

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: REIMAGINING RESILIENCE:  
EXPLORING BLACK EARLY  
ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EXPERIENCES,  
DESIRES, AND NEEDS WHILE  
GROWING UP IN BALTIMORE CITY

Stephanie Y. Akoumany, Doctor of Philosophy.  
2018.

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Sheri L. Parks, Associate Professor,  
American Studies

"Reimagining Resilience: Exploring Black Early Adolescent Girls' Experiences, Desires, and Needs While Growing Up In Baltimore City" asks the following research questions: What are black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies while growing up in poor and working class communities in Baltimore City? What are the girls' perceptions of their own life experiences, desires, needs, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships?

This dissertation is informed by a three-year longitudinal ethnographic and participant action research study, conducted from 2010-2013, at a Baltimore City public school. Eighty-five, hour-long, weekly and biweekly workshops were conducted with 55 black middle school girls between the ages of 11-14 years old, who were in three different grade-based cohorts, until their respective eighth grade graduations.

The black early adolescent girls in this study shared that their major stressors were feeling misunderstood, increased domestic and academic responsibilities as they transitioned into adolescence, conflicts with peers and adults, cyberbullying on popular social media sites, race, gender, and class stigmatization and policing at school, a lack of social supports, pressure to engage in sexual activities, physical and sexual violation, navigating structurally decaying neighborhoods, and community violence.

This dissertation argues that black early adolescent girls utilize resilience strategies, particularly, self-assertion, storytelling, creativity, play, and community building to cope with these daily stressors and other traumatic life events. This dissertation explores connections between adolescent development, relational aggression, adverse childhood experiences, emotional intelligence, neuroplasticity, and resilience. It suggests that holistic wellness approaches such as mindfulness and play based therapy, socioemotional learning opportunities, restorative justice, facilitated intergroup dialogue, story exchange, participant action research, and comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education interventions that listen to black girls' perceptions of their own experiences and needs can help schools promote health equity among adolescents in Baltimore City, the United States, and the world.

REIMAGINING RESILIENCE: EXPLORING BLACK EARLY ADOLESCENT  
GIRLS' EXPERIENCES, DESIRES, AND NEEDS WHILE GROWING UP IN  
BALTIMORE CITY

by

Stephanie Yvonne Akoumany

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2018

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Sheri Parks, Associate Professor, Chair

Dr. Nina Harris

Dr. Kimberly Holmes

Dr. Mary Sies

Dr. Mia Smith-Bynum

© Copyright by  
Stephanie Yvonne Akoumany  
2018

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, mentors, teachers, and black girls everywhere who believe that they can overcome impossible odds and thrive! I especially dedicate this to my mother and father who continue to do everything in their power to make sure that I thrive. Thank you for loving me, being emotionally intelligent, caring, empathetic, and resilient! Thank you for fighting for me every day of my life.

Komi thank you for being my best friend for the past 12 years! Thank you for inspiring brilliant ideas and helping me to take swift and confident action. You have supported me every step of the way! This journey would not have been the same without you. Zoe thank you for your unconditional love, late night conversations, art, singing, dancing, yoga, workout, and play sessions. Thanks for literally sitting by my side as I wrote and defended my dissertation proposal and dissertation.

Thank you to my aunts and grandparents thank you for always investing in my education and my family's happiness. You all helped me to Bloom into the resilient, carefree, and adventurous woman that I am today. I would not be here without your love, guidance, and support. Thank you to my mother-in-law, father-in-law, and brother in law for accepting me as your own! I am so proud to be an Akoumany. Thank you for caring for me and my daughter and sharing your love! This dissertation is also dedicated to every teacher who has motivated me to succeed and sparked my love of education and inquiry: from the Union Baptist Head Start Program to the University of Maryland College Park

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Sheri Parks for being an amazing Dissertation Chair, advisor, and mentor. You inspire me to be my best every day. Thank you for believing in me from the very start. I would also like to thank my committee members Dr. Mary Corbin Sies, Dr. Kimberly Holmes, Dr. Mia Smith Bynum, and Dr. Nina Harris for their constant support and guidance throughout this beautiful journey. I have learned so much about myself during this process and am forever grateful. I would also like to thank the students, parents, administrators, teachers, and staff at “Lakely” Elementary-Middle for allowing me to observe their school community. What a journey!

It’s been a complete honor to spend the last seven school years learning about our nation, the world, what it means to be human, and black girls’ stories of resilience! I am so grateful to have graduated from such an interdisciplinary program like the Department of American Studies and to have received a Women’s Studies Certificate at the University of Maryland College Park!

I would like to thank the faculty of both departments for molding me and letting me explore my passions! I will be forever indebted to my advisor Dr. Sheri Parks and committee member Dr. Mary Sies for their mentorship and friendship. Thank you both for helping me develop into the scholar, researcher, professional, woman, mother, and global citizen that I am today.

Dr. Parks you are one of the “Fiercest Angels” I know. You have encouraged me to relentlessly pursue my wildest dreams for the past decade! I would like to thank you for being my advisor and modeling what it means to live a purpose driven

life! You will make such an impact as the VP of Strategic Initiatives at MICA! They are lucky to have you! Dr. Sies thank you for taking me under your wing and inviting me to take your historic preservation class and learn about the amazing Lakeland community. This course showed me what scholarship and community engagement was all about.

Thank you to Tatiana Benjamin, T’Naija Gormley, and Amber Royal for their sisterhood and Paul Saiedi and Shane Wash for their brotherhood. You all have encouraged me to always shine and be unapologetically me. Thank you to Drs. Darius Bost, Douglas Ishii, Tiffany King, Portia Hopkins, Jessica Walker, Dan Greene, Cristina Perez, Mike Casiano, Bimbola Akinbola, Jason Ezell, Tony Perry, Khalid Long, Michelle Rowley, Psyche Williams-Forson, and Patricia Hill Collins for being so supportive along this journey. I am so ready to keep Blooming on this next stage of my journey.

# Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	v
Chapter 1: Black Girlhood and Resilience.....	1
Black Girlhood and Resilience in Context.....	1
Overview of the Study .....	7
Statement of the Problem.....	9
Statement of Purpose .....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Research Approach.....	12
Researcher Perspective and Experiences.....	13
Methodological Approaches .....	15
Ethnography.....	15
Participant Action Research.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	17
Intersectionality.....	17
Findings.....	18
Significance.....	21
Chapter Outline.....	22
Chapter 2: Self Ethnography and Community Context .....	24
Navigating Neighborhood, Home, and School.....	24
School Cultures of Discipline and Care.....	27
Educational Environments Shaping Black Girls’ Chances of Success.....	30
Analyzing Inequality, Gaining the Tools for Peace.....	31
Chapter 3: Listening to Black Girls’ Stories.....	36
Adapting Approaches to Listen and Co-Create Knowledge with Black Girls .....	36
Proposing the Study .....	42
Contributions.....	45
Transcription Process.....	52
Navigating the Role of a School Partner, Researcher, Mentor, and Friend.....	54
The Power of Listening, Ethnography, and Intervention.....	55
Using Participant Action Research and Play to Discuss Drama and Trauma.....	62
Chapter 4: Findings: Navigating Social Conflicts Resiliently.....	70
Resolving Peer Conflicts with Resilience Strategies and Emotional Intelligence..	70
Field Notes .....	72
Emotional Intelligence Builds Resilience.....	75
Black Girls Navigating the Drama of Middle School.....	77
Sharing Stories for Trauma and Resilience .....	81
Fighting for Respect.....	83
Field Notes .....	83
Investigating the Root of the Conflict with Participant Action Research.....	87
Field Notes .....	87
Fighting to Forge Friendships.....	89
Fighting to Protect Reputation.....	90

Why Girls “Act Out”: Feeling Misunderstood .....	94
Moving Beyond Policing and Utilizing Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports .....	101
Restorative Justice and the School to Prison Pipeline .....	104
Conclusion .....	110
Chapter 5: Navigating Love, Friendships, Sex, and Consent .....	112
Coping with Betrayal .....	113
The Politics of “Being Too Fast.” Moving Beyond Respectability Politics and the Slut-Shaming of Early Adolescent Girls.....	117
Building Rapport and Resilience While Discussing Love, Friendship, Sex, and Consent .....	121
Deciding What Counts as Sex.....	122
Rape, Pressure, and Consent.....	126
Rape, Sexual Coercion, and Desire.....	128
“Facebook, Sexbook, Pornbook” Navigating Sexualized Online Communities .....	134
Reframing Notions of Healthy Sexuality for Black Girls.....	141
The Need for National Sexuality Education .....	144
A National Investment in Sexual Education: Personal Responsibility Education Programs .....	145
A History of Sexual Miseducation.....	147
Pushing for a Sexual Education Revolution .....	148
Limited In-School Opportunities to Educate Middle Schoolers About Sex.....	150
Conclusion .....	150
Chapter 6: Pushing for Health Equity in Baltimore: The Need for Socioemotional Learning Opportunities and Comprehensive and Medically Accurate Sexual Education Courses .....	152
Holistic Wellness Approaches to Combat Trauma.....	154
Bibliography .....	163

# Chapter 1: Black Girlhood and Resilience

## *Black Girlhood and Resilience in Context*

This dissertation explores the resilience strategies that the black early adolescent girls in growing up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City used to navigate relationships with their peers, teachers, family members, and romantic and sexual partners. Even more it examines the girls' perceptions of their own needs, desires, and the quality of their relationships with peers, teachers, family members, and romantic and sexual partners.

This dissertation reimagines resilience as intellectual and emotional labor required to create strategies that will help adolescents cope with every day stress, domestic and academic challenges, social conflicts, and violation from once trusted peers, family members, and romantic and sexual partners. The girls' stories suggest that utilizing self-assertion, play, creativity, storytelling, and community building were key resilience strategies that helped them overcome any challenge that they faced.

My main claim is that although some black early adolescent girls from poor and working-class communities are at risk for adverse childhood experiences (ACES). ACES can include verbal and physical abuse, neglect, and household disorganization and exposure to too many ACES can lead to disrupted neurodevelopment, social, emotional, and cognitive impairment, the adoption of health-risk behaviors, disease, and early death (Burke Harris, 2014; Giovanelli, Reynolds, Mondì, & Ou, 2016; Center for Youth Wellness, 2017; Burke Harris, 2018). Nonetheless, recent pediatric

and adolescent health scholarship show how focusing on youth and family resilience strategies and tools to help them heal is most important. Burke Harris (2018) specifically explores the importance of examining the epidemiology of ACEs, the neurobiology of toxic stress and the effects of ACEs on children and adolescents' developing brains, and the how the study of resilience can help children and families heal themselves (Burke Harris, 2018).

Scholars, teachers, and practitioners can help black girls thrive if they take time to learn about the resilience strategies that the girls are already using and new ones that they can use to combat daily stressors. When black girls use their agency and power in ways that are seen as too adult-like, they are especially marked as defiant and unruly and are they are often policed. Black girls have to constantly make decisions about when and in what social contexts to use the aforementioned models of strength to avoid punishment, express themselves, and manage stress. These intense decision-making processes require them to use a great amount of “emotional, spiritual, and intellectual energy” (Parks, 2013).

Making time for self-care and harnessing personal and academic resilience can be extremely difficult, especially while balancing challenging domestic responsibilities, stereotypical expectations, social and environmental stressors (Cahill et al., 2004; Guthrie et al., 2002). Nonetheless, poor and working class black girls' early exposure to adult responsibilities, sexism, and racism does not signify a complete departure from fun “childhood” experiences. They still find time to play games, use their imaginations, and accomplish their dreams even if authority figures aim to police these modes of expression (Ladner, 1971; Brown, 2009; Chin, 2001;

Sears, 2010). Focusing only on the challenges that black girls may face, dismisses the complexity of black girlhood and strips girls of their agency.

Resilience is a dynamic process where individuals assess their risks, strengths, and resources, shift their mindsets, and take actions that help them thrive throughout their lifetimes (American Psychological Association, 2008). Resilience can be understood as the use of critical mindedness (harnessing self-awareness and courage to protect oneself from discrimination), active engagement (using agentic decision-making that supports one's beliefs, desires, and goals), flexibility (the ability to adapt to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical situational demands), and communalism (the desire for independence while creating caring bonds with peers (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003).

Contemporary research in the fields of human development and positive psychology show us that resilience can be cultivated by youth and adults alike. More scholars have emphasized the need to examine individuals' resilience strategies in addition to their feelings and perceptions of their experiences and environments (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; APA, 2008).

All humans are resilient, but it is important to understand the specific racial, economic, and cultural experiences of black adolescent girls who grow up in poor and working class urban communities as they transition into adulthood. This dissertation highlights the subtle distinctions among the terms "poor," "working poor," and "low-income" to highlight the complexities of poverty in the United States and important observations that I made while growing up and conducting this ethnographic and

participant action research study in an economically disadvantaged community in Baltimore City, Maryland.

Baltimore's poverty rate was 21.6% in 2013 (U.S. Census, 2017) and the city's 2013 child poverty rate was 33.5%, which was 12% more than the national rate (Yelp, 2015). In 2013, the federal poverty threshold (FPT) was \$23,624 for a family of four with two children. Individuals who earned less than this amount were considered poor. Individuals who earned less than two times the FPT, \$47,248 for a family of four with two children, were considered low-income (Jiang, Ekono, Skinner, 2015).

Nationally families are officially classified as poor when their incomes are equal to approximately two times the federal poverty threshold (FPT) (Cauthen and Fass, 2008; Jiang, Ekono, and Skinner, 2015). It is also important to note that "poor" families may be working in formal labor forces or "underground economies," but their income still does not allow them to meet their basic needs. Underground economies are also called "informal," "parallel," or "shadow" economies because individuals trade goods, services, and money without being monitored or taxed by the government (Schneider and Enste, 2002).

While growing up in the neighborhood surrounding the school, where the study was conducted, I knew many community members who were well known for their underground economy work as they braided hair without cosmetology licenses, prepared "dinners" for families and the elderly at affordable rates without any culinary training, repaired and painted homes without formal training, and ran unlicensed daycare centers.

Nonetheless, these individuals were respected and seen as resilient, as they were able to create sophisticated business strategies to survive and thrive in Baltimore City while also helping others. Some individuals also conducted more illicit business in the underground economy such as drug dealing, theft rings, and sex work, but these individuals still were resilient and created strategies to survive.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the working poor as individuals who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work), but whose incomes still fell below the official poverty level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). It is also important to note that the working poor include individuals who primarily work in formal government monitored and taxed labor forces and those who are actively searching for jobs. Families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line are referred to as low income.

Poverty thresholds are updated each year to reflect changes in the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The concept of a poverty threshold was developed by the Social Security Administration in 1964 and was changed by federal interagency committees in 1969 and 1981 (Shipler, 2005; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). It was originally based on the Department of Agriculture's Economy Food Plan and was used to estimate various families' consumption needs based on their size and the number of children under 18 years of age (Shipler, 2005; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Research shows that the FPT may not be the best way to measure the true effects of poverty as the income needed for families to meet their basic needs changes based on their

location (Shipler, 2008; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Jiang, Ekono, Skinner, 2015).

Many black girls from poor and working class urban communities have to learn to be economically resilient very early on but they also have to navigate: dangerous and structurally decaying neighborhoods (Miller, 2008; Jones, 2010), race, gender, and class stigmatization at school (Evans-Winters, 2006; Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015), a lack of necessary social supports in their schools, homes, and communities, (Pillow 2000; Cahill, 2015; Miller, 2008, Brown, 2009; Sears, 2010), cyberbullying on popular social media sites (Stokes, 2007; Marwick and Boyd, 2011), pressure to engage in sexual activities (Fine, 1998; Rosenthal and Lewis, 1996; Cohen, 2010; Hunter, Cohen, and Guerrero, 2015), and increased domestic and academic responsibilities as they transition to adolescence (Chin, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2002; Evans-Winters, 2006; Jones, 2010).

Black girls who grow up in poor and working class urban communities are often considered inherently at risk of being negatively affected by environmental threats. Their exposure to racial and economic segregation and structural racism in the forms of “racial profiling, low expectations, [and] institutional barriers” (APA, 2008; Spencer et al., 2006; Weinstein, 2002) have just exacerbated the problems they face. When black girls are able to cultivate meaningful relationships with their parents, peers, and caring adults in their schools and neighborhoods they are better able to handle varying levels of stress and adversity over time (Masten, 2001; Corneille and Belgrave, 2005; Annunziata, Hogue, Faw, & Liddle, 2006). These bonds provide training grounds for girls to develop resilience strategies that can help

them feel less anxious, shy, scared, aggressive, or anti-social while navigating stressful life events (Costigan, Cauce, Eitchison; 2007; McCabe, Clark, and Barnett, 1999; Pastor, McCormick, and Fine; 2007).

