A Group of Our Own: Strategies to Support the Black Female Student in the Private School Setting

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The schooling experience of Black girls in private schools is complex and nuanced. To explain this unique experience, a composite narrative was written by the first researcher based on the lived experiences of 12 Black female graduates of private schools. The composite narrative design entailed conducting semi-structured interviews. The criterion-based sample gathered using the snowball method included 12 participants who identified as Black female graduates of prekindergarten through grade 12 education (P-12) private schools in the United States. The literature suggests that Black female students need specific support in the school community, a critically conscious school culture, a strong school–home connection, a diverse faculty, and a culturally responsive curriculum that reinforces their identity to ensure a positive learning experience. Through exploration of the racialized schooling experience Black female students have in the classroom, the first author identified what racial cognitive dissonance, resilience, and resistance look like in these students. In consideration of participants' academic experiences, the researcher explored what role a sense of belonging, support systems, and institutional connections had in their schooling experience. Private schools can use these findings as guidance not only to recruit students, but also to determine what they need to do to retain students and ensure their alumni return as future parents or donors. Finally, private schools that work to create a critically conscious school culture can craft positive learning experiences that produce confident students who feel seen in their school community.

Keywords: Black girls, school administration, belonging, racialized spaces, affinity groups

Introduction

Moments in our lives create a tapestry of stories that then become the life we live in this world. It is these lived experiences that formulate the stories, giving meaning to what we define as our life. It is the intimate study of life that finds the knowledge gained and shared to help make sense of situations that others may not be able to understand (Wertz, Nosek, McNiesh, & Marlow, 2011). Specifically, the stories of marginalized people are so unique that they are called counter stories, because they exist as type of counter reality (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2007; Patton & Catching, 2009). Narrative inquiry is the qualitative research vehicle that allows these stories to be told. By presenting the data as a story line, the researcher challenges the reader to examine the schooling experience of a fictional Black female student in a U.S. private school.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Black female graduates of prekindergarten through grade 12 education (P-12) private schools in the United States and to understand the nature and essence of their schooling experiences. In this study, the detailed descriptions and experiences of 12 Black female graduates of P-12 private schools underwent exploration to discover the factors Black graduates perceive as contributing to their success. In other words, the aim of this research was to understand what happens to Black female students in private schools and what, if any, impact, either positive or negative, their private schooling experience has had on them. This topic is personal to the researcher, as the first Black teacher at a single-gender private school in the U.S. Southeast. In addition, as the mother of a daughter whose education has been solely at a single-gender private school in the Southeast, the researcher found it important to understand how to help her daughter and her peers avoid some of the pitfalls their predecessors had encountered. The intent was to understand what happens to Black female students in private schools and the nature and the essence of their schooling experiences. Through exploration of this schooling experience and the racialized experiences Black female students have in the classroom, the author identified what racial cognitive dissonance, resilience, and resistance looked like in these students. In consideration of participants' academic experiences, the researcher explored what role a sense of belonging, support systems, and institutional connections had in their schooling experience.

Literature Review

Racialized Experiences and Racial Cognitive Dissonance

Racial cognitive dissonance serves as a protective function by which an individual rewrites the negative racial experience in a less anxiety-provoking way (Hall & Stevenson, 2007). When Black students are the minority in a school setting or in a tokenized role, dissonance becomes a key issue (Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula, 2016; Watson, 2014). Students schooled in environments where there are no racially and critically conscious Black faces other than those of the custodial staff often feel a sense of self-hatred and isolation, which can be very damaging for Black students and may cause them to reshape their racialized experiences, something referred to as racial cognitive dissonance (Butler-Barnes, Martin, Hope, Copeland-Linder, & Scott, 2018; Horvat & Antonio, 1999).

One of the primary reasons students rewrite their racialized experiences is that they think it is necessary to stay within the system to achieve success (Hall & Stevenson, 2007). The benefit to Black girls who decide to minimize their racial identity is temporary, but the psychological impact is long-term (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2015). The dissolution of self, or struggle with racialized experiences, allows Black girls to return to the classroom after harmful experiences by convincing themselves they have support (Fordham, 1991; Hall & Stevenson, 2007). In a private school community, the impact to the female student who engages in racial cognitive dissonance is an increase in stress and vulnerability (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). The cloak of invisibility forces Black girls to adjust, cope, and adapt to a presumed inferior status instead of exercising freedom within in the classroom (Haynes, Stewart, & Allen, 2016; Hooks, 2014). Black girls' experiences of feeling invisible in the

classroom minimizes them, which further supports the need for the school to understand how these students manage to survive in the classroom (Haynes et al., 2016; Hooks, 2014; Lorde, 1977).

