

WHY DO SMART BLACK GIRLS GET IN TROUBLE?

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ABSTRACT

The question of why smart Black girls get in trouble is in need of an answer, particularly when the answer is provided from a smart Black girl's perspective. In the past decade, researchers have suggested that school bonds amongst students and between students and adults can have a direct impact on the success of the student (Roorda, 2011). This research is particularly relevant as it pertains to school bonds for high achieving students of color within urban school environments (Archer-Banks, 2012; Eisele, 2009). Directly related to this conversation is how school bonds or teacher-student relationships are impacted by school discipline policies and how these policies affect student performance and perception towards school. The school discipline research speaks to clear disparities which suggest that students of color are disproportionately targeted and are frequently given more severe punishments than their peers (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Kinsler, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Townsend, 2000). While Black boys surpass all other students in terms of disproportionate disciplinary sanctions in school, Black girls are not far behind as the most highly targeted race amongst female students (Black et al., 2011; Jordan et al., 2009; Monroe, 2005). With the questions: how do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues and 2) what effect does the institution's discipline of them or their experience of that discipline have on their future aspirations, this study builds on the literature about the self-expressed experiences of African American girls by interviewing eight participants who fit the seemingly contradictory criteria of being high achieving students involved in excessive disciplinary infractions. The study finds that students identify two key areas as propellers of their misbehavior: a contentious teacher-student relationship and personal stress caused by home related issues or negative relationships with peers. Students expressed clear frustration with the discipline policies and felt that past

discipline practices did not consider what caused misbehavior resulting in unfair discipline consequences. In fact, students often labeled the school as being unaware of their true self. Despite the high frequency of their involvement with the discipline system, most participants' view of their personal self was not negatively impacted and all students had positive views of their future success.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Janet Powell, who always told me I was “The Best” and to my father, Rev. William L. Powell who demonstrated for me a real-life example of true greatness. This dissertation is also dedicated to all of the little “bad” Black girls who haven’t yet seen the awesome beauty in their strong personalities.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, researchers have suggested that school bonds amongst students and between students and adults can have a direct impact on the success of the student (Roorda, 2011). This research is particularly relevant as it pertains to school bonds for students of color within urban school environments (Archer-Banks, 2012; Eisele, 2009). According to Roorda, a positive relationship with teachers and other adults in the building can directly impact the students' grades and work habits as well as their sense of belonging in the school environment. This ultimately impacts successful performance as a student (Osterman, 2000). Related to this research is how school bonds or teacher-student relationships are impacted by school discipline policies and how these policies affect student performance and perception towards school.

Like the criminal justice system, there are clear disparities in school discipline research which suggest that students of color are disproportionately targeted and are frequently given more severe punishments than their peers (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Kinsler, 2010; Monroe, 2005; Townsend, 2000). While Black boys surpass all subgroups of students in terms of being the recipients of disproportionate policies in schools (Monroe, 2005), Black girls are not far behind as the most highly targeted race amongst female students (Black et al., 2011; Jordan et al., 2009). Researchers have asserted that a possible underlying reason for this discrepancy amongst Black girls is due to assumptions about femininity and a belief that the behavior of Black girls is in opposition to these set gender beliefs and values (Morris, 2007). As a result of this prejudice, school employees misinterpret the cause of student behavior, specifically the behavior of Black female students, which has led to an increase in the amount of punishments given out (Black, 2011; Pugh-Lily, 2001).

Within this discussion of factors that contribute to student performance, the conversation around high achieving students is equally pertinent. Research has suggested that high-achieving students are also impacted by the connection of school bonds as well as parental involvement and community environment (Daly, 2008; Stewart et al., 2007). Although high achieving students amongst other races tend to reach higher levels of success than their peers, this is not always the case for high achieving Black students (Hoxby, 2013). As a result of this talent-loss, the negative cycle of social stratification continues (Blau 2004; Niu et al., 2008). Research on what needs to happen in order to better support students in urban areas has expanded greatly in the past decade finding that the combination of positive home, school and community factors are paramount to the success of these students (Byrd & Chavous, 2009;Daly, 2008).

The present study seeks to bridge the gap in the literature between studies of high-achieving students and students who find themselves involved in the school discipline systems. The rarity of these marginal labels intersecting has resulted in high-achieving students who are involved in the school discipline system being a lost group of voices amongst literature about students in urban areas. Focusing on a specific gender, female, adds yet another element to this nexus of intersecting labels. This study will build on the literature about the self-expressed experiences of African American ¹girls and will provide a voice for this sub-group of students by exploring personal narratives of those who reside in the center of these marginally intersected spaces (Belenky et al., 1997; Polleck, 2010; Winn, 2011; Wissman, 2008).

¹ For the purpose of this study, African American and Black will be used interchangeably in reference to people of African descent residing in the United States.

Statement of the Problem

Research has shown that students of color in urban areas who demonstrate the same academic capabilities are not reaching the same levels of post-secondary success as their white peers (Daly, 2008; Stern, 2013; Stewart, 2007). The major arguments that have been asserted as the reason behind this gap in postsecondary success are the negative impact of living in an urban environment, the relationship this group of students has with school personnel and the level of familial interest and involvement (Eisele, 2009; Roorda, 2011; Tate & Cunningham, 2010). As a result of school, community, and home factors that do not support high achieving students in applying to and attending college or the same notable colleges that their white peers are attending, there is ultimately a loss of talent from students with significant potential (Hoxby, 2013). Alongside (but not along with) the research discussing the gap in success amongst high achieving subgroups of students, recent research has also highlighted the significant gap in school discipline policies towards children of color (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Jordan, 2009). Inequitable discipline policies result in students of color receiving a significantly greater number of suspensions and expulsions, as much as six times greater, than their white peers. The fear of the result of these unequal discipline practices has fueled discussion around the school-to-prison pipeline and how it affects the future outcomes for youth of color (Monroe, 2005).

The combination of the above research paints a bleak picture for the smart Black girl who gets in trouble. Academically, she is less likely to reach the same level of success as her white peers and from the discipline standpoint, she is more likely to be suspended and expelled which removes her from the academic environment in which she is already at a disadvantage due to her color, gender and, at times, her social economic status. Hence, regardless of her academic ability and natural intellect, she is placed in the position of not obtaining the background knowledge

needed to be nationally, or internationally, competitive. This perpetuation of social stratification not only continues a negative cycle, thus placing one group in the position of always being subordinate to the other, but it strips the country of its brightest stars (Blau, 2004; Niu et al., 2008).

Investigating challenges faced by high achieving African American female students should continue in order to combat this negative cycle. There is a clear and real fear about what can, and cannot, happen for and to this often overlooked subgroup of students. So far research has started to scratch the surface of smart Black girls and Black girls who get in trouble, but these sections have not intersected in the recent studies. In order to understand what contributes to the continued academic success of some students and not others, researchers should continue to intensely explore the various subgroups within the realm of high achieving students. In order to shed insight on the impacts of discipline policies on the students, researchers should go beyond discipline records and work with students who have found success in other aspects of the school life. The present study seeks to do this by diving into the world of a subgroup of high achieving students, specifically high-achieving Black female students impacted by the discipline system. These students are often ignored since they do not easily fit one label, successful student, or the other, “at-risk” troubled student. This study intends to add to the body of research that explores both the nuances of high achieving Black students and the impact of discipline policies on Black students by focusing on a specific subgroup, smart Black girls, and unpacking their thoughts and opinions on what impacts their everyday lives.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of a marginalized subgroup of high achieving Black female high school students as it pertains to their experiences with and perspectives about school discipline. The rarity of discussing students who fit into both subgroups, high achieving and receivers of a high amount of discipline consequences, provides a clear need for this study. The intersection of these marginalized labels results in this subgroup of students having a unique experience that is worth studying. Additionally, the possible impact of studying this subgroup of students has the potential to shed light on two key areas of focus, high achieving Black students and Black students in the discipline system, within the current body of educational research. Lastly, the qualitative approach of this study allows for the outcome of this research to come directly from the mouths and minds of the very students it seeks to explore- thus resulting in the collective voice of this subgroup joining the larger conversation within the world of education and academic research.

There were two ultimate goals of this study. The first goal was to offer a safe space for the Black female student to express her viewpoints regarding her personal experiences at school. Research suggests that the construction of a safe space is important in order for Black female students to safely express their opinions (Belenky et al., 1997; Polleck, 2010; Wissman ,2007;). As a group that biologically inhabits a dually marginalized position, the ability and opportunity to openly express their viewpoints is not a luxury but a necessity in order for this group to develop self-pride and confidence in their ability. Wissman argues “As young women both in and outside of school navigate a variety of oppressive social discourses and practices in their journeys toward adulthood, the crafting of educational arenas responsive to their desires and needs to "make a way" within critical and supportive communities therefore seems even more

essential” (p 347). The creation of a safe space within an education environment allows this subgroup of students to share their voices and their personal experiences in a way that is unthreatened. While the creation of a safe space speaks to the physical environment, it really emphasizes the practice of encouraging and allowing for open, honest and unrestricted communication and expression. It is this sort of space that the study sought to create with the students as a means of providing them with much needed validation and support.

Additionally, this study sought to give students the opportunity to discuss the effectiveness and impact of school discipline policies on their personal view of self. Since school discipline systems are structured with students in mind but not in positions of power, disciplinary practices do not always consider the lasting implications of such discipline policies on students (Crenshaw et al., 2015). By placing the recipients of such practices in the center of the conversation, this study seeks to introduce a new but relevant voice to the dialogue around school discipline. In her groundbreaking article, Delpit (1988) highlights how the “culture of power” between the dominant White middle-class and the “other” comes into play within the classroom with both educators and students of color feeling as if their voice is silenced or not heard when it comes to verbal interaction with White educators. Delpit asserts that it is their lack of knowledge regarding the cultural rules and norms of the dominant class which even further contributes to this silencing. It is this very culture of power that this study seeks to interrupt by placing the normally unheard Black girls in the position of doing the speaking. In this safe space, this subgroup was given the opportunity to speak on their own terms and in their own way without having to overtly navigate the culture of power that exists in many of their classrooms. It is in this space that students were provided a chance to speak about their own lived experiences on their own terms.

Significance

This study is important to educators who can use this research as a basis for more informed decisions regarding how to best serve and respond to smart Black girls who get in trouble. By bringing the voice and perspective of the student to the center of the conversation, decisions that are more representative of student voice and opinion can be made regarding discipline practices and procedures. This study is central to other researchers as an addition to the small, but growing, body of literature exploring the experiences of Black girls (Morris, 2007; Polleck, 2010; Wissman, 2008). The present study will contribute to literature by introducing a new voice to the dialogue around the experiences of Black girls. While researchers have studied high achieving Black students (Archer-Banks et al., 2012; Stern, 2013;) and Black girls experiencing discipline (Black et al., 2011; Jordan ,2009), literature has not yet looked at students who occupy both of these labels. The present study will provide yet another perspective of the silenced Black voice discussed by Delpit, Wissman and Polleck. Similarly, this study seeks to provide a safe space in which these students can be heard without judgment and the threat of discipline. Morris asserts that Black girls are often given consequences for being “loud” which is yet another form of silencing. This study joins the group of researchers which seek to not only provide a space for the girls to talk but take the time to actively listen and report back (and out) what they are saying.

Research Questions

Understanding the dynamic of smart Black girls who experience discipline was a difficult journey of identifying the right question that will lead to the most insightful answers. Originally, I sought to simply ask – Why did you do that? However, that question assumes that the students

have already arrived in a space in which they have self-identified that they occupy a contradictory position and that they have reflected in a way to answer that complex question with clarity. Additionally, the above question assumes automatic wrongdoing on behalf of the students. That is not the goal of this study. The present study seeks to uncover what students think about their behavior and how these thoughts and their experience with the discipline systems impact their view of self. Their position of being a smart Black girl was determined by the criteria outlined in Chapter 3 and is an assumption that is intentionally not reflected in the questions. The study seeks for students to share their experiences and self-identify how those experiences influence their personal view of self and their future aspirations. As a result of this intention, the below questions surfaced as the most appropriate research questions to drive this study.

- 1) How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors, especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues?
- 2) What affect does school disciplinary experiences have on their future aspirations?

Understanding the impact of school policies on the high-achieving Black student provides us with more information on how to best serve this student. There is a clear reality that talent is lost amongst Black communities as a result of inappropriate school policies for this population. This study sought to provide more information around how a specific school policy, discipline systems and practices, impacts the high achieving Black student. Recent literature and popular discussion has highlighted the negative consequences of severe discipline policies on students as well as the large prevalence of these policies negatively impacting students of color specifically. This study provided a platform for the recipients of these practices to express their own views on

how discipline systems and routines impacted their self-perspective and future goals. In order to understand where this study nests itself, it is important to paint a landscape of past and recent literature that has explored various aspects discussed within the present study. The following chapter will provide a deeper dive into some of the literature already mentioned as well as engage with other existing literature relevant to this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a synthesis of literature in the following areas: charter schools, adolescent development, high academic achievement, school discipline and qualitative studies on Black girls. Each section will provide a piece to the puzzle of understanding the study participants as well as the backdrop of their lived realities. The first section, Theoretical Framework, provides the lens and the assumptions on which this study was founded. Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 2000, 1989) suggests that the individual encountering the lived experience is automatically an expert of his or her own experiences. This framework does not assume that a person who has not lived the experience can produce more knowledge than the individual who has actually lived it. Due to this set of assumptions, it will be solely the thoughts and opinions of the actual participants which will provide the answers to the above research questions.

The section on charter schools dives into the history of the charter school movement and provides detail around a set of schools referred to as “no excuses” charter schools (Casey, 2013). The fact that the study site is a part of a network of schools referred to as “no excuses” cannot be ignored. While not the focus of this study, it is assumed that certain experiences that the participants have had may possibly be due to the type of school they attend. The research questions focus on the participants’ personal experiences but it is necessary for the reader to understand the context in which these experiences have happened in order to have an authentic picture of the participants’ school encounters.

The remaining sections, Adolescent Development, Academic Achievement, School Discipline and Qualitative Studies on African American girls, dive into the research surrounding the specific study participants. Adolescent Development provides the sociological backdrop of girls who are in this age group. Academic Achievement discusses the factors that researchers have argued contribute to high or low academic achievement amongst African-American students. School Discipline discusses research findings surrounding school discipline policies and practices and how students of color are often disproportionately targeted as well as the variance in school consequences given to African American students. Finally, the Qualitative Studies on African American girls discusses the small remaining group of qualitative studies that have targeted this specific group beyond studies that focused on one of the above-mentioned areas. Ultimately, the participants in this study occupy multiple spaces – they are Black female adolescents who are high performing academically while also having a higher number of school discipline infractions than their peers. These multiple labels place them in a very specific position that has not yet received attention in research.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of Black Americans in a space of un-belonging is one that has been theorized by several scholars (Belenky, 1997; DuBois, 1903; West 1999). Black Feminist Thought has specified this focus by targeting the voice and unique positioning of Black women. Black Feminist Thought seeks to create a framework that honors the knowledge of the everyday Black woman thus creating a theory that is developed and influenced by the participants of the study (Collins, 2000). According to Hill Collins, instead of relying solely on members of the academy as the sole intellectual proprietors of the knowledge validation process, this theory gives equal credit to the women who have never seen, or will never see, the inside of a university. Due to

this acknowledgement of the everyday woman, this theory is dynamic as it is directly affected by the varied context and standpoint of its inhabitants. The everyday woman is connected to the identity of the intellectual woman (also acknowledging that these identities can exist within the same person) to provide a collective identity and voice (Collins, 1989). The group identity formed by the combination of these two identities creates a complete picture that authentically represents the lived group and individual experiences of the Black woman as a collective. Black Feminist Thought builds on Alice Walker's womanism by prioritizing the perspective of the Black woman. However, this theoretical framework does not seek to join the feminist conversation in the same sense of womanism, but prioritizes how the Black woman's occupation of multiple marginal identities leads to a life that is uniquely different from others who may occupy other marginal identities.

It is this collective identity that serves as the intellectual crux behind Black Feminist Thought. There have been several studies that have used this theoretical framework to study the intersection of marginal identities and bring voice to those women whose voices are often lost in the academy, such as women in rural areas, domestic workers and women intellectuals who are ignored in their area of study (Bolles, 2013; Madison, 1993; Norris, 2012). However, one area that has not been sufficiently explored is how this theoretical framework can be used to discuss not just the unique positioning of Black women, but how the intersection of these marginal identities converge when they are imposed on Black girls. The present study seeks to focus less on identities as the term identity assumes personal acknowledgment and awareness by the participant. However, this study does seek to study participants who occupy multiple marginal labels by using this theoretical lens to study the lived experiences of Black women before they

actually become women. Central to this study are three key components of Black Feminist Thought: *standpoint*, *self-definition* and the *knowledge-validation process*.

Standpoint – Like a jigsaw puzzle, the concept of a group's standpoint within Black Feminist Thought speaks to how the individual and collective experience of a subgroup such as Black women, paints a collective picture (Collins 2000). Due to the commonality of historical and current experiences, Black Feminist Thought asserts that there is a group identity that emerges. Standpoint also speaks against the oppressive model in which a group identity is developed due to either their lack of independence from the dominant viewpoint or their awareness and submission to the dominant viewpoint. Standpoint, in contrast, is the position of the apparent subordinate group being the dominant group within the intersecting oppressive identities. This leads to the group perspective coming from their individual and collective experiences as they experience them and not from how the dominant societal viewpoint thinks they should experience them. According to Hill Collins, the only people who can speak with authenticity to this standpoint or particular positioning are those who reside in it, not those who define it from the outside looking in.

The idea of standpoint is not unique to just Black Feminist Thought but is also a concept used in Dorothy Smith's feminist standpoint theory (Smith, 2005). Similarly, Smith speaks of standpoint in terms of the positionality of the everyday woman's experiences (Allan, 2010). However, one area in which Smith and Collins diverge is in the ultimate goal of this theoretical concept. Whereas Smith uses the notion of standpoint as a vehicle to critique the social text or knowledge that is produced without the input of its subjects, Collins' standpoint is not only a vehicle used to critique but is also an ultimate outcome in Black Feminist Thought. Since the

theory seeks to develop a collective voice that privileges the specific standpoint of this subgroup, standpoint is both the center and the goal of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000).

Self-Definition –The concept of self-definition within Black Feminist Thought speaks to the actual process in which this group defines themselves. Resonant of DuBois' double consciousness, self-definition is the awareness of two identities – one which is presented in front of the dominant society and the other which is seen only in front of other members of the subordinate community (DuBois, 1903). However, unlike double consciousness, the reality of these dual identities does not create a tension but a level of empowerment according to Black Feminist Thought. Self-definition asserts that awareness of the controlling images placed on Black women (mammy, welfare mom, sexually-craved, etc.) are not internalized due to the Black women's ability to separate these images from who they define themselves to actually be. Hence the images of the dominant society are not as internally damaging when self-definition is in play. They serve as a mold that is evident in society, but not one that provides a true depiction of who the Black woman sees herself to actually be (Collins, 2000).

Knowledge-Validation Process – Instead of asserting that the process of knowledge creation depends solely on those in the academy, and subsequently, the dominant class, Black Feminist Thought challenges the Eurocentric model of knowledge validation. Instead, this theory asserts that the creation of knowledge is not dependent on the approval of the White dominant class, but is created in the regular practices of the everyday Black woman. Instead of depending on the academy as a whole, this notion asserts that the Black woman intellectual and her dialogue with the everyday Black woman is all that is needed to assert and affirm knowledge claims because of the standpoint and experiences of this group as a collective (Collins, 1989).

This study uses Black Feminist Thought as the lens through which the participants are viewed and how the data are collected and analyzed. Instead of interpreting the “unsaid” during analysis, this study analyzed what students are actually saying by identifying repeated ideas and highlighting trends that emerged from student responses. The student participants in this study are the experts of their lived experiences and of their own opinions. As a researcher in this study, my goal is to serve as the conduit for these lived experiences to become part of the research. I did not assume to know the answers to these questions but trusted that through a series of interviews and a questionnaire, the student participants will provide answers to the questions asked. The use of standpoint, self-definition and the knowledge-validation process are the key levers that are pulled from Black Feminist Thought which supports the stance and the lens of both the data collection and data analysis.

The following section will shift away from the underlying assumption used as a driving force in the study to the context that is necessary to understand the site in which the study took place. While not a component of the goals of this study, charter schools, specifically “no excuses” charter schools, create a unique context that cannot be ignored. The section that follows will provide a brief history of the start of charter schools which emerged from the school choice movement, will then dive into what it means to be a “no excuses” charter school, and will finally end with the major critiques that this brand of charter schools has received.

