voice is listened to and that smaller groups gets sucked up and ignored.

Beyond having a place to have their voices heard, the girls viewed the group as a think tank for action. It was a place where through the exchange of ideas they would be able to learn and develop strategies that would support them not only in their everyday acts of resistance, but also in larger initiatives and projects that would engender a more inclusive community for Black girls. Kathryn, an 11th grader at GCP summed this up well in her response to why she what she hoped to get out of the Black Girl Project: “I want to be able to learn how to communicate with those who don’t know our struggles and how to resolve the many awkward situations that occur on a day to day basis regarding my race.” Kathryn’s response describes the potential of girls’ group spaces as places where members learn how to develop skills and strategies to aid them in navigating through different aspects of their lives. Related to the focus of this dissertation project, Kathryn’s reflection describes the central ideas connected to Stevenson’s (2014) concept of racial literacy and my own conceptualization of BGCL, where Black girls are able to develop
the ability to recognize situations the arise where one might feel “awkward” because the issue of race arises, and then also develop the ability to be able to communicate with others in that same moment about race-related matters.

The girls’ search for and creation of community hinged on their understanding of their common experiences of being Black girls who attended school in an elite predominantly White context. Though their experiences varied due to differing socioeconomic statuses, family and community support structures, length of time attending an independent school, and a host of other factors, their being Black and female within U.S. society created what Collins (1989) refers to as a collective “Black feminist consciousness” (p. 748)—an understanding that across all differences in social location, being Black and female in U.S. society creates a common and unique awareness that Black girls and women have related to their lived experiences.

An equally important factor to cultivating Black girl activism is the opportunity for Black girls to create and claim their own space for the work. In creating “homespaces” (Ward, 1996) and “homeplaces” (hooks, 1990; Pastor et al., 1996) for themselves, Black girls are able to set the tone and focus of their work. Having a space in school where they are free to develop meaningful relationships while potentially overcoming any barriers that keep them apart is significant. In schools, where the focus on academics and, in the case of Black girls, control of their behavior, often takes precedence over socioemotional learning (Fine & Zane, 1989; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016; Pastor et al., 1996), making space for Black girls to explore their identities is central to their positive development. Additionally, Black girls being able to create their
own space and decide who to welcome to that space works to support Black girls in feeling inspired to move to action and not be defeated by sharing their experiences, which are often painful, embarrassing, or enraging.

**Black Girls Defining Where They Want to Create Change and How**

This theme sits in close connection with some of the points that were raised in Chapter 5, Section 1: “The Influence of School Culture on the Developing Critical Consciousness of Black Girls,” when the girls used critical lenses to examine their experiences as Black girls in independent schools. This theme builds off of the girls’ critiques to focus on their ideas of where they want to create change in their school communities and the actions involved in making those ideas come to life. In this theme, the girls engage in what Robinson and Ward (1991) term “resistance for liberation” strategies—those actions in which “Black women and girls are encouraged to acknowledge the problems of, and to demand change in, an environment that oppresses them” (p. 89). The first two points of this theme are connected to change processes that focus on the actions of the girls in terms of how they assessed the problematic areas of their school lives. The last point highlights the potential of adults to work alongside the girls as allies for change.

**Analyzing the landscape.** When we used our discussion groups to talk about what actions the girls wanted to do to create change in their schools in efforts of making their school environments more inclusive spaces, their ideas fell into two major categories—one connected to wanting to create more spaces for community, and the other connected to feeling represented within the school community. Both of these
categories are related to the larger issue that within their independent school environments, the girls in this study not only felt isolated or alone because of their relatively small number in comparison to their larger school populations, but also that those feelings were magnified by the fact that in both schools there were only 2-3 Black teachers in the upper school.

Creating spaces for community. The girls saw creating different spaces for community as one way to combat the isolated status that they and other students of color experience while attending their schools. As described in the previous section, the girls valued the discussion group space because it was a place where they could get to know each other better and also know that they were not alone their experiences and their observations. That being said, the girls were not satisfied with the girls’ discussion group as being the only space where they could feel a sense of community or have meaningful dialogue connected to change, inclusivity, and equity.

At GCP, Adrienne described how she had formed a student organization that puts together a conference each year where students from local independent schools come together for a day and engage in discussions, exercises, and workshops focused on issues of diversity and equity. When discussing the name and purpose of the group, Adrienne described it in this way:

Adrienne: Acceptance and awareness in diversity. I want to add on another A but they’re not going to let me. But it would be like triple A, D. Which sounds weird. Because I wanna say “and appreciation”, because I feel like there’s a difference between acceptance, awareness, and appreciation… So it’s like—it’s a conversation that we will have.

Melanie: Accepting diversity isn’t the same as appreciating diversity?
Adrienne: It’s like tolerating it versus liking it.

Melanie: Got it, got it. Got it, got it.

A common theme during the GCP discussions was that even though different organizations in the school hosted discussions or events focused issues of diversity and equity, all of the events were voluntary, meaning students at the school could easily avoid ever having to talk about these issues in depth and with their classmates. To Adrienne, “accepting” diversity was akin to “tolerating” it—she saw students in her community who had no real investment or incentive to have these conversations. What Adrienne and the girls at GCP wanted to move towards was an environment where all students were expected to learn and hopefully appreciate the different experiences of their classmates as well as broader terminology and current events connected to issues of equity and discrimination. For that reason, the GCP girls’ ideas of change revolved around mandatory attendance for assemblies, community meetings, or discussions focused on issues of equity, and the development of a database of resources and websites dedicated to issues of equity so that members of the GCP community, in Melanie’s words, “have absolutely zero excuse to being ignorant.”

At Grace School, the girls’ ideas for change culminated in the creation of a Black Student Union, a space that would serve to extend the space of community for students of color at Grace, and also a vehicle through which conversations of diversity and inclusivity could move beyond only happening between Black students. The excerpt below is from a discussion that the girls had about who should be a part of the BSU in relation to its purpose:
Alexis: Um, well, just like touching on the, adding people. I—I’m like torn between like yes, and I'm torn between like no. But um, because I know for a fact, like this group, like one of my best friends at the school is white, [female student name]. And she like, really wanted to come to this, but like she couldn’t because it was all Black. And like, I know for a fact that that kind of like, a little upset her, because she like hangs out with most of us all the time, and she wanted to like, just be a part of the conversation and stuff like that. So, I could see it from like that point of view. Like, you really want to like help, or you really want to talk about it, and be like more aware, which would help like, gain awareness of like, outside races and stuff like that, of like the problems that we think we possess and stuff like that. And they can give their input on those problems. But, on the other hand, people may not feel as comfortable talking about those issues because of other people being around. They don’t want to offend or anything like that, I guess. But, I don’t know, there’s just two, like, there’s two really interesting different, like, ways this group could go. And one way is by having other races, and the other way is by not adding other races. Which I think would accomplish two completely different things. So I think that if we strictly want to raise awareness, I think that the adding other races would be better. But if want to just have a comfort space to talk about these issues and stuff like that, I think that not adding would be more appropriate.

Bethany: Can I say? I don’t want other races in this for the sole fact that I just don't wanna, have to come to a place, like every time, like my free time, and deal with the, like, ignorance that will probably come with having people of other races. But then again, I feel like if they were to like, like you said, they might like, people might have like questions about us or like whatever, like I feel like we could have like assemblies or whatever, if we were going to actually talk about something. But I just don't want other races in it, because I think it would just kinda take away from like the group experience that we could have.

Alexis’s and Bethany’s comments above highlight one of the tensions that often arises when doing affinity group work—the dual purpose of the affinity group being a space of community for a particular group of people, and additionally its potential to serve as a space where those outside of the affinity group could become educated about the issues and experiences of its members. In her research on Black youth in primarily White contexts, Tatum (1997) points out how the period of adolescence is a time where environmental cues trigger identity awareness, making race, gender, and other identities
particularly salient. In the case of the girls at Grace and GCP, attending school in a predominantly White context heightens their identity of racial awareness, leading them to want to find spaces where they fit in. Similarly, in their study on the peer networks of Black students in independent schools, Datnow & Cooper (1997) found that affinity spaces for Black students, whether formal or informal, served to minimize feelings of isolation and alienation.

On the other hand, Alexis’s musings about the potential of the BSU to be an educative space for non-Black people reflects a larger systemic challenge within the school where students of color take on the responsibility of educating others. Hall & Stevenson (2007) found that a similar expectation surrounded the role of diversity directors in independent schools. In their interviews, the diversity directors in the sample, similar to Bethany’s and Alexis’s discussion, felt that the responsibility to engage in and promote diversity work was solely left to them, and if they did not do the work, then it would not get done. Bethany’s and Alexis’s discussion highlights the need for independent schools to develop other spaces, programs, and initiatives that support community-building work, so that it is not left to affinity groups to carry that particular responsibility.

*Representation.* Through the eyes of the girls, the issue of representation stemmed from their experiences of feeling invisible in their school communities. African-American/Black heritage and experiences connected to being an African-American/Black in the U.S. were only superficially or minimally represented in their school curriculum, and rarely were there opportunities for everyone in the school community to come
together and learn about and/or discuss issues that the girls cared about connected to race and equity. The girls talked about how when it came to their schools’ coverage of African-American/Black history or the African-American/Black experience, it often took the form of a highlights reel, where year after year students learned about the same events (U.S. slavery and the Civil Rights Movement) and historical figures (Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr.). Kathryn, an 11th grader, describes her experiences at GCP below:

So I’m like – but you – like the school focuses on so much about things that are overseas and I’m like, “But there are things that happened here.” Like the Civil Rights Movement is more than Martin Luther King, there was James Lothian, there was Mary McLeod Bethune, there was like Fannie Lou Hamer, like there’s people that you don’t know about. Like please, just educate people on things that they don’t know about instead of just reinforcing the things that we already know about, or the things that really don’t matter such as the 500 Napoleons, [laughs] like they are so irrelevant – but yeah.

In light of those contextual factors, the girls at both Grace and GCP often brought up wanting to have an African-American history course as something that they wanted to see implemented in their schools’ curriculum. For the girls, an African-American history course would not only provide them with the opportunity to learn about their own history and see themselves reflected in the curriculum, but also could be a space in which students from all different backgrounds would come together and have focused discussions about race, discrimination, and inequity—conversations that the girls saw lacking in most of their classes. In the conversation below, the girls at Grace discuss why having an African-American History class is important to them:

Sheena: We never really have a class about Black history. It’s always about modern Europe.
Alexis: Yeah, but the thing is, what White teacher would be comfortable going that far?

Diana: Why don’t we get some Black teachers here so we can teach Black history?

Sheena: It should be mandatory so everyone ... If we all have to learn about y’all history, you have to learn about ours.

Tanya: Everyone needs to learn about African-American history. It’s our history. It doesn't matter if you’re black or white, it’s still your history. You’re a part of the history at the end of the day. It’s about us.

Patricia: In 9th grade we do learn about Africa and stuff.

Tanya: You always learn the white side of everything. We learn what white people think.

Cheryl: Adding to that, they say you learn best with what you’re interested in. It’s so interesting how many honors classes there are for modern Euro, American—American Studies...I feel like there might even be more people of color in these high level classes...

The Grace girls’ discussion highlights several components that connect to their feeling of not being represented in their school. First and foremost, they do not see their experiences or histories represented in the current curriculum at their school. Instead, they feel that they are constantly learning about “the White side of everything.” On another level, Cheryl’s comment about students of color perhaps being more interested in taking an African-American history course (and assuming that it would be an honors-level course), speaks to the fact that at the time only a very small number of students of color were in honors-level history courses at Grace. On the broadest level, Alexis’s question of who would teach the African-American history course speaks to the low numbers of Black teachers in the upper school at Grace.
A critical race theory analysis of education views the curriculum in schools as “a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script…This master script means stories of African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge authority and power” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 18). The girls’ reflections on the lack of attention given to the achievements of Black people in the U.S. and the Eurocentric perspective that dominates what they learn in their classes speaks to Grace School’s reinforcement of dominant historical narratives in the U.S. that serve the function of communicating to the girls that their membership in the school community is not valued. Additionally, Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) point out that from a critical race feminist perspective, the curriculum that exists in the majority of U.S. schools (and what the girls at Grace describe) is not only Eurocentric, but also patriarchal, thereby erasing two aspects of Black girl identities from their daily learning experiences.

**Strategizing and planning.** While developing ideas for change in their school communities served as a first step in the change process, the heart of the changework that the girls engaged in revolved around their strategizing about how they could accomplish their goals and then developing plans based on those strategies. The fact that the girls’ ideas such as creating a Black Students Union and developing an African-American History course were occurring within the larger context of the school as an institution meant that the girls had to analyze the power and decision-making structures that existed within their schools. With the girls’ groups at both schools, I focused their attention on these factors by asking them to think about the people in their school who could be allies.
with them in their work and what protocols the girls might need to follow in order to present their ideas to different members of the school community.

At GCP, the girls’ discussion about allies, or rather, their lack of the allies at the school, was revealing in demonstrating how the girls defined the characteristics of an ally as well as the factors that complicated adult allyship within their school:

**Charlotte:** So, I just put down the stuff that we had talked about our last conversation. The characteristics that we had about what we wanted these actions to be…Also, it’s really important, I think, especially within your school context, that we think about allies. So who are the adults that might help you push this stuff forward? Just because I know that, …sometimes the administration can be a powerful force in kind of pushing back. So, making sure you have people who are on your side, who will be vocal in advocating for you all and what you want to do.

**Kendra:** I feel like allies that I used to have, they’re starting to become more with the school and more like, “You have to abide by the school's rule.”

**Adrienne:** No one with a title, but that’s what we need.

**Melanie:** That's the problem. I think out of all of them, [names an administrator] is the most likely to want to be able to help us, but her hands are tied. The other ones just aren't up to it.

In the exchange above, the girls’ assessment of who would be a solid ally to them in their work was based not only on their current relationship with adults, but also on different adults’ relation to power and decision-making in the school. In Kendra’s opinion, the challenge of identifying adult allies was that most adults in their school (including those who had formerly been allies), seemed more allied with the status quo of the school culture than with what the girls were looking for. As evidence of this point, later in the conversation, the girls then went on to give different examples of how various former “allies” had let them down or had shown how they were no longer allies in terms of what
the girls wanted from the school. These examples included times when the girls had brought ideas to the administration about changes they wanted to see, or grievances about a particular incident or experience only to be promised a meeting that never took place, or no forward movement from the administration after something had been brought to their attention.

During the discussion above, Adrienne and Melanie’s evaluation of the characteristics that their adult allies need to have is based on the relative power of that person’s particular role. Even though Adrienne is resistant of having an ally be a person “with a title” because of their likelihood to stand by the very rules and policies the girls are fighting against, she also realizes that people with titles are particularly powerful within the GCP community. Melanie’s comment about a high-up administrator’s hands “being tied” in connection with being able to support them illustrates her growing understanding of the complexity of changework in a school where the outside influences of the Board of Trustees and parent body can affect what happens within GCP. Melanie’s point indicates her understanding of how it may not be that an administrator or teacher does not personally want to support the girls, but rather that there are some larger system of rules and understandings at play that limit how much of an ally a teacher or administrator can be.

In response to their assessment of a lack of support from influential adults within their school, the strategy that the girls at GCP employed was a belief that once they had access to roles of authority and power within the student landscape, that they would be in a better position to affect change at GCP. In the excerpt below, Melanie reflects on the
work that she and other Black girls have tried to do at GCP, and the significance of her
and Adrienne taking on leadership roles within the BSU the following school year:

We’ve been having meetings with [names school administrator] and stuff. A lot of
times it’s just like discussion and figuring out which students are going to be there. They’ll say like, “Okay. Great talk guys. Next time we can have some more conversation and keep talking about this stuff.” The thing is, now that we have these positions, we can go in and say, “This is what we want and now we have the authority to get what we want.” We can, as far as the course [referring to the African-American History course], even if we don’t get it for next year, we’ve got the power and the support behind us to get it, I think because we’ll be taken more seriously in their eyes.

