

USING SISTA CIRCLES TO EXAMINE THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF  
CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS: A COLLECTIVE STORY  
ABOUT SCHOOL CULTURE AND SUPPORT

by

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(Under the Direction of Cheryl Fields-Smith)

ABSTRACT

There is very little literature in teacher education to inform our knowledge about mentoring among Black female teachers. This gap has left a void in our understanding of the effectiveness of mentoring in supporting Black women in the teaching profession. Therefore, I examined the mentoring and support that six Black women elementary teachers in a Southeastern state received inside and outside of schools. Using sista circle methodology, teachers discussed professional experiences that validated their need for alternative support in their school settings and beyond the schools. The findings of this study offer important implications regarding culturally relevant approaches for mentoring and researching Black women.

INDEX WORDS: Mentoring, Support, Black women, Elementary teachers, Sista circle methodology, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Black feminism

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my heavenly mentors, my grandmother and uncle: Alvane Clay and John Earl Clay. Losing you both during my Ph.D. journey was extremely difficult; however, your memories continue to support me.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The lack of support for African American women is a major issue that has been highly disregarded in the teacher education literature (King & Bey, 1995; Leake & Leake, 1995; Tillman, 2003). Given the particular encounters that African American women face, Black feminist scholars—whose work this study stands on—argue that many Black women need ‘safe spaces’ where they can express their concerns, construct a self-defined perception of Black womanhood, and acquire tactics to cope with their present realities (Collins, 2009; Dillard, 2012; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 2005; Hull, Bell-Scott & Smith, 1982; Lorde, 1984). According to Tillman (2003), mentoring is one mechanism used by schools to mentor Black female teachers. However, the overriding model of mentoring in teacher education is a one-on-one formalized system that pairs a novice teacher with an expert teacher for professional support (Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Boreen & Niday, 2003; Myers & Anderson, 2012). These mentoring models are designed to be one size, fit all and are based on the norms of White, middle class males (Ambrosetti, 2014; Bullough & Draper, 2004). Although Black women share common experiences with both Black men and White women, they also possess a separate, yet collective perspective that deserves additional research and provides details about their unique presence in the teaching profession. There is a gap between what we know about mentoring and what we know about Black women teachers. According to Crawford & Smith (2005), in order for mentoring to bring about change in the lives of Black women, it must be “personally valued...it cannot be dictated or prescribed” (p.53). In other words, it must meet our needs and be relevant to our experiences. The lack of cultural congruency and the failure to

contextualize the sociopolitical realities of Black women teachers limit the effectiveness of traditional mentoring programs in supporting Black female teachers (King & Bey, 1995).

Further, Okpalaoka (2014) argued that discovering appropriate ways to mentor Black women is not just the responsibility of the teacher educator but also the researcher. “There is not much in the mentoring literature [or qualitative research literature] that describes mentoring as research methodology” or how research studies can be designed to mentor or support participants from marginalized groups. “The notion of a sustained relationship between the researcher and the participants during and after the study can be understood in the context of mentoring” (Okpalaoka, 2014, p.52). The subsequent gap in qualitative research calls for the development of culturally relevant methodologies for studying and supporting people of color. The study presented here addresses the aforementioned gaps in both mentoring and qualitative research by examining the professional experiences of present-day Black women teachers; more specifically the mentoring and support they received inside and outside of schools using a new culturally relevant, gender-specific methodology I call *sista circle* methodology. The results of the study offer important implications regarding culturally relevant ways of mentoring and researching Black women.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a critical shortage of Black teachers in K-12 classrooms across the United States (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Wilder, 1999; Irvine, 1988). Of the 3,385,200 public school teachers in the U.S during the 2011-2012 school year, only 231,100 were African Americans (NCES, 2012). In addition, a large number of Black teachers exit the teaching field each year (Gay & Howard, 2000; Conner, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics has identified little or no support as a major factor influencing Black teachers’ decision to leave the profession (NCES, 2009). The NCES report calls for research that investigates the support

Black teachers, who are primarily women, receive and want to receive. Although pairing an African American female teacher with a mentor, who is commonly White, has been identified as one strategy (Tillman, 2003), other possibilities for mentoring and supporting Black women teachers may exist.

There is limited literature in teacher education that informs our knowledge about mentoring among Black women teachers (Tillman, 2003). This gap has left a void in our understanding of the effectiveness of mentoring in supporting Black women in the teaching profession (Leake & Leake, 1995; King & Bey, 1995). Therefore, I examined the mentoring and support that six Black female elementary teachers in a Southeastern state received inside and outside of schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was threefold. First, I sought to investigate the professional experiences of contemporary Black women teachers in schools to confirm their need for enhanced support. Particularly, I gathered the participants' stories about (a) the challenges and joys of being Black women educators and (b) the mentoring and support they received inside and outside of schools. Second, I explored a culturally relevant, gender-specific methodology I call *sista circle methodology* as a way for qualitative researchers to simultaneously study and support Black women. Third, I examined how contemporary Black women teachers responded to *sista circle methodology*. The overall goal of the study was to extend both the mentoring and qualitative research literatures to include culturally relevant ways of supporting and researching Black teachers.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do contemporary Black women teachers describe their professional experiences in schools?
2. How do contemporary Black women teachers describe the mentoring and support they receive inside and outside of schools?
3. How do contemporary Black women teachers respond to sista circle methodology?

## **Significance of the Study**

This dissertation is significant because few studies have explored mentoring and support among Black female teachers, and the current study helps to fill this gap. Not only is there a small number of studies on mentoring among Black women teachers, there is also little research directly investigating Black women teachers' professional experiences to validate their need for such support. Researchers and practitioners alike have reported the many benefits of mentoring, including increased teacher retention (Clifford & Green, 1996; Hawkey, 1997; McNamara, 1995). However, much of the literature on mentoring in teacher education examined mentoring in the professional lives of White female teachers (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009; Street, 2004). Lacking are studies that explore the effectiveness of mentoring for supporting Black teachers.

## **Definition of Terms and Concepts**

Following is a discussion of the key terms or concepts used in this study. All concepts are defined according to their application in the study.

Contemporary Black women teachers- Black women teachers who are currently teaching in a public, homeschool, or private K-12 school setting.

Historical Black women teachers- Black women teachers who taught during segregation or pre/post desegregation in the United States.

Mentoring- a type of support that characterizes the relationship between at least two people for the purpose of helping an individual to progress or develop in his or her professional and/or personal life.

Professional experience- teachers' everyday work experience in schools; as it relates to this study, professional experience primarily focused on teachers' relationships with individuals within the school setting (e.g., other teachers, administrators, parents).

Sista- in-group term used mainly among Black women to refer to the solidarity and connection we feel toward each other. "It can sometimes be used interchangeably with the term "sister," but often does not refer to a biological relationship" (Dorsey, 2001, p.71).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that grounded the study, Black feminist thought (BFT), guided and anchored the data collection and analysis process of the study. I selected BFT to frame this study because "the Black feminist perspective recognizes a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression as the context" in which Black women live and work (Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings & McClendon, 2011). Black feminist thought as a collective standpoint constructed by Black women provided a dynamic framework from which to understand the experiences of Black women teachers (Collins, 2009). Below, I provide a rich and detailed explanation of BFT including (a) the origination of Black feminist thought; (b) Black feminists' decision to organize; (c) the purposes of Black feminism; (d) who are Black feminists and what do they do; and (e) distinctive features of Black feminist thought. This



section concludes by indicating the relevance of Black feminist thought to the study I conducted.

### **The Origination of Black Feminism**

An examination of the origin of Black feminism requires a (re)examination of the origin of feminism in general. A tracing of the history of feminism takes us back to the enslavement of Africans and African Americans (Norwood, 2013). The civil birthplace of feminism in the United States was the abolitionist or anti-slavery movement of the 1800s (Freedman, 2007). Although the U.S. government banned slave trade around 1809, the possession of slaves remained legal and lucrative; therefore, the call to eradicate slavery and free slaves became an active movement in the United States in the 1830s (Taylor, 1998). While northern states slowly ridded themselves of slave labor, the South relied upon it all the more—leading Northern women to challenge the racist institution. These women believed that the system of slavery did not correspond with their ideas of womanhood as slave mothers were being separated from their families and sexually abused. Many of these women responded by organizing female anti-slavery societies in the 1830s (Yee, 1992). The agenda of the female anti-slavery societies included creating petitions asking government officials to abolish slavery and supporting the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad, which gained prominence in the 1830s, was a network of routes, safe houses, and anti-slavery activists who helped slaves escape to the northern states or Canada (Foner & Garraty, 1991). While White women abolitionists supported the Underground Railroad, majority of the railroad workers were northern free Blacks or escaped slaves. There was a race barrier within the female anti-slavery movement. “Opposition to slavery did not necessarily translate into a belief in racial equality” (Freedman, 2007, p.77). Some female anti-slavery societies did not

admit Black women. In response, northern free Black women organized their own groups whose mission was to combat slavery, women's rights, and racism (Yellin, 1989).

These themes and Black women's personal experiences provoked feminist and race discourse among Black women intellectuals on the complexities of Black womanhood. Black women intellectuals from diverse backgrounds began merging intellectual work and activism. They attended conferences, delivered political speeches, produced and distributed literature (e.g., pamphlets, poems, stories), and preached among many other things. Maria M. Stewart was the first Black woman to speak publicly about women's rights in 1832. "Stewart stands at the beginning of an unbroken chain of Black women activists whose commitment to the liberation of Black and women defines their life's work" (Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p.25).

### **Black Feminists' Decision to Organize**

In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was established after founder, Ruby Doris Smith Wright, called a meeting to discuss concerns regarding the subordination of Black women in both the civil rights movement, particularly the Black Power Movement, and the feminist movement (Wallace, 1995). Many Black women did not feel valued in either group. Within the feminist movement, White women had internalized the racist beliefs of White males and discriminated against Black women. Similarly, the leadership of Black women active in the civil rights movement was overlooked, suppressed, and tested. Black women were viewed as inferior to men and subjected to trivial roles. Because of these experiences, Black women realized the need to establish the National Black Feminist Organization. Through their efforts in NBFO, Black women proved themselves to be knowledgeable and valuable. In fact, contemporary critical race theorists (predominantly males during this time) gleaned from their knowledge to later formalize their own collective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

## **Purpose of Black Feminism**

The 1973 Statement of Purpose for the National Black Feminist Organization highlighted the initial purpose of contemporary Black feminists. Below is an excerpt from the statement of purpose:

Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being black and female, in a country that is both racist and sexist. There has been very little real examination of the damage it has caused on the lives and on the minds of black women. Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be put on black male suffering. No one of us would minimize the pain or hardship or the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced by the black man. But history, past or present, rarely deals with the malicious abuse put upon the black woman. We were seen as breeders by the master; despised and historically polarized from/by the master's wife; and looked upon as castrators by our lovers and husbands. The black woman has had to be strong, yet we are persecuted for having survived. We have been called matriarchs by white racists and black nationalists; we have virtually no positive self-images to validate our existence. Black women want to be proud, dignified, and free from all those false definitions of beauty and womanhood that are unrealistic and unnatural. We, not white men or black men, must define our own self-image as black women (National Black Feminist Organization, 1973).

As evident in the above quote, Black feminists realized a need to organize a group “separate” from White women and Black males because neither group understood what it meant to be Black and female. White feminists and Black male groups did not consider the specific needs of Black women. Therefore, Black feminists organized their own group whose purpose was to: combat the prevailing negative images and confront the cruel racist and sexist abuse of Black women, while constructing new images and providing empowerment.

## **Who Are Black Feminists and What Do They Do?**

Black feminists are individuals who believe Black women are valuable and possess distinct knowledge that derive from the unique experiences they face due to multiple oppression (Hull, Bell-Scott & Smith, 1982). Their commitment to the emancipation of Black

women shapes their life's work whether it's activist or intellectual work (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Activist work is considered on the ground social justice efforts, while intellectual or scholarly work constitutes the production of Black women's knowledge or scholarship. The production of Black women's knowledge can be a form of activist or social justice work as well. The activist and intellectual work of Black feminists are interconnected. Black feminist activism informs Black feminist intellectual work. Similarly, Black feminist intellectual work can inform Black feminist activism. One of the major goals of Black feminism is to merge action and theory. It is important to note that it is not necessary for Black feminists to limit themselves to the singular role of "activist" or "intellectual." Many Black feminists operate within the realms of both activist and intellectuals (Davis, 1981).

Because Black women's knowledge has traditionally been suppressed and deemed as worthless, Black feminists employ a number of practices to rearticulate Black women's knowledge. Black feminists engage in the practice of reclamation or the retrieval of Black women's knowledge. Black feminists also engage in the practice of reinterpreting existing knowledge through new theoretical lens and often present this knowledge in new ways (e.g., using narratives, poetry). In the field of education, this process is illustrated by Audrey Thompson's (1998) critique of the "colorblindness" found in theories of care in education. She calls for a reassessment of the Whiteness rooted in these colorblind theories and expounds upon this criticism by demonstrating how differently some of the themes that have proved generative for theories of care might look if interpreted from a Black feminist perspective. Finally, Black feminists search for Black women's knowledge in alternative spaces outside academia (e.g., music, poetry) and among women who are not normally viewed as scholars. For example, Black women poets are often not recognized as Black intellectuals as poetry is

perceived to be only a site of imagination. However, Lorde (1984) argues that poetry does constitute knowledge:

Poetry is the way we [Black women] help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives...poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change (p.38).

Situating the thoughts of ordinary Black women as well as those of well-known Black women intellectuals at the center of investigation produces a new lens by which to understand the issues confronting Black women.

The practices of Black feminists are not limited to the aforementioned. Although a “collective,” Black feminists include subgroups who engage in distinctive practices to discover, reinterpret, and analyze the issues confronting the Black women of their particular subcategory (Collins, 1996; Rousseau, 2013). The participation of Black feminists in certain subgroups is motivated by their unique experiences of oppression as well as their distinct identities. Not all Black women experience oppression in the same way, therefore, they do not take up Black feminism in the same way. For example, a working-class Southern Black woman will experience oppression differently from a middle-class Northern Black woman. This organizing of Black feminists into subgroups has led to the emergence of various forms of Black feminism such as hip-hop feminism (Sharpley-Whiting, 2007), and “endarkened” feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000). These diverse forms of Black feminism illustrates Black feminists’ efforts to include heterogeneity in constructing a “collective” Black women’s knowledge.

### **Distinctive Features of Black Feminist Thought**

Black feminist thought is rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of Black feminists based in the United States and in the diaspora. It is comprised of Black women’s

collective knowledge that derives from their shared experience of intersecting oppressions. “It is a group-based, collective standpoint” or group knowledge (Collins, 2009, p.28). The purpose of this body of knowledge is twofold. First, Black feminist thought is used to combat the very oppression that produced the body of knowledge in the first place. Second, Black feminist thought is a tool for empowering Black women within oppressive contexts. To effectively resist oppression, Black feminist thought has six distinctive features that characterize it. While some of these features may be similar to the tenets of other theoretical frameworks, the features as a whole is what makes Black feminist thought a unique theoretical framework.

The first distinctive feature of Black feminist thought is its recognition of how the ties between experience and consciousness impacts the everyday lives of individual Black women and Black women as a collective. This realization of how both what we do and what we think shapes our lives and also permeates our work. Black feminists use Black feminist thought as a tool for rearticulating their experiences and consciousness. The process of rearticulation provides Black women with opportunities to express their consciousness publicly and to reconstruct a different view of themselves and their world. According to bell hooks (1989), rearticulation is Black women’s pathway to self-recovery:

The most important of our work—the work of liberation—demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice. Fundamentally, the oppressed person who has moved from object to subject speaks to us in a new way. This speech, this liberatory voice, emerges only when the oppressed experience self-recovery (p.29).

The consciousness of Black women or the ways in which Black women think about oppression is influenced by their diverse experiences. Awareness of these experiences subsequently produces diverse responses.

Black women's diverse responses to oppression represent the second distinctive feature of Black feminist thought. Although Black women share some common experiences, all of their experiences will not be the same. "There is no essential or archetypal Black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic" (Collins, 2009, p.32). Some Black women may experience differential treatment that other Black women do not; however, Black women as a collective still regard these occurrences as differential group treatment and knowledge. Not all Black women need to experience the discrimination for an understanding of discrimination to become part of Black feminist thought or group knowledge. The everyday experiences and knowledge of all Black women constitutes Black feminist thought. Black women's diverse responses to their experiences create a body of knowledge that is comprised of different kinds of thought.