### Overview of the Study

This dissertation is informed by a three-year longitudinal ethnographic and participant action research study, conducted from 2010-2013, at a Baltimore City public school. Eighty-five, hour-long, weekly and biweekly workshops were conducted with 55 black middle school girls between the ages of 11-14 years old, who were in three different grade-based cohorts, until their respective eighth grade graduations.

The purpose of this ethnographic and participant action research study was to explore black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies, their perceptions of their life experiences, interpersonal relationships, needs, and desires while growing up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City, Maryland.

The primary research questions guiding this study were: What are black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies while growing up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City? What are the girls' perceptions of their own life experiences, desires, needs, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships)? The girls' stories revealed their resilience in the face of adversity. The major stressors that girls in the study reported were: feeling misunderstood, domestic and academic challenges, conflicts with peers and adults, stigmatization and punishment, physical and sexual violation, deterioration of their neighborhoods, and community violence.

They had to make strategic decisions about when, where, and how they could protect themselves and care for their bodies, mental stability, families, and reputations.

Although a few girls occasionally turned to alcohol, marijuana, and sex for stress relief, the overwhelming majority recounted instances of using self-assertion, creativity, play, and community building to manage and cope with stress. It is important to note that the girls in the study did not label their actions as resilience strategies. They described their challenges, their decision-making processes, and the actions that they ultimately took to deal with and resolve the challenges and conflicts that they faced. I label these processes as resilience strategies because they helped the girls to thrive over time and reclaim a sense of power, self-respect, calm, and joy. These strategies helped them to also enjoy many cherished moments with family members, teachers, close friends, and romantic and sexual partners.

The girls described deep desires to build and maintain strong, caring, respectful bonds with family members, teachers, school administrators, peers, and romantic and sexual partners. They also shared their desires and needs for more opportunities to express themselves, share their experiences, and gain advice in their interpersonal relationships. The risk of punishment, judgement, and physical and verbal conflicts deterred many of them from vocalizing their needs and desires at home, school, and online.

This study offers community stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners insights to better understand the emotional, intellectual, and physical labor (i.e. resilience strategies) that black girls utilize to thrive in their communities every day and their perceptions of their experiences. This information can provide adults and

other teens (from any background) with tools to use more empathy in their daily interactions with black adolescent girls from poor and working-class communities and open up lines of communication that are free of stigma and shame.

### Statement of the Problem

Some studies have implicitly made the terms “‘urban’, ‘inner city,’ ‘black,’ and ‘poor’” synonymous with ‘inferiority’ (Evans-Winters, 2005, p.8). These connotations limit the public’s understanding of the beauty, joy, challenges, and accomplishments that black girls experience while living in poor and working class, urban neighborhoods.

Furthermore, it overlooks the strategies that they have to use to persevere in the face of adversity. Academic research conducted on black adolescent girls’ experiences with poverty and personal development is often “deficit oriented” and provides little to no solutions for the girls’ future success (Evans-Winters, 2005, p. 6). Black adolescent girls are often characterized as being trapped in intergenerational cultures of poverty that influence them to make irresponsible personal, economic, and sexual decisions (Lewis, 1959; Wilson, 1987; Anderson, 1999).

They are labelled as socially deviant and too autonomous (Grant et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2011) and thus “at-risk” for early engagement in unhealthy sexual activities, drug use, and violent or emotionally abusive peer, romantic, or sexual relations. Despite these common characterizations, the girls’ race, gender, socioeconomic status, and residential location do not make them inherently at-risk for engaging in socially deviant behaviors.

Existing theories used to describe Black girls' life experiences often perpetuate the aforementioned negative stereotypes and assumptions. Some researchers have even asserted that black girls are more likely to engage in early sexual and criminal activities, since they tend to experience an earlier onset of puberty and menarche than their peers in other racial groups (Grant et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2011). These narratives stigmatize black girls' transitioning bodies, identities, and experiences during puberty. Even more they diagnose black girls as suffering from oppositional defiance disorder, aggression, social isolation, exhaustion, and depression (Grant et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2011).

Early adolescence is a developmental stage defined by many physical, mental, emotional, and social changes primarily due to hormonal changes as puberty begins (MSU, 2016; CDC, 2017). Some girls may have concerns about the way they feel and may be perceived once they start their periods and grow pubic hair and breasts (CDC, 2017). Some early adolescents face over pressure to engage in drugs, alcohol, and sex, but if equipped with social emotional learning skills and an understanding of their bodies, they will not inherently fall victim to these social pressures. Parents and trusted adults can help early adolescents gain the tools to improve the complex decision-making skills they already have (MSU, 2016; CDC, 2017). They become more independent, with their own personality and interests, although parents are still very important.

These theories do not paint a holistic picture of poor and working class, urban black girls' every day stresses and joys. There are gaps in the research on urban black girlhood because researchers often do not engage with black early adolescent

girls to better understand the complexity of their experiences. They often collect information from surveys that ask closed questions and aggregate large pools of national data in hopes of proving already problematic assumptions and hypotheses about this populations supposed biological, psychological, and cultural predispositions. This scholarship is extremely limiting and has the power to negatively influence the public's understanding of whether black girls who grow up in poor and working class urban communities deserve access to free and high quality academic, health, and economic resources.

Findings from this study and relevant literature are centered on black girls' strengths and the quality of black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies, interpersonal relationships, and personal values influences their decision-making strategies and actions more (Luthar, Doernberger, and Zigler, 1999; Chin, 2001; Maton, Shellenbach, Leadbeater, and Solarz, 2004; Evans-Winters, 2005; Cahill et al., 2004; Brown, 2009; Sears, 2010; Luthar, Lyman, and Crossman, 2014; Cox, 2015). Examining black girls' strengths helps us to see that although black girls may show developmental competence or resilience in one domain they may not show them in another (Leadbeater, 2007).

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this ethnographic and participant action research study was to explore black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies, their perceptions of their life experiences, interpersonal relationships, needs, and desires while growing up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City, Maryland.

### Research Questions

The primary research questions guiding this study were: What are black early adolescent girls' resilience strategies while growing up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City? What are the girls' perceptions of their own life experiences, desires, needs, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships)?

### Research Approach

This dissertation is informed by a three-year, University of Maryland College Park, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved, longitudinal ethnographic and participant action research study that was conducted from 2010-2013. Eighty-five, hour-long, weekly and biweekly workshops were conducted with 55 black middle school girls between the ages of 11-14 years old. These students belonged to three different grade-based cohorts and remained in the program until their respective eighth grade graduations.

I chose to conduct research at this school, not only because I am an alumna, but because the school is located in a community that is representative of many urban areas in the North Eastern and Southern regions of the United States. Residents of the neighborhood surrounding the school face the effects of extreme racial and economic segregation. In 2010, 75% of this community's 26, 366 residents were black (U.S. Census, 2010 c). In 2011, the median income was \$29,039 for families, but 25.4% of families made below \$25,000 (U.S. Census, 2010 c). In 2011, the unemployment rate was 23.5%, and 22% of the unemployed only obtained a high school degree during their lifetimes (U.S. Census, 2010 b).

Although individuals in this community suffer from high rates of unemployment, poverty, understaffed and underfunded schools, violence, drug addiction, teen pregnancy, and HIV & AIDS, these issues do not solely define their or my own experiences growing up and living in Baltimore City. Although some individuals faced extreme hardships, many also experienced an abundance of joy.

### *Researcher Perspective and Experiences*

As a black female researcher studying the experiences of black adolescent girls' academic, social, and sexual experiences in the urban public school that I attended as a child and in the community where I was raised, I constantly negotiate the tension of the politics of studying home. I acknowledge that my research is personal and political. I consciously chose to explore and theorize the every day experiences, struggles, and accomplishments of black adolescent females in my hometown and community. Villenas (2000) expresses the constant tension that women of color researchers face while trying to unearth and articulate the erased and hidden stories of "resilience and survival in our own families and communities" in hopes of carving out an equal space for them in academic and political archives (p.76).

During my childhood and adolescence, poor and working class black girls were constantly associated with narratives of social deviance, economic failure, promiscuity, and disease. My work aims to show that they should also be associated with personal agency, abundance, altruism, creativity, and vitality. All of these characterizations only describe small aspects of the human experience. They do not individually define a group's identity.

As a black woman, who was once a young black girl, I acknowledge how I too am “written by [the same] culture [that I attempt to write about]” and I am “Othered” by imperialist gazes of the academy in which I am situated (Villenas, 2000, p. 75). It is my hope that being reflexive about my own epistemological groundings, life experiences, and assumptions (Villenas, 2000) that I can critically analyze my methodological approaches.

In Chapter 2, I will share why I chose to conduct a research project in my hometown and my perceptions of my life experiences, interpersonal relationships, challenges, desires, and needs as a black early adolescent girl. I will also share my perspective on the differences and similarities between my research participants’ in-school, neighborhood, and online experiences in relation to my own. It is important for me to expose the assumptions that I had before entering the study and what I learned during the process.

Although I had first-hand experiences with some of the challenges that my research participants faced, I only had second-hand knowledge of more traumatic experiences such as violence, sexual abuse, and personal/mental health issues. I believe that my story provides a unique lens for the reader to explore the school community, the built environment, and cultural landscapes that black girls navigate every day.

## Methodological Approaches

### Ethnography

I used ethnography and participant action research to conduct this school based ethnographic and participant action research study because I believed it was necessary to listen to girls' conceptualizations of their own interests, needs, challenges, accomplishments, and dreams. Ethnography is defined as an “interpretive account of a group’s every day life” (Caughey, 1982, 222). These accounts are often directed to the public to reveal the complexities of seemingly mundane social situations, institutions, communities, and individuals (Caughey, 1982).

My work aims to share the often untold and/or misrepresented stories of black early adolescent girls who grew up in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore City. I had to build trusting relationships with my research participants and mentees and share my story with them to gain a deeper understanding how they navigated every day life. Caughey (1982) explains that researchers should establish close personal relationships with their research participants and be cognizant of how their presence shapes their interactions and data collection processes. Ethnographic data collection includes experiencing personal relationships with research participants “through casual conversations, watching what goes on, participation, and formal interviewing—and through the concepts and methods brought to the field” (Caughey, 1982, p. 223).

## Participant Action Research

I also used Participant Action Research (PAR) as it utilizes ethnographic methods that value collective investigation of an issue, a reliance on participants' understandings of the social contexts in which they live, and the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem (McIntyre, 2000). This methodological approach provided me with the tools to foster an environment that encouraged the girls to openly discuss their every day experiences, struggles, and accomplishments, and learn strategies to handle the complex situations that they encountered. This allowed us to organically collaborate to create peer mentoring communities of care and respect that supported the girls' diversity of opinions and ways of being. Research shows that if scholars and practitioners listen to and collaborate with young people to design action plans that "address their concerns, they can more effectively frame research questions and teaching pedagogies around their understandings of urban life" (McIntyre, 2000, p. 126).

My research participants shared that being provided the space and time to listen to their peers' stories was very important to them. It helped the girls to understand their shared, but unique resilience strategies and experiences while navigating various environments and interpersonal relationships. This helped them to gain a deeper level of respect for one another and increased their desire to share their stories while participating in the program. More detailed information about the research methodology will be provided in Chapter Three.

The stories that the participants shared during our focus group and mentoring sessions informed the overall findings of this study. Major events and

conversation topics that emerged during our sessions, my memories of conversations that were not recorded, my experiences, and observations while sitting and moving throughout the school also informed this study. I wrote field notes during and directly after our focus group sessions. I used an audio recorder application on my smartphone to record our conversations. I uploaded the audio files on my phone to my personal Google Drive account. I transcribed these interviews verbatim by using the playback function on the Google Music Application. All participants were identified by pseudonyms.

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze my data. First, I conducted a close read of the transcribed interviews without taking notes. Then I read, coded, and analyzed significant sections of the transcript. This allowed me to take note of the major themes that emerged from my data on a separate Google Doc. The major themes that emerged from the data analysis revealed the girls' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with family members, peers (in school and online), and romantic and sexual partners. These themes will be discussed and analyzed in detail in Chapters Four, Five, and Six respectively.

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a framework to conceptualize the socially constructed nature of identity categories such as race, gender, class, age, geographic location, sexuality, religion, and able-bodiedness. These categorizations expose individuals and groups to varying levels of power and disadvantage, thus affecting

their life experiences (Crenshaw: 1987; Collins, 2000: Reid-Brinkley, 2008; Dill and Zambrana, 2015).

Swanson et al. (2002) notes that researchers must understand how "social political, cultural, and historical contexts interact with and influence identity formation" to foster and promote resilient outcomes for black adolescent girls (p. 73). This dissertation relies on the theoretical framework of intersectionality, as it provides a foundation to understand the diversity of black adolescent girls' experiences. Their experiences are not monolithic, but they do have observable common themes that need to be discussed and analyzed in academic and public spheres.

### Findings

The girls' stories revealed their resilience in the face of adversity. The girls constantly navigated dangerous and structurally decaying neighborhoods, race, gender, and class stigmatization at school, a lack of social supports, cyberbullying on popular social media sites, pressure to engage in sexual activities, and increased domestic and academic responsibilities as they transitioned to adolescence. They had to make strategic decisions about when, where, and how they could protect themselves and care for their bodies, mental stability, families, and reputations. Although some girls occasionally turned to alcohol, marijuana, and sex for stress relief, the overwhelming majority recounted instances of using self-assertion, play and creativity, and community building to manage and cope with stress.

The girls' use of self-assertion as a resilience strategy helped them to constantly stand-up for themselves when they felt disrespected by various forms of injustice, adversity, harassment, bullying in their neighborhoods, homes, schools, and

online social networks. Practicing self-assertion included verbalizing how they felt wronged, writing letters or private messages on social media to the person with whom they were having a conflict, reading the letter or message to that person and a group of peers they trusted, and physically fighting back when threatened or assaulted. Choosing not to fight was also a resilience strategy that the girls used. They often made complex calculations about whether fighting was worth the physical and social pain that they might feel afterwards.

The girls used play and creativity as resilience strategies as well. This included playing games, dancing, rapping, drawing, coloring, creating poetry, creating songs, writing books, performing spoken word, engaging in arts and crafts such as jewelry-making and t-shirt design, video-chatting, storytelling, and bonding with peers, family members, and romantic partners. The girls often used these experiences to build rapport and engage in community building.

Creating communities of care and respect with trusted peers and adults was a very important resilience strategy. These relationships were forged when individuals shared a joyous or challenging experience together. These communities could consist of a few people or a very large group. The girls made it clear that they cared about the quality of the bonds they made and not the amount. The girls seemed able to weather many of life's storms at home and at school when they had a friend that they could share their stories with, get advice from, and rely on to honor their reputation, and help protect or assist them in a physical fight with a bully, enemy, or sexual predator.

Poor and working class urban girls are better able to build resilience strategies to life's challenges when they have access to "safe" spaces where they can explore their own hopes, values, and choices with trusted peers and with adults. The girls in the study described how they were shocked that so many of their female peers had similar experiences. They were excited to share their resilience strategies with one another they gained rapport.

Storytelling served as a major resilience strategy especially when overt physical play was not allowed during the school day. Storytelling provided the girls with opportunities to share the resilience strategies that they cultivated and practiced throughout their lives. Before this study the girls were not accustomed to sharing their deepest stories with girls who were not directly a part of their inner circle of friends, so I had to help them build rapport with each other and myself.

Structural inequality, respectability politics, and patriarchal and misogynistic community and peer group ideologies and practices often force black girls to focus on defending themselves physically and emotionally, instead of focusing on how to thrive. Black communities and school officials can help create "safer" spaces for black girls by creating cultures of accountability and respect (Jones, 2012). Black adolescent girls should not feel the need to avoid certain neighborhoods, areas of their schools, or need familial or peer escorts to navigate their school and neighborhood spaces safely.

The girls' ability to use self-assertion, play and creativity, community building, and storytelling as resilience strategies helped them to thrive over time and reclaim a sense of power, self-respect, calm, excitement, and joy despite the

challenges they faced in their everyday lives. These strategies also helped them to enjoy many cherished moments with family members, teachers, close friends, and romantic and sexual partners. Too often black girls who live in poor and working-class communities are described as having very little social capital, but it is important to realize that many have supportive and uplifting communities that help them live happy lives.

Findings from this study show that black early adolescent girls who grow up in economically disadvantaged communities say that they desire and need more opportunities to express themselves, share their experiences, and gain advice in their interpersonal relationships. They often feel deterred by the risk of punishment, judgement, and relational and overt aggression.