Melanie’s comments above indicate her understanding that within the context of GCP,
having power and authority is key to having the ability to make changes. While adult
allies, such as the administrator that they have started to meet with are important, Melanie
believes that being the figurehead of a group of which almost all of the Black girls in the
school are members, guarantees that the school administration can no longer ignore their
demands.

In contrast to the experiences of GCP around their activism work, early on the
girls at Grace School had support from adult allies who worked them to push forward
with their plans. Once the girls decided that creating the BSU was going to be their main
project, Ms. Mitchell, a teacher and administrator at the school worked with them to
figure out which adults at Grace they would need to talk with to make forward progress.
The girls identified a school administrator, Mr. Thomas, who they believed would
support their ideas of wanting to create a Black Student Union and develop an African-
American History course. They based their assessment both on the strength of their
relationship with him as a past advocate, and that he had organized school-wide community discussions in the past that focused on issues connected to race.

Another aspect of their decision to approach Mr. Thomas was that part of his administrator role was to approve student clubs and organizations. At my suggestion, the girls invited him to one of our weekly meetings to ask him about the protocol for creating a BSU at Grace. Before this meeting, Ms. Washington, a staff member at the school, and I worked with the girls to develop talking points about their purpose and plans for the BSU, and questions for Mr. Thomas at the meeting. Though Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Washington, and I worked with the girls in the sessions leading up to the meeting with Mr. Thomas, in line with my feminist and critical pedagogy orientation, I was intentional in ensuring that the girls were the key decision-makers by reminding them that they were the ones in charge:

Here's the other thing, too. Just like I said the last time we met, is that the adults in the room, we're really here to support you. So, we want you all to take control of this. You all are in charge. You're going to lead this meeting. If there's something that you feel you need Ms. Washington or I to step in about to answer questions for Mr. Thomas, we're willing to do that. But, we really want you all to feel like you're the ones pushing for this. Just keep that in mind, too. Because I know a lot of times when decisions are made, a lot of times adults are the ones that talk over young people. I don't want that to be the case. (Charlotte, work time before the meeting with Mr. Thomas on March 31, 2015).

After the girls presented their ideas to Mr. Thomas, he asked them questions about the membership to the BSU (Would it be open to all students or not? Would Black boys also be involved in developing plans for the BSU? Which students would take up leadership roles?), gave them feedback on their plans, and outlined the next steps that the girls would need to take to apply for club status. Beyond the logistical and operational
feedback, Mr. Thomas also gave the girls some pointers about how to navigate school structures:

Yeah, and the things that matter are follow-through. And, honestly, put pressure on. Put pressure on the school. Put pressure on me. Say, “Hey, Mr. Thomas. We need to hear from this speaker. Hey, Ms. [teacher’s name], we don't have enough books in these classes.” Right? Be relentless. If you want this to be successful, be relentless. Right? You know?...Make sure people listen. If you don't get an answer, ask them, again. Ask for really big things…Dream big, ask big, and try to make it work.

Mr. Thomas’ advice to the girls at Grace as well as the work of Ms. Mitchell, Ms. Washington, and myself highlights the importance of young people having adult allies working alongside them as they engage in activism. As insiders to the Grace School culture and bureaucracy, the adult allies at Grace provided information to the girls at Grace in terms of navigating the school processes that they might not ordinarily have access to or understand. In contrast, the girls at GCP were left to figure out the processes on their own, and subscribed to the belief that their future relative positions of power would give them the access to change processes that they were currently denied.

As an advocate for intergenerational activist work, Brown (2016) holds that adults who work with young people must work to nurture a “horizontal” rather than “vertical” relationships (p. 147). Horizontal relationships mean seeing the girls that they work with as equals, recognizing that even though their experience in the world may not be as vast, they still have an important perspective and positionality to bring to the work. The key to being a supportive adult ally is to promote the conditions where girls can take ownership of their work, and know that they have informed and committed adults behind them who will provide resources and information to assist the girls in moving closer to their goal.
Brown (2016) also focuses on how adult allies can develop scaffolding that will further girls’ development as leaders and activists through having open and honest discussions about negotiating power structures, providing information, and sometimes material resources to get the work done.

Brown’s (2009, 2013) work with her ongoing Black girls’ group SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths) illustrates how intergenerational work with Black girls is even more nuanced because of the many identities, places, and spaces that Black girls occupy. Brown states,

…when working with Black girls, recognizing power requires an understanding that because institutional narratives so often frame Black girls’ actions as too loud, too much, too sexual, too disruptive, we must work to resist these narratives created about us. We have to try and come up with another way of being and relating that breaks routine and invites creativity. This is hard work. Real hard work. But this is how we make power to be used towards socially just ends. (2009, p. 26)

In the case of the girls at Grace and GCP, this “work” required them analyze how power relations worked in their schools, particularly in relation to their status as Black female students. The work also meant that they had to strategize and analyze who they thought would be on their side and who would hinder their work within the context of school culture, policies, and norms.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented how the BGCL component of agency and activism is enacted by Black girls within the context of independent schools. The core of Black girls’ agency lies in the various ways through which they resist the dominant narratives that
prescribe who they are and what they can and cannot do. This chapter illustrated how Black girls demonstrated that resistance by engaging in “resistance for liberation” strategies (Robinson & Ward, 1991) that produced a counternarrative or counter-story of their experiences. From producing their own media that depicted the positive attributes of being Black girls, to creating presentations and speeches that illuminated their daily experiences with microaggressions at school, to advocating for initiatives that spotlight their heritage and history, the participants in this study intentionally placed the experiences of Black girls at the center and articulated how their school communities could be allies in supporting their needs and their sense of belonging at their school.

This chapter also highlights what scholar, researcher, and activist Evans-Winters (alongside members of the organization Girls for Gender Equity) (2017) describes as “Black girl power” which is “located in girls collectively questioning, exploring, engaging, and naming one’s own reality throughout the research process” (p. 8). The girls’ discussion group served as a place where the girls engaged in the research process of reflecting on what it meant to be Black girls in their schools, and where their schools served as places of support and where they as Black girls remained in the margins. The examples in the chapter of girls doing research by interviewing students of color at local independent schools, facilitating meetings with school administrators about school protocols, and engaging in reflective and iterative decision-making demonstrates that an important part of agency and activism is Black girls being able to see themselves in the work that they do.
Lastly, this chapter shows that the BGCL component of *agency and activism*, similar to the other BGCL components, is not the sole work of the girls themselves. Thoughtful, genuine, and reflective adult allies are central to promoting Black girls’ development in how to effectively and productively engage in changework where they will see the results that they want. In the context of schools, adults typically possess amounts of power and access to knowledge about school policies and procedures of which young people may not be familiar or aware. The role of adult allies is to provide “scaffolding” (Brown, 2016, p. 161) to young people’s activism so that the required conditions exist for girls to do the activism work they want in order to create school-level and broader change.

The role of the BGCL component of *agency and activism* in the lives of Black girls in independent schools functions as an outlet for Black girls to move towards a form of praxis (Brown, 2013; Freire, 1970) in the midst of their *developing critical consciousness* about their status in their schools and in the world as Black girls, and their *emotional* experiences of being the “outsiders within” (Collins, 1986).
CHAPTER 8: THE INTEGRATED THEORY OF BLACK GIRL CRITICAL LITERACIES

A fundamental aspect of the Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL) model is the way in which the components of school culture, a developing critical consciousness, emotional literacy, and agency and activism are integrated to display how Black girls in independent schools embody and enact these competencies as a part of their everyday school lives (Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1. Preliminary Theory of Black Girl Critical Literacies in Independent Schools

The findings of this chapter primarily represent the integration of the emotional literacy, a developing critical consciousness, and agency and activism components within the particular context of the Grace and GCP schools. The findings in this chapter are organized in a somewhat progressive manner, first exploring the emotional aspects of developing a critical consciousness, and then exploring how everyday acts of resistance
exemplify critical consciousness. The following two findings, that analyze the roots of activism and the emotional components of agency and activism, represent a progression in terms of the intensity and commitment of the girls towards creating meaningful change. Lastly, I present the finding that illustrates how I as the researcher influenced the study participants’ developing critical consciousness by situating the Black Girl Project as an intervention.

Section 1: The Emotional Landscape of a Developing Critical Consciousness

The study participants described a spectrum of emotions that they experienced as they came to understand how their racial, gendered, and classed identities influence their interactions with others and how others perceive them in their independent school contexts. The main sub-themes from the data were fears attached to perceptions of being Black and female, growing frustrations that emerged as participants’ critical consciousness developed, and the tensions that arose from feeling grateful for the opportunities that attending an independent school provided them, yet knowing that their schools were not a place where they felt that they completely belonged.

Fears Attached to Perceptions of Being Black and Female

In this sub-theme, the girls described how their choices to engage or not engage in different interactions and behaviors are influenced by their awareness of what it means to be Black and female, particularly in their independent school context. The study participants’ fears mainly stemmed from their concerns that they would be perceived as or treated like they were the embodiments of negative stereotypes associated with Black
girls and women, such as being overly aggressive, hypersexual, not smart, and always angry (Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017; Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016). As one example of the connection between a developing critical consciousness and this fear, Tanya, a 12th grader and a lifer at Grace, described in her interview how she copes with the fear/insecurities that she experiences.

Yeah, it’s a lot of – that is trouble, it is trouble. And I have a lot of friends going there, I just like – it was like close to home, I just want to like different, I want to like meet new people and stuff, but I’m not I think good at meeting people. People say I have like this – I intimidate people, and I was like – “it’s like the way you look”, I just think – I have no, that’s my face– …Like I can’t change it. Like, it’s not my fault– because that’s-- and I know that is like – that is like my mechanism for like, feeling insecure, like in – for my insecurities, I guess. Like in like large crowds, I feel like insecure. Like I don’t know, I just feel like people are just like looking at me and judging me, and I just don’t like – like that. So “my mean face” it’s just, like a way to show like, that I don’t care like to people, but I do. And then on the outside I show I don’t care, and like I, look mean and like – but I do care…so yeah.

Tanya also talked about how when she’s in class she hates doing class presentations because they make her nervous and how she hates speaking in front of her classmates because she is afraid that she will not sound smart or that the class is thinking certain things about her because of what she looks like.

Tanya’s assessment of her behaviors connects to the sub-theme of fear in relation to outside perceptions of Black females because what she describes is her well-developed response to how people respond to her, which is by using adjectives such as “intimidating” to describe her. While Tanya did not specifically elaborate on the fact that people were interacting with her in a particular way because she was a Black female, the fact that the stereotypes of the “angry” or “aggressive” in association with Black women
and girls is so pervasive in our society, it is logical that Tanya has developed a defense mechanism in response to others’ assumptions about Black girls.

Similarly, in explanation of her identity map, Patricia, a 9th grader and at lifer at Grace also talked about her fears based on how people stereotype Black girls, “I feel like people’s perception of me is what I care about the most, and when people look at me in today’s times, that is what they see. I fear that instead of seeing me for who I truly am, someone will judge me based on incorrect stereotypes that are ingrained in them. As much as people deny stereotyping, humans really cannot change the way they think.”

Growing Awareness, Growing Frustrations

This sub-theme describes how the study participants displayed and reflected on their increasing feelings of frustration in relation to their developing awareness of being Black girls in their schools and in the U.S. One aspect of this sub-theme explores how a lack of awareness of peers and teachers about Black girls’ experiences serves as a source of frustration for the study participants. The girls at both schools described how their classmates live in a “bubble” where they have the privilege of not being concerned with issues of racism and discrimination. During a discussion at GCP, the study participants shared their perspectives:

Adrienne: Wait. I wish you’d talk with your friends about racism and discrimination against black people. Hashtag all we talk about. It's sad. We shouldn't have to talk about it all the time. That shouldn't be the only thing we talk about. Yes, we talk about other stuff. Silly stuff, but it's majority this. Because this is our every day and the fact that we have to deal with it here, where I spend exactly 12 hours out of a 24-hour day.

Charlotte: Does that stress you out? Talking about these issues all the time?
Melanie: I feel like it didn't. And, then it did. Now, it's kind of plateaued. I'm just sort of like, “Yeah.”

Lauren: What?

Melanie: How we talk about racism all the time, every day.

Lauren: Yeah. I kind of get tired. I'm at the point where I'm like… "Okay."

Adrienne: Here we go, again.

Lauren: Here you go, again. Obviously, it's not clicking, but something still needs to be done. It's just frustrating.

Related to this conversation, the study participants often talked about how they see that one of the reasons that the “bubble” continues is because their schools are not invested in having authentic discussions and initiatives that would lead to a deeper inquiry of issues related to inequality and discrimination. The girls talked about sitting in school assemblies and discussion forums focused on issues of race and equity that lacked any follow up conversations or activities, about bringing suggestions to school administrators for events or initiatives, only to be told that they could set up a meeting to talk about it later. Additionally, the study participants described ways in which “the bubble” seems to extend to the faculty as well, with faculty members not taking the time to process assemblies and talks, and some faculty members using problematic language such as “ghetto” to describe low-income areas and underresourced schools.

Another aspect of this sub-theme highlights the study participants’ reactions to feelings of prolonged frustration, which often took the form of resignation and exhaustion. As a part of this sub-theme, the girls described how experiencing and responding to microaggressions, invasive questions, or dismissal of their ideas on a
regular basis without any signs of positive change from their peers and teachers made them want to give up. In her interview, Lauren, an 11th grader at GCP, describes the situation in this way:

**Charlotte:** And I think it’s hard too. I mean, just hearing you talk and the girls who are explaining the stuff over and over again, and they are passionate about it; I mean I see how that could also just like be--

**Lauren:** Yeah, it gets frustrating and while you almost see change--

**Charlotte:** Yeah, and like it wears on you.

**Lauren:** Exactly like I feel like by this time – like by this point it’s like almost like “What’s the point?” because we keep trying, and it’s like obviously something’s not getting through. So like, almost in my opinion, I feel as if it’s like we’re going to try to keep like – “educating” you on certain things, but if you’re not going to get it, like at this point I’m like fine, that’s your own problem because it’s not like I have a problem with you, you’re the one that has a problem with it…But in my opinion it’s like, “All right fine, if you don’t want to learn then – when you said something ignorant and somebody who doesn’t want to teach you retaliates on it, that’s your own problem because we tried to say something and you didn’t want to listen.” So [laughs] – pretty much like in – not everybody is going to be as nice, so yeah. I mean unless you want to stay in your own little White bubble for the rest of your life and not spread yourselves to the rest of the world, then have fun, but – yeah.

Similar to Lauren’s description, other study participants described “making peace” with and “becoming accustomed to this type of stuff,” demonstrating a fatigue at having to constantly be in the role of advocates for themselves and educators of others with no results. As a part of their frustration, the girls also talked about their active disengagement with certain people or in particular situations where they simply got “fed up” or were “over it.”

Lauren and the other study participants’ coping responses of being “over it” or “fed up” to the daily microaggressions and discrimination that they experienced from
interactions with their peers and their teachers are consistent with the behaviors of those who have symptoms of “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2011). Racial battle fatigue, a psychophysiological condition, occurs as a result of the stress that people of color experience when having to encounter daily racist and discriminatory behaviors of others (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2011). Though the symptoms of racial battle fatigue vary, the symptoms most closely connected to what the study participants described were “difficulty thinking or speaking coherently, and emotional and social withdrawal in response to racial microaggressions or while in environments of mundane racial stressors” (p. 301). The participants’ statements that they had made peace with the hurtful or frustrating situations, or had become accustomed to always having to take on the role of fighting for themselves, represents a psychological distancing from their experiences as a way to further protect themselves. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano point out that one of the dangers of adopting this sort of attitude is that it could lead to people of color “losing confidence in themselves, questioning their life’s work or even their life’s worth” (p. 301). Therefore, it is important that we pay attention to how Black girls describe their reactions and/or plans of action in responding to negative encounters of race, gender, and class, with an ear towards listening for signs of fatigue and the suppression of their emotions so that Black girls’ psychological and emotional well-being are positively supported.

