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# Killing Me Softly: The Missed Education of African American Females

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KILLING ME SOFTLY: THE MISSED EDUCATION OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES

by

Margaret Daphne Cattenhead

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
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## KILLING ME SOFTLY: THE MISSED EDUCATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES

Margaret Daphne Cattenhead, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2017

Using a literature review and personal experience, this paper aims to examine the paradoxes and barriers of African American girls in education. The educational system has left black females without support to ensure consistent results across a variety of settings and environments. There are a variety of voices on what barriers African American girls face and how those barriers influence their educational progress. Despite some progress, many African American girls are at risk for suspension, expulsion, and grade retention. They are at risk to be pressured into dominant culture norms for behavior, to be regarded as subordinate, to be negatively stereotyped, alienated, and silenced. The one size fits all educational system has not supported black girls in educational achievement. Research revealed that despite the obstacles and barriers, many African American females develop a sense of strength that allows them to bear up against oppression and inequities. Barriers are a result of societal inequalities. As a society, we should move toward a solution that would center around ending societal inequities and supporting African American girls until educational access and results are equal to that of white, male students.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

He sang as if he knew me  
In all my dark despair  
And then he looked right through me  
As if I wasn't there  
And he just kept on singing  
Singing clear and strong  
Strumming my pain with his fingers  
Singing my life with his words  
Killing me softly with his song

(Written by Lori Liebermann 1971, sung by Roberta Flack, 1973)

To all the Black girls, like me, who struggle every day to find a place of peace with your beautiful brown skin in a society who values white. You are not invisible. I see you, and I honor you. For all those Black women, like me, who struggle every day, follow all the rules and still find yourself on the outside looking in. To all the African American females, young and old, I love you. You are beautiful, you are enough. Forget what the world says. Be proud to be different, be proud to be you. It's time, our time to stand together for change. We are strong!! Just look at our history to know our strength. Our blood is the blood of queens. Together we can move mountains.

## Acknowledgments--Continued

This paper is a letter of gratitude to the people who taught me that I was not the only one with these feelings; bell hooks and Jacqueline Woodson. Reading the writings of these women opened my eyes and gave voice to thoughts, put names to feelings, and understanding to concepts. They write and speak my heart.

Margaret Daphne Cattenhead

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## INTRODUCTION

Growing up and attending school in a rural farm town with an almost all white population, I often felt out of place and confused. But I stumbled through and progressed along well enough. The school curriculum involved little study about African Americans or any American people of color. Discussions about African Americans were brief and focused solely on slavery and did not include any deeper insight into societal systems of inequity, oppression, or power structures. My second-grade teacher introduced me to books on Frederick Douglas and I soaked up every word. I connected with his passion for learning, using everyone as a learning tool. But, there was no one to discuss this new information with, ask questions to, or help me make sense of what I was learning. One of the barriers for African American females growing up in predominantly white communities is not having anyone to process or explore the meaning of experiences with, and having few people (if any) to look to for support and strength. Education was an important part of my life but I had no role models, my school had no teachers of color, and certainly no one discussed oppression in education or society.

My sixth-grade English teacher challenged me. She pushed me and gave space for me to feel as successful and accomplished as the other students in class. She was never easy on me but I felt she was fair, kind, and pushed me because she wanted me to grow as me. She called on my when I raised my hand and gave me time and space to speak, to be myself, supporting me in exploring my own ideas and passions. I left that classroom feeling able. I left the other classrooms feeling barely visible and tolerated at best. One of the many paradoxes African American females wrestle with is the need to be recognized by a dominant culture system that overlooks you. You want to be respected by a system that consistently disrespects you and silences you as an African American, as a woman, and as a child living in poverty.



I was pressed in and I didn't belong. That message was clear. But I learned to function despite that feeling. I thought differently than my peers, faced different challenges, and found little support to explore my own racial, gender, or class identities. So, I assumed the dominant rules and norms as best I could. This creates another paradox, wanting to feel that my experiences as a poor, black female can possibly be in the same category as the experiences of a dominant culture female. Wanting to fit in and be a part of what everyone else in the room shares is a powerful force. As an adolescent, I just wanted to be like everyone else, to be a successful part of the group. I understand that there were barriers blocking my way and paradoxes I was trying to sort out. I understand now, looking back from my places of experience, success, and insight, how confusing and discouraging educational settings can be with their inequities, power structures, and dominant cultural norms. I can only imagine how many bright, talented African American females out there right now, with the innovation, perseverance, and strength to solve some of society's problems, are sitting in classrooms where the educational system has ignored and overlooked their potential contribution. Leaving them to tackle barriers and fend for themselves in a system not created for them where success can take every ounce of energy.

I truly believe we are missing out, as a society, on the unique gifts of African American female students. Women and girls who, struggle every day, through devaluing and dehumanizing experiences to continue to learn and grow. Woman who have lived in these spaces will have new perspectives on societal challenges. Considering the history of slavery, the oppression of women, and the treatment of those living in poverty, African American women are visible in each of these categories, having lived through multiple oppressing conditions and microaggressions. The intersection of oppressive conditions, one person being multiply burdened and marginalized under the weight of compounding or overlapping forces, is how Crenshaw (1989) defines

intersectionality. African American females, living in poverty would have experiences encompassing race, gender, and class oppression. While Morales (2014) defines microaggressions as racial stereotyping, exclusionary behaviors, and inappropriate comments endured by marginalized groups.