Black feminists can be both activists and scholars who aim to merge action and theory. This goal encompasses the third distinctive feature of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought, as critical social theory, stimulates Black women to resist. This resistance is often referred to as Black feminist practice or activism. Black feminist thought is designed to generate activism among Black women. BFT is constructed under the assumption that action and thought informs one another. However, the action BFT stimulates Black women to perform will differ according to women's social locations. This point incorporates the fourth distinctive feature of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought draws upon the different dialogical practices of Black women. The ways in which Black women intellectuals engage in dialogue about their oppression is dependent upon both their social locations and experiences. For example, a Black woman artist may use painting or drawing as a medium to dialogue about her experience of having the art program removed from her segregated, all-Black

elementary school. Black feminist thought consists of two interdependent types of knowledge: (1) everyday, taken for granted knowledge shared by Black women deriving from their everyday thoughts and actions; the thoughts that Black women share informally with one another daily, such as those about relationships with men or family issues or day-to-day experiences with discrimination, and (2) knowledge provided by Black women experts or specialists who come from different social and educational backgrounds.

The fifth distinctive feature of Black feminist thought is the ways in which the body of knowledge does not remain the same. Because Black feminist thought is designed to combat the social injustices Black women face, it must change as social conditions change. This is the only way for “Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism” as a facilitator of social justice (Collins, 2009, p.43). Finally, Black feminist thought recognizes the importance of social justice for not only Black women but all humans. A concern for human solidarity is the final distinctive feature of Black feminist thought. Black women intellectuals believe Black feminist practice and thought to be a means to empowering not only Black women but all individuals. This feature of Black feminist thought joins Black feminists with other social justice groups for the purpose of achieving solidarity of humanity.

In the study, Black feminist thought was used to design and frame data collection methods (e.g., *sista circles*) that allowed the participants to express their consciousness of their everyday experiences in schools with other Black women as a source of empowerment. This use of the theoretical framework draws upon the second distinguishing feature previously discussed and is elaborated in Chapter Three: Methodology. The theoretical framework also served an analytic tool for interpreting the professional experiences of the participants.



### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

This dissertation continues with a literature review in Chapter Two, which includes two sections on Black teachers in schools and mentoring and support among Black women. Each section is linked to research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology, describes in detail those methods and procedures that comprised the research protocol utilized for the study, including: research design, process for recruiting and selecting participants, data collection, and analysis. The chapter ends with a discussion of issues of validity and a summary.

Chapter Four: Findings, presents the results for research questions that drove the study. All findings are discussed and illustrated using narratives and participants' actual voices from data. A summary of the findings concludes this chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion, presents the conclusions drawn from the findings of each research question. The findings are discussed separately and build upon the literature review.

Chapter Six: Implications, provides suggestions for practice in teacher education and future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

I begin the review of literature by providing an overview of the research on the experiences of Black teachers in schools which may lend a deeper understanding to the discussion of why Black teachers need mentoring and support. Then, I discuss the literature about the mentoring experiences of Black women to demonstrate what mentoring is and does for us. Each section is linked to research questions.

<i>The Experiences of Black Teachers in Schools</i>	<i>Mentoring and Support Among Black Women</i>
<b>Research Question 1:</b> How do contemporary Black women teachers describe their professional experiences in schools?	<b>Research Question 2:</b> How do contemporary Black women teachers describe the mentoring and support they receive inside and outside of schools?

#### **The Experiences of Black Teachers in Schools**

This literature review examines research on the experiences of historical and contemporary Black teachers in schools. My choice in reviewing both is influenced by three factors. First, I sought to examine the research about the continuity of racism as a societal construct impacting the professional lives of Black educators. Second, I found only a minimum number of studies on the experiences of current Black teachers in schools (within the last ten years). Third, an understanding of the professional experiences of Black teachers in schools requires a historical context (Madkins, 2011). The literature review provides important implications concerning the prevalence of racism in American schools and its impact on Black teachers. I begin with a discussion of the limitations of existing research.

Before discussing the findings of this literature review, let me consider a number of limitations and issues apparent in the database itself that limited the review. ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) was selected as the primary database because it covers all aspects of education and educational research. While a fair amount of literature under the descriptors Black teachers and African American teachers existed in the ERIC database. Of the 800 entries, none were generated within the last ten years. While this contributes to our historical knowledge of Black teachers' experiences, it represents a tremendous chasm in knowledge of contemporary Black teachers. The literature on Black teachers did exist, but not under the descriptor Black teachers; instead it was found under descriptors such as teacher attitudes or teaching methods. Additionally, a majority of the research identified examined the experiences of Black teachers who taught during segregation or immediately after desegregation (Madkins, 2011; Oakley, Stowell & Logan, 2009; Ramsey, 2012; Wilson & Segall, 2001). Little research existed that explored the experiences of current Black teachers in schools. Further, the desegregation literature focused more on the process of desegregation and not the lived experiences of Black teachers during this time (Baker, 2001; Ethridge, 1979).

Another limitation of the research base was the lack of research that investigated the experiences of Black teachers in multiple contexts. Most of the studies that examined the experiences of current Black teachers were conducted in predominantly White schools that usually included only one participant. This is shocking as most Black teachers teach in urban, predominantly Black schools (King & Bey, 1995; Tillman, 2003; Shann, 1998). Finally, much of the literature highlighted the experiences of contemporary Black male teachers (Brown, 2009, 2011; Lynn, 2002, 2006; Howard, 2008). Few studies examined the experiences of contemporary Black women teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson, 2003, 2008).

Both the lack of literature on Black teachers in multiple school contexts, and on women, led me to highlight issues of context, race, and gender in my literature review.

### **School Contexts and Black Teachers' Experiences**

Substantial literature (mostly historical) existed that examined the experiences of Black teachers in schools (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dingus, 2006; Fairclough, 2000; Foster, 1994; Fultz, 1995; Jay, 2009; Kelly, 2007; Lee, 2012; Mabokela & Madsen, 2003). In reviewing the literature, many factors were observed that had a significant influence on the teaching experiences of Black teachers. The first to note is context. Context is noteworthy as majority of the research about Black teachers focused on their experiences in predominantly Black school settings during pre and post desegregation (Milner, 2006). Much of the literature portrayed an image of Black teachers as being primarily effective in predominantly Black urban schools (Milner, 2012). Contrarily, despite extreme adversities, Black teachers have been effective in multiple school environments (Ladson-Billings, 2009). More research is needed to understand the experiences of Black teachers in various school contexts. As shown below, the experiences of Black teachers in predominantly White schools and predominantly Black schools are quite diverse. The disparities in the experiences of Black teachers in predominantly White schools and predominantly Black schools provide significant implications about the prevalence of racism in American schools. It is important to note that predominantly White schools are schools with a majority White student and/or faculty population and predominantly Black schools are schools with a majority Black student and/or faculty population.

**Predominantly White Schools.** Historically, the transmission of racial ideologies has influenced the experiences of Black people (Hughes & Berry, 2012). Perhaps no other institutional system has been more impacted by these racist ideologies than American public

schools (West, 2001). Further, I argue that perhaps no other group has been more impacted than Black teachers. The lasting and damaging effects that racist ideologies have had on Black teachers, especially in predominantly White schools, is extensive (Zamudio et al., 2011). Black teachers in predominantly White schools have reported experiencing issues of scrutiny, isolation, and ridicule because of their racial identity.

Jay's (2009) study illustrated the ways in which confronting racism was a common part of the everyday experiences of five Black teachers in predominantly White schools in North Carolina. These teachers described how their racial identity rendered them highly visible in one instant and invisible in the next. In one moment they were the Black experts, and in another thought to know nothing. Lee (2012) interviewed six Black teachers in predominantly White suburban high schools in the Northeast about their professional lives. In this study, Black teachers revealed being pressured to abandon their culture capital—ways of communicating, behaving, socializing as well as values and beliefs—to assimilate to the dominant school culture (Yosso, 2005). These teachers were expected to mimic the pedagogic styles and mannerisms of their White counterparts. Many of them knowingly hid certain aspects of their identities, particularly those parallel to stereotypes of Black people, to fit in or feel more comfortable around their White colleagues. At the same time, their expertise or professional knowledge was questioned. The teachers were scrutinized by administrators, teachers, and parents about their professionalism and knowledge of subject matter. The undermining of their authority caused them to feel isolated. They also felt isolated because of the lack of the presence of teachers of color and the failure of administrators to provide opportunities for them to build support systems with other minorities.

Mabokela & Madsen (2003) interviewed seven Black female and seven Black male teachers in predominantly White elementary, middle, and high schools in the Midwest about their professional experiences. The findings from this study revealed Black teachers' experience of boundary heightening, negative stereotypes, and role entrapment. Because these teachers were one or among the few Blacks in the entire school, the differences (e.g., racial) between them and the White teachers were heightened or made more visible. The heightened visibility of difference created boundaries or tension between the two racial groups. Mabokela & Madsen (2003) term this phenomenon—boundary heightening. Among the differences made more visible were the dissimilarities in the pedagogic and class management styles of the two groups. Many of the Black teachers noted tension in their interactions with White colleagues when they perceived the pedagogical practices of their peers to be nonresponsive to Black students. The participants also reported that the White institutional culture of the school did not support their use of culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), culturally relevant pedagogy is teaching that is responsive to students by incorporating aspects of the students' cultures in instruction. Some of the participants were troubled that their schools modeled Eurocentric traditions and instructional practices. They found it difficult to build relationships with their White peers because they perceived them to be unwilling to adapt their instructional strategies and continued to teach Black children in the same way they did other children. One participant stated:

There are some theoretical underpinnings in the way schools are structured. They are essentially structured for the middle-class European American child. A Black child interacting in a traditional setting like my district may need more from that teacher simply because assumptions are made about what the teaching style will be or the learning style of the student and so forth. It is not geared toward that minority kid. Their experiences are not taken into account in relation to the experiences that the average European

American child has when they interact in the same classroom (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003, p.101).

In regard to the heightened visibility of the differences in classroom management styles, Black teachers mentioned being condemned by their White peers for not being hard on the Black students. These narratives of Black teachers counter negative perceptions of Black teachers as harsh disciplinarians, loud and destructive, and lacking professionalism (Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Ross, Bondy, Gallingane & Hambacher, 2008; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004). Drawing upon James Vasquez, Delpit (1995) described African American teachers who implemented a “tough-minded” yet caring approach to helping Black students succeed as “warm-demanders” (p.33). According to Milner (2012), Black teachers in predominantly White suburban schools feel isolated and are not accepted because they offer a counterstory to the prevalent views of many of their White counterparts. A counterstory “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The Black teachers in Milner’s (2012) study described themselves as flexible while perceiving their White counterparts to be too harsh—citing how they used their power and control to enforce Eurocentric traditions on Black children.

On another note, Kelly (2007) argued that the experiences of Black teachers in predominantly White schools are not all bad. He contended that racial differences are not the primary cause of Black teachers’ negative experiences in schools. However, nearly all of the narratives of the Black teachers in his study highlighted negative experiences including racism. These teachers were pressured to perform better, experienced social psychological troubles due to being the only Black teacher in the school, and were entrapped into roles placed on them by the White faculty. When Kelly asked Shelia about her teaching experience she responded:

I have to prove myself...there is racism here. It is so ingrained and a lot of them are just not aware of it. When I was hired here, I knew that I was going to be the only person of color...the principal here was very positive and very supportive with my being a minority...I tell her how I feel when someone says something racial. I have confronted people...I raise their consciousness (p.235).

Shelia believed the racism inherent in her predominantly White school was due to the teachers' colorblindness or failure to recognize racism. According to Milner (2007), individuals who adopt colorblind ideologies believe they can overcome or conquer racism by ignoring it. Lewis (2001) reported that many teachers in predominantly White schools refuse to acknowledge or even discuss race-related matters.

**Predominantly Black Schools.** In reviewing the literature, the experiences of Black teachers in predominantly Black schools, especially in regard to racism, were quite different than the experiences of Black teachers in predominantly White schools. Black teachers in predominantly White schools often dealt with blatant racism—racism that was openly expressed such as direct racist statements made by White colleagues (Jay, 2009; Kelly, 2007; Lee, 2012; Mabokela & Madsen, 2003). On the other hand, Black teachers in predominantly Black schools experienced more subtle racism—disguised or hidden racism, such as being told that only substitute teaching positions were available (Foster, 1997). Furthermore, Black teachers in predominantly Black schools frequently noted the dual experience of “joy” and “pain” more often than Black teachers in predominantly White schools. They consistently emphasized how the “good” outweighed the “bad” and motivated them to stay in the field of education. Black teachers in predominantly Black schools believed they were able to do a greater good for their students.

In *Black Teachers on Teaching*, several retired, veteran, and novice Black teachers provided accounts concerning their experiences in predominantly Black schools. Inequity and



heavy workload were two themes visible across the accounts. While accentuating the challenges of working at predominantly Black schools, the teachers simultaneously noted the positives of working at these institutions. Everett Dawson, a retired teacher who taught in an all-Black segregated school from 1943-1970, mentioned how inequity in resources and pay and the heavy workload were among the challenges he faced as an educator at a predominantly Black school during segregation.

Today I look back and see the inequity in equipment, books, and materials in the Black schools...I experienced it as a student and a teacher. In the Black schools we only get books that White kids had already used. They did not get books that we had used. In other words, we got the hand-me downs. To this day it bothers me that those conditions existed anywhere in this country (Foster, 1997, p.4).

When I look back to when I first started teaching, the one thing that has bothered me all these years is that Black teachers were not paid the same rate as Whites in North Carolina (Foster, 1997, p.4).

Another condition that existed in Black schools is that the teachers had to be able to pitch in and teach whatever needed to be taught...I had to teach everything...I taught history—actually social studies—geography, sociology, economics, all of those subjects...also I taught health and physical education as well as math and some science...there weren't enough teachers to cover all the subject matters (Foster, 1997 p.4).

Despite these challenges, Everett reported the “joy” of providing a good education to Black students as outweighing the challenges noted above. He felt he could do more for Black students at a predominantly Black school.

A lot of people say that teaching in all-Black schools wasn't up to par, but I disagree with that because I saw and experienced the good work we were able to do with Black students...I became disillusioned with what I saw in desegregated schools. The biggest difference is that we are able to do more with the Black students in all-Black schools (Foster, 1997, p.6).

Etta Joan Marks, a veteran teacher who had taught both at an all-Black school and at a White school, compared her experiences. Her narrative also illuminated the joy of teaching at an all-

Black school despite inequity and heavy workload. Ms. Marks noted how Blacks were treated better at the all-Black school.

If I had to compare the experiences, I would say that in the black schools teachers had to do a lot more work, but our kids were appreciated more. In the white school we get more materials, we have more to work with, but we—blacks—aren't appreciated as much (Foster, 1997, p.87).

Baker et al., (2011) argued that Black teachers are able to do more for Black students in predominantly Black schools because Whites exercise little supervision over and concern for these schools. This was especially the case during segregation. Because Black schools were unmonitored spaces, Black teachers of the segregation era were able to provide their students with extracurricular programs that heightened racial consciousness, political awareness, and nurtured leadership skills including: school newspapers, student councils, Negro history programs, debate and drama clubs, and voter registrations (Siddle-Walker, 2000). The ability of Black teachers to do greater work in Black schools has led many scholars to question if the Supreme Court's decision to declare school segregation unconstitutional in *Brown vs. the Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954) was in the best interest of Black students and teachers (Bell, 2004; Ethridge, 1979). The passing of this law transformed the experiences of Black students and teachers in schools (Foster, 1997). During the post-*Brown vs. the Board of Education* era, the number of Black teachers in schools declined (Irvine, 1988). Madkins (2011) cited:

Prior to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954), nearly 82,000 Black teachers taught approximately two million Black students in U.S. public schools...tens of thousands of Black teachers lost their jobs as a result of the *Brown* ruling (p.419).

Ramsey (2012) examined the impact that desegregation had on the professional lives of two Black teachers, who later became principals, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Kathleen Crosby and

Bertha Maxwell-Rodney “struggled against discriminatory forces to fight for educational equality in the public schools...in addition to battling against racism, they often had to combat gender discrimination” (p.245). They received death threats from racist community members and were repeatedly questioned by parents who refused to adhere to their authority. In the face of adversity, Crosby and Maxwell perceived these challenges to have optimized their opportunities to better the lives of Black youth. Ramsey (2012) commented:

Maxwell Rodney bore the brunt of hatred and resentment from those who were against integration; however, in the midst of that storm she developed and implemented her administrative goals. She also received new exposure as she became a recognized expert on the education of teachers working in desegregated environments...one year later, her life would change again as she became a leader in a new struggle to better the lives of young people...she researched and learned about Black Studies programs and worked to incorporate the ideas of Black Power into a feasible curriculum that would not only teach Black students information, but also transform Negro youths into strong and self-aware Black students (p.259).