**Emerging Tensions in Feeling Grateful for the Opportunities**

Another sub-theme that emerged from the data illustrating how school culture interacts with the participants’ developing critical consciousness and their emotional
literacy is the tension that the girls expressed between recognizing their “outsider within” status in their school communities while also feeling grateful for being at their schools. At the end of each of my interviews with the girls, I asked them “Is there anything else that you want me to know about being a Black girl at your school?” Overwhelmingly, their responses first started with a reassurance that their overall experience “wasn’t all bad” and that they were thankful for many of the things that their schools had provided. As a part of this theme, at the same time that girls talked about enjoying having the opportunity to travel to places such as Italy and Ireland on school trips, they also lamented how much those trips cost, and the stress that is a part of making sure that they receive enough financial support from the school so that their families are not too overburdened with the cost of the trip. Their feelings of gratitude also extended to instances where they felt their school was particularly supportive of them. The support the girls described connected to finances, such as the sizeable financial aid they received for school tuition, particularly those who had been lifers at the school, and also to academic support, such as ongoing one-on-one meetings with teachers at times when they struggled academically after the transitions from their neighborhood school to their current schools, or when missing a fair amount of school due to sports injuries.

In addition to their feelings of gratefulness, however, the girls displayed their developing critical consciousness in the ways that they continued to critique particular school policies and practices. In her interview Candace, a 12th grader, reflects on how though Grace School is a good place for academics, it is still a hard place to be as a Black girl:
Um, in general, Grace uh, Grace School is pretty good like education wise. They have really smart teachers, as long as you want to learn and you put an effort then they’re going to get – they’re going to give you the best education they can. Um, it can be a little hard, basically you just go, you learn, and then you just go and do whatever, yeah. But, um, as a Black girl, uh, the environment is…I don’t want to say hostile, it’s just like neutral, it’s neutral for like a lot of communities that’s—they try to be welcoming, but like they don’t make, um, like, they don’t make huge gestures, they just say that Grace School is welcoming, and like they try their best not to offend anybody. But like as long as it doesn’t make people who are more conservative mad too, if that makes sense; they don’t – they yeah, they try to stay in the middle I guess.

Candace points out that even though one can receive a good education at Grace School by putting in the effort to learn, the school’s position of staying “in the middle” when it comes to making the school environment welcoming is a problem. To Candace, “staying in the middle” rather than making “huge gestures” creates a situation where Black girls do not feel completely welcomed at school.

Andrea’s (a 12th grader at GCP) remarks at the closing of her community assembly speech also illustrate the juxtaposition of gratefulness and critique:

This is why I’m so grateful I go to GCP: throughout my high school career, GCP has given me so many opportunities to explore myself within a racial context. Without GCP’s resources, I would never be the confident young woman you see standing in front of you. Not only that, but GCP’s diversity consciousness has affected my high school career in so many ways. Being a part of such a huge group of leaders, and I’m referring to my class of 2015, has made me view the world in such a different way. Even though I am blessed to attend such an amazing school, I believe that we still have work to do here.

Similar to Candace, Andrea is able to point to the aspects of her time at GCP where she feels that the school supported her own personal growth in terms of her racial identity and her confidence in her own abilities, but at the same time, Andrea also reminds her audience of the fact that the school still has work to do.
The tensions that the study participants describe between their feelings of gratefulness and their recognition that they still feel apart from the school community demonstrates their developing awareness of how systems of power and opportunity function within U.S. society. A Black girl who did not have a developed critical consciousness would simply be grateful for the opportunity to be a student at her elite predominantly White school because of the access it would give her to a world of power and privilege. The presence of a developing critical consciousness, for Black girls, however, creates a situation of a growing understanding of how their status as Black girls intersects with their position as students who attend elite schools.

Section 2: Everyday Acts of Resistance: Demonstrating Agency Through Action

This theme focuses on how Black girls enact the relationship between the BGCL components of the development of critical consciousness and agency and activism by engaging in daily acts of resistance. In line with the integrated BGCL model, the study participants’ resistance stemmed from their growing awareness of their status as Black girls and also how society operates through larger power structures and relationships that discriminate against and oppress others. Throughout their weekly group discussions and interviews, the forms of resistance that the girls described fell into two categories—times when the girls displayed or described overt resistance, and situations in which they engaged in covert resistance.
Overt Resistance

The girls’ overt resistance was characterized by moments in which they acted in the moment when they experienced or perceived that a situation was discriminatory towards them or their friends. This took the form of correcting people repeatedly who either called them by the wrong name or continuously mispronounced their names, confronting teachers who misread their questioning of a situation as aggression, and having “no patience” for “people who try to make other people look stupid.” In the interview excerpt below, Bethany, a 10th grader at Grace, describes her approach to and reasons for pushing back against insensitive comments that her White peers make:

**Bethany:** And just like, you people [referring to White students at Grace] are stuck in such a bubble to see that like everything is not pretty outside the White race you know? And I think that’s something that a lot of people here don’t really get, so they say a lot of things that um support what they think they know even though they don’t really like usually know what they’re talking about.

**Charlotte:** [laughs] So what do you do – what are you feeling in those situations, like when the students make comments or–?

**Bethany:** Uh, most times I say something. Because, I mean I’m not afraid of these White kids, I’m – I say whatever I want to say, and I know it makes them uncomfortable because I can see that. But uh, I mean, I really don’t care. I feel like if you’re saying something that’s ignorant or untrue, I mean I feel like someone should tell you, or else you’re just going to keep going around and saying it. And I feel like I’ve done that a lot here, because um, I feel like people just think they know so much and I’m just like, “You never been to [name of the city], you’ve never been outside of [name of the suburb], so like, how could you talk about like, one race, or like poverty, or like anything you don’t know about?” So I try to give people an informed perspective.

Bethany’s description of how she aims to provide an “informed perspective” to her White peers who say or believe “ignorant” or “untrue” things demonstrates her developing critical consciousness both about her own perspective of the world and the relative
undeveloped critical consciousness of her classmates. Similar to what other girls in the study shared, Bethany feels a particular responsibility to correct her peers’ thinking with the goal of promoting their own awareness beyond what they have learned from living in a privileged bubble.

**Covert Resistance**

The covert resistance strategies that the study participants described predominantly took the form of showing different levels of disengagement when they found themselves in an experience or situation that they found frustrating or unjust. On an interpersonal level, the girls disengaged by “tuning people out,” often after experiencing fatigue from having engaged repeatedly in similar situations without any indication of change or a growing awareness on the part of their White peers and teachers. On a structural level, in response to their feelings that they were constantly being hounded by the development office to give donations to the school on top of the tuition that their families were paying, they told their parents and grandparents not to donate to the school. The girls’ resistance to having their families make donations to the school stemmed from the fact that they realized that for most of their families, paying for them to attend GCP was a financial burden, regardless of whether they were full-paying students or students receiving financial assistance. In one of our discussions the girls described how in addition to tuition, families were expected to pay for school uniforms, sports team uniforms and equipment, and other school life activities such as class trips. To many of the girls, asking their families to make a donation to the school in addition to
other existing expenses reflected a lack of awareness on the schools’ part about the financial constraints of some of their students.

Another way that some of the study participants engaged in covert resistance was through their role as tour guides for potential students. When giving tours for their school, the participants described how they were open and honest to applicants about their experiences at their school. In the excerpt below, Melanie, an 11th grader at GCP, explains how she received pushback from school administrators when they found out she was “telling the truth” when acting as a tour guide:

Yeah, I had to quit around the end of last year. I just stopped responding to their emails and stuff, because I was touring a girl...I was giving a tour to her and her family and she said, she was like, ‘Okay, like, what actually happens under the surface? Like, how are things here? How is making friends?’

And so, I said, like, ‘Honestly, like, looking at you and from knowing your background and the sports that you do, like, I don't think you'll have any trouble making friends. I think you'll be fine. I think you're outgoing enough and you're an extrovert to be able to make them easily and you're really open to that.’

And, she's like, ‘What do you mean, like, I won't have any trouble?’ I was like, ‘I mean, it's like any other school. Not everyone's going to be perfectly comfortable all the time.’

And, apparently, her parents relayed that information somehow to admissions. The part where I said ‘not everyone is comfortable all the time’. And, they called me in and they were like, ‘We really want to let you know, we really want to put our best selves out there. This isn't something you should be--’

Of course, I defended myself and was like, "I just wanted to make sure she was as comfortable as possible." And, they-- they basically said, like, ‘That's something for them to discover once they get to the school.’ As in, ‘Lie to them, until they get here.’ So….

Melanie’s assessment of the situation illustrates her growing critical consciousness in terms of her being able to identify what GCP values and which types of students are the mostly like to fit comfortably into the GCP environment. Melanie’s actions reflect both
overt and covert resistance in that she presented an honest picture of life at GCP, and then when the GCP administration asked her to change her responses, she disengaged by quitting.

Section 3: The Roots of Activism: Critical Consciousness

Following the structure of the BGCL model, the components of *a developing critical consciousness* and *agency and activism* have a reciprocal and integrated relationship with one another, so that each is enhanced by the presence of the other in Black girls’ lives. In contrast to the discussion of the integration of the critical consciousness and agency and activism components in the previous section, which focused on the everyday acts of resistance that the participants engage in, this analysis focuses on how a growing critical consciousness serves as a foundation for larger acts of activism. This section will explore two emergent sub-themes that explore how critical consciousness serves as a catalyst for Black girls’ activism work and also the spaces that work to support both critical consciousness development and youth activism.

Seeing Themselves in the Work

A point that stands out in the majority of the activism work that the girls displayed throughout this project was that the work was deeply connected to their own identities and experiences as Black girls. Some of these examples were how Andrea and the SDLC presenters focused on their status as Black girls in independent schools, and how the girls at Grace took stock of both their own and the general experiences of Black students at their school, or how Kendra explored the status of Black girls and women in
the U.S. in her assembly speech. What all of these cases have in common is that at the roots of their activism was an acute awareness that the experiences that they were having were somehow tied to their identities as Black girls who exist in the predominantly White elite environment of their school as well as a U.S. society that is dominated by patriarchal and racist ideologies.

Andrea’s assembly speech as a whole serves as an example of how her developing critical consciousness tied to her own experiences led to her engaging in the activism of creating a public speech. Andrea displays her developing critical consciousness in the way that she contextualizes her observations of and experiences with how Black people are treated differently than White people in the U.S., and uses her own experience as a Black girl in an elite predominantly White all-girls school to localize the experience. When Andrea describes the microaggressions that she, her peers, and other Black students in independent schools have experienced, she traces those encounters to the larger societal beliefs and stereotypes that exist about Black people. Andrea’s ability to link microaggressions and discriminatory policies to a legacy of racism and classism exemplifies critical consciousness:

It’s human nature to put people into categories; however, in an all-white school, when there are so few black students, the tendency for the majority is to expect that those few of us represent all of our kind. For common example is history class: many of the students I interviewed for this assembly felt awkward when discussing anything about black history because the students and even sometimes the teachers would look at them for the ‘black perspective’: but the reality is that there is not just one black perspective. Another example inappropriately grouping black students together is when other people confuse the names of black students. I mean c’mon guys, do I really look like [name of a Black girl at GCP]? Or [name of a Black girl at GCP]? How about [name of a Black girl at GCP]? But in all seriousness, sometimes it perplexes me that a teacher always seems to get me and the other black girl in the class confused when there are 5 blond white girls in the
classroom whose names the teacher never questions. This just reiterates the fact that people who are a part of the majority seem to inappropriately group black students as just a group thereby failing to recognize their individuality.

In their ongoing work with Black girls committed to social justice, both Evans-Winters & GGE (2017) and Brown (2009; 2013) highlight the importance of Black girls having control over their activism work. Historically, activism work focusing on girls has largely left Black girls out of the picture, where the stories and experiences of Black girls have been absent or minimized and folded into a larger whitewashed version of “girl power,” (Brown, 2016). In a world where Black girls’ actions are under constant surveillance in schools and in their communities (Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017; African American Policy Forum, 2015; Morris 2016), and where their bodies are viewed as “dangerous” and therefore need to be controlled by others (Brown, 2009; Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017), it is important that Black girls are able to fully participate in their own liberation work. This means starting the work from a place where Black girls are encouraged to engage in a form of praxis (Friere, 1970) by examining their own experiences and then critically reflecting on them with the goal of moving to action, and hopefully transformation.

Sources of Critical Consciousness Development Leading to Activism

As scholar and girls’ activist Lyn Mikel Brown points out in her book Powered By Girl: A Field Guide to working with Youth Activists (2016), youth activism does not happen in isolation. In order for young people to be moved to engage in action that leads to constructive and productive change, they must first become aware of what the issue is, and then second, learn about effective ways in which to engage in action (Brown, 2016).
The examples of Black girls’ agency and activism presented throughout this chapter all stem from consciousness-raising work and spaces of which the girls were a part.

The discussion group spaces at both Grace and GCP served as a place where the girls were encouraged to ask questions, trust their observations, and offer suggestions related to their schooling experience. Following the principles of critical pedagogy, the girls engaged in “problem-posing education” (Freire, 1970, p. 79, 80), where they took on the role of knowledge-producers by actively engaging in dialogues with themselves and with their adult allies about relationships of power, dominance, and privilege in their school lives. For the girls, their sources of critical consciousness development not only took the form of the structure and approach of the discussion sessions, but also videos the girls watched where they saw other Black girls engaged in activism, the online campaigns of #ITooAmHarvard and The Faces of Private Schools Tumbl they looked through, as well as the advice and guidance they received from adult allies.

Outside conferences and forums also provided a foundation from which the girls could begin to contextualize their experiences within the broader landscape of systems, institutions, and ideologies. Melanie’s, Adrienne’s, Nicole’s, and Lauren’s attendance to the SDLC served as a site of critical consciousness development in that for 3 days they had the opportunity to be in community with 1,500 high school students, and a faculty of 50 college students, teachers, and practitioners who were all interested in having dialogues about issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in independent schools and in U.S. society. When they participated in the discussions and exercises at SDLC, the girls learned new terminology and activist strategies. As an example, when describing their
experiences at SDLC, the girls included an image of the SDLC attendees using the well-known “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” position that was used as form of protest following the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. This image illustrates the opportunities the girls were given to learn about and engage in forms of unified protest during the conference (Figure 8.2).

![Image of SDLC attendees in protest pose]

Figure 8.2, GCP SDLC Presentation, “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot”

Similarly, much of the focus and content of Kendra’s assembly speech on #BlackGirlsMatter was inspired by her experience at the Breaking Silence Summer Camp, an activism, arts, and healing camp sponsored by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF, http://www.aapf.org/). Co-founded by legal scholar and intersectionality activist Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, the AAPF is “an innovative think tank that connects academics, activists and policy-makers to promote efforts to dismantle structural inequality” (AAPF website, 2016). The current work of AAPF focuses on using a lens of “intersectional social justice” to interrogate the status of girls and women of color in the U.S. In particular, AAPF is leading three different social justice campaigns, #SayHerName, #BlackGirlsMatter, and #WhyWeCantWait, movements that focus on
how women and girls of color have been victims of police brutality, how education systems have failed girls of color, and why it is imperative that we focus on the experiences of girls and women of color in the U.S. through the lenses of different institutional systems.

The awareness of the status of Black girls and women that Kendra displayed throughout her speech can be traced to the influence of scholars, activists, and media mentioned throughout her speech. Kendra drew on the work of scholars such as Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and activists such as the founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and Assata Shakur to defend and support the points she made. Her access to reports written by the AAPF and her decision to follow the hashtags of the different campaigns provided Kendra with a particular perspective and a knowledge of statistics regarding the status of Black women and girls in the U.S.