“No Excuses” brand of Charter Schools

In 1985, the state of Minnesota signed the country’s first school choice legislation (Fossy, 1992; Wong & Langevin, 2007). This was considered revolutionary, because the assumption surrounding school choice policies is that this system promotes voluntary school integration and increased student achievement statistics (Evans, 2010; Wells, 1996). Wells also believes that

there are positive longitudinal effects associated with integrated schools and school choice policies, such as increased student postsecondary matriculation and graduation rates, along with better career advancement opportunities. One of the school choice outcomes catalyzed by this legislation was the birth of charter schools. Charter schools, which are now in half the states and number more than five hundred across the country, operate as independently organized public schools within a district and under a contract (charter) from a state or local school board as to how they will specifically be held accountable for improved student achievement (Ramirez, 1998). Although charter schools are an alternative school choice option for parents, these academic entities are still considered public academic entities, primarily because they are publicly funded despite not receiving the same per pupil expenditures as traditional public schools (Center for Education Reform, 2012; Paquette, 2005; Finn, Hudson Institute & And, 1996). Charter schools are either individually owned or operated by a sponsoring group, such as a local school district or state education agency (Fusarelli, 1997). Some of the benefits associated with charter schools focus around: (a) the operational autonomy they are provided, (b) its ability to determine how the school's academic success will be measured, and (c) its capacity to offer smaller learning communities and classrooms for students (Davis, 2013; Fusarelli, 1997; Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014).

Currently, charter schools are a national education reform priority in half of the country's states (Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014). Although the 1985 Minnesota legislation marked the beginning of charter schools, it was not until California followed suit in 1992 that charter schools began spreading nationally (Rebarber & Zgainer, 2014). The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2013) documented that in the 2012 – 2013 academic year, over 2.2 million children were enrolled into 6,004 charter school settings. The Center for Education Reform

(2013) also report that during the early part of 2013, 42 states including the District of Columbia had authorized charter school statutes. According to many critics, the charter school movement has posed a distinctive form of “competition for traditional public schools, whose primary challenges until now have been choice in the form of residential mobility and private schooling” (Davis, 2013, p. 3).

Charter school enrollment is generally based off parents opting in to sending their students to the school and opting out of the public school. Proponents of this choice model argue that this market-based strategy pushes low-performing schools to improve since students are no longer guaranteed (Lacireno-Pacquet et al., 2002). Opponents of this choice model have questioned the “choice” aspect with claims that enrollment strategies such as the lottery, testing requirements and other institutional practices give charter schools the freedom of cherry-picking their students (Weiler & Vogel, 2015). These arguments have often been used to question the validity of high-performing charter schools’ success.

Bumping up against this argument is the existence of turnaround charter schools. Turnaround charter schools still have the independence of a regular charter school but enrollment is based off pre-set zoning and feeding patterns as determined by the state and county. Turnaround schools serve as the assigned public school and do not have the luxury of “influencing” enrollment in the way that opponents argue a traditional charter school can. However, turnaround schools, specifically turnaround charter schools, have received their own level of criticism. Stuit (2012) argues that turnarounds are loosely characterized by two criteria: significantly low performing schools and large spikes in student achievement. However, Stuit finds that turnaround schools do not, in fact, show significant improvement in student

achievement as a whole beyond some isolated cases which are used to champion the cause of all school turnarounds (Stuit, 2012).

Within the charter school movement arose a group that has commonly been termed as “no excuses” charter schools. In popular reference, this term refers to a group of schools which use strict and controversial discipline policies. According to the website of Foundations Academy, a “no excuses” charter organization, Samuel Casey Carter (2013) has been credited with coining the term “no excuses” in his book *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*. Casey’s study sought to highlight successful schools in high-poverty areas and Foundations Academy defines “no excuses” as a set of schools which “collectively refuse to make poverty, race, language skills, prior schooling or any other factors an excuse for academic failure” (2013). Casey’s study highlights private, parochial, traditional public schools and charter schools, including several Knowledge is Power Program schools, (KIPP). In his book, Casey provides a profile of twenty-one schools which are located in low-income areas but have consistently high results in terms of academic performance on the state-wide exams. Casey’s study found that there were seven common traits of these high-achieving schools. Amongst these traits are clear measurable goals, emphasis on testing, high expectations for teacher performance and high expectations for student effort and behavior. Interestingly enough, despite the term “no excuses” current use of describing charter schools, Casey’s original study highlighted only three charter schools in comparison to fifteen traditional public schools and Casey himself is affiliated with a group of faith-based Catholic schools. Regardless, in recent years, the term “no excuses” is often used to characterize high-performing charter schools that use questionable and often criticized discipline policies. This labeling has resulted in the

reception of multiple critics such as Joanne Golan (2015), who are either not in favor of the charter school movement or what is now seen as the “no excuses” approach or both.

Several schools and management organizations often referenced under the “no excuses” banner include KIPP, Uncommon, Mastery, Achievement First and several others. Though KIPP first opened its doors in 1994, Achievement First in 1998 and Uncommon formed from existing high-performing charters in the Northeast, the spread of the movement took off in 2000 and aimed to not allow any “excuses” to stand in the way of academic achievement. The spread of “no excuses” charter schools unsurprisingly coincided with the passing of *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 which emphasized accountability as measured through standardized test scores, and subsequently, awarded successful schools with monetary rewards and penalized unsuccessful schools with the threat of closure. Ultimately, NCLB’s goal was to “close the achievement gap...so that no child is left behind” (Thernstrom, 2004, iv). Coupled with a “no excuses” movement that specifically aimed to close the academic achievement gap amongst low income students of color in urban cities and their white counterparts in suburban areas, the era of *No Child Left Behind* led to a strong sense of measurable accountability and academic progress as well as a heightened sense of urgency to be successful in a short period of time.

Generally, “no excuses” charter schools are loosely characterized by specific traits such as “discipline and comportment...and selective teacher hiring” (Angrist, Pathak & Walters, 2013). “No excuses” charter schools are also characterized by an overt college-driven culture as well as extended school days and years (Boyd, Caleb, Maranto, 2014). Though lauded by the Obama Administration for being successful in actually closing the achievement gap across the nation, this group of schools has no shortage of passionate critics. Representative of these critiques, Golan (2015) argues that this type of charter schools creates students who struggle with

“middle class social skills” because they are “taught to monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority rather than take initiative, assert themselves, and interact with ease with their teachers” (p. 104). This form of critique has been echoed by other educator reformers; Goodman (2013) states “Through constant monitoring, eliminating behaviors only marginally relevant to necessary school decorum, and erecting a series of negative consequences for ‘bad choices,’ the schools subdue discordant impulses and keep students narrowly focused on the tests that are believed to be gateways for their futures. Although the CMOs may successfully deliver higher student scores, the success comes with significant costs” (Goodman, p. 95). This level of critique has not gone ignored, prompting schools, such as KIPP and Mastery, to begin exploring cultural context and considering the impact of such strict discipline policies on primarily low-income minority youth. It is the application as well as critique of discipline policies that is most relevant to this study. While many researchers and education reformers have looked at these discipline policies and projected the impact on students from an adult perspective, this study seeks to look at the school discipline policies as they pertain to a specific group of students and their lived experiences in a “no excuses” school context.

The following sections shift focus from the outside context to more participant-based aspect of the study in terms of adolescent development, academic success, experiences with discipline and lived experience. These sections will provide the reader with the information necessary to understand the complete research backdrop relevant to the study.

Adolescent Development

In order to dig into a study that focuses on teenage girls, understanding the contributing factors to the actions and internalized behavior of this specific age group is necessary. There are several factors that researchers have suggested can directly impact youth in the adolescent stage:

parenting, peers and social community (Ary, 1999; Battle & Coates, 2004; Blair, 2000; Blake, 2010; Morris, 2001; Peterson, 1988; Murray, 2011; Smetena et al., 2006; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Although there is not a consensus on how parenting impacts adolescent development, whether it impacts adolescent development is rarely contended. Parenting surfaced as one of the most often cited influencing factors in terms of adolescent behavior and future success. On the other hand, literature on the influence of peers and the social community was often mentioned but rarely contained consensus on the impact of these factors.

Parenting. The impact of parenting on adolescent development is an area that is often referenced in studies on adolescents. During this phase of life, particularly in the shift from early adolescence (11-14) to middle adolescence (15-17), there is a clear strain which develops between the parent and the adolescent (Healthy Children, 2015; Smetena et al., 2006). While originally this strain has been attributed to biological factors that take place during the adolescent stages, more recently, research has argued that this strain and conflict has its origin in childhood and materializes more openly in the adolescent stage (Ary, 1999; Blair, 2000; Peterson, 1988; Smetena et al., 2006). The lasting impact of this conflict is influenced by other factors such as how the parents respond to the conflict and the level of conflict within the family structure. Families with consistently higher amounts of conflict tend to have lower parental involvement which can contribute to deviant behavior within the adolescent (Ary, 1999). Ultimately, the more positive association that parents have with their adolescents, the less likely there is to be a great amount of conflict, the more likely adolescents are to share their deepest secrets with their parents and the more likely the parental influence will positively impact adolescent behavior (Blair, 2000; Smetena et al., 2006;). Conflict between adolescents and parents can also be attributed to a form of mimicking in which the child mimics the parents' social interaction. On

the other hand, the notion of a stormy adolescent/parent relationship is argued by Peterson to be unfounded and an exaggeration. Peterson attributes the sense of conflict more to the biological changes caused by puberty over the cause of a generational gap and lack of understanding as attributed by other researchers.

Researchers have also argued that there are marked differences in the adolescent/parent relationship when it comes to ethnic differences. Blake and colleagues (2006) sought to determine if ethnic groups differed in parental response to their daughters' use of physical, verbal and relational aggression. The study was particularly interesting as it pertains to this study since it considered how families responded to their daughters' implementation of punishable behavior in a school setting. The research argued that White parents were more likely to discipline for verbal aggression than other types of aggression and that White parents have more influence over their daughter's physical and aggressive behavior. The research findings also suggested that the more Black parents disapproved of relational aggressive, the more their daughters' were likely to engage in it (Blake et al., 2010). Ultimately, the findings suggested that White parents showed a stronger disapproval of one form of aggressive behavior than others, while Black parents did not show a specific distinction in which forms of behavior were less acceptable.

Battle and Coates (2004) also tackled the topic of the parental/adolescent relationship in the Black community and sought to determine the impact of the parent relationship and social economic status on academic achievement. While seeking to determine how the single-parent household can impact academic achievement, Battle and Coates found that socioeconomic levels have a larger impact on academic achievement than parental configuration. Since parental configuration, single or two-parent households, can be a causal factor in the level of

socioeconomic status, it has a secondary, but not primary impact on the academic achievement reached by the student. More discussion on the effects of parenting outcomes on academic achievement is explored later in this chapter.

Peers -During adolescence, the relationship with peers becomes increasingly more important than other relationships, such as those with parents and other authority figures. At times, the relationship with peers is asserted as more powerful and influential than family ties. Steinberg and Morris (2001) argue that peer influence can be both positive and negative and that adolescents generally choose to hang out with peers that are similar to them. Any level of influence is due to admiration and respect and not coercion. Henceforth, the adolescent chooses his or her peer group and both the level of influence and type of influence that the peer group has is up to the individual adolescent. This suggests that adolescents dictate the types of friendships that they develop and the level of influence that each friendship has over their personal behavior – this argument places more autonomy for behavioral decisions in the hands of the adolescent and out of the hands of the peer group. Furthermore, the type of relationship that the adolescents have with their family can alleviate the significance of peer relationships. If an adolescent has a positive and close relationship with the parent, the impact of the peer relationship is less powerful and influential (Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Community - Surrounding communities and neighborhoods also impact adolescent development. Community ties for adolescents in neighborhoods with high poverty levels can directly or indirectly impact multiple factors such as identity development, academic achievement and self-harming thoughts and behavior (Elliot, 1996; Murray, 2011). The actual impact of the neighborhood, however, can be either positive or negative. However, it is not if teenagers who live in high poverty neighborhoods are ultimately impacted negatively by the

community itself since there are a variety of influencers that come into play. For example, when students were moved from high-poverty neighborhoods to low poverty neighborhoods, they only experienced a temporary spike in academic achievement. According to Murray, this suggests that social efficacy and social belonging to the neighborhood are also factors that can positively or negatively impact student academic achievement. However, in terms of self-esteem and opinion of self, youth in high poverty neighborhoods are more likely to show symptoms of depression and display an increase in amounts of suicide attempts. Girls are more likely than boys to display low self-esteem even though Black girls are more likely to display low self-esteem and have high academic achievement in comparison to Black boys (Perry, 2011).

While the reasons for parental influence vary, most researchers agree that parental involvement and relationships directly impact adolescent development (Blair, 2000; Smetena et al., 2006). Similarly, peer groups also directly impact the adolescent whether the influence is negative or positive (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). On the other hand, research is inconclusive on the impact of neighborhood on adolescents' perspective of self and argue that the impact of the surrounding community can be either direct or indirect and either negative or positive (Murray, 2011). Research also argues that while Black girls are more likely to achieve higher academic heights than their Black male peers, they are also more likely to demonstrate lower levels of self-esteem (Perry, 2011). Unfortunately, the low number of adolescent development studies on Black youth leaves a large gap of understanding in the adolescent development model of these marginal groups. Many studies use a comparative model in which Black adolescents are compared to their white peers or assume a deficient approach in focusing on negative behavior amongst Black teens. More significantly for this study, the lack of research on Black girls and their adolescent development leaves many questions unanswered.

Academic Achievement for African American Girls

Several studies have found that there are a variety of factors that contribute to high academic achievement (Archer-Banks et al., 2012; Stern, 2013). Current research argues that academic achievement for predominantly Black students is impacted by school bonds, parental involvement and neighborhood composition (Bird & Chavous, 2009; Daly, 2008; Stewart et al., 2007; Tate & Cunningham, 2010). Tate and Cunningham focused on students in urban areas and attributed strong academic achievement to parental involvement. Interestingly, this study found that high levels of parental involvement had a stronger correlation to high academic achievement amongst females over males. Research has also found that positive school bonds and student relationships with teachers are especially important for students of color in both low income and middle class areas (Eisele, 2009; Roorda, 2011).

Studies have also focused on factors that can contribute to low college aspirations amongst youth. Stewart et al. (2007) found that the structural characteristics of a neighborhood can have a direct impact on the college aspirations of its inhabitants, ultimately proposing that youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods are exposed to a larger number of risk factors. As a result, this study found that youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to have less competitive and positive goals for their future. Sampling majority middle-class students, Byrd and Chavous (2009) hypothesized that the more positive the neighborhood characteristics (in regards to income, resources and social mobility), the stronger the racial identity and consequently, the stronger the academic outcomes. However, they also found that the original hypothesis was only partially correct. In neighborhoods with a larger amount of resources and higher income, student identification with their racial identity did not translate into higher GPAs,

but the opposite. Yet, in areas with fewer amounts of resources and slightly lower income, student identification with their racial identity and pride did have higher GPAs.

Likewise, Daly and her colleagues (2008) juxtapose the effects of what they consider to be risk factors, “perceived neighborhood crime/delinquency problems and neighborhood incivilities” (p. 64) with what they label as protective factors, “teacher support, family support and peer support” (p 64). Exploring multiple factors, this study focused on the notion of school engagement, which considers how student in-school actions ultimately contribute to the students’ academic performance in school and overall academic outcomes. The findings revealed that age plays a significant role in how perceptions affect student engagement. In younger students, perceived social support showed the ability to combat the negative effects of the environment, while in older students, perceived social support had no effect on student engagement and the neighborhood played a more influential role. More specifically, neighborhood incivilities were reported to have more of an effect on school engagement than crime/delinquency. The authors reported that due to the seeming contradictions in the data, no conclusions can be made from the study and more research must be conducted.

Similarly, there are several qualitative studies that look at factors that influence student academic and life success. Stevens (1997) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study on a group of African American females ages 11-14. Data were collected through participant observation as well as meetings with administration, staff and parents. There were two major themes that came out as influential of academic and life success – that of personal identity and self-efficacy. From these themes, Stevens asserts there is a form of disconnection between Black females and their parents during this developmental time of the adolescent’s life, a disconnection not dissimilar from the tension discussed in studies that do not specify race (Blair, 2000; Smetena et al., 2006.

According to Stevens, the development of life “requires that adolescents assume complex differentiated identities” that leads to these “discrepant realities.”(p. 162.) Archer-Banks and colleagues focused on the same group of students and found that African American high school girls attributed their high achievement to familial support and school relationships despite finding fault and possible bias with school policies and practices (Archer-Banks et al.,2012). Henceforth, while Black girls may experience personal tension and difficulty with their parents, a positive relationship with their parents or other family members is a key lever to academic success. Archer-Banks argues that even when students have difficulty with school personnel or a school discipline system, students felt they could still be successful if they have strong familial support.

In a similar vein, Caroline Hoxby’s (2013), “The Missing One-Offs: The Hidden Supply of Low-Income, High Achieving Students,” sought out the possible rationale regarding why high-achieving low-income students are not attending top colleges. Hoxby suggests one of the key reasons why poor students attend selective colleges infrequently is because such students do not apply to these colleges. There were several possible reasons provided for this reality, such as students have a lack of awareness about the colleges because college representatives do not target their schools, students tend to only apply to colleges they have heard of and students are under the impression that they would spend more money attending these colleges (whereas this may or may not be the case if they attend a local college instead without receiving aid). Hoxby’s work validates the study of this group of high-achieving students by highlighting the possible consequence that can happen as a result of these students succeeding academically but struggling to socially navigate their world inside the school building.

Awareness of the importance of parental involvement, school bonds and neighborhood characteristics informs this study by providing relevant context regarding the factors which contribute to student success and student in-school behavior. The present study seeks to add to the body of literature that discusses what influences student academic and social behavior by including the actual student as a determining factor in this discussion. While speaking to the academic achievement of the student subgroup that this study targeted, the majority of the current literature does not target the complexity of these marginal labels as they may manifest themselves within a school environment. Many high achieving students are viewed as a subgroup of successful stories because they have learned how to navigate their complex world in terms of academic success.. However, the Hoxby (2013) study has revealed that achieving within the school building is not enough. What has yet to be explored in depth is how students who demonstrate the same academic capability as their high-achieving peers describe and define their experiences when their social world or behavioral actions are challenged within the school environment, thus placing them within a marginal space unlike that of their academically successful classmates who do not experience the same challenge.

School Discipline

The topic of school disciplinary practices and their effects, particularly as it pertains to students of color, is one that has required thorough investigation. Students of color are often the target of disproportionate discipline practices which has led to a domino effect of negative consequences for the students affected (Black et al., 2011; Jordan, 2009; Monroe, 2005). More specifically, Black students often lead the pack in terms of school discipline referrals and punishments (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Jordan, 2009). When paired against all students, Black boys, specifically, have surpassed both white students and Black girls in terms of discipline

referrals. As a result, this has led to the criminalization of Black males and a continuance of race and class privilege (Monroe, 2005). When more severe punishments are in play, such as expulsion, suspension and other discipline practices that remove the student from the classroom, the results are students missing out on learning which leads to them falling further behind in their studies as well as students developing a mistrust of school employees and policies (Townsend, 2000).

When separated by gender, Black girls also exceed their white peers in the amount of discipline referrals or discipline practices enacted (Crenshaw et al., 2015). A possible reason provided for this disproportionality is what is considered to be an attack on white femininity (Black et al., 2011). According to Black and her colleagues, what is seen as aggressive and unfeminine-like behavior demonstrated by Black girls threatens the teachers' perception of how women should behave, thus resulting in students being punished for this behavior. The 2015 report by Kimberle Crenshaw and colleagues titled "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Unprotected" support findings regarding the large disparity in discipline policies and its impact on Black girls. This report argued that the suspension rates of Black girls not only exceed those of their white counterparts but that Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended than White girls. Emphasizing the reality of the school-to-prison pipeline that many have used as a justification against suspension and expulsion policies, particularly towards Black boys, this report provided a stringent critique of zero-tolerance policies (those which theorize and emphasize a lack of or "zero" tolerance for specific misbehaviors in a school setting) and called for more attention to be paid towards the impact and increasing disparity of these practices on Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

While disproportionate discipline practices are often enacted at the teacher-level, this is not necessarily the same for how punishments are handed down at the administrative level. John Kinsler (2010) found that despite the prevalence of disproportionate disciplinary referrals within an entire public school district, there was no sign of evident bias in how principals implemented disciplinary practices once students are sent to them. This suggests that the reason behind the disproportionate findings amongst students of color lies between the student-to-teacher relationship and not the student-to-administrator relationship. Kinsler's finding supports arguments of the importance of the teacher-student bond in impacting student behavior and consequently, student involvement with the discipline system. Kinsler's finding also suggests that the problem with disproportionate discipline practices is at the level of teachers who enact the discipline policies and not necessarily the administrators who may dictate the discipline policy.

Student perception regarding disciplinary practices has been found to have an effect on student behavior or the continuation of what is considered to be student misbehavior. May (2011) identifies two frameworks that are generally used in regards to school discipline, the *traditional deterrence* framework and the *normative perspective* framework. The *traditional deterrence* framework suggests that the implementation of harsh punishments for student behavior leads to students being deterred from committing disruptive acts. The *normative perspective* framework suggests that the students' commitment and respect for the authoritative figures and the rules leads to a greater deterrence from committing punishable behavior. According to May, schools which have students who perceive discipline practices to be unfair have a higher amount of student disruptions within the classroom than schools who have students who do not have a negative perception of school discipline policies.