The above analysis of literature about the contrasting experiences of Black teachers in predominantly White schools and predominantly Black schools reveals several issues. First, it illuminates the tangible, material realities of racism for Black teachers in schools. These stories counter the grand narratives that position racism as a declining force in schools. Issues of race and racism are a central theme of the literature in both predominantly White and predominantly Black schools. Second, it portrays an image of Black teachers as mere victims. However, Black teachers often negotiate negative experiences to maximize learning opportunities for their students. Despite the extensive adversities they face, Black teachers are effective and successful (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Third, literature about the teaching experiences of Black teachers is limited to the public school setting. Research studies examining the experiences of Black teachers in private schools and home schools are few. Fields-Smith & Williams (2011) examined the experiences of Black home educators in the Atlanta metro area. The participants

in this study noted the challenges of being a Black home educator. These challenges included: (a) difficulty gaining access to services provided by public schools (such as testing, speech therapy, sports, and extracurricular activities); (b) lifestyle changes or trying to balance household duties, marital role, and educating their children; (c) structuring and managing the learning process for children of different ages; (d) understanding the children's learning process and styles and (e) negative reactions and general lack of understanding from family members. Many similarities exist between the experiences of Black home educators and Black teachers in public schools. Despite constant challenges, Black home educators, like Black teachers in public schools, have proven themselves to be effective and seek ways to overcome adversities. For example, some of the Black home educators in Fields-Smith & Williams' (2011) study, who were faced with students of different ages, allowed their students to study the same topic but at different levels and with different expectations. Secondly, these Black home educators, like Black teachers in public schools, felt they were able to do a greater work for Black students. Several had taken their children out of the public schools because institutional racism prevented them from excelling academically. Their awareness of racism, like Black teachers in public schools, in turn influenced their teaching and teaching experiences. The experiences of both Black home educators and Black teachers in public schools counter the negative perceptions of Black teachers that predominate in the literature.

### **Gender and the Role of Black Women Teachers in Schools**

Another factor observed that had a significant influence on the teaching experiences of Black teachers was gender. In the literature, Black women's experience of racism in schools was impacted by identities beyond race—most commonly, gender (Ramsey, 2012). For example, in segregated all-Black public schools, it was not likely that Black women teachers

would secure jobs as principals (Banks, 2000). Because Black women embody multiple intersecting identities, their experiences in schools are drastically different from those of Black males (Wing 1997). The discussion of gender is critical as the majority of the recent literature about the experiences of Black teachers in schools highlights Black male teachers (Brown, 2009, 2011; Lynn, 2002, 2006; Howard, 2008). Although teaching is frequently labeled as female work, the experiences and perspectives of Black women teachers have often been excluded from teaching discourse—even in studies of teachers of color. Black women teachers carry with them gendered experiences and worldviews that have been traditionally suppressed and disregarded in discussions about teaching and learning (hooks, 1994). However, the review of the literature revealed the distinguishing roles and pedagogical styles of Black women teachers. The unique roles and pedagogical styles of Black women teachers provide critical implications regarding the need for more Black women teachers in education. The next section reviews literature that examined the role of Black women teachers in schools. The review begins with a look at the role of historical Black women teachers in schools followed by a look at contemporary Black women teachers.

### **The Roles of Historical Black Women Teachers in Schools**

Historically, Black women educators have challenged injustice inherent in both their schools and communities. As advocates for Black students, families, and communities, many Black feminist scholars have characterized Black women teachers as intellectuals and political activists (Collins, 2009; Yee, 1992). Guy-Sheftall (1995) argued that Black political activists are always portrayed as male. However, Black women have also served as advocates for Blacks, especially in regard to educational advancement. To understand the activist role of contemporary Black women teachers, it is necessary to look back at the Black women-teacher

activists who came before them. Many contemporary Black women teachers draw upon the ideologies and practices of their teacher foremothers (will be discussed in greater detail later). Much literature has been written about Black women teacher-activists during pre-and post-desegregation (Barnett, 1993). Two major themes can be seen in the literature: “Black women teacher-activism as a collective effort” and “pedagogy as activism.”

**Activism as a Collective Effort.** Historical Black women teachers conceptualized activism as a collective effort (Barnett, 1995). They sought to collaborate with others to bring about transformative changes in their schools and communities. “Because struggles for institutional transformation are rarely successful without allies...Black women’s activism relies on coalition-building strategies” (Collins, 2009, p.219). Loder-Jackson (2012) explored the activist practice of Black women teachers of the pre-and immediate post Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas (1954) era. The Black teacher-activists in Loder-Jackson’s study provided evidence of their participation in collective struggles to transform their schools and communities. They noted that their activist contributions often involved supporting Black males and community organizations, since the professional threats were much too great for their visible involvement in formally organized civil rights activities such as boycotting and marching. Because Black women teachers could be condemned both personally and professionally, their organizations served as a source of protection. Black women educators in the decades before Brown vs. Board of Education “utilized their organizations as a way of expressing collective beliefs about equality and justice” (Siddle-Walker, 2013, p. 208). According to Siddle-Walker (2013), Black women educators’ codependent relationship with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is notable. Jane, a participant in Dingus’ (2006) study, reported assisting her husband in organizing the local

NAACP chapter meetings. Black women teachers and the NAACP promoted mutual objectives that encouraged individuals to work together for a common good. Their communal viewpoints reflected a shared understanding of how racial, economic, and social factors impact the lives of Black people, especially Black youth. Despite somewhat contrasting agendas, both groups collaborated to improve Black education. Historically, Black women teachers' collective efforts demonstrated their awareness of the importance of unity and equality for all individuals. They "advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice" (Collins, 2009, p.46).

**Pedagogy as Activism.** While some scholars described historical Black women teachers as fearful and inactive (Fairclough, 2000; Fultz, 1995), many Black women teacher-activists did not want to jeopardize losing their positions in schools because they perceived teaching to be an activist practice in and of itself. The pedagogies and teaching philosophies of historical Black women educators consisted of a political, social justice component. Dixon (2003) commented:

For African American women teachers, political work has been more than just a personal interest in equity and equality; the historical research on African American teachers...suggests that African American women teachers' political activities may be part of a broader conception of pedagogy (p. 219).

Using their pedagogy, historical Black women teachers sought to combat oppression. It is important to mention that although the pedagogies of historical Black women teachers were inherently political, they encompassed much more. For the purpose of this review however, I will focus only on the political nature of their pedagogy—particularly philosophies of racial uplift and care.

Since slavery, Black women teachers have viewed themselves as responsible for the racial improvement or “racial uplift” of their race (Siddle-Walker, 2000). Racial uplift refers to the process of advancing or making a race better. Historical Black women teachers believed their pedagogy or teaching to be a means to improving the conditions of Blacks (Perkins, 1981). Their pedagogy of uplift was twofold. First, they sought to improve the educational condition of Blacks. Perceiving the intellectual inferiority of the Black race to be the primary validation of slavery, Black women viewed education as their greatest liberating force. They sought to improve the educational condition of their race to help dispel the widespread myth of the uneducated Negro (Perkins, 1989). Second, Black women teachers sought to improve the material condition of Blacks. For some Black women teachers, the only way to improve both the educational and material condition of the Black race was to establish schools that would teach Blacks both subject-matter knowledge and life skills. In the early 1800s, Maria M. Stewart called for Black women to establish their own schools (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). These schools became sites of racial uplift as Black women teachers uplifted students and students in turn uplifted their families and communities.

Recently, there has been much literature in education about the notion of “caring” in schools (Noddings, 2006; Parsons, 2005; Roberts, 2010). Researchers have critiqued teachers’ lack of care for students, particularly Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Thompson, 2004). This assessment has even led researchers to develop strategies and provide exemplars of effective, caring teachers (Siddle-Walker & Snarey, 2004). Among these exemplars are the narratives of Black women teacher activists of pre and post desegregation (Foster, 1997; Mayo, 2007). The literature on these exemplary teachers provided evidence that there was a distinct form of caring exhibited in the pedagogy of historical Black women teacher activists.



Stating that the caring exhibited in the pedagogy of these Black women teacher activists is unique is not to say that other teachers fail to exhibit care; or that all Black women teachers are caring. Rather, it is an attempt to raise awareness about how the dialectical relationship between the cruelty of oppression facing Black women and our actions to resist that oppression has stimulated us to care for both our biological children and other people's children in distinct ways. Black teachers' care and concern for their students has been described as other mothering (Collins, 2009; Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 2003). Collins cited:

Biological mothers, or bloodmothers, are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Collins, 2009, p. 192).

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) suggested “that researchers have come across a womanist tradition of caring that extends throughout the history of Black women” (p.71). She described the central elements of the pedagogy of Black women teacher activists as facets of “womanist caring.” According to Walker (1983), a womanist is “committed to the survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). Beauboeuf-Lafontant illustrated how the following characteristics demonstrate the care exhibited in the pedagogy of historical Black woman teacher activists: (a) an embrace for the maternal; (b) political clarity; and (c) an ethic of risk. An embrace of the maternal refers to the ways in which Black women teacher activists connect their teaching vision to their unique mothering experiences. They bring the same standards of care and accountability to their students as they do their children. In other words, teachers want for their students the best—just as they would want for their biological children.

This nature of care provides important insights regarding student behavior. According to Milner (2012),

students seem to be able to sense teachers' commitment to them and their care for them...students may question: 'Why should I adhere to this teacher's requests, expectations, and desires when she or he does not really care about me?' (p.31).

Students often act in a rebellious or rude manner in order to distance themselves from what they understand to be uncaring teachers. Many Black women teachers during both pre- and post-desegregation seemed to understand how care translated into worthwhile learning opportunities for students.

The second element of womanist caring is political clarity. Political clarity refers to Black women teacher activists' perception of systemic injustices as both social and educational issues. They recognize that there are relationships between schools and society that "differentially structure the success and failures of groups of children" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p.77). This political worldview stimulates them to challenge the societal stereotypes placed on Black children. The caring pedagogy of Black women teacher activists is responsive to the injustices their students face. They view their caring qualities and mother-child relationship with their students as critical to their resistance of oppression (Casey, 1990). The third element of womanist caring is an ethic of risk. An ethic of risk defines the decision of Black women teacher activists to care and to act although there are no promises of success. Black women teacher activists know and accept "not that life is unfair but that the creating of fairness is the task of generations" (Welch, 1990, p.70).

### **The Roles of Contemporary Black Women Teachers in Schools**

Like their foremothers, contemporary Black women teachers still describe teaching as a political commitment. Dixson (2003) described the political aspect of the pedagogy of two

contemporary Black women elementary teachers in predominantly Black Midwestern schools. The political work of these teachers included engaging in everyday protests and rebellious actions to dismantle the racist beliefs that harm Black students. They fought to make school a safe space for Black children by speaking out in faculty and school board meetings. Although advocates for Black students themselves, they encouraged their students to be active and productive citizens who challenge White supremacy by incorporating their experiences of racism, classism, and sexism into their lessons. They used their identity in a positive and liberating manner to empower themselves, their students, and their communities. They felt a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to the Black community and more specifically the Black children they taught. Like their teacher foremothers, they took their political beliefs outside the school building and fought issues that affected their communities. Dingus (2006) examined families of intergenerational Black teachers and noted connections across three living generations of teachers. Although these teachers taught during different eras, they conveyed “an active sharing of traditions, behaviors, and beliefs” (p.196). Among these traditions was community reciprocity (Dingus, 2006). Community reciprocity describes the giving of Black women teachers to their communities and the ways in which the community in turns gives back to them. Emphasizing the community reciprocity in the work of Black teachers is important as literature depict Black women teachers solely as givers to their communities without considering what they gain from community connections. The participants in Dingus’ study commented about receiving community recognition and how community membership, conversations, and relations contributed to their high level of job satisfaction. Their communities made them feel valuable. These teachers countered the narrative of Black teachers

as diligent givers within their communities who obtain little in return for their community-based work.

Contemporary Black women teachers (like those in Dingus' study) cited how the work of historical Black women teachers influenced how they viewed their roles in teaching and connection to the Black community. The ideologies and practices of historical Black women teachers are still practiced today by contemporary Black women teachers. Watson (2007) cited Mary McLeod Bethune as one historical educator whose practices are still utilized.

Mary McCloud Bethune incorporated three essential educational concepts, three aspects of educational vision which are still practiced today. They are: 'head, heart, and hand'. The head, was used to convey the importance of knowledge. Bethune believed that people's innate search for knowledge would draw them into education. She also wished her students to incorporate their heart in teaching; this was her highest priority. The heart was a means of creating an environment to foster knowledge of Christian principles, Biblical teachings, and reaching out to others. The concept of the hand represented the training of blacks for jobs in the work force (p.179).

Watson further noted how Bethune's educational philosophy of "head-heart-hand" permeated through the "decision to teach" narratives of the teachers in her study. In studying outstanding Black women educational leaders, Reid-Merritt (1996) found that her participants' were also inspired by the philosophies of Mary McLeod Bethune. Bethune was a well-known educator who opened the Daytona Educational and Industrial School for Black girls in Daytona Beach, Florida (Henkes, 1997). The participants considered Bethune to be one of the most influential Black women of the twentieth century.

### **Summary**

The review of the literature revealed several factors that impacted the teaching experiences of Black teachers. The three factors highlighted were context, race, and gender. Context is significant as the examination of Black teachers in both predominantly White and

predominantly Black schools exposed disparities in teaching experiences. There was a vast difference in the level of challenge Black teachers in predominantly White and predominantly Black schools faced. These disparities imply a need for more research that examines Black teachers in different educational contexts—even those beyond public schools. Context was a major factor that influenced the experiences of Black teachers in schools.

The “race” theme that persisted throughout the literature is also critical to note. Racism played a major role in the professional experiences of both Black teachers in predominantly White and predominantly Black schools. However, the ways in which racism played out was different across school contexts. Black teachers in predominantly White schools reported experiencing issues of scrutiny, isolation, and ridicule, all of which they believed was influenced by their racial identity. Racism was a common part of the everyday lives of these Black teachers who were expected to act “White.” Black teachers in predominantly Black schools experienced inequity in resources and pay and heavy workload. Nevertheless, Black teachers enjoyed working at these institutions because they were able to do more for Black students. They believed this was due to racist administrators’ lack of concern for Black schools. The discrepancies in Black teachers’ experience of racism at predominantly White and predominantly Black schools may provide insights on why many Black teachers choose to teach at predominantly Black urban schools. Research of this nature may enhance existing literature on the shortage of Black teachers.

Secondly, the findings from this literature review suggest the need for mentoring and support that specifically addresses the unique challenges and experiences of Black teachers. While researchers and teacher educators have begun to address the challenges of mentoring in teacher education, these models fail to consider issues of racism, sexism, and classism, all of

which are issues that most Black people experience. Further, this literature review calls on administrators to provide opportunities for Black teachers to build support systems with other minorities as they often feel isolated. In predominantly White schools, Black teachers are often one or among the few Blacks in the entire school. Moreover, in these White institutional cultures, their pedagogic and classroom management styles appear abnormal.

In regard to race and gender, the unique roles and pedagogical styles of Black women teachers provide implications regarding the need for more Black women teachers in American schools and research that examines their professional experiences and perspectives. In an era where the number of students of color are increasing but their level of success is seen to be decreasing, Black women teachers' ability to collaborate with local community members and organizations to ensure the success of Black students and "uplifting" and "caring" pedagogy may be a knowledge base for schools and teacher education programs preparing future teachers to teach students of color. In closing, the fact that contemporary Black women teachers are fighting many of the same issues (e.g., negative stereotypes of Black children, inequality) as their teacher foremothers demonstrates that racism has not declined in American schools. Zamudio et al., (2011) argued that "schools are as racially segregated [today] as in the past" (p.24).

### **Mentoring and Support Among Black Women**

This literature review examines the literature on mentoring and support among Black women. It shifts from the traditional literature review (as provided in the previous section) to an inquiry-based literature review (Montuori, 2005). I chose this method to illustrate how I posed questions of the literature and how the voices of Black women spoke to me.

I approached this literature review as a “surveying of the land” in which I have chosen to travel (Montuori, 2005, p.375). My initial journey in teacher education in search of literature on mentoring among Black women yielded me much of nothing. Well, I did meet Tillman (2003) during my stop at the ERIC database. I was glad to see her. Tillman (2003) spoke to me about her study of the mentoring relationship of a first-year Black female teacher, her mentor (a Black female), and White male principal. She had done little work in the land of teacher education because she primarily resided in higher education. Tillman (2003) encouraged me to go a little further on my journey (e.g., into the land of higher education, Black feminism), because she believed mentoring was an effective strategy for supporting Black women.