**Section 4: The Emotional Components of Agency and Activism**

The integrated aspect of the BGCL model illustrates how emotional literacy is a necessary part of Black girls demonstrating their agency and leading or participating in activist work. As countless scholars and activists point out, activism work is personal and political—creating a context in which emotions are a necessary part of what drives and inspires people to question, push back, and fight for what they think is right (Brown & Pickerell, 2009; Brown, 2016; Taft, 2011; Evans-Winters & GGE, 2017). This section focuses on the central emotions and emotion work that emerged as the girls had
discussions, developed plans, and gave presentations in service of making their school environments more inclusive of the needs of Black girls.

**Feelings of Frustration, Anger, and Pain**

One of the central reasons that many girls joined the Black Girl Project and participated in other activism work that would highlight their experiences was their frustration at having endured many painful experiences of being ignored, questioned, or silenced as a result of their being Black and female at their schools. Nicole, a 10th grader at GCP, explained her reasons for joining the Black Girl Project in this way:

> I chose to be a part of the black girl project because I feel like I needed an outlet like this one to let out my frustrations as well as share my aspirations as to what our school should become in regard to acceptance of minorities. I think that this project is so important because we could actually change aspects of our school instead of just talking about it. In addition to that I feel like the voices in this project deserve to be heard because I think we deserve an end (or progress toward the end) to the issues we face as minorities at GCP.

In several of our discussions, the girls at GCP in particular shared stories of times when they had tried to raise the awareness of their faculty and peers by making suggestions for topics for community meetings or events, calling for the creation of certain courses (African American history course and Native American history course), and reporting of problematic incidents that happened on campus, only to be ignored or brushed off by the faculty and administration. Below, Adrienne describes such a situation:

> Flat out furious...After that first meeting with [Name of a school administrator], I’m like, “Ok, here's the problem. We don’t see ourselves in the curriculum. We don’t see ourselves as being important in the school environment.” She [the school administrator] was like, “Well, okay. Email it to me and we’ll get back to it.” And then like, we had to email her. This is months later as we’re trying to get a time to talk to her, because she’s so busy. And we had a second meeting and she’s like, “Well, uh, that’s nice, but I want to focus on this.” And took the focus
away from diversity and actually said, “You know what I really think we need? I really think we need a white, um, affinity group.” Yeah. We all sat there and we were like…

In Adrienne’s case, much like many of the girls at both Grace and GCP, their feelings of frustration also gave way to anger, and many of the girls saw and welcomed the discussion space as a place to “vent” and experience feelings of validation for their emotions. In her wrap-up questionnaire about her experience in the group, Melanie, an 11th grader at GCP commented: “I got less angry as the meetings continued because everyone was as angry as I was so the anger level sort of plateaued out among the group.”

**Feelings of Skepticism and Fear**

As documented in Chapter 7, “Elements of Black Girl Critical Literacies--Agency & Activism”, the girls’ success with their calls for change in their school environment was mixed, with progress being thwarted by school protocols, unavailable or uninterested adult and peer allies, and lack of follow through. It makes sense, then, that throughout our work together the girls often reserved a fair amount of skepticism about whether change was really possible. The emotion of fear seemed to be in close relation with skepticism, as the fears the girls expressed around their activism work often related to the idea of whether people in their school community would support their efforts.

At Grace School, the skepticism of the girls about the success of forming a Black Student Union seemed to stem from two different sources. One was from the past experiences that some of the girls had with a former multicultural student organization that existed at their school a few years prior, but ultimately dissolved because of strong divides in the Black community along lines of socioeconomic status. The second source
seemed to speak to a larger fear the girls had that their non-Black peers would not take them or their work seriously. Below is an excerpt from a discussion where the girls at Grace are discussing how to move plans forward with the BSU:

**Alexis:** Yeah, just to bring the idea to the table so the school doesn’t see it as a joke. If they saw someone coming up there like, “Yeah, this what we about to do.” Or something like that, but if it’s someone who’s like, “Yeah! We're going to start this joint up.” That’s not going to be that.

**Jennifer:** It’s just another Black club. They’re not going to take it seriously.

**Alexis:** Yeah. So, if we have people that want to present. I’m not saying we have to go full out, but even if when we present it, other persons wearing a dress and pants and attire or something. Because every, single time someone is doing something like that they’re always carrying themselves well and stuff like that. So, even that little aspect of it.

This excerpt is just one example of several times where the girls’ commitment to activism work was overshadowed by their fears of whether their concerns and ideas would be seen as legitimate outside of the group discussion that happened each week. From a psychological perspective, the girls were experiencing what psychologist and scholar Claude Steele (2010) terms “stereotype threat.” Steele describes stereotype threat as “whenever we’re in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our own identities could be applied to us…we know it. We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly” (p. 5). The Black girls’ extreme minority status in their predominantly White school creates a situation in which their awareness of their race and gender identities are consistently heightened. This hyperawareness causes them to have feelings of doubt and fear about their capabilities, and in the case of the example above,
fears about being taken seriously then manifest themselves in the girls strategizing about how they will present their ideas and what clothes they will wear so that their peers will support their efforts.

Another aspect of fear connected to their activism work was the girls’ fear that their work would make others feel uncomfortable. This trend speaks to different situations in which the girls wavered around engaging in different forms of activism because they were afraid of offending or making others uncomfortable. This fear appeared throughout the conversations that the girls at Grace had as they continued to make plans for developing the Black Student Union. The statement below from Ariel, a 12th grader, captures these sentiments:

I think a lot of people try to be politically correct when they speak in this school. And a lot of people are afraid to dig into certain issues because of fear of backlash, fear of fitful reactions, but I think we shouldn’t be afraid of fitful reactions. I feel like if we try to keep everything on the hush hush so everything is cordial, it’s just unnecessary, I think. In order to solve the problems, we have to dig into them.

Ariel’s points acknowledge the discomfort and fear involved in doing work where they will be discussing and bringing issues to light that are not normally talked about or addressed. This fear stems from the “fitful reactions” or pushback they may receive from their peers, teachers, and administrators as Black girls who are going beyond being “cordial” to talk about what they see as serious issues in the school.

Feelings of Confidence

Another emotion that the girls prevalently displayed as they participated in activist work was a sense of confidence. In the different examples of the girls’ activism
described above, experiencing confidence, and the related emotions of pride, admiration, and empowerment, led the girls in the study to boldly and proudly affirm their experiences, their identities as Black females, and to confidently articulate what they need and expect from their schools in order to feel supported, valued, and seen. This performance is displayed through the actions of the girls themselves and through their observations of what other Black girls and women are doing that demonstrate or reflect similar emotions.

For example, the confidence that Kendra displayed throughout her speech was evident from the introduction. As an opening exercise, Kendra asked the audience to raise their hands if they have heard of the names of various people of color who have been murdered by the police. She began with the names of Black boys and men such as Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and then proceeded to women of color such as Shelly Frey and Kayla Moore. Kendra’s point with this introductory exercise is that most often people have heard of the Black men who have been murdered by the police, but not Black women and other women of color. Kendra’s confidence lies in the expectation that her audience will be engaged and will participate when she asks them to do so. It took confidence for Kendra to overcome feelings of invisibility or dismissal from her peers to stand before them and put herself in the position to command the audience—the same people who had been responsible for her prior feelings of powerlessness. Kendra borrowed this exercise from Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who used the exercise as part of one of the workshops at the Breaking the Silence Summer Camp. As an attendee at the
camp, Kendra experienced the confidence with which Professor Crenshaw commanded the room, and was able to emulate that affect.

The emotion of confidence was also present in the way both Kendra and Andrea used rhetorical questions when presenting to their audiences. By intentionally speaking to, questioning, and at times calling out their audiences, Kendra and Andrea showed confidence in that they were not afraid of speaking truths and risking people in the audience feeling discomfort in order to move towards their larger goals of awareness and action.

Lastly, both Andrea and the presenters of the SDLC presentation demonstrate confidence through discussing challenging and often uncomfortable topics like racism, sexism, and microaggressions, particularly how they occur within their own school community. Andrea’s remarks and the “A Day in the Life” slide (Figure 7.3) serves as a call out or “naming it” (Ward, 2007) of sorts by listing the different comments, remarks, and actions that members of their school community have made towards them as Black girls at GCP. It takes a considerable amount of confidence for the girls to share their experiences, knowing that doing so could make members of their school community defensive or angry. Additionally, Andrea and the SDLC presenters display confidence in the ways that they instruct the audience to reflect on their individual thoughts and actions, and then push the community to write down ideas to become part of a collective action to bring about positive change in the community.

The emotion of confidence of these presentations also extends to the fact that the girls feel that they have the power to illuminate some problematic occurrences that are
happening both at the national level and within their own school, and then also direct their audience about how to begin the process for finding solutions to the problems.

In their article focusing on the intersections of emotions and activism, Brown and Pickerill (2009) argue for the importance of having *emotional reflexivity* and *emotional sustainability* as consistent parts of activism work. Similar to the components of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995), *emotional reflexivity* is described as being continuously aware of emotions in general, to recognize the emotions of yourself and others, and to manage one’s emotions skillfully. *Emotional sustainability* refers to the intentional processing of one’s emotions with the goal of being able to continue to engage in activist work amidst one’s personal emotional landscape. In this sub-section focusing on the girls’ emotions related to their activism work, the girls displayed both of the elements of emotional reflexivity and emotional sustainability in the way that they reflected on their own emotions throughout their experiences, and how they often took note of the emotions of others. The processing of their emotions of anger and frustration through “venting” then cleared the space for them to focus on moving forward with their work.

Additionally, the girls’ group space provided a space where the girls could continue to form a collective identity around their work (Jasper, 1998). Melanie’s comment that she felt that her own emotions of anger were reflected back to her by other girls in the group functions as a source of collective group identity through their common emotions of anger and frustration.
Section 5: The Role of the Researcher and the Black Girl Project in Influencing the Developing Critical Consciousness of Black Girls

From a research and developmental perspective, the Black Girl Project worked as an intervention that served to promote the critical consciousness development of Black girls who attend independent schools. As a researcher, I approached the project with the understanding that the girls brought a particular knowledge of their own lived experiences to the table. I also went into the project with the understanding that as a Black woman with my own social location and educational experiences, I would be able to offer a broader perspective about Black girlhood to the Black girls who were a part of this study. As an intervention, the Black Girl Project was comprised of two main elements that worked to promote the participants’ awareness of race, gender, and class: the activities that I brought in for the girls to do as a part of the weekly meetings, and the discussions that emerged during the girls’ group meetings and their one-on-one interviews with me as the researcher.

Introductory and Wrap up Questionnaires

The introductory and wrap up questionnaires served the purpose of increasing the study participants’ awareness of issues related to race, gender, and class by asking them to reflect on the everyday aspects of their lives that often fade into the background (See Appendices A and B for the questionnaire protocols). The questionnaires asked the girls to reflect on the racial composition of their neighborhoods, how they thought race, class, and gender may affect the number of opportunities they would have access to related to their future careers, and how often they talked with their friends and family about issues
connected to race, gender, and class. While the girls’ responses on the questionnaires were important in indicating their relative level of critical consciousness and comfort with talking about race, gender, and class, equally important were the conversations that naturally emerged as the girls completed the questionnaires. As the girls completed the questionnaires, they debated about the racial breakdown of students in their schools, and about different factors contributing to racial identity such as how people define themselves versus how they are typically defined by others, and the lack of Black teachers in their school. Some of the girls seemed genuinely surprised by the cumulative effect of their responses on their survey, particularly in relation to how isolated from the Black community some of them were who lived in predominantly White neighborhoods, couple with their daily lives in a school with a predominantly White population of teachers and students. In alignment with the developing critical consciousness BGCL component, the questionnaires influenced the developing critical consciousness of the study participants by bringing their attention to how race, gender, and class influence the interactions that they have and how they understand the worlds in which they live.

Identity Mapping

The identity maps served as one of the introductory activities in the girls’ discussion groups. As a part of the identity map activity, I instructed the girls to create some sort of visual that would depict the different aspects of their identity. When debriefing the activity, the girls first journaled about their identity maps-- What identities stand out to them? Why? What identities did not stand out to them? Why? What makes some identities stand out more than others? As the girls went around and shared their
maps and summary explanations, the reflection part of the activity happened organically. After a couple of girls shared, the girls began relating their own experiences to what others in the group had shared. They began to tell stories that framed the experiences that happened while at school, how they navigated between their school and their home communities, and how they negotiated the different social perceptions that students (both Black and White) have of them.

One element of the identity mapping activity that supported the girls’ critical consciousness development was how the map sharing served as a way for Black girls to communicate to each other about their experiences, and thereby influence each other’s awareness of how they recognized, understood, and processed encounters of race, class, and gender. For example, in Patricia’s identity map explanation, she highlights how the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri influenced her awareness of what it means to be Black, particularly in relation to the way that non-Black people may view her:

I agree with what everyone else is saying, but like recently, the whole Mike Brown thing and all that stuff so, like, I’m starting to think more about how I’m perceived by other people, maybe. So, like, I always knew that I was Black or whatever, but when I came to Grace, but I always I felt like I blended in, but in some situations I felt like I didn’t. Um, so like now, I’m starting to think about ... starting to reevaluate everything I always thought kind of. Like, maybe everyone always did look at me a lot differently than I thought they did. So I was kind of worried about that. And even now ... like we’re all from different places, and we all can like, realize that and acknowledge it, but like ... We need to be together in the end. You know what I mean, because at that we’re all Black.

Patricia, a 9th grader, was a lifer at Grace school and had grown up in a predominantly White neighborhood. In Patricia’s sharing of her identity map, she is not only reflecting
on her own growth in her awareness of race relations and definitions of identity, but her thoughts also could potentially serve as a point of critical consciousness development for the other girls in the group by reminding them of how they need to stick together, because even if they are coming from different places, they are still being looked at in the same way by others.

Another element of the activity was how identity mapping served to heighten the girls’ sense of self-definition. Similar to Patricia’s comments above, a particular tension that emerged concerning self-definition was how the girls were choosing to define themselves through their identity maps versus how they thought others saw them. Tanya, a 12th grader and lifer at Grace School, describes the tension this way:

So my identities that I think about most is being Black and my attitude. Well, being Black, it’s like … I feel like, being a Black person you’re in a different world, like, than White people or any other race, ‘cause the way people see you and the way you want to be seen is, like, two totally different things… ‘Cause you don’t … I feel like White people most times they categorize us, they put us all in the same group and we’re not all the same people; we’re all unique. And then, my attitude, well, we all know that … I’m nice, sometimes.

Similar to Tanya’s response, many of the girls shared their maps by confidently describing who they were in terms of race, their interests, their personality traits, and their connections to their friends and family, but that explanation was typically accompanied by a reflection about how they felt that White students and teachers saw them, and how those ascriptions were either not the same way they saw themselves, or communicated to them that they were outside of the norm.

Through the lens of the Black Girl Project as an intervention that promotes the development of Black girls’ critical consciousness, the identity maps provided the space
for the girls to pause and define themselves for themselves within the larger context where they are invisible in terms of their school, educational policies, and larger society, and yet at the same time are hyper-visible in those same spaces.

**Discussions and Interviews**

In addition to the activities, other meaningful elements of the Black Girl Project were the group discussions and interviews (see Appendix D for interview protocol). Both of these components of the Black Girl Project served to promote the critical consciousness development of the study participants by incorporating discussion topics and interview questions that focused on the intersections of race, gender, and class and how their experiences as Black girls related to those structures. The discussion topics ranged from local topics such as the lack of Black teachers at their school, observed differences in disciplinary practices for Black students compared to other student populations, and how their schools’ websites worked to promote a certain image of each school’s level of diversity. The discussion topics also focused on broader societal issues such as the experiences of Black girls in schools and how their bodies and hair are policed, the messages that the media communicates to them about who Black girls and Black people are, and standards of beauty in the U.S. in relation to being Black girls and dating.