Several studies have contributed to extant knowledge of student perception regarding discipline practices as it pertains to Black students (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). Fordham asserts that the labeling of a Black student being “loud” is a form of silencing. In order to be taken seriously, Fordham suggests Black female students must at all costs avoid being labeled as a loud Black girl and consequently retreat to a position of invisibility within the academic environment. Not only has this group of students have to make themselves invisible in order to avoid this negative labeling, educators have also taken actions to ensure the silencing of this group of students. By employing practices that push these girls to act like a “lady,” educators have blatantly and latently implied that being “loud” is a negative trait (Morris, 2007). Other studies have taken this notion of “loudness” and discussed how Black women have subverted this definition by using loudness as a form of resistance (Pugh-Lily, 2001). Instead of adhering to the notion that Black students must be quiet in order to be taken seriously, Pugh-Lily suggests being aggressive has also been used as a means of combatting what is perceived to be a hostile and unsupportive environment.

While the current research around school discipline takes a necessary step in discussing how school discipline affects students of color, and more specifically, female students of color, there is still work that needs to be done. This study adds to the area of research that seeks to use a qualitative approach by deep diving into the lived experiences of this subgroup of students. Additionally, this study speaks to a group of students that the current research does not yet lend itself to – students who have demonstrated punishable behavior in schools but continue to achieve academically. The current research either focuses specifically on female students that demonstrate punishable behavior while not at all considering their academic success or assumes

that students with discipline problems struggle academically. This leaves a marginal group of students, high-achieving students involved in the discipline system, who still have a story to tell.

Other Qualitative Studies on African American Girls

A third aim of the present study is to contribute to the literature that prioritizes the lived and spoken experiences of African American girls in areas beyond school discipline and academic achievement. The studies of Kelly Wissman and M.F. Belenky make a much needed shift to using the voices of the participants to guide the rationale behind student actions. In “Making a way: Young Women Using Literacy and Language to Resist the Politics of Silencing” Wissman (2008) takes a qualitative approach to how poetry and photography can be used to deflect the often negative social influences of society on African American adolescent women, projecting that while young women are often aware of the “inequities they endure in their schools,” the means to actually combat the inequities are lost to them. Ultimately this study argues that these students need to make a “space” for themselves where there was previously no “space” for them. Similarly, Belenky et al. (1997) argue that it is the use of these safe “spaces” that allows for African American women and marginalized others to develop “voice” and become empowered because of the opportunity to do so. Both suggest that creation of these spaces must be intentional in order for them to serve as a safe space which allows for and encourages open discourse and the taking back of power lost.

Like Belenky and her colleagues, Polleck (2010) focuses on the means of offering an alternative space in which to provide a ‘voice’ to the marginalized. This study takes a qualitative approach to discovering the effectiveness of book clubs on inner-city adolescent females. The

goal of the study was to find if a book club can serve as a “transformational space” for the participants. Polleck argues that the goal of the article was to “demonstrate how the girls not only worked on their emotional and social issues, but also their academic development” and ultimately finds that the “collaborative nature” of the book clubs creates a transformative space and place of self-growth and discovery (p. 1). Polleck, Wissman and Belenky all emphasize the importance of creating a safe space in order to create a platform for personal experiences to be shared in an authentic manner. The notion of safe spaces informed the present study as it pertains to data collection. In order for the participants to share honestly and openly, it was important for me to be aware of what personal assumptions and settings would create a sense of an unsafe environment and consequently take special care in creating a safe space for the participants by ensuring that the language of the conversations was not assuming and assuring students that the results of the present study will not have a negative impact on their school relations and school bonds.

Current literature has provided a plethora of information regarding the overall adolescent development of the targeted age group, what affects student academic achievement, how school discipline disproportionately represents students of color which negatively affects their performance in the classroom and the importance of exploring and providing space for the sharing of personal experiences amongst African American girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Polleck, 2010; Smetena et al., 2006; Tate & Cunningham, 2010). As a result of this information, the study pulled on the research in a variety of ways. The use of Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework justifies the use of student voices as the providers of knowledge. In order to implement this theory along with the phenomenological approach (which will be discussed in Chapter 3), I pre-identified personal assumptions prior to and throughout the interview process.

This process of bracketing does not assume complete objectivity but is a self-awareness measure taken in order to encourage separation of my underlying thoughts from the data being analyzed. The charter school research along with the school discipline research provided context for the consequences students received in a school disciplinary setting. As a result of this context, the interview protocol provided multiple instances for the study participants to share their thoughts around their own experiences with discipline as well as an outsider's experience with discipline as generated by the use of videos. The multiple questions around discipline as well as the use of two video clips allowed me to ensure that students were able to talk about their own personal experiences as well as detach their personal experiences *with* discipline from their personal opinions *about* discipline.

The academic achievement literature led me to ask students to self-identify how they viewed their own academic success as well as self-identify factors that may detract from their ability to be successful. Since the research argued that there were multiple influences that could affect student performance, it was important to give the participants the opportunity to identify and speak to their own personal influences. Lastly, the literature discussing the lived experiences of African American girls highlighted the importance of ensuring that the participants not only felt safe in the types of questions asked but also felt physically comfortable in the interview space. As a result, I often reminded participants that they did not need to answer questions that caused significant discomfort and ensured that the interview space took place in an environment that was not surrounded with other people in the school building. Additionally, student identity was kept anonymous. All of these actions were taken in an effort to ensure that students felt "safe" during and following conversation.

While current literature has helped to paint a complete backdrop for the experiences of this student group as well as methods for how to best work with students who fall into this category, there is a clear lack of research that discusses how all of these labels come together. Not only does research not discuss the conglomeration of all of these marginal spaces, but there are rare instances which allow such a specific subgroup to share their opinions about a label that has been placed onto them. This study will begin to fill the current gap in literature about this specific type of student. Ultimately, the present study will add to the growing conversation about how occupying marginal spaces can and does affect the very people who live their everyday lives within them.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study used a phenomenological approach as the conceptual framework and methodology. Phenomenology as a conceptual theory seeks to uncover meaning and knowledge from the lived experience of the individual. As a method, phenomenology provides suggested practices that a researcher should take in order to uncover meaning (Abawi, 2012). Popularized by Edward Husserl, phenomenological thought explores several concepts, such as the conscious experience (the way our experiences represent the world to us), how we categorize the world around us, language (the tools we use to express our feelings and thoughts) and our cultural norms and shared thoughts about the world around us (Smith, 2013). According to Smith, “In short knowledge begins in evidence, in evident judgments, which form knowledge...” (p. 59). There is one key aspect of phenomenology that was utilized within this study: the essence of consciousness. Within the essence of consciousness is another sub-concept that will be explored: the inner consciousness (Silverman, 1980).

Essence of Consciousness - Smith (2013) describes this idea by stating “of all the things we encounter, consciousness is special because we experience it, we live through it. Indeed, the very essence of consciousness includes this first-person character: we each experience it in our own case; we know it as we experience it from our first-person point of view” (p. 55). Within the essence of consciousness are four entities: (1) the object of consciousness (the entity which is the source beyond the individual’s experience/perception of it), (2) the act of consciousness (the actual momentary happening), (3) the content of consciousness (also called the “noema” which refers to what the ideal and lasting meaning beyond the actual moment of experience), and (4)

the individual experiencing the consciousness. Smith summarizes Husserl's tree example and breaks down these concepts by using the idea of a person seeing a tree. The object of consciousness is the actual tree, the act of consciousness is the individual seeing the tree, and the content of consciousness is the idea of the tree beyond the moment of the individual seeing it and the lasting understanding that would remain even if the tree was burned down. Lastly, the individual experiencing the consciousness is the inner consciousness and meaning making of the individual actually seeing the tree; for my analysis, it is this fourth entity that is of the most interest.

The inner consciousness does not refer to a form of inner monitoring, but a sense of inner awareness of one's own experiences. It is this awareness that makes the happening or experience part of the essence of consciousness. This study sought to tap into this portion of the student, the awareness of which the study participant may be unaware. The goal was that through the conversation and reflection of past activities, discussion of past experiences brings to the outer consciousness what the inner consciousness has already perceived. It is through what Belenky et al. (1997) have identified as a "safe space" that the students received the opportunity to explore the inner workings of their own actions and behaviors. In an attempt to create this safe space, I paid close attention to both the physical room and the structure of the conversation. I purposefully choose an isolated room in the school in which students were not surrounded by other adults or peers. Throughout the conversation, participants were often reminded that answering the questions was an option and when students demonstrated hesitance to respond (elongated pause, eyes shifting, readjusting seating posture indicating discomfort), I quickly reminded students that they could opt-out. Finally, I used a pulse-check in the beginning, and in the middle or at the end of the interview in which students were asked how they were doing and

how they felt about the interview questions. As a result of this intentional creation of a “safe space”, the students were able to provide a collective answer to the “why” of their own seemingly conflicting behaviors.

Intentionality - What characterizes lived experiences as consciousness is intentionality. Moustakas explains this concept by stating, “In reflecting on what one has “seen” and described, one is coming to an understanding of meanings that have been concealed” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29). In order to discover the answer to “why” students are displaying actions that from the outside are viewed as contradictory behavior, it is important to distinguish that this discussion is around personal behavior that is identified through reflection or that is “intentional.” The students of this study are assumed to be engaging in behavior that they are, to an extent, aware of. Discussions around behaviors that the students cannot explain or take ownership are not the focus of this study. In order to find the answer to “why,” it is necessary that the dialogue centered itself on personal actions in which students indicate a sense of awareness of personal behavior. Since the theoretical framework posits the students as experts of their own experiences, outside views around whether the students are actually aware of their behavior from the outsider’s perspective are of minimal concern. Hence, if the study participants identify these actions and reactions as being within their control or realm of awareness, it is of little matter if an outsider, including the researcher, agrees with this perspective.

The use of the essence of consciousness and the inner consciousness provide the backdrop for the conceptual understanding of the participants and subsequently impacted the methods used to both gather and analyze data. There are three rounds of interviews which surrounded different aspects of the same subjects gave students the opportunity to reflect on their own actions and ultimately brought an awareness of their lived experiences. At the end of

Round 3, candidates were re-asked the first question from round 1, “describe yourself to me” in an effort to bring this reflection process full circle. One of the participants responded “this really made me realize how much I’ve grown.” While not all candidates were able to identify personal growth, the majority of the students shared throughout the interviews and particularly during the last round how they had never taken the opportunity to self-reflect or discuss their past experiences in this way. Most importantly, all of the candidates found the process to be worthwhile. It was this outcome that the phenomenological approach, specifically one focusing on the essence of consciousness, seeks to uncover. Ultimately, this study not only uncovered meaning from the individual’s lived experience for me, but for the participants as well.

With this conceptual framework in mind, the following sections explicate specific information concerning the research site and study participants, as well as details regarding the data collection and analysis methods.

School Discipline System

The site selected for the present research is a “no-excuses” secondary (grades 7-11) charter school within a high-achieving charter school management network in the Northeast region of the United States. As discussed in Chapter 2, “no excuses” charter schools have taken the specific approach of having high expectations for both student social and academic behavior as well as teacher instructional delivery. These expectations are often reinforced through systematic academic and discipline policies as well as intense teacher coaching and support (Sparks, 2011). These schools tend to be extremely data-driven and determine success by tracking and measuring student performance on interim assessments and other academic goals. Although coming under fire for using a “business model” approach to education, “no excuses”

charter schools (particularly the network used as a site for this study) have found great success according to the metrics of state-wide testing. Additionally, student graduation rates and college acceptance numbers tend to be higher than average in comparison to traditional public schools.

“No Excuses” charter schools also have strict discipline policies with some using the controversial zero tolerance policies.² However, one unique aspect about this research site as well as the majority of schools within this particular charter school management organization is that these schools have once served as public schools that have been “turned around” into charter schools. Because of this unique element, these schools cannot use the “zero tolerance” policy and remove a student from the charter network completely. Consequently, this charter school management organization has implemented a tiered discipline process with the highest punishment being students sent to a temporary alternative discipline program. There are three levels of infractions within this tiered discipline system: Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3

Table 3.1 Tiered Discipline System

Infraction Level	Discipline Behavior Examples	Punishment
Level 1	disruptive in class; uniform infractions	detention is given after 6 infractions as indicated on filled demerit cards
Level 2	inciting or being involved in an argument; excessive (more than 2 in a classroom) Level 1 infractions	multiple can lead to suspension or taking away of privileges
Level 3	stealing; fighting	student is sent to an in-school hearing

² Zero tolerance policies are rooted in gun use within the criminal justice system and originally referred to automatic sentencing for violent crimes regardless of a person’s past record. In the school sense, these policies refer to automatic suspension or expulsion for specific behaviors regardless of the students past academic or discipline record (Losinski et al 2014).

Level 1 – A Level 1 infraction consists of petty behaviors that demonstrate negligence of standard school policies such as uniform code and food policy or temporarily disrupt the learning environment. These are behaviors that do not lead to a complete disruption of learning and rarely affect multiple people. When demonstrating these behaviors, students are given a single demerit. The accumulation of six demerits within a set time period often leads to an immediate consequence, such as a school detention.

Level 2 – A Level 2 infraction happens as a result of multiple Level 1 infractions within a class period which leads to a more impactful disruption of the school environment due to the need of constant redirection. A Level 2 infraction can also be given as an outright consequence to a single behavior that impacts multiple students negatively such as loud arguing or extreme disrespect. Level 2 infractions also include excessive lateness or absences. When given a Level 2, students are placed on a consequence scale which increases in severity as the student receives additional Level 2 infractions. These consequences can include multiple detentions, suspension and community service.

Level 3 – A Level 3 infraction refers to the more egregious behaviors such as actual fighting, theft or extreme bullying. Once demonstrating Level 3 behavior, a student is immediately removed from the classroom environment and a hearing with the student's parents and school administrators is scheduled.

Currently, the school and charter management as a whole is undergoing a revamping of the discipline system. Regardless of this revamping, students were chosen for this study based on the above discipline tiers which were in full play during the time the study was conducted.

Hence, the above descriptions are a direct reflection of the infractions for which the participants in this study were held accountable. While the discipline code has experienced change, many of the students' examples and opinions of the discipline system are based on their experience with the past discipline system, not the revamped-system. Additionally, the new system is more reflective of a mental approach than actual changes in the above consequence chart. Regardless of the shift in discipline practices that have just taken place, within the school year in which the data were collected (2014-2015), students are still held accountable for Level 1, 2 and 3 discipline infractions. More discussion around the history and context of the study site and charter management organization as well as shifts in practices are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Study Participants

The unit of analysis for this research study is the high achieving African American female student who displays punishable behavior in school. Since this is a student-level analysis and the phenomenological approach of this study relies more on the student's perception than the possible contextual influences I decided to conduct this study at a single site instead of across multiple sites. Despite having equal access to multiple school sites, this decision was made in order to control for the site context and eliminate factors, such as changes in school location, administration and implementation of the discipline policy, which would compromise the integrity of the categorizing data for the students. In order to ensure validity, the study explored students who fall into the defined category of high-achieving while being placed in varying categories amongst the discipline system. I recruited eight Black female students in grades 11 and 12 using two primary criteria: (1) high academic achievement and (2) excessive (above student average) discipline infractions across the tiered level system. In order to identify the

students who fit the criteria, the school principal granted me permission to access a student overview report which documented student academic information, such as GPA and ranking on interim scores as well as baseline student discipline data, such as the amount of infractions acquired at each level of the tiered system. I initially sorted the document from highest GPA to lowest GPA. Students who did not have a GPA of 3.0 or higher were deleted since the school determines high achieving as an A or B average student. A GPA of 3.0 is equivalent to a B grade average. I then determined the average amount of infractions within this specific group for each tier to create a baseline comparison. I finally sorted the document of the remaining students, all of whom had a 3.0 or higher GPA, by each level of discipline infractions. Students were highlighted if they were female and exceeded the average amount of discipline infractions at any level. These criteria are elaborated below.

Academic Achievement

This study includes Black female student participants who were in grades 11 and 12 during the study period and satisfied the requirements for the following criteria in the prior school year (when they were in grades 10 and 11). Since the school site emphasizes a college-readiness culture, the students' cumulative GPA score is in this specific school context. As above-mentioned, students in this study are considered high achieving by staff members if they have maintained a cumulative GPA of 3.0 or above which is the equivalent of a "B" student. Additionally, since this charter-school environment uses regular interim assessments, the participants also have a history of out-performing their peers on either the Math or the Language Arts assessments.

Disciplinary Behavior

While all students operate under the same disciplinary system, there is a clear variance in where specific schools or classrooms focus their attention. For example, one teacher may emphasize the importance of students not chewing gum while another teacher may let gum chewing slide and focus more on students not calling out. Oftentimes, this inconsistency can create tension amongst teachers with their colleagues or between students and teachers. Level 1 infractions are where this variance is most often seen since they are generally up to the teachers to punish. While this level of inconsistency can be a source of tension between students and teachers, the older students have traditionally shown less outward concern about Level 1 infractions and detentions than younger students. As a result, Level 1 infractions were used as an identifying factor for the study but not a unit of analysis within the study itself. Students were, however, given the opportunity to share their opinions about the discipline system and its structure during the interview process.

Since each level increases in severity of behavior, the average of violations per student decreases within each level. Table 3.2 provides the annual average number of discipline infractions per level for the 2013-2014 school year of the school being used for the study. The student participants for this study have exceeded the average amount of Level 1 and Level 2 infractions in the prior 2013-2014 school year. Since a Level 3 infraction consists of the most severe behavior and the average amount of Level 3 infractions is 0, student participants were included in this study if they have received any amount of Level 3 infractions.

Table 3.2 Average Discipline Infractions at study site (2013-2014)

Infraction Level	Average Infractions in students with >3.0 GPA	Average Infractions for Study Participants
Level 1	4	5
Level 2	1	5
Level 3	0	0

Data Collection

Data were collected through the use of observation of school context and three semi-structured student interviews, one which included a questionnaire (Appendix 1: Interview Protocol; Appendix 2 Questionnaire) over a five month time frame. The observation for school context was conducted prior to the interviews and the collected data were used as a means of gathering specific site context for the school regarding how the discipline system is regularly implemented as well as other school-specific information relevant to the study. However, given the theoretical framework and conceptual approach of this study, the meat of the data comes directly from the student participants as it is their voice, their perspective and their experiences that this study sought to explore.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis purposes. The first set of interviews served as a means of gathering specific background information regarding the student. These questions focused on collecting information about the students' family, residential

community and social community. Ultimately, the first round of interviews provided the information used to describe each student participant in the student profile section. The second set of interviews focused on the students' most recent behavior that was deemed punishable by the school community as well as the students' definitions and descriptions of punishable behavior. During the first two rounds of interviews, I recorded field notes of themes that were mentioned by several students. I identified these themes initially by writing notes when a student mentioned a statement that seemed to be directly aligned to one of my research questions. After the first two interviews, this field note-taking process evolved to include either students directly answering the research questions or students saying something that was aligned or similar to another comment made from a different student during another interview. It was these set of themes that were used to create the questionnaire which served as the nexus for the third round of interviews. The second and third set of interviews specifically targeted both Research Questions 1 and 2 while the first set of interviews served to provide necessary background context for each student.

I began the second interview by showing participants two video clips of an African American student demonstrating punishable behavior within a school setting. The first clip takes place in a classroom setting. The short clip only shows a total of 4-5 middle-school aged students sitting in desks. Somewhat suddenly, one African American male student stands up and, while smiling, hits another African American male student several times. The student being hit does not respond in any way and in the background, an adult voice (presumably the teacher) yells "Hey! Stop that playing!" The clip then stops. The second clip opens up in a classroom that has stadium-like seats as each row is elevated a step up from the row in front of it. The classroom has approximately 20 high-school aged students, mostly African American, all of

whom are speaking to and playing with each other. After a few seconds, a female student stands up and begins yelling and cursing at the teacher, an African American male standing in the front of the classroom, for “not teaching.” She is extremely upset and feels justified in her behavior as evidenced by her yelling at the teacher saying “y’all went on strike for a whole week because you want to get paid to teach us and now you’re here and you don’t want to teach!” The student also yells that she is not going to be treated like “a little kid” and that she is “fed up” with “not learning.” Her classmates in the background are laughing and clapping. The purpose of these videos was to both observe an authentic reaction from the student regarding punishable behavior while the video clip is showing and to create a neutral platform for discussing punishable behavior once the video clip is complete. Following the video clips, I asked the students to give their initial impressions and talk about whether the behavior depicted in the videos should be punishable or not. The rest of the interview focused on the student explaining recent incidents in which they received punishment and their thoughts and feelings around the punishment.

The third set of interviews served as a means of having students share their reactions to the initial analysis of the first two interviews as they pertain to how they see themselves. Within the questionnaire, there are a total of seven question prompts followed by several choice options. Students were asked to either label the responses in terms of accuracy or to choose a single response that was most accurate for them. Following this activity, students were given the chance to explain their answers and their rankings. This activity served to give the participants a chance to identify how they viewed themselves in light of the school discipline system as well as where they feel they reside within it and the school context.