Resistance and Resilience

The classroom experience for Black girls has a resistance factor rooted in "twoness," defined by DuBois (1903) as the space where Black people exist between their race and nationality and the belief that resistance is an expectation of their culture (Brodwin, 1972; DuBois, 1903; Quashie, 2012). Most research into the Black female student experience pertains to resilience and school spaces marked by racism and discrimination (Neal-Jackson, 2018). Resilience is the ability to successfully adapt despite adversity (Chesmore, Winston, & Brady, 2016). Specifically, Black female students struggle with the intersectionality of race, gender, and citizenship. Students who engage in acts of resistance within the school setting are grappling with the feeling of having neither support nor visibility in the school community (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). When students resist, it can look like a strong sense of self-determination demonstrated by a refusal to accept majority definitions of their race or to conform to majority norms (Quashie, 2012). Resistance does not have to be outwardly protesting or organized (el-Khoury, 2012); it can appear in the day-to-day activities of students who work to resist racial stereotypes in the classroom and on the field (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Morris, 2007; Quashie, 2012). The challenging schooling environment is psychologically damaging for Black girls; thus, their ability to persevere attests to their resilience and tenacity (Paul, 2003).

Black girls become resilient when connected to community and culturally relevant organizations, such as religious institutions or after-school programs (Evans-Winters, 2014). A supportive network that reflects them in spaces where they are the minority is necessary and instrumental to Black girls' emotional well-being and academic success (Clauss-Ehlers & Parham, 2014; Evans-Winters, 2014).

Lack of Institutional Connectedness

When Black girls attend a private school, they are seeking not only a rigorous academic experience that will have a long-term impact on their lives, but also an opportunity to develop soft skills in a supportive environment (Reilly, 2018). Success includes not only academic skills, but also soft skills such as personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). The connection between the student and the school is significant and has a profound impact on the student's success. When the school culture is rife with racialized experiences, Black female students lose connection to the school. The ability to connect with the school culture is difficult for groups that exist on the margin, such as Black female students, because they are unsure how to fully engage in the face of often negative stereotypes of their ethnic group (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Social belonging is a psychological control positively impacted by the use of targeted interventions, framing social adversity as common and transient (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Lack of Belonging and Support Systems

Black girls arrive on campus with their gender and race visible for all to see. They often find themselves in classrooms that do not fully support their personal or academic journeys, with the absence of curriculum and academic experiences that support their gender and race (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Nunn, 2018). These students may be proud to be

a part of the Black community, but on campus they may be uncomfortable or distanced from the school community (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Tatum, 2017). When private schools do not hire Black professionals to work in their school communities, they decrease the sense of belonging Black female students need to thrive in an academic setting. A Black female student feels as if she belongs when she feels personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment (Allen et al., 2018).

Without a sense of belonging to the school, a student's social isolation, loneliness, academic motivation, intellectual achievements, and health are affected (Boston & Warren, 2017; Fordham, 1991; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Students whose race is central to their self-concept feel more connected to school because this centrality acts as a buffer to negative racial stigma (Boston & Warren, 2017; Seaton & Carter, 2018). Students who demonstrate high levels of belonging usually report increases in academic achievement, positive student–teacher interactions, and positive personal and peer relationships (Alexander-Snow, 2011; Allen et al., 2018; Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Black girls in White spaces must be who they are completely, without outward expectations to change or hide portions of their identity; as such, schools need to learn how to move through opposition and discomfort to support and empower their Black female students (Haynes et al., 2016).

Methodology

The composite narrative inquiry provides a thick, ethical description in relation to contexts, narratives, examples, and communities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Van Manen, 1990). The narrative approach enabled a fundamental analysis of the common experiences of Black female P-12 private school graduates, as crafted from significant themes that surfaced in individual interviews. Through an understanding of the happenings (both subjective and objective) in these participants' worlds, it was possible to examine their personal experiences and well as their interactions with others (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002; Padilla-Díaz, 2015).

The interconnected themes that emerged helped to develop the detailed story line that serves as the foundation for the narrative story. The interviews provided the substance for the collaborative narrative that is richer and more condensed than scattered stories of single interviews. The experiences of Black female graduates, retold through this coherent narrative constructed from the 12 interviews, comprise the narrative. The culmination of the "restorying," through the construction of a composite narrative, allows for a transformative and reflective look at Black girls' experiences in P-12 private schools in the United States. The development of a narrative that embraced the totality of the participants' experiences allowed for a deeper understanding, as well as a foundation upon which to build a platform for discussions of what can otherwise be challenging and sensitive topics. Through the stories of many, individuals may understand the complete schooling experience with all the nuances of a great story: characters, setting, problem, actions, and resolution (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