Kaba (2011) articulates the position of African American women and girls when he reminds us that, “On the human journey to progress in the history of the USA, Black females were forced to start hundreds of years behind all other groups and subgroups, including Native Americans who, too, enslaved them, working for them for free” (p. 122). This paradox has always been on the heels of African American women; openly admitting African American women started the American race for education and prosperity centuries behind all others yet, the expectation is that we should have caught up.

The United States educational system has not changed to meet the needs of African American females in their unique position. The educational system, mirroring societal systems of power and privilege, has not evolved to support this part of the American population. The barriers and paradoxes have remained remedied. African American females have grown up in a society that has continually attacked African American culture and identity through oppression and marginalization. Those societal systems of inequity and oppression have only been strengthened in the educational setting.

When I converse with African American females, they are struggling under the weight of intersectionality and weary from navigating inequitable systems and processing a multitude of paradoxes while battling microaggressions. Johnson (2006) in his book *Privilege, Power, and Difference* offers this, “Of all human needs, few are as powerful as the need to be seen, included, and accepted by others” (p. 55). Black girls have those same needs yet, as Rollock (2007) points

out, African American girls “occupy a less visible position in the school” (p.199). Black girls want to be valued, acknowledged, and embraced as we are, not as dominant society would have us be.

This literature review examines the barriers and paradox African American girls face and wade through as part of the education system. Results show a wide range of perspectives on which barriers are most salient for African American girls. Addressing these paradoxes and barriers are multifaceted and will take planning and sustained effort to find effective solutions. Programs that offer viable solutions will be inclusive and support African American girls until access and results to education are comparable to that of dominant culture. The best solutions will be predicated on tackling racism, sexism, and classist inequities in society. This research opened a long list of questions for the researcher to consider and left many questions unanswered. More research is needed on educational barriers and influences effecting African American girls as well as what variables helped African American girls be successful, analyzing what or who may have been a support, and understanding what kept them going when the systems is alienating and oppressive.

### **Background and Significance of the Problem**

In a recent study, Murphy, Acosta and Kennedy-Lewis (2013) discussed research on disciplinary practices used with African American girls, its effect on their education, and the status of the current system. The authors suggest that on the surface education for African American girls looks one way but when we dive deeper and critically analyze it, we find deeper reasons for its failure. Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis (2013) focus on the discipline gap, finding that African American girls are more likely to receive exclusion (in-school suspension, out of school suspension, and expulsion) as a disciplinary action than white female students. The

use of exclusionary discipline patterns deepens feelings of alienation and forces African American girls to respond with retaliation. Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis (2013) also insist that when African American female adolescents endure microaggressions during this crucial time in their life, they may develop a negative self-image. They observed that, “These girls school experience consists of repeated assaults on their cultural and gendered identities” (Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 605). Exclusionary discipline patterns intensify the microaggressions that African American girls experience in educational settings. Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis (2013) found that African American girls were often disciplined based on presumption of guilt, judgements of behaviors, and conflict with teachers and students. These researchers found exclusionary discipline practices left a disproportionate number of African American girls being sent out of the classroom, serving in school suspensions, and out of school suspensions. Consistent use of exclusionary discipline patterns in which students have limited, if any access to educational resources, creates deeper academic deficits that help perpetuate the cycle of inequity.

Another perspective comes from Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who centers her studies on the intersectionality of gender, race and class and insists that intersectionality is a significant barrier to African American female educational progress. Conceptually, it opens a space to understand that one person can be multiply burdened, experiencing multiple oppressive conditions at once. Crenshaw (1989) stresses that intersectionality encompasses the nature of race, gender, and class in a way that recognizes the overlapping of these conditions. From Crenshaw’s (1989) perspective, the experiences of poor, black girls are often lost in the dominant view that recognizes only one discriminating factor at a time. She explains,

Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides. Yet the continued insistence that black women's demands and needs be filtered through categorical analyses that completely obscure their experiences guarantees that their needs will seldom be addressed (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality does not offer a generalization of experiences, instead it offers a lens to view the experiences of people who function through multiple burdens. Crenshaw (1989) advocates for understanding of the multifaceted experiences of black girls.

Tyson (2003) points out the paradoxes African American girls face as barriers to education. In *Notes from the Back of the Room: Problems and Paradoxes in the Schooling of Young Black Students*, Tyson (2003) discusses one such paradox between education and socialization for black students. She questions whether teachers should educate black students in academics or the rules of dominant culture social conformity. As a teacher, you want to educate students with the skills needed to be successful. Knowing African American girls may need to adjust their behavior to be successful in dominant culture, teachers may need to include teaching these rules in their lessons. It's an interesting dilemma for teachers who are short on time with students, to decide which one is more important to teach. Is it more important to teach content and skill or is it more important to teach comportment and ways to navigate the social system? Delpit (1988) offers a viable solution. She acknowledges the political power game her students must eventually play and teaches the rules along with the skill and knowledge needed to navigate these games in combination with academics.