Data Analysis

The conceptual approach required that I as the researcher bracket out my “ownness” in an effort to remove my personal opinion and experiences from that of the study participants (Silverman, 1980). This was accomplished by taking note of and recording personal assumptions prior to the interviewing and in-between the interviews. I maintained a log of these assumptions that was kept separate from my field notes throughout the data collection process. During the interviews, I created field notes highlighting major themes or phrases that arose in conversation with the participants (Schutt, 2013). In addition to using the themes identified in the field notes, the first round of interviews were coded primarily through reading and re-reading through the interview transcripts (Philips-Pula et al., 2011). While coding the first round of interviews, similar themes arose as discovered in the field notes. For example, themes such as difficult relationships and interactions with teachers and issues with other peers jumped out in both my field note collection and during the first round of interviews. These themes were then used to both create the questions for the questionnaire as well as serve as the primary codes during the first round of coding. While these themes served to focus the collected data, a second round of coding for new themes was necessary in order to properly analyze the data. While coding for the second set of interviews, I found that new themes arose that were more nuanced than the original themes as evidenced in Table 3.3. It is during the second round of coding that answers to the research questions emerged. As the coding process continued, the original themes emerged into more specific components as indicated below.

Table 3.3 – Evolution of Coded Themes

Field Note Themes/Round 1	Round 2
Teacher-student relationship	Teacher-student relationship (Poor instruction vs poor relationship)
Peer friendships	Peer friendships and family issues remained a factor but collapsed as students stressed either/or both
Family issues	See above
College aspirations	College aspirations and personal opinion of self vs school opinion of self
This year discipline versus last year last year discipline	School Punishment -justified punishment vs unjustified punishment

Every student interview was transcribed and transferred to an excel document. Using the excel document, I read the interviews and identified categories that emerged from the student responses. I then sorted the categories to determine commonality and quantity of pervasive themes. Themes were chosen for analysis if they were recurring amongst multiple study participants and provided important information for the research questions (Jacob, 2012).

Positionality

As Hill Collins asserts in *Black Feminist Thought*, “when an individual Black woman’s consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can

become empowered” (pp. preface). It is my own experience that has catalyzed my interest in this research topic as I used to be one of the girls in my study. Unlike the students in my study, my school environment was completely different. I attended a majority white private Christian school with a total enrollment of approximately 600 students. School punishment was much less structured than that of the study site. When displaying “punishable behavior,” students were sent to the principal’s office and, normally, a parent was called. As a middle school student who lost her father in the sixth grade, I often found myself getting in “trouble” despite scoring amongst the highest in my class. While my academic performance was important to me, getting along with peers and teachers was not. Although, my report card often had high marks, my mother would be called into the principal’s office several times a year to learn of another scenario involving my “bad” behavior. In these moments, my mother would often question the school authorities regarding my behavior and why I was being punished. On one occasion, my mother was told I only hung out with other Black girls, which created tension among my classmates because my close circle of friends were viewed as mean to the other students. Resonant of Tatum’s *“Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In the Cafeteria?”* My mother pointedly asked why it was a problem for me to choose to spend time with other Black girls if the white children were allowed to spend time with each other. In that moment, my mother problematized the very definition of “bad” behavior. Many years later, I admitted to my mother, that I had, in fact, broken school rules purposefully with my school friends and had been mean to some students (though not to the extreme of what was told to her at the time). However, while I knowingly exhibited “bad” behavior according to the rules of the school, I still perceived an element of unfairness in how I was singled out amongst my peers. Whereas my mother was able to accurately question the school’s description of “bad” behavior, what neither my mother nor I

considered at the moment was an answer to the other half of the problem –why did I, in fact, break the school rules?

As a school administrator in an urban area, I see similar young women of color over and over again. These are students who I can empathize with, because like me, they seem to be a bit of an anomaly –doing well in the classroom but often finding themselves in the middle of school “drama.” These are also the students that tend to fly under the radar since they do not necessarily fit the profile of a stereotypical *bad kid*. Such students are seldom targeted for behavioral interventions because they are not extremely disruptive so they are not deemed as those who are “at risk” for dropping out or the other ill consequences deemed common to poor students (retention, weak post-secondary aspirations, etc.) However, Black girls who passively resist school rules can miss out on the positive experiences and opportunities available to students who are both strong academically and embrace school rules. Black girls who are smart but not perceived as displaying good behavior are sometimes seen by staff as immature or “not ready” to take advantage of these opportunities. As a result, they do not receive any appropriate attention, positive or negative. The more I came across high achieving Black girls who are involved in the discipline system, the more I started to wonder, “why do they do that?” One area of concern with this type of student is that the misbehavior can be cyclical as it continues from year to year. Since it can be squelched quickly if appropriate supports are available, the student is rarely suspended but is often in need of constant redirection throughout the day. At times, the petty misbehavior builds and spirals into larger, more serious actions. In speaking to the CEO of a charter network, it was suggested that the high achieving student with multiple discipline infractions can be difficult to deal with in the context of a larger school environment from a school leader’s perspective. Since their grades are high, this student type quickly becomes

favorites of the school staff, but the petty misbehaviors consistently happen. As a result, he stated that it is difficult to “figure out the issue.” Because the root of the problem is hidden, the typical response to the behavior does not cease the behavior but simply pacifies it momentarily. Ultimately, the poor behavior is continuous and disrupts the quality of the learning environment from the school perspective.

Within this study, I am positioning myself as both an everyday Black woman as well as the Black woman researcher. Since my interest in this study emerged from personal experience, it is my reflections on everyday experience as a Black teenager that served as both the catalyst and driving force behind this study. However, I am currently in the position of examining the experiences of the Black girls in the world of academia and the use of the Black Feminist Thought framework has tasked me with “asking the right questions and investigating all dimensions.” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 33). It is this role, as a Black woman intellectual, that I will be primarily occupying throughout this study. In doing so, I seek to give voice to and empower the participants within this study as well as all others like them, including my younger self.

As an administrator within the organization during the time of data collection, I was aware of the asymmetric power dynamics involved in such a study. Although my position as an Assistant Principal of Instruction lent itself to working directly with teachers, I was viewed as an authority figure in the school building and was placed in the position of being a disciplinarian to the students. As a result, my view of the students that I seek to study is both empathetic, because of my personal experiences, but critical, because of my past position. I view this seemingly conflicting position as generally favorable because it served as an internal check-and-balance as I sought to uncover new knowledge regarding the reasons these high-achieving teenagers “get in trouble.”

However, in recognition of the power tension that can surface, I ensured that the data collection process was as transparent as possible. Instead of collecting data at the school in which I served as an administrator, I chose to work with a school that is in the same charter school management organization, but one that I do not frequent throughout the school year. Students who attend this school have not developed a relationship with me that mirrors that of a school administrator-student relationship. Yet, in order to best neutralize the power dimension that will remain due to the fact that I am an adult and students will be aware that I am a school employee, the questions asked used non-judgmental language that avoids assumptions. As one who is used to “school jargon,” this was a difficult process and, at times, I had to rephrase questions in order to not use value-laden language. For example, instead of asking questions that administrators generally use when speaking to students and wanting them to reflect, I veered on the path of more open questions. In lieu of asking “what is something you could have done differently,” I asked “what did you think about that situation?” In the process, I found that the more open my questions were, the less likely I was to put on my administrator hat. The use of an interview protocol was utilized to map out the major questions that were asked as well as questions prompts that can be used to request follow-up information from a student response. During the process of interviewing, I maintained a journal that recorded any possible assumptions being made on my behalf in order to create awareness of my own personal bias prior to deep analysis.

Additionally, though having access to over five sites, I purposefully chose to zero in on a single site in order to maintain the integrity of the study. Since the unit of analysis is at the student level, combining too many sites into the study can compromise the subgroup of focus students since the context of discipline and academic levels vary based off the staff members of a

given location. While all use the same system, policy implementation varies slightly from one campus to the next. The use of multiple sites would compromise the validity of the student subgroup which is serving as the center of analysis for this study.

Using a phenomenological approach as the conceptual framework and methodology, specifically essence of consciousness and intentionality, forced me to not only bracket my assumptions prior to and throughout the interview process, but to emphasize two specific components in my data collection: that of creating a safe space for the students and ensuring that the rounds of questions gave room for students to reflect on their own behavior and thoughts. Students were given the opportunity to not just talk about past incidents but to share their feelings and thoughts about those experiences. Students were not asked about what they would have done differently because there was no assumption in the conversation that they were wrong. If that conclusion was reached, it came from the student thought process and sharing, not my questioning. It was important that the data collection mirrored the assumptions of a phenomenological approach in order to maintain consistency within the data collection and analysis process.

My positioning as both a researcher and an everyday Black woman was a difficult yet significant position for me to maintain. In my own efforts to remind me of that role, I did not participate in any administrator-like activities during my time as an interviewer. I avoided actions such as standing in the hallway during transition or even dressing in professional dress to maintain the distinction of this position. Additionally, using Black Feminist Thought as an analytical tool ensured that I did not place answers onto the participant. This is why the second round of coding was of utmost importance, not just to ensure the validity of the data analysis process but to force me to pay attention to the themes that did not jump out to me during the

initial interviewing process. Beyond the coding, the use of Black Feminist Thought gave credence to the participants as speakers of their own experience. In their positions as students who are high achieving but involved in the discipline system, the students are the experts of their own experience and it was important for me to only serve as a conduit of their opinion, not a conductor.

Despite these attempts to be as objective as possible, I do not assert that this study is completely absent of bias. As a human conduit, there are likely latent biases for which I was unaware and could not account for regardless of the procedures that were set in place. To position myself as a completely objective being would be inauthentic to my positioning as both a qualitative researcher and the Black Feminist Thought approach with which this study is centered. However, as mentioned above, careful measures were implemented in order to ensure that the voice and outcome of the study is significantly more reflective of the girls' experiences and feelings over my own.

As you move into chapter four, you will see the themes that the students identified as being of the utmost importance in their experiences. You will not see that students emphasize their color or their gender in their responses but you will see that there is a clear collective voice that emerged from the data, one that acknowledges this specific groups' standpoint, validates their experiences as knowledge-creators and empowers them to self-define who they are and who they will become.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

At the outset of the study, there were several findings I expected to emerge from the data given my own history of working with students and the literature surrounding students in urban areas. For example, I anticipated the importance of teacher student relationships (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Eisele, 2009; Roorda, 2011) and some level of tension with their parents (Ary, 1999; Blair, 2000; Peterson, 1988; Smetena et al., 2006). Knowing the context and critique of “no excuses” schools, I also expected that students would find the discipline policies to be too strict (Golan, 2014; Goodman, 2013). Lastly, I admit that I walked in believing that most of the students were, more often than not, purposefully engaging in what they understood to be “poor behavior.” While some assumptions such as the significance of the teacher-student relationship and tension with parents were evident in the data, the other assumptions were less apparent. In fact, the data revealed a much more complex answer to my research questions and challenged my own assumptions. As I elaborate in this chapter, the Black female participants often exhibited a high level of self-awareness regarding their own behavior as well as a critique of the punishments they received to behavior that was deemed inappropriate. In fact, the participants noted that the school has a low understanding of what causes behavior and is ultimately ignorant of the stressors that cause certain student reactions. Major themes emerging from this study were centered on student-staff relationships, a clear difference between school intention and school rules, and the belief that school discipline policies showed a lack of understanding for the population it is intended to serve.

In the next few paragraphs, the reader will be introduced to the site, Kamer Campus, as well as the larger organization of which Kamer Campus is a part -- Esquire Charter Schools. Following an overview of the larger organization and study site will be a more detailed overview of the specific components of the school which are necessary for understanding the full context of the study. The chapter will then profile each student participant. These profiles will share specific information about who that student is in terms of their home life and school experiences. Finally the chapter will provide the answers to each research question. In response to research question #1 - How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues? - students generally emphasized the importance of teacher student relationships, discussed the reality of home and life stress and critiqued the effectiveness of the discipline system. In response to research question #2 - what effect does school disciplinary experiences have on their future aspirations? – the reader will find that students felt positive about their future aspirations and noted that the school did not truly know or understand their authentic self.

The Educational Site: Esquire Charter Schools

Esquire Charter Schools is a charter management organization (CMO) that serves over 10,000 students and spans across 17 schools with the intent to continue growing into an even larger school district, whose end has yet to be specified. Starting as a single charter school in 2001 and rapidly expanding since its inception fourteen years ago, Esquire is nationally recognized as a leader in turnaround schools, which are traditional low-performing public schools that are given to CMOs in hopes of increasing student achievement, and the only “no-excuses” CMO which is primarily made up of neighborhood schools with the exception of three schools that are traditional charters. Esquire also uses a merit-based advancement system for its

employees. This system is the most solidified when it comes to teachers and historically has based teacher growth (and promotions) off three categories-- Student Achievement, Instructional Effectiveness and Values-- with the two former being the most heavily weighed when determining teacher advancement. There is no such official status of “tenure” in Esquire’s merit-based advancement system.

Another significant part of Esquire’s culture is the emphasis on going to college. The emphasis on getting students to college is most prevalent in the structure of the college advisor position as well as the school-wide metric which sets a greater than 90% college acceptance as one of the school goals by which every campus is measured. The responsibility of the college advisors is to ensure that every student in their school of service participates in some form of college visits as well as working with every senior student to apply to multiple colleges by mid-November. College advisors are also responsible for supporting students with financial aid and ensuring that students take advantage of scholarship opportunities. This emphasis has led to the majority of Esquire high schools boasting of a higher than average college acceptance rate.

In 2012, Esquire Charter Schools recognized a plateau in student performance on the state-wide exams and an overall lack of success in students remaining in college. Additionally, the impact of the Common Core Standards began to spread rapidly throughout the nation. Though starting in 2008 due to an Arizona governor’s goal to revamp Arizona’s current state standards, the Common Core Standards, a set of standards significantly more rigorous than state standards had currently been, did not really begin to have a nation-wide impact until 2010 (Bidwell, 2014). Alongside the unimpressive post-secondary school data and the fact that states were rapidly either implementing the Common Core Standards or creating new state standards similar in rigor and content, Esquire sought to make a major change instructionally.

Historically, Esquire Charter Schools used a Direct Instruction Model for all instruction. This model, made popular by Madeline Hunter in her book *Mastery Instruction*, is an extremely targeted and specific teaching approach which stresses an I Do, We Do, You Do teaching sequence. This involves the teacher modeling the strategy or concept, the teacher then leading the students in practicing the concept followed by the teacher releasing the students to practice the strategy or concept on their own. Madeline Hunter's approach emphasizes the importance of teachers driving instruction through targeted methods such as modeling, checking for student understanding in a purposeful way and being extremely targeted and specific in the information discussed from one classroom to the next (Hunter, 1982). Esquire used this model as well as data gathered from observing other high-performing schools in the nation in order to create the first document of the Instructional Standards. The Instructional Standards came to take on the literal meaning of the phrase as teacher ability to execute the Standards at what was deemed by administrators as a Proficient level became the literal standard for satisfactory instruction. This document was used as the evaluative tool during formal observations of teacher instruction and ultimately served as 1/3 of teacher evaluation (along with student achievement and teacher display of adherence to the values of the organization) for both mid-year and end-of-year evaluations. Each year, members of Esquire's central office give teachers and administrators the opportunity to provide feedback on the Instructional Standards which has resulted in slight changes and tweaks since the inception of this standard teaching effectiveness document.

This past year, however, the Instructional Standards shifted significantly in order to include more student-focused learning. In the most recent re-vamp of the Instructional Standards, Esquire deleted many of the older standards such as Objective-Driven Instruction (refers to the Madeline Hunter instructional approach) and Expectations and Accountability

(referred to strict classroom management) in favor of more student-centered standards such as Student Growth (measuring how student products are increasing in sophistication) and Classroom Culture (assumes strong management but emphasizes a student-driven classroom culture). The new instructional standards focus less on what actions teachers are doing and more on the outcomes that students are producing. Though starting to shift towards this direction in past revisions, the new instructional standards are worded in such a way that student outcomes must be present in order for instruction to be deemed Proficient. In the past, a teacher could use a series of strategies and receive a Proficient mark on the instructional standards for attempting these strategies. In the current state (see Table 4.1), a teacher could do the same, implement a series of strategies but the evaluation is not considered Proficient unless the student outcomes are happening as a result of the implemented strategies.

This shift in the “bar” for Proficiency has raised significant level of concerns at the site level as teachers who were used to performing at the Advanced level have now dropped down to Developing evaluations which raises fears around teacher advancement and promotion within the merit-based system. From a central level, there has been no clear direction regarding how to respond directly to this concern. Central offices, however, have emphasized the importance of understanding the “learning curve” of this new direction and have encouraged leaders to be honest with feedback but not condemnatory in the impact of this feedback on teacher advancement. This has resulted in leaders at school sites making different decisions regarding how best to respond to teachers and handle the conflict of a harder bar being raised within a merit-based system.

Table 4.1 Evaluation and Teacher Advancement Ratings

Rating	Evaluation Description		Teacher Advancement Description
Unsatisfactory	Learning is not happening; the environment is unsafe		
Developing	Teacher is implementing strategies but student outcomes are not present	Associate	Entry Level; Expected level of new teachers, teacher scores are Developing but move towards Proficient; teacher values are aligned to school and Student Achievement meets expectations
Proficient	Teacher strategies are resulting in student outcomes	Senior Associate	Teacher evaluation scores are Proficient; teacher values are aligned to school and Student Achievement meets expectations
Advanced	Teacher instruction results in high level student outcomes	Advanced	Teacher evaluation scores are Advanced; teacher values positively impact the school and Student Achievement meets/exceeds expectations
Mastery	Classroom is completely student-driven and teacher is facilitator, not director, of learning	Master	Teacher evaluation scores are Master; teacher drives and inspires the values in the school and Student Achievement meets/exceeds expectations

In addition to the instructional shift, Esquire Charter Schools also determined that in order to be successful, their schools needed to not only do a better job in pushing students to have a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the content but in supporting students with soft skill acquisition, such as personal efficacy and social belonging, in order to ensure students' success beyond their high school experience. This goal towards improving the focus on student "soft skills" has led to Esquire restructuring or revising a number of policies and practices around discipline.

The “broken window theory” has historically served as the theoretical backbone of Esquire’s school discipline system. This theory was popularized by social scientists James Q Wilson and George L. Kelling in *The Atlantic Monthly* article (1982) titled “Broken Windows” but stems from the work of Stanford psychologist, Phillip Zimbardo. Zimbardo found that untended property or objects become targets for people, even those who generally obey the law, to vandalize and further ruin. Wilson and Kelling expanded this theory as it pertains to human behavior, specifically human behavior in urban areas. Citing the police foot patrol initiative in New Jersey in 1972, Wilson and Kelling theorize that “untended behavior...leads to a breakdown of community controls.” Henceforth, the broken window theory suggests that focusing on the more minor delinquent behavior in a community (such as petty vandalism, loitering, rowdy disruption), leads to an internal control system that can positively impact more violent behavior because the people, in a sense, police themselves.

Like many “no excuses” charter schools, Esquire built a school discipline system that embraced this theory. As a result, minor infractions, such as gum chewing and uniform requirements, received attention and punishment in an effort to control and discourage the larger disruptive behaviors, such as fighting and stealing. In comparison to the public school district, Esquire has reduced fights between students and other more egregious behaviors are kept to a minimum. However, using a theory that was directed towards criminal activity and supplanting it into a school system holds an underlying assumption that the students have criminal tendencies. During a leadership training that took place in January 2014, the CEO of Esquire named this problematic assumption as part of the rationale in the discipline shift towards a restorative justice model.

In an effort to revamp its disciplinary system and approaches, Esquire sought outside training and ultimately established a relationship with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). According to the website, this organization states that “restorative practices is a social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making” (IIRP). Some aspects of this social science that Esquire focused on implementing were the use of circles and restorative conferences. Circles include participants literally sitting in a circle and are normally used to satisfy a variety of purposes, such as “conflict resolution, healing, support, decision making, information exchange and relationship development” (IIRP). Restorative conferences are a bit more targeted as they consist of a “specific process, with defined protocols, that brings together those who have caused harm through their wrongdoing with those they have directly or indirectly harmed” (IIRP).

Restorative conferences have not only been used to solve student-to-student issues but student-to-teacher issues as well. While staff mediations have always been a part of the fabric of responding to discipline issues, this year the school has taken a more intentional turn with the implementation of a specific restorative practice framework. Though the actual practice of restorative practices has ranged from informal mindset focus to specific structures from school-to-school, the tone from central offices has repeatedly emphasized the shift from “no excuses” to restorative practices. While encountering varying degrees of success in this launch year, several students noted that the school is more willing to listen to them this year. However, it is clear when talking to the students that the process is far from perfect.

Cultural context is yet another area that Esquire sought to begin discussing this school year. Although the large majority of the student population consists of students of color, only approximately 30% of the school staff is made up of persons of color. Despite previously

integrating an African American history course into the curriculum, discussion around race and the impact of poverty was rarely a topic discussed amongst the staff. As a result, there is a clear disconnect between the school employees and the students that they serve. Initially this year, cultural context served as little more than a buzz phrase as many school leaders were overwhelmed with the influx of changes taking place. With the exception of some targeted staff professional development sessions throughout the year, the notion of cultural context, like restorative practice, was originally placed in the hands of the school site leaders. In the latter part of the year, the central office took more of a lead in the cultural context conversation by hiring a director of cultural context. Under the director's leadership, the central office instituted a series of student-centered lessons and staff-centered professional development. However, the quality of implementation and the emphasis at each site still came down to the school site leaders. At best, cultural context focus is extremely varied.