The land on which the mentoring experiences of Black women rested was less traveled in teacher education, so I journeyed toward higher education. I decided to strategize before making my next stop. In the land of teacher education, “hope” was my strategy. I was hopeful to find any literature. I needed a plan. What specifically would I be looking for at my next stop? I knew exactly what I wanted to find. I wanted to discover the narratives of Black women who spoke about their own mentoring experiences or who spoke about the mentoring experiences of other Black women. I wanted to know: *What does mentoring mean to Black women? What does mentoring look like to us? Why do we mentor or want to be mentored?* These questions served as my traveling guide as I surveyed the rest of the land.

I met a lot of scholars in the land of higher education. They were able to share the mentoring stories of Black women they had encountered while conducting research or by articulating their own personal stories. Most of them had spoken with Black female professors and/or administrators. Grant & Simmons (2008) told me about a Black female professor who desired an African American female tenure-track professor as a mentor but was unable to

locate one within her department. In fact, she never had a Black female mentor during her doctoral studies or career. When I asked Grant & Simmons (2008), what mentoring meant to this particular Black woman, they shared how the professor defined effective mentoring:

A variety of components should be included in effective mentoring for me. These components are contingent upon the nature and type of relationship (formal or informal). This includes the type of rapport established with the mentor, the kind of project or support needed, and more. These components might include professional support, modeling, listening and advising, encouragement and nurturing, task-oriented support with timelines, sponsorships, professional networking, and personal and social support of other women of color (sistering) (p.509).

Grant & Simmons (2008) proceeded to tell me how the professor had received all these elements except sistering through her department mentoring program. I wanted to know more about what the professor meant by sistering. Grant & Simmons (2008) shared how sistering was “relationships with other caring and nurturing women of color for social, professional, and spiritual support with networking opportunities” (p.509). This statement led me to my next question which was: Why did the professor want this particular type of mentoring (sistering, that is)? The researchers shared the following quote from the professor:

Socialization into the profession has been the most difficult challenge. Had I experienced the type of sistering and networking from other African-American women professors, many things would have been different for me. I would have been less confused about the culture and I might have felt less isolated. Although I have received professional assistance, personal assistance from African-American women to negotiate race and gender bias...would have been most helpful to me (p.509).

From the quote I concluded that the professor believed having African American female mentors in the academy would have helped her to cope with isolation and issues of race and gender. At this point in the conversation, three more scholars, Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth (2010), joined in. They mentioned having studied Black women faculty at predominantly White institutions. I asked, “What did mentoring mean to this group of Black women?” Henderson,



Hunter & Hildreth (2010) informed me that Black women faculty used mentoring as a form of resistance and tool for managing challenges such as social isolation, navigating different academic roles, and inequity due to racial and gender differences. Next, I desired to know what mentoring looked like to these women. Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth (2010) spoke to me about a common form of mentoring used by Black women faculty at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) called peer mentoring. Peer mentoring shifts the nature of mentoring from a hierarchical, one-on-one relationship to group support.

Moving away from a hierarchical power relationship and traditional models of mentoring, we are sometimes able to regroup, resist, and change our expectations and behaviors via the supportive tool of peer mentoring...we view mentoring as a power-free partnership between a group of individuals where one individual usually has greater skills, experiences, and wisdom (Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth, 2010, pp.34-35).

Unlike traditional mentoring models, Black women faculty relied on peer mentoring for both career and emotional support. Peer mentoring was used among Black women faculty to establish friendships and validate one another as colleagues and sisters. A key component of peer mentoring is reciprocity. Dillard & Okpalaoka (2011) stepped in to explain reciprocity within the context of mentoring among Black women. "Every person [is] both teacher and taught, changing as we know the other and the other knows us" (p.158). Henderson, Hunter & Hildreth (2010) helped me to understand that this was why Black women sometimes referred to peer mentoring as mutual mentoring.

Peer or mutual mentoring is a form of group or mutual mentoring that centers on individuals who hold the functional roles of both mentor and mentee and the engagement in a mutually edifying, interdependent relationship (p.34).

The phrase "interdependent relationship" stood out to me. Interdependence is the key element of the African concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is the "interdependence of persons for the exercise,

development, and fulfillment of their potential to be both individuals and community...I am because we are” (Battle, 2009, p.3). I thought again about my guiding questions. What does mentoring look like to Black women? Mentoring among Black women embodies *Ubuntu*. What does mentoring mean to us? Why do we mentor or want to be mentored? We mentor one another because we need one another and are committed to existing together. Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth (2010) went on to say that mentoring among Black women is consistent with our “reliance on networks and relationships with each other to adapt and survive the material conditions associated with race, gender, and class oppression (p.34).

As I continued down the road in search of scholars to share their wisdom about mentoring among Black women, I met Black women who used mentoring to support African American college women. hooks (2005) was one of the first to talk about a group she organized entitled *Sisters of the Yam* to support Black college women enrolled in her literature course. When I asked hooks (2005) why she decided to mentor these young women she responded:

Our collective hope for the group was that it would be a space where Black women could name their pain and find ways of healing...I want[ed] to share those strategies for self-recovery that I and other black women have used to heal our lives (pp. 6-7).

Historically, higher education institutions, as sites of trauma, have stimulated mentoring and support groups among Black women. In *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, Michelle Wallace shared about her Black women’s college support group:

Baffled by my new environment, I spent most of my time with [Black] women...most of the women were from small southern and midwestern communities...we stayed in on Friday and Saturday nights on campus...we talked about men—all kinds, Black and white. Joe Namath, Richard Roundtree, the class president who earned quite a reputation for driving

coeds out on the highway and offering them a quick screw or a long walk home. 'But girl, ain't he fine?' (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982, p.8).

Greyerbiehl & Mitchell (2014) joined in on the dialogue to provide their insight on how Black college women at the undergraduate level face unwelcoming experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), including unfavorable social lives, racism, and inadequate relationships with faculty. The researchers went on to say how many Black women join Black organizations or cultural clubs for mentoring and support. Popular among the Black organizations Black college women join for support are historically Black sororities.

Greyerbiehl & Mitchell (2014) examined the social support Black sororities provided seven African American women at a predominantly White institution in the northeast:

They [Black college women] joined historically Black sororities because of family, role models, and mentors; and building community, academic pressure, and high standards were fostered through involvement in historically Black sororities and shaped their educational experiences at a PWI (p.282).

After this provoking conversation, I decided to continue on my journey. The next group of scholars I met had a lot to say about mentoring Black girls. I asked the scholars, "Why they mentored Black girls?" Brown (2006) talked about how Black women used mentoring to empower Black girls and to be empowered themselves. When recalling her mentoring experience with a group of sixth grade Black girls, she described herself as a "girl empowerer" and mentoring among Black women and girls as a time for Black female bonding and connection making.

We forgot the burdens of the world and focused on ourselves, individually and collectively, loving who we are...mentoring...gives meaning to a female empowerment strategy based on the creation of shared power (pp.106-107).

Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, & McClendon (2011) discussed how Black women used gender and culturally responsive mentoring to support African American girls who also faced

challenges in school and society at large. Culturally responsive mentoring incorporates “African American girls’ cultural background and lived experiences in aspects of the mentoring process” (p.72). Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, & McClendon (2011) studied how five African American adult female mentors of a culturally responsive mentoring program called Ananse Aya supported Black urban girls in the Southeast. One key element of this mentoring program was the presence of diverse Black female mentors ranging in age from nineteen to thirty (e.g., faculty mentor, undergraduate mentor) who “created a network of mentorship for the participating high-school students” (p.74).

Finally on my journey, I encountered scholars who had mentored and were empowered by Black girls through their research. Love (2012) helped urban Black girls negotiate and counter the negative discourse of Black women and girls in Hip Hop music while examining their experiences with rap music:

Black girls have to negotiate and navigate not only communities raided by crime, sexual assault and harassment, and poor schools but also the liberating, counter-cultural, misogynist, and sexist genre of Hip Hop music and culture, which is empowering and disempowering within the same beat (pp. 30-31).

Okpalaoka (2014) shared about the mentoring role she took on during and after her study of West African immigrant girls and their process of ethnic identity construction:

At the beginning of the study, I was aware that my research participants might view me as a ‘mother figure...the mentor role earned me invitations to several of the participants’ high school graduation parties—invitations that I honored, to the girls’ delight (p.61).

Okpalaoka explained how reciprocity, intentional listening, and community involvement played a central role in her mentoring relationship with the girls.

## Summary

The review of literature on mentoring among Black women addressed the following questions: *What does mentoring mean to Black women? What does mentoring look like to us? Why do we mentor or want to be mentored?* The following table summarizes what was found in the literature:

Table 1. Conceptions of Mentoring Among Black Women

<i>What does mentoring mean to Black women?</i>	<i>What does mentoring look like to us?</i>	<i>Why do we mentor or want to be mentored?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional/Academic support (e.g., modeling, advising)</li> <li>• Spiritual support</li> <li>• Personal/Social Support</li> <li>• Resistance</li> <li>• Care/Nurture (e.g., encouragement)</li> <li>• Networking/Building Friendships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective/Group Support</li> <li>• Interdependent</li> <li>• Intergenerational (e.g., elders, role models)</li> <li>• Reciprocity</li> <li>• Validation</li> <li>• Culturally relevant</li> <li>• Both formal and informal relationships</li> <li>• Sistering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To build community</li> <li>• To adapt and survive oppression (e.g., isolation, inequity)</li> <li>• Healing/Self-recovery</li> <li>• Empowerment</li> </ul>

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes in detail the methods and procedures that comprised the research protocol utilized for the study. The chapter is organized into several sections that provide a framework within which to describe the research plan. An in-depth explanation of the research design is provided. A discussion of the procedures for recruiting and selecting participants and collecting and analyzing data follows. The chapter ends with a section addressing validity and a summary.

#### **Research Design**

When I embarked on my study of mentoring and support among Black women teachers, my goal was not to simply highlight the professional experiences of Black female teachers to confirm their need of enhanced support or narrate the mentoring and support Black women received inside and outside of schools. Additionally, I wanted to provide an example of how researchers could support their participants in culturally relevant ways. Drawing up Okapalaoka (2014), I viewed my methodology as mentoring. Mentoring as research methodology:

will determine the type of questions we ask as researchers and what we do with the responses we get... means rejecting the detached position of the traditional researcher and engaging in the community in which we work both during and after the study... [and] challenges us to seek a 'higher moral responsibility' that transcends our pursuit of career advancement (p.65).

This notion of mentoring as research methodology was central in my development of a conceptually new methodology I termed *sista circle methodology*. Sista circle methodology is simultaneously a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women. It moves beyond traditional methodology to include research practices that draw on the wisdom and social relations of Black women transnationally. The

history of Western educational research is disfigured by a near complete dismissal of the social and cultural relations of Black women, yet Western research methodologies continue to serve as the norm. The primary aim of sista circle methodology is to assist in the development of “culturally relevant, gender specific” research methodologies appropriate for studying Black women (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sista circle methodology takes up Dillard’s (2006) proposition to honor “allegiance and substantive connections to the very communities under study” (p.2) by regarding the history and culture of the participants. In the subsequent sections, I discuss the sista circle, which is the primary data collection method within sista circle methodology (and the concept from which the methodology derived its name). I begin with a review of the history of sista circles.

### **The History of Sista Circles**

Although foreign to social scientists and qualitative research, sista circles have played a significant role in the lives of Black women for over 150 years (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). As traditionally defined, sista circles are support groups formed among Black women of the same community, profession, or organization that build upon friendships or networks already existing between Black women (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sista circles were the foundation of the Black women’s club movement of the late 1800s (Giddings, 1985). During this era, Black women transformed sista circles into formalized Black women’s clubs (McDonald, 2007). This social action was a response to the exclusion of Black women from White female and Black male dominated social sites. Black women’s clubs provided a space for Black women to discuss the issues that impacted them and ways to uplift the Black race (White, 1999).

In 1895, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, who founded the Woman’s Era Club of Boston (1893) decided to extend an invitation to Black club women from all over the nation to attend

the first national conference of colored women in Boston. This meeting led to the formation of a national organization for Black club women, the Afro-American Federation of Colored Women. The following summer of 1896 the president-elect of the Afro-American Federation of Colored Women, Mrs. Margaret Murray Washington (wife of Booker T. Washington), decided to join the leaders of the Colored Women League of Washington, D.C. to host an inaugural convention at a Baptist church in Washington. At this convention, the Afro-American Federation of Colored Women was renamed the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and Black woman educator Mary Church Terrell became the first president of this new group. The NACW was a “collective self-help project” that allowed colored women to care for one another, their local communities, and build a national social network (Davis, 1996 p. xvii). The primary goal of the organization was to uplift and honor women of color.

Other formal organizations that emerged from sista circles were historically Black sororities. Black sororities are societies established among college-trained women to promote sisterhood, academic excellence, and community service. The first Black sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., in which I and the teachers in this study are members, was established in 1908 by a group of college women on the campus of Howard University in Washington, D.C. (Parker, 1999). Among the few Black women on the campus, these ladies supported one another in their scholastic efforts while being of service to their community.

### **The Nature of Sista Circles**

Sista circles are group discussions or conversations among Black women arranged by a researcher to examine a specific set of topics and/or experiences. The major goal of sista circles is to gain an understanding of a specific issue, topic, or phenomena impacting Black women from the perspective of Black women themselves. Unlike focus groups, sista circles are not



simply for obtaining the stories of the participants. Rather, it is a method to support and empower participants as well (this will be discussed later in this chapter). Sista circle as a qualitative research method is designed to be conducted in a supportive—“sister to sister” context. Sista circles provide a unique support for Black women whose shared experiences enables conversations marked by the offering of advice and wisdom. Black women have frequently noted how “communicating with African-American women in small groups provides a unique support; one that is unwavering sources of strength for them” (Dorsey, 2001, p.71).

Health scientists and psychologists have already begun to regard sista circles as an appropriate method for studying Black women. Gatson, Porter, & Thomas (2007) used sista circles as a culture and gender specific health intervention to empower middle aged Black women to make positive health changes and reduce the risks associated with physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and stress. Neal-Barnett et al., (2011) used sista circles to inform and teach Black women techniques for managing anxiety and panic. The researchers also explored the possibility of using sista circles as a psycho-educational anxiety intervention for Black professional women.

### **Distinguishing Features of Sista Circles**

In this section, three of the distinguishing features of sista circles are discussed: (1) communication dynamics (2) centrality of empowerment and (3) researcher as participant. These features reveal the ways in which sista circles are different from focus groups or group interviews. However it is important to note, while sista circles are unique, they may share some qualities with other research methods.

**Communication Dynamics.** The first distinguishing feature of sista circles is communication dynamics. Unique verbal expressions (e.g., “I’m from the old school,” “off the

hook!”) exist among Black women and are used within Black female small groups (Dorsey, 2001). Campbell (1986) even argued that the style and content of Black women’s speech raises the need for separate analysis. Black women alternate between Mainstream American English (MAE) and Black English Vernacular (BEV) and in many cases understanding Black culture is necessary for comprehending our language (Stanback, 1985).

Black women also engage in nonverbal communication that at times helps us share meaning only with one another. A participant from Dorsey’s (2001) study on small group communication among Black women quoted:

It’s like...you give each other that look or that “mmm mmm” or that (puts hand up)...you know...and it’s just you have a lot of non-verbal communication and a lot of very verbal communication that other people don’t understand (p.74).

Because sista circles stimulate natural social interactions among Black women, dynamics such as participants’ finishing one another’s thoughts or being outspoken and direct is common. The informal nature of sista circles—such as meeting at the home of the researcher or over food—likewise influences communication dynamics. For example, one of the sista circles for the current study took place on a Sunday around the kitchen table. It resembled a Sunday dinner conversation. The kitchen as a research site is significant because the kitchen table has historically served as a social location for Black women’s talk. “The kitchen is the center of the home, the place where [Black] women in particular work and communicate with each other” (Smith, 1989, p.11).

**Centrality of Empowerment.** The second distinguishing feature of sista circles is the centrality of empowerment. Sista circles are designed to be supportive, sister-to-sister contexts that foster Black women’s group empowerment. According to Collins (2009), “if U.S. Black feminist thought is to reach its full potential... then U.S. Black feminist thought must redefine

power and empowerment” (p.292). As it relates to sista circle methodology, empowerment is the process of stimulating Black women to access their personal or collective power to strengthen one another. Sista circle methodology regards Black women’s experiences and wealth of knowledge as power. Black women participating in sista circles empower one another through the sharing of their wisdom and experiences.

**Researcher as Participant.** The third distinguishing feature of sista circles concerns the role of the researcher and the researcher’s relationship with the participants. With focus groups, the researcher’s role is to simply facilitate the group discussion and listen to the participants’ stories (Hennink, 2014; Puchta & Potter, 2004). With sista circles, the researcher’s role extends beyond facilitating the discussion. The researcher participates in the group dialogue. Building upon Black feminist epistemology, the researcher shares her personal experience when necessary as a source of empowerment (Collins, 2009). Methodology of this sort values reciprocity. The researcher both obtains knowledge from the participants and contributes knowledge when appropriate. Sista circles are a way to give back to participants and not just take from them.