Some participants described their experiences with verbal and physical abuse from family, friends, and peers, but also love and support. Many reported increased domestic responsibilities as they entered adolescence. These girls often noted that their parents worked night shifts and had more than one part-time job. These girls were responsible for caring for their younger siblings, cooking, cleaning, picking up groceries, going to the laundromat, washing and folding clothes at home, in addition to caring for themselves, studying, completing their homework, and trying to maintain social and romantic lives.

### Significance

This study offers community stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners with insights to better understand black girls' needs and to open up lines of communication that are free of stigma and shame. These conversations can provide

underserved black girls and ultimately all youth with the tools to live healthy and happy lives and gain access to social supports that can help them accomplish their wildest dreams.

This study shows that same-sex friendships among black female peer mentors in school-based participant action research programs may facilitate poor, urban, black early adolescent girls' abilities to learn complex resilience strategies and practices that can help them thrive despite economic hardship and the intensity of relational and overt aggression exhibited in school communities (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, 1996; Sullivan, Farrell, and Kliewer, 2006) and online social media websites (Marwick and Boyd, 2011).

### Chapter Outline

Chapter Two will provide my perspective and assumptions about the study in the form of self-ethnography. Chapter Three will further explain my research methodology. Each of the following chapters will explore how the girls used resilience strategies, particularly self-assertion, play and creativity, community building, and storytelling to navigate the relationships that mattered the most to them. Chapter Four will discuss the ways that black early adolescent girls in this study navigated, coped with, and overcame major every day stressors and social conflicts within their peer relationships. It will also explore connections between adolescent development, relational aggression, adverse childhood experiences, emotional intelligence, neuroplasticity, and resilience.

Chapter Five will discuss the girls' resilience strategies and sexual resilience strategies. It will also share their perceptions of the quality of their

relationships with romantic and sexual partners (in school, in their neighborhoods, and online). It will also examine the history and current state of comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education interventions in Baltimore City and the nation. Chapter Six will discuss the ways that the girls' stories highlight the need for holistic wellness approaches to achieve health equity such as mindfulness and play based therapy, socioemotional learning opportunities, restorative justice, facilitated intergroup dialogue, story exchange, participant action research, and comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education interventions that listen to black girls' perceptions of their own experiences and needs in Baltimore City, the nation, and the world.

## Chapter 2: Self Ethnography and Community Context

### *Navigating Neighborhood, Home, and School*

The field of American Studies aims to study individuals' and groups' every day interactions, beliefs, and cultural practices. Even more it seeks for scholars to be self-reflexive about their own positionally, identity, and lived experiences in hopes of better articulating the experiences of the research participants and communities in which they immerse themselves in (Caughey, 1982; Jackson, 1989). Many black girlhood studies scholars have taken on self-ethnography to really share the complexity of the author's own positionally and juxtapose this to the stories of the research participants as they move throughout their worlds (Evans-Winters, 2005; Brown, 2009; Sears, 2009; Cox, 2015; Callier, Hill, and Waters, 2017).

Self-ethnography is a powerful methodological tool because it conveys the complexity of the "relationship between storytellers and story listeners; and the canonical narratives that circulate through society" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). This chapter offers a self-reflexive account of my own story, experiences, and understanding of the cultural dynamics of the school, neighborhood, and online spaces that the black early adolescent female participants described navigating every day. ‘

Using self-ethnography was especially important as I attended the same school that the study took place in (from 1996-1999). My family moved to the Lakely Community (Lakely is a pseudonym for the real name of the school) when I was five years old. I lived there until the age of 17 when I left to pursue my undergraduate degree at the University of Maryland College Park. The neighborhood was mainly

comprised of deteriorating and boarded up homes and subsidized government apartments, but also a small amount of remodeled, and newly constructed homes. The closest places that residents could purchase food or water without needing a car or bus were Chinese and American carryout restaurants, “fish fry” restaurants, liquor stores, and “corner” convenience stores that only sold processed snacks and drinks like candy, chips, pastries, juice, and soda. The closest grocery stores, laundromats, banks, and check cashing/money order stores were about two to three miles away.

My parents did their best to shelter me from experiencing the harshest effects of poverty. I never witnessed extreme acts of violence in my neighborhood; only occasional fist-fights. Criminals primarily stole cars, car parts, and valuable items from parked cars. Throughout the 23 years that my parents resided in neighborhood, their cars were stolen twice and broken into and damaged once.

Sometimes while looking out the window as a child and teenager, I spotted drug deals on our street corners throughout the day. The city’s police department placed blue lights with cameras on the exteriors of row homes nearby in hopes of deterring crime. Although my neighborhood did not have any, I always imagined how frustrating it must have been to have those deep blue lights shine in one’s windows at night. The lights and cameras did not make me feel more protected. Instead they served as a constant reminder of real possibilities of impending violence and crime. Nonetheless, I felt relatively safe in my neighborhood and the communities that surrounded my home and school. My parents taught me to always practice “street smarts,” such as paying attention to my surroundings, not walking with visibly valuable items, and locking our home and car doors at all times.

I was aware that we had several economic challenges, but I always had everything that I needed to thrive. I relied on the love and support of my family and had food, water, clothes, shelter. I felt safe and cared for at home and at school, but unfortunately both were structurally unsound and deteriorating. In the fall and the winter my family and I relied on our oven, space heaters, comforters, and sometimes winter coats to help keep us warm. I was extremely grateful for these resources because they helped me to concentrate on my homework and sleep more comfortably at night. Our heating system did not work properly, and the apartment was poorly insulated. These conditions also made it very expensive to heat our entire home. Luckily, we qualified for an energy assistance program to help make the cost more affordable.

In the summer we relied on old, dusty fans, and breezes from outdoors to stay cool at home as our air conditioner did not work properly. Even when the air conditioner did work, we could not use it often because it made the energy bill too expensive. Sitting outside to feel the cool night breeze was also not a viable option because of the swarms of roaches that ran along the sidewalks. I always feared that the roaches would make their way from the sidewalk and up to our porch steps. No matter how much my mother cleaned, and she did every night, one or two roaches often entered our home through small cracks in our walls.

I lived two city blocks away from Lakely Elementary-Middle School, the site of this research study. I faced similar experiences with urban decay and structural blight at school. The school had two main levels with extremely long hallways that housed classrooms, a library, an auditorium, and a gymnasium. The cafeteria was

located in a musty basement. Although the janitors worked hard to keep the building clean, my classmates and I occasionally spotted roaches and mice roaming around the floors and cabinets. The school was in need of better insulation and centralized heating during the fall and winter and a better air conditioning unit to cool the school during the spring and summer.

Some days we had to wear our winter coats, hats, and gloves because the school heating system did not work properly. The administrative office was the only area that had air conditioning, but even that was old and in ill-repair. Students and teachers in classrooms were lucky if they received a fan. Also, the water in the school, as in many other Baltimore City Public Schools, was designated as unfit to drink. Several studies revealed that the drinking the water would lead to lead poisoning. Students were not allowed to drink from the water fountains when I attended the school from 1996-1999 and when I conducted the ethnographic and participant action research program there from 2010-2014. Many schools provided and still provide students and teachers with water coolers for drinking water (Bowie, 2016).

### *School Cultures of Discipline and Care*

Lakely Elementary-Middle has been a pillar of this Southwest Baltimore City neighborhood since 1958. When I attended the school it only enrolled students in Head Start and elementary school. Administrators, faculty, and staff worked hard to maintain a tight-knit community where youth could receive a quality education despite the issues that they dealt with at home. Parents and teachers wanted the school to function as a middle school as well. This allowed students to remain there until

departing for high school. The school's faculty, administrators, and staff were predominantly black middle-class women who cared about the wellbeing of their student body, but they also created a culture of surveillance, discipline, law, and order.

When I attended the school and during my research study I noticed that when students acted out of line they primarily disciplined them by yelling, forcing students to be silent or sit away from their friends during lunch. They also restricted their access to field trips, gym, art, computer lab, recess, or fun activities. The ultimate punishments were sending students to the principal's office, in-school detention, or at-home suspension.

If students were sent to the principal's office, they often received verbal punishment and/or a motivational speech about how to correct their behavior in the future. If these methods did not work students were subjected to attend in-school detention or at-home suspension periods. These methods were used during my time as a student and when I served as researcher and participant action research study facilitator there. Although only a small number of students exhibited extremely unruly behaviors, teachers and administrators created a school culture that policed students' freedom of expression in hopes of deterring the general population from "acting out."

The school's administrators had a history of partnering with many nonprofit organizations to provide after school programs geared toward mentoring, cultural enrichment, environmentalism, and sports. While I was there I benefited from teachers who pushed us to succeed academically, but who also showed that they cared about our

well-being. I was lucky to have teachers who invited me to their homes to practice subjects that I had trouble with, to help my parents and me fill out scholarship and admissions applications for the private middle schools that I hoped to attend. My teachers also reached out to my mother to let her know about my progress in school and my social conduct.

The school's faculty, staff, and administrators provided elementary school girls with a mentoring program from the third to fifth grades called Just Us Girls (JUGS). The program paired us with middle aged, black female, business professionals. Many of the mentors, school faculty, and school administrators were members of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, a sorority comprised of college educated black women that has been historically dedicated to helping African American communities in need.

We often ate lunch with our mentors as we learned about topics such as self-care, personal hygiene, academic and career success, and goal setting. We also went on field trips, and participated in Secret Santa, Easter, and Valentine's Day parties. We even received an honorary sweater which had our school and program name embroidered on it. Being a part of this program was one of my first experiences with the concept and act of peer mentoring. The program was so important because it exposed me to black women who had made advances in their respective fields and wanted to share their time and knowledge with underprivileged girls like myself whose parents often did not have the time, knowledge, and/or resources to teach them how to gain access to and be successful in collegiate and corporate environments.

*Educational Environments Shaping Black Girls' Chances of Success*

After graduating from Lakely, I received substantial scholarships to attend the Bryn Mawr School, a predominantly white, college preparatory school for girls, from the sixth to the twelfth grades. Nonetheless, my parents, both living with work-related disabilities, still had to sacrifice the little money that they had to cover the remaining costs of tuition. They had faith that their investment in my education would help me to have a successful life.

Although this school exposed me to the importance of intellectual freedom, diversity, and feminism, it also revealed the realities of structural inequality and racial and economic segregation in Baltimore City. I was lucky that my father was able to drive me to school every day, as it was 30 minutes away from our home. During our drive we passed boarded up and dilapidated homes, liquor stores, and apartment projects until we reached the highway. The highway led us to North Baltimore where the school lay in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city. It was surrounded by large brick homes and mansions with lush, green gardens. The built environment was drastically different than my neighborhood.

The school has several green spaces, tennis courts, athletic fields, state of the art athletic facilities, computer labs, art rooms, photography labs, theaters, dance studios, libraries, and community meeting spaces for students to learn, relax, build bonds, and collaborate. Although I appreciated these luxuries, I truly valued the way that the school nurtured my sense of adventure, curiosity, and feminist spirit. My teachers emphasized the notion that I could do anything that I set my mind to, but also provided me with the tools to do so.

I actively participated in class with confidence and excelled academically. I ran for and was elected as an arts council representative in middle school and lead our Black Student Union as a Vice-President and Co-President during my junior and senior years of high school. I played on Softball, Badminton, and Volleyball teams, and served as the Basketball team's traveling manager. All of these experiences provided me with the tools that I needed to succeed in life, but also college and graduate school.

The school provided a space for girls to be free to be themselves but to also practice kindness and respect for teachers and students in their school community. We were not unjustly disciplined or consistently monitored to ensure that the school-maintained order. Students were invested in maintaining this culture as we were allowed to have fun, play, learn, grow, and think critically about the world around us.

As I reflect on both school experiences I realize that education alone is not the great equalizer. One's educational environment matters too. Girls from any background can reach great heights when schools foster cultures of mutual respect and care and provide students with various opportunities for mentorship and quality educational tools and resources.

### *Analyzing Inequality, Gaining the Tools for Peace*

During my undergraduate career I found it difficult to choose between broadcast and print journalism. Even more after speaking with several journalists who came to campus, I realized that I would not have full control over the stories that I wanted to tell. I was always intrigued by investigative journalism that exposed social

issues and provided the public with stories that explained human struggles, joys, accomplishment, dreams, and desires.

I chose to enter the field of American Studies at the University of Maryland College Park, because the department allowed me to explore various disciplines such as Journalism, Media Studies, African-American Studies, Women's Studies, History, Sociology, Human Development, Education, and Government and Politics. This interdisciplinary approach gave me the tools to understand how systems and policies impacted the every day lives of marginalized people around the world. I learned to use ethnography to tell individuals' stories in hopes that they would encourage the public to be more engaged in every day activism and be change that they wanted to see in the world. I believed that these untold stories could be a catalyst for building bridges, mending broken hearts, and ultimately creating world peace.

I participated in the University's Federal Semester Program which allowed me to take a course on Homeland Security during the fall of 2008 and intern on Capitol Hill in the Office of Jerry McNerney (CA-D-11) in the spring of 2009. This was a unique experience because most members of congress appoint interns who are from their home districts. Every time I gave the visiting Californian constituents tours of the Capitol they were always shocked that I was from Baltimore. I constantly shattered their stereotypical assumptions about the character and demeanor of a black girl from Baltimore.

When I did not meet their limiting and sometimes racist, sexist, and classist expectations they looked relieved. Then with a false sense of comfort they would always ask "Oh my gosh, is it like what they show on "The Wire?" They viewed

Baltimore as a war zone where drug dealers and police fought for turf, drug and alcohol addicted men and women neglected their families as they wasted their days away on street corners and trap houses. The effects of drug sales, drug use, police brutality, community violence, family turmoil, and unemployment greatly impact residents across the city, but these experiences do not define life in Baltimore City.

In college many of my friends were first-generation college students from Baltimore City and Prince George's County, Maryland. They endured many hardships and were working to overcome several life challenges such as poverty, physically and verbally abusive familial and romantic relationships, familial drug addiction, familial incarceration, the loss of parents, homelessness, and exposure to community violence.

My close friends were a part of a scholarship program that aimed to help them achieve academic and social success in college. Although the program was not perfect, my friends were provided with peer and adult mentorship from upperclassmen in the program and alumni business professionals. They were also provided with free housing, meals, and academic supports.

Like the teachers and administrators at Lakely, this scholarship program's administrators struggled to balance treating students from "challenging" backgrounds with respect. Although these students were young adults who were at the top of their classes in high school, the program still tried to manage and "handle" them without giving them the needed tools and support to sustain their own confidence while navigating the university's fast paced environment. Some still cope with the stresses of familial drama, but many have their own families and are working to create peace in their lives.

As an undergraduate, I was very active in and outside of my classrooms. I truly enjoyed learning about issues of social justice. I attended several academic talks and joined social clubs that engaged in discussions about creating solutions to the world's problems. During my junior year I was interested in seeing how policies were created and enacted on the front lines. I served as a representative for my department on the University of Maryland College Park Student Government Association.

While attending a Student Government Association (SGA) meeting I overheard an organizer from the Maryland State Governor's office noting that they needed someone who could attribute their success in college to receiving Pell Grants. They noted that this speaking engagement would take place at the White House, but I had no idea that it would be a televised event. I wrote down all the information and approached the representative after the SGA meeting. I assured them that I would apply that night. I raced back to my dorm, wrote the speech, sent it to my McNair graduate assistant for review, edited it, and emailed my speech to the White House representatives that night. They replied the next morning while I was working at my internship on Capitol Hill. They conducted a background check on me and my parents and invited us to come to the White House the next day.

On Wednesday April 29, 2009, I introduced President Barack Obama at the White House to advocate on behalf of increased Pell Grants for lower-and middle-class college students. As I noted in my speech, my position as a first-generation college student from a low-income family in Baltimore, Maryland, truly gave me a deep understanding of how scholarships help students excel in college. I stated with conviction that “my family taught me that I should never let my socioeconomic status

negatively define who I am, but that I should embrace my strengths and strive to overcome the challenges that may be placed in front of me” (CSPAN, 2009). With humble confidence, I acknowledged that I “fought my way to the top,” but that fight was only possible because of my determination, passion, and drive, and supports like my family, teachers, scholarship programs, and resources like the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program. I was determined to pursue a Ph.D. to give back to my country and impoverished urban communities across the nation.

During my junior and senior years, I began to cultivate my research interests in urban education and human development. I was specifically interested in the ways that black girls navigated urban school spaces, homes, and neighborhoods and what social and environmental factors motivated them to succeed. These collective experiences pushed me to pursue doctoral studies in American Studies and Women's Studies.