Along those same lines, Morris (2007) digs into the social pressure to conform in areas of comportment and how intersectionality creates "unique obstacles" for African American

females. Adolescence centers around social awareness; fitting in and group acceptance. The social pressure for African American girls to “fit in” is intense and permeates most of a girl’s daily functioning, creating barriers to acceptance, positive self-concept, and academic achievement. As an African American girl, trying to fit into dominant cultural standards can be disheartening, you are automatically an outsider because of race, gender, and class.

Of course, a some researchers have reported the crisis for African American girls by looking at the statistics. Research by Susan Aud, Mary Ann Fox, and Angelina KewalRamani (2010) informs us that black girls experience more retention, suspension, expulsion, and harassment than white girls. Their research reveals that in grades K-12, 15.3% of black females have been retained in a grade in comparison to the 6.1% of white females who have repeated a grade. Of the black females attending school, 34.7% have been suspended compared to the 21.3% of white females suspended and 8.2% of black females have been expelled from school while .7% of white females end up expelled. Looking at the numbers, there certainly would seem to be a problem for African American girls. This report, while important, gives us only numbers. There is no interpretation of data or suggestion for what these data may mean. While numbers don’t lie, they don’t give us a complete picture. Numbers always warrant a deeper look, examining other variables that may affect the data would give a better picture of the barriers causing these outcomes.

Research on African American girl’s education is sparse; thoughts and perspectives are varied and there is no consensus on how to tackle the problems. Of the studies used in this paper, researchers disagree on what the significant problems are, what evidence support which barriers, and they offer few suggestions to improve the experience for black girls. My research focuses on using the information gathered from varied researchers to create a more complete picture of the

barriers African American girls face in the educational system. I believe these concepts are layered for African American girls. For some girls, all the information may reflect their experience and for others very little of the information may fit them; their experiences may be vastly different. There is an extensive void in the research on the educational process of African American females. The need for further research regarding the resiliency, experience, strength, and strategies of African American females is evident. Further research is also needed in the areas of educational programs and services needed to properly support African American female students in educational achievement. This research will add to the literature on barriers experienced by African American girls, help clarify and more accurately conceptualize the space where black girls, burdened by intersectionality, learn.

### **The Paradox**

From Katz, Stern, and Fader (2005) we know African American females endure inequality daily. We earn less, have difficulty gaining employment at the same level as men, and are thus, categorically, poorer. One paradox is found in discrimination; it is illegal yet exist. The rules shift just enough depending on race, gender, and class, continuously airing on the side of dominant culture. The many shifting rules of acceptance, power, and control are a result of inequality, and are difficult to navigate. Along the same vein, another paradox is found in following the rules yet the rules are always changing. As an African American female, you contend with those shifting rules on multiple levels throughout your day, throughout your life, at home, work, or school. So, you follow the rules but get different, usually less impressive results.

Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) point out that African American females develop a strong inner strength to bear up against the microaggressions that center around intersectionality. Because of intersectionality, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) observed that African American female's sense of strength serves as protection from the challenges of

being a black female living in American society. Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) and Seaton, Sellers and Schottham (2006) assert that as these young women grow from adolescence to adulthood, many retain that sense of strength and are psychologically healthier because of it. This is a perfect example of another paradox African American females live with in American society. They live through microaggressions and marginalization but gain a sense of strength to develop as a kind of consolation prize for enduring oppressive conditions (Shorter-Godden & Washington, 1996).

In his writing about oppressed people, Friere (2000) submits that, “The dilemma of becoming authentically themselves and being torn between liberating themselves and others or letting the status quo continue in power” (p. 48). If we can apply this to black girls and intersectionality, then as black girls navigate social groups, they may be torn between loyalty to their own culture or finding a place in and adapting to dominant culture. Educators of African American females should recognize this pull between solidarity and support from other African American females and the alienation from the group if one chooses to find success within the perceptions and definitions of the dominant culture (O’Connor, 1999). During adolescence, this struggle can be exhausting, debilitating, and can have negative effects on educational performance.

Teachers who work with African American girls face an interesting paradox. Karolyn Tyson (2003) supports teachers who know and embrace the cultural aspects of their students and understand intersectionality. She celebrates teachers who want to support African American females in forming a strong group identity and acknowledges the dilemma in teaching “normative standards of behavior and deportment, such as self-restraint and silence” (p. 335). It is imperative for teachers to teach black female students the tools they need to navigate dominant



cultural standards while teaching them to be themselves, defining their own identity, and helping them to understand it may leave them on the outside of dominant culture's definition of success and beauty. African American females receive mixed messages loud and clear. Everyone tries to instill the message that you can be anything you want to be, if you just work at it. The paradox is that you can't be anything you want unless you fit into the very culture that rejects and silences you.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Ladson-Billings (2000) advocates that racial or cultural experiences across cultural and ethnic groups, should not be viewed as the same. The experiences of each cultural group are unique and should be treated as such. While the experiences of African American woman may hold some commonalities with other marginalized groups of woman, all experiences of oppression, racism, and inequity, are not the same. For African American females, additional variables affect identity. That difference happens because of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). DeCuir-Gunby, (2009) posits that African American females experience racial identity development on a completely different level. There is no one "quintessential" black experience. African Americans are a multifaceted group with layered experiences of intersectionality (Hesse-Biber, Livingston, Ramirez, Brook Barko, & Lorene Johnson, 2010). This means that every experience will affect each girl differently because of past experiences with race layered with gender and class.