This system-wide shift in practices and systems has been referenced as either The Big Pivot or 3.0 by school employees. The result has been a re-vamping of the Instructional Standards, a change in the discipline approach from the "broken windows" theory to "restorative practices," and a complete launch into a focus on cultural context in order to bridge the gaps between the staff and the students. Though a rocky transition, the top leaders of Esquire boast of significant change and applaud school leaders and teachers for making big changes in a small period of time. However, the success of the shift is not as positive at the site level. School leaders are generally overheard saying that the change was the "right direction" but many question and wonder if the outcome will be successful.

The Site: Kamer Campus

The silent charter school hallway is flanked with blue and white pendants, burgundy and gold posters and scores of information about upcoming college visits or college programs. While walking down the hallway, one can hear an occasional teacher or student talking through the wooden doors and see classrooms surrounded with open windows – an intentional design that results in classroom activity being clearly visible to the observer. Though silent during class periods, the hallway fills with activity as soon as the bell rings. Junior and Senior students fill this particular hallway in a burst of energy. Some students are slowly sauntering in groups as they joke with friends and stop by their lockers, while others walk alone and purposefully – hurrying to get to the next class before the bell rings again. The principal, an average-height, middle-aged Black man, stands in the middle of the hallway amidst the activity. Like a rock in the middle of a stream, he interacts with most of the students who come across his path by engaging in small talk with students who ask questions about upcoming events, shaking his head and smiling as a tall female student taps his head and runs down the hallway all while yelling reminders of the looming bell that will indicate the start of the next period. It's clear that he has worked with this particular group of students for years. As the founding principal for this turnaround charter school in a large northeastern city, he has served as a foundational figure in the school building since its inception. The bell finally rings, and almost as if it was a blip in time, the hallways are once again silent with the occasional teacher or student voice heard through the wooden doors.

Kamer Campus was the third school that was added to the CMO and has been in existence since 2006. Once one of the most violent schools in the area, Kamer now has a reputation amongst Esquire and the city-at-large for being a successful school that provides a

positive service to the students. Kamer Campus has historically more readily dealt with cultural context issues and more purposefully engaged with parents and community members. With a founding principal that has a rich history in the surrounding neighborhood and throughout the city, Kamer Campus is often cited as one of the lead campuses in the Esquire organization in terms of actively engaging with more cultural-based incentives and programs. Often quick to host events, such as beginning of the year block parties and student oratorical contests, that highlight their students' talents beyond the classroom and collaborate with community organizations in the surrounding neighborhood, Kamer Campus has received accolades from both local and national outlets due to their successful work within the city.

The Kamer Campus was chosen for this study due to its unique positioning in the CMO. Kamer's principal is the longest standing principal within Esquire Charter Schools and has a reputation for thinking outside the box. One of my assumptions in working in Kamer Campus is that this site, more than the others, would be on the leading curve of the 3.0 or Big Pivot shift as they had a reputation for being more intentional in serving the needs of the students. This is also the only campus that has had the consistency of the same school leader which helped to eliminate the factors that can change from one year to the next when a new leader is in place. Although I assumed that the Principal himself had likely changed his own approach as many school leaders do, the scope of that change was less likely to be significant. Additionally, since the focus of the study is on older students, I (correctly) assumed that these students have been at Kamer Campus for several years and it was important to control for other factors, such as school leadership and school changes, which could significantly impact or disrupt their past experience with the school discipline system.

While part of the large shift, as a site Kamer has implemented its own new policies in terms of Restorative Justice that are unique to this campus specifically. In response to the Big Pivot, Kamer implemented several new discipline practices. Still using the demerit/merit card system, Kamer expanded the amount of demerits that students could get prior to receiving a detention punishment from six demerits to eight and also made the collection of demerit cards from students more frequent. The hope with these changes was to give students more “chances” before receiving the larger punishment. This change was coupled with a weekly incentive to get a dress down day for the next week which is earned if students are able to stay beneath a set number of demerits each week. This set number of demerits is determined by the amount of weeks students have had the demerit card. For example, the “set number” during week three of the month is higher than the “set number” during week one. The school also solidified its launch into restorative practices by identifying a room that would be used for restorative conferences and attempting to respond to student concerns and comments more frequently.

One set of adults in the building who have received the ultimate task of implementing the new Restorative Justice approach and who are expected to be knowledgeable about the inner happenings of student lives is the “culture team.” This culture team normally consists of a head, the Assistant Principal of School Culture, and the school deans; they are charged with the ultimate purpose of maintaining a safe and joyful school environment. Although the school systems (such as the demerit and merit system) and approaches,(de-escalation of upset students and positive relationship building between students and staff) are similar, the actual methods utilized by one school to the next vary. At Kamer campus, students are assigned a specific dean who is responsible as the “go to” person for a group of students. Sometimes the dean is assigned to an entire grade and other times the dean is assigned to a specific group of students.

Straddling the line between friendship and authority, deans are charged with the difficult task of simultaneously preventing possible conflicts and resolving past conflicts all while ensuring that all discipline systems are running smoothly and the culture of the school is “joyful.” Historically, deans at Esquire campus have often found themselves in lose/lose situations when it comes to teachers who do not approve of the positive relationships deans have with the students. A topic often addressed during Esquire-wide orientation in the beginning of the year, the company has attempted to preemptively resolve possible conflicts between teachers and deans. Though teachers and deans are in lateral positions but different roles of support to the students, teachers often disagree with deans when it is deemed that the punishment given to disruptive students is not severe enough for the level of disruption or disrespect shown in the class. As Esquire shifts more to restorative practices, this tension between deans and teachers has not lessened.

At Kamer Campus, this tension is evident. When speaking to students, they often discuss relationships with the dean in a more positive light than that with the teachers. However, the students also noted that they get frustrated when it feels like the dean is taking the “teacher’s side” over theirs. The pressure to build positive and trusting relationships with all stakeholders is the deans’ charge. Those who are successful in navigating this tricky land mine become respected deans while those who are not are deemed mediocre – which directly threatens their job security in the merit-based world of Esquire. Ultimately, what determines the deans’ success is their ability to work with all stakeholders – students, teachers and parents – and reach a productive outcome.

The world of discipline within Esquire Charter Schools is a land which occupies a history of strict consistency but a future of uncertain change. The smart Black girls in this study are

both intimately aware of what Esquire has been versus what Esquire is seeking to become. Their opinions and experiences are key to understanding not just the system from an aerial view but, more importantly, understanding the discipline system from the view of those most impacted by it. Their critiques are a combination of this shift: they are harsh while understanding; critical yet forgiving. These critiques are honest assessments of how these Black girls who out-perform their peers academically feel about a system which they have experienced throughout their high school career. This study sought out a unique group of girls and sought to understand their experiences and their impact on their personal perspective of both the system and their own selves. This is their story.

Student Profiles

This section provides an authentic picture into each student participant. While each profile holds similar data by including information around each girls' home life and school experiences, writing each section using the same exact template would not be authentic to whom these girls are. Although each student is a smart Black girl who has a high number of discipline infractions in comparison to her peers, each Black girl is distinctly different and writing about them in exactly the same way would rob the reader of the experience of meeting these girls. Table 4.2 provides key information about each student and the profiles that follow will provide an even deeper dive into the lives and personalities of each student.

Table 4.2 – Student Participant Data

Name	Age	Grade
Shayla	16	11 th
Heather	17	12 th
Kian	18	12 th
Naomi	18	12 th
Missy	17	12 th
Denise	17	12 th
Melanie	17	12 th
Sasha	18	12 th

SHAYLA

“I like to play with my brother because he’s, like, he’s a special ed child.” -Shayla

Though living with an aunt and knowing of family in states around the country, Shayla sees herself as her younger brother’s only family. “He has Down Syndrome, autism and ADHD...he doesn’t have nobody but me. My mom died when I was 10 and his dad, I think the year he was born.” Despite this heavy label that Shayla has placed on herself as her brother’s only family, his health complications often keep him from recognizing his sister “I don’t think he knows that I’m his sister.” This difficult family situation is exacerbated by a distant relationship with other family members “there are some family members that I can’t get to see...it’s all this family beef” and a strained relationship with the aunt who serves as her guardian “she don’t understand what teenagers go through and she thinks everything is just wrong.” Shayla

highlights one familial situation as beneficial as she describes the closeness of a relationship she has built with an older female cousin – a relationship, which her aunt disapproves of “my aunt doesn’t like when we’re together because she thinks she has a bad influence on me...”

Ultimately, Shayla summarizes her home situation in a simple but profound manner, “there’s just a lot going on.” Though not always willing to expound, it was clear that Shayla’s home situation brought her stress. When speaking about it, her voice would lower, her shoulders would slump and her normally easy-to-hear responses became less clear and more mumbled.

“Because I feel like I have nobody...and when I’m around my friends, they make me feel different, like, they’re there.” - Shayla

Shayla’s countenance instantly brightens when she starts talking about her friends. Proud of her group, Shayla explains how she always hangs out with the same group of girls both in and outside of the school building. Self-identifying her “squad” as the “classy type,” Shayla shares that they don’t like to be involved in school gossip and tend to stick together, “if you see one, you see the other.” Unlike some superficial high school relationships, this friendship dips below the surface as Shayla’s group of friends also provide her with a consistent shoulder to lean on, especially when it comes to her mourning the death of her mother “I’m just always crying...and [they’re] always there to make me laugh.” Outside of the fun she has with her friends, Shayla isn’t particularly fond of school, “it’s boring,” she says but she sees education as a vehicle to success, “I don’t mind coming to school...I’m getting an education and I’m trying to reach my goals...” Like most of the participants, Shayla plans to attend college and have a successful career following, “I want to be a pediatrician so I can help the disabled...take care of kids like [my brother].” Despite her own family situation, Shayla has dreams for a brighter future, “When I get older, I want to at least be rich and have a happy family.”

HEATHER

“I’m a really sweet person. It’s just that the drama came to me” - Heather

When Heather walks in she’s all smiles and self-describes herself as shy with most people but loud and silly with her friends, “if I’m with my friends, I can be myself, just a little louder.” Of all the participants, Heather was originally a bit surprised that she was highlighted as a student to participate in this focus group. However, once talking to her discipline advisor, or “dean,” she shared that she was involved in several disciplinary situations in the past, “I didn’t realize that [I fit the description] until I had to think back like wow, I was in the dean’s office a lot this year- last year.” Although unaware of how her discipline infractions may have exceeded the average of her peers, Heather was one of the participants who came off as generally self-aware and honest. When asked how people who she didn’t get along with viewed her, Heather paused and admitted

[They would] probably say that I’m mean... I guess because I do say stuff sometimes to people... Like mean stuff. I can’t say everything. Just mean, like mean stuff just to hurt their feelings. ‘Cause they hurt my feelings... So I try to do it back.

This level of insight is something that jumped out to me throughout our discussion. Without being prompted, Heather would often provide an explanation regarding the why of her behavior – an explanation that went beyond the initial question asked.

“I would describe my family as normal...but, no, I wouldn’t say normal. No it’s not normal...Nobody’s family’s normal. I have a lot of arguments in my family.” - Heather

Heather lives with both of her parents and her two brothers. When asked what causes the arguments in her family, Heather shares “me and my mom were in the midst ‘cause we’re always trying to defend my brothers...and my dad doesn’t like it very much.” Heather’s mom is also

sick, a topic that, unlike most, she doesn't want to expound on "And my mom's sick...Not heavy sickness. She just has like certain problems with like her body and stuff...And she's been in and out of the hospital for a year now." While not specific about the nature of her mother's seeming chronic illness, Heather does feel the stress of it, "it's so much stress, but I like my family...but it's a lot of drama in the house." *A lot of drama* is how many of the girls describe home life, school life or a combination of both. When asked how it affected her school experience, Heather describes the difficulty of coming to school when there was a lot happening either at home or with other peers in school, "I feel like I didn't wanna come to school sometimes just 'cause of...all the drama...And I knew that when I would come to school it would just be like...same drama just a different day."

Despite the regular stress of both home and school issues, Heather is determined to go to college and pursue the career of her choice, "I want to major in either foreign languages or history...I could see myself being a flight attendant or an interpreter." Similar to Shayla, Heather's issues with other students or problems in school do not impact how she views her future progress, ultimately pegging issues in school as a problem that comes to her and not one she has ever sought out, "I don't start anything. I don't intentionally look for drama...it just comes my way." This idea of not "looking for drama" is a recurring theme with Heather. During the second round of interviews, her close relationship with one of her friends has blown up in the very day of the interview. When asked about it, Heather first stressed that it came out of "nowhere" but later admitted that she had issues with this specific friend last year. Unlike the other students, Heather is also the only student who felt that the school's perception of her was higher than her own perception. It became very clear after three rounds of interviews that the

opinions of others deeply impacted her opinion of herself. This revelation was the most salient with Heather in comparison to her peers.

KIAN

“Esquire gets on my nerves” - Kian

The most outspoken member of the group, Kian does not mince on words and her honesty has an edge that can, at times, come off as offensive. However, I found it refreshing. A high school senior that self-admittedly has an “attitude” that “moves up and down,” Kian takes ownership for her behavior and refuses to let others off the hook for theirs. When discussing a negative relationship with a teacher, Kian shares “I gave her my attitude and then she gave me hers.” While noting that that she doesn’t always approach things the best way, Kian holds teachers to a high standard,

[the teacher would probably describe me as] rude, but at the same time, you got to [take responsibility for] your own actions. You can’t always think about somebody else; like what were you doing to make me come off that way?

As a result of her tendency to speak out when she feels she has been mistreated, Kian feels that the school assumes the worst in her, “some students just get in trouble, and trouble and trouble, and they just bring them back, but if I was to get in trouble I would have gotten sent home, suspended all of that.” Because of this, Kian believes that Esquire is a good school, but undeserving of all the accolades, “I would not recommend [anyone] go to this school...[Esquire has gotten] so much publicity...they just think they’re all that...they don’t have it all...don’t act like you do when you don’t.”

“Once I go to college, I’m going to have all of these new friends...people will be on my level.”

– Kian

With aspirations to go into nursing, Kian cannot wait to be on her own. It is this yearning for independence that often results in conflicts with family members, “[my grandmother] got mad because I didn’t call her, but I’m busy.” Spending most of her time with friends or working, Kian shared how she, at times, struggles to communicate with her mother although she considers them to have a close relationship. This communication is often made difficult because Kian’s mother wants her to be more open about her life, while Kian wants to take advantage of the fact that she this is her last year before leaving the nest,

This is my senior year. This is probably the last time that I’m going to be home for a while so I’m just going to hang out with my friends who I might not see in the next two years.

With a father that is “back and forth,” Kian shared that she is only close to two other family members in addition to her mother, her aunt and grandmother. Often dealing with any family issues by holding it in until she explodes, “I’ll take it in and then when something else happens, everything will just come out,” Kian shares that family issues, particularly negative run-ins with her mother greatly affect her see-sawing attitude “[negative interactions] with my mom impact me in the morning...and then I don’t care.” Ultimately, Kian feels that most adults, both at school and home, don’t realize that she and her peers should be treated differently because they are older and mature, “We’re seniors, and I feel as though we’re being treated like the whole school.” As a result, she desires to always speak her mind because that is the only way she feels her voice will get heard, “nobody speaks for us students in Esquire at all.”

NAOMI

“They’re only, like six [students] from our original class, we started out with like 20 something...” - Naomi

Referencing her original class from 7th grade, Naomi notes how few have remained in Esquire. Although, any school might lose students from one year to the next due to a variety of reasons, (students moving, going to a different high school, etc.) Naomi believes the majority of her personal group of friends decided to not return for senior year because they were “sick of Esquire and just left.” Naomi then quickly amends her statement by adding how Esquire has changed for the better, “it’s gotten much better this year – I wish they would have stayed.”

Clearly not a person who is swayed by popular opinion, Naomi is the only study participant who holds the school distinction of being a Key Holder, an award that holds special privileges and is given to students who have demonstrated exemplary behavior in the current school year, and her face is plastered in the first floor hallway as one of the high school seniors who has already received a large amount of college scholarship money in the first half of the school year. This is a clear distinction from the prior year in which Naomi self-describes herself as being “bad” and laughs as she shares how often she found herself in punishable situations during her junior year. Naomi is purposeful in her communication and open about how her own behavior has gotten her in trouble in the past, “I just needed to learn how to control my mouth...like I just said stuff. If I felt it, then I would say it.” Naomi now prides herself in her ability to handle difficult situations with teachers more maturely, “I’m not going to be like you’re doing this wrong [to a teacher] you need to fix it...[now] I might pull you to the side and after class like just explain myself.” This mature lens also extends itself into a balanced critique of

Esquire's school culture as it played out on the Kamer campus, "this year is ok, but in the past, I felt like Esquire was trying to [force] assimilation...they were trying to make us all the same."

Naomi perceptively pointed out the disconnection between Esquire's public goals versus the specific policies and practices used to reach those goals. For example,

I was like so mad that I got sent home for my socks one time. Why would you make me miss out on a whole day of education? All of this discipline...it's just so unrealistic. And the motto is preparing for economic success or something like that. But really, I don't think that my boss is going to care about my socks.

This level of specific critique is indicative of the type of conversations Naomi and I often held.

Though she was willing to admit when she felt she was wrong, Naomi would quickly pinpoint when she deemed herself to be a victim of an unfair disciplinary consequence. In the one situation that she self-identified as a point of conflict with a teacher this year, Naomi shared "maybe I shouldn't have yelled at her" but also quickly stated, "but she was wrong" in reference to the teacher's behavior.

MISSY

"This school is not fair. They want respect no matter what but you have to give respect to get respect." - Missy

Missy is a high school senior who self-describes herself as "quiet" with an "anger issue." Admitting that her anger management resulted in her seeing outside counseling, Missy normally keeps to herself, "I like to stay to myself...I don't really talk to people." However, throughout our conversations, it became clear that Missy had a strong sense of fairness and lashed out when she felt as if there was an obvious lack of fairness evident. This conviction played out in past discipline situations with both staff and students alike. While most of the study participants identified the bulk of their discipline infractions resulting from interactions with either other

students or staff members, Missy explains that she has been involved in discipline issues with both groups. When discussing negative interactions with teachers, Missy shares “if you respect me, I’ll respect you back. [teachers are] like, no you have to respect them. Even if they don’t [respect you], I don’t like that.” Similarly, Missy’s stance has also placed her in compromising situations with other students, due to her either standing up for herself or for someone else, “I don’t like people messing with people, like, I don’t like that.” A victim of past bullying, “I used to be really quiet and people would take advantage,” Missy is now quick to speak up for herself and on the behalf of others.

“[My mom doesn’t] like it when I talk back and I’m like – I feel like I [have to] say it ‘cause I need to stand up for myself.” - Missy

This sense of fairness and tendency to be a loner also permeates its way into relationships with her family members, particularly her parents. Like most teenagers, Missy shares how she often finds it difficult to communicate with her parents. Also feeling a yearning for independence; Missy’s relationship with her mother is characterized with the tension of two perspectives, “I’m not a child, don’t treat me like that.” Similarly her introverted traits make it difficult to communicate with her father, “I don’t want to be bothered by people. If he’ll call I’ll look at it and [not pick up]. I don’t want to be bothered by nobody. But I’ll call him back.” Describing her mother and her four siblings as “loud,” Missy often finds herself as an outsider within her family, “I stay to myself, I’m different,” with the only exception being her close relationship with her brother. A deep thinker, Missy often sprinkled in gems of wisdom. In random spurts, Missy keyed in on a difference that can emerge from a school that places more emphasis on student safety than student character,

[in a] public school...nobody messes with you but once you get here the rules change and you can't do certain things (i.e. physically fight). Like people [here] hurt people with their words and not with their hands...and I think words hurt worse...words mess you up mentally and emotionally...[I'd rather fight] because you can heal from physical wounds.

It is this level of insight that often separated Missy from her peers in the study. At times, Missy came off as wise beyond her years.

DENISE

“I'm manipulative with certain people 'cause I know I have certain kinds of strengths and advantages and I take advantage of it.” - Denise

Denise is a tall and thin senior whose looks could rival any fashion model. Strongly identifying with her large group of senior friends, her high school experience has been greatly influenced by a group of girls that she considers to be family, “we're all just so close...they're my sisters.” Because of this close bond, Denise takes it personally if she observes something that would upset one of her sisters, “[other people are] aware of what they do and say around us 'cause they know... if I see something pertaining to one of my other friends... I'm [going to] snitch.” This allegiance to her friends has led to Denise being in her own share of trouble as she is often involved in situations as a result of her close friendships. Not relating to any of her family members, Denise's likening of her friends to her family is much more literal than one would at first assume. Although she lives with her father, her relationship is distant, “My dad don't care about none of my friends. He don't know none of their names or nothing.” Alongside a distant relationship with the custodial parent, Denise shares how her mother, though back in her life now, did not play a major role in her upbringing, “my mom...moved when I was younger...she moved to North Carolina...and she was...there until this past June when she moved back.” Additionally, both parents have struggled with drug or alcohol addictions. It is

only through this lens, does one understand the literal meaning behind Denise's honesty when she states,

all of my friends, like, we all got our own like crazy situations going on...with relationships, family wise, and when we come to school, it's just so different. That's like all of our escapes...being with each other... That's why we all like leaning on each other so much.