These programs have given me the needed tools to conduct socially conscious research and to give back to the community and school that I grew up in. My work aims to explore the complexities of every day urban life, share my story, and the stories of poor and working class, urban, black early adolescent girls as they navigate interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers, administrators, peers, and romantic and sexual partners in school, in their neighborhoods, and online.

## Chapter 3: Listening to Black Girls' Stories

### *Adapting Approaches to Listen and Co-Create Knowledge with Black Girls*

I aimed to create an in-school ethnographic and participant action research study that served as a “safe [social] space” where black adolescent girls could speak freely and discuss their understandings of their identities, concerns, and interests (Collins, 2000; Reid-Brinkley, 2008). I created a space that embraced black adolescent girls’ “every day talk” (Reid- Brinkley, 2008) to foster open and honest conversations about their interests and concerns. Throughout the study we discussed issues that affected the girls at home, in school, in their romantic relationships, and online communities. The girls shared stories about their life experiences, family economic struggles and pursuits, and their access to community resources that could help them meet their basic needs. They also shared how these factors affected their health and emotional wellbeing.

Many researchers have used ethnographic and participant action research approaches to examine the strategies that black girls use to navigate economically disadvantaged communities and to help them explore additional strategies that can help them thrive (Chin, 2001; Evans-Winters, 2005; Cahill et al., 2004; Brown, 2009; Sears, 2010; Cox, 2015). When researchers listen to adolescent girls’ perceptions of their own experiences and collaborate with them they can create cultural enrichment and life skills studying that truly address their needs (McIntyre, 2000). At the end of the ethnographic and participant action research study the last cohort of eighth grade girls told me that listening to each other’s stories helped them to realize that other girls had similar experiences. They noted that this helped them to gain a deeper level

of respect for one another. Even more they expressed that hearing their classmates' resilience strategies helped them to deal with extremely stressful situations and every day life challenges.

This dissertation hopes to highlight the importance of listening to black adolescent girls' perceptions of their own experiences and the resilience strategies that they use to navigate every day challenges while growing up in poor and working-class communities. Studies have shown that intergroup dialogue and story exchange can help youth and adults learn how to build communication and critical reflection skills, trust, and develop a greater sense of empathy for one another (Zúñiga, Lopez, Ford, 2012).

Intergroup dialogue aims to promote critical co-inquiry, consciousness-raising in regard to social inequalities, conflict transformation, and civic engagement for social change (Adams, 2007; Maxwell, Fisher, Thompson, & Behling, 2011; Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007, Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron Walker 2007; Zúñiga, Lopez, Ford, 2012). Ultimately these processes help individuals from similar and diverse backgrounds internalize others' challenges and resilience strategies while reflecting on their own (Murray and Zvoch, 2011; Narrative 4, 2018; Rodriguez, 2010).

Participant action research and intergroup dialogue provided me with the tools to foster an environment that encouraged participants to openly discuss their every day experiences, struggles, and accomplishments, and learn strategies to handle the complex situations that they faced. This allowed us to organically collaborate to

create peer mentoring communities of care and respect that supported the girls' diversity of opinions and ways of being.

Using participant action research allowed me to create an environment that served as a secondary home-space to the girls where they could express themselves with less risk for punishment from adults or judgement from peers. It also helped me to give the girls a space to discuss each other's mundane and extraordinary experiences, struggles, and accomplishments. Even more it provided them with a time and space to learn strategies to handle complex situations and manage their emotions. This approach allowed the girls to build rapport with each other and cultivate a community of care and respect.

As our trust grew as a group the girls asked more complex, personal questions. The girls often noted how they did not share many personal stories with their family and friends because they felt that they would be punished or judged. They primarily wanted to discuss their experiences with and questions about dating, body image, oral sex, sex, fears of pregnancy, STIs, HIV/AIDS, and their struggles to find safe and comfortable spaces to be intimate with their partners, sexual coercion, being cheated on, cyberbullying, sexting, online and in school slut shaming, love, self-love, loyalty, and heartache. They discussed their frustrations with limited gender and sex role expectations that their peers, romantic partners, parents, and teachers often had of them.

I worked to teach the girls to accept one another and show each other respect as they recounted their stories. This greatly minimized conflicts amongst the girls as they were able to see the similarities in each other's experiences and recognize

that they also wanted to be heard and not be interrupted by their peers. Curiosity allowed each girl to “respectfully and gently [focus] exclusively on their story as they safely revisited, understood and re-narrated their experiences” (Donoghue and Picher, 2015).

These experiences helped my girls to learn and practice empathy every time we met as they had to really listen to their peers’ stories without judging them, interrupting them, or getting too overwhelmed by others’ stories. Donoghue and Picher (2015) note that this approach can help youth “develop literacy storytelling skills, or simply listen to their stories without judgement.” More recently schools around the world are using relaxation and mindfulness techniques to provide youth who have and have not experienced ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) with the tools and the ability to be present and analyze how their thoughts influence their emotions and behavior.

Teachers and school practitioners can create school cultures that promote youth physical and emotional wellness during times of distress. Even if schools have not implemented socioemotional learning programs teachers can provide “comforting, non-punitive ‘time-out’ corners” in their classrooms and create sociograms (friendship maps) to help alienated students sit next to new students that might be more willing to be friends (Donoghue and Picher, 2015). They encourage teachers to report their knowledge of students who have experienced traumatic events/life circumstances in hopes that they can be assisted (Donoghue and Picher, 2015).

It was important for me to utilize participant action research (PAR) in addition to participant observation ethnography because it allowed me to use ethnographic methods that supported a peer to peer and adult to peer mentoring space. The principal noted that she wanted my research study to also serve as a peer mentoring study where the girls could discuss their life experiences and gain valuable advice about how to deal with social pressures and life challenges. understanding of their experiences that could not be gained by talking with school administrators, teachers, or parents alone. This prompted me to use participant observation ethnography paired with participant action research.

Participant observation ethnography provides researchers with opportunities to better understand the complexities of a group's world views and every day experiences navigating even the most seemingly mundane social situations, institutions, and communities (Caughey, 1982). This method allowed me to witness the girls' every day interactions with their peers, romantic partners, teachers, and parents in school and listen to their perceptions of the quality of these relationships. Even more it allowed me to better understand the strategies that they used to thrive.

I occupied multiple spaces and positions in the girls' lives so that I could have a clearer understanding of their every day experiences. Caughey (1982) calls for Americanists to “adapt rather than borrow the theoretical perspectives and methodological techniques of existing camps—and innovate new ones” (p. 230). He encourages American Studies scholars to push the boundaries of traditional fields such as Anthropology and Sociology to conduct ethnographies that are not rigidly

guided by particular theories and to use interdisciplinary methods to effectively collect data and bond with research participants.

I conducted a “‘strategic’ or ‘applied’” form of ethnography (Caughey, 1982, p. 243) and participant action research so that the girls could openly discuss their lives and provide each other with positive affirmations and various strategies to deal with their challenges. This blurring of theory, method, and praxis (Evans-Winters, 2005) allowed me to gain the trust of my research participants/mentees, their parents, school administrators, and faculty. Even more it helped me to learn about the girls’ perceptions of their needs and create adaptable and interactive activities and questions for our focus group sessions.

Caughey (1982) explains how American Studies scholars should embrace a “humanistic orientation to every day life” while conducting academic research (p. 239). This call for the study of every day life is also seen in the field of cultural landscape studies which focuses on the “history of how people use every day space” to create their identities and understand their cultural and social meanings (Groth, 1997, p.1). The notion of studying every day life was crucial to my study as I conducted fieldwork to observe how black adolescent girls from poor and working-class communities interacted and described their every day experiences in school, their neighborhoods, and online social networks.

During our meetings the girls described their experiences in Baltimore City neighborhoods and in the social places that they visited such as skating rinks, malls, family members’ homes, and in their own homes. Groth (1997) emphasizes the importance of studying cultural landscapes as it provides “better knowledge of

ordinary environments [that] can foster a deeper understanding of American people and American culture and can lessen the environmental dangers caused by people who cannot see and interpret their surroundings” (Groth, 1997, p. 2). These insights can provide community stakeholders, researchers, and practitioners with better understandings of the emotional, intellectual, and physical labor and resilience strategies that black girls utilize as they navigate their communities every day and their perceptions of their own experiences.

### *Proposing the Study*

I built rapport with the school’s administrators, faculty, and some students years before the start of the study since my cousins and I previously attended the school. During all of our matriculations at the school, my mother was very active in the school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) as she was our primary caregiver. Even more throughout high school, I occasionally visited the school to update my old teachers about my accomplishments. During my senior year of high school, I even completed community service hours serving as a teacher’s aide in the kindergarten classroom. These interactions made it easy for me to schedule a meeting with the principal and vice principal to pitch my idea and submit a proposal for the study. Although some of my old teachers still taught at the school, the school’s administrators were all new.

I was a bit of an outsider because I moved away four years before I began the study to complete my undergraduate career at the University of Maryland College Park. Even more, I lived in Prince George’s County, Maryland during the time of the study. My parents, the local news, teachers, school administrators, and my student

participants greatly informed my understanding of the neighborhood and city's social and political climate during that particular time.

When I proposed the ethnographic and participant action research intervention study to the principal of the school in August of 2010, I was excited because she noted that she wanted her female middle school students to have a dedicated space to share their stories, gain advice from me and their classmates without shame, stigma, or punishment. She was willing and motivated to find solutions so that the girls could feel valued and respected, but also so they could learn new techniques to balance the hardships of life, puberty, academic rigor, and possible romantic and sexual relationships that they may have entered.

I completed a fingerprinting and background check with the Baltimore City Public School System central office and an IRB protocol application with the University of Maryland College Park. I received permission from the school's principal to recruit middle school female students. During the first year of the study, I arranged a time with the school for me to meet with the sixth and eighth grade girls separately in the school auditorium during their free periods. I described my goals for the study, asked them what topics they wanted to discuss, and what activities they wanted to participate in. I took notes of their requests and asked the girls to fill out student assent and parent consent forms for the University of Maryland College Park IRB. I had to remind the students to return the forms several times before I received them back.

It was very challenging to connect with the girls' parents. I spoke with some on the phone, but others did not answer. The girls told me that their parents

often did not pick up phone calls for phone numbers that were out of the area since. My number was registered in Prince George's County, Maryland and they noted that their parents probably thought I was a telemarketer or bill collector.

After three attempts I asked the principal for advice. She noted that parents were more accustomed receiving one-page permission slips to inform them about studies and events. I decided to give participating families a one-page permission slip that outlined the partnership between me, my advisor Dr. Sheri Parks, the University of Maryland College Park, and Lakely Elementary Middle School.

She emailed me the school's official letterhead and I wrote a letter addressing sixth and eighth grade students and parents explaining that I was an American Studies Ph.D. student at the University of Maryland College Park, and an alumna of Lakely, who grew up in the community. I noted that I attended Lakely from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades and was inviting the girls to participate in a peer mentoring and research study where I hoped to learn and help the girls learn more about black middle school girls' life experiences while growing up in Baltimore City.

I stated that the study would provide a time and space in school where the girls could discuss their interests, goals and struggles, but also gain strategies to increase their self-esteem, maintain positive relationships, make healthy decisions, and achieve academic and economic success in the future. I shared that we would discuss, read and watch movies about: self-esteem, beauty, body image, health, wellbeing, age-appropriate sexual education, healthy relationships (with romantic and sexual partners, peers, family, and teachers), black girls' and women's representation in the media, how the girls used Facebook, social networks, and the internet, and the

importance of diversity, politics, and social justice. I emphasized that I would work hard to give the girls a comfortable environment to learn, talk, and have fun.

I explained how the principal and middle school vice-principal agreed to let me conduct the study in the school during the girls' (grade based) resource period every other Thursday from November to June and that we hoped the girls would stay in the study until they respectively graduated from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I asked students and parents to fill out and return the bottom half of the permission slip and their parent consent and student assent forms to the main office. I provided my name, phone number, and email address so they could contact me with any questions or concerns.

This was important because it allowed parents to quickly and easily understand the premise of the study. It also alerted them to look out for more forms that were coming. All of the students turned this form in very quickly. I was so relieved that this strategy worked and that I learned how to better connect with families.

Due to the late IRB form submissions, we did not officially start our study until November 2010. Nonetheless the school allowed the girls to consistently meet with me throughout late September and October after I received the one-page permission slips back from parents. This allowed me to facilitate icebreaker activities and discussions with the girls to build rapport. I learned their names and interests and gave them snacks like cookies, pretzels, and fruit.

### Contributions

The first year, I worked with 20 sixth grade girls and 24 eighth grade girls for an hour each Tuesday. During the second year the school asked me to work with

11 more girls from their incoming sixth grade class. At first the students were a bit difficult to work with because so many of the girls did not get along. I knew that I had to gain control of the room quickly if I wanted the study to go smoothly. At first, I used the tactics that my old teachers used to get students' attention. I turned the lights off and kindly but firmly requested that students put one hand in the air if they heard me ask for their attention.

Even though the principal was excited about our study, there was little room in the school for extracurricular activities, especially since we operated during the school day. At the beginning I was very excited as we were given our very own classroom. I decorated the room with artificial flowers and colorful poster boards. Unfortunately, we were only able to use the room for about 2 months, as administrators realized that they needed it for another academic study that they were starting.

We had to change rooms three times after this because they were needed to prepare students for state testing and the school's detention period. Although I completely understood the need to move, it was unfortunate because the rooms they moved us to were in very poor condition. Soon we consistently met in an old classroom that was being used as a storage room for dusty and unused textbooks. The room was poorly ventilated and had a musky odor. One student named Kalindra stated, "It's dirty in here! That's petty for them to make us come in here...the storage room." We had to open the windows every time we met. We often saw at least one roach or cockroach pass through the room. Although the girls were grateful to have a

space to discuss their lives, have fun, and gain advice, the girls noticed the poor conditions of the rooms and often verbalized how they felt disrespected.

On a few occasions the school administrators let us use the auditorium and library (before and after it was renovated). These rooms were more aesthetically pleasing. When the girls and I were allowed to use these rooms, they beamed with joy and pride. They always expressed that they felt like they were a part of an exclusive club when we gained access to these rooms. Over time the girls made the best of whatever room we used and found ways to express their identities, creativity, and stories to me and their peers.

The study aimed to create opportunities for girls to explore their experiences, world-views, feelings, and resilience strategies together. I always asked the girls to place their chairs (and sometimes desks) in a circle to resemble oval shaped Harkness tables (Phillips Exeter Academy, 2008). The Harkness method is a teaching strategy that arranges seats in an oval formation so that students face one another. Here teachers encourage students to engage in conversations with each other, ask each other questions, share ideas, and participate in constructive debates (Heskel and Dyer, 2008; Benjamin, 2010; Phillips Exeter Academy, 2018).

This method was very important because the girls were used to sitting with their desks in rows during the average school day. This positioned some of them in the very back of the classroom and others in the front closest to the teacher. Usually students who sat closest to the teacher were the primary individuals to speak up and share their ideas. Sitting in an oval formation encouraged all students to feel like equals and listen to each other's experiences.

The Harkness teaching method helped the girls build self-esteem, self-awareness, self-assertion, self-expression, and actively practice peer mentoring and conflict resolution strategies. I wanted the girls to recognize that they were co-creators of knowledge who could collaborate with their peers to learn valuable lessons and change their school culture. Over time more of the girls confidently spoke up, listened to their peers, openly supported each other's ideas, and constructively critiqued ideas that they disagreed with. This was of great importance because at the beginning of our study many of the girls did not show each other much respect during our discussions.

Our Harkness circles and activities provided a setting for the girls to mentor and advise each other (in addition to my guidance), to utilize conflict resolution skills, share positive affirmations, and bond more in their actual classrooms. This led to school administrator, teacher, and student reports and observations of many of the girls' increases in self-esteem, sense of belonging, and academic success. After each session I always asked the girls what topics they would like to discuss, what activities they would like to engage in, and what food they would like to eat. After taking note of the girls' requests, I allotted time for them to create dances, songs, beats, skits, artwork, arts and crafts during our meetings. We sang and dance, shared cookies, granola bars, fruit, candy, and stories, sisterhood, and love.

This was important because it acknowledged the value of the girls' ideas. It allowed them to practice advocating for themselves and expressing their interests, desires, and needs to their teachers and each other. So much of their school day and their lives was structured by adults who dismissed and punished them for verbalizing

how they felt. These activities also helped create an environment that showed the girls how to actively engage in self-care and community care through fun, play, creativity. These activities helped the girls to feel that it was safe to express themselves creatively and be more affirmed in revealing their identities to their peers without fear of ridicule.