In one of the sessions, I facilitated a discussion that focused on my previous research with middle school Black girls in independent schools. Similar to the focus of the Black Girl Project, in the middle school project I met twice with a group of Black girls and asked them to talk about what it was like to be a Black girl at their school. It is
also important to note that some of the girls who were currently in the Black Girl Project had participated in the middle school study. From that project the themes that emerged were: 1) experiencing situations of being “the other”, 2) searching for and developing a sense of community, 3) negotiating a world of money and privilege, and 4) pushback and resistance to negative experiences around race, gender, and class. When facilitating the discussion, I showed a Powerpoint presentation that had each of the themes listed with excerpts from the middle school girls’ discussion groups, and as we went through the presentation, I asked the study participants to share their opinions about what the middle school girls said and how their own experiences may or may not have reflected what the middle school girls were saying. In the excerpt below, Renée, a 12th grader at Grace, reflects on her experiences going on an overnight trip in middle school and the awkwardness of her White peers not understanding why she had to wear a head scarf at night to protect her hair:

I think it all comes down to age and stuff. When I was in middle school, I was kind of embarrassed to do things. I wouldn't want to put my scarf on. I need braids because, I don't want to deal with you in my hair every day.... I think as you get older you learn to just ... This is me, this is who I am, and if you have a problem with it that's your problem.

Renée’s reflection points to how her experiences in middle school (similar to what the girls in the middle school project described) quickly informed her that she was different from her White girl peers, particularly when it came to hair, body type, and life perspectives. Her statement also illustrates how her critical consciousness has evolved over time, with her learning to care less about what others think, and instead, embrace her identity and who she is.
Related to the BGCL component of a *developing critical consciousness*, this discussion opened multiple avenues for the girls to explore what it means to have a growing awareness of race, gender, and class. Through a developmental lens, the study participants were able to see how middle school-aged girls were understanding and processing their school experiences, and then reflect on how those understandings were similar to or different from their own as high school-aged girls. Through a structural lens, the participants were able to trace how the experiences were linked to aspects of school culture, and larger societal norms about race, gender, and class.

The interviews encouraged the study participants to tell their stories about their experiences with racism, sexism, and classism in their schools, to reflect on their emotions during these experiences, and what things they wanted peers, teachers, and administrators in their schools to know about their life in schools as Black girls. Additionally, as part of the interviews I also asked the girls to tell the story of how they became students at their independent schools. The interviews promoted Black girl critical consciousness development in the way that the questions prompted the girls to define racism, sexism, and classism on their own terms, to analyze how their social locations as Black girls in independent schools and in the U.S. create particular circumstances through which they navigate on a daily basis, and to reflect on the choices they make in responding to those encounters.
Conclusion

This chapter presented how the BGCL components of a developing critical consciousness, emotional literacy, and agency and activism are integrated with one another as well as within the larger context of school culture to create a working model of BGCL in independent schools. The findings connected to the integrated model represent a spectrum of development and impact, with the beginning stages of awareness around emotional literacy and critical consciousness leading to small, everyday acts of resistance. The findings of “The Emotional Landscape of a Developing Critical Consciousness” and “Everyday Acts of Resistance” demonstrate how Black girls develop an awareness of emotions and the status of Black girls that is more local in nature, and particularly tied to their experiences at school.

The integrated model progresses to where the critical consciousness and emotional literacy of Black girls is connected to a larger vision of change and agency. The integrated model findings of “The Roots of Activism: Critical Consciousness” and “The Emotional Components of Agency and Activism” illustrate how Black girls adopt a broader perspective about how their experiences are connected to the lived realities of other Black girls and women in the U.S. No longer are they contextualizing their experiences solely within the culture of their schools, but they also are interrogating the larger systems and structures of power and dominance that exist and function to oppress Black girls and women. A central component of this advanced level of awareness and emotional literacy is that Black girls’ actions serve to contribute to a larger and sustained movement of social justice and equity. Though their emotions of fear and frustration stem
from their own individual experiences as Black girls, these emotions are also connected to the roles that they take on as activists pushing for systemic change.

Lastly, the integrated model reflects how the Black Girl Project was situated within a context of a larger research study that employed a curriculum grounded in critical pedagogy and critical feminist thought. The role of the researcher as facilitator, mentor, and ally highlights how adult allies, armed with the knowledge, beliefs, and pedagogies of critical feminist thought, can positively influence the developing critical consciousness of Black girls with the larger aim of contributing to the further development of all components of BGCL.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation presents the preliminary theory of Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL) as a way to understand how Black girls in elite, predominantly White independent schools recognize, process, and respond to encounters of race, gender, and class, while simultaneously crafting their own Black girl identities. The model of the BGCL theory shows how the components of a developing critical consciousness, emotional literacy, and a sense of activism and agency interact with independent school culture to create a unique set of competencies and strategies that Black girls develop and enact to navigate their school environment while also constructing their sense of self. This study also highlights the centrality of girls’ group spaces in promoting a sense of community, belonging, and agency for a population of girls that are often pushed to the margins in their schools as well as in society. In the sections below I present both practical and scholarly implications that this dissertation project highlights in how to effectively support the optimal development and agency of adolescent Black girls, as well as directions for future research.

Section 1: Practical Implications

The Significance of Girls’ Group Spaces

From a practice-based and developmental perspective, this study shows how discussion groups have the potential to serve as in-school curricular interventions in that they can create “homespaces” (Ward, 1996) or “homeplaces” (Pastor, et al., 2007), sites in school where girls can come together to express their frustrations, hopes, and desires
with the goal of creating change and promoting resistance to oppressive structures. Often in schools, though critical thinking and analysis skills are promoted, they are not taught with a social justice or liberatory orientation (McLaren, 2003). Weekly discussion groups, which formed the basis of this research study, provided a space where adolescent Black girls had the freedom to be critical of institutional systems and spaces and their locations in them, with the goal towards dismantling these structures and working towards the collective empowerment of Black girls and women.

**Schools as Sites of Resistance for Black Girls Through Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy**

In the discussion group meetings, I watched as the girls, without prompting, enacted critical media literacy skills in how they responded to the media they watched in the different sessions. They asked questions about the different Black girls who made each of the videos, trying to discern who they were and where they were from as a way to understand the perspectives these Black girls were presenting—all examples of questions that are part of a critical media literacy framework (Morrell, Dueñas, Garcia, & López, 2013). After a few meeting sessions, the girls also felt comfortable bringing in videos and news clips that they had seen to share with the group and start their own discussions that centered on the experiences of Black girls and how they are depicted in society.

Using a critical media literacy pedagogy in the classroom teaches Black girls the skills to critically analyze the ways in which media presents representations of Black girls and women, how it idealizes certain forms of beauty, and reinforces race and gender stereotypes. Through the development of critical media literacy skills, Black girls can
continue to develop an “oppositional gaze” (hooks, 1992) that critiques and resists the negative images of Black girls and women, enact this oppositional gaze through the creation of their own media, and present a counternarrative to the dominant images and representations of Black girls and women that are perpetuated daily in the media.

**How Independent Schools Can Support Black Girls**

The BGCL model also has implications for educators and administrators by illuminating the particular experiences of Black girls in independent schools and what sources of support schools can implement to be more inclusive of the needs of Black girls. Following the feminist orientation of my work, I leveraged the knowledge of Black girls as experts of their own lived experiences by asking them what they wanted their schools to know about them and what recommendations they had for how their schools could better support them. Below is a shortlist of each, in the girls’ own words:

**What the girls wished their schools knew about Black girls.**

- “I wish they had a better understanding of why we hang out together, why we have the opinions about the school that we do, and I wish there were more teachers of color.”

- “We are just as capable as a White male.”

- “We’re not all the same. People in the community (mainly staff) could take the time to get to know each child better.”

- “I just want them to understand our feelings and take our thoughts about certain topics regarding race into consideration.”

- “They should know that we can do anything they can do, and sometimes better!”
The points that stand out from what the girls wish that their schools knew about them highlight how they are calling for members in their school community to look past the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding Black girls in order to make an attempt to get to know them on a more personal level. To accomplish this task, schools need to approach understanding Black girls by using an intersectional lens. This means understanding that at the same time that each Black girl brings her own unique identity and personality to school each day, the presence of structural racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism also dictate that Black girls in independent schools will have some common experiences. In order to support Black girls, educators, practitioners, and administrators need to interrogate how school practices, policies, and traditions reinforce dominant messages that continue to marginalize Black girls.

**Recommendations for supporting Black girls in independent schools.**

- “Actually listen to us, and make an effort to make a change. We aren’t as scary as the Anglo-Saxon school thinks.”

- “I wish that the school would make the topic of not only race, but any controversial topic more open for discussion.”

- “Be understanding of what we go through.”

- “Seeing more Black female faces in presentations, textbooks, powerpoints, books. Talking about more topics in classrooms so other students can recognize that seeing a Black face is just as normal as seeing a White face. Integration in all aspects is key!”

- “People need to be aware and conscious of microaggressions and not making assumptions based on skin color.”

The girls’ recommendations about how independent schools can better support Black girls speak to issues of visibility and representation. Their calls for school
administrators and teachers to listen to them illustrate the paradox of their experiences of marginalization and hypervisibility, particularly when it comes to perceptions about their thoughts, ideas, and critiques around school change. Rather than engaging in a certain level of guesswork required to develop initiatives and programming that speaks to Black girls’ needs, schools need to come to the table ready to listen to what Black girls have to say about what they need and how school administrators, teachers, and students can work with Black girls to ensure that those needs are addressed. This level of engagement with Black girls also means that when schools are listening to Black girls they are listening from a stance that is open-minded and supportive, and not one of defensiveness or dismissal.

Additionally, on an interpersonal level, the girls’ recommendations suggest that members of the school community need to take the time to examine their own racial, gendered, and classed biases, particularly in how they relate to the status of Black girls. Developing this awareness extends to conversations in the hallway, classroom discussions, and even the selection of curricular materials so that Black girls feel valued, respected, and represented in all areas of school life.

Section 2: Scholarly Implications

The findings of this dissertation contribute to the fields of education and gender studies and the disciplines of psychology, and sociology by offering perspectives on adolescent development, identity formation, and curriculum development that are infused with feminist and critical pedagogy frameworks. Specific to education, my research
contributes to the literature on how to support students of color in independent schools, and points to how affinity group spaces can function as places for the critical consciousness development of adolescents. From a psychological perspective, the findings from this project deepen the literature on adolescent development and particularly highlight the identity development and construction of Black girls.

Also in the psychological realm, the BGCL model contributes to the literature focusing on the sociopolitical development of youth, a theoretical framework emerging from the areas of community psychology and liberation psychology. Watts, Williams, & Jagers (2003) define sociopolitical development (SPD) as “the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and the capacity for action in political and social systems necessary to interpret and resist oppression” (p. 185). In particular, SPD emphasizes the role that contextual factors such as social location, historical events, cultural identity, and the broader political landscape, play in the level of awareness and the belief in the capacity for action that one has about being able to dismantle different oppressive structures (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

Currently, most of the empirical research that examines the sociopolitical development of youth either focuses broadly on adolescents (Watts & Guessous, 2006) or more narrowly on Black boys or young men (Watts, Griffith, & Adul-Adil, 1999). What sociopolitical development looks like for Black girls, and in particular, Black girls in independent schools, has yet to be fully studied.

In the sociological tradition and connected to the field of gender studies, my research contributes to the emerging field of Black girlhood studies by presenting how
the social structures of race, gender, class, function within particular sociocultural contexts. To that end, the BGCL theory builds on the framework of Black girlhood (Brown, 2013) by examining what sources of agency and competencies come together to create a particular critical lens Black girls employ in relation to the construction of their adolescent Black girl identities as well as provides a framework through which the experiences of adolescent Black girls can be adequately privileged and contextualized.

Section 3: Directions for Future Research

Exploring Black Girl Emotions

One phenomenon that I was struck by throughout my dissertation research was how my participants expressed their emotions, their awareness of the emotions of others, and how their independent school culture often required the participants to engage in a particular form of emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). Using the video footage from the weekly discussion group sessions, my goal is to conduct a combined thematic and visual analysis to better understand the emotional landscape of Black girls in independent school spaces.

On a broader level, I am also interested in becoming more familiar with the literature that exists about Black girl and Black women emotions, and tracing how emotional expression shifts throughout the different developmental stages of life. Since my study specifically examined Black girls during adolescence, I would want to explore the messages that Black girls receive in childhood, adolescence, and going into adulthood around which emotions are appropriate/inappropriate to express in particular contexts,
and how Black girls understand their own emotions. Engaging in this research would serve to deepen my findings around the emotional literacy component of BGCL.

**Expanding the Positive Youth Development Model for Adolescent Girls of Color**

Recently, Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula (2016) published a paper that presented an adapted version of Lerner et al.’s (2005) positive youth development (PYD) model that would more closely align with the experiences of adolescent girls of color. Lerner et al.’s traditional model contains six competencies that they hold that all youth must master in order to reach their optimal development in school, their future careers, and overall life course. The six competencies are: *competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, and contribution*. Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula (2016) argue that while these competencies are important for all youth to master, the intersecting identities and marginalized statuses of girls of color in the U.S. prompt a more nuanced perspective. Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula infuse the traditional PYD model with a critical race feminism perspective (Wing, 1996, 2000) and situate the competency of critical consciousness at the center of the model as the core mediator of the other competencies. Furthermore, Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula’s model brings in the additional competencies of *resistance* and *resilience*, which they argue are particularly significant skills and perspectives that contribute to girls of color’s optimal development.

Moving forward, I would be interested to see how the preliminary BGCL theory and the adapted PYD model intersect in terms of the experiences of Black girls and the particular skills they develop in order to successfully navigate their academic, social, and emotional worlds. I would be interested to see how the data from my dissertation could
serve an empirical touchpoint for the adapted PYD model, and illustrate where the adapted PYD model aligns with the experiences of Black girls and where there are particular nuances that are not captured by the current model.

**Examining Adolescent Critical Literacies in Different Contexts**

The preliminary theory of Black girl critical literacies serves as an approach to explore how Black girls recognize, process, and understand encounters of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in relation to the construction of their Black girl identities. This dissertation specifically analyzes what BGCL looks like within the context of independent schools. In future research studies, my goal would be to identify and analyze what BGCL looks like in other educational spaces, particularly those in which Black girls form the majority of the school population. I am interested to see what aspects of the BGCL theory are specific to particular contexts, and which elements are applicable to Black girls’ experiences regardless of their educational context.

Furthermore, though the BGCL theory is attuned to developing the critical literacies of adolescent Black girls, similar grounded theory-informed research methods and the implementation of a curriculum informed by critical pedagogy and other critical theories related to identity development could potentially be employed by researchers to understand the elements and processes of critical literacies of youth sub-populations of various identities. Encouraging the critical literacy development of all adolescent youth ensures their path towards successful development and a movement towards more just and equitable practices in schools whereby all students’ academic, social, and emotional needs are met.
APPENDIX

Appendix A: Black Girl Project Introductory Questionnaires

Black Critical Literacies Study Introductory Questionnaire Protocol
Thank you for your interest in participating in the Black Girl Literacy Study! Please take a moment to complete this introductory questionnaire. Completing this questionnaire is completely optional and you may stop taking the questionnaire at any time. You are free to leave any questions blank that you do not feel comfortable answering. Only the researcher (Charlotte Jacobs) will view your responses.

Your name: 
Your age: 
Your current grade:

1) How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?

2) What broad categories best fit your racial and ethnic background (as described above?). Please select all that apply:
   ___ American Indian
   ___ Hispanic/Latino
   ___ Alaska Native
   ___ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   ___ Asian
   ___ White
   ___ Black or African-American

4) Number of years that you have attended your current school (including this year):
   ___ 1-3 years
   ___ 4-6 years
   ___ 7+ years

5) Names of other schools you have attended if you have not attended your current school starting in Kindergarten:

6) Please indicate the highest level of education completed by your parent or guardian:
   1st Guardian is: Mother / Father / Other Person
   - Some high school
   - High school graduate
   - Some college
   - College graduate
   - Graduate or professional degree

7) Please indicate the highest level of education completed by your parent or guardian:
   2nd Guardian is: Mother / Father / Other Person
   - Some high school
   - High school graduate
   - Some college
8) Why did you choose to be a part of this research project?