### **Participants’ Response to Sista Circle Methodology**

Being that sista circle methodology was a new qualitative methodology employed in the study, I examined how contemporary Black women teachers’ responded to sista circle methodology. Specifically, I examined the teachers’ perceptions of their participation in the sista circles. During the post-interviews, the teachers reported about their experiences in the sista circles. Their responses are discussed below.

<i>Participants' Response to Sista Circle Methodology</i>
<b>Research Question 3:</b> How do contemporary Black women teachers respond to sista circle methodology?

Tansy highlighted the benefit of being able to talk with other Black women teachers about “topics that may have been touchy to bring up” with her colleagues. She commented “I liked the sharing part of the sista circle meeting. It was enlightening and enjoyable at the same time.” Ivy, who also felt she could not express her concerns to fellow co-workers, likewise emphasized this benefit.

The sista circle meetings benefited me because it allowed me to express things that were weighing heavy on me as an educator. I am fairly new to the school where I currently teach. I am also one of the few African American teachers that work there. Therefore, I really don't feel as if I can express my concerns to fellow co-workers.

Holly and Lily articulated the opportunity to share the “issues” and “frustrations they faced with other Black women teachers who had similar experiences.

Holly: It felt good being around other Black women teachers that share the same issues I face on a daily basis, and hear what they had to say.

Lily: It helped me to know that I'm not alone...I can lean on others who face the same frustrations like me.

Another benefit the teachers reported was the ways in which their participation in the sista circles empowered them as educators. Rose stated that she was empowered by the “support” and chance to connect with “women of like minds and spirits.” Ivy reported feeling a “sense of satisfaction” when she “collaborated” with such successful Black women. She commented:

Everyone in the group seemed to be excellent educators and I feel that I learned something from each and every one of them. For example,

collaborating with Lily made me realize that I need to create closer relationships with my students' parents.

These findings provide important implications regarding the benefits of culturally relevant, gender specific research practices for studying and supporting Black women. These implications will be addressed in chapter six.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Participants for the study were first identified through community nomination.

Community nomination is when researchers contact members of the community in which they are conducting research to help them locate potential participants (Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tillman, 2002). Specifically, the president of the local Alumni Chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was contacted. NPHC is a collective organization comprised of the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Phi Beta Sigma, Zeta Phi Beta, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity (Kimbrough, 2003). The membership of the local NPHC included several Black women teachers, making it an appropriate source for recruiting participants. In general, the president was asked to suggest Black women teachers whom she believed would be interested in sharing their professional experience. Having served as an instructor and field supervisor within the local university's College of Education and being a member of a local Black sorority myself, I also identified participants through my work and social contacts. Finally, potential participants suggested other Black women teachers (they were not prompted to do this) who they believed would be interested.

Eight potential teacher participants were identified representing three of the four historical Black sororities—one member of Zeta Phi Beta, one member of Delta Sigma Theta,

and six members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority. The six Black women teachers of Alpha Kappa Sorority were purposefully selected. According to Merriam (1988), “one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most” (p. 48). These teachers were purposefully selected to be participants for two compelling reasons. First, being a member of Alpha Kappa Sorority myself, I held the assumption that it would be easier to build rapport and the participants would be more open and trusting with their sorority sisters versus members of other sororities.

According to Roulston (2010),

participants are likely to orient to others within the group according to existing relationships. People who know one another prior to the group will talk in ways that reflect their roles and relationship outside the group...the moderator may have little work to do in order to establish a comfortable environment in which members are willing to freely discuss topics of interest (p.39).

Second, more than half of the founders of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority were educators (Parker, 1999), so the research became a sacred endeavor for me; a way to honor these foundational Black women teachers. According to Dillard & Okpalaoka (2011), Black feminist research recognizes the

need for an approach to research that honors the wisdom...of transnational Black woman’s ways of knowing and being in research, with the sacred serving as a way to describe the doing of it, the way that we approach the work (p.5).

The six selected participants were initially contacted in-person or via phone in June 2014 and provided with a detailed explanation of the study and criteria. The overall criteria for inclusion included: (1) self-identified as a Black woman (2) elementary teacher in the local community in which the study was being conducted (3) between the ages of 25-65 and (4) have at least three years of teaching experience. All selected participants agreed to take part in the study and

scheduled a date, time, and location in July to sign consent form and participate in pre-interview. In the next section, I introduce each teacher participant individually using narratives. Pseudonyms were used to describe participants and the schools in which they teach (or have taught) in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Participants' Narratives**

In this section, I provide brief narratives of the participants. The six Black women teachers who participated in the study constructed a distinctive intergenerational group. One participant was in her twenties. Three participants were in their thirties. Another participant in her forties and the oldest participant in her fifties. The women ranged in teaching experience from three to twenty-five years. They had taught in a variety of public school contexts including urban, suburban, and rural White and African American schools. Four had attended historically Black colleges; two predominantly White state colleges. All had received or were pursuing graduate degrees. Three actually grew up in the community in which the study took place. The participant profile chart (Table 2) that follows the narratives provides a snapshot of the group.

#### **Participant One: Ivy**

Ivy, a thirty year old fifth grade teacher, grew up in a majority Black suburban neighborhood outside of a major metropolitan city in the state. She described her K-12 education experience as “fun” and of “good quality” despite the lack of diversity.

I always went to school with other African Americans. That was from elementary on up to high school...but it was fun. I felt like my education was good. I think I got a good quality education.

Although she had attended predominantly Black schools for her entire K-12 education, Ivy still decided to attend a public HBCU (Historical Black College & University) in a rural city for

her undergraduate studies. Ivy did not grow up wanting to be a teacher but knew whatever career she chose it would be with children. She contemplated both “pediatric nursing” and early childhood education as possible majors. Ivy decided to become a teacher because she wanted to “change society” by helping to “mold” young children into great citizens. After graduating, Ivy remained in the university city (after meeting her husband) for six years to teach at a predominantly Black elementary school and pursue a masters in postsecondary education.

Ivy had moved to the city (in which the study took place) three years ago and after one year of teaching at Willow Elementary, an urban school with a primarily Black faculty population, was moved to Maple Elementary, a suburban school with a predominantly White faculty population, due to a drop in student enrollment. At the time of the study, Ivy had been teaching for eight years and had recently received her specialist degree in early childhood education.

### **Participant Two: Tansy**

Tansy, a second grade teacher in her forties, actually grew up in the city in which the study took place. She termed the rural, family community in which she was raised “the village.” She boasted about the fact that “everybody knew everybody.”

My community consisted of my mother’s side of the family...we called it the village. It was my mom and all her siblings, and my mom actually still stays there.

Although Tansy described her family environment as loving and supportive, her description of the local elementary school was quite the contradiction. She labeled the school as prejudice and reflected on the day she saw the first Black teacher.



The school was very prejudice...it was extremely prejudice. You didn't see not one Black teacher...Mrs. Odell, when she came, she was like a breath of fresh air.

Tansy's rare encounter with Black teachers persuaded her to become a teacher. She majored in education at a small, private HBCU about an hour from home. After graduating, she returned home to teach at the same elementary school that she had attended as a little girl. After only one year, Tansy returned to her alma mater city to teach at a predominantly Black elementary school for six years. In 2005, she moved back home to be closer to her parents and returned to her childhood elementary school to teach. Although she now has a masters and specialist degree, Tansy has no aspirations to be an administrator. She stated that she loves being in the classroom.

### **Participant Three: Rose**

Rose, an elementary special education teacher in her fifties, grew up in a nearby southeastern state. The predominantly Black elementary school that she attended was in walking distance from her suburban home. She joked about having no intention of becoming a teacher. Rose had received a bachelor of arts in economics from an HBCU but the first job that she was able to acquire and enjoyed was as a teaching assistant. Her experience as a teacher assistant influenced her to pursue education as a career.

I looked around at the professionals there and the children. I just thought that it would be a good place for me and a good fit.

Rose moved to the city after her husband, who was also an educator, received a teaching job. She obtained a part-time job at a nearby school as a paraprofessional and pursued what was then called an "irregular" special education degree at the local university.

I didn't do the master's program because I felt like I didn't know enough theoretically about education in order to go into a program that would be an extension of BS. So that's why I chose the irregular degree.

Her first teaching position was as a special education teacher at Hemlock High School. While sharing about her twenty-five years of experience at the elementary, middle, and high school level, Rose did not hesitate to mention she loved middle grades best.

#### **Participant Four: Holly**

Holly, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade gifted teacher in her late twenties, grew up in a predominantly White suburban neighborhood of the city in which the study took place. Holly got emotional when sharing about her schooling experience as a little girl. She recalled having all White teachers, and the lack of support she received convinced her to become a teacher in the third grade.

I had a hard time in elementary school...some of the teachers...when my parents went to teacher conferences were not as supportive. I remember my third grade teacher wanted to hold me back...my problem was I needed directions...I said that when I grow up, once I become a teacher, I'm not going to turn my back on anybody. I'm going to help these kids because I know how it feels to be left in the dark...it's just the simple fact in elementary I didn't feel like I had that support from the teachers.

Holly came from a "family of educators" so that influenced her decision to become a teacher as well. Holly mentioned having culture shock when she went to middle school because she had "never seen so many Black people." During her senior year, Holly volunteered at Willow Elementary, the school at which she currently teaches. Holly decided to attend a community college to get her associate's degree first before pursuing her bachelor's degree. Her interactions with struggling readers motivated her to apply for a master's program in Elementary Reading and Literacy. She got accepted into the program in the middle of the study.

#### **Participant Five: Jasmine**

Jasmine, a thirty-five year old special education teacher, grew up in an urban community of the city in which the study took place. Like Rose, she had not dreamed of becoming a teacher. She majored in criminal justice while attending a large, public HBCU in the state.

Jasmine's inspiration to teach came while working in the Juvenile Justice System. She hated how the Black children were depicted in the court system.

Working in the Juvenile Justice System, I have seen how many of the African American kids were portrayed in the court system...many of them were special ed and a lot of the complaints you would get is from White teachers...so I saw a lot of injustice with our kids who had issues in the community.

Jasmine already had a Masters in Educational Counseling Psychology but decided to enroll in a special education training program at the local university. After a year of student teaching at Pine Elementary, Jasmine was hired as a special education teacher.

### **Participant Six: Lily**

Lily, a thirty-five year old fifth grade teacher, grew up in a "close knit community" in an adjacent southeastern state. Although both her mom and dad went to an HBCU, Lily decided to attend the prestigious teaching college in the state. She majored in both math and English for one semester but was convinced by her mother, a former high school teacher, to take an elementary education course. Lily switched her major after one class.

I was like okay. So, I took a course. I was in a fourth grade classroom at Poplar Elementary. I loved every single minute of it and changed my major that next day to elementary education. I was like I like this.

The class only required Lily to intern one day a week but she went to Poplar Elementary almost every day. "I made sure I had no class during certain parts of the day. I was there every single day working in that classroom." Lily preferred teaching fifth grade because she wanted to make a "lasting impression" on the students "right before they entered middle school." This was her seventh year at Spruce Elementary; the longest she had ever been at any school. Lily has a Masters in Administration and Supervision and plans to pursue educational leadership in the near future.

Table 2. Participant Profile Chart

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>	<i>College</i>	<i>Teaching Environment</i>
Ivy	8	HBC	PW*
Holly	3	WPU	PB*
Lily	15	WPR	PB
Jasmine	3	HBC	PB
Tansy	13	HBC	PB
Rose	25	HBC	PB*

*Key*

PW = Predominantly White Student  
Population

PB = Predominantly Black Student Population

PB\* = Predominantly Black Student and Faculty Population

PW\* = Predominantly White Student and Faculty Population

HBC = Historical Black College

WPR = White Private

WPU = White Public

**Data Collection**

Multiple methods were used to collect data for this study: pre-interviews (audiotaped), focus groups (videotaped), journal entries, and post-interviews (audiotaped). The resulting information created a triangulation or convergence of sources (Creswell, 1994) regarding the

professional experiences of Black women teachers in schools. Below, I explain how each research method was implemented during the study.

### **Pre-interview**

I interviewed each participant in July 2014 to gather background information (e.g., educational background, teaching experience) and to understand the unique professional experience of individual teacher participants. Pre-interviews took place in either my home or the participants' to safeguard confidential information and ensure the participants were comfortable. It is important to note that I was open to conducting the pre-interviews at any location selected by the participants. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of a uniform set of open-ended questions (See Appendix B). All interviews were conducted face to face and lasted from 35-120 minutes. With participant approval, each interview was audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription (Merriam, 1988). I also took handwritten notes during each interview to record major points to return to later or to highlight ideas of particular interest. All six participants were interviewed.

### **Sista Circles and Journal Entries**

Sista circles were the primary data collection method. The participants as a group participated in two sista circles—one in August 2014 and another in September 2014. The purpose of the sista circles was to examine the “collective” experience of the participants in schools. Each sista circle was scheduled about a month apart to allow myself time to completely transcribe one sista circle before conducting another. Two of the participants volunteered to host the sista circles at their homes and I provided food. Each sista circle focused on a theme relevant to the research questions. The theme of the first sista circle was *support* and the theme of the second was *professional experience*. I acted as a facilitator and participant—posing pre-constructed questions to stimulate in-depth conversations around the

topics. The first sista circle resembled a Friday night gathering as the participants and I sat on couches around the living room. We ate finger foods and had conversations about the support we received as Black female educators. The second sista circle resembled a Sunday dinner as we sat around the kitchen table eating a three-course meal and talked about their everyday experiences in schools. Only five of the six participants were able to attend the first sista circle. Only four attended the second due to two participants having extreme emergencies. Each sista circle was videotaped and lasted from 60-120 minutes. At the end of the first sista circle, the participants were asked to record in journals examples of “critical” experiences at school that occurred for discussion at the next meeting.

### **Post-interviews**

All participants except one, who was still facing a family tragedy, were interviewed in October 2014 at the conclusion of the study to gather information about their experience in the sista circles. The primary aim of the post-interviews was to examine the participants’ perspectives of sista circles as a possible source of support for Black women teachers. Additionally, they served as a tool for evaluating the new qualitative method for data collection. The post-interviews also took place in either my home or the participants’ to safeguard confidential information and ensure the participants were comfortable. The interview was semi-structured and a uniform set of open-ended questions were posed (See Appendix E). All interviews were conducted face to face and lasted from 15-30 minutes and were audio-recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis fundamentally means to organize and attribute meaning to the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Data for this qualitative study were analyzed manually using a three-step process described by Miles & Huberman (1994) that includes the following procedures: data

reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. I engaged in analysis throughout the study but the formal analysis process began in late November 2014.

### **Data Reduction**

Data reduction was the initial step of the analysis process. Data reduction is the process of selecting, simplifying, and extracting themes and/or patterns from data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During this phase, I constructed two meta-categories relevant to the three research questions: (a) professional experiences (b) mentoring and support and (c) sista circle methodology. The purpose of this was to reduce data to quotes pertinent to the research questions. The initial or pre-interview transcript of each participant was analyzed and relevant data or quotes were extracted and placed under the appropriate meta-category. I followed the same procedure when analyzing sista circle transcripts, journal entries, and individual post-interviews.

### **Data Display**

During the second phase, I reviewed the data under each meta-category and aggregated or combined data addressing the same issue or topic. The aggregated or combined data under each mega-category became a theme or sub-category. The themes or sub-categories were then organized using a data display. A data display is an organizational tool for showing the outcomes of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers who want to integrate data into an accessible summary to simplify the later conclusion drawing or interpretation process use displays. Matrices were used to organize the reduced data from this study. Matrices are rows and columns of data that have been removed from transcripts and are ordered according to themes and contains quotations serving as evidence of the themes.

## **Drawing Conclusion and Verification**

The final phase of the data analysis process involved drawing conclusions (or making interpretations) based on the data displays and then using appropriate procedures to verify the validity or credibility of the conclusions. It is important to note that a few strategies for increasing validity were implemented before this data analysis phase. Strategies used to verify the validity or credibility of the results are discussed below.

### **Issues of Validity**

Validity is the accuracy or credibility of a conclusion or interpretation (Maxwell, 2005). According to Maxwell, validity should be incorporated into the research design and is comprised of the strategies used to identify and eliminate inaccuracy. Maxwell identified several methods and procedures to increase the validity of conclusions. Three of these procedures were employed in this study: “rich” data, member checks, and triangulation. “Rich” data refers to “data that are detailed and varied enough that they provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2005, p.110). To obtain rich data, I asked participants to provide details about specific events or occurrences and asked additional questions not included in the interview protocol and sista circle protocols to receive clarification or more information. Member checking (also called respondent validation) is requesting feedback about data and findings from participants (Maxwell, 2005). During member-checking, I paraphrased my understanding of something a participant said and asked her to verify my accurateness. Finally, triangulation is obtaining data from a diverse group of individuals, settings, and/or by using a variety of methods. In this study, triangulation was achieved by using multiple methods to collect data (Maxwell, 2005).