The girls used play and creativity as resilience strategies in every day life as well. This included playing games, dancing, rapping, drawing, coloring, creating poetry, creating songs, writing books, performing spoken word, engaging in arts and crafts such as jewelry-making and t-shirt design, video-chatting, story exchange, and bonding with peers, family members, and romantic partners. The girls often used these experiences to build rapport and engage in community building. So much of their school day and their lives was structured by adults who dismissed and punished them for verbalizing how they felt.

I wanted the girls to learn that they could trust a reliable adult to create fun and engaging activities for them. I invested a lot of time into creating and facilitating our workshop. During the first year I met the girls every Thursday from late September to June. I commuted 45 minutes to Baltimore from my home in Prince George's County, Maryland and another 45 minutes driving back at the end of the day. Due to the cohorts' varying schedules, I met the eighth graders in the morning from 8:15 am - 9:15 am and the sixth graders from 1:30 pm to 2:35 pm on the same day. I usually interacted with teachers, administrators, and school staff for an hour during the gap period and then walked to my parents' home since they lived very close. While there I ate lunch, reconnected with my parents, learned about issues

facing Baltimore via the local news, completed readings for my graduate courses, and prepared for the next session.

While conducting the study I took written field notes during and directly after our focus group sessions. These described major events and conversation topics that emerged during our sessions, my memories of conversations that were not recorded, and my experiences and observations while sitting and moving throughout the school. Sometimes I had to wait in the main office for meetings with the principal and vice principal of the school and I overheard several conversations between parents, students, and office staff.

I listened to better understand what parents and students noted they needed from the school, challenges that female students faced in every day life, the ways parents and administrators identified and celebrated the girls reaching developmental milestones and academic achievements, and conflicts that emerged between the girls and how they were resolved. This provided me with a greater understanding of the daily life of the school and the challenges that administrators, staff, and families faced in helping students succeed. I also had the chance to visit the classrooms of teachers that I gained rapport with when I picked students up from their classes to go to the study.

At first, I used a digital recorder to record some sessions but then I switched to using an audio recorder application on my smartphone. This was important because although the girls and their parents agreed that our conversations could be recorded, the girls became visibly uncomfortable every time I took notes in my notebook or

placed the audio recorder on my desk. Their speech became stifled and they were more conscious about what they revealed.

They verbally acknowledged that they trusted me, but they were divulging personal information that some of them had not even shared with their family members or friends. They wanted to make sure that they could not be personally identified or get in trouble for the things they said. I informed the girls that they were being recorded on my smartphone before the start of each session, but it allowed them to feel more comfortable because they were accustomed to seeing cell phones in their every day lives and on their teachers' desks.

If teachers caught the girls using their phones during the school day they were immediately reprimanded. The teachers attempted to restrict student cell phone usage as much as possible as they viewed it as a major distraction from learning. Students often tried to loan their friends their phone if they did not have any cell phone "minutes" left, but this was difficult because those girls were often punished by their guardians if too many minutes, texts, or too much data was used.

Phones and prepaid minutes were a luxury to many of the girls. They used plans by Boost Mobile, MetroPCS, and Sprint that ranged from \$20-\$50/month. Parents mainly wanted the girls to have smartphones, so they could stay in contact with them as they traveled between school and home, but the girls often aimed to use them to stay in contact with friends and romantic/sexual partners.

### Transcription Process

I uploaded the audio files on my phone to my personal Google Drive account. I transcribed these interviews verbatim by using the playback function on Google Music Computer Application and typing what I heard on a Google Doc. I made sure to listen intently to all of the words that were being said by multiple girls in the group. I played back the files, read my transcription, and labelled and noted recurring themes in the girls' conversations until I was sure that I transcribed what the girls said correctly. I also created keys to understand the body language that I remembered accompanying a certain phrase from myself or participants. I even tried to transcribe phrases as phonetically accurate as possible to capture the use of Baltimorean vernacular and dialect.

Like Fetterman (2010) suggests, I had to listen to and transcribe audio recordings, analyze the meaning, and then explain the significance of the major themes that emerged in my conversations with the girls. I wanted to share the girls' stories as accurately as possible as to not add to the historic misrepresentation of black girls' voices. Ethnographers highlight the importance of considering the ethics one's research and best practices to respect and protect research participants (Caughey, 1982; Fetterman, 2010; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Callier, Hill, Waters, 2017). It was important for me to grapple with the struggle of theorizing about taboo topics such as black middle school girls' engagements with sex, dances, parties, family struggles, self-definition, rumors, relationships, school politics (with peer and teachers). These are all sensitive topics to discuss because of the girls' age, race, gender, class, and residential location.

When it was time to analyze my data, I used a “grounded theory” approach. First conducted a close read of the transcribed interviews without taking notes. Next, I read the transcript, identified important sections and recurring themes that emerged in our conversations by highlighting and selecting them in the Google Doc and typing my analysis in a comment which appeared neatly on the right side of the page. I did this several times. This allowed me to take note of the major themes that emerged from my data on a separate Google Doc. I then created 10 Google Docs separating the data by theme by copying relevant sections from the original document that I created. As I constructed theories about the school culture, the girls, the teachers, and my own experiences, I compared them to prevalent themes that emerged in my conversations with the girls and related literature on urban black girlhood and resilience strategies.

Major themes present in transcripts were as follows: love for parents, family issues, experiences at dances and parties, interests in hair and fashion, life dreams, community building, drug use, exposure to sex, porn, sexting, the lack of school and home based sexual education, physical and verbal fighting, cyberbullying, social media and technology use, limits on freedom of speech and agency, academic experiences, grades, and experiences with teachers, peer pressure, finding reliable friends, feeling misunderstood, romantic and sexual experiences, sexual desire, rape, and conflicts in romantic relationships. My arguments are rooted in this analytic process.

*Navigating the Role of a School Partner, Researcher, Mentor, and Friend*

While conducting research with the girls at Franklin Square, I was always extremely cognizant of my position as a 23 to 26-year-old, black female, first-generation college graduate, graduate student, and graduate instructor in the University of Maryland College Park Department of American Studies. I also served as a humanities teacher in the University's Upward Bound study for high schoolers who would be first-generation college students like myself. These positions helped me better understand what it meant to be a teacher and gave me a better understanding about how to work with the girls in the study. It also helped me to garner more respect from teachers at Franklin Square, some of whom were my teachers when I attended the school.

I had to straddle a fine line of being a researcher, teacher, mentor, and friend to the girls in the study, as well as a pseudo-colleague to the school's faculty. I took my role as a researcher and mentor seriously and realized that in order to gain and maintain the girls' respect I had to show them respect and commitment. We built a relationship where they could ask me any question that they wanted to. Bloom's (2010) methodologies helped me consider my approach to this ethnographic and participant action research study, which aimed to disrupt traditional research and participant power relations by utilizing intimate conversations and interactions with my mentees/participants.

How could I ask my research participants to reveal so much about the lives, when I would not be expected to do the same. As Villenas (2000) emphasizes, we are

written by the same story. I believed that it was important for all of us to have time and space to reclaim our stories and share the diversity yet similarities of our experiences. This method helped me to connect with my mentees/participants on various levels (as a researcher, teacher, friend, and big sister). Even more my position as a “stranger-friend-surrogate family” (Bloom, 2010) member helped me to gain my participants’ trust.

### The Power of Listening, Ethnography, and Intervention

Listening to and demonstrating that I valued the girls’ stories helped me to better understand the ways in which they navigated conflicts and built lasting friendships amongst peers. It also helped me to have a better understanding of the ways that drama emerged amongst the girls. It was clear that drama often arose for “no good reason at all” or because of conflicts that stemmed from economic struggles, poor or neglectful parenting practices. The consequences of engaging in “dramatic performances” can be observed at any site and are informed by the girls’ social understandings of femininity and respectability and protecting one’s reputation. Most of the girls all placed a lot of value on the ways that they represented themselves at school, in their neighborhoods, and online. Peer mentoring programs can help alleviate these issues in school. Increasing the girls’ opportunities to learn and practice socioemotional intelligence can help create school cultures of care and respect and reduce conflicts that may otherwise arise during class time.

This 2012-2013 cohort was my most easygoing and reflexive cohort and it was our second year together. I was unable to hold sessions as frequently as I did during the previous years. Due to work, family, and school responsibilities and the

girls' increased practice sessions for the Maryland School Assessment testing sessions (state required academic performance tests), actual testing days, and snow days, I went from meeting with the girls every other week to once a month. This made me nervous that they might have wanted something new. After I convinced myself that this was misplaced fear, I listened to what the girls actually had to say and played it cool.

The girls noted that the women who ran the Divas Mentoring Group that the school partnered with were in their mid to late 40s or 50s and that they did not feel that they understood what they were going through because of this age gap. Even more, the girls felt that the women did not make a conscious effort to connect with them on "their level." The girls described how they trusted me since I constantly showed that I cared about their every day lives and let them choose our discussion topics. They knew that I had not gone through many struggles even though I grew up in the same neighborhood as the school, but they felt that I still had a better understanding of their every day struggles and desires since I was a young adult.

When creating an ethnographic and PAR study for middle school girls, facilitators and mentors can connect with students by being open and honest about their intentions and asking youth what their interests, needs, and every day life experiences are. It is also important to remember that the study is for students, so the curriculum and agendas should be fluid and open to change (Evans-Winters, 2005; Brown, 2009; Sears, 2010; Brown, 2014). Being able to improvise and integrate certain themes, topics, and information into sessions that may shift based on the girls' needs. Here the girls described how a mentoring study called "Divas" was offered for

them to join, but their approach did not appeal to them. They expressed that they liked the study because I encouraged them to be themselves and share their stories without judgement.

Rochelle: Ms. Stephanie we was in this other little group...Divas thing. They asked us "Do you want to come here or not?" We said yes and they asked us "What's your honest opinion? Do you want to be in it or not? Do you want to come here or not?" The first time we said yes, but then we were like honestly...we said no. Then they got mad and she said come next time and see if anything change and you all can be out of here officially.

Me: What's the problem?

Mariah: Well they don't talk about things like we talk about in here...Don't you know how you ask us and let us pick the topic? They don't talk about stuff we want to talk about.

Kandice: And they are older people!

Mariah: They like in their 40s, 50s, late 40s. Don't you know how Ms. Brittany is probably like in her 20s... she talks to us, but she mainly writes stuff on the board...but the main person she gotta be at least 45. But they don't talk about stuff for kids. Like they ask us stuff that we don't know nothing about...you talk about stuff like relationship problems...you talk about stuff that is on our level... like..they keep asking us stuff like...

Rochelle: High level!

Me: Like what kinda stuff?

Mariah: Like for the past two times we went...the only thing they asked us about is what we want to do when we get older.

Kandice: And boring stuff that don't even matter!

Me: Oh that's what you mean?

Mariah: Yeah it's like they ask us every time and the only thing we do is sit around and talk about problems we got and for me it's not very interesting to see people talk about stuff like that...

Me: You wanna talk about the good stuff too.

Mariah: Yeah see the thing is you...you understand us ...your trusting

Rochelle: Like you understand us cause you're young and you've been through a lot...well you been in similar stuff to us!

Me: Thank you! I try! (I mumble and smile)

Mariah: It's been a long time since they've been through what we've been through.

Kandice: Yeah like a decade!

Me: (I laugh)

Mariah: Like two decades!

Me: How old are you all? Like 13? I only say it because you said 'like 2 decades' and you ain't even that old!

Mariah: I don't care (laughs)

Janay: We want to talk about what's going on in our lives!

Rochelle: Yeah, they don't want to talk about stuff like that! They keep talking about communication

Mariah: Yeah, they keep talking about communication...

Me: Like how to communicate better?

Mariah: Yeah to the people that we really don't talk to...

Girl: And it's a big group! Like they have 8th graders in there!

Mariah: And yeah, I don't feel comfortable telling those 8th graders stuff!

Me: Cause gossip spreads?

Me: Wow you've been here since Pre-K! Wow! That's crazy so ya'll got attached to this group?

Saraya: Even Yasmine been here since the 5th grade and she's attached to all of us!

Yasmine: (acts like she is crying tears of joy)

Mariah: Yeah like you separate us into different groups ... Like I like all the girls in here and we're all cool with one another! I really don't know those 8th graders!

Me: Naw I feel ya, and that's why I chose at the end to only work with ya'll group because I wanted ya'll to feel comfortable. Cause I didn't want to close it off to people in ya grade, but I do understand that you all have built a community here.

Celeste: Yeah like some of these girls been here since elementary school! I came from Stuart Hill, but that was back a long time ago I came in the third grade.

Sandra: Yeah, I came in Pre-K!

Here the girls expressed that they decided to stop attending the other ethnographic and participant action research study that was offered in the school because they felt that the facilitators did not value their interests, experiences, and stories. They stated that the facilitators did not listen to their suggestions for conversation topics and primarily wanted to discuss their "problems" and the importance of communicating with girls they did not like.

Although the girls discussed the challenges they faced in our group, they did so by choice. They shared how they wanted to focus on the positive aspects of their lives too. The girls also explained how they did not feel comfortable sharing their stories in the other group because they were worried about the eighth-grade girls spreading rumors about them. They emphasized that they felt I understood who they were, what they wanted, and what they needed because I was not much older than them and had similar experiences growing up in the community surrounding the school. Ultimately, they left the other group because they felt that the facilitators were pressuring them to stay and not listening to their concerns.

The girls wanted to end conflicts with their peers more quickly but did not know how. At the start of our study several members of each cohort considered each other as enemies. The girls belonged to different cliques that changed formation very quickly due to inner group arguments that were left unresolved. They noted that the arguments were often left unresolved because no one wanted to openly apologize for the rumors that they spread or the mistakes that they made. They noted that they were very aware of this phenomenon and did not like it. because it caused so much tension between groups.

They described this tension as drama which often led to verbal and physical fights in school and rumors spread online. They thought it was that it was immature to argue over rumors or differences of opinion and like it. Our study provided the girls with the space, time, and strategies to have diplomatic conversations about personal and social conflicts that arose. They described how they did not feel that they had a

loyal group of friends. They described how they wished it could be different, but it was clear they didn't know how.

The girls also expressed how the study coordinators invited all of the seventh and eighth grade girls to the mentoring group. This was problematic because the girls felt that there were too many students present for them to feel safe sharing their stories or advice with. They did not know them and did not trust their secrets being shared as rumors quickly spread around the school and online. The girls noted that they worked hard to cultivate relationships over time, as the girls that they trusted attended the school with them since elementary school.

Study coordinators can share the complex ways that girls build community. Rapport must be established with peers and facilitators over time. This is best done by all parties being given the space to safely be themselves. Although the girls noted that the facilitators encouraged them to improve their communication skills with people they did not really like, it seemed that the girls felt the facilitators were too forceful in their approach.

Adults must work to facilitate activities and conversations that help girls see commonalities amongst themselves and be invested in keeping each other's secrets. The girls' stories and experiences must be centered, and adults must acknowledge the girls' inherent agency and power in order for the girls to feel cared for and respected. The girls were frustrated that women only wanted to them to talk about their problems and career goals, but not their every day lives. The girls said they were happy that I spoke to them about the positive things and the complicated things in their lives, especially relationship issues. They also appreciated the fact that

I allowed them to choose the topics that they spoke about. This was very important to them as they were not able to do this in any other study or class in school.

The girls also discussed how they felt that their voices were policed in this study as they were reprimanded for using certain words, even ones that weren't curse words. The study leaders were invested in teaching the girls to be politically correct, instead of being real but respectful. The girls understood the difference. They were frustrated because they felt like they had to watch what they said and always be on guard.

#### *Using Participant Action Research and Play to Discuss Drama and Trauma*

During the study we used play as a learning tool that helped the girls practice modeling respect for their peers' full human experiences. When I first met with the girls to recruit them and also when I met them during our respective first meetings, I described my goals for the study, asked them what topics they wanted to discuss, and what activities they wanted to participate in. I took extensive notes. The girls stated that they wanted to have more fun in school because they felt like they "could not really express themselves." They said they liked playing games, dancing, rapping, drawing, coloring, creating poetry, creating songs, writing books, performing spoken word, engaging in arts and crafts such as jewelry-making and t-shirt design, video-chatting, telling stories, and "chilling" with family, friends, and romantic partners.

The girls noted that there was too much drama in the school and that they were more stressed out in middle school than they were in elementary school due to their increasing school workload and family responsibilities. Some of the girls had to

care for their siblings, make dinner, wash clothes, and help siblings with homework while tending to their own when their parents worked late nights. I realized that the girls were collectively seeking a dedicated space and time for self-care and community building.

As we continued our sessions I saw the way that the girls opened up to one another, laughed, and treated each other with more respect as we incorporated fun icebreakers and activities into our weekly discussions. They were able to find common ground and built more empathy for their peers over time. This allowed us to engage in thoughtful conversations and reflect on the resilience strategies that we used to handle every day stress.