9) What do you hope to get out of this research project?

10) What do you hope to do as part of this research project?

11) If there were 10 people in your neighborhood, how many of your neighbors would be… (must total 10)

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12) If there were 10 students in your school, how many of the students would be… (must total 10)

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13) If there were 10 people you call friends, how many of them would be… (must total 10)

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14) Most of my friends are in:

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<th>My School</th>
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15) Which varsity sports do you participate in?

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<th>Football</th>
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16) Which extracurricular activities do you participate in?

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<th>Debate team</th>
<th>Drama</th>
<th>Intramural sports</th>
<th>Student government</th>
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17) What kind of grades are you getting in high school?

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<th>Mostly B’s &amp; a few C’s</th>
<th>Mostly B’s</th>
<th>Mostly B’s &amp; a few A’s</th>
<th>Mostly A’s</th>
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- College graduate
- Graduate or professional degree
18) If you could do anything you wanted with your life, what would you most want to do and be? (Please list at least 3)

19) What factors in life do you think will influence you the most in terms of what you want to do?

   (Please choose only 4 and rank in order of 1—Most Helpful; 2—Very Helpful; 3—Very Hurtful; 4—Most Hurtful)
   ___ Being a minority     ___ Hard Work     ___ Intelligence     ___ Me
   ___ My Community     ___ My family     ___ My Gender     ___ My Health
   ___ My Income     ___ My Looks     ___ My Religion/Spirituality
   ___ My Sexual Orientation     ___ My Talent     ___ My Teachers     ___ Nothing

20) How easy is it for you to talk about race?

   ___ Very Hard     ___ Hard     ___ In the Middle     ___ Easy     ___ Very Easy

21) How much do you talk with your parents about racism and discrimination against Black people?

   ___ Not at all     ___ A little     ___ Somewhat     ___ A lot
   ___ All of the time

22) How much do you talk with your friends about racism and discrimination against Black people?

   ___ Not at all     ___ A little     ___ Somewhat     ___ A lot
   ___ All of the time

23) Have you ever had any experiences of racist acts against you?

   ___ Yes     ___ No

24) If yes, where did this incident occur? (Check all that apply)

   ___ My neighborhood     ___ My school     ___ With family/at home
   ___ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

25) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to racist experiences that you may have?

   ___ Very Uncomfortable     ___ Uncomfortable     ___ In the Middle     ___ Comfortable
   ___ Very Comfortable

26) How easy is it for you to talk about gender or being a girl/woman?

   ___ Very Hard     ___ Hard     ___ In the Middle     ___ Easy     ___ Very Easy

27) How much do you talk with your parents about sexism and discrimination against women and girls?

   ___ Not at all     ___ A little     ___ Somewhat     ___ A lot
   ___ All of the time
28) How much do you talk with your friends about sexism and discrimination against women and girls?
____ Not at all  ____ A little  ____ Somewhat  ____ A lot  ____ All of the time

29) Have you ever had any experiences of sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) acts against you?
____ Yes  ____ No

30) If yes, where did this incident occur? Check all that apply.
____ My neighborhood  ____ My school  ____ With family/at home  ____ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

31) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) experiences that you may have?
____ Very Uncomfortable  ____ Uncomfortable  ____ In the Middle  ____ Comfortable  ____ Very Comfortable

32) How easy is it for you to talk about socioeconomic status/class?
____ Very Hard  ____ Hard  ____ In the Middle  ____ Easy  ____ Very Easy

33) How much do you talk with your parents about classism and discrimination against low-income people?
____ Not at all  ____ A little  ____ Somewhat  ____ A lot  ____ All of the time

34) How much do you talk with your friends about classism and discrimination against low-income people?
____ Not at all  ____ A little  ____ Somewhat  ____ A lot  ____ All of the time

35) Have you ever had any experiences of classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) acts against you?
____ Yes  ____ No

36) If yes, where did this incident occur? Check all that apply.
____ My neighborhood  ____ My school  ____ With family/at home  ____ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

37) In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) experiences that you may have?
____ Very Uncomfortable  ____ Uncomfortable  ____ In the Middle  ____ Comfortable  ____ Very Comfortable
School Environment

38) In general, teachers at my school talk about race:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

39) In general, teachers at my school talk about gender:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

40) In general, teachers at my school talk about socioeconomic status/class issues:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

41) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about Black people at my school:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

42) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about women and girls at my school:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

43) I have seen and/or heard stereotypes about low-income people at my school:
   ___ Never  ____ Occasionally  ____ Somewhat frequently  ____ All the time

45) How do you define feminism?

47) How do you define oppression?

48) Do you believe that everyone in the U.S. has an equal opportunity to be successful?
   ___ Yes  _____ Unsure  ____ No

Please explain your answer:

49) Is there anything else you would like to share? If so, please write your response here:

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!
Appendix B: Black Girl Project Wrap-Up Questionnaire

Black Girl Critical Literacies Study Wrap-Up Questionnaire
Thank you for your interest in participating in the Black Girl Critical Literacy Study! Please take a moment to complete this wrap-up questionnaire. Completing this questionnaire is completely optional and you may stop taking the questionnaire at any time. You are free to leave any questions blank that you do not feel comfortable answering. Only the researcher (Charlotte Jacobs) will view your responses.

Name:

1. What major ideas or memories are you going to take away from being a part of this group?

2. Did you notice any differences in how you felt, how you spoke, or how you thought during our meetings? If so, please describe.

3. Is there anything you learned in the group that you didn't know before? If so, what?

4. Is there anything you wished we could have discussed in the group that we didn't? If so, what?

5. Is there anything that you still have questions about after leaving this group?

6. What's one thing you want your school to know regarding Black girls OR one recommendation you have about how the school can be more supportive of Black girls?
7. How easy is it for you to talk about race?
   ____ Very Hard       _____ Hard       ____ In the Middle       _____ Easy       _____ Very Easy

8. How much do you talk with your parents about racism and discrimination against Black people?
   ____ Not at all       ___ A little       ____ Somewhat       ____ A lot       ___ All of the time

9. How much do you talk with your friends about racism and discrimination against Black people?
   ____ Not at all       ___ A little       ____ Somewhat       ____ A lot       ___ All of the time

10. Have you ever had any experiences of racist acts against you?
    ____ Yes       ____ No

11. If yes, where did this incident occur? (Check all that apply)
    ____ My neighborhood       ____ My school       ____ With family/at home
    ____ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

12. In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to racist experiences that you may have?
    ____ Very Uncomfortable       ____ Uncomfortable       ____ In the Middle       ____ Comfortable
    ____ Very Very Comfortable

13. How easy is it for you to talk about gender or being a girl/woman?
    ____ Very Hard       _____ Hard       ____ In the Middle       ____ Easy       ____ Very Easy

14. How much do you talk with your parents about sexism and discrimination against women and girls?
    ____ Not at all       ___ A little       ____ Somewhat       ____ A lot       ___ All of the time

15. How much do you talk with your friends about sexism and discrimination against women and girls?
    ____ Not at all       ___ A little       ____ Somewhat       ____ A lot       ___ All of the time

16. Have you ever had any experiences of sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) acts against you?
17. If yes, where did this incident occur? (Check all that apply)
   _____ My neighborhood   _____ My school   _____ With family/at home
   _____ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

18. In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to sexist (discrimination based on being a girl) experiences that you may have?
   _____ Very Uncomfortable   _____ Uncomfortable   _____ In the Middle   _____ Comfortable
   _____ Very Comfortable

19. How easy is it for you to talk about socioeconomic status/class?
   _____ Very Hard   _____ Hard   _____ In the Middle   _____ Easy   _____ Very Easy

20. How much do you talk with your parents about classism and discrimination against low-income people?
   _____ Not at all   _____ A little   _____ Somewhat   _____ A lot
   _____ All of the time

21. How much do you talk with your friends about classism and discrimination against low-income people?
   _____ Not at all   _____ A little   _____ Somewhat   _____ A lot
   _____ All of the time

22. Have you ever had any experiences of classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) acts against you?
   _____ Yes   _____ No

23. If yes, where did this incident occur? (Check all that apply)
   _____ My neighborhood   _____ My school   _____ With family/at home
   _____ Public places (mall, supermarket, park)

24. In general, how comfortable do you feel responding to classist (discrimination based on socioeconomic status) experiences that you may have?
   _____ Very Uncomfortable   _____ Uncomfortable   _____ In the Middle   _____ Comfortable
   _____ Very Comfortable

25. Do you believe that everyone in the U.S. has an equal opportunity to be successful?
   _____ Yes   _____ Unsure   _____ No

Please explain your answer:
26. Any other comments or questions regarding your experience with the Black girls group?

27. Would you be willing to be contacted over the summer or next school year for any follow-ups regarding this project? If yes, please provide your contact information below:

   Email address:

   Phone number:

Thank you for completing the questionnaire!
### GCP Meeting Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/16/15</td>
<td>Intros &amp; Identity I—community norms, overview of project, creating identity maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/28/15</td>
<td>Storytelling-- Talked about issues going on at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/6/15</td>
<td>Storytelling-- Talked about school uniforms, SES, and GCP school image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/12/15</td>
<td>Identifying sources for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/31/15</td>
<td>Moving forward with plans for action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/10/15</td>
<td>Media Literacy-- Watched “Average Black Girl” video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving to Action-- Talked about action steps related to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African-American history course proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/21/15</td>
<td>Our Stories-- Class trip to see Mac Beth; student leadership at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving to Action-- Strategizing about using BSU to create</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>change in the next school year; Developing proposal for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African-American History course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/30/15</td>
<td>Reflection/Wrap Up Activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Sessions Total; 30 min. each session

### Grace School Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/8/15</td>
<td>Module I--Intros &amp; Identity: community norms, overview of project, creating identity maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15/15</td>
<td>Module I-- Intros &amp; Identity Map Follow-Up— Sharing of identity maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/22/15</td>
<td>Module I--Intros &amp; Identity: BGCL questionnaire, discussion about observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/29/15</td>
<td>Module II-- Our Stories: BG Study data, family interview prep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/5/15</td>
<td>Module II—Our Stories: Talked about their reflections on the assembly that they had had on Monday around race in the U.S.; we came up with the idea of putting together a proposal for an Af-Am history course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/12/15</td>
<td>Module II—Our Stories: *Ended up talking about the parent meeting the night before—some parents invited, some parents not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/19/15</td>
<td>Module III—Power &amp; Privilege: Contextualizing Power/Levels of Oppression—will aim to process discussion from last week, particularly around SES, and will aim to watch A Girl Like Me video</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2/26/15**  | Moving forward with Action:  
  ○ Talk more about Race & Ethnicity Class  
  ○ Talked about ideas for BSU  
  ○ Looked at I, Too Am Harvard tumbler, Faces of Private Schools Tumbler, and watching a Kai Davis video |
| 3/12/15    | Conversation w/Mr. Franklin & Mr. Thomas about forming a BSU; checking in about other action steps                                                                                                     |
| 3/19/15    | Moving forward with BSU planning/proposal                                                                                                                                                             |
| 4/2/15     | Moving forward with BSU planning/proposal; Looked at video from Fox news                                                                                                                              |
| 4/9/15     | Moving forward with BSU planning/proposal                                                                                                                                                             |
| 4/16/15    | Mr. Thomas & Ms. Turner come to visit; Moving forward with BSU planning/proposal                                                                                                                       |
| 4/30/15    | BSU planning—nominating and electing positions                                                                                                                                                         |
| 5/7/2015   | Reflection/Wrap-Up Activity                                                                                                                                                                             |

15 Sessions Total; 40 min. each session
Appendix D: Black Girl Project Interview Protocol

Learning to Create and Define Who We Are: Using a Critical Literacy and Feminist Curriculum to Develop the Racial, Gender, and Class Literacy of Black Adolescent Girls in Independent Schools

Thank you for participating in this interview for the Black Girl Critical Literacies Study. In this interview I will ask you about your experiences as a Black girl generally and particularly at your school. Your participation in this study is completely optional and presents minimal risk to you. You can decide to not answer any of the questions or stop the interview at any time.

Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

My first set of questions has to do with you being a Black girl in general.

1) Where do you get or have you gotten most of your messages about what it means to be a Black girl?
2) What are some of those messages?
   • Probe: How do you interpret or feel about those messages?

My next set of questions has to do with you being a student at [school name].

3) Can you tell me the story of how you ended up being a student here?
   • Probe: When did you start at [school name]?
   • Probe: Whose decision was it to come to [school name]?

4) How do you feel about being a student at [school name]?

5) Have you ever experienced or witnessed any racist situations here at [school name]?
   • Please describe one of those incidents.
   • What emotions did you feel related to that incident?
   • What did you do in that incident?
   • Is there anything that you wished you would have done and didn’t? If so, what?

6) Have you ever experienced or witnessed any sexist (discrimination based on gender) situations here at [school name]?
   • Please describe one of those incidents.
   • What emotions did you feel related to that incident?
   • What did you do in that incident?
   • Is there anything that you wished you would have done and didn’t? If so, what?

7) Have you ever experienced or witnessed any classist (discrimination against low-income people) situations here at [school name]?
Please describe one of those incidents.
What emotions did you feel related to that incident?
What did you do in that incident?
Is there anything that you wished you would have done and didn’t? If so, what?

8) Now we’re going to take a look back at your identity map—can you walk me through it a bit? What are some of the important elements on your map and why?

[OPTIONAL—only if they have a map]

• Probe: Is there anything you wanted to share about your identity map that you didn’t get to share in the

Now, onto the last question:

9) Is there anything else you’d like to share about being a Black female in general or at your school?

10) Do you have any questions that you’d like to ask me?

Thank you for participating!
Appendix E: List of Codes and Definitions

- **Agency & Activism**—this category focuses on the actions that the girls take when involved in experiences/encounters around race, gender, and class. What decisions do they make throughout the encounters? How do they choose to define themselves in the face of being defined by others? How do they advocate for themselves and for the equity of Black girls and women?
  - Counternarrative—This is stemming from my reading around Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race Feminism where the idea of a counternarrative is a description or story that pushes against the dominant narrative about a group of people, phenomenon, or experience. Counternarratives are often grounded in the true experiences and words of the individuals who experienced them—privileging the voices and experiences that are typically marginalized. What I’m interested in with this code is looking at how girls describe their own experiences—how do their experiences serve as a counternarrative? I’m also interested in when the girls are demonstrating resistance of a certain narrative or “given fact” and instead are creating their own narrative or definition.
  - Decision-Making—This code focuses on how and when the girls are making decisions, often when they are making plans for what they want to do to create change in their school community; this code also can apply to some situations where the girls are reflecting on things that they’ve learned about themselves that caused them to make decisions about what they want to do moving forward, or how they choose to identify themselves.
  - Developing/Establishing community—This code speaks to the ways that the girls are using the discussion space to develop relationships with each other and to form a sense of community as being Black girls in the same school. This code also looks at how the girls attempt to find common ground with each other by just being Black girls in the U.S.
  - Navigating school politics—This code describes how the girls analyze the power structures within their school in order to figure out how they can accomplish their goals of making the school more inclusive for Black girls.
  - Resistance—This code pulled partly from Janie Ward’s definitions of “resistance for survival” vs. “resistance for liberation.” What are the short-term, in the moment resistance strategies that the girls use? What are the
resistance strategies that the girls use that show a deeper and broader understanding of their experiences around race, class, and gender?

- **Questioning**-- When the girls are pushing back against something that they don’t agree with or against the status quo.
- **Taking a stand**-- When girls confidently articulate their beliefs or perspectives, often using their own experiences to support their ideas or statements
- **Disengagement**-- A behavior that girls describe when they or their classmates are not into something, or a way of exhibiting their frustration with something

  ○ **Seeking/Finding Allies**-- Something that seemed to be key to their positive experiences in their school is that they’re able to find a few supportive teachers/faculty members who they see as allies. The idea of finding allies will also be important as the girls strategize about the changes they want to make in their school and how they learn about and navigate the school politics to get what they want. I think this code also relates back to the broader status of Black girls in independent schools as being isolated, an extreme minority, and sometimes marginalized. Due to their status, it’s particularly important that they have people who they know will support them emotionally and as they move into more visible activist work.