Thomas and Jackson (2007) remind us that in the early 1900's on into the mid-century, education for all African Americans was focused on gaining access to educational programs and resources in addition to equality. They agree that the present day focus has shifted to issues of inequality. In support of this, Thompson-Dorsy (2013) argues that most schools continue to be

more segregated and unequal in educational standards than they were in the 1960's.

Neighborhoods with high numbers of people living in poverty also tend to be high in minority population. To see this, we only need to look to Detroit, Michigan, Baltimore, Maryland or any one of many major cities. Despite what many people may think, students usually attend schools in their neighborhoods. Per the National Women's Law Center (2014), segregated schools with high minority populations usually don't have the funding for quality academic resources, rigorous curriculum, properly credentialed teachers, and extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for African American female students. This means few extension activities for African American girls who are meeting and exceeding educational standards and few support programs for girls falling short of the standards.

Thomas & Jackson (2007) also argue that while focus has been directed at African American males, the needs of African American girls has continued to fall into the background becoming less and less visible in the current educational landscape despite being held back by the same conditions. This group of girls have dropout rates that are as alarming as those of African American boys. From the U.S. Department of Education (2015), we find in 2012-2013, the African American female dropout rate was 7.0% and African American male's dropout at 8.1%, while white girls dropped out at a rate of 3.8% and white boys dropped out at a rate of 4.8%. African American girls who have dropped out have limited access to programs and support, while girls who continue in school have a few more options and opportunity to improve their situation. While the educational system, for African American girls, does not live up to its promise of a quality education, it is still a place for learning the rules and success standards for getting along in the dominant culture.

According to Lipford-Sanders & Bradley (2005), the primary task of adolescence is to develop an identity. These authors believe adolescence forms the basis for personal goals, values, and beliefs that will endure throughout the life span. As adolescent identities form, Murphy, Acosta, and Kennedy-Lewis (2013) contend that African American females both defy and cling to the expectations of the dominant culture, that often includes positive and negative perspectives expressed by the teachers. This is a constant battle for African American females. They want to feel all the benefits and privileges of the dominant culture, want to buy in as equal partners, and as part of that buy in, they may accept the views and stereotypes held by the dominant culture. They feel like non-acceptance, by the dominant culture, is their burden to rectify. At the same time, they want to defy the dominant culture standards. They work to follow and exceed those standards, feeling as long as they can meet the standards, they fit in dominant white culture. At the same time, they adopt the dominant white culture's views and perceptions of blacks, viewing themselves negatively.

Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, and Cogburn (2008) find negative racial experiences in the school setting are more damaging to the academic achievement of African American youth than racial experiences in other settings. Adolescents of color are more vulnerable to the impact of racial discrimination on personal identity development. African American adolescents, as a racial group, report a greater amount of racial discrimination in the classroom than other racial groups. Young, African American females wade through "normal" adolescent development and issues but also work through daily experiences living in a society that devalues and dehumanizes African American women (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). These struggles cannot be left at home. DeCuir-Gunby (2009) argues further that "African American students do not leave their identity issues at the schoolhouse door. This means the

issues that were not reconciled outside of the school context will be manifested inside the school context” (p. 119). Considering this knowledge, educators need to understand that education and schooling are an intricate part of forming a positive identity (Pyant & Yanico, 1991, DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

Both Morris (2007) and Chavous and Cogburn (2007) observed that black girls are pressured by teachers to exhibit socially acceptable feminine behavior dictated and defined by the dominant culture. Female students should be quiet and obedient, behaving in a manner that is perceived to be feminine and ladylike. Morris (2007) reported that white teachers often promoted social interaction with black female students, allowing the academic focus to take a less important role. African American girls are taught and expected to take on caretaker roles instead of being encouraged to develop leadership skills (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). This may be representative of the perception of femininity and the roles in which American society has placed black women. Chavous and Cogburn (2007) insist schools in U.S. society are generally based on a patriarchal system, mirroring the societal system of gender bias. Morris (2007) concluded that race, gender, and class combined to influence classroom experiences for black females in terms of blackness and femininity, making their educational experience “complex and unique” (p. 497). Many teachers perceive Black female students as controlling, more mature, and more sophisticated than white female students, functioning outside the dominant culture stereotypes of femininity. In school, the pressure to adopt dominant cultural norms is, for some, overwhelming. bell hooks (1996) writes to explain that teachers should understand the way they measure self-esteem for white girls cannot be used to measure the self-esteem for African American girls because it was created on white dominant cultural value, creating an unattainable standard for African American girls that is detrimental to developing a positive identity.