Many researchers have begun to see the importance of incorporating play in trauma-based intervention approaches. Researchers and practitioners have created safe and calming school environments for traumatized youth using a method called PACE. This approach uses playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy and allows researchers, teachers, and practitioners to help students “just be” and “feel safe,” make meaningful connections with peers and adults, and “[re-narrate] their personal trauma stories in therapeutic ways” (Donoghue and Picher, 2015).

Although I did not know this approach existed when I conducted the ethnographic and participant action research study, it embodies the methods I used to build connections with the girls, have them build connections, and listen to their stories for my dissertation. This method has been called on to help black girls who experience trauma and were being unfairly punished in America’s public schools (Quinlan, 2016).

Research in neuroscience and evolutionary biology support trauma-based approaches like the study and PACE. Neurology shows us that our reactions to threats which usually manifest through “fight, flight, or freeze responses” are “natural survival-enhancing adaptations, and that trauma is the result of these responses being over-activated” (Donoghue and Picher, 2015). Neuroscience also confirms that the structure of our brains is strongly influenced by storytelling (Donoghue and Picher, 2015).

The girls shared their stories of poverty, violence, molestation, harassment, familial incarceration, and death, but also of joy, accomplishments, life goals, family traditions, and fun moments in their lives. Once they became more comfortable sharing these stories, they more openly discussed their conceptualizations of success, love, romance, intimacy, and sex and its importance in their lives. We engaged in conversations about familial, teacher, peer, and romantic relationships, sex, sexuality, sex trafficking, gender roles, racism, colorism, beauty standards, body image.

Deep introspective group conversations and debates helped the girls to reflect on their initial feelings and understandings of these concepts and events and reconsider and evaluate them as they are exposed to other ideas and ways of being by the group. Throughout our study this process occurred organically during our conversations. Giving youth the opportunity to speak openly with their peers and/or a trusted adult allowed them to really express ideas that are often policed in a school environment.

Participant Action Research (PAR) helped us to explore these often-silenced voices and issues as it utilizes ethnographic methods that value collective

investigation of an issue, a reliance on participants' understanding of the social contexts in which they live and the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem (McIntyre, 2000). This methodological approach paired well with the theory of Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought is a theoretical framework which describes the importance of black women in and outside of the academy being able to reclaim their stories, define themselves, and have their lived experiences be recognized as true, despite limited controlling images that exist in the public sphere.

These methodological approaches can foster girls' utilization of strategies to help them form and maintain peer, romantic, and familial relationships, navigate adversity, and celebrate their joys and accomplishments. Even more it helps youth build executive function and self-regulation skills that can help students stay engaged in school and have outlets to deter them from making risky decisions (Harvard, 2011).

Executive function skills are "a set of skills that relies on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control" (Harvard, 2011). Youth are not born with executive function skills, they are shaped and scaffolded over time by one's experiences and social supports. Neuroscience shows us that early adverse experiences can impair the development of youth's social, emotional, and moral development (Harvard, 2011). This research conveys the deep need for programming that centered youth's experiences and developmental needs.

Some of the girls described experiencing what many psychologists call adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as economic challenges, familial health

concerns, familial or personal drug abuse, or familial incarceration (Wade et al., 2014). Some girls even experienced or witnessed the trauma of sexual and verbal abuse, rape, molestation, and violence. The students who shared these noted that sometimes thinking about these traumatic experiences made them angry and frustrated, but those who could relied on friends and family to cope with these challenges. They seemed to be generally happy while in school and in the study, but they did not like it when too many girls discussed “depressing stories.” Some of these stressors such as trauma, neglect, poor connection with parents or guardians, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, mental health issues, bullying are classified as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

ACEs have been shown to increase the likelihood that youth will engage in riskier and potentially unhealthy behaviors throughout their life cycle, thus increasing their likelihood of experiencing poor academic achievement, incarceration, unemployment, poverty, chronic illnesses, disability, and early death as they age (Felitti et al., 1998; Shonkoff and Gardener, 2012; Bethell et. al., 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014; Wade et al., 2014; Bethell et al., 2015). Nonetheless ACEs are not absolute social determinants of poor health and poor economic outcomes in adulthood. Many students can overcome these obstacles when they are exposed to environments and social supports that model skills for resilience, self-awareness, self-control, self-management, and empathy (Donoghue and Picher 2015; Harvard, 2011; Wade et al., 2014; Payton et al, 2008; Evans-Winters, 2006).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines socioemotional learning as the “process through which children and adults

acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to: recognize and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively” (Payton et al., 2008).

CASEL asserts that socioemotional learning studies should tackle five key topics: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Payton et al., 2008; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; 2005; Devaney, O’Brien, Keister, Resnik, & Weissberg, 2006). CASEL states that in-school (during the school day) and after-school socioemotional learning studies are amongst the most effective studies for kindergarten through eighth grade students from all racial, ethnic, residential, and economic backgrounds to gain those aforementioned skills.

Whether taught by teachers in regular academic courses or by study facilitators in specific socioemotional learning classes, these studies were shown to help students improve their “socioemotional skills, attitudes about self and others, their connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance; they also reduced students’ conduct problems and emotional distress” (Payton et al., 2008).

These methodological approaches can foster girls’ utilization of strategies to help them form and maintain peer, romantic, and familial relationships, navigate adversity, and celebrate their joys and accomplishments. Even more it helps youth build executive function and self-regulation skills that can help students stay engaged

in school and have outlets to deter them from making risky decisions (Harvard, 2011).

Gaining executive function skills are needed not only to help close the widening academic achievement and socioeconomic gaps in our society, but to improve every day citizens' qualities of life in America. We must create school communities that inspire confidence and provide black girls and all students with opportunities to learn, practice, and improve upon socioemotional skills such as self-awareness, empathy, confidence, assertiveness, self-regulation, conflict resolution, and leadership. These skills can help students develop better interactions with teachers, administrators, staff, parents, peers, and romantic and/or sexual partners as they make the transition from childhood to adolescence.

This work confirms that teachers and all adults who interact with youth can work to “re-establish and build trusting connections” (Donoghue and Picher, 2016). It is never too late. More schools must offer outlets for students to learn and improve their executive functioning and self-regulation skills. These approaches can benefit not only the students who may act out, but the entire school community. Also, it recognizes that children are not born with these skills and adults have a large responsibility to scaffold youth to adapt to their environment, especially if they do not have many reliable social supports at home (Harvard, 2013). This approach can change negative assumptions about the inherently “socially deviant” nature of poor and working class black girls who grow up in tough neighborhoods.

Black youth from poor and working-class communities do not need to be ‘managed’ and should not be criminalized in their schools. Research shows that

adults can create meaningful connections with youth at any time through engaging in play, accepting youth for who they are without judgment, showing curiosity and interest in their students' stories, and modeling empathy for their experiences (Harvard, 2013; Donoghue and Pitcher, 2015; Payton et al 2008).

This dissertation will use the stories of poor and working class black early adolescent girls as a sounding board to emphasize the need for comprehensive and medically accurate socioemotional learning opportunities and sexual health resources in Baltimore, the nation, and the world.

## Chapter 4: Findings: Navigating Social Conflicts Resiliently

### *Resolving Peer Conflicts with Resilience Strategies and Emotional Intelligence*

This chapter focuses on the ways that black early adolescent girls in this study navigated, coped with, and overcame major every day stressors and social conflicts within their peer relationships. The major stressors that they identified included: feeling misunderstood, increased domestic and academic responsibilities as they transitioned into adolescence, conflicts with peers and adults, cyberbullying on popular social media sites, race, gender, and class stigmatization and policing at school, a lack of social supports, pressure to engage in sexual activities, physical and sexual violation, navigating structurally decaying neighborhoods, and community violence.

This chapter also explores connections between adolescent development, relational aggression, adverse childhood experiences, emotional intelligence, neuroplasticity, and resilience. This chapter explores the ways that they utilized self-assertion, storytelling, play, creativity, and community building as resilience strategies to cope with and overcome these challenges and other traumatic life events that they experienced in middle school.

The 2012-2013 7th grade cohort separated themselves into two groups of friendship circles that they called “cliques.” It is important to note that one third of the girls in this cohort did not belong to any designated clique and explained how they felt that they were friends with everyone. The girls in the defined cliques described these girls as trustworthy, nice, and quiet. One clique referred to themselves

as “The Cruddy Squad” and other referred to themselves as “The Swagger Girls.” The girls explained that they chose the name “The Cruddy Squad” because they were “direct and honest and did not care what anyone thought about it.” They emphasized that they were not using the colloquial definition of “cruddy” that means “ignorant” or “nasty,” and that they “changed it to apply to them.”

The “Swagger Girls” shared that they chose their clique’s name because they thought about themselves as “cool,” “calm,” “beautiful,” and “classy.” Members of this group were a little more reserved and passive aggressive than the members of the Cruddy Squad. They never yelled or cursed at members of the Cruddy Squad directly, but they rolled their eyes at them, mumbled insults with contempt under their breath, and spoke about members of the group in a condescending manner when they spoke privately with me.

One day two Swagger Girls members, Rose and Elizabeth, asked me if I could make some of the girls from the Cruddy Squad leave the study, because they “didn’t think that they would be ‘right’ for it.” They rolled their eyes and mumbled “they are so ghetto!” Swagger Girls members constantly dismissed and ignored Cruddy Squad members as they shared their stories during our focus group sessions. When the girls shared this sentiment with me, I thanked them for their concerns but explained that I wanted each girl to feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing their stories.

Solange was a friendly but reserved student at Lakely. She was respectful to most students but did also express to me privately that some girls might not fit well with the group. My field notes describe an instance where Solange, a member of the

Swagger Girls clique, wrote a letter to her classmate Sara while we were watching a documentary about black girlhood. She read the letter aloud to Sara and the other study participants during the question, reflection, and answer period of our focus group. Solange reveals her frustrations about Sara constantly moving between both cliques to maintain a sense of social acceptance and physical safety. Solange decided to let Sara know that everyone recognized that she used her position to spread rumors between the groups and that everyone wanted her to stop to keep the peace. I listened intently and observed without interjecting as Solange read her letter aloud to the entire group.

#### Field Notes

While we were watching the documentary, Solange must have written a page long letter about her frustration with Sara. After the film ended, Solange quickly raised her hand and asked me if she could read a letter that she wrote about every day “drama” that arose between the girls in the Swagger Girls and Cruddy Girls Cliques. She said that she “felt like Sara was the main girl going between the two cliques and sharing each group’s secrets and ‘business.’” Solange noted how she used to be very close with Sara, but she did not like how she started so many rumors. She was very calm and respectful while addressing Sara and tried to be as diplomatic as possible so that she would not hurt her feelings.

After Solange read her letter aloud, Sara seemed very defensive. At first, she denied that she actually spread the rumors. The other girls in the study tried to mediate this situation and calm Sara down because they could tell that Solange did not mean to appear insensitive or rude. She was just expressing a concern she had for

the wellbeing of all of the girls. Yasmine and Brittany (two members of the Cruddy Squad) led this conversation. They told Sara that they used to be really close to her too, but they saw her and heard about her spreading rumors as well.

Yasmine and Brittany admitted that “at one point or another they all spread rumors about one another, but they were working on not doing that anymore.” Once they admitted this in front of the entire group, Sara stated that she “just wanted to fit in with everyone and did not mean to hurt anyone’s feelings.” Yasmine and Brittany stated that they understood why Sara used that strategy but explained how it was hurting the larger group of girls. They also noted how boys in the school continued to spread rumors about the girls as well, which created a cycle of drama. Many of the girls noted that they preferred for the rumors to stay amongst the girls.

After Solange spoke the girls had a very calm discussion noting that they wanted to be friends with Sara. They verbally agreed that they “needed to stop spreading rumors between the two groups because it caused too much ‘drama’” amongst the girls in their class. They expressed a need and desire to defend their reputations, but they were also able to openly acknowledge the mistakes that they made in the past.

Solange, Yasmine, and Brittany used self-assertion, storytelling, and community building as resilience strategies to face this conflict with their peers’ head on. Solange was assertive enough to voice their opinions about the “drama” that shaped the girls’ experiences and how she felt they could create more caring and respectful peer interactions. Since Solange was respected by many of the participants in the study she promoted an open, honest, and caring conversation which helped her

peers feel comfortable enough to discuss their perceptions of how conflicts arose and the best ways to possibly resolve them.

When Solange read her letter to Sara and the rest of the girls in the study, she utilized storytelling as a resilience strategy. She stood up to Sara but also recognized her own and her other peers' shortcomings. This was important because her tone and language made it clear that she shared this story and her feelings in hopes of building stronger bonds between the girls and not to shame peers who were known to spread rumors. She seemed to recognize that girls who primarily spread rumors between cliques wanted to ensure that they always had a friend group base as peer bonds were so mercurial.

She saw that spreading rumors only made the division between cliques wider and would cause the girls to continue arguing and physically fighting. She wanted peace. Her bold statement helped her peers quickly and collectively verbalize their perceptions of the conflict and began the process of resolving these tensions during our session. Solange's courage, confidence, self-expression, and altruism helped her to utilize resilience strategies that helped the majority of participants in the focus group overcome this problematic social issue.

This conversation ultimately set a precedent for the girls' approaches to interacting with each other as they settled future disputes. They learned that they could calmly and safely address each other and engage their peers in tough conversations when conflicts arose. They also learned that they could work to solve conflicts peacefully on their own without adults. As the girls became more accustomed to voicing their concerns with each other in a more respectful, but honest

manner, the easier it was for them to engage in challenging conversations that addressed their publicly and privately known intergroup conflicts in our future sessions.

### *Emotional Intelligence Builds Resilience*

Emotional intelligence can be defined as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills that every individual has the potential to cultivate (Goleman, 1998). Emotional intelligence is also a form of social intelligence that allows individuals to observe their own thoughts and emotions to guide the direction of their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Salovy and Mayer, 1990).

Individuals can learn about their emotions by speaking about them (Salovy and Mayer, 1990). Understanding one's own and others' emotions is important because they affect our psychological, physiological, cognitive, motivational and experiential systems (Salovy and Mayer, 1990; Mayer, DiPaolo, & Salovey, 1990; Mayer, Salovey, Caruso & Sitarenios, 2001; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008).

Understanding one's own and others' emotions can "potentially lead to a transformation of personal and social interaction and enriching experience" (Salovy and Mayer, 1990, p. 186). The girls in the study often shared how much better they felt after exchanging their stories and expressing their feelings once they built rapport with one another.

Like resilience, emotional intelligence, includes flexible planning (the ability to adapt to unexpected changes), creative thinking (maintaining a positive mood to create new and fun opportunities to overcome challenges), mood redirected attention (the ability to observe one's emotions and refocus their attention on the

things that matter the most to them), and motivating emotions (harnessing one's feelings to encourage them to carry out a personal challenge) (Salovy and Mayer, 1990).

Lerner, Dowling, and Anderson (2003) note that resilience can be understood as the use of critical mindedness (harnessing self-awareness and courage to protect oneself from discrimination), active engagement (using agentic decision-making that supports one's beliefs, desires, and goals), flexibility (the ability to adapt to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical situational demands), and communalism (the desire for independence while creating caring bonds with peers).

The literature suggests that using emotional intelligence can place individuals at an advantage for solving problems adaptively (Salovy and Master, 1990). These skills can be learned, practiced, and cultivated at any time in the life cycle because the brain is placid. Neuroscience suggests that neuroplasticity allows all humans to create new neural connections after learning novel information or being exposed to different behaviors (Shaffer, 2016). When individuals are exposed to new ideas, new thought patterns can emerge which can increase their chances of changing their actions, and in this case approaches to overcoming challenges by changing habits (Shaffer, 2016).

The literature suggests that socioemotional learning opportunities such as cognitive therapy and meditation can enhance humans' wellbeing and life experience over their lifespan (Dariotis, Mendelson, and Blanchard, 2011; Davidson and McEwen, 2012). Advanced understandings of the links between positive psychology and neuroscience suggest that schools, parents, and community members can foster

environments where youth can better assess their life challenges, strengths, resources, shift their mindsets, and take actions that can help them thrive throughout their lifetimes (American Psychological Association, 2008).

*Black Girls Navigating the Drama of Middle School*

One day I asked the girls if they liked middle school. Many of them said yes and quickly shook their heads up and down happily. In the midst of the smiles, one girl hesitated to join the consensus and suddenly yelled out “but there’s too much drama.” Immediately the other girls shook their heads in agreement and almost collectively sighed “YESSSS,” as if they had forgotten about this stress momentarily.