### **Summary**

This chapter presented the design of the study. A culturally relevant, gender-specific (qualitative) methodology called sista circle methodology was used to examine the professional and mentoring experiences of Black women teachers inside and outside of schools. The research protocol used to conduct the study was thoroughly discussed, including procedures used for recruitment and selection of participants, data collection, and analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings for two of the three major research questions that drove this study (the third research question was addressed in chapter 3). The chapter consists of two sections related to the two research questions: (1) professional experiences and (2) mentoring and support. The findings are reported using narratives that illustrate the teachers' professional experience and the mentoring or alternate support they received inside and outside of schools. Throughout my interactions with the participants, I felt it incumbent upon me to tell a story that enabled readers to understand both the teachers' experiences and the methodology used to investigate their experiences. Before presenting the findings, I provide a narrative of the context of the sista circles to illustrate the environment in which the teachers' stories were primarily told. Rather than attempt to provide the narrative of each participant to illustrate a finding, I have selected the stories of the participants that best exemplify each finding. All findings are narrated using the participants' actual voices from data. A summary of the findings concludes this chapter.

#### **Context of the Sista Circles**

During the first sista circle, we were literally sitting in a "circle" in the living room of Rose's, the oldest teacher of the group, house. Rose had volunteered to host the first sista circle during her pre-interview. Upon their arrival, I invited the participants to the kitchen for food and Rose helped me serve. The teachers began eating and having conversations before I officially introduced the group and the theme for the night. Although all sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, all the teachers did not belong to the same chapter, so some of the sisters had

never met before. Ivy had only been in the city for a few years and had not joined the local chapter. Lily was affiliated with a chapter in a neighboring state. Before beginning the sista circle, I explained to my sisters why I had decided to use sista circles as my primary data collection method.

I was really inspired to do this because I went back and started reading the history. I always go back and periodically read the history of the sorority. And I was like over half the founders were educators. At first I was going to get Deltas, Zetas, representatives from each group but I was like no. I really just want to do it with us [AKAs] and this would be a way for me to use my dissertation to honor the sorority and our founders.

As I talked about my choice in choosing sista circles as a way to honor our founders, the room got quiet and my sisters just stared at me in amazement. Their silence for me confirmed the sacredness of the study.

It became noisy again as the heavy footsteps of Ivy's toddler son filled the room. Ivy apologized for bringing her two little boys:

Ivy: Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't have a sitter.

Tansy: He's like "hey" look at me. His shirt says playtime (laughing and reaching for the toddler).

Ivy: Okayyyy! [The group laughs.]

Everyone stopped in anticipation as the toddler approached them. I saw by the look on Ivy's face that the sisters' embrace of her sons seemed to be the affirmation that she needed—to let her know it was okay that she had brought her children. I likewise understood why Ivy questioned whether she should come to our first gathering. Growing up in the Black community, children were not allowed in grown folk conversations, especially women. This was because the dialogue among Black women was what bell hooks (1989) described as intimate and intense:

Dialogue—the sharing of speech and recognition—took place not between mother and child or mother and male authority figure but among black women. I can remember watching fascinated as our mother talked with her mother, sisters, and women friends. The intimacy and intensity of their speech—the satisfaction they received from talking to one another, the pleasure, the joy. It was in this world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright. (p.6)

As both Ivy's sister and a Black feminist researcher, I must admit that I was thrilled about the toddler incident, although I initially worried about the transcribing process. Our embrace of Ivy's sons exemplified the supportive context of *sista circles*.

In each of the *sista circles*, there were “heightened” moments where emotions (both frustration and excitement) were extremely visible. Being a Black woman who frequently engaged in small group dialogue with my sisters, I knew when these heightened moments were about to take place during the *sista circle* before they took place. One sister-teacher began to talk about something that happened to her at school that every other sister-teacher in the group could relate to; then immediately everyone wanted to say something. I saw our hands go in the air and heads nodding. We would hit the sisters next to us in agreement. I heard “amens,” and “girl, yes.” We validated one another and felt solidarity within the interactions. This was our reason for coming together and why I had chosen to examine the “collective” experience of the group. Although the experiences we shared were not generally good ones, the connections we made while sharing our stories produced moments of joy.

### **Professional Experiences**

**RQ1 asked how do contemporary Black women teachers describe their professional experiences in schools?** Three major themes emerged from analysis of the data for this research question: (a) Pressure to Re-form (b) Resisting Negative Stereotypes and (c) Being Overlooked.

## Pressure to Re-form

The teachers revealed that their professional experiences in schools included the *pressure to re-form* themselves. In some cases, the teachers were pressured to change their style of dress or outward appearance. In other cases, the teachers were pressured to change their pedagogic style or behavior. The stories of Lily and Ivy best illustrate this finding.

**Outward Appearance.** Lily prefers to wear casual attire such as khakis and collared shirts to work every day, yet she wears dresses or slacks. She complained about how her administrator, an African American male, expected the Black teachers to dress professionally while allowing the White teachers to be casual. During the *sista circle*, Lily recalled a particular incident that happened two years ago in which she was pressured to change her style of dress. She even remembered the day of the week and season in which the incident happened. She commented that she could “never forget it.”

When Lily decided to wear one of her casual outfits to school—one that she described as being similar to that which several White teachers had previously worn, she was called to the principal’s office. The administrator explained how he expected the Black women to uphold higher standards.

Mind you, I’m not the only one who has ever worn that outfit in the school. It was just my first time ever wearing it. Oh I got called to the office. “Oh you as a Blackwoman you need to make sure...you need to make sure you uphold the standards.” And I’m thinking, disregard everything I have ever done here. I only wore this once [holds up one finger] and you going to focus on this.

Lily felt that her decision to wear the casual outfit was a mistake and returned back to striving to be better than her White colleagues. She commented “from that point on I was like I got to make sure I do everything above and beyond.”

While the other sisters did not provide a detailed story of how they had been pressured to re-form their style of dress, they all agreed that African American principals expected Black teachers to dress more professionally and be more professional in general. This conversation was one of those “heightened” moments that I described earlier in the chapter:

Lily: My administrators are both Black, so it’s kind of like, what? No one has a problem with what I have on. It wasn’t indecent.

Ivy: But they [White teachers] can come to school wearing anything.

Tansy: They can be dirty, blue jeans.

Lily: It bothered me. Like one White lady, if you all could have seen her room. Last year when she was cleaning it out, let me tell you how messy it was. When she was cleaning her room and opened the refrigerator, roaches came out [everyone hollers in amazement]. She just had stuff everywhere. All I could think of is, if my room was like that...

Tansy: Oh yeah!

Lily: It’s just like certain people can do certain stuff but I could never get away with that. Even though I wouldn’t let my room get that messy.

As Rose saw how heated the conversation got, she raised out of her seat. The room became extremely quiet as Rose, who I considered the mother figure of the group, shared her wisdom on why Black principals expected Black teachers to be more professional:

I can go on Lily on this one regard that I’ve been a teacher under African American administrators and I feel like they expect us to be up there too. Because they have more stress to prove themselves. So they in turn depend on us greater to support them. I think maybe that’s where you might be getting a little bit of that from in terms of pressure.

Although some of the teachers were currently at schools with White administrators, they had all taught at schools under Black female or male leadership and confirmed Rose’s insight.

**Pedagogic Style and Behavior.** Another aspect of the *pressure to re-form* was the pressure to change pedagogic style or behavior. Ivy's story best exemplifies this aspect. Ivy had only taught at Maple Elementary, one of the highest performing elementary schools in the district, for one year. The students at Maple Elementary have scored the highest in the district on state standardized tests for the past three years. At the time of the study, Ivy had just begun her second year. She was one of the only two Black teachers at Maple. During our *sista circle*, Ivy commented that she had only taught at predominantly Black elementary schools before coming to Maple. "I worked at Willow last year which was predominantly Black. Then I worked in Sycamore for the previous six years and most of the teachers there were Black." After only a few months at Maple, some of Ivy's parents—all of whom were White—went to the principal, a White male, requesting to have their children removed from her class. They complained to the principal that her teaching style was aggressive and that she came off as mean. Ivy mentioned that she was bothered that the parents never came to talk to her. "The parents who were complaining. They never came to me. They go to the principal."

The principal came to Ivy to report what some of the parents were saying. "He was just like one of the parents were fussing about her child being in my room because she had heard from other parents that I was mean. This is a little White boy." Ivy commented about how the principal asked her to alter her speech or the way she talked to the students and parents:

He came in and gave me a run down. "This is what you need to say to this parent. This is what you need to say to that parent." I'm going to be me regardless. I'm not going in there just because I'm teaching a lot of White kids. I'm not going in there changing my style. I'm not that, "Good Morning, how was your day?" [sounding overly excited] That's not me. I'm sorry I don't give them what the others [White teachers] give them.

Ivy refused to change her teaching style to please the White parents and administrator. Ivy was the only teacher in the group who experienced the pressure to re-form teaching style.

## Resisting Negative Stereotypes

In this section, I discuss the teachers' experience of resistance. The teachers revealed that their professional experiences in schools included resisting negative stereotyping of both Black women and Black parents. I have selected the stories of Tansy and Rose to illustrate this finding.

Tansy, a second grade teacher, had returned to Redwood Elementary after leaving for six years to teach at, Birch Elementary, a neighborhood school in a nearby metropolitan city. Redwood Elementary was the same school Tansy attended as a little girl. Tansy valued family and had only returned to the district to be closer to her parents. Once again at Redwood Elementary, Tansy mentioned how her interactions with White teachers often reminded her of how prejudiced the school was growing up:

I work at Redwood Elementary and I attended Redwood too. The school was very prejudiced back then. It was extremely prejudiced. You didn't see not one Black teacher. I remember my parents saying how my sisters qualified for the gifted program. They [White teachers] would overlook the Black students and try to put the Black students in remedial classes.

Tansy believed the school was quite different than when she was growing up; but still noticed the negative views White teachers had about Black people. Tansy observed how one of the White teachers at Redwood always changed her voice when talking to her. Tansy felt the teacher was attempting to mimic how Black women were portrayed in the media—"loud" and "ghetto." One day Tansy decided to confront her colleague about the issue. "She comes up to me at work all the time. "Hey girrrrrl!" This is a White lady. I asked her one time, "Have you ever heard me talk like that?" She responded, "Ah, you just stuck up." I said, "No."

Rose emphasized the experience of resisting negative stereotypes of Black parents. Having taught for twenty-five years in the district at the elementary, middle, and high school



level, Rose recalled having several debates with White teachers (and a few Blacks) who simply thought Black parents were not engaged because they did not care:

A lot of times White teachers put in their minds that Black parents don't really care, but that's not true. Teachers assume like another teacher will tell them, "Oh, his mother doesn't care for him." It's like okay, really. Well he comes to school decent. He comes to school clean.

Rose believed a lack of presence at school was not a definite indicator that a parent did not care, but instead that there could be other important indicators of parents' care for their children.

Both Tansy and Rose's stories brought about another "heightened" moment during the sista circle. Lily got very emotional and stood up to comment, "It's like sometimes they [White teachers] see us as that stereotypic Black female." Lily's remark led to a lengthy dialogue among the group. All the sisters began to share how their daily experiences as Black female teachers included confronting racist and sexist questions by White teachers who wanted to be down or become the Black expert:

Lily: I feel the need to break that stereotypic idea of what a Black female is. I think, I like, make it a mission sometimes just to do the opposite of what they [White teachers] think a Black woman is supposed to be like.

Latoya (researcher): So you feel like you just have to prove that you are not the stereotypic Black woman.

Lily: Because what you see on television, I'm not going to be out there in the street, and you see me and be like, "No."

Ivy: Yes, girl! In the street or in the school either  
[laughing]

Tansy: We need to break the curse. [rolling her eyes]

Lily: Because one teacher was like, Lily, do you know how to twerk?

Everyone: Whattttt!!!! [shouting angrily]

Lily: I said I sure do. [being sarcastic]

Latoya (researcher): So are they coming to you asking you about [supposedly] Black stuff?

Lily: Yeah...they'll ask me about words because they'll hear me say. I'm like that's "ratchet." "What does ratchet mean?"

Holly: Like one teacher asked, "Is that your hair? Where is your hair?"

Latoya (researcher): Did she touch your hair?

Holly: Yeah.

Lily: We, literally, it was the special ed parapro and myself. We had a hair discussion during lunch one time...my coworker was like, "You about to get yo head, yo relaxer in [acting Black]." One of the teachers was like, "How you know that?" "When Lily starts beating her head because she can't scratch it...being around Lily, I know about Black female hair." We had that discussion because I'm the one that has the relaxer. The other [Black] teacher is natural, and we were talking about the differences. And one of the teacher goes, "Why don't you go natural?" I said, "I don't like doing my hair...that's it." I mean it was a thirty minute discussion on Black hair with about four or five White teachers.

This discussion of resistance was marked by moments of frustration and joy. The sisters became angry after hearing the racist and sexist questions posed by White teachers, yet they experienced joy after hearing how their sisters responded. During this dialogue, Rose did not say much of anything. She just listened, and after all the sisters had calmed down; she again shared her wisdom:

Rose: A lot of times the perceptions of some of the teachers, they pretty much think that we understand. They don't realize that within our culture there are subcultures.

Latoya (researcher): Exactly.

Rose: And that some of the things that go on are novel things to us too [everybody is amening]. So that's one of the things that I have encountered by the difference in the diversity over the years. That some of the other teachers [White teachers] would just assume that we [Black teachers] are aware of what's going on. When sometimes, and I've had to explain, "Now remember we have a culture and we have subcultures within this culture. So

we don't always understand what's going on as well." And she was like, "Oh yeah because that's right we're different." "Yes, we're all different."

Much to Rose's surprise, her story of educating White teachers about the diversity within the Black culture only got the sisters stirred up again, and the dialogue about Black stereotypes continued. This time Holly and Ivy shared how their experiences were different.

Tansy: To kind of piggy back off what Lily said. I don't know if you all have experienced this at your schools, like when a group of Black teachers are talking, it's a big deal. Like people want to know what's going on when a group of White teachers can go in a classroom all day long and talk (you know after hours). I don't know why, but every time I talk to my Black friends after school, one White teacher comes in, "What you all talking about?" We're not a clan meeting. We are not planning a clan meeting.

Lily: That's the lady at my school.

Tansy: But you all can sit and talk in your little pods all day because you got us outnumbered. But when us little four or five get together, it's like what you talking about.

Lily: Like the downfall of the school. Nobody talking about you!

Holly: I guess that's different for me being in a school that's mostly Black. I mean we have our couple of White people... like the opposite for us, for them.

Ivy: See, I don't experience that at all because there are no other Black teachers there for me...the one other Black teacher acts White.

Contrary to the other teachers, Ivy did not have other Black teachers at her school to help her cope with the negative stereotypes. She revealed not feeling a sense of belonging or wholeness because she was missing the presence of her sisters. For Ivy, teaching at Willow and Basswood Elementary with majority Black faculty, then coming to Maple Elementary and being one of the only two Black teachers was a challenge:

Sometimes I don't feel that closeness with my co-workers like I did at my other schools, you know. At Maple, I kind of find myself staying to myself. Nobody is really inviting you to hang out. Whereas in my previous schools, I created lifelong friends. And I haven't done that at Maple. It's just like work is a separate environment from your personal life. Whereas in my previous schools, my co-workers were a part of my personal life because we did so much together.

Ivy was accustomed to forming mentoring relationships with Black teachers that extended beyond the school building. These relationships were important to Ivy because they provided a space for her to talk about the stereotypes she confronted. Ivy mentioned that she had to go outside of Maple and the school district to create these bonds or sisterly relations with other Black women teachers. "A lot of times when I want to vent or when I need help, a lot of times I go to teachers I have worked with in the past." The other sisters were able to connect with Ivy. They also went outside their school buildings to form additional mentoring relationships with Black female teachers, going to Black women teachers in their families, communities, and churches for support. This finding is addressed later in the chapter.

### **Being Overlooked**

In this section, I discuss the ways that the teachers experienced being overlooked or disregarded by administration and White colleagues. I have selected the stories of Lily and Jasmine to illustrate this finding.