Tyson (2003) believes the behavior of black students, who do not adopt the norms and values of dominant culture are immediately regarded as subordinate and deficient; even deviant. Solorzano (1977), Lipford-Sanders and Bradley (2005), and Tyson (2003) agree that teachers should find where students are strong, using that as a base to begin work instead of working from an assumption that African American students start out at a deficit. African American female students would be best served, Ladson-Billings (2000) advocates, by teachers who can teach using culturally relevant pedagogy, curriculum, and strategies; teachers who facilitate a student's cultural competence as well as their academic achievement thus raising academic expectations and outcomes. Ladson-Billings (2000) reiterates "Schools and teachers treat the language, prior knowledge, and values of African Americans as aberrant and often presume that the teacher's job is to rid African American students of any vestiges of their own culture" (p. 206). Essentially, teachers work to assimilate students, believing, consciously or unconsciously, that the dominant culture's way is the only way to educate. It would only strengthen education for African American girls to move away from a deficit model and utilize a strength based model of teaching, a model that values each student's cultural experience.

Cibattari (2010) posits the idea that African American female students and families often do not have the cultural or social capital to navigate the educational system's expectation of parental involvement, student engagement, and educational attainment. Cibattari (2010) contends that many of the common educational expectations and practices are based on values and beliefs of the middle class dominant culture; leaving African American students and other marginalized groups not knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. Expectations of when and how much to be involved may be unknown to students living in poverty and working class families. Cibattari (2010) reminds us that many parents or guardians work during the hours of school

conferences, class parties, project presentations, school board meetings, curriculum presentations or voting days. While some events are offered in the evening, that seldom works for families with more than one child, families taking care of other family members, or when parents are working more than one job (Cibattari, 2010). If schools value parental involvement; schedule, and time adjustments must be made to allow for more attendance in the educational process.

In 2014, 26% of African American females lived below the poverty line compared to 16.5% of all females in the US living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Kaba (2008) acknowledges that a legacy of slavery and gender discrimination has placed many African American women in poverty causing the need to utilize government assistance programs. Kaba (2008) also points out, “No subgroup has suffered severe economic, political, or social isolation more than Black American females” (p. 310). Educators who know and understand this history along with its ramifications strive to work with black female students in a manner that empowers them. Poverty is an undeniable and long standing barrier for African American females in education.

Scott-Jones and Clark (1986) emphasize how important environment is when they write “The social environment in which learning takes place can enhance or diminish behaviors that lead to achievement” (p. 523). To support that idea, Tyson (2003) and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (2015) found that in early grades, black females receive less time and attention from teachers than white female students. Teachers have lower expectations of student from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Scott-Jones & Clark (1986) report. Positive praise is given to white students who perform well but positive praise given to black students often has a qualifier, such as; “Glad to see you took my suggestions, this is a great project”. Scott-Jones and Clark (1986) believe that the “different treatment may occur because

teachers do not expect intellectual competence in black students” (p. 524). Black females receive a different treatment, being praised for gaining social competency while white females received praise for being academic minded. Creating a classroom atmosphere consisting of high expectations, quality feedback, and trust would enhance behaviors that lead to educational achievement and eliminate classroom atmosphere as a barrier.

DeCuir-Gunby (2009) recommends that teachers examine personal bias and preconceived notions, analyze how these notions may shape the educational process for African American females, and work to resolve them. Personal examination is especially important for teachers to challenge the systems of inequity. Given the history of African Americans in this country, specifically African American women, Weis and Fine (2004) insist we need teachers who discuss race and its intersectionality with gender and class while decentering privilege. Weis and Fine (2004) also advocate for educational practices that center around questioning power, perspective, and privilege. DeCuir-Gunby (2009) calls on educators to critically analyze stereotypes held about adolescent African American females and work to deconstruct those perceptions to fully support African American females in their educational pursuits.

## **DISCUSSION**

I started this research looking back at my own educational experiences in K-12 education. I began questioning my own perceptions of education as an African American female, wondering if what I believed was true. Was there a need for educational changes to better educate African American female students? Isn't the current system good enough, after all, many black girls are successful. Do African American females need different educational experiences? If so, why would we need different experiences? Researching, trying to make sense of the many

perspectives on the problem with the educational process for African American girls, I considered many of my own experiences.

Understanding the black female experience is influenced by intersectionality is an important variable in education and can mean the difference between success and failure. Ladson-Billings (2000) reminds us that African American people did not start out at the same level as white people so applying the rule of “sameness” or “one size fits all” may have an adverse effect, creating more disparities. Understanding from DeCuir-Gunby (2009), there is no one “African American experience” and knowing African American females experience race, gender and class differently, the “one size fits all” rule does not elicit the same wide spread, successful results for all. Instead of giving black students more of the current educational prescription, we need to work to restructure the learning environment to offer more opportunities to build skill and knowledge, while supporting and focusing on the unique strengths and skills African American females bring to the classroom.

If we look at this concept of offering “sameness” for black girls in the educational setting “sameness” is, of course, what dominant culture would want to offer. It is the best avenue to push black girls into behaving like and accepting the symbols, plans, and rules of dominant culture (Crotty, 1998). Then the behavior of black girls could and would be controlled. Education and how we serve it, is part of the cultural system that has existed for a very long time. Offering African American girls, the general one size fits all education ensures the continuation of the status quo. Power structures stay the same, students know their place, and knowledge is metered out to whom the system deems worthy.