The girls started having side conversations about recent examples of the “drama” that they experienced, so I quickly asked Kandice what she meant by “there being too much drama.” I wanted her to describe the ways that drama operated in her class specifically. She passionately said the following:

Kandice: There’s so much drama ...the boys keep startin’ stuff with the girls, spreading rumors between us...then the girls are always trying to find out if the rumors are true.

Me: Oh so the boys start the problems...what do they say?

Kandice: They’re always talkin’ ’bout some girl doin’ something with some boy, or that some girl was talkin’ about another girl in the class. (The other girls watched and joined in on our conversation through forceful vocalizations of “YUPPP” and “YEAH”).

Me: Do y’all believe them? (In reference to the boys)

Most of the Girls: NOOOO!

Kandice: Well some of the girls do...it depends on what they say...I don't like when they put my name in stuff. I always end up getting in trouble!

This early conversation shows that the girls identified the boys as direct “instigators” of conflict. They “started stuff” (initiated conflicts) by creating and spreading lies. Many of the girls noted that they did not like these rumors because it caused conflict between the already tenuous female peer relationships within their grade. Even more these rumors caused divisions between girls in school, in their neighborhoods, and online.

The girls described “drama” as a social conflict that could emerge between two or more individuals. Marwick and Boyd (2011) note that drama can include jokes, sarcasm, and performative play-fights (pg. 8). Nonetheless the girls’ actions conveyed that drama, rumors, gossip, and physical fighting still cause tensions amongst students and adults at school. Drama symbolizes this lack of trust that exists between students, teachers, and peers in middle school. Often this drama emerged because of rumors about girls’ participation in romantic and sexual relationships.

The girls’ theorization of “drama” is highly related to the subtle yet aggressive forms of social interaction between youth in their peer networks. When using a Human Development approach to examining drama, some may define it as a complex, yet sometimes subtle social conflict (Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003). Studies have found that relationally aggressive and victimized youth often develop more maladaptive internalizing problems such as depression, acute personality disorders, unbalanced eating patterns, (Crick, et al., 1999; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003) and psycho-social adjustment problems such as asocial behavior, loneliness, hostility, and

peer exclusion/rejection (Crick 1996; Crick, et al., 1999; Murray-Close, Ostrov, Crick, 2007).

Previous studies on relational aggression and victimization have primarily focused on American school districts that are comprised of predominantly white middle-class male and female youth, with smaller racially diverse, middle-class populations. Although these studies are helpful, my research hopes to inform future studies in American Studies, Women's Studies, Black Girls' Studies, and Human Development. This interdisciplinary effort requires using the theory of intersectionality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009) to analyze how race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), location/ region, and age/ grade level may affect early adolescent black girls' experiences with "drama," relational aggression, and victimization over time.

There is a small amount of research that has emerged specifically that examines low-income, urban black American female and male students' experiences with aggression and victimization in schools in the North/South Eastern Atlantic (Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003; Sullivan, Farrell, & Kliewer, 2006; Putallaz et. al., 2007; Goldstein, Young, Boyd, 2008). This is particularly important as social context and student socialization will greatly influence the various ways that students express forms of relational and social aggression (Putallaz et. al., 2007).

Relational aggression and conversely victimization are characterized by attempts to eliminate threats to previously established relationships through the use of harmful acts. Some examples are: telling secrets, gossiping, manipulating others, and directly/indirectly excluding peers from social activities (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995,

1996; Crick, et al., 1999; Murray-Close, Ostrov, Crick, 2007). Research shows that children from low socioeconomic statuses (SES) have increased chances of expressing overt aggression (direct physical/verbal aggression) than their student counterparts from higher SES backgrounds (Crick & Dodge, 1994). This is often the case if students have suffered from ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) as previously noted.

Although these examples show the importance of controlling for students' racial, gender, socioeconomic status, and regional background, it also should encourage scholars to critique the measures used to gain certain information. Scholars should be careful to not make general assumptions about how identity categories will influence individual's actions in their social worlds, but to look for the complexity and variability within these performances.

Using an intersectional framework and a methodology of listening (Apter, 1990; Brown and Gilligan, 1992) helped me challenge certain areas of traditional human development literature on relational aggression and share my black early adolescent female participants' descriptions of their everyday experiences and struggles. Comparing the girls' description of drama to relational aggression is important because it provides a way to examine the complex ways that black girls form, maintain, and dissolve friendships and relationships in their schools and neighborhoods. It also provides a lens to observe how experiences as an aggressor, "drama starter," "drama queen," or victim may affect girls' socioemotional and physical development, and academic success.

## Sharing Stories for Trauma and Resilience

Yasmine was very self-reflexive and often tried her best to articulate her feelings to the rest of the class no matter how controversial or depressing her ideas may be. She perfectly described one way that “drama” and relational aggression can negatively affect some girls’ socio-emotional and psychosocial development. In this conversation Yasmine updates her classmates and me about the progress that she made with her therapist.

Yasmine: They know but you didn’t know...I started a therapy session with my therapist and my last session was yesterday...and she was like...telling me...like don’t let those same little girls’ lies...get to me...don’t let the same one little boys get on my nerves. She just...like...She said that I had a breakthrough...’cause...like I usually get mad when somebody say something to me or say something about me...but to be truthful I don't really care no more...cause she said that the whole world gonna talk about me once in a while.

Me: That's a good point!

Yasmine: But the whole world not gonna be brave enough to say it to my face the whole entire time...so she said don't let the same stuff get to me...the same lil’ girls and little boy and she said if I’m in a conflict with my friends or like drama queens and all of that ...boys...I had a journal and I wrote all my feelings down she still will collect them like...my journal and she will collect them at the end of the month..”

Here, Yasmine used our focus group session as a secondary therapeutic space. She felt comfortable enough to share the fact that she went to therapy to help her cope with drama going on in school (and later she described issues that she experienced at

home). Yasmine was not the only girl in the study who shared that she attended therapy or other mental health service providers in the city or the school.

Although quite common, these discussions are not “normalized” in the space of the school. There is a history of therapists, social workers, and school officials pathologizing black women and girls in these institutional settings (Pastor et. al., 2007). These stories still invoke sympathy and empathy from girls who listen to these stories. The girls already knew which students had regular meetings with the social workers and therapists during or after the school day, but usually did not tease each other about it. Many revealed that they also visited a therapist before, but others just had empathy for their situation.

The girls all respectfully listened to Yasmine as she spoke indirectly to the girls about the impact that their “dramatic” social environment and actions had on her. Moreover, she stated that she also attended therapy because of the struggles she faced at home, particularly her parents’ divorce and her feelings of being neglected. She calmly, but somberly described how she used to cut herself before she began therapy because she was raped as a child and was recently almost raped again in the previous month by the same family friend, who was just released from jail.

She described journal writing and venting through discussion as useful resilience strategies. They helped her deal with the drama of stressful school events and trauma of past life experiences. West (1995) hopes that therapy can provide this safe space for black girls and women to step outside of oppressive gender roles and strategize ways to gather community resources (in the family, church, and community). Using these strategies can disrupt limited cultural expectations of black

women's roles and build new healthy and dynamic relationships with those whom are dependent on their assistance. I was grateful and appreciative of Yasmine's strength for sharing her story with me and the girls, as it gave us further insight into the struggles that some of the girls in our study faced at school and at home.

### Fighting for Respect

The girls' stories revealed that they did not have many in school opportunities to practice reflecting on, analyzing, or managing their emotions. Conflicts were usually resolved through forced meetings in the principal's office after verbal arguments and physical fights. I had to break up two physical fights between girls in two different cohorts of the study. The following excerpt from my field notes and analysis explains the ways that three students from the 2011-2012, 7th grade cohort used self-assertion (verbally and physically fighting to stand up for themselves) and storytelling (exchanging stories of their experiences) as resilience strategies to resolve a conflict among peers. Although one of the girls who participated in the fight was not present, her friends were there, and they engaged in a very insightful conversation.

### Field Notes

As I opened the gymnasium doors to take the girls to our meeting room, I found a crowd of students surrounding two students who were a part of the study, Felicia and Rochelle. The girls were yelling and cursing at one another. Rochelle yelled "your house gave me, Tashae, and Dominique a rash. You shouldn't be inviting other people over when your house isn't clean."

When I heard this, I cringed. This was one of the worst possible public insults. I was even more shocked because the girls in the study usually did not speak to each other that way. One second later I saw Felicia charging and swinging at Rochelle and Rochelle tried to fight back. Felicia was a more experienced fighter, Rochelle did not seem to have a chance. The gym teacher and I immediately ran toward the crowd and made our way to the two girls. The gym teacher vigorously pulled Felicia off of Rochelle. The other girls who were members of our mentoring study pulled Rochelle away.

After asking Rochelle if she was okay, I quickly tried to calm Felicia down as she wanted to start fighting again. Felicia: “Ms. Stephanie she called my house and mother dirty. They all claim they got rashes on their arms and faces after staying at my house last weekend, but I don’t know where else they been. They didn’t get those rashes at my house! They have NO right to call me out like that in front of everybody! I can’t stand those bitches! All they do is lie!”

This was an example of Felicia using self-assertion and storytelling as a resilience strategy. These tactics allowed her to explain how she felt publicly and embrace her feelings of betrayal. I tried to calm Felicia down and get her to come to our session with Rochelle and the other girls, but she did not want to come. She angrily yelled, cried, and ran to the bathroom. I could tell that she would not be coming to our session that day. She described feeling humiliated, angry, and upset with the girls who she thought were her closest friends.

Felicia’s uniform and shoes were often extremely ragged and dirty and her dreadlocks were usually dry and matted. Nonetheless, her peers seemed to respect

her. They called her “the queen of comebacks,” as she was a master jokester and comedienne. Most days she used play and creativity as resilience strategies to deal with her challenges and build community with her peers. She often created danced, played drums on the desks, created rap beats and sang songs. Felicia was respected and sometimes feared by students and teachers because she exuded so much self-confidence and self-awareness. She was very assertive and often publicly declared that she “was not one to be messed with” so most girls did not challenge her to fights. She owned her status as a tough girl who never hesitated to fight, get loud, show “attitude” (i.e dissatisfaction with a situation), or tell you how she really felt. This particular moment truly upset her because she felt betrayed by her closest friends. She felt that they publicly shamed her, her mother, and the quality of her home life. It was clear that their behavior was unacceptable to her.

To average spectators who witnessed this fight, it may have seemed like a “Black Girls Fight in Baltimore Middle School” video that might be posted on World Star Hip Hop. World Star Hip Hop is a content aggregating video blog that was created in 2005; the site averages 1.1 million visitors a day. The site often features public fighting caught on tape, music videos, and movie trailers, etc. The viewers would likely make comments stating that these girls were “too ghetto” and in need of “better home training.” If the video did not capture what was said before the fight, some might make assumptions that the fight was about a boy, a negative comment about one of the girl’s clothes, hair, looks, or body image. A human development researcher may label the girls as relationally and physically/overtly aggressive, controversial, rejected, pathological, violent, and socially deviant.

Relational aggression is defined by behaviors that threaten to or do aim to damage interpersonal relationships (i.e. threatening to end a friendship, manipulation of peers for personal gain, social exclusion as a punitive measure, spreading rumors) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Physical aggression is defined by behaviors that threaten to or that do inflict physical harm (i.e. intimidation, hitting, pushing, etc.) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Controversial children are defined as strategically aggressive to intentionally cause harm to another but avoid retaliation and gain the respect of peers (Putallaz et al., 2007).

Some scholars assert that rejected children may provoke reactionary aggression/violence due to a lack of skillfulness and/or social competence (Putallaz et al., 2007). From a Human Development perspective, Felicia may have been labelled as an aggressive and rejected adolescent with poor social adjustment skills who reacted to the situation in an immature or “unskillful” way.

My conversations with Felicia after the fight revealed that she fought Rochelle to protect her own and her family’s honor and reputation. Students’ use of physical force and/or verbal attacks to protect their social standing may not seem to be a resilience strategy or a productive, respectable, or legal solution to researchers, teachers, administrators, or staff, but it was one that allowed Felicia to publicly express frustration and anger in response to her friends’ public accusations that would be spread throughout the whole school. Students may be more prepared to find other conflict resolution strategies if they are provided with engaging socioemotional learning opportunities in school.

## Investigating the Root of the Conflict with Participant Action Research

In “Community Meaning About Violence, School, and Community,”

McIntyre (2001) notes that there are three essential aspects of most Participant Action Research projects: (1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem, and (3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem. These aims are achieved through collective investigation, education, and action throughout the research process. This research method allowed me and the female group participants to analyze their interests and concerns. Establishing a close bond and rapport with the girls allowed me to see and learn that there was so much more to understand in this moment than just the fight. My field notes describe how we used Participant Action Research to explore the root of the conflict together and the girls’ perceptions of their own resilience strategies, experiences, desires, needs, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships.

### Field Notes

When we arrived at our designated classroom, the girls immediately wanted to discuss the reason that the fight started. I could see that they needed to have this conversation and wanted to resolve their issues. We organically spoke about what caused the fight, their emotions, and what they could do to prevent and/or manage similar conflicts in the future. The three girls who attended Felicia’s sleepover shared that they stayed at her house during the day and overnight for a sleepover.

They noted that they were apprehensive about staying at Felicia's home as it was not very clean. The girls noted that it looked like someone threw trash around the living room and kitchen. They said they saw roaches running on the floors, several unwashed dishes in the sink, and dirty clothes that were strewn across Felicia's room. They said that they did not want to leave because they did not want to seem disrespectful.

Felicia was one of their best friends, but two days after staying at Felicia's home, they all had to go to the doctor to get medicine for their rashes. They said that their parents were so upset with them for staying in her home and not calling them. Their parents were also upset at Felicia's mother for not keeping a clean environment for Felicia to live in and for their daughters to visit and play in.

It was challenging to engage in this conversation because we all walked a thin line of talking about Felicia and her family when she was not there to state her case. I reminded the girls of the study's purpose and mission: to maintain respect for individuals in our group, to stick to the facts of what happened to cause the fight, and to express their feelings and frustrations without malice.

The girls ended the session by brainstorming a way to apologize to Felicia. They acknowledged that they should not have talked badly about her in front of other classmates in gym. They stated that they were just so mad about the situation that they felt that they had to "let it out" and tell others what happened. Here the girls described the need to express their frustration with Felicia as they felt that their health and wellbeing was compromised. They were shocked that Felicia did not see a problem with inviting people over when her home was not clean.

Using Participant Action Research approaches allowed the girls to speak about and work through those issues together. Here the girls used self-assertion, storytelling, and community building as resilience strategies to strengthen pre-existing friendships and foster a community of care and respect. The girls' willingness to share their stories and brainstorm solutions under a participant action research model helped them to cultivate new resilience strategies and build on previous emotional intelligence skills to better deal with the challenges and drama that they faced in middle school.

### Fighting to Forge Friendships

Building community and friendships were key resilience strategies used by the girls to celebrate and cope with the stresses of everyday life. Trusted friends were very important as they offered a source of stability for the girls in a social environment that was very mercurial. The girls realized that their friendships were ephemeral and could quickly end with one disrespectful word that was uttered or posted online. Friendships often emerged when someone demonstrated that they would risk their own safety or reputation to help someone else gain the respect they deserved. Kelly's story reveals the intricacies of the girls' community building strategies. Here she shares how her best friend Olivia stood up for her when other girls threatened to fight her in the cafeteria one day.

When I first met Olivia, she was all nice to me and stuff and when I was about to get banked (i.e. beat up) that's how we became best friends...they tried to bank me over a fruit cup at lunch! They said, 'can I have it' as I was about to throw my tray in the trash and I didn't hear what they said. They started fussing at me saying that I heard them and knew that they wanted it...and that I threw it in the trash on purpose and stuff. And when we went outside Olivia was the only one right there (saying) 'whoever try to hit her,

I'm fighting them too.' Like that's stupid to get banked over a fruit cup so that's how we became best friends! I used to always be like 'Olivia why you always mug people?' Olivia used to, but she never mugged me!"

Kelly's story shows that she and Olivia were able to build a strong relationship because Olivia demonstrated her willingness to risk her own safety and reputation so that Kelly would not be bullied by girls at their school. When recounting this story, it was clear that Kelly was inspired by and respected Olivia's kindness and bravery.

Her account of Olivia's character and actions also conveys the complexity of black girls' identities and resilience strategies. On one hand Kelly described Olivia as someone who was very nice, but also someone who was self-assertive enough to "mug" (i.e. intimidate others with a tough facial expression) a group of bullies at school. Here Olivia used self-assertiveness to show others that she was ready to defend herself and those she cared about. This strength was recognized by the bullies at school and they backed down.

The girls often noted that if bullies felt that someone was too nice, they perceived them as weak and tried to take advantage of them. Olivia decided that she could reveal the complexity of her identity at school in order to protect herself. She was committed to standing up for justice and showing her peers that she could be nice and strong at the same time.