The composite narrative, which emerged from the themes gathered in interviews, helped explain the nuanced group experience of Black female graduates of private schools. The development of a main narrative allowed for an in-depth review of experiences. The researcher took this rich in-depth review and restoried it into a narrative chronology to provide the meaning of experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Through an interactive

approach (looking at inward and outward conditions) and a continuous approach (looking at past, present, and future experiences) came the establishment of a specific sequence of situations (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). By focusing on the stories of the participants and finding common themes, the researcher was able to create a general knowledge to support the composite narrative (Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Broadening, one stage of the narrative analysis helps to explain the sociopolitical, physical, and structural contexts so that the reader can understand the "small picture" (Garvis, 2015). The intention with a narrative inquiry is to present the shared stories in a way that offers a natural conversation flow rich with authentic details in an easily followed manner (Nardi, 2016). The search for new themes and patterns describing the type of shared schooling experience through this narrative was vital to identify the best private school culture for Black female students.

The population for this study was Black female graduates of P-12 private schools in the United States (see Table 1). The researcher utilized criterion and snowball sampling via social media and professional groups for this study. The criterion method was ideal due to the specific racial and gender makeup of the sample population. Upon establishing a group of qualified participants via social media, the researcher used that group to snowball into a larger pool of qualified participants. This type of sampling method is an efficient and expeditious way to grow the number of participants. All 12 participants met the criteria of being Black, female, and a graduate of a P-12 private school.

The interviews for the study occurred in August and September 2019 via video teleconferencing or in person. The interviews took place in locations that provided fewer opportunities for disturbances and protected the confidentiality of all participants. One person participated in a face-to-face interview, with the remaining 11 women opting for video conferencing due to time constraints and interviewee convenience.

Table 1
Study Participants

Name	Region of school	Participant number	Decade	School
Sojourner	Midwest	100	1980s	Lincoln Academy
Oprah	Midwest	101	1970s	William Harrison School
Serena	Northeast	102	1990s	Andrew Jackson Academy
Dorothy	Southeast	103	1990s	Franklin Pierce School
Johnetta	South	104	1990s	Grover Cleveland Episcopal School
Rosa	Northeast	105	2000s	Herbert Hoover Academy
Toni	Northwest	106	1980s	John Quincy Adams
Mary	West	107	1980s	Jefferson School
Coretta	East	108	1980s	Grant School
Harriet	Midwest	109	1980s	Ford University School
Ida	South	110	1990s	Bush Prep
Shirley	Southeast	111	2000s	St. Nixon

Note. This table represents the 12 participants within the study. Their names and schools are pseudonyms to protect privacy. The regions are displayed to show a nonlocal selection of participants. The years are displayed to provide context to the decades of schooling experiences.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a list of 30 open-ended questions to use for each semi-structured interview. These 30 questions contributed to an understanding of the power dynamics between peers, teachers, coaches, and parents. As this was a phenomenological and narrative inquiry qualitative study, it was important to establish transparency to ensure reliability and validity of the interview protocol (Hays & Singh, 2011). An interrater reliability analysis was used to assess consistency among the peer review team for each of the interview questions (Cargo et al., 2015; Lange, 2017).

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data through a narrative inquiry. This analysis provided a more specific composite approach to understand the lived experiences of Black female graduates of private schools. The narrative inquiry enabled an in-depth look at the themes and subthemes that surfaced from the interviews. Using this method to analyze the data provided a richer, deeper, and more contextualized understanding of the schooling experiences of Black female graduates of P-12 private schools.

First, the researcher read all of the transcripts and made notes about first impressions. The researcher also began the coding process, which entailed indexing repeated words, phrases, and experiences into 452 cards. The researcher sorted the cards into 36 categories and then organized them into nine elements, subsequently clustering the elements into six meaning units and three themes. Through this explication process, the essential features and relationships of the lived experiences of Black female graduates of P-12 private schools emerged.

The three themes that emerged from the initial data collection were consistent and comparable within the participants' responses in the study. All of the women had consistently experienced the situations in the themes. This alignment was another reason for the effectiveness of writing the data as a counter story that could highlight these common themes. The three themes were: (a) positive learning experience, (b) confident student, and (c) visible Black girl. The six meaning units were (1) racialized experiences, (2) racial cognitive dissonance, (3) resilience, (4) resistance, (5) lack of a sense of institutional connectedness, and (6) lack of a sense of belonging/support system, which all reflected a consistent and comparable perspective held by the participants (see Table 2). The results from this study presented evidence of the unique schooling experience Black female students have while attending private schools in the United States.