Denise is also the only girl in the group who self-identified herself as gay. When asked to talk about this experience, Denise shared that she always knew that she was gay and that her parents "kind of" know. When asked to expound, Denise shared that she spoke to her mother about it but not her father. Though not showing any affect, Denise gave a story about how one female friend that she "talked to" (ie in a undefined romantic relationship) came to the house and her dad wouldn't let her friend come inside. It was unclear in Denise's discussion how this incident impacted her, but this fact remains true for most discussions with Denise. Though having one of the least desirable family situations, Denise often spoke about her family life experiences in the same way one would speak about the weather or a restaurant.

MELANIE

"I'm tired of hearing my grandma saying she don't want me." - Melanie

A part of Denise's circle of friends, Melanie was one of the hardest students to track down for interviews because she was in the midst of moving from her grandmother's home to her father's home. Often coming to school late or not at all, after having the opportunity to interview her about schooling experiences, I gained a better appreciation for the reason why. Though admitting "I'm goofy, I'm smiley," Melanie, who often wears a bright beautiful smile, has a sadness that permeates her more than the other girls in the study. In the first conversation, she shared how much of a struggle she has experienced this year at home. Living with a

grandmother who often tells her that she doesn't want her, Melanie missed school for several days because she was transitioning to live with her father whom she hadn't lived with since she was seven. With a father who has been inconsistent in her life, "My dad was in jail...he's been out since I was like eleven," Melanie has spent the majority of her life living with a grandmother for whom she has mixed feelings. "I think my grandmom impact me because...I really love her so much... But I don't feel as though she thinks [her words] impact me in any way [but] she impacts me good ways and she impacts me negatively." Often torn between love and pain when thinking about her grandmother, Melanie struggled to articulate the negative things that her grandmother has said to her without sharing something she also considered positive, "she didn't want me in her house... And then she saying she was gonna send me away and stuff like that. And she always be saying this since I was younger... And that's irking (annoying)... when you think that you aren't wanted by somebody...[but] She never gave me away or something like that." It is only through the lens of understanding Melanie's home situation, one in which she feels that the adults in her life don't want her, can one understand her (arguably) dangerously close relationship and reliance upon her school friendships. More so than any other student, Melanie spoke about her friends in a way that suggested clear closeness but also questionable interdependence. Melanie almost demonstrated a blind belief in the importance of and her reliance on friendships that had only lasted less than a year.

"I never knew that you could grow to love people like this...[it's only been] a couple of months... And I just love all of them so much... I would do anything for them." - Melanie

When talking about her friends, Melanie's smile grows even brighter and her eyes literally twinkle. Only battling Denise in the friendship equating family department, which is no

surprise since Denise and Melanie are close friends, Melanie's description of her friends is filled with evidence of a strong bond and great admiration,

It makes me feel like crying when I'm about to talk about them because I really, really love them... And we argue a lot but like even if we get into a big argument...we're still going to be sisters at the end of the day.

It is due to this level of attachment that Melanie feels justified in picking up her friend's battles.

Melanie notes that the last time she got in trouble it was due to a fight that broke out in response to her standing up for a friend (who was not a participant within this study), "I got into a fight. I got in trouble for it because we [are] not allowed to fight...but I had a good reason." Although clearly demonstrating loyalty to her friend group, this same sentiment is not always returned.

Within the same year, Melanie's friendship with the friend she stood up for dissolved over a disagreement about a boy. When asked if they are still friends, Melanie's eyes and head drop as she softly and sadly states, "No. We're associates."

SASHA

"Sometimes it's just like too much." - Sasha

A member of a blended family, Sasha lives with her mother, stepfather, twin brother and little sister (the biological child of her mother and stepfather). Sasha also has an older sister who is no longer in the house. The "drama" Sasha references is a result of what she sees as her stepfather's unfair treatment towards her and her brother in comparison to her little sister "my little sister, she's like a really big problem... And I feel like he (her stepfather) lets her do whatever she wants." Sasha also admitted that there were other issues in the household, "my father, like, he drinks too much." As a result of her stepfather's alcoholism and the blended family issues along with her parents consistent arguing, Sasha nurses this fear that her family

will be broken up which will ultimately result in her experiencing the same thing she felt when her biological father left – abandonment, again. Sasha tenses up and her boisterous persona deflates a bit as she admits “I don’t want nobody to leave me.”

Although the third member of the study group who part of the same group of friends (eight total) as Denise and Melanie, Sasha is starting to question her former blind allegiance to her group of friends. Though expressing loyalty and love in the same manner, “I really cherish all of my friends... I don’t take none of them for granted. And I like just love all of my friends,” Sasha was the only study participant from this particular clique that suggested being part of this circle of friendship is not all it’s cracked up to be. Identifying one key person (who did not take part in this study) as the group member who is always “starting something,” Sasha began to share a bit of annoyance over the repeated behavior, “it just becomes too much... sometimes [she should stop and think] my friends are too good for this. You don’t have to keep telling us.” While Sasha considers her friends to be “family,” she also boasts of a close relationship with her blood family members, another factor which differentiates her from Denise and Melanie, “I love being home. It’s nothing like being home.” However, like most of the students in the study, her less than ideal family life causes additional stress, “[It’s] just so much drama in my house, like all the time... I feel like I’m the person that’s trying to hold everybody together. Kind of like glue.”

Since they are all members of the same school, the lives of these girls intertwine at different junctures. For example, the clique that Denise, Melanie and Sasha all belong to have a problem with the group of girls that Missy hangs out with. Missy self-identified a problem with a specific student in which she was “close to fighting” and it turns out that Sasha was the student she referenced. Beyond the specific criteria of being high achieving with a large amount of

discipline infractions, these students were also similar in that they often mentioned their home lives as causing stress and all students self-identified as college-bound with specific future career aspirations. On the other hand, these girls also have very distinct lives apart from one another, both in school and outside of school. Shayla was the only student who mentioned prior bullying experiences, Denise was the only girl who self-identified as lesbian and both Shayla and Sasha discussed their concerns about weight issues. When asked questions about teachers and other students, the girls generally did not choose the same people to discuss and ranged in the types of situations they self-identified as “trouble.” However, within this tapestry of different stories and experiences, a clear collective voice arose, one in which students identified the importance of teacher-student relationships, discussed the impact of home and school stress, shared a critique of a harsh discipline system and projected hopes and assurances of their future successes.

Findings: Cross-Case Analysis

There were two research questions that this study sought to answer: (1) How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the causes of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues? (2) What affect does school disciplinary experiences have on their future aspirations? The below analysis explicates themes that emerged from interviews with the eight study participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, themes were initially determined from the field notes and round 1 coding. A theme was initially identified if a student response was directly aligned to the research question and also if it stuck out during the interviewing process as playing a major role in the students’ experiences or perspectives. As the coding continued, these same themes became more specific in nature as student responses began to identify ways in which one theme (i.e., teacher-student relationships) had more nuanced details that needed to be explored (i.e., teacher-student

relationships – poor instruction versus poor relationship and/or interaction). The multiple rounds of coding helped to ensure that the analysis provided an accurate reflection of the student statements and responses.

What High Achieving Black Girls Think About Their Behavior – Research Question 1

How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues- was posed under the assumption of Black Feminist Thought's standpoint and knowledge-validation. Standpoint speaks to the positioning of the Black woman and knowledge-validation speaks to the ability of the Black woman to be the creator of knowledge. Since standpoint refers to "group knowledge," the only process needed to validate this knowledge is that it is indicative of the group's experience. The following section discusses how the group's standpoint identified the impact of school and personal factors on their behavior and the punishments that they received. The group also problematizes the punishments that they have received and raises a valid question concerning the validity and fairness of such consequences.

This study did not intentionally seek to ask the question, "so how does it feel to be a smart Black girl who gets in trouble?" because that would have been inauthentic to the goal of this study for several reasons. First, asking that question would assume a specific identity that the girls had taken on instead of problematizing a label that has been placed onto them. This study was more about the experiences of girls who fall into this cross configuration of labels and not girls who self-identified as specifically occupying multiple identities. For this reason, Hill Collins' intersecting oppressions was not chosen as a focal point from the theoretical framework. In an effort to not place an identity onto them, the girls for the study were pre-chosen due to their

labels. Once in the study, the goal was to give them the space to share their own stories, and thus, create knowledge around how students placed in this intersection of labels feel, think and respond when asked about one of the labels, being “bad.” Secondly, in order for true knowledge to be created, any question that served as the driving force for this study had to be given the space for any answer to arise without limiting the scope of the response. In order to understand the true experiences of this group, it was important for me to allow their intersecting label to serve as the context, but not the sole content of the study.

In response to RQ1 – How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues - the girls were quite holistic in their thinking about behavior and generally considered multiple factors that contributed to them being punished. Students generally felt that the school rarely focused on all factors that contributed to the situation in its entirety. As a result of this lack of consideration the girls often disagreed with the school’s actual sanctioning of their behavior even though they rarely disagreed with the idea of actually being punished. Ultimately, the girls felt that there was a disregard of other factors which led to the behavior but were not considered in *punishment of* the behavior. Within this critique, students were willing to acknowledge any parts they played in the negative situations. However, since the punishments rarely considered all causal factors as identified by the students, they were dismissive and untrusting of the discipline system. I have decided to label these causal factors as school (teacher-student relationships and interactions) and personal (home life stressors).

School: Teacher- Student Relationships and Interactions

Research suggests the significance of the teacher-student bond can impact the achievement of the student (Eisele, 2009; Roorda, 2011). Seven of eight girls felt as if they had exhibited punishable behavior and often reflected on better ways to handle past incidents and the majority of participants felt as if in interactions with teachers, there was clear mishandling of the situation and that a teacher's actions could make a difficult situation better or worse. Although a slew of different stories, there were two themes that surfaced in most conversations regarding situations that disrupted the teacher- student relationship bond: (1) Teachers' prior perception of the student or unfair targeting and (2) Poor Instruction. The girls felt as if teachers' targeting of them led to them getting in trouble more so than another peer would in the same situation. The girls also felt that teachers were weak instructors in terms of their inability to manage the classroom or teach students effectively. Through their personal experiences, the girls created knowledge around what constitutes teacher professionalism and what defines good teaching.

Teacher Perception and the Feeling of Being Targeted

“Because I had a history of going through problems with people... They [thought], “Aw yeah. She's going to get in trouble. She's the problem here. They target people” - Kian

Out of the participants, Kian was the most critical of adult behavior within the school. However, the above statement was a critique that came up in multiple conversations. Like Kian states, the girls felt that if they had a prior negative interaction with a staff member, that information would be used to either target or unfairly punish them in any subsequent settings. This stood out as unfair because the students felt that once a situation was over, it should be over and there should not be residual consequences. All but one participant had attended Kamer

campus from at least the 9th grade and six of the eight girls have attended since 7th grade. They expressed frustration over the fact that their reputation preceded them, making it difficult to change adults' perception of them from one year to the next. In fact, the students felt as if teacher talk about their past behavior with other staff members not only inhibited them from improving their behavior or the perception of their behavior, but was just plain unprofessional.

Naomi described a situation in which the teacher did not give her the proper information but held her accountable for completing an action step. In this situation, Naomi was told by her college advisor to complete a certain number of applications by a set date despite the fact that she was the only student in her class who had already received two college acceptances. According to Naomi, the understanding was that the college advisor would provide her with information in order to complete the college applications. When she did not receive the information, Naomi did not meet the set date of college application completion. Once the date was missed, the college advisor contacted Naomi's mother to share that Naomi had not completed the applications and also spoke to other teachers about the situation. "What made me even more mad was she had teachers coming up to me like 'oh I heard you're getting lazy and you don't wanna do it.' So then I went off (expressed verbal anger)." In response to her "going off," Naomi received a Level 2 infraction. In this instance, Naomi already felt unfairly treated by the teacher because of the confusion regarding what the teacher was supposed to do prior to Naomi completing her responsibility. Her negative perspective was intensified by the teacher sharing information of the incident with other teachers who then approached Naomi demonstrating disappointment in her actions. The combination of these actions then triggered Naomi to react negatively – for which she was punished. Ultimately, the teacher apologized to Naomi for the behavior, "later on in the day, she gave me a big hug and said it was a

misunderstanding.” However, it was clear that the situation left a bad taste in Naomi’s mouth since she self-identified it as a time when she got in trouble unfairly. It was also clear that she was still upset by the situation as her voice rose when speaking about the situation and she seemed dismissive of the teacher’s attempt to rectify the situation. Naomi did not see it as a “misunderstanding” but a misuse of power. As a result of past incidents in which they felt unfairly targeted either prior to meeting the teacher or with a teacher’s lack of response to a negative incident, the students were less likely to trust or like the teachers. This led to strained relationships and created an element of distrust.

Missy relates another experience which resulted in lack of trust towards school staff members. In this incident, Missy discussed how she ended up in trouble for initiating a fight despite her telling multiple staff members that there was an issue for weeks prior to the fight. In the situation Missy discusses, she was bullied by another group of girls, the clique of which Denise, Melanie and Sasha are a part, for a disability. In conversations with Missy’s mother, she shared that Missy has a physical disability which is not particularly visible to the outsider but restricts her ability to move one of her arms freely. Despite the fact that it is not noticeable, Missy is highly sensitive about it. According to Missy, this bullying generally happened in the form of cyber taunts. In order to avoid a fight, Missy spoke to multiple staff members about the bullying. After no change happened, Missy took the matter into her own hands and came into school one day ready to confront the student bullies. She entered one classroom and approached a student by telling her to “get up” and fight. She was ushered out of the classroom by the teacher but then proceeded to look around the building for another student who had bullied her. She ultimately approached this second student, who happened to be Sasha, in the hallway and started to rush towards her. Missy was then restrained by a staff member before physically

attacking Sasha. In her opinion, Missy had done all she could in an attempt to not fight but felt abandoned by the staff. As a result, Missy wanted to fight in order to bring what she felt would be an end to the situation. When asked how she felt about the staff members' lack of response, Missy stated "I lost a lot of respect with them. I don't talk to them. I don't like them talking to me." If one of the girls perceived a lack of trust or disliked a teacher, she was typically less likely to behave in the teachers' classrooms. In line with this finding, research has argued that teenagers across all boundaries deal with significant emotional and psychological factors that increase the level of emphasis and significance that a teacher-student relationship may have (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Davis & Dupper, 2004). The students' reactions to broken trust or increased dislike with a teacher profoundly impacted not just their personal opinions of the teachers but the behaviors they exhibited in those teachers' classes. Naomi shared in another portion of the interview that she and her friends were more likely to misbehave in the classrooms of teachers that they didn't like. Once the bond was broken with these teachers, the girls either became dismissive of that teacher's authority like Naomi or withdrew from a relationship with the teacher(s) completely like Missy. In both scenarios, the teacher-student bond was disrupted which resulted in a higher likelihood of students exhibiting what is deemed punishable behavior in class. From the students' standpoint, a teacher-student bond transcended simply impacting the ability for students to be successful, particularly since these girls have managed to be high achievers regardless of teacher behavior. According to the group knowledge created by these girls, the teacher-student bond directly impacts, not just academic success, but the students' behavioral actions and reactions.

It is the prevalence of these situations, in which there is staff mishandling of a situation, which caused the girls to feel as if the punishment is unfair. According to Morris (2007), Black

girls are more likely to be punished because they are exhibiting a behavior that challenges a teacher's personal value system. Within the context of these findings, Esquire's history of top-down assumptions in terms of student discipline results in the girls being extremely critical and untrusting of the system. When asked, the majority of the students chose on the survey that the "school's discipline policy is somewhat appropriate" instead of choosing the "discipline policy is appropriate" or "the discipline policy is inappropriate." The seeming ambiguity is a result of students who have self-admitted that they were wrong but question the appropriateness of the punishments they have received in response. This mixed feeling is also a result of a system that holds students accountable but ultimately believes that the adult is right. Since the handlers of the discipline system, the Deans, are charged with ensuring that all parties are happy, and out of the group of stakeholders, the teachers have the most capital in terms of the power to discipline and students have the least, it is unsurprising that the students feel this way. Naomi conveyed the sentiment of many of the young Black women in this study in asserting, "... at the end of the day, as much as you might not like somebody, if they got more power over you, you can't really do nothing about it." According to Naomi, it is a sense of powerlessness which caused the students to either disconnect like Missy or blow up in anger like Naomi - both of which can result in receiving more punishment. In this moment, Naomi is problematizing the idea of student choice and suggesting that the underlying controller is teacher power, thus creating knowledge around who holds or lacks power in this specific school context. Ultimately, both the experiences of Naomi and Missy suggest that unprofessional teacher behavior is a factor in continuing the ineffective discipline cycle and causing distrust amongst the students.

Poor Teacher Instruction and the Students' Perceptions of Good Teaching

"But like I feel like it's not my fault that I'm fed up with you not being a good teacher" - Naomi

Another category students referenced as a school factor that led to or could not be removed from their past discipline issues is poor instruction. Naomi's above sentiment is reflective of the expectations students have for teaching and the attitude that is displayed when they are encountered with a teacher who cannot manage the classroom or does not relay information in a way that the students feel successful. It is in these classrooms that students were more likely to feel justified in exhibiting behavior that was deemed inappropriate. When explaining why she sometimes misbehaved in a specific teacher's class, Denise stated

“Because teachers don't know how to teach. And if you don't teach – if you don't teach me or you're not teaching like the class right or can control the class, then I'm gonna talk and do what I want.”

This frame of thought was most evident in the participants' response to a video clip shown during Round 2 of interviews. In this video, a female student yelled and cursed at a teacher for not teaching, exclaiming, “I'm here to learn! Y'all went on strike for a whole week to get paid to teach us. And, now you're here and you don't want to teach?! Man, you better teach something!” Though most students noted that the method of sharing concerns was inappropriate and would likely result in severe punishment at Esquire Charter Schools, the Black girls in the study also felt as if the student depicted in the video was justified in her anger. Sasha shared “I don't feel like she should get in trouble because she's speaking her mind. And she's actually doing the right thing by saying how she feels.” While particularly aware of what the school expects from them, these participants also have clear expectations for the school, specifically when it comes to in-class instruction. From the girls' standpoint, failure of the school to complete its “end of the bargain” (strong instruction) justifies them doing the same (exhibiting undesirable behavior).

Students also noted that positive relationships and interactions with teachers resulted in feelings of trust and the desire to exhibit positive student behavior. After asking students to describe a negative incident with staff members, students were asked if they would exhibit the same reaction with a teacher with whom they had a positive relationship and students repeatedly answered “No.” Naomi bluntly shared “I just feel like if you’re doing your job as a teacher, you’re going to earn respect.” Ultimately, the students felt as if a positive teacher- student relationship results in less frequency of negative interactions and a higher likelihood of students developing and maintaining a trusting relationship with the teacher. This finding echoes research findings which show that students, specifically Black students, both value and prefer having a positive and trustful relationship with their teachers (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012).

Personal: Home Life and Other Stressors

“I used to come to school and I would be so upset sometimes. And I wouldn’t focus in class.”

- Heather

Parental involvement and neighborhood risk factors directly impact Black student academic achievement (Stewart, Stewart & Simmons, 2007; Trask-Tate & Cunningham, 2010). Heather’s above sentiments paint the picture of how a negative home experience impacts a student’s perspective prior to even entering the school building. From the standpoint of the girls, personal stress is a clear factor which can directly impact their daily behavior. When asked to identify an area of their lives that negatively influenced their attitude, the majority of students chose “home and school stressors.” When asked to expound or share what could negatively affect their moods, the participants shared how their home lives as discussed in the student profile section made it difficult to focus on academic work, particularly on days when they are

confronted with home issues right before going to school. Kian shares in response to how home issues impact her day,

I think it impacted me [for the worst] especially with my mom in the morning when she yelling and stuff like,... Be quiet. You're irritating. So it just like makes my day be bad and I don't care...like I don't be caring and I don't call her when I'm getting out of school. Like [it affects] my whole attitude.

As Kian shared this statement, one could literally hear the annoyance pick up in her voice. In Kian's case, she has repeated negative interactions with her mother. When these interactions happen, Kian is less likely to monitor her emotional response and more likely to become outwardly frustrated during school. Although this group of students has navigated how to maintain high academic achievement despite the personal stress they experience, it is clear that they respond to this stress in other ways. As a result, being stressed before they enter the school building increases the likelihood of them acting out once they are in the school building. However, this stress is not limited to home interactions. The students also shared how coming to school alone can be the source of stress. Heather shares the anxiety she would feel when coming to school meant a repeat of negative interactions with classmates,

I feel like I didn't want to come to school sometimes just because of all the drama...And I knew that when I would come to school it would just be like same drama just a different day. And I just didn't feel like dealing with it. I just hated coming to school and dealing with those people.