Lily believes that her best resource as a teacher is parents. She takes pride in the strong relationships she has established with parents across her fifteen years of teaching. During the *sista circle*, she constantly emphasized how important it was to her that all parents felt connected. "Whether the parents are White or Black, my parents know me. They will call me." Lily mentioned that in the past she had even visited the homes and churches of her students just

to get to know the parents. “I used to make those home visits at Cottonwood. I would know what church they went to. I would go to that church. I would just make every effort possible so they could, not so much the kids, but the parents would see me.” Lily welcomed the parents in her classroom and they often reported the great things that she was doing to the administration. Although she received attention from parents, Lily desired more to receive accolades from the administration.

Then when you have parents going up to the front like, “Oh, she’s doing this!” And they [administrators] just kind of wash it off. They wash it off, like, “She’s supposed to do that.” But when somebody else does it [referring to the White teachers], they make this big ole hooray.

Lily revealed that being overlooked was not an issue until she realized that this was not the case for White teachers who were consistently being celebrated.

He made this presentation about what this one [White] teacher did last year. And I’m thinking, I have done that ten times and you’ve known about it.

This was not the first time Lily was overlooked. In fact, she had contemplated leaving the school multiple times because she was tired of facing the issue.

I called, I was like I’m done. Is there any openings somewhere? I think I’m going to leave and he [the administrator] was like you are not going anywhere. I told him, what the problem was. I was like I’m tired of getting overlooked.

Jasmine’s story also illustrates the experience of being overlooked. Jasmine, a special education teacher, had only been teaching for three years. She has a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice and worked with youth in the juvenile justice system before becoming a teacher. When I asked her why she decided to become a special education teacher, Jasmine replied that she had “seen how many of the African American kids were portrayed in the court system. Many of them were in special education.” Jasmine grew up in the community in which she

taught and had seen a “lot of injustice with kids who had issues in the community.” These incidents provoked her to enter the teaching profession.

After teaching only one year at Pine Elementary, Jasmine was moved to Oak Elementary. During our initial interview, she compared her professional experience at both schools. Both Pine and Oak Elementary have a predominantly Black student population. However at Pine Elementary, there were only five African American teachers while Jasmine was present. Jasmine recalled the relationship between Black teachers and White teachers at Pine Elementary. She commented that the White teachers only made them (the Black teachers) feel valuable when they desired their knowledge or expertise (e.g., about Black students):

When they’re wanting something, you are valued. You’re needed. You’re wanted...I think for situations like at Pine Elementary. It’s a prime example. Like lack of support. Then with the colleagues, how it’s like these cliques. Like these racial differences. The White teachers clique up and leave the Black teachers out of certain things. Except when they need something or want to know something. Then you are valued.

Jasmine believed that this differential treatment was the reason many Black teachers were leaving the district and the other sisters agreed with her. Rose stated that she was speaking for the group when she commented “we might say it’s not important that we be noticed, but it is.” She encouraged the group to remember the joy students bring when they get frustrated with White colleagues or administration. “After all, the students are the reason why we are here.” Her encouragement changed the nature of the conversation:

Latoya (researcher): Rose, you’re smiling.

Rose: One day I was so frustrated and one of the students was tapping me on my arm [demonstrating the tapping]. I looked at him and was like, “YES!” [gets very loud]. He said, “I love kindergarten and I love you.” And I thought, “Wow!”

Holly: And they appreciate you too. Like, my kids from last year, “Ms. Holly I want to come back to yo class. I want to do this.” My first class they’re in the fourth grade and I still have this little girl who comes to my room every so often in the morning time. She still says hello to me.

Lily: I like to spoil my kids [students]. That is one of my biggest joys is to spoil them.

Holly: Seeing the success of my students brings me joy. Seeing where they were at the beginning, then seeing where they are at the end...knowing that you had some part in that makes a big difference.

Ivy started to cry as the sisters discussed the joys of working with their students. She shared how she felt bad because her students were succeeding, but her son was struggling:

I have no choice but to take my stuff home, but then when I’m taking my stuff home it’s like, “Okay, what are you doing for your own? Your own children.” Because I feel like I’m lacking as a parent... I feel bad because I feel like I’m not being the best mom I can be. My son, he’s struggling with math, and I’m like, I’m a teacher, my child has no business, you know, struggling in math. I feel like it’s too much. My husband he works all the time. He coaches and then you know he works at Wendy’s at night. It’s like I feel like a single parent.

Rose, who also has two sons, shared her advice to provide emotional support:

Rose: But when Ivy says; I’m a teacher my child has no business struggling with math. Take it from me, from someone who is older, who has older kids. Your children are your children and they’re not your children because you are a teacher. They don’t respond any differently to anything because we are professional people. See what I’m saying. So you have to take that off of you too... like my son, I was like how am I telling other people’s kids what to do when I can’t get my son to go through college? Then I was, like, that’s not really on me. I’ve done the best I can do and you are doing the best you can do [in a motherly tone]. We just got to continue to just do, like my mother used to say a long time ago, “Get tired. Stop and rest. After you’ve had your rest, knock the dust off your feet and keep going.”

Latoya (myself): And I think that is why gatherings like this are so important.

Rose: Amen.

Ivy: Yeah.

All the sisters stopped to give Ivy a hug. The teachers may have been overlooked at school, but they were made visible in the sista circle.

### **Mentoring and Support**

**RQ2 asked how do contemporary Black women teachers describe the mentoring and support they receive inside and outside of schools?** Two major findings emerged from analysis of the data for this research question: (a) lack of support from school mentoring programs and (b) other Black teachers and spirituality as primary sources of support.

#### **Lack of Support from School Mentoring**

The teachers revealed that they received little support from their school's mentoring programs. Some participants emphasized the invisibility of their mentors. Others highlighted the need for emotional support. The stories of Lily (a mentee) and Ivy (a mentor) best illustrate this finding.

Ivy was assigned a mentor when she first transferred to Maple Elementary but was never introduced to her. Ivy was not aware her school even had a mentoring program until she was approached by her mentor at the end of the school year to sign paperwork. Ivy's mentor wanted her to falsify that she had completed her mentoring responsibilities.

She was like, oh, I need you to sign off to make sure I did this. I'm like, "Oh, you're my mentor. Didn't know that...I didn't know that we actually had a mentee/mentor system set in place."

According to Rose, all mentors in the district have a checklist to complete. Rose, who was a mentor at Willow Elementary, believed the mentoring system was another list of things for teachers to do. She often found herself "overwhelmed" or not having enough time to complete her mentoring tasks.

It is not as effective. In the afternoon, we have already established meetings. In the afternoon, you don't have as much time to sit down. In September,



you should show them this. We have a list. August you should show them this... you get overwhelmed with all of that...that can be very challenging.

Rose stated that mentors are expected to coach fellow teachers, however, many of the teachers at her school (which has a predominantly Black teacher population) came to her for emotional support. She commented:

We need to know that we're going to mentor in other ways too. When people come in there, you've lost a love one, you might be dealing with a sick parent, your child may not be well...you need [emotional] support.

The other sisters attempted to help Rose understand why the Black teachers might be coming to her for emotional support.

Tansy: I agree with them [referring to the teachers at Rose's school] because I only confide in certain people. It kinda like three of us [Black teachers] at my school. Like people really don't see us talking during the school day, but we'll go out after work, get on the phone...we are more comfortable talking to each other.

Holly: You feel comfortable around Black teachers.

Tansy: Yeah, more comfortable around Black teachers.

Ivy: You know, not to say that the [White] teachers I work with now aren't helpful. They're helpful when it comes down to academics, but they're just not your teachers you're going to vent to, because you don't know where it is going to go after that. It's a totally different atmosphere when you're working with predominantly White teachers versus predominantly Black teachers.

Lily: I understand that situation moving from one school to the next.

The teachers revealed that their primary sources of support as Black women teachers were other Black teachers and spirituality. Although the participants identified Black women educators, Black male teachers, and Black administrators all as sources of support, they emphasized more their relationships with Black women veteran teachers and educators in their families.

**Black Women Veteran Teachers.** The first group of Black teachers who the participants described as a major source of support were Black women veteran teachers. During the *sista circles*, the teachers consistently referenced these older women. To demonstrate the kind of support the sisters received from the veteran teachers, I provide narratives of Shonda Flowers, Heather Harris Stewart, and Mrs. Jill Robins (pseudonyms). Mrs. Flowers, a petite lady who was able to get students to correct their behavior with one simple look, was the veteran teacher Lily often commented about. Lily aspired to acquire Mrs. Flower's subtle classroom management skills.

Mrs. Shonda Flowers. I love that woman to pieces...she was just wonderful. She is a little bitty lady. When I say I thought I was "bad" [slang really meaning good] on getting kids together. I got nothing on Mrs. Flowers. I mean she doesn't have to say anything. She just looks at you. I said, I'm going to be like that one day. Just look at you and not say a word.

Lily reflected on the times she would go sit in Mrs. Flower's room to receive wisdom about, not only teaching, but life. "She tells me about my life. She will let me know it's okay to still be single."

Heather Harris Stewart, a retired teacher who had recently passed away, was the veteran teacher Rose frequently talked about. Rose admired the way Mrs. Stewart cared for the new teachers at the school. "She inspired me because she would wrap her arms around you. Take good care of you." Rose recalled how Mrs. Stewart "took" her in as a young teacher.

I was a young person and she took me in. I mean when new people came into the school, she embraced them. "I'll show you where this is. How are you doing?" That kind of warm and friendly personality.

Rose mentioned she aimed to "be just like" Mrs. Stewart, "always supportive." Now a veteran teacher herself, Rose is supporting the new teachers at her school.

Mrs. Jill Robins, a sixty year old teacher who was often moved to a new grade level because of her ability to "adapt to change so easily," was the veteran teacher Ivy shared stories

about. Ivy was impressed that no matter what grade level Mrs. Robins taught—she exemplified excellent teaching. “It’s like wherever she is; it’s like that’s where she is supposed to be. She is just an awesome teacher and I just like how she can adapt to change so easily.” Ivy remembered the support Mrs. Robins provided her during her first year of teaching. She was willing to do anything to help.

When I tell you she just. She wasn’t even my mentor but she helped me with whatever I needed. Being that we all taught third, if she was making copies for something she would come over, “This is what I’m doing. Do you need this?”

Ivy appreciated the support she received from Mrs. Robins because she noticed some teachers were not as willing to share. “I really liked that because some teachers are, like, this is what I’m doing and I don’t want anybody else to know.”

**Educators in the Family.** The second group of Black teachers who the participants described as a major source of support was educators in the family. Throughout the sista circles, the teachers reported family members who were current, former, or retired educators to be a significant source of support. I have selected the narratives of Holly and Lily to illustrate this source of support.

Holly, the youngest teacher of the group, had only been teaching at Willow Elementary for three years. She was not ashamed to tell me during her initial interview that she still lives with her parents. Holly’s mother and father are both former educators and were a major influence on her decision to become a teacher. When I asked the group about who or what helps to sustain them as Black women teachers, Holly did not hesitate to mention her parents. “So for me, it’s been my mother and my dad because he’s a retired teacher.” Holly’s grandmother was also a teacher before she passed. Holly further commented about her aunt, who is an art teacher at a local middle school. Holly described her aunt as her “biggest support.”

For the most part, I mainly talk to my aunt since she is still in the middle school and close to elementary. We just got off the phone yesterday, talking thirty minutes, talking about what we're going to do today. I would say she's my biggest support.

In total, Holly has three aunts who are teachers. She was proud to announce that she has "a lot of educators" in her family.

Lily's mother, who is now a college instructor, was also a former teacher. Lily still relies on her mother for teacher wisdom and regards her as her "biggest support" as well. "One of my biggest supports if I have education questions, I will talk to my mama." Lily shared the wisdom her mother gave her as a first year teacher:

With my first job, she was like you need to remember two things: take care of the custodians and take care of the cafeteria workers. She said you take care of them. The rest of your life will be easy because they will take care of you.

Lily stated that she still follows this advice today. She also has a supportive aunt and godmother who are former educators.

## **Spirituality**

In this section, I discuss how spirituality was a major source of support for the teachers. The teachers revealed that their participation in daily spiritual practices helped to sustain or support them as Black women teachers. *Spiritual practices* are actions that allowed the teachers to give attention to and care for their "spiritual being." The significance of spirituality is evident in Lily's narrative.

Lily arrives at Spruce Elementary early each morning, before her students, to meditate. She believes that meditation is necessary to keep her spiritually grounded throughout the school day. She even joked that her students knew when she had not meditated. "It keeps me grounded. Even my kids know that. I'll come in early in the morning and I meditate."

Sometimes instead of meditating, Lily would listen to gospel music. This was her way of preparing for the issues she might face each day.

If it's quiet and my favorite little troublemakers come in, I'm not ready. I'm still meditating. If they come in and they hear gospel music, they go, "Hey, she got gospel music on. Shush. Shush."

Lily also mentioned that she would sometimes pause during the middle of the day to pray.

"Sometimes the kids will be in there and I will quickly put them to doing work and I will kind of sit down and be still. Have that moment of stillness." Lily commented that if she does not have a time of stillness, her "days are not good."

Like Lily, Tansy also arrived to school early to meditate. "I usually get there, our school starts at 7:15, so I like to get there around 6:50 to meditate, get myself together." Ivy commented that she reads an inspirational book each morning before getting dressed, since she cannot make it to work early. "Before I even start getting dressed. I start my day by reading something inspirational, whether it's Daily Bread or the Bible, because you never know what you are going to encounter." Rose agreed with the group that "it's good to have a spiritual base where you can reflect or grasp on something." Spiritual traditions have long played a central role in supporting Black people.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the major findings of the study which emerged from analysis of pre-interviews, sista circles, journal entries and post-interviews. Findings were discussed in two parts that corresponded with two of the three research questions guiding the study. The data for **RQ1** focused on the professional experiences of the participants in schools. Three major themes were generated: (a) Being Pressured to Re-form (b) Resisting Negative Stereotypes and (c) Being Overlooked. The data for **RQ2** focused on the mentoring and support

the participants received as Black women educators. Two primary sources of support were reported and discussed by the participants: (a) other Black Teachers and (b) spirituality.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### **Professional Experiences**

The professional experiences of the Black women teachers in this study appear to be very similar to those described in the literature. However, resistance among Black women teachers emerged as a significant theme in this study.

#### **Pressure to Re-form**

The literature accentuated how the professionalism of Black teachers is scrutinized by White administrators (Lee, 2012; Milner, 2012; Delpit, 1995). The White principals described in Lee's (2012) study, for example, questioned the professionalism of Black teachers' instructional strategies and tone. Similarly, in this study, Ivy's professionalism was questioned by a White administrator after White parents, who viewed Ivy as strict, threatened to pull their children from her classroom. The parents' reaction to Ivy's teaching is very similar to a reaction Delpit (1995) described twenty years ago when a White teacher criticized a Black teacher's "warm-demander" pedagogic style.

It's really a shame but she (that Black teacher upstairs) seems to be so authoritarian, so focused on skills and so teacher directed. Those poor kids never seem to be allowed to really express their creativity. (And she even yells at them) (p.33).

These analogous cases illuminate how the professionalism of Black teachers continues to be criticized in discourses among White teachers, principals, and parents, and warrants further research that unpacks and counters these perceptions.

A discrepant finding in this study, not mentioned in the literature review, was that the professionalism of Black female teachers was interrogated by Black administrators who had higher (yet oppressive) professional standards for Black teachers. As opposed to White administrators, the Black administrators (as described by the participants in this study) appeared to give more attention to professional dress. For example, Lily recalled how her administrator, a Black male, called her to the office when she wore a casual outfit to work for the first time. According to Scott (1990), Black administrators “unlike their White counterparts...desire to be accepted as competent professionals by the general [dominant] public” and understand that their appearance is the first element of professionalism to be judged (p.166). Du Bois (1903) described this striving to appear competent in the eyes of the White man as a feature of double-consciousness.

The Negro...only lets him [her] see himself [herself] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity...two unreconciled strivings (p.2).

Lomotey (1987) argued that Black administrators have higher professional standards for Black teachers because Black students see them as role models. Much of the literature on the professional experiences of Black teachers gives little attention to the inequities in the expectations and requirements of administrators. This study addresses this gap, and we need further research to investigate the issue in depth.

### **Resisting Negative Stereotypes**

Mabokela & Madsen (2003) reported that Black teachers face stereotypical views about their contributions as professionals. The participants in their study noted constantly speculating if they would be able to change the stereotypical perceptions that White teachers,



administration, and parents held about Black teachers. While Mabokela & Madsen's (2003) study was conducted over ten years ago, the data from the current study indicated that negative stereotypes of White faculty and parents are still impacting the professional experiences of Black teachers. Additionally, the stories of the teachers in the current study exposed the stereotypical views White teachers and parents had about Black women and Black parents. An interesting finding from this study is how the teachers resisted the negative stereotypes. Recent literature on Black teachers is missing stories of resistance. The teachers in this study confronted stereotypes in diverse ways, including acting opposite of what White teachers expected and challenging teachers directly. Recall the example of Tansy:

She comes up to me at work all the time. "Hey girrrr!" This is a White lady. I asked her one time, "Have you ever heard me talk like that?" The teacher responded, "Ah, you just stuck up. I said, "No."