  ○ **Self-Definition**-- When the girls are defining who they are and who they want to be. This code also stems from Black Feminist Thought and the importance that it places on Black women being able to define themselves because for so long they have been defined by others in society

  ○ **Strategizing/making plans**-- Captures what the girls are doing/saying as they describe what action steps or plan they have and the different ways that they want to carry it out.

- **Emotions**
  - **Admiration**-- Some of the ways that the girls talk about other girls’ actions have a tone to admiration to them, especially when they are describing a girl standing up for herself
  - **“Alone”**-- When girls described how they sometimes felt in their classes, especially when discussions about race came up
  - **“Anger”**-- When girls described experiences around race, class, and gender when they felt they were being ignored, silenced, overlooked, or when it was clear that there was a difference in treatment between them and another group of students. Also appeared when they talked about the stereotypes that exist about Black women and girls
○ “Annoyance”/ “Frustration”-- Similar to the “anger” code, this emotion was often mentioned when the girls were describing microaggressions that they experienced and the negative stereotypes and expectations placed on Black girls. What makes this code different from the “anger” code is that the girls seemed to use the word “annoying” more often to describe hurtful/painful situations where they might have actually been angry. Sometimes “annoyed” seemed to be a way to minimize or distance themselves from the painful emotions of the experiences-- a coping mechanism

○ Anxious/Worried-- This came up when girls talked about when they were thinking about what others thought about them

○ “Awkward”/ “Weird”-- The girls used these phrases to describe experiences with microaggressions, racism, sexism, and classism.

○ “Caring” -- The girls used this emotion when describing the adult allies that they had in their lives, and what type of school environment they wanted for Black girls

○ “Comfortable”-- This code focuses on when the girls described what they saw as roadblocks to authentic conversations about race, class, and gender in their schools-- that the schools wanted to make sure that everyone felt comfortable/at ease/not challenged. In the beginning, I lumped this code and “safe” together, but “safe” seems to focus more on how the girls themselves are feeling in a particular space, and what they’re looking for in their school, while “comfortable” seems to describe what the school community is trying to do avoid in-depth discussions about trigger topics

○ Confidence-- This describes when the girls are sharing an experience or idea of theirs and demonstrate that they are completely sure of what they are sharing and how they are thinking

○ Confused-- Focuses on situations where the girls share experiences where they weren’t quite sure what was happening or what the particular meaning of a situation was. This also comes up when the girls are describing how they thought about things in the past, and how their thinking has shifted

○ Curious/ “Interesting”-- This code captures when the girls are describing a situation that they either don’t understand, or are using the term as a form of critique about something

○ Defensiveness -- one of the defining elements was how the girls were responding to CB’s defensiveness, and also how defensive CB was becoming as a result of the girls’ questions. [so this might be something that ties into the “school culture” code]
“Discomfort”-- This code mainly comes up when the girls are describing the emotions of the white students in their school when having conversations about race/class/gender. When critiquing the school, the girls talk about how the school wants to avoid making anyone feel uncomfortable. The girls also talk about how discomfort or being uncomfortable can be a part of learning

Disempowered -- this code captures the times where the girls feel like they have no agency

Disgust-- I’m trying to capture the emotion behind what the girls say when they say “I’m done” or “I’m over it” or “I can’t do this.”

Distraction/Suppression of feelings-- This code describes when girls use language to minimize, suppress, or distract themselves from powerful and/or hurtful emotions

Embarrassment-- This code describes where girls described situations where they felt embarrassed or unsure.

“Empowered” -- this is where girls described feeling that they had agency, and were confident in the power that they had

Engaged/Interested -- I noticed how I made note of when the girls were engaged and what their engagement looked like

“Excited”-- This code describes when girl felt excited about something

“Exhausting”/ “Tiring”-- This codes describes times when the girls described having these emotions, usually because of an encounter when they had to take on the role educator with their peers

“Fear”-- This describes times where the girls felt afraid to do something. The girls also used this word when critiquing their school’s culture about why their schools aren’t more proactive about having discussions around race/gender/class

“Gratefulness”-- some of the girls talked about how in spite of all of the negative experiences/interactions that they have in their schools, overall they are happy/content to be in their schools and are grateful for the opportunities they get from attending their schools.

Guilt -- this emotion seems to come up particularly when the certain Black girls are describing some aspect of privilege that they have or that they are perceived to have.

“Happy”/Content-- some of the girls talked about how in spite of all of the negative experiences/interactions that they have in their schools, overall they are happy/content to be in their schools and are grateful for the opportunities they get from attending their schools.
○ “Hard”/Challenging-- This describes when girls talk about experiences that were painful or hurtful, and when they felt disempowered

○ Humor-- what is it that girls are finding funny or that they’re laughing at? This could be connected to “developing/establishing community” or part of a developing critical consciousness-- is the laughter one of disbelief and finding humor in the underlying aspect of the situation

○ “Hurt”-- when the girls are describing situations around racism, sexism, or classism where they’ve been hurt

○ “Overwhelming”-- this code describes situations where the girls felt overwhelmed-- usually around emotions or around school expectations

○ Pity-- Girls talked about feeling sorry for the white students who make ignorant comments, and also for affluent Black students who feel like they have to do certain things to fit in. In this way, the pity code also shows some growing awareness or consciousness of alternative ways of doing/seeing things and going beyond the status quo

○ Pride-- this describes when girls either displayed pride for themselves about something that they did, or they have pride for something that another Black girl did

○ Resolve/Acquiescence-- how often do the girls display ideas and thoughts of or make statements that are emblematic of “resolve/acquiescence”? The idea that things are the way that they are and that they’re not going to change. This also might be connected to the “annoying/frustration” code-- a way that they are distancing themselves from the emotional impact of the experience. This could also be tied to the “Exhausting/Tiring” code

○ “Sadness”-- This describes when girls felt sad about a certain situation

○ “Safe”/ “Unsafe” -- I noticed how the girls keep using the phrase “safe space” to describe what they want the BSU to be for them. There are other places in interviews and group discussions where the girls talk about needing or wanting a safe space. So far, I’ve been coding this using the emotion “comfortable.” This is something that I will need to pay attention to if I decide to pull out the “comfortable” sub-code-- when are they using the words “safe” and “comfortable” and what meanings do they have in the context of the girls using them?

○ “Shock”/ “Surprise”-- This code usually occurred when girls were describing microaggressions that they had experienced

○ Skepticism-- This code came into play mostly when the girls were describing whether or not they thought the school culture would actually change
- **Stressed**-- this code describes times when the girls describe feeling stressed about a certain situation
- **Suspicious**-- this might be similar to “skepticism” where the girls are analyzing whether or not they are able to make a real difference in their school culture
- **Unsure**-- I’ve noticed that there are some places where the girls seem to indicate that they are unsure about their ideas or what happened in a particular experience-- usually indicated by ending the sentence with “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.”
  - “Upset”-- this code describes where girls mention that they are upset

- **Development of Critical Consciousness**
  - **Awareness/Analysis of difference**-- As I use this code, I’m realizing that it has more nuance to it than the girls simply noticing or analyzing that there are differences between their experiences and those of others. A lot of the time when the girls are describing or analyzing these differences, what they are really describing are different systems of power and privilege. Sometimes they name the larger “macro” view of what is going on in terms of institutional structures of oppression, and other times they are making note of something that creates a power relation difference, but they don’t have the specific name for it. This is definitely something to keep in mind as I track different stages of critical consciousness, and also to note when I begin looking at the excerpts from this code in more detail. This code also follows when the girls have an awareness or analysis of how different people may view, experience, or think about different things because of their social identifiers or because of where they are in terms of identity development and critical consciousness development.
  - **Awareness/Analysis of status of Black girls & women**-- this code describes when girls talked about stereotypes and the status of Black girls and women in their school, community, or society
  - **Critique of school culture**-- Captures the different instances where the girls were critiquing aspects of their school culture. I am tracking how the girls are critiquing their school culture-- what are they saying/describing about how the school doesn’t work for them as Black female students? What particular aspects of school culture are they critiquing? I’m wondering if this larger code should be something like “Display and development of a critical consciousness”? 
Definitions/descriptions of classism-- how the girls define/describe personal encounters of classism, or general ideas of what it might be/what it looks like to them

Definitions/descriptions of racism-- how the girls define/describe personal encounters of racism, or general ideas of what it might be/what it looks like to them

Definitions/descriptions of sexism-- how the girls define/describe personal encounters of sexism, or general ideas of what it might be/what it looks like to them

Influence from others-- Describes the different sources that might stimulate the critical consciousness development of the girls based on interactions that the girls have with these different people and mediums

- “Family”-- family members that the girls describe
- “Friends from home”-- friends that the girls describe that are from their home communities and don’t attend independent schools
- “Media” -- it occurred to me that a lot of what the girls are responding to are the situations that Kai Davis describes in her spoken word poem. In that way, the girls may be noticing things that they hadn’t thought about or made connections to before. I’m also remembering when the girls talked about different TV shows (especially Being Mary Jane) and how they connected to some of the things that we were talking about in the group. Media is also a source that the girls mentioned when I asked them where they get a lot of the messages from about what it means to be a Black girl or how others view Black girls
- Peers-- In thinking about my RQ #3 where I’m looking to see how the girls communicate BGCL to each other, this code will be particularly important. I’ve been coding this to capture what their White classmates are doing as well as what their Black classmates/friends are doing. So I should pay closer attention to distinguishing between the two when I begin analysis.
- Teachers/Administrators-- I think that is really what I aim to track-- that I want to look and see how what teachers and administrators are doing contributes in some way to the critical consciousness development of the girls.; I thought that this made sense particularly in light of the influential roles that administrators play in the sessions as the girls critique the schools and then strategize about how they want to change the school.
○ Triggers of class identity awareness-- when the girls describe moments, interactions, or experiences that cause them to become aware of their own class status or the class status of others

○ Triggers of gender identity awareness-- when the girls describe moments, interactions, or experiences that cause them to become aware of their own gender identity or the gender identity of others

○ Triggers of racial identity awareness-- when the girls describe moments, interactions, or experiences that cause them to become aware of their own racial identity or the racial identity of others

- Role of the Researcher-- There are key moments where I offer up my own experience as the girls are sharing, and also offer a critical lens or context for some of the things that the girls say. This is something that I know I also do in the discussion groups, so it makes sense to track what I, as a Black female researcher, interested in the experiences of Black girls, is doing throughout my time with the girls.

  ○ Ally-- When I am making moves or conveying to the girls that I support what they’re saying, how they’re thinking, and their overall perspective on things. This code also describes the moves that I make towards encouraging and helping the girls to create change in their schools

  ○ Educator/Facilitator-- I made this edit because the discussion that we had in Sharon’s class yesterday about all of the things that go into a conceptual framework reminded me of how committed I was/am to this being a feminist project and that critical pedagogy is guiding the decisions and moves that I make in the sessions. My goal is that even though I may be “educating” the girls about certain terms, topics, or issues, my approach to doing so is through facilitating a discussion where I asked particular questions or examples that get the girls to reflect on their own experiences in relation to what I’m talking about, so that they see that they have an amount of expertise in the topic/subject as well. This move is also important because I’m also trying to create a situation where the girls learn from each other so that I’m not viewed as the “expert.” In this way, I aim to disrupt the traditional teacher/student power and knowledge hierarchy that would typically place me “above” them.

  ○ Questions that the girls ask me-- this code captures the types of questions that the girls ask me; and how I respond to their questions-- what type of information do I share with them? How might my responses work to develop a relationship with the girls?
○ **Researcher**-- The moves that I make as a researcher-- questions that I ask the girls to get a better sense of their experiences and their school culture; also the decisions I make about the structure and organization of the discussion sessions, observations, and interviews

- **School Culture**-- With the *school culture* code, I am using it as more like an “removed” code where it is me as the researcher making assessments/descriptions about the school culture, particularly in relation to Black girls at the school. It gives more of a “birds eye” view of the school culture.
  - **Challenges**-- Areas where the school seems to especially struggle when it comes to diversity and inclusion efforts and initiatives
  - **Discomfort with difference**-- instances where people in the school community tend to fumble when it comes to talking about or addressing issues of race, class, and gender. This seems to be particularly salient when the girls are showing resistance and are putting the spotlight on local and current events connected to racism, sexism, and classism
  - **Divides in the Black community**-- where the Black community in the school might have fissures. I mostly observed that this fell along perceived class lines and experiences (ex.-- city kids vs. kids from the suburbs); within the girls there were also some divides according to skin color; there were also some places where there were divides along gender lines
  - **Microaggressions**-- times where the girls describe experiences with peers, faculties, and administrators that would be characterized as microaggressions
  - **“Niceness”**-- This is related to the “discomfort with difference” code in that the school favors “niceness” and not making anyone feel uncomfortable instead of openly discussing and addressing situations around race, gender, and class
  - **Privilege**-- Situations where the girls describe experiences/factors that demonstrate considerable wealth, or societal or social privilege
  - **Roles of Black Girls**-- The sub-codes under this code [educators, compromisers, angry black girl stereotype] are inspired by Linda Grant’s 1984 study on Black girls in the elementary school classroom. I was interested to see when girls took on these different roles, and how they described the experiences vs. how I as someone from the outside who also is able to see the patterns and frequencies with which the girls take on these roles
- **Educators**— when the girls take on the role of teaching or educating about race, racism, sexism, or classism. This most often occurred between them and their peers.

- **Angry Black Girl**— this describes the stereotypes usually ascribed to Black girls and women when they are expressing any emotion other than happiness. The girls go back and forth between embracing this role and trying to avoid it.

- **Compromisers**— this describes when the girls are put in the position of not being able to fully express their thoughts/emotions/full beings and instead are required to do things that “smooth over” the tension or ignore their own needs
  - “School as a Business”— where the girls were talking about how the school asks families for donations, and how the school prioritizes what they spend their money on, often in the girls’ opinion, GCP only spends money on things that “will make the school look good.” I feel like this is a particular nuance within school culture.
  - **Silence**— describes places where there is no discussion about topics related to racism, sexism, and classism [this could also be related to the “discomfort with difference” code]
  - **Status of Black Girls**— this code describes what the status is for Black girls within their school, referring to their demographic, psychological, and social status

- **Isolated**— not having connection with others, particularly when they are in class and are only 1 or 2 Black people in the class

- **Extreme minority**— their general demographic status in the school and in their classes

- **Leaders**— describes moments when the girls demonstrate leadership, and when they take on the role of leaders in the school

- **Invisible**— refers to when the ideas, emotions, and needs of the girls are ignored or not taken into account

- **Hypervisible**— with this code the girls talked about how they felt like they were being watched, particularly when it came to the dress code, their behavior in the hallways, and even when Andrea was describing how intently the advisors seemed to focus on editing her senior speech compared to others

- **Supportive**— this code describes the times when teachers, students, and the school itself is supportive of the needs of Black girls
Appendix F: Andrea’s Speech—“A Guest in a Strange House”

This year commemorates the 60th anniversary of Brown vs. The Board of Education: the monumental supreme-court case that decided blacks deserve equal rights in the field of education. As we reflect on our past, it is important to question what is it like for black students in this space, in this time. By this space, I am referring to the type of elite educational environment where white is the majority and tuition is required to attend the school. Does this sound familiar? Good morning, my name is Andrea and I truly believe that the unique journey of a black student at a prestigious mostly white school deserves to be highlighted. Since 7th grade, I have attended GCP, which is why I chose this topic: I want you all to understand how my personal experience has made me who I am today. Therefore, aside from exploring statistics, my research for this assembly has been internal: reflecting on my experience and comparing it with other black students’ in nearby schools like ours. I interviewed students from [name of independent school], [name of independent school], and GCP. Although our experiences are diverse, there is one phrase that I believe captures the essence of all of our journeys; thus, my senior assembly is entitled “A Guest in a Strange House.”