It is difficult to function in the dominant culture, while holding different cultural beliefs. White, middle class male students from the dominant culture do not have to contend with such



issues of navigating two cultural systems nor do they have to navigate a system that does not value their gender. They can go about their lives not giving a second thought to power structures and inequity due to race and gender. The message they get, this system was created by people like you for people like you. The system will work for in your favor. For African American girls, it is a continuous balancing act, working to own aspects of African American culture, rejecting negative stereotypes and perceptions the dominant culture has created but also, embracing aspects of the dominant culture that one may choose or aspects that may be useful to know and understand, all the while, trying to be secure when so much of the system works against you.

My middle school and high school were very small, almost all my friends were white. There were only a small handful of black students attending my school. And by handful, I mean six. I felt like everything I did was scrutinized to see if I was like all the others. Often, I would hear comments like, “Well, you don’t talk black.” Or if someone made a derogatory comment about black people, I would get the “Oh, but not you Daphne.” I wasn’t ever sure what that meant to “talk black” but at times I felt it would gain me trust, other times I felt it made white and black people more suspicious of me. I worked to talk and appear in all aspects possible, like dominant culture and value the things they valued. I found that to be tricky, I know there were so many things that my family did and valued that my white friends didn’t know about and didn’t do. The music I listened to seemed to speak to me more deeply than what my white friends listened to and the foods we ate were different. But I was determined to feel normal but I never felt normal. There were boundary lines between children and adults, in my family, and you didn’t cross them without serious negative consequences. My white friends had no such boundaries and often treated their parents in ways I would never dream. There were lines drawn on what was acceptable to talk about and what wasn’t. At a very young age I learned where those

lines were and was vigilant about what I shared about my family with my white friends. Proof of this divide became clear when at my 25<sup>th</sup> year reunion, one of my good friends in high school remarked that they didn't really know much about how I grew up, yet I knew many things about their upbringing. This was part of the balancing act, balancing my culture with dominant white culture. I could guard and shield myself from judgements and cruel comments, at times, through self-prescribed alienation.

The thing is, as an adolescent you think these experiences happen because of you, because of something you are not doing or something you don't understand. That comes from that place of self-centeredness that all adolescents live within. When these things happen, it is because of culture, the "historical and social perspective" (Crotty, 1998, p. 54) that was already wired into us. Culture was already directing our actions and reactions. Dominant culture had already assigned value to people like me and my culture, just as my culture, had already assigned value to them. My experiences happened when those two very different cultural systems meet and it has left lasting impressions, some that are still shaping my interactions to this day.

Part of that balance is racial identity development, which can begin at any age or stage in a person's life. DeCuir-Gunby (2009) explains that racial identity development can be experienced as a cycle, revisiting the same stage from time to time, on a continuum progressing through stage after stage, or some people live life in one stage. For me, my racial identity development took a long time and has been a cycle that replays from time to time depending on the situations I am working through. As a young girl, I worked to disprove the stereotypes American culture had prescribed for poor, young black girls. I worked to prove that I was not any different, that my experiences were the same as all the other students in my class. Yet, I was struggling with very different issues than my white peers on multiple levels and thus tried

desperately to connect with them even though they had little concept of what I was experiencing. I desperately searched for some common ground, always adjusting and continually denying my racial identity to keep my place in the group. I did not understand that we are born into an established culture and that it is work to change the cultural perceptions already learned and deeply ingrained in my dominant culture friends.

So, as part of my effort to protect myself, I chose to disaffiliate with other African American students (O'Connor, 1999). I already understood that blackness meant that people treated you as if you, your ideas, and your voice meant didn't exist. I saw people of color as strong because they had endured. But I also had learned that strong identification with African American people meant more alienation, deeper rifts between me and my white friends, and more barriers between me and dominant culture. I internalized the cultural symbol of blackness; being marginalized, and devalued. I thought something was wrong with me. I struggled with navigating both groups; African American students, because I wasn't quite like them and I struggled with my white friend group because I was not like them either. In her work from 1999, O'Connor explains how students can embody multiple social identities. Some African American girls choose to disaffiliate from their cultural background and embrace dominant culture's definition of success in order to minimize the influence of race as a dominant influencing social identity. Others work very hard to insure they leave poverty behind diminishing poverty as the dominant influencing social identity. Still others, work to eliminate the effects of gender as a dominant influencing social identity. For some, the dominant social identity can vary from situation to situation. It's not that people can't navigate multiple identities but navigating multiple identities in a society that devalues them all can be exhausting.

School as a tool for assimilation is not necessarily harmful if the school setting is used to educate students about other cultures and advance knowledge and skill, without reinforcing the inequitable power structures and systems of discrimination in society. And, if the school setting is used to open students' minds to other perspectives and narratives without devaluing their own, then schools can be a tool for positive societal change. But often, school practices deliver a message of cultural or social deviance to African American students who choose to embrace the African American based culture (Tyson, 2003). bell hooks (1996) testifies to this when she writes, "She tells me that we go to school to learn the white man's ways to learn to deny parts of ourselves" (p. 52).