Coming from a situation where she left her prior school due to bullying, Heather felt discouraged when having to deal with similar issues at Kameron Campus. In Heather's case, not only does she come to the school having to deal with difficult issues from home, but she enters the school and there is no reprieve. Heather's response is indicative of many of the girls as they

often referenced “drama” from both home and school. The prevalence of this drama results in students either not wanting to come to school or being defensive when they are in school.

The girls also noted how negative interactions with school and staff could increase their level of stress in the day. For example, referencing the strict focus on uniforms Kamer demonstrated in the past, Naomi discusses a specific experience regarding uniform rules that stuck with her

We would get sent home because of our socks. And I just thought that was stupid... Like, they would lift our pants’ leg up [to check] our socks. One day I had to tell a lady to, like, please back up from me, like, don’t touch me.

This practice is indicative of a displaced Broken Windows Theory that criminalizes students. In light of the research of Crenshaw (2015), Monroe (2005) and Winn (2011), such a practice becomes even more problematic through the lens of the school-to-prison pipeline and the over-criminalization of Black students. A routine process in which students are literally inspected from head to toe upon entering the building is resonant of a prison or military. When asked how this experience impacted her day, Naomi shared “I would just get like an attitude. A lot of times I wouldn’t say nothing... I would just be irked about it all day.” While sharing her annoyance in a matter that diminishes the significance of the experience, it was clear in conversation that this practice significantly impacted Naomi as she mentioned it multiple times throughout the interviews. Her stating “don’t touch me” was an example of her resistance and discomfort with this practice. This specific example is a clear sign of how strict adherence to school expectations by school staff can lead to student blow-ups and negative reactions. Many staff members interacting with students are unaware of the other issues and stressors that may be affecting the students (Pugh-Lily et al., 2001). As a result of this lack of awareness, there are often situations

where staff members seek to reinforce a rule and it results in the student reacting negatively. As Shayla simply states, “as teenagers, we stress too, it’s not just y’all.”

Denise discusses how it is only the positive interactions with students that help to alleviate the stress from home. In reflecting on her peers at school, she stated, “we all got our own crazy situations going on... and we’ll be sad at the beginning of the day, but eventually we’ll just make everybody happy.” Similarly, several students noted that a positive interaction with a staff member, with most students referencing their dean, could help to change the vibe of a negative attitude. While students varied on if school increased or alleviated home stress, all students agreed that they have stressors (home or school) outside of in-class academics and demonstrated a desire for the adults around them, specifically school staff, to be understanding of this reality. In the discussion of their own personal stress, the girls’ standpoint leads to them creating collective knowledge around what they define as stress as well as how that stress impacts their school lives. Ultimately, the students overwhelmingly identified home and school stress as one of the causes of their “attitudes and bad moods.” According to the girls, their daily interactions with school staff can serve to either alleviate or increase the levels of stress they are already experiencing.

Perceptions of Punishment

In general, participants admitted when discussing past issues that the school was right to sanction certain behaviors. However, students were extremely critical of the fact that the school’s response rarely took into account what they saw as other important or mitigating factors. The girls’ take on punishment and their critique of the school system falls right under Black Feminist Thought’s knowledge-validation process. Instead of believing the narrative that

the school discipline system prepares them for college, the girls problematized this very idea. In conversation with me, the students argued that the discipline policies failed for two reasons: (1) they did not take into account the other causal factors (school and personal) that contributed to the student's in-the-moment behavior, and (2) consequences were more severe than the behavior warranted. The young women juxtaposed such ideas when giving examples of what I coded justified punishment versus unfair punishment. For example, when discussing justified punishment, Sasha explains a situation when she received a zero on her exam because her phone went off during testing, "before benchmark (interim assessments) everyone is supposed to turn in their phone...I didn't turn in my phone...I just felt like it wasn't that important." Sasha then explains how her phone went off during the exam and displayed information that she had used to study the night before, "I couldn't prove that I wasn't cheating...I regretted it so much...[but] I felt as if it was a learning lesson." In this incidence, Sasha chose to disobey the rules and had to deal with the consequences. When asked how she felt about it, Sasha responded "I feel like it was my fault...I have to deal with the consequences...I should not get the easy way out because I'm a good student."

Similarly, the majority of students in the study were able to identify a moment when they felt as if their punishment received was justified. In general, the students felt the punishment was justified when they could self-identify how their behavior was clearly in opposition to an understood rule. In fact, Shayla identified punishment as justifiable even when the situation context had gray areas. For example, Shayla shares how she was suspended due to disrespecting a teacher,

I went to the teacher and I needed my homework and she said I disrupted her class. I knocked on the door. She looked at me then like she was standing out front near her computer. She wasn't doing nothing. Everybody was doing their work. So I knocked

again. She didn't answer. I knocked one more time. [Then] I opened the door. I said excuse me. I need my homework. She was like you need to step outside. Why are you disrupting my class? And so I got mad. I slammed the door and I kicked it. And I walked away. I got suspended.

Though sharing where she felt the teacher was wrong, "But at the same time, I was mad because don't ignore me. You see me. I'm a student and I need my homework 'cause I'm about to leave. At least I tried to be polite and knock on the door," Shayla was still open to taking ownership for her own actions, "I deserved [the punishment]...because I was disrespectful." In this example, Shayla demonstrated the ability to see both sides of the same coin. Shayla is not uncommon in this prospect. However, her opinion of this interaction as "fair" is a bit of an outlier in comparison to the rest of the study group.

While the majority of students were able to identify moments in which both the behavior of the school staff alongside their own personal actions resulted in punishment, the majority of students labeled these moments as "unfair punishment." Overall, student definition of unfair punishment was punishment that is unfairly relayed or punishment that does not hold all participants responsible. For example, Denise gives an example when she disagreed more with how she was given the punishment in terms of teacher tone and method versus the actual punishment itself. In this specific instance, Denise was prevented from going on a school trip due to a negative interaction with a school dean a few days prior.

[He was trying to talk to me] and he was standing in front of the door and I'm trying to leave. So I kind of pushed him to the side. But he made it all extra - like I didn't push you I was just [wanted you to] get out of my way...and he got mad.

Though not overjoyed at missing the trip, Denise's most negative feelings came from the method in which she was informed, "as soon as we get to the lunchroom, everybody in there, [he] put us on blast [and said] we couldn't go on the trip. He should have called... it was the fact that he did it in front of everybody. That was shady." Ultimately, Denise felt embarrassed by how the staff

member informed her of the punishment. In this case, Denise was less concerned with the punishment and more concerned with the publicized nature of the punishment. In her critique, she shared that she did not mind staying home and not attending the trip, but that she was bothered by the announcement in front of her classmates. According to Denise, the announcement of the punishment was, in fact, another punishment in and of itself resulting in the punishment now becoming more severe than necessary. Through this experience, Denise problematizes and not only questions the validity of a punishment that includes unnecessary embarrassment, but now labels this incident as an unfair punishment due to the increased level of severity.

In other examples, students felt that there was a failure on the school's part to hold everyone responsible for their actions in a fair and even way. Sasha relays a moment, which happens to be the same moment discussed by Missy, when she received a more severe punishment than her peers despite all students committing what she felt to be the same infraction. "One time I was arguing on Twitter and it was between me and other girls at this school, with my friends against them. It was kind of like a war a little bit." The argument which had been going on throughout the year erupted on Twitter that night. As a result, the following day, one of the students (Missy) confronted both Sasha and another friend in a manner that would have led to a physical altercation if staff hadn't stepped in. In reflection on the fight, Sasha believes that she should have received punishment but points out that other students were not treated the same way, "I had to be removed from school...and the other girls who were saying stuff- really crazy stuff – they stayed in class. But me, I was out." During discussion, Sasha admitted that she was the only student who came close to actually fighting that day and suggested that this was the

reason for her removal. However, the fact that other students were not removed for their interaction at all was something Sasha deemed as unfair.

Similar to Denise, Sasha problematizes the punishment due to other factors involved in the incident. In these instances, the students are creating knowledge around what is fair punishment versus unfair punishment. In neither case do the girls assert that they are completely innocent or undeserving of receiving a consequence. In fact, they both shared the opposite. However, what they do assert is that when there are other relevant factors which are not considered in the consequence given, the punishment as a whole becomes unfair.

In general, the girls felt that Esquire's system of discipline was more severe than necessary. In response to two video clips, one in which a student playfully hits another student and another (referenced earlier) in which a student yells at a teacher for "not teaching," the majority of participants agreed that the students should be held responsible. However, when asked how the school would handle the same situation, six out of the eight students felt as if the school would handle the situation more severely than necessary. Sasha states "Esquire would take it to whole other level" and Missy states that the punishment Esquire would likely give would be "too much." This perception of the school over-punishing is not unlike the critique others have had of "no excuses" charter schools implementing petty discipline policies that have little to do with academic achievement (Golan, 2014; Goodman, 2013). According to the girls' standpoint, Esquire's tendency to give extreme punishments for small rule infractions was unnecessary and ineffective. While often lauding the academic education they have received from Esquire, students' belief in the discipline system was low. As a result, their overall opinion of the school was muddied by their experience with unfair and extreme discipline practices.

Hence, the students' collective knowledge about Esquire's discipline system is that it is necessary in theory but inappropriate in practice.

The Impact of Discipline on the Black Girl's Opinion of Self – Research Question 2

In response to the second research question – what affect does the school discipline experiences have on their future aspirations - this section will directly draw on Black Feminist Thought's concept of self-definition. Self-definition is the awareness of negative controlling images that are placed onto the Black woman but the resistance of these images as true reflections of who the Black woman views herself to be. Self-definition acknowledges the presence of the image but believes that one's true self differs from the image. The controlling images shared by Hill Collins, mammy, matriarch, and Jezebel, are much more aligned to that of Black women than for Black girls. However, the definition of the matriarch directly fits the description of a "bad Black girl" in that it projects assertiveness as being aggressive and the appearance of mental and physical strength as being un-ladylike. This aggressive nature of the matriarch justifies the implementation of harsh controlling techniques in order to tame the negative nature of this unfeminine beast (Hill Collins, 2000). Though not particularly inhabiting the notion of "breeding" and literally running a household in the same way that the controlling image for a matriarch does, the bad Black girl label also projects a strong and uncompromising image that challenges the assumptions of femininity (Morris, 2007). Despite the reality of this image, Black Feminist Thought's self-definition acknowledges both a dual recognition and rejection of this label.

Self-definition was evident in the girls' response to the impact of the discipline system on their personal view of self. Outside of Heather who identified her self-perception as more

negative than the school's perception of herself and Sasha who felt that her self-perception and the school's perception were one in the same, the other girls felt that the school had a more negative perception of them than their own self-identification. It is this ability to not only clearly separate what they perceive to be the school's perception of them from their own but to assert that their actual self is more positive that is indicative of these girls' power to self-define themselves within a dominant environment.

In response to RQ2 – what affect does disciplinary experiences have on their future aspirations? - the students rarely felt as if their current or past behavior negatively impacted their future aspirations and readily separated how the school viewed them versus how they viewed themselves. The questionnaire used to garner responses around student perception of self and their experiences used seven base questions. As a means of answering the questions, students were given a plethora of response options that generally ranged from a highly positive response to a highly negative response. The seven questions touched on the following concepts: Factors that caused students to behave poorly, factors that impacted the student attitude, reasons for the students getting in trouble, the student's perception of themselves as a student, the students views on the school's perception of them as a student, the students' beliefs around the level of their intelligence and the impact of in-school behavior and the appropriateness of the school's discipline policy.

The girls' opinions of their future aspiration were undoubtedly positive. Even during the initial interview, every student, without prompting, referenced that their future plans included college and discussed their life aspirations in a positive light. In fact, the girls' self-perception of being high performers when asked how they viewed themselves was evident as the majority of students reported "I am smart but my behavior sometimes gets in the way." None of the students

chose any sentences that started with “I am not smart” on the student questionnaire. These responses give two flashing indicators: (1) students self-identify themselves as smart regardless of past discipline infractions; and (2) students see their behavior as a possible stumbling block to success in their current environment but not a roadblock to success in the future.

Students’ Self-Perception of High Intelligence

“I’m smart, I’m not gonna throw my ‘geniusness’ in the trash!” - Sasha

Like most of the students, Sasha’s intelligence was never in question to her. Although in the midst of deciding if she was hanging out with the right group of friends and juggling issues resulting from a blended household, the very idea of being less than smart was almost offensive to Sasha. She exclaimed the above statement in the midst of a conversation around the impact of her toxic friendships on her grades. Naomi goes into more detail around this concept of being smart as she specifically identifies the difference between high school and college and why being disobedient in high school is less important,

And then like [the high school] could kick you out of their class and you just fail. But here at Esquire or any other school, we [are] in high school. So we [have to] complete high school. And it’s, like, we’re going to be in class the next day or if we get kicked out of school we’re going to be right at a different school. So either way, you’re going to get a high school diploma. But when it comes to a degree, [you might not get it].

This line of thinking shows the distinction between what Naomi views as being punished in high school versus being punished in college. According to Naomi, not getting her high school diploma is unlikely and her behavior in high school does not impact the possibility of being successful in high school. On the other hand, not getting a degree is not as assumed and poor behavior in college can result in a negative outcome. Naomi’s comments speak to a larger issue that high schools must contend with concerning lack of student investment in the everyday

happenings and systems of high school even amongst students who are college-bound. However, though the other students were not as analytical in their responses and the distinction between behaviors in high school versus behavior in college, the undertone of their responses demonstrated a belief that their current or past infractions did not dictate or impact their self-labeling as a good student. Heather states, “I’m a good student. I don’t look at me getting in trouble... I don’t view myself as a student who gets in trouble a lot. I just – I’m just a good student.” Though the one lone student who self-identified the school as having a higher perception of her than she personally held, Heather still held onto the belief that despite the difference, she sees herself as a good student who gets into trouble, not a student who is bad because she gets into trouble.

While self-identifying themselves as good students, most of the study participants were able to share how their behavior can sometimes impact their in-the-moment success. Kian laughs in response to the prompt, “I’m smart but my behavior sometimes gets in the way.” As she explains “Yes, because when I got an attitude, I’m gonna snap back, regardless. I don’t care what you say.” Naomi also chuckles during her explanation as she states, “yea, sometimes it gets in the way.” Though not all students chuckled during their responses, the majority of students did not view their behavior as a lasting obstacle. This opinion was due to the fact that they did not take the discipline policy seriously because it showed a lack of understanding of who they were. As a result, the policies became easy to dismiss. Kian, Naomi, Shayla and Denise all indicated in their responses that several policies were “stupid.” Shayla expounds on this idea with her critique of a bathroom policy, “I don’t like the seven- minute bathroom policy, like what if [you need longer]? But then you get a level 2.” Naomi sums up her criticism by stating, “It’s petty...always getting in trouble for every single thing you do.” Sasha and Missy

took their critique a bit further as they argued that staff's implementation of the policies showed that they didn't understand students and student needs. Sasha states, "people really don't understand who I am" and Missy states about the school, "like they don't understand people sometimes. Sometimes people [go through things] that can make them act, like, different." Since the girls view the school's discipline policies as either "petty" or strongly question if the discipline policies consider who they are as people, they are both quickly dismissive of the severity of being disciplined by the school and do not see their high number of discipline issues as an inhibitor in future success. According to their own self-definition, the girls' academic success was more important than their frequent involvement in the discipline system.

Students' Rejection of the Bad Girl Label

The girls showed a clear distinction between how the school viewed them versus how they viewed themselves. In fact, the majority of students indicated that the school's opinion of them was less positive than their own personal view. Black Feminist Thought's self-definition is directly in play with this rejection of the school's labeling. Although able to identify what the school thought and possibly projected onto them through the behavior of staff members, the girls' opinion of self was more positive and less condemning. When asked why she felt the school's opinion of her was inaccurate, Naomi responded "Because I'm me." This simple statement summarizes the viewpoint of many of the participants. Despite their past negative interactions, students felt that they were more aware of who they were and what they were capable of than the school and often self-described themselves as "good students." Since the students do not respect several discipline policies, they were able to compartmentalize getting in trouble in the school context to just being an in-school consequence of which they were critical.

As a result, their interactions with the discipline system did not greatly impact the positive light in which they viewed themselves.

Most of the students also noted that they have greatly matured in past years and some students felt that the school failed to see their own personal growth. Kian, the student who indicated feeling the most targeted out of the group of participants, shared that the school continued to look at her through a negative lens, “since 7th grade, I would always get in trouble with girls...and that always stuck with me.” Kian went on to explain that as a result of this targeting, the school would rarely take her concerns seriously and would not react to anything she brought to them. Despite the school’s actions, Kian still feels as if she has grown a lot, “[I’ve been through] a lot since being in Esquire.. But I learned to overcome some stuff. And I learned that I got to move on from the past...And not be focused on what happened in the past because at the end of the day, you’re going to grow from those situations... So I just grow every day.” This sentiment was echoed by Sasha, “at 12th grade, it just feels like I’m really growing up” and Naomi “I’m definitely more mature. This (the interviews) really made me realize how much I’ve grown.” Overall, the students demonstrated a high sense of positive self-worth despite if they felt that the school agreed with that sentiment or not. Missy sums up the group’s sentiment perfectly when she looked me in the eyes and shares about the school staff, “They just don’t understand me...I know what I do.” In this moment, Missy summarizes the collective thought around self-awareness. The girls assert that their own self-definition is more accurate than what they assume to be the schools’ definition. They have chosen to reject labels that are contrary to their personal perspectives.

Ultimately, the students shared two key ideas when it comes to their opinion on causal factors behind their school behavior. The first idea is that improper or unprofessional behavior

by school staff and poor instruction can serve as either a trigger for negative reactions or a reason to misbehave. The second idea purported as a causal factor was the reality of home issues and how negative interactions with students or school staff influence a negative mindset which can instigate punishable behavior. The students then offered a poignant critique of the school discipline systems and highlighted two specific ideas about Esquire's discipline policies which resulted in the students identifying the discipline systems as only moderately appropriate. The girls felt as if the discipline policies were "petty" and focused on insignificant rules. The girls also felt that the discipline consequences failed to acknowledge other influential factors resulting in the students having a lack of trust in the integrity of the discipline systems. Finally, the students identified two specific components regarding how the discipline policies impacted their own personal perspective of self. Students felt that the adults in the building have a lack of understanding for who they truly are but the girls' view of themselves and their future aspirations was positive despite their past experiences.

Using Black Feminist Thought's standpoint, knowledge-validation and self-definition opened up the space for this analysis to be based solely on the students' experiences and collective voice. As Black girls who outwardly occupy multiple labels - Black, female, smart, bad – the use of this theoretical approach to data analysis provided base assumptions which allowed the girls the opportunity to share openly about their experiences while problematizing one of the labels placed onto them – being bad. This study sought to address how students who have been given these labels operate within this context, what their stories are, what they deem to be most important and how they contend with one of the images projected onto them. Their collective voice provided a clear response to the research questions which sought to discover their thoughts on past discipline experiences and how these experiences impacted their thoughts about

themselves. In their collective voice, the girls highlighted the significance of the teacher-student bond and what can happen when it is disrupted, the impact of home and personal stressors on their attitudes and their opinion on the appropriateness of Esquire's discipline system. Pulling on the ability to reject projected images, the students self-defined themselves as being smart and asserted that their more positive perspective of their personal self was more accurate than the school's perception. According to the students, they are in fact smart and their past experiences with the discipline system do not define who they are or who they plan to become.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

African American adolescent girls who are both high-achieving but exceed the average amount of discipline infractions are a seeming contradiction. Current literature highlights the amount of Black girls who receive consequences that are disproportionately given, but does not include Black students' academic levels when discussing discipline concerns or assumes that students with high academic achievement are not a part of the discussion around discipline (Crenshaw et al., 2015). The study of this specific group of girls sheds light on gaps evident in current literature. This study does not just speak about a small group of smart Black girls who get in trouble but highlights the tendency of research to focus on Black students who are not succeeding or the proclivity of discipline research to discuss discipline practices from the outsider's perspective. Answering the question of why smart Black girls get in trouble provides us with valuable information about a single group that occupies multiple marginal labels and, consequently, multiple areas of research. The ultimate purpose of this study was to give this group of students an opportunity to speak as experts of their own experiences and to bring voice to a group of students whose own experiences and opinions can answer even more questions around academic achievement in the urban Black community and the impact of discipline policies on the students receiving them.

This study set out to find the answers to two questions: (1) conceptualize the cause of their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues? and (2) What affect does school discipline experiences have on their future aspirations? In response to the first question, the students identified two key areas that directly impacted their behavior: a negative relationship with staff members and home or personal stress.