Table 2
Themes, Meaning Units, and Elements

Themes	Meaning units	Elements
Positive learning experiences	• Racialized experiences • Radical cognitive dissonance	• Trauma • Wealth/class • Racialized spaces • Alienation • Isolation
Confident student	• Lack of institutional connectedness • Lack of sense of belonging/ support system	• Parents • Socialization
Visible Black girl	• Resilience • Resistance	• Future coping • Surviving

Note. This table depicts how the elements from significant statements connect to meaning units and then, ultimately, themes within the study.

Analysis

All participants expressed feelings of joy and excitement upon acceptance to the private school, and initially most felt welcome. None of the participants felt the school curriculum reflected their personal story. Most women reported greater diversity within the student body and little to no diversity within faculty. Some participants were engaged with peers on the weekends through classwork or sports, but most reported not interacting with their peers after the school day. All participants expressed frustrations and challenges with managing their school and home lives. The majority of participants felt that, at some point, they had experienced racism in the private school setting, which typically occurred either during the school day, with peers, or through exclusion from after-school or weekend activities. The racialized experiences highlighted were overt and more systemic in nature. Overall, the participants stated they would return to their private school, but they were evenly divided about sending their children to their alma mater. Some participants had wanted to transfer to other schools due to social isolation and feeling alone and disconnected from the school; most, however, felt the schooling experience was worth the sacrifice of a social life, friendships, and sense of belonging. All participants spoke to the macroeconomic impact private school had on their lives as evidenced by their access to people with wealth, the connection to a prestigious school, exposure to an exemplar education, access to resources, and unique experiences that aided in their educational development.

The counter story that emerged is the schooling experience of a young Black female student enrolled at Fitzpatrick Day School, a private school in an exclusive community called Ardelia Holmes Bay. The voice of Phoebe Norris expresses the shared narratives and reflections of the 12 study participants. The embellished retelling weaves a story to provide a deeper understanding of the shared experiences of all participants (Hairston, 2010).

Composite Counter Story

As Phoebe, a junior, waited to talk to the small group of Black students at her private school, she remembered how she had felt on her first day. Phoebe thought about how excited she had been because she was finally going to start middle school at the exclusive Fitzpatrick

Day School, located in Ardelia Holmes Bay, an exclusive area of a large, metropolitan city. She recalled how her previous visits to the school in the spring had left her with a comfortable feeling. Mr. Handy, the social studies teacher, was very nice to her when she spent time in his class, so she couldn't wait to see him. She remembered lugging her lacrosse bag, backpack, and lunch beside her on the bus on the first day. She had to ask her cousin, James, "Will you help me get all this stuff across the parking lot to my locker?" James assured her he would. She smiled as she remembered telling him, "James, I am so glad you are starting school with me today."

James smiled back at her and glanced around the bus, saying, "Me too. I don't see anyone else I know on the bus."

Phoebe recalled the nervous stomach flips she felt when her mom told her, "You may see some friends from your magnet school, but who knows, they may have chosen a different private school." Phoebe remembered how proud her mom was when Dr. Robinson, her principal, invited her to a special meeting of the best and brightest students with representatives from Fitzpatrick.

Phoebe chuckled to herself as she remembered how her mom always told her to put reminders in her phone, something she even did this morning. She had put a reminder in her phone to ask about special scholarships to cover the cost of the upcoming fall break trip. Phoebe complained at the time to her mother, in true middle school fashion, "I don't know why they would provide more scholarship money for me!"

Her mom laughed with her while saying, "Well, they must not understand that we don't have a trust fund or grandparents to pay your tuition."

Smiling to herself, Phoebe blinked and looked out the window. She sighed, as she thought about how often the school found resources to help her attend camps and other special trips. She wondered if Mr. Handy would be on campus after school today so she could tell him about her plan to attend Spelman College and how she would need a help finding scholarships.

As Phoebe watched the girls file into the room, chattering, she thought about the long, 40-minute bus ride she took every day to the beautiful campus, with its lush landscaping and beautiful old buildings, which had been supported by loyal alumni since its founding in 1865. She recalled how her bus driver, Mr. Leary, would announce each day, "We are here. Be careful getting off the bus and look around your seat so you don't forget anything." Phoebe thought back to how she always smiled at Mr. Leary; he was really nice and she was happy he let them off close to the entrance.

As she looked through the window onto the parking lot, she recalled how, as a middle schooler, how ill-prepared she had been to see the expensive cars, purses, and other items she noticed on campus. "Thank you, Mr. Leary," Phoebe had said with a smile, which is what her mom told her to always do whenever she saw Black people at school or at a friend's house. Even now as a high schooler, Phoebe remembered how she observed that *everyone here looks the same*.