Negative stereotyping of African American females as loud and confrontational affects self-perception and leave lasting impressions shaping future decisions. Looking at negative stereotyping, dominant culture has taken what they feel is appropriate and tried to force African American girls to fit that framework. The system of appropriate behavior and demeanor was already there, dominant culture wants everyone to follow their cultural norms. It creates less dissonance, society runs smoother. The shame in allowing culture to dictate behavior is that it keeps black girls from expressing their thoughts, ideas, and feelings while holding them back in leadership development and educational attainment. In effort to make black female's behavior more acceptable to dominant culture, we have sacrificed the Black female voice and in doing so have undermined her power to be unique. This outspokenness and assertiveness is what aids black females in being engaged in education while developing self-efficacy. Trying to discipline this behavior out of black girls has caused them to disengage as learners (Morris, 2007). Morris (2007) describes the effect of this practice when he writes, "The discipline directed at black girls was aimed to make them more "ladylike," yet this same process appeared to discourage

behaviors that could lead to educational success” (p. 494). The outspoken and assertiveness of black woman contributes to the forward movement of African American females. They have used this persistence and independence to aid in educational achievement. When educators and policy makers work to silence the voice of African American females, they have taken away the very tools used to persist in a racialized, gendered, and classist settings. It is the African American girl’s way of standing up against devaluation as a black female (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). It is self-advocacy at its finest.

This silencing of voices often creates a hostile classroom atmosphere and leaves African American females to respond with retaliation, feeling like they must fight for themselves, trying to prove they should not be treated in such a manner, trying to be heard and respected (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). These experiences harm African American females by deepening their sense of alienation. These girls struggle to feel their opinions are valued and many feel they are not taken seriously because of intersectionality. To counteract systemic silencing, African American females need to receive a steady diet of affirmative and supportive messages to combat the barrage of microaggressions and inequities. Educators should evaluate their perceptions of African American female adolescent’s behavior. Those perceptions come out of a comparison-deficit model and may, without deep reflection, blind them to see the needs of African American female students (Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Many behaviors from African American females are an attempt to develop self-worth and resilience within a societal structure that places little value on black female students.

Educators have embraced and internalized the oppressive system that thrives in American society and education. It has not been oppressive to them and some educators have a difficult time believing it is oppressive at all. They have internalized that difference creates dissonance

and they try to suppress dissonance by maintaining the system. It is an internal, automatic response. The culture of oppression has been cultivated for hundreds of years. Many educators adhere to that culture and are comfortable in it; never questioning the rules, symbols, or even discussing cultural norms or challenging why they exist. Delpit (2003) informs us of what happens when we follow the script in education when she writes “When we strip away the focus on developing humanity of our children, we are left with programmed, mechanistic strategies, designed to achieve the programmed, mechanistic goal of raising test scores” (p. 17), which only reifies the current systems of inequity. Affluent schools do not use the same canned lessons being used in low income schools. These prescribed lessons only create students who fall in line with the status quo, keeping systems of inequity in place. Prescribed lessons and closely followed timelines leave little room for creativity or critical thinking. Teachers have little time to create a classroom culture of learning and exploration where student perceptions are challenged while nurturing the student’s humanity. Delpit (2003) argued that “Teacher proof” lessons with scripted daily instruction that does not challenge the student or the teacher are madness. Creating classrooms where the teacher is in tune with students and challenge critical thinking with “high quality, interactive and thoughtful instruction” (p. 17) should be our goal.

I’m sure I had some very well intentioned teachers in my small school. They taught school the way they were taught. All students came to school, learned from the teacher’s perspective, felt about events and information the way they were taught to feel. Conversations were not deep, different perspectives or views were not explored, and teachers gave most attention to students who already knew the information they were teaching. The system remained undisturbed, inequitable, and portrayed one view.

## CONCLUSION

All women and especially all women of color cannot be placed in the same category and cannot be compared when looking at experiences within the intersectionality of race, gender and class. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) writes “Our understanding of the commonalities of oppression cannot wash out the particularities and specifics of each experience” (p. 207). While women of color have faced similar experiences, none have carried with them the historical shame and dehumanization of slavery that African American woman have carried. African American girls continues to live with the historical effects that shape daily interactions in the educational setting.

That being said, while the American education is a system that needs changing, it is the place African American girls, currently, find the best opportunity. During those adolescent years, when interactions leave deep impressions, little assaults seem so debilitating; comments from educators and peers cut deeply and silence many black girls. Inequities in rules and expectations may leave the African American female adolescents confused and alienated, at a time when her job should be to build an identity (Sanders & Bradley, 2005 and Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). This is where support for African America girls is crucial. Black girls navigating adolescents and identity development are looking for connection with schooling and culture but inequities create barriers these girls spend energy trying to navigate.

Listening to the many perspectives on the barriers African American females face leads me to think that African American girls are all hostile, controlling dropouts who don't learn or listened to anyone, especially their teachers. But, we know that is not true. Many African American females enjoy academic success despite many barriers. We learn from Chavous and Cogburn (2007) that educational attainment for African American women has risen steadily

since the 1970's. Kaba (2008) reports evidence of new data confirming the growth and gains made by African American women in education, politics, and the economy. But, African American girls are still at risk; at risk for suspension and expulsion (Murphy, Acosta, and Kennedy-Lewis, 2013), experiencing inequality (Thomas and Jackson, 2010), having negative racial experiences (Chavous et al., 2008) and at risk to be pressured to behave in more “ladylike” ways (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007). They are at risk for having their behavior scrutinized (Tyson, 2003), being ignored (Scott-Jones and Clark, 1986), living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), and at risk for grade retention, suspension, and expulsion (Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani, 2010).