The students felt as if their behavior was triggered by a teacher who either acted in what the students considered to be an unprofessional manner or by a teacher whom the students categorized as a “bad teacher.” According to the girls, behaving unprofessionally referred to a teacher displaying immature characteristics, such as gossiping about students with other staff members or going out of their way to embarrass a student in public. When these actions took place, students were less likely to like the teacher which resulted in the student-teacher bond being disrupted. The girls also had a high bar for what it meant to be a good teacher, which they characterized as someone who could control the class by ensuring that student behavior was productive and positive. When a teacher demonstrated an inability to manage the class, the gateway for misbehavior was opened. According to the girls, a teacher who is not “doing their job,” which they characterized as ineffectively managing the class, should not receive good behavior from the students. The logic behind this thought was that teachers who failed to “do their job” should not expect students to in turn “do their job,” exhibiting good behavior. In this opinion, one behavior begets another – bad teaching results in bad students and good teaching results in good students.

Though not an overt theme in this study since the students’ language did not explicitly reference this concept, the idea of mutual respect is implied in the students’ opinions. When a teacher behaved in what students deemed as unprofessional, the girls responded by treating that teacher as a person unworthy of good behavior. On the flip side, when students liked a teacher, they were more likely to behave in that teacher’s class. This theme is also evident in the girls’ responses to the second video clip. In the video, the girl makes the statement “I take care of my d**n self!” It was clear that the girl in the video felt that since she was behaving as an adult at home, she was justified in having high expectations for how she was treated in the school.

Although disagreeing with her method of sharing, the majority of students understood the frustration that can happen when a teacher is a poor instructor. The notion of mutual respect was suggested in the students' belief that a teacher's behavior can be the determining factor in a student's reaction. A lack of respect from the teacher through the form of immature communication or weak instruction would result in a lack of respect from the student through the form of presented behavior. In either of these situations, the students felt justified in their misbehavior because the teachers were not "doing their job."

Students also identified home and personal stress as a cause of misbehavior. The student discussion of these factors suggests that there is a lack of understanding from the school staff members regarding the situations students face at home and at school which impact their behavior. When discussing their home life, every student, without prompting, shared home situations that caused stress. These home situations included sibling rivalry, strained communication with parents and stressful responsibilities. Living in this home reality followed by entering a school environment that exacerbated the stress due to unfair discipline policies or unprofessional teachers resulted in additional stress. In several cases, the girls noted that negative interactions with peers intensify this feeling of stress upon entering the school building. When the combination of these other factors that cause or intensify misbehaviors were not considered in the punishment provided, the girls felt as if the punishment was unfair. The lack of consideration for these other factors made the students feel as if the school does not know who they are or what they deal with on a regular basis. This feeling results in students deeming the discipline policy as only somewhat appropriate.

The girls also critiqued the discipline policy as being "petty" or holding the students accountable to rules that were meaningless. Naomi's declaration of her boss not caring about her

socks is a key example of the girls' view on several school rules. Being keenly aware of the college preparatory nature of Esquire schools, the girls often juxtaposed the discrepancy between what the school preached, college-going culture, versus what the school did, instilled petty childish rules. However, the students also shared how they knew certain behaviors that they currently displayed were not acceptable in college. This level of awareness suggests that the students are not only aware of the distinction between high school consequences and college-level consequences, but that they are confident in their ability to behave appropriately when in a different setting.

In response to the second research question regarding the impact of the discipline policy on student future aspirations, the girls determined that the influence was minimal. The students demonstrated a self-awareness which was strong enough for them to generally separate their own personal perspective of self from what they felt was the school's perception of them. Each student self-identified themselves as smart. This label was one which they proudly accepted and did not problematize within the study. The girls did not display any level of angst regarding their intellectual ability and, in fact, showed clear pride in their academic accomplishments. The girls did not question if they were smart but felt confident in the fact that were smart and that they were in line to be successful in the future regardless of other conditions. When speaking about their future, the majority of girls identified specific colleges they would attend and careers they would have. The discussion of school discipline and negative experiences did not at all impact this perspective and many students shared at the end of the interview rounds that they had matured over the years.

The girls also felt that the school viewed them in a more negative light than they viewed themselves. This concept was hinted to throughout Round 1 and Round 2 of the interviews but

became evident when students identified the school's perception of their own self versus their own perception as discussed in Round 3 of interviews. When asked to explain, the girls stressed that their knowledge of their true self was greater and more accurate than the school's knowledge of their true self. This level of self-definition is aligned to Black Feminists Thought's assertion that a Black woman's awareness of negative controlling images is acknowledged but not internalized (Hill Collins, 2000).

The findings of this study contribute to current research regarding the importance of the teacher-student bond and the critique of "no-excuses" charter schools (Golan, 2015; Roorda, 2011). Students identified that a disruption of the teacher-student bond can negatively impact student performance. The girls' comments also critiqued the arbitrary nature of the discipline system within the context of a "no excuses" school site. The findings of this study furthers current research in terms of the impact of a negative teacher-student bond on student behavior as well as the implications made around the identity formation of the high achieving Black female student. The girls not only reiterated the importance of the teacher-student bond and its impact on student performance but also implied that this bond directly impacts student behavior. All of the students in the study are high performing which suggests that despite their negative experiences with teachers, they are still able to successfully navigate the academic component of school, which suggests that the teacher-student bond is not important just for academic performance but for the behavior of the student beyond their academics. The girls also suggested that there are other factors beyond home and school that influence their opinion of self. This study did not dive into identity formation, but there is clear room to further explore what other factors contribute to the identity of high achieving students.

Implications for Practice

Although students were extremely critical of their experience with the current discipline system, students often made a clear distinction between “this year” and “last year.” The interviews for this study took place during the first half of the school year and student awareness of the changes in discipline policies was only somewhat apparent which may or may not speak to the effectiveness and evidence of these changes. Since the interviews took place in the beginning of the school year, all of the students were chosen for the study based off the academic and discipline data from the prior year. As discussed in Chapter 4, Esquire schools are currently in the midst of a total re-vamping of the discipline system. Several of the girls responded positively to this re-vamping and noted that staff members “this year” were more willing to talk to and listen to them. The girls also made clear distinctions between their own behavior “this year” versus “last year” and commented that they had matured and were more aware of how to respond during difficult situations.

Additionally, several of the girls noted that they had participated in providing feedback on past teachers which resulted in the administrative response of either being more present in the classroom or the teacher being removed from the classroom. During the prior school year, Kamer Campus was involved in a pilot program in which students were given surveys regarding teacher performance. During a 2014 professional development to leaders, Esquire’s data management team reported that from this pilot offered at Kamer and two other schools, they found that student survey data of a teacher were more aligned to student success on state-wide exams than Esquire’s own interim assessments. As a result, Esquire has chosen to implement student surveys as part of the teacher evaluation full-scale during this current school year.

The combination of these differences suggests that Esquire may be headed in the right direction. Several of the girls noted that “this year” was better than “last year” and either identified the changes in the school’s policies, their personal maturity, or both as the reason for this specific opinion. In either case, this distinction implies that there is a clear need for practices to move in the direction of listening to and making changes which take into account student opinions and thoughts. While Esquire has headed in this direction, there is clearly a need for this to happen even more overtly in order for students to be successful in a school environment.

Implications for Policy

There are two clear implications for discipline policies as it pertains to the research findings. The first implication is that there should be a clear alignment between the intention of the discipline practice and the execution of the discipline practice. Students generally categorized discipline policies as petty when they did not see or understand the connection between what they were told or had personally experienced about the world beyond high school in comparison to the rules they were expected to maintain while in high school. As a result, several rules seemed pointless. This suggests that there is a lack in either proper communication around the rule or in the validity of the rule itself. Hence, a stronger alignment between the intention and execution of the rule as well as intentional messaging around this alignment to parents and students would lead to a greater understanding and possible acceptance of the rule system.

A second implication for discipline is that such policies should be differentiated for different grade groups even if multiple groups occupy the same building. In their critique of many of the discipline policies, students often emphasized their age and questioned the appropriateness of certain policies. In the context of this school building, many discipline

policies span from the 7th grade to the 12th grade. With all of the participant's being in the 11th or 12th grade, they often emphasized their own maturity and juxtaposed the school's "college-going" culture with what they deemed as elementary discipline policies. It is important to further consider the appropriateness of discipline policies for different grade groups.

Implications for further research

There are multiple areas in which this specific study can be explored further. However, the below areas are most specific to this study because they are either areas in which the nature and design of the study did not allow for complete consideration or areas which arose throughout the data collection and analysis process that could not be fully explored based off more pervasive themes. The first section discusses the issues of identity and juxtaposes the notion of identity with that of labeling. For the purpose of this study, I chose to focus in on labeling over identity because the latter is full of assumptions that this study was not prepared to take on. However, there is clear room for researching this specific group of girls within the notion of identity and what that means to them and to systems which impact their daily lives. The next section returns to one of my bracketed assumptions made prior to engaging with the data collection process. This section discusses student behavior and the intentionality of it. Similar to identity, student decision-making in its entirety is not a component that the data collected from this study can truly respond to. However, based off student responses, there is clear room to dive into what drives student decision-making and how school and personal factors contribute to student behaviors from this lens. Lastly, the final two sections discuss possible outcomes due to the school context. Since this was not a case study, school context was an important component that deserved discussion but not a key component in determining the ultimate answers to the research questions. However, since the study site was within a very specific context, it is quite possible

that student opinions were influenced by the context of their school and that these opinions could change within a different school setting.

Issues of Identity

While the criteria for this study were the impact on students who occupied multiple labels, the goal for this study was to discuss the discipline label that was placed on students. As a result, there were no questions which directly asked students how being smart or how being Black impacted their perspective. Possibly due to the absence of these direct questions, the girls did not discuss being smart or being Black during the interviews. While intentional, the absence of these questions limited me from being able to really dig into student self-identity in the same fashion as purposed within Black Feminist Thought. Although the data answered my research questions, the data gathered did not allow me to assume an identity beyond what the students shared, which is their self-perception around being smart and if they believe that the school's opinion of them is accurate. Though touching on how the students felt about themselves, the data from the study do not give me room to explicitly state how the students identify themselves in a way that explores the nuances of accepting a particular self-identity. However, the data collected do indicate that the girls self-identified as smart and that the school's perception of them was more negative and less accurate than their own perception of self. Several research studies have discussed factors that impact the academic achievement of high achieving Black students such as parental involvement, teacher-student bonds and neighborhood factors (Archer-Banks et al., 2012; Stern, 2013; Tate & Cunningham, 2010). However, there is room for more research on the impact of being a high-achieving student on the positive identity development of high-achieving Black girls. Stevens (1997) dove into this discussion finding that there was a positive impact of personal identity and self-efficacy on student achievement, but the findings of

this study suggest that the reverse application, high achievement impacting personal identity, may be true as well. This goal of this study was not to explore the different formations of personal identity but the findings suggest that there is room for more research in the identity formation of Black female adolescents.

Are Student Behaviors Intentional?

The girls' criticism of the teacher's actions combined with their critique of the arbitrary nature of certain school rules in comparison to collegiate rules suggest that at least some of the behaviors that the students have displayed in the past were within their realm of control. The phenomenological approach for this study set out to focus on incidents and behaviors in which the students felt they were in control. Since the goal of the study was to identify the collective voice of the student from their perspective, I chose to limit the outcome of this study to the students' perspective which does not allow or deem important the perspective of the outsider. However, the students' suggestion of what can cause student misbehavior- poor teacher performance and lack of student investment in the discipline policies- suggests that student intention is worthy of a deeper dive.

Upon entering this study, one of my bracketed assumptions regarding student behavior is that the students were purposefully misbehaving. This assumption was neither completely proven nor refuted. The assertion that poor teacher behavior results in poor student behavior can suggest (1) students intentionally misbehave when they don't like a teacher or (2) poor teacher behavior triggers students to misbehave. One example suggests intention and the other suggests the effects of a causal factor. The distinction between these two cannot be made within this study due to the assumptions of the phenomenological approach but implies the need for further

research distinguishing the difference between intentional decision-making of teenagers and instinctual reactions in teenagers.

Would the Outcome Change in a Different School Context?

Since the research site was a “no excuses” charter school, some the participants’ critique of the discipline is due to their intersected identities as “smart Black girls who get in trouble” and the very specific discipline policies of a “no excuses” charter school. One area which was highlighted by the girls is the prevalence of “petty” school rules. When giving examples, the students identified rules around uniforms and bathroom policies. While many different types of schools have both uniforms and bathroom policies, it is quite possible that the “no excuses” charter school’s implementation of the rules around these areas can be more extreme than the implementation would be in a different school setting. Because of this, the student feelings around arbitrary discipline policies can be slightly skewed due to the nature of the school. In order to determine if this specific critique is more indicative of the smart Black girl who gets in trouble instead of the smart Black girl who gets in trouble in a “no excuses” charter school, it is important for this study to be implemented in a different school setting. The repeat of this study in a different context may or may not impact the findings of this study.

Does the School Context Impact the Student’s Positive Aspirations?

Within the description of the site-at-large, I discussed the overt college-going culture that permeates the school building. Within the cross-case analysis, I also discussed how every student has positive aspirations about their future and intends to attend college. While this study did not seek to find a clear connection, there is a possibility that the overt college-going culture directly impacts students’ aspirations to not only attend college but to identify specific careers that they plan to explore. This connection becomes even more likely since most students not

only mentioned college when asked directly about it, but also in passing when discussing another topic. There was a level of assumption on the students' behalf about going to college; an assumption that was never hesitant or questionable. Due to this assumption, there is room for more intentional studies on whether intentional college-going cultures directly impact students' college aspirations.

Final Thoughts

Why do smart Black girls get in trouble? The smart Black girls in this study problematized the very nature of this question as they suggested that “getting in trouble” is a much more complex notion than the question suggests. Getting in trouble must consider the impact of causal factors such as the teacher-student relationship and personal stress. Getting in trouble must question the fairness and applicability of discipline policies and practices. Finally, getting in trouble must assume that its impact may only be minimally influential on self-perception. The study of a group of girls who occupy multiple labels, one of which they claim – being smart – and one of which they reject – being bad, is a multi-tiered study on a subgroup of students who are significantly aware of the world they live in. This level of awareness led to a rich experience of exploring a group of girls who have a strong opinion of self, a critical view of their school experiences and a positive perspective of the future in front of them.

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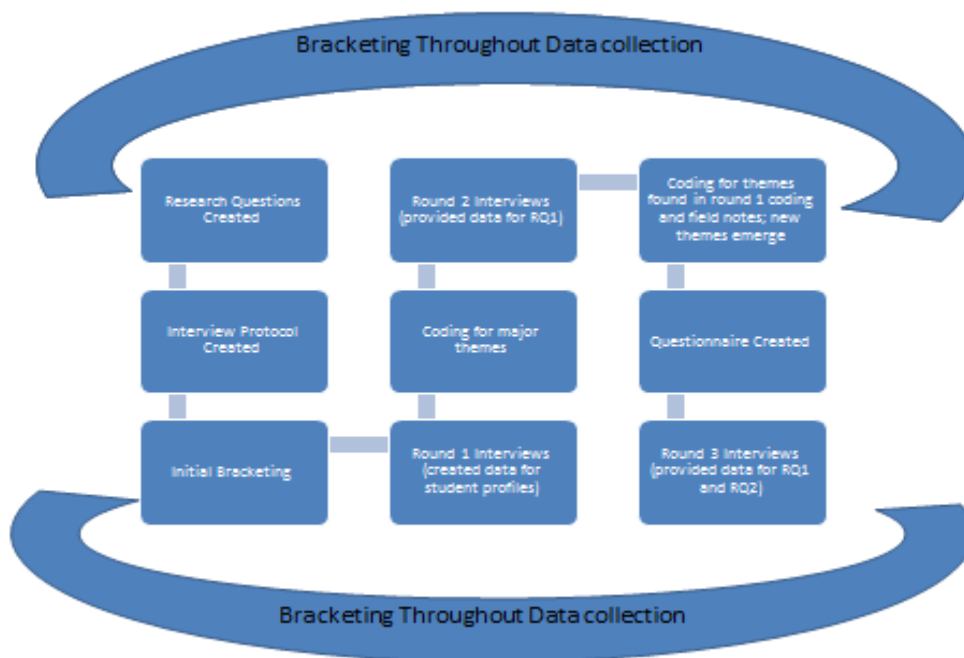
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APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS VISUAL

Research Questions Devised – Initial Bracketing (around bracketing and field notes) – Round 1 Interviews (created information for student profiles) – coding for major themes – Round 2 interviews (created questions for RQ 1) – coding themes found in round 1, new themes emerged, student questionnaire created – Round 3 – coding for new themes.



APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Below are the questions that will be used for each round of interviews with the student participants. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes. Indented questions were at times used for probes.

Round 1 Interviews:

- 1) Tell me about yourself
 - a. How would you describe yourself to someone who will never meet or see you?
 - b. What are some things you like to do for fun?
 - c. Do you have any hobbies
 - d. If yes, what?
 - e. If no, why not? What would you like to be a hobby?
- 2) Tell me about your family
 - a. Who lives with you at home?
 - b. Who takes care of you?
- 3) Tell me about your friends
 - a. What are some things you like to do with your friends?
- 4) Walk me through a day at school
 - a. What do you do from the moment you come in the building to the moment you leave
- 5) If you weren't in this school where would you be?

If time permits:

- 6) What do you plan on doing when you get older?
 - a. What are some things you're going to do to get there?

Round 2 Interviews:

*Researcher opened the interview by showing 2 video clips that exhibited a student displaying two different types of infractions. After the video showing, the researcher will ask:

- 1) What do you think about that behavior?
- 2) Do you think the student should be punished for it or not?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. If you think she should be punished, what would be a proper punishment?
- 3) Let's talk about the last time you got in trouble here. Tell me about it.
 - a. How did you feel about that punishment?
 - b. Did you agree with the punishment?
 - c. Why/why not?
- 4) Talk to me about a time that you got in trouble and felt like you should have gotten in trouble

- 5) Talk to me about a time when you got in trouble and felt like you should not have gotten in trouble
- 6) Tell me about somebody who is really good at working the system.
 - a. What's the difference between you and them?

Round 3 Interviews:

Based off our prior conversations and some of my observations - here are some themes that I came up with...

- 1) Fill out the questionnaire

For each question,

- 1) Talk to me about your response?
 - a. Why did you choose this one?
 - b. Would you have chosen this same answer last year?
- 2) Is there anything else that you want to share with me about your thoughts on the school discipline system or your own personal experiences that you haven't shared so far?
- 3) How would you describe yourself?

APPENDIX C: RESEARCH QUESTION/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS CHART

Research Question	Interview Question
<p>How do high achieving Black female students conceptualize their own actions as they navigate classrooms and corridors especially behaviors categorized as discipline issues?</p>	<p>Let's talk about the last time you got in trouble here. Tell me about it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you agree with the punishment? • Why/why not? <p>Talk to me about a time that you got in trouble and felt like you should have gotten in trouble.</p> <p>Talk to me about a time when you got in trouble and felt like you should not have gotten in trouble.</p> <p>Tell me about somebody who is really good at working the system.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the difference between you and them?
<p>What affect does the institutions discipline of them or their experience of that discipline have on their identity formation?</p>	<p>Arrange these themes for me in order of the ones that you believe to be the most accurate to the least accurate for you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your list. Why did you choose ____ as the top two and ____ as the bottom two? <p>These are my research questions and this is my bullet list of answers. Which answer to do you think is the most accurate about you? Why</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which answer do you think is the least accurate? Why • <p>Is there anything else that you want to share with me about your thoughts on the school discipline system or your own personal experiences that you haven't shared so far?</p>

APPENDIX D: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Things that cause me to get in trouble/behave poorly in the moment (**label 1-5, most to least**):

- Friends influence me to misbehave
- The teacher is a bad teacher and gives poor instruction
- The teacher is unprofessional and targets me or talks to other teachers about me
- I have drama with other girls in my school
- I have been bullied in the past so I am quick to respond/stand up for myself

Things that impact my attitude/put me in a bad mood (**label 1-5, most to least**):

- I don't always get along with my parent/guardian
- I don't always get along with other members in my family
- I sometimes have issues with my romantic partner
- I sometimes have issues with my friends
- I am stressed out by home and school

I would likely get in less trouble if (**Identify top 3, label most to least**):

- I had different friends
- I had better teachers
- My peers (all peers) understood me more
- Adults in this school understood me more
- My home situation was better
- I was more confident in myself
- This question doesn't apply to me because I don't get in trouble

I view myself as (**choose one**)

- A good student
- A student who is mostly good but sometimes gets in trouble
- A student who is mostly good but often gets in trouble
- A student who is sometimes good but often gets in trouble
- A student who is never good and always gets in trouble

I think this school views me as (**choose one**)

- A good student
- A student who is mostly good but sometimes gets in trouble
- A student who is mostly good but often gets in trouble
- A student who is sometimes good but often gets in trouble
- A student who is never good and always gets in trouble

Choose one

- I am smart but my behavior gets in the way
- I am smart and my behavior sometimes gets in the way
- I am smart and my behavior does not get in the way
- I am not smart and my behavior makes it worse
- I am not smart and my behavior is fine
- I am not smart and I have poor behavior

Choose one

- This school's discipline policy is appropriate for girls like me
- This school's discipline policy is somewhat appropriate for girls like me
- This school's discipline policy is inappropriate for girls like me