She thought about one incident when she was in the eighth grade. She saw a girl she had played lacrosse with all summer and waved to her with a big smile. "Hi, Edna Ruth!" called Phoebe. "Can't wait to hear about lacrosse camp." Phoebe remembered feeling a wave of relief when she saw the familiar face. Sadly, she also recalled that Edna Ruth glanced at her with a tight smile and muttered, "It was okay. See you at practice, okay?" Phoebe

remembered wondering why Edna Ruth was acting so cool, because they had just hung out at her house a few weeks ago. Phoebe had heard that Edna Ruth's parents were recently divorced and that Edna Ruth was sad; that must be it.

As Phoebe looked around the room, she wondered how the beginning of the school year was going for this group of middle school girls. That is why she wanted to have an affinity group meeting. She remembered feeling alone at the beginning of the year, when having support would have been nice. This affinity group had been a long time coming, but it was a goal of hers, as a high schooler, to have it in place before she left Fitzpatrick next year.

Phoebe daydreamed for a minute more before the session started. She reflected how it felt good to be a part of this day, because when she had started at Fitzpatrick, there were no opportunities to speak with other Black female students. She and James were the first of their race to attend Fitzpatrick. Phoebe recalled those first few days of getting to know her class schedule and meeting new friends as being stressful and nerve-racking. She was pleasantly surprised that lunch was a family-style system with six students from Grades 6 to 8 with a teacher present to moderate the discussion. She mused to Mr. Handy, her table's facilitator, "I am happy we have assigned seats. At my last school, I spent a lot of time trying to find a spot to sit and it was not always easy." She remembered how Mr. Handy smiled at her and how comfortable that had made her feel at lunch.

As she looked around the room she noticed there were only six Black girls present. There weren't many other Black students when Phoebe and James started at Fitzpatrick. Back on her first day of middle school, on the bus ride home, James commented, "I didn't see any Black teachers; did you?"

Phoebe responded, "No, just Mrs. Akers in the kitchen."

James agreed, "Yes, she was really nice to me in the lunch line. She gave me an extra piece of pizza."

Phoebe laughed softly, because Mrs. Akers had done the same for her. Phoebe recalled that she and her cousin had looked at each other oddly, because this all-White school was an unusual experience for them, having just left a school where they had all Black teachers. Phoebe recollected that she and James had told their parents, "The bright spot of those early long days was the smile of Mrs. Akers." Truth be told, Mrs. Akers was still the bright spot of her day.

Phoebe welcomed the girls to the first Black student affinity group of the year. She asked them how their year was going. The girls all talked about their excitement and their heavy course loads. Phoebe probed a bit more and asked how things were going in the classroom. She started, "As I remember, in Mrs. Strowbridge's class, my classmates could just hop up and move about the classroom, but whenever I did that, I was reprimanded. Does that happen to anyone?" A few girls nodded their heads, but most seemed afraid to talk. Phoebe continued, "I remember one day I went home and told my mom, 'Mrs. Benjamin told me that I had to stay after class today after I spoke up in class. She told me that I was getting too big for my britches and that I needed to check myself.' My mom rolled her eyes and glanced up from the dinner she was preparing. My mom was not happy, even though it was handled. I did not want my mom to come up to the school with an attitude and make a scene. At this point, Phoebe laughed and shared that her mom had promised to come to school if she needed to. "I don't know about you all," Phoebe continued, "but I quickly decided not to share anything else with my mom. I decided it was best to just get through my work and try

to stay on the honor roll, which meant that English class became less interesting for me over the year. Anyone else choose not to involve your parents?"

Katherine and Tracy both raised their hands.

"Yeah." Tracy said, "Girl, my momma would get loud up here if she knew some of the subtle stuff we have to put up with from these girls."

Karen exclaimed, "If one more girl touches my hair…"

All the girls laughed and started to chatter. Phoebe was happy that the session started off with a bang. She broke into their chatter to remind them that it was a safe space and that what they shared was confidential.

One of the students, Olivia, said that she was frustrated with her science teacher, who was trying to explain homogeneity. She recalled that the teacher said, "Like this classroom, everybody's blonde, blue-eyed, upper middle class, going to a great school, will marry someone wonderful, blah, blah, blah." The girls looked at each other, shaking their heads. Olivia said, "Even my classmates gasped, so I raised my hand and said, 'Excuse me. Okay, what is happening here? Can you guys see me?'" Olivia said the class laughed and the teacher turned red. She continued, "'That's not the definition of homogeneity; I think you are talking about heterogeneity.' I shared examples of hair color differences and eye color differences and then we had a good discussion, but I still felt invisible." Olivia wondered out loud, "How could my teacher miss me, the only Black female in class, when discussing homogeneity?"

Phoebe shook her head and said, "Yes, things like this happen. I remember when a teacher dressed up like Huckleberry Finn all the way down to the overalls, dirt on his shirt, and bare feet. He then proceeded to read the n-word. But I did not feel like I had the power to do or say anything as the only Black girl in the class. Good for you that you did."