Historically, Black women's oppression has stimulated resistance and fostered activism (Springer, 2005). However, prevalent definitions of political activism and resistance (that emphasize the official efforts of White males) disregard the equally important, everyday political action and resistance of Black women. Dominant analyses of Black women's resistance and activism depict overt political actions such as rallies and protests. From a Black feminist standpoint, resistance and activism are intertwined and encompasses a complexity of Black women's collective actions within everyday life that challenge oppression in diverse spheres (Collins, 2009). The teachers in this study used their political action in schools to foster a positive image of Black women and parents among White teachers and administration. Their actions were an expression of what Collins (2009) called *struggles for group survival*. Struggles for group survival "consist of actions taken to create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures" (p.219).

## **Being Overlooked**

The notion that Black women are “invisible” has been a prevailing theme in Black feminist literature for decades (Bell, 1992; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; King, 1988). By invisible, I mean we have been left out and poorly acknowledged, and our voices have been ignored relative to those of White women and Black and White men. hooks (1981) cited:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group “women” in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgment of the interests of black women; when women are talked about, racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women (p. 7).

The limited research on the invisibility of Black teachers primarily focuses on race rather than race/gender as intersecting identities influencing our lives (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003).

However, the Black women teachers in this study recognized how both their race and gender rendered them invisible. Lily was never acknowledged (by her Black male administrator) while White teachers were consistently praised. Jasmine was left out of critical professional activities, such as special education team meetings, by her White colleagues. Sesko & Biernat (2009) argued that invisibility is a distinctive type of discrimination. An interesting finding from the current study is how the teachers were made visible by White teachers when their expertise was needed.

## **Mentoring and Support**

The literature described how Black women generally form mentoring relationships with other Black women when assigned a White mentor, to gain emotional support (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Henderson, Hunter& Hildreth, 2010). The findings from the current study

illustrate this phenomenon in an educational context. Although their schools had mentoring programs, the Black women teachers in this study created their own culturally relevant mentoring model, what I termed *sista mentoring*, that incorporated their dependence and reliance upon other Black women. Particularly, the participants' mentoring model included Black women veteran teachers and educators in their families. These *sista mentors* provided the Black women teachers with: (a) informal support (b) role models (c) intergenerational support (d) psychosocial support and (e) care. Rose saw these characteristics in Mrs. Heather Harris Stewart:

I was a young person and she took me in. I mean, when new people came into the school, she embraced them. "I'll show you where this is. How are you doing?" That kind of warm and friendly personality.

This model of mentoring adds to the literature on traditional teacher-to-teacher mentoring by going beyond the five central components: (a) formal structure (b) expert teacher (c) single mentor (d) professional support and (e) coaching, to add five key dimensions to be considered in developing mentoring support for all teachers, but particularly Black teachers who are presently only in small numbers in our schools and programs of teacher education.

## CHAPTER 6

### IMPLICATIONS

#### **Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study confirm that African American teachers, who are majority women, are still facing the same challenges that they have been for decades in schools. Further, the findings illustrate how much of these challenges arise out of the tensions that exist in Black teachers' relationships with White colleagues and parents due to race and gender differences. This study challenges school district leaders to give careful consideration to the following recommendations to better support Black women teachers. While these suggestions may also be applicable to all teachers of color, given the findings in this study, they are particularly important for Black women teachers.

First, school district leaders must take steps to facilitate spaces (e.g., workshops, professional development) for all school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, custodians) and parents to engage in dialogue and critical thinking around issues of race and gender in schools. The Black women teachers in this study reported feeling socially isolated and were "burdened" because they did not feel comfortable having meaningful race and gender conversations with their White colleagues. According to Dillard (2012), "creating community for women generally and women of color particularly cannot happen without such engagements if one of the end goals is the ability to live and work cooperatively across our differences" (p.88). Although I do not recommend school districts use cross-race mentoring to meet the unique mentoring needs of Black women teachers, cross-race mentoring may be useful in helping to facilitate workshops or professional development around working across differences (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2002). Additionally, *professionalism*,

*stereotypes*, and *invisibility* are significant topics to be addressed if this initiative is to improve the professional lives of Black women teachers. As mentioned earlier, the professionalism of the Black women teachers in this study was questioned by both White and Black administrators. The participants were also stereotyped and made to feel invisible by colleagues and school administrators. University school leadership programs can support school districts in this effort by making it their goal to prepare culturally competent administrators.

Second, school district leaders must take steps to cultivate the cultural strengths of Black women teachers and monitor the ways in which they are valued within the school by administration, other teachers, and parents. The strengths of Black female teachers such as their “tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured” classroom management styles are often viewed within the dominant culture as deficits (Delpit, 1995, p.56). This was the case in the current study when Ivy was asked to change her teaching style because White parents viewed her as mean. Countering the negative perceptions of Black women teachers, Milner (2012) reported that the pedagogic approaches of Black women teachers are “grounded in a history and a reality that is steeped in care for the student’s best interest” (pp. 31-32).

Third, school district leaders must take steps to implement culturally relevant mentoring models that reflect the needs and culture of Black women teachers. The findings from this study, which report that Black women teachers need the psychosocial support of other Black women, suggest that district administrators establish mentoring initiatives that provide informal gatherings and networking opportunities for Black women teachers throughout the district. Since there are only a small number of Black teachers in most school districts, this strategy is more suitable (and culturally relevant) than pairing Black women teachers. Finally, district administrators may want to call on Black women veteran teachers or retirees to help them with

these initiatives as many older Black women mentor younger Black teachers. To be effective, I suggest ongoing activities that allow the teachers to support one another.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the results of this study, I recommend the following for future research. First, studies that examine how the leadership styles of school administrators influence the professional experiences of Black teachers should be conducted. Unfair expectations and behaviors of administrators greatly influenced the professional lives of the participants in this study. Second, studies that explore resistance among present-day Black women teachers are needed. Studies investigating the resistance of contemporary Black teachers in comparison to historical Black teachers also warrant attention as much of literature positions Black teachers as victims. The participants in this study used resistance as a tool for managing the challenges they encountered. Third, more research is needed that investigates mentoring among Black women teachers. While this study contributes to this literature, the majority of research on mentoring among Black women is in the field of higher education. Finally, I recommend that these studies be conducted using culturally relevant methodologies. Culturally relevant methodologies incorporate the culture of the participants in the research design. The researcher integrates methods that honor the participants' social and cultural ways of being and doing. For qualitative researchers examining the lived experiences of Black women, I recommend *sista circle methodology* as a way to both study and support Black women.

### **Afterthought**

Although I considered sista circles to be a valuable and successful research method for examining the professional experiences of the participants in the study, there were some issues that I faced before, during and after the sista circles that made me wonder how I might do things

differently next time. For instance, one of the sisters in the group often monopolized our conversations; talking more than others, while another sister said very little. I assumed the teachers' engagement in the conversations reflected their personalities and regret not developing strategies to resolve this issue. I remember thinking throughout my study that I may not have enough data to capture the collective experience of the group.

Each sista circle had a theme (e.g., support, professional experience) and I posed related questions to ground our conversations. My decision to organize the sista circles around a theme was influenced by my previous experiences in unstructured sista circles. I knew that sista circles that were not focused could begin with a conversation about school, progress to a dialogue about dating and relationships with Black men, and end with the unimaginable. I feared not having the data necessary to answer the research questions. However, I still wonder if having themes limited the possibilities of the sista circles and study outcomes.

I also regret only having two sista circles and not anticipating participants' absenteeism. My reason for only having two sista circles was to conduct research that respected the participants' values, in this case time. At the onset of the study, majority of the teachers were very concerned about how much of their time participation in the study would require. Initially, they viewed the study as research not support. I was disappointed that I fail to describe my research as mentoring and support during the recruitment process. I think this would have eliminated the teachers' apprehension about the length of the study. On the positive side, the data was very rich despite only two sista circles. Additionally, the sista circles were very fruitful even when teachers were absent. I had chosen not to interview the absent teachers (using the sista circle prompts) for two reasons: caring was a hallmark of my study as a Black feminist researcher and the teachers' interactions with the other sisters were a critical element of the

analysis process. “The ethics of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2009, pp. 281-281).



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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
Consent FormUSING SISTA CIRCLES TO EXAMINE THE PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE OF  
BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS: A COLLECTIVE STORY ABOUT SCHOOL  
CULTURE AND SUPPORT**Researcher's Statement**

You are being invited to participate in a research study entitled **Using Sista Circles to Examine the Professional Experience of Black Women Teachers: A Collective Story About School Culture and Support**. This research hopes to more deeply understand the experience of Black women teachers in schools. I am asking **you** to participate in this research because you have been nominated by a local community member.

Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you critical information about the study to aid you in deciding whether or not you would like to participate. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. The researcher is available to answer questions or to provide more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can make a decision regarding whether or not you would like to participate. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Cheryl Fields-Smith  
Department of Educational Theory and Practice  
The University of Georgia  
[cfields@uga.edu](mailto:cfields@uga.edu)

Co-Investigator: Latoya Johnson  
Department of Educational Theory and Practice  
The University of Georgia  
[latoyaj@uga.edu](mailto:latoyaj@uga.edu)  
(601) 559-3332

**Purpose of the Study**

Because there is little research focusing on the professional experience of Black women teachers, you are being asked to participate in a study that investigates the experience of Black women teachers in schools. This study is significant as there is a shortage of Black teachers in American schools. The only criteria for inclusion are that you are a Black woman elementary school teacher teaching in [REDACTED] between the age of 25-65 with at least 3 years of teaching experience.

### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Take part in a 60-90 minute audiotaped pre-interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- Participate in two monthly videotaped 60-90 minute group talks (called sista circles) focusing on school culture and support at a time and location that is convenient for all participants.
- Participate in a 60-90 minute audiotaped post-interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- In addition to the interviews and group talks, you will be asked to record in journals “critical” professional occurrences that occur between the monthly group talks that they would like to share with the group.
- Please see the attached list of sample interview questions so that you will be aware of the types of questions you will be asked.
- You will only be asked to give 60-90 minutes of your time once a month between August-November 2014

### **Risks and discomforts**

- Because all information obtained will be confidential and any subsequent documentation of the research will use pseudonyms, there are no foreseeable risks as a result of your participation in this study. You may choose not to answer any questions asked during the interviews or group talks that you are uncomfortable addressing. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

### **Benefits**

- Possible personal benefits include the opportunity to share and learn from fellow teachers.
- This study could also benefit educational administrators and researchers in their efforts to recruit, retain, and support Black teachers.

### **Alternatives**

This study does not involve any experimental treatment, therapy, or intervention.

### **Incentives for participation**

There are no monetary or non-monetary incentives for being in this study.

### **Audio/Video Recording**

The researcher will audio-record the interviews and video-record the group talks for the purposes of later transcription and use in documenting results of the study. All recorded and written data will be secured in the researcher’s locked office and will be password protected on her computer. Upon completion of the research, the data will be coded to avoid any individually identifiable information. The recordings will be archived after transcription and destroyed within 2 years after completion of data collection (around July 2016).

Please provide initials below if you agree to be audiotaped/videotaped during meetings. Information from these recordings may be used in future publications. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to be recorded during meetings.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to be recorded during interviews and group talks.

\_\_\_\_\_ I am willing to be recorded during interviews and group talks.

### **Privacy/Confidentiality**

The data collected in this study will be coded to protect your confidentiality. The researcher will utilize pseudonyms to describe participants and the schools in which they teach in order to maintain confidentiality. Participant's privacy will be protected by the use of coding in the data collection and transcription phases. The code key will be destroyed within 2 years after data collection has been complete (around July 2016). Additionally, data collected will be stored on a password protected computer until it can be transferred to external storage devices (i.e. CD's, USB drives, external hard drives). Once transferred, these external storage devices will remain locked and in the possession of the researcher. Only the researcher will have access to data. Researcher will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. Even though the investigator will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future.

### **Taking part is voluntary**

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

### **If you have questions**

The main researcher conducting this study is Latoya Johnson, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Latoya Johnson at [latoyaj@uga.edu](mailto:latoyaj@uga.edu) or at 601-559-3332. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

### **Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher                      Signature                      \_\_\_\_\_                      Date                      \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Signature                      \_\_\_\_\_                      Date                      \_\_\_\_\_

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Pre-Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me about the community you grew up in. What city? What state? Was it rural, urban, or suburban?
2. Tell me about your educational background. What college(s) did you attend? What degrees have you earned?
3. When and why did you decide to become a teacher?
4. Tell me about your teaching experience. When and where did you begin teaching? How long have you been teaching? What different schools have you taught at?
5. Let's talk about a time when you felt appreciated by a colleague/student/administrator. What did they say or do that made you feel this way?
6. Let's talk about a time when you felt unappreciated at work (by a colleague/student/administrator)? What happened (e.g., what was said/done) that made you feel this way? You do not need to give names.
7. What is a typical work day like for you?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

**APPENDIX C****Sista Circle #1 Protocol**

Theme: Support

1. Who or what are your main sources of support as educators? Who or what helps you to sustain or endure?
2. What role does spirituality play in supporting or sustaining you as educators?
3. Describe the types of mentoring or support that you have or are currently receiving from your school administrators or school district?
4. Do you feel Black women teachers need a unique type of support? Explain Why.
5. If you could create some form of mentoring or support for Black women teachers, what would it look like? What would be its key components or features?
6. Are there veteran teachers who inspire or influence you? How have they inspired or influenced you?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share?



**APPENDIX D****Sista Circle #2 Protocol****Theme: Professional Experience and Support**

1. What are the joys you have experienced as educators? What have been the most rewarding parts of your job?
2. What are the challenges you face as Black educators? What have been the most difficult parts of your job?
3. How do you think the professional experience of Black teachers differ from that of White teachers?
4. Are there Black women veteran/retired teachers (especially in the Athens area) who inspire or influence you? How have they inspired or influenced you?
5. Describe the level of parental support you are currently receiving or have received as an educator including the role of PTO (at your school) in supporting you as an educator.
6. Is there anything else you would like to share?

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Post-Interview Protocol**

1. In what ways did your participation in the sista circle meetings benefit you as an educator?
2. Did your participation in the sista circle meetings empower you as an educator? How? In what ways?
3. Do you feel sista circles could be an effective source of support for Black women teachers? How?
4. Tell me what you liked or disliked about your participation in the sista circle meetings.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

## APPENDIX F

### Verbal Script for In-Person Recruitment

Hello potential participant's name. My name is Latoya Johnson. I am a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Cheryl Fields-Smith in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at The University of Georgia. I am conducting a research study entitled **Using Sista Circles to Examine the Experience of Black Women Teachers: A Collective Story About School Culture and Support**. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. The president of the local Alumni Chapter of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) has suggested that you may be a possible participant for my study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of Black women teachers in schools. This study is significant as there is little research focusing on the professional experience of Black women teachers and a shortage of Black teachers in American schools. The only criteria for inclusion are that you are a Black woman elementary school teacher teaching in [REDACTED] between the age of 25-65 with at least 3 years of teaching experience.

If you agree to participate, you will only be asked to give 60-90 minutes of your time once a month between August-November 2014. Your participation will involve:

- Taking part in a 60-90 minute audiotaped pre-interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- Participate in two monthly videotaped 60-90 minute group talks (called sista circles) focusing on school culture and support at a time and location that is convenient for all participants.
- Participate in a 60-90 minute audiotaped post-interview at a time and location that is convenient for you.
- In addition to the interviews and group talks, you will be asked to record in journals “critical” occurrences that occur between the monthly group talks that you would like to share with the group.

You may choose not to be audio/video recorded and still be able to participate in the study. All information obtained will be confidential. Only the researcher conducting this study will have access to the data from this study. The results of the research study may be published, but your name or any identifying information will not be used. In fact, the published results will be presented in summary form only. I will utilize pseudonyms to describe participants and the schools in which they teach in order to maintain confidentiality. There are no known risks associated with this research. The benefits include the opportunity to share and learn from fellow teachers and aid educational administrators and researchers in their efforts to recruit, retain, and support Black teachers.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part

of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

Do you have any questions? If you agree to participate, please read carefully and sign the attached consent form. You will receive a copy as well. If you need more time, you may return this form at the first meeting.

If you have any questions about this research project after today, please feel free to contact me at (601) 559-3332 or send an e-mail to [latoyaj@uga.edu](mailto:latoyaj@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).