I am convinced that most of the struggles that black students face at majority white schools derive from a narrow definition of what black culture is. To grasp this concept, it is important to understand what being black means. This varies from person to person: one student I interviewed stated “being black is not just the color of my skin: it’s being a part of a culture where your ancestors came over from Africa and knowing that’s part of my heritage.” To another student, black was “her experience in America. A
history of being treated of a second class citizen.” As stated on CNN’s report on *Black In America*, black is both of those things, it’s a “descriptor of culture, history, and ancestry” (Black In America). However, the problem that black students face at majority white schools is that students obtain their definition of black from a myriad of sources. Some people get their definitions from vine, world star, or and some even show evidence in believing in Urban dictionary’s definition. According to urban dictionary, black people are “A potentially great people who have a lot of problems that need to be addressed. Quite rightly they feel a great injustice has been done to them in the past, but this tends to negate any ability they might have to look upon themselves self critically…thus perpetuating a cycle of crime and underachievement” (Urban Dictionary). If you don’t believe me, and if you’re sitting in your seat thinking, “Andrea. Everyone knows black people don’t act that way,” then consider comments like, “you aren’t really black on the inside” or “I don’t think of you as black” and even “you don’t sound black, you sound smart.” All of these things, that are ironically meant as compliments, have been said my friends and I who attend schools similar to ours. However, I want to accentuate the fact that not only have white people used these phrases, but it is common for black students to receive these comments from their black counterparts. This thinking process prompts a couple of questions. Firstly, why is the standard for black not excellence? When people think of black, why do they immediately revert to black stereotypes and not to the people who defy them? Furthermore, what are black children being taught about themselves to believe that if they defy stereotypes then that somehow erases their cultural identity. This perception of “black” also leads to vocabulary being used ignorantly and improperly.
Uses of the terms ghetto, ratchet, and hood are often used by other students to target black students or black culture simply because people fail to understand that these words are “not synonymous to blackness” (I Too Am Harvard). This perception is sometimes perpetuated with school community service outreach. While community service is an amazing thing, independent schools must be conscious about the impressions they are giving to students by continuously outreaching to poor, predominately black public schools. A complaint that I’ve heard throughout my interviews is that black students felt like their schools are attempting to be “the white hope saving the poor black people.” Perhaps schools need to look into diversifying their efforts because when schools pride themselves on regularly going into impoverished majority black neighborhoods, it conserves the stereotype that all black people are poor. Community service trips like these also tend to perpetuate the association of black students being on scholarship, financial aid, or affirmative action. However, not all black students are on scholarship, and not all scholarship students are black. In fact, I just found out on Tuesday that the number of GCP white girls on scholarship is more than the number of black girls on scholarship. I had to edit this part of my assembly because I assumed that the number of black girls was higher than the number of white girls. Even I, who had invested interest in this subject, had this perception. Why is that?

On a daily basis, black students see examples of micro-aggressions inside the classroom. According to Psychology Today, micro-aggressions “are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target
persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Psychology Today). Because committing a micro-aggression is often a subconscious deed, these comments reveal the raw mentalities of a person. It’s human nature to put people into categories; however, in an all-white school, when there are so few black students, the tendency for the majority is to expect that those few of us represent all of our kind. A common example I heard through my interviews is how during classes, black students felt awkward when discussing anything about black history or culture because the people in the classroom would look at them for the “black perspective.” But the reality is that there is not just one black perspective, we all think differently. Another example of inappropriately grouping black students together is when other people confuse their names. I mean c’mon guys, do I really look like [name of Black girl at GCP]? Or [name of Black girl at GCP]? How about [name of Black girl at GCP]? But in all seriousness, sometimes it perplexes me that a teacher always seems to get me and the other black girl in the class confused when there are 5 blond white girls in the classroom whose names the teacher never confuses. This reiterates the fact that people who are a part of the majority seem to inappropriately associate black students as just a group thereby failing to recognize their individuality.

Just as non-blacks have an influential role of making black students feel like they are guests in a strange house, within the black community, internalized racism is a prevalent issue. As I discussed earlier, a falsified definition of black can provoke issues of self identity especially with young black students. Some students report that one of the hardest things about going to a mostly white school is going back to a black community
where some have lower standards for what it means to be black. When you don’t meet standards, either by the way you talk, walk, or dress, the tendency is for other black people to make call you “white, bougie, or Oreo.” When the group you have an affinity to denies your legitimacy based upon racist definitions of what it truly means to be black, it’s heartbreaking. It evidences that black people even fail to see the diversity within their own culture. Personally, being the target of comments like these feels suffocating: they leave me no room to be myself and to be black. Internalized racism plays a huge role in making it uncomfortable for black students because this type of racism is the most disruptive, especially to young children who are still struggling with finding themselves. Therefore, “code switching” is something that is way too familiar for most black students. For some, this looks like speaking a certain way at school, then hanging with black people and speaking in a completely different manner. Code switching is almost like having two different identities based upon the color of the people you’re surrounded by. In my opinion, code switching inherently implies that the subject fears not being accepted, for whatever reason, so the person changes his or her behaviors to ensure they are accepted. Another example of internalized racism a black person might experience at a predominately white school revolves around issues of beauty. It’s easy for children, especially girls at middle school age, to feel the pressure to assimilate to whom they’re surrounded by. Sometimes words don’t even have to be said for your heart to be penetrated by how vastly different you look. For example, black girls at all white schools can sometimes be very uncomfortable with their natural hair because they are surrounded by others whose hair is naturally straight. For me personally, I spent my middle school
years ensuring that my hair was always straight in fear that people would find my natural
hair unappealing. But as you can see, I grew out of that (flip hair). Sometimes you see
yourself in the way the world sees you until you’re mature enough to define for yourself
what makes you beautiful.

Thus far, I have spent a lot of time discussing how outside influences can affect
black students’ lives. But I truly believe that just as the majority, black students have
responsibilities too. First and most importantly, black students need to own their
blackness. Don’t deny your cultural identity: being proud and educated about your race is
the first step to ensuring that it is properly accepted in your community. It is essential to
understand that there’s a duality to blackness, you can claim that you’re mixed, part
native American, or only human, but if you look black, then regardless you are going to
be treated like a black person. With that being said, black students need to be constantly
aware of how they are carrying themselves and they need to be wary of perpetuating
stereotypes. On the surface this may seem unfair, why can’t we just be ourselves
regardless of our race. However, was being deemed free but not being treated free fair?
America’s promise of freedom is filled with contradiction, and throughout history, black
people have had to constantly bear the responsibility of keeping our country loyal to their
promise. Owning this responsibility is how, as a race, we have come so far since the first
slave came to the shores in 1619 until the first black president in 2008. Therefore,
practicing restraint and self-control to ensure that we don’t perpetuate black stereotypes
is a small sacrifice black students need to give for the sake of the younger generation.

Black students need to make their concerns heard. Recently, the BSU’s of
prestigious majority white colleges have made efforts to promote their voices. Georgetown’s BSU made a Facebook entitled Dangerous Black Kids of Georgetown University (Dangerous Black Kids of Georgetown University). Their group originated in effort to take the stereotype of black kids being dangerous and reverse it by highlighting member of their BSU proving that they are not to be feared, but they are to be respected. Penn’s BSU recently published an article in the Daily Pennsylvanian entitled Why Black Students Need a Column explaining that “the purpose of this column is to strengthen black voices in order to add dimension to [their] continued activism on this campus” (Hardison, Ford). Lastly, black students at Harvard felt that “[their] voices often go unheard on [their] campus, [their] experiences are devalued, [their] presence is questioned” (I Too Am Harvard). So they created a photo campaign called I Too Am Harvard which is their way of reclaiming that just like other students, they too deserve to attend Harvard. As you may have noticed, I’ve scattered photos of this campaign throughout my assembly. These are perfect examples of student leaders who see a problem within their institution and tackle it head on. As black students, it is part of our responsibility to never allow a micro-aggression to go unaddressed, and to never allow others to question our belonging.

I chose this assembly topic because like I said earlier, I’ve always struggled with my African American identity. In kindergarten, my best friend, who was white, told me I couldn’t be a princess like her because I was black. From 1st – 6th grade, I was homeschooled and my extended family threw words at me like “bougie, white, and oreo” which only made me even more conflicted about how I view myself. When I came to
GCP in 7th grade, I felt too black for my middle school counterparts and attempted to assimilate into main line culture. Freshman year, I was “too white” to be associated with the black crowd. It wasn’t until 10th grade that I realized that I relied too much on outside opinion to define my identity. If I wanted people to accept me, I first had to accept myself for the way I am. This is why I’m so grateful I go to GCP: throughout my high school career, GCP has given me so many opportunities to explore myself within a racial context. Without GCP’s resources, I would never be the confident young woman you see standing in front of you. Not only that, but GCP’s diversity consciousness has affected my high school career in so many ways. Being a part of such a huge group of leaders, and I’m referring to my class of 2015, has made me view the world in such a different way. Even though I am blessed to attend such an amazing school, I believe that we still have work to do here. I cannot finish this assembly without mentioning my black seniors: I love you guys. You are truly my rock and getting to know you each as beautiful individuals and becoming a unit ensured that I’ll never forget GCP and the memories we’ve created here. You guys are the epitome of black excellence. To the younger generation of black GCP girls, support each other. Speak up, but also be grateful to go to such an amazing school that truly cares about you. To everyone who’s listening to me, I would like to leave you with a quote by the Rv. Dr. MLK Jr., “it’s not a matter of white or black, it’s a matter of justice vs. injustice.” I hope that I have highlighted the intersectionality of black identity in the context of a majority white school. Personally, questioning myself and my beliefs has been a transformative experience. Allow these statistics, stories, examples, and information to serve as only the beginning as we reflect
on our history and continue to build a community that fosters a dialogue of understanding.
Appendix G: Kendra’s Speech--#BlackGirlsMatter

I want you all to raise your hand. When I say a name you do not recognize, put your hand down. While doing this activity, stay aware of when your peers’ hands go down as well as your own. Mike Brown. Eric Garner. Trayvon Martin. Shelly Frey. Kayla Moore. Sheneque Proctor. When did a majority of the hands go down? With the men or the women? According to Prof. Kimberle Crenshaw of the African American Policy Forum “Although black women are routinely killed, raped, and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality. Yet, inclusion of black women’s experiences in social movements, media narratives, and policy demands around policing and police brutality is critical to effectively combatting racialized state violence for black communities and other communities of color.” (Crenshaw).

Good morning, my name is Kendra, today I will speak on why #BlackLivesMatter. Though created by three black women, it became a movement that has virtually omitted the experiences of black women and girls in dialogue as well as action surrounding the issues of; police brutality, the school to prison pipeline, school pushout and why we can no longer wait to be included in policies and initiatives that have been formed, such as, “My Brother’s Keeper.”

Philadelphia is a, “My Brother’s Keeper” city. For those who do not know what “My Brother’s Keeper” is, it is an initiative launched by President Obama and the White House in February of 2014 to, “address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and
young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential” (WhiteHouse.gov). If we take a look at this statement, it says to “ensure all young people can reach their full potential”. However, if we go back a couple words, we will see that it says “opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color.” So where does this leave the women and girls of color? The “My Brother’s Keeper” website tries to justify it by saying “boys of color are too often born into poverty and live with a single parent.” Well, White House, wasn’t I born into the same single parent household as my African-American brother? Aren’t the Latina girls I know going to the same underfunded and practically useless schools as the Latino boys? There is a myth that women and girls of color are doing “all right”, however we most definitely are not.

A majority of people in this room have heard the term #BlackLivesMatter. What about the names Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometti? Patrisse, Alicia, and Opal are the three queer black women who created the hashtag after the murder of seventeen year old Trayvon Martin. Alicia Garza has spoken out about how others have taken their hard work and hashtag and put their spin on it, with Law and Order episodes, and things like #AllLivesMatter. In an article titled “A #Herstory of #BlackLivesMatter”, Garza writes, “Straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions. Perhaps if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days, it would have been a different story, but being [a] Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy.” (Garza).
Like black men and boys, black women and girls are killed by the police as well. The African American Policy Forum’s former associate director Rachel Gilmer put it best when she said “When we wear the hoodie, we know that we’re embodying Trayvon. When we hold our hands up, we know we’re doing what Mike Brown did in the moments before he was killed. When we say ‘I can’t breathe,’ we’re embodying Eric Garner’s final words. We haven’t been able to do the same thing for black women and girls. We haven’t carried their stories in the same way.” (Gilmer). The black men who have been unjustly killed by the police have been the main focus of police brutality, with black women and girls as the afterthought. Why aren’t black women and girls who are killed by the police given the same attention as the men and boys? Kimberle Crenshaw, feels the same way I did and was one of the founders of #SayHerName. The #SayHerName movement is “intended to serve as a resource for the media, organizers, researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders to better understand and address Black women’s experiences of profiling and policing.” (African American Policy Forum) Black women have decided to take matters into our own hands to show people that we are affected by police brutality just like the men and boys. Now, while I could talk about police brutality for hours, it’s time to move on to the school to prison pipeline, and school pushout.

According to the United States Department of Education “black girls are suspended 6 times the rate of white girls despite being 17% of the enrolled students in school.” (United States Department of Education) Additionally, in cities such as New York “Black girls are expelled 53 times more than white girls”. (AAPF) Girls of color
face harsher discipline in schools, whether they be enrolled in public or private schools, and with efforts to talk about the school to prison pipeline, we have unfortunately been excluded. The school to prison pipeline is the pushing out of at-risk and promising youth (who are mostly students of color) out of the classroom and into the hands of the juvenile and criminal justice system. It begins with underfunded schools, zero tolerance policies, which is expulsion for the first infraction, and the over policing and underprotection of students of color. In the United States, girls of color are dealt with in a punitive manner. I am sure that most of us can recall the Spring Valley High School incident where a black girl student was pulled out of her chair, thrown around like a ragdoll by a grown white male police officer for allegedly being on her phone. According to a report from the African American Policy Forum, a 12 year old girl faced expulsion and criminal charges for writing "hi" on a locker; her white peer who was also involved faced a less severe punishment. (Overpoliced, underprotected AAPF report) The situation was handled and designed to tear down her self-esteem, criminalizing her in the sixth grade. This is the unfortunate reality for girls of color, especially black girls, in the American school system. According to reports from the African American Policy Forum “black girls are the fastest growing group in the juvenile detention centers” (African American Policy Forum Report), so it is surprising that we are not included in the school to prison pipeline discussion. School pushout is another unfortunate reality. Black girls have always been forced to grow up too quickly, choose between school and leaving to take care of their family members. Notice earlier how I said pushout and not dropout? This is due to many black girls leaving school before the legal “dropout” age of 16 year-old, with the schools
doing nothing to reach out to them. So what could be done? I believe that schools should begin to form protocols, the country can develop policy that ensures black girls never have to decide between familial obligations and their education; or being pushed out and into a jail cell. Remember the pledge of allegiance says justice for all, not some.

Lastly, I will speak on the hashtag, #WhyWeCantWait. This is another hashtag created by the African American Policy Forum to applaud the White House for creating a program for men and boys of color, but to tell them that we will not wait [for them] to work with men and boys only to receive what remains. The trickle down policy did not work when it was called ‘Reaganomics and it is obviously not working now because black women and girls are still struggling. Most of us use social media, therefore I urge all of you [who do] to follow the hashtags #WhyWeCantWait and #SayHerName. It will bring tears to your eyes to see what is happening to black women and girls in this country. Such as the Daniel Holtzclaw who was an Oklahoma police officer convicted of raping thirteen black women, which was undocumented in on major news networks. It is critical that you begin to work towards being a better ally with your black classmates and women and girls like them across the nation. We are the catalyst for change in the country. We have the power to break the silence on racial injustices across this country. Thank you for taking up this work. I will leave with a quote from former Black Panther Party member Assata Shakur “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other, and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” (Assata Shakur)


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