The group of girls continued to share their stories about classroom incidents for a few more minutes. One student, Katherine, fumed, "My teacher is so frustrating. Instead of bringing up the wonderful aspects of Black history, she only asks trivia questions about rappers and athletes."

Karen agreed. "Why is Black history the only time we talk about Black people, and it is always about slavery and Martin Luther King, Jr.? Don't they know we are more than that?"

Shirley added, "I just feel awkward whenever we talk about Black history or slavery. I feel like all my peers are staring at me. So, I always hate when we get to those units." Tamar agreed.

"I don't want to be the spokesperson for all Black people," Phoebe told the girls, "but, it used to be worse than this. Once our Martin Luther King, Jr. speaker was a woman who spoke on the need to be pro-choice. It does look like we are making some progress on campus; maybe our new diversity and inclusion director, Mrs. Earl, can help?"

Olivia raised her hand and said, "Well, I am going to ask Mrs. Earl to speak to these teachers. Does anyone else get confused for other students? I get so annoyed that I am confused with this chick Melanie Davis; we look nothing alike!"

Phoebe empathized, "Yes, I am often mistaken for other girls, which is confusing to me, too, since we don't look alike and there are only three Black girls in my grade. I mean, we don't look alike at all!" Phoebe decided to start a list of some of the girls' comments so that Mrs. Earl would be aware of their concerns.

The girls began to eat the pizza and snacks provided. A few moments later, Phoebe asked if anyone else would like to contribute. Tracy raised her hand to share how her older sister and another student had been named National Achievement Scholars a few years ago, but the school ignored the accomplishment. Tracy said, "My sister and Jonathan made a huge fuss about it. They wrote the head of school, too. The school ended up giving them a separate ceremony. They handled it by themselves, too. They never told their parents."

Phoebe thought of the number of times she had not contacted her mom but wished she had. Phoebe told the girls, "You know, I did not involve my parents because I did not want to worry them. After a while, they just stayed away from school. I would really encourage you all to reach out to your parents and ask them to get involved with the parent groups and meet the administrators."

The girls nodded. Olivia pointed out, "They send so many postcards and things to our home and my mom doesn't read them."

Tracy added, "Yeah, my parents laugh at the requests for donations because we can barely pay tuition."

Shirley raised her hand. "Hey, is anyone going on that fall break trip?"

The girls all shook their heads no.

Karen piped in, "Why do they think we can afford to do that stuff when we can barely keep up with tuition and the latest hydroflask?"

Phoebe laughed and proposed, "Maybe you all should apply to the 'special fund' for students who can't afford to go on the trips."

With wide eyes, the girls all looked at each other, confused, and Phoebe realized they were not aware of the fund. She reflected on how she had learned about it; Mr. Handy had pulled her aside a year or two ago and told her about the fund. Phoebe shared, "Mr. Handy told me there is a fund for students who can't afford to take the special trips. It allows students to have the full experience at Fitzpatrick. You have to have pretty good grades and no discipline issues, but other than that, there are no other requirements. I do remember that Mr. Handy said that the school appreciated my parents donating to the school annual fund and that is how my name popped up for the special fund."

Katherine interrupted her. "So, wait…your parents can afford to donate to the annual fund?"

Phoebe laughed and replied, "Girl, no. My parents just give $25 each year, but the school sees that as supportive of the school. My parents think that the school is giving me a great education, so even though they can't give a lot, they like to support the school."

Katherine, who wanted to go on the trip, sent her mom a quick text to donate online to the annual fund. When Katherine's mom asked her why, she texted back, "Because the school sees the students of parents who donate in a good way." Katherine gave a silent cheer when her mom agreed to donate. She made a mental note to go see Mr. Handy.

Phoebe reminded them that Mr. Handy was a great resource, along with Mrs. Earl. Tamar asked which teachers the other girls saw as supportive. The girls shared a few names, but most were not teachers; the people they listed were Mr. Leary, Mrs. Akers, Mrs. Earl, and Mr. Handy. Shirley mentioned the school secretary, Mrs. Miller, a Black woman who had worked at Fitzpatrick for many years. Phoebe laughed and said, "You all don't have any teachers to list besides Mr. Handy?"

The girls all looked thoughtful. Karen shared a story of how she felt unsupported by her teacher, Mrs. Pete. "For some reason, everyone had just learned the word *ghetto*, so then someone called me ghetto. I don't remember how I responded, but I remember going home and googling the word ghetto. I went back to school and told them, 'I'm not ghetto; I googled it. This is what ghetto means and I am not ghetto.' The teacher overheard the conversation and said, 'There are multiple meanings of ghetto.'" Karen lamented that the teacher did not defend her.