So, which barrier do we focus on? Few of the researchers agree on the problem or even a productive way to analyze the different opinions on which problem is most pertinent. Teacher preparation must include learning and analysis of teacher perspectives and perceptions of African American girls, their behavior, culture, and abilities. In direct connection to teacher preparation, the classroom environment can facilitate learning or be a barrier, utilizing inequitable policies that feed feelings of alienation and marginalization. African American girls need more access to resources and opportunities in all settings. They need financial resources, teachers who challenge privilege, have higher expectations, and equitable educational policies. And without doubt, we need a permanent solution to issues of racism, poverty, and the gender discrimination. All the perspectives, on the barriers African American females face, are rooted in the inequitable practices in American society.

So, how do we get there, how do we even begin? This research has left me with more questions than answers. American society says education is important but doesn't fund it as if it's important. How do we sustainably and completely fund education? The current system seems so



broken, is it worth fixing? How do you find consensus on which problem to address first? How do you completely overhaul the current system with its power structures, inequities, and problems centered around race, gender, and class? How do we build and sustain a system meant for equality in a society that allows such inequities? Knowing that African American females are at risk for so many issues, how does the current educational system find support for them while trying to rebuild, revamp, reinvent itself?

Some researchers implore schools to provide support programs that facilitate cooperation inside and outside of African American girl groups. Schools must invest in conflict resolution programs and training instead of activating no tolerance policies that leave African American girls suspended, expelled, and at times facing juvenile detention charges. These programs should provide girls who have conflict or who have experienced trauma with emotional and social support to guide them in building coping and conflict resolution skills (National Women's Law Center, 2014). African American girls need support to navigate intersectionality, societal pressures, and social dynamics.

Accordingly, legislatures and taxpayers should completely and equitably fund education. According to the National Women's Law Center (2014), funding should be fairly distributed; ensuring that African American girls have needed resources that include access to high quality curriculum presented by teachers who are properly credentialed. I echo The National Women's Law Center (2014) emphasis on the importance of ending the racial and gender gap by utilizing state, local, and federal funding equitably. Equitable funding is a good start in making black girls feel important and valued. It's fair to expect equitable funding, it is the right thing to do and it shows confidence and belief in the capabilities of African American girls. In addition, schools servicing African American girls should receive additional funding to ensure that this group

receives equal opportunities that ensure equal results. The additional funding should use to secure the program's success at supporting black girls.

African American girls need mentor programs that span the calendar year, not only during the school year. I believe a 4 to 6-week summer bridge program, structured with African American girls in mind, would be a place where girls can find support and success. This bridge program would connect girls with educational and career classes and also internships, where girls could choose what they would like to pursue along with classes in leadership and conflict resolution. Included would be time and space for African American girls can find common ground, share frustrations with barriers, and work through solutions together. This summer program would then be coupled with internships where African American girls can job shadow and gain experiences in the careers they don't regularly have access to explore. Programs outside of school day and year will help cut down on the feelings of separation that may come along with attending such programs during the normal school day. African American girls need smaller class sizes in smaller neighborhood schools to help facilitate a feeling of connectedness and inclusion. These girls are part of a community and they will need the whole community to lean on for support in being successful. Smaller classes will allow for more time and attention from the teacher, more discussion, and academic exploration.

American society has left many accomplishments, beliefs, and values of African Americans in this country out of its curriculum. A big step in the right direction would be to rewrite school curriculum to include the contributions, accomplishments, and culture of African Americans. This is more than "using either an additive or infusion approach" (Banks, 2006, p. 207), which allows current power structures, assumptions, and values to remain undisputed and viewed as the standard. When we embrace a "transformative curriculum" paradigm detailed by

Banks (2006), curriculum is selected using non-dominant cultural perspectives and values, selecting information to be learned without using white, dominant, male perspective to decide what should be valued and therefore included. This puts curriculum in a completely new perspective making it culturally relevant for African American females, allowing them to learn everything through eyes of non-dominant cultural perspectives.

Lastly, African American females deserve to be respected because of our existence, continued strength, and humanity. We deserve to live day to day without fear of comments or questions, assaults or aggressions to our race, gender or class. We deserve an educational system that does the very best to educate us, offering equal access and ensuring equal results, using curriculum that is transformative, and working with us as equal partners. African American girls learn and have fought to learn, under unfathomable circumstances for hundreds of years, it's not the learning or the desire to learn, it's the barriers of living in a society that does not value black or brown people and therefore devalues their experiences. Until we tackle the systems of inequality: face the racism, deal with the issues of poverty, and dismantle the patriarchal system in American society, I don't feel any recommendations I make will be able to take hold. If politicians are allowed to continue making educational policy when they have no background in education, specifically public education, or working with poor, black females, and no vested interest in equality then any recommendations I have made will fall on deaf ears.

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