Phoebe looked at Karen and said, "You are most definitely not ghetto."

Karen replied, "I know. That is what was so frustrating. They didn't seem to understand that I was not ghetto."

Phoebe murmured, "I'm sorry."

Karen replied, "Girl, I got over it. I know I'm not ghetto, but I wish my teacher had stood up for me."

Phoebe asked, "Did any of your friends stand up for you?"

Karen replied, "Nope."

The other girls nodded in agreement. Tracy added, "Girl, you know we are not their *real* friend." There was a murmur of agreement. Phoebe wanted to understand more, so she asked them about their social lives at school. There was a universal sigh and eye roll.

"I'll start," said Olivia, waving her hand in the air. She proceeded to share her dating woes. "You know, everyone wants to feel beautiful, look beautiful. There were just no romantic interests. So, it kind of knocked my self-esteem down a couple of pegs, but I have some really great girlfriends."

Phoebe agreed, "I haven't dated much either in school. My pickings are nonexistent, so every school dance I go to, I never have boys to dance with. My other friends dance and meet boys, but I don't even have someone to go to prom with; there are rites-of-passage experiences I have not had."

Shirley shared, "Well, it was weird. In this one cotillion class where we were supposed to dance with boys, I never did and the instructor never pushed the boys to dance with me, either. It was awful."

Phoebe told Shirley, "I'm sorry that happened. I know it must have been painful."

She switched topics. "Have you all had better luck now that Chicago University School is working on their diversity?" Some of the girls nodded. Phoebe explained that this was why she wanted to have the affinity group. She wanted the girls to know they were not alone and that they had a support network.

Katherine asserted, "I am happy to be here today because it has been hard to fit into this school culture, especially since so many activities are around parents! Like the Daddy–Daughter Dance that is coming up. My dad does not live with me, and he is not involved and hasn't been for years, but that doesn't stop them from asking me where he is and asking if he is coming to stuff. Good grief!" She reflected, "One time in fourth grade, everyone's father was picking them up on this one day. I said that my father was going to pick me up. There was one problem, though: I had not talked to anyone about this at home. I literally sat at school until 7 p.m., waiting for my father to pick me up. I don't know why I did that. I wanted to feel like everyone else whose father came and picked them up from school." She had gotten in trouble at home for doing that because no one knew, and the sad thing is that no one at home ever asked her why she did it.

Olivia told her, "Girl, I understand. My mom works all the time and can't come to the events, but when she helps out with the annual garage sale, she is appalled at the conversations. Once I caught her looking at the other moms and rolling her eyes. I wonder if she thinks I am like these people? I am not!"

Phoebe understood exactly what Olivia was saying. A few years ago, her uncle reminded her, "Don't push your hair back like that; you are not White." Phoebe asked if anyone else had been accused of acting White. The girls all nodded their heads. Phoebe said, "Yeah, my family is really clear on telling me when I code-switch. I don't even know I am doing it."

"Yes!" said Tamar. "That is exhausting, having to go between both school and home. Sometimes I just forget and listen to my White music at home because it is what I want to do." Tamar elaborated, "I just felt consistently left out. And it almost made me feel like I wasn't doing…I felt like, maybe I'm not doing enough to be a part of these groups." The girls nodded in agreement, and then there was a lull in the conversation.

"Well, this seems like a good place to stop," said Phoebe. She looked around at the small group of girls and said, "Did you all hear what Tamar said? She felt like she was not doing enough to be a part of the groups. Well, let me tell you, not only are you doing enough, you are doing the most, and guess what? *You are enough*. Please do not feel like you have to change who you are to be a part of this school. We have to demand through our actions that the school accepts us as we are. We have to let them know that we need to see ourselves in the classroom, that there needs to be more Black faculty, and the activities on campus need to reflect who we are, too." Phoebe continued, "We now have a Black student affinity group, which we did not have a few years ago. Now, we can move forward with some additional activities to increase the work around diversity, equity, and inclusion." The girls all agreed and Phoebe scheduled the next meeting for the following month.

Discussion

The above narrative provides several insights into how Black girls navigate and experience private school in the United States. Although the narrative presented is a composite story, it is important to remember that it is based on the actual experiences of Black female graduates of private schools, using direct quotes from their interviews. This complex restorying is an opportunity to explore the participants' experiences. It is through revealing these stories that the lived experiences of these women emerge. The restorying allows administrators and educators access to the unique learning experience and contexts of Black female students, helping these school leaders to understand recruitment, retention, and the return of these students to their community. The narrative enables the development of a more inclusive school culture that fully views students with all of their traits, and that helps students feel more connected to the school community. As the participants shared, most of them felt socially isolated on campus. Specifically, what participants experienced was a sense of invisibility in the classroom with respect to curriculum and activities on campus.

In general, the women had very similar experiences, despite a range of graduation years from 1976 to 2018. During the interviews, participants repeatedly spoke about their desire to be students at private schools and to do their best. They all saw access to the education and opportunities as worth the less-than-perfect schooling experience. In addition, seven of the 12 women stated that they would return to their private school. Regrettably,

every participant expressed varying levels of disconnectedness to the school community, a low sense of belonging to their peer group, and a limited support system, all of which align with the literature. The absence of a diverse faculty was also a common factor.

The above narrative indicates that administrators and educators need to be engaged in critical race conversations to address not only the racialized experiences these girls encountered, but also the issues of colorblindness and absence of culturally responsive pedagogical practices in the school. Administrators and educators must acknowledge, include, and understand all facets of the Black female student and how these elements impact the unique schooling experience of Black girls. As private school administrators and educators focus on their sustainability, understanding how to recruit, retain, and return Black female students will be an integral part of that strategic plan.

Participants reflected on how they survived their private school experience, or as is sometimes said in the Black community, they wondered "how they got over." They got over because of their resilience and their ability to see beyond their day-to-day existence, putting a value on the education they received, which outweighed the negative experiences. In some cases, their ability to diminish the racial experience or attribute it to other factors, such as height or class, may have aided in their capacity to move within the private school culture. In spite of all of their racialized experiences and feeling as if they did not belong or had disconnected, they were all proud of their private school experience; however, they wished the private school culture was more supportive.

Implications

A supportive private school culture is not just about diversity and inclusion; it is about a sense of belonging. Many schools overly focus on trying to increase the number of students from diverse backgrounds, which only addresses diversity. However, inclusion is about how students feel once they are on campus. The participants shared many suggestions and feedback on what they thought private schools can do to be the best learning environment for Black girls.

First, students need to feel welcome, able to come to school and be themselves. This means, for example, not having policies in place that prohibit Black girls from wearing their hair naturally. The participants expressed the need for a supportive school culture that is critically conscious and reflects the values, mores, and folkways of all students in a way that is inclusionary and not an afterthought. School administrators and educators can create this type of culture by intentionally hiring diverse faculty, which was the number one suggestion from the participants. Recruitment of diverse faculty, including counselors and administrators and not merely coaches, will take concerted effort based on trust and commitment.

Existing faculty must also be willing to reflect and celebrate differences rather than shy away from people and things that are different. Specifically, having a significant member of faculty or staff who is accustomed to interacting with Black people would be an equally important resource, because Black students frame their problems and issues differently. Students need someone they can talk to about the stress they encounter as they cope with living in two cultures; thus, having someone who truly understands and can guide them would be extremely helpful. In other words, schools should not just hire a White speech and language pathologist, because there are different dialects to consider.

Finally, focusing on broadening curriculum choices for all ethnic groups is important. Black girls need to see themselves in the curriculum; in addition, the entire student body should receive a full and complete story of the Black experience and contributions made to this country. This expanded ethnic curriculum would create a positive learning experience that benefits all students aiming to be the next global leaders.

Once a positive learning environment has been created, educators and administrators should be intentional in developing relationships with students and their families. This can occur in the school setting through systematic programming that helps change the social construct on campus. One example would be providing special educational training on what it means to be a good friend and a global citizen; another idea would be having assigned seating at lunch or incorporating events with an adult to facilitate the conversation. Two participants found that having a "scripted" lunch experience helped them connect with more students and faculty.

Putting effort into getting to know students and their families is important, and will help dispel stereotypes and assumptions stakeholders may have.

Admissions officers should be intentional and ensure adequate representation, so that there are no opportunities for Black female students to feel tokenized. Connecting students with other Black students on campus is critical to their success. A student who feels connection and a sense of belonging to the school community will have increased self-assurance. Finally, to further develop the confidence of the Black female student, it is important that the school culture and pedagogical practices affirm her racial identity and demonstrate an understanding of the unique schooling experience of the Black female student to aid in her feeling seen on campus as her complete self.

Conclusion

The findings from this narrative study provide guidance for private schools not only on how to recruit students, but also about what they need to do to retain students; in addition, school administrators can learn how to ensure Black alumni return as future parents or donors. First, Black female students in private schools deserve to have a positive learning experience. Next, Black parents need to know that the private school they have chosen for their daughter will see her completely. Finally, private school administrators and educators need to be aware of the unique schooling experience of Black female students. When all stakeholders are fully informed, then progress is possible to create a critically conscious school culture that connects not only the parent with the school, but the student as well, in a way that is racially affirming and supportive of her identity. Private schools that work to create a critically conscious school culture will craft a positive learning experience that produces a confident student who feels seen in her school community.

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