#### Fighting to Protect Reputation

On another occasion, three students Felicia, Malia, and Camille shared that they "got banked" while fighting a group of neighborhood girls who spoke badly about their friend who had a child with a boy that one of them liked on Facebook. The

girls in the study were winning the fight at first and then the girls that they were fighting called their cousins to help since she was losing.

Felicia, Malia, and Camille were the toughest girls in the focus group and had very dominant personalities, so the fact that they told us that they actually lost a fight showed that they were very comfortable and considered us friends. They were not embarrassed and in fact appeared to be exhilarated to share their story. They were proud of themselves for standing up for their friend and for also being strategic enough to get away before being hurt too badly.

Once the girls in the study started losing the fight, they tried to flee the scene as they did not want to get caught or arrested by the police. The girls strategically decided to fight, but also knew when they needed to stop in order to protect their health, safety, and freedom. The girls story suggests that standing up for their friend allowed them to show their loyalty and increased the chance that they would have someone to protect them if they ever needed help during a fight. In this instance, Felicia, Malia, and Camille were only concerned about protecting their friend's reputation, not their own.

Felicia: We got banked yesterday! It was crazy! We got banked because this girl wanna talk about my homegirl Kandace because she got a young baby! Don't play with her... she got the boy!

Me: How old is she?

Felicia: I don't know.

Malia: Shanae threw a brick at my face.

Felicia: Remember Shawna

Malia: She threw a brick at my face.

Felicia: She had boots on kicking!

Malia: They didn't do any damage though!

Camille: I was supposed to be cooking but they were fighting across the street from my house.

Malia: They was taking too long... I couldn't wait till police come...cause we were in the wrong!

Me: So, you started it?

Malia: Yeah cause the things she wrote on Facebook...if you know what she wrote!

Me: Oh, so it started on Facebook?

Malia: Yeah so we was beating her and before she was all scared to come out of the house and then when her cousins came she started getting hype. Then they...Took a brick and hit that lady with it. I was gonna beat the blank outta her!

Felicia: And the lady was like wassup!!??

Me: How old are these girls?

Malia: They were like 15 and 16!

Me: So, they were in high school?

Malia: Naw they in middle school. They just dumb! (Girls in study laugh). Then LaLa said put ya shirt up u gonna ... (pretends as if she is checking for gun). Curly was like 'Wassup!' (i.e. 'What's Up) and I said guurrrll (i.e. girl) Wassup? (i.e. 'What's Up) She looked at my niece and she was really swinging hands (acts out fighting). I felt so bad!

Me: So, what's a way to get out of that (i.e. situation).

Camille: I choose not to fight! I'm not gonna fight nobody, cause everybody I can't beat!

Me: You pick your battles!

Camille: Yeah, I'm not gonna fight no big person! Like my sister and she beat the crap outta me!

Malia: I'll fight when I have to...but if somebody call me out then words don't hurt me...but if they in my face saying they wanna fight...I'm gonna pluck 'em! If they cut me first...don't you eva in ya life cut me off (says to Felicia jokingly)!

Malia described a girl throwing bricks at her and Felicia described another stomping her but they proclaimed that it did not do any damage to their bodies. They noted their loyalty to their friend, as they stayed as long as they could before the police would come "since they were in the wrong."

When I asked Felicia how old the girl they were fighting for was, she didn't know. Felicia considered her as a "home-girl" and was willing to fight for her. The girls' participation in the fight suggests the value that the girls place on loyalty. The girls were building alliances, because they knew that one day they themselves might be in a fight and need help.

When I asked the girls how this fight might have been prevented Camille stated that even though she fought, sometimes she chose not to fight, and she picked her battles. Camille was very short and very petite. Although she had a big personality, she knew her limits.

Camille: I'm not gonna fight no big person like my sister...and she beat the crap outta me."

Malia: "I'll fight when I have to, but if somebody call me out then words don't hurt me. If they in my face saying they wanna fight I'm gonna pluck em. If they cut me first... don't you eva in ya life cut me off."

Malia's statement seems a bit contradictory but if you pay close attention you can hear a subtle nuance. Although she noted that bullying words did not really matter, the way that a potential rival approached her did. The context of the situation determined whether words were fighting words or not. It is important to note that a small number of students openly discussed using fighting as a resilience strategy with pride. Although most girls did not state that they used fighting frequently to resolve social conflicts, our focus group conversations suggest that they would fight someone if they had to protect themselves from someone they cared for. The female participants in the study had a wide array of experiences and strategies to deal with the social challenges they faced, fighting was just one.

#### *Why Girls "Act Out": Feeling Misunderstood*

When girls at Lakley felt misunderstood by peers or adults they would often "act out" (i.e. express themselves through yelling, cursing, or physical violence). They "acted out" in similar ways to both peers and adults who they perceived as misunderstanding them or showing them disrespect. The literature suggests that school cultures fueled by hostility, frustration, and distrust often cause students to act out in class (Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999; Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015). The girls described how acting out provided them with outlets to protect themselves against disrespect from peers and adults and publicly share their frustrations when they felt that no one was listening. When the

girls felt verbally disrespected by another peer or adult they often said, “I don’t know who she think she’s talking to. She’s not going to talk to me like that!” The girls usually acted out in response to a perceived social or physical threat.

The girls noted that they did not feel that there was a hierarchy of who deserved more respect based on age. In fact, they spoke up and acted out to resist the age and class-based respectability politics that emerged in the school. They spoke up and “acted out” to let the teachers know that they would not be disrespected. They saw themselves as worthy of the same dignity and respect as their peers and the adults in the school. When peers and adults addressed them respectfully the girls responded with the same level of respect.

Many of the girls in the study described how they felt that their teachers and peers did not care about them and always judged them. The girls often said, “She don’t know me!” Here girls were saying that their teachers and peers should not judge or criticize them because they did not know what type of person they really were, their experiences, challenges, passions, goals, or accomplishments. Some girls had legitimate reasons to be upset. They noted how they were often talked down to and disrespected at home, in school, and online. They stated that this often made them feel like they needed to stand up for themselves in their everyday encounters with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and strangers. One student, Leticia frequently stated that she felt she had to “show people how to treat [her].” Here Leticia explained that she had to fiercely advocate and stand up for herself to show others that she would not allow them to control her life. This sentiment was commonly expressed amongst

the girls in the study, but they all were at different stages of their self-assertion journeys.

The literature suggests that black early adolescent girls tend to experience increased levels of stress due to increased domestic responsibilities and socioeconomic status as they get older (Ladner, 1971; Chin, 2001, Guthrie et al., 2002; Evans-Winters, 2005; Brown, 2009; Cox, 2015). Many of the girls in the study also explained that they were a bit frustrated and overwhelmed by the vast amount of adult responsibilities that they had to tend to in addition to increased expectations of academic rigor as they entered middle school. Some of the girls shared that they had trouble finding balance, especially if they did not feel very supported and appreciated by their parents and guardians.

Several girls noted that their parents often worked night shifts and had more than one part-time job. These girls (who were all between the ages of 11-14) often had to care for their younger siblings, cook, clean, pick up groceries, go to the laundromat, wash and fold clothes at home, care for themselves, study, complete their homework, and maintain their social lives.

Some expressed that they were happy that they could help their mothers since they felt that they were often too stressed out from working hard at work and at home. The literature notes that black girls often cultivate a deep sense of altruism that pushes them to help those they care about survive and thrive (Ladner, 1977; Chin, 2001; West Stevens, 2002; Evans-Winters, 2005). Even more, helping others helps them feel a greater sense of purpose and feel more deeply connected to the community they help. This is just another example of the ways that black girls use

community building as a resilience strategy to manage and overcome their own challenges.

Some of the girls described taking pride in helping to “raise” their siblings with their parents and guardians. These girls noted that having to help their parents helped them gain several valuable and fulfilling skills that would prepare them to “take care for their own children one day,” but they often described feeling that they needed more time to take care of themselves and complete homework. Many of the girls did not have trusted individuals to share these frustrations with as they noted that they often did not share how stressed out they felt with their parents because they did not want them to feel overwhelmed too. Many of the girls in the study noted that they were happy they had a space to share what they were stressed about and to get advice about to do because it made them feel less alone and angry.

I often overheard teachers loudly asking students to stop speaking to one another loudly in the halls, in classrooms, and in the cafeteria in hopes of maintaining order. When teachers asked students to quiet down in a demanding tone, students often became even more angry and disruptive because they felt disrespected. The girls described how they felt that they had very few opportunities to share their feelings and experiences with each other and be active. When I spoke to teachers and administrators about this they noted that they had very little time as the school day was so structured. So much of their extra time was spent trying to get the students in their classrooms to settle down and listen to instructions at the beginning of class.

Tonya noted that many teachers told her that she needed to “keep her problems from home outside of the classroom.” She noted that although she

understood they needed to learn in class, she wished that the school also had a space like the focus group where girls “could just be themselves every day” Many of the girls expressed that they felt they had to silently manage their problems and wished that they had more outlets to speak about their issues to supportive, encouraging, and understanding peers and adults.

Many of the participants in the study described how challenging it was to cultivate open, honest, and meaningful long-term relationships with their parents, teachers, peers, and romantic/sexual partners. Some of the girls in the study described feeling like they could not “say anything right” as they were often targeted for expressing themselves in ways that were understood as too “loud,” “ghetto,” or “inappropriate.” They expressed how this made them feel alienated from their teachers, administrators, and peers. Even more it decreased their sense of happiness and belonging to the school community.

Some girls noted that they felt misunderstood by adults, peers, and potential romantic partners who were the closest to them. During one of the focus group sessions Janay described this feeling,

I can't tell my friends everything because they are not going to understand how I feel. If I tell a family member how I feel they not going to understand and they gonna say ‘you don’t understand what you going through! That’s nothing!’ Some young people go through the same things that grown-ups do but worse than that, and when certain people feel like they in love and stuff. Like boys don’t understand cause they don’t want to just like. I’m not going to lie, I got my heart broken by one [boy] that I really loved and he just left me hanging. He come back not saying hi, [just] baby this or that and he think that he can just say anything [and come back to me].

While sharing this story Janay took several pauses as she delved deeper into ways that she felt misunderstood by her family and peers. It seemed like it was challenging for her to express. She described a desire to resist her teachers, caregivers, peers, and romantic partners' expectations for how she should act, be, and love based on her age and gender. Janay was affirmed in the truth of her experiences and wanted to be able to express herself without judgement, engage in meaningful conversations with adults and peers in her social milieu, and be mutually loved and respected in romantic and sexual relationships.

Some girls “act out” when they feel misunderstood. The literature suggests that Black girls who “act out” in school may experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on a daily or recurring basis. Teachers, administrators, school resource officers, and social workers have been noted to punish girls through verbal reprimands, detentions, expulsions, fines, and jail without asking them about their experiences and what caused them to “act out,” break rules, be absent from or late to school (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015; Morris, 2016; Quinlan, 2016).

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, CEO and founder of the Center for Youth Wellness explains that teachers and school staff might consider sincerely asking more students ““what happened to you?”” instead of yelling ““what is wrong with you?”” (Quinlan, 2016). When they do not ask this simple question with care and respect, poor and working class black girls may feel alienated from school and sometime lash out in order to protect their reputations (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015; Morris, 2016; Quinlan, 2016).

The participants' stories suggested that there is a need for socioemotional learning and restorative justice opportunities such as: facilitated intergroup dialogue, story exchange, and mindfulness meditation before, during, and after middle school. These activities can provide black girls with opportunities to normalize the healthy expression of emotions, learn emotional intelligence from facilitators, express their frustrations, and brainstorm solutions. The girls described how they enjoyed sharing their feelings and getting advice from peers in our group because once the girls established rapport, they could rely on group members not spreading rumors about them.

All humans, especially developing youth want to be seen, heard, acknowledged, and understood for who they truly are. School was supposed to be a place where students felt protected, served, cared for, and educated. The girls in the study note how they felt angry when teachers and peers disrespected them and did not meet those needs. The girls described how they did not feel the need to "act out" in school when they were offered socioemotional learning and self-expression opportunities (such as this participant action research study, art, music, dance, physical education, during lunch). This study suggests that black girls will be better equipped to use the resilience strategies that best suit them when navigating the stresses of school and everyday life if they are able to actively practice socioemotional learning skills and learn about diverse and relevant resilience strategies on a daily basis. These activities can help teachers and students resolve conflicts, learn about each other's' experiences, and develop a deeper sense of empathy and respect for all members of their school communities.

*Moving Beyond Policing and Utilizing Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports*

The principal of Lakely allowed me to conduct this ethnographic and participant action research study to listen to her female students' needs, provide a time for unstructured and structured play, and a time to have open conversations about their struggles and accomplishments. School administrators, faculty, and staff also tried to regulate when, where, and how the girls could express themselves, but also their everyday concerns, emotional struggles and joys, and sexual curiosity and intelligence. This did not shield them from the realities of peer pressure, sexual harassment, slut shaming, and cyberbullying that carried over from the school day. The girls had to constantly navigate the challenges of friendships, "frenemies" (i.e. friends who were enemies), dating, and online representation. Every day the school's faculty and staff told students that they were restricting their interactions with each other because they would become "too distracted, loud, or sexual." Students were often punished when they were not quiet. Due to limited space available the focus group participants were not given substantial space or time to express themselves, be creative, be active, share stories, brainstorm solutions to social issues, and escape the humdrum of the day.

Teachers and staff placed signs and poster boards in several classrooms and hallways throughout the school calling for students to follow "PBIS Rules: Respect Yourself, Others, and the Learning Environment." Nonetheless the study's participants described how drama, rumors, gossip, and physical fighting in their school environment. Many students noted that in the school. PBIS, is an evidence-based, multi-tiered behavioral framework, which stands for Positive Behavioral

Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Studies show that PBIS can help improve overall school climate and safety (Bradshaw, C., Koth, C.W., Thornton, L.A., & Leaf, P.J., 2009).

These interventions can be completed with individual students or the entire school community, but the goal is that they use proactive and preventative approaches to address the underlying cause or purpose of unwanted behaviors and reinforce positive ones. This method is highly related to the aforementioned restorative justice programs that aim to help students find peaceful and non-punitive solutions when someone has been harmed or offended them (Varnham, 2005; Macready, 2009; Zaslaw, 2009; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). PBIS studies have been associated with increases in academic engagement, academic achievement, and reductions in suspensions and school dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Although the school aimed to use this approach they did not often have a chance to train teachers in how to effectively use it; therefore, it was hardly implemented.

The literature shows that poor and working-class girls are often underserved and shortchanged by U.S. public school systems (Paul, 2002; AAUW, 1992; Brown, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2006). Even more they are often over-policed and under-protected by administrators, faculty, staff, security guards, and sometimes family members (Paul, 2002; Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015). Their knowledge, feelings, experiences, and modes of expression such as speech, body language, dress, and dance are also often monitored, disciplined, and judged by adults and students alike in schools (Evans-Winters, 2005; Sears, 2009; Brown, 2009).

Every time I entered a conversation with an administrator, teacher, or staff member they described how they wanted the girls to break generational chains of racism, poverty, stress, violence, and poor physical, emotional, and sexual health that many of their students and their students' families faced while residing in Baltimore City. They wanted them to have a chance to be respected and viewed as equals in predominantly white higher education institutions and in their future careers. Most administrators unfortunately wanted girls to speak less loudly, with less expression (i.e. without an "attitude," to be more attentive in class, and to identify their dreams. They saw the ability to regulate oneself and code-switch away from behaviors that are stereotypically associated with black girls in poor and working-class communities as a path to economic freedom.

Many scholars have critiqued the limiting and dismissive ways that poor and working class black girls are labeled as irresponsible, dysfunctional, hypersexual, and at risk for teen pregnancy, STIs, HIV, and AIDS (Hunter, Cohen, and Guerrero, 2015; Carter et al., 2010; Sears, 2009; Collins, 2005). As black girls age they are increasingly targeted especially if they are understood to have a history of classroom misbehavior. They are characterized as too loud (Fordham, 1993; Evans, 1980), having an attitude (Koonce, 2012), aggressive and violent (Miller, 2008), "ghetto" (Jones, 2010), "fast" (Stevenson-Akoumany, 2012), and promiscuous (Sears, 2009). These labels do not acknowledge the diversity and complexity of poor and working-class girls experiences, nor does it consider why girls may engage in risky behaviors or "act out" in school.

Nationally black girls comprise 50% of suspensions and expulsions from K-12 public schools (Smith and Harper, 2015). They are consistently suspended at rates higher than their female peers from other races and ethnicities. This decreases their chances of graduating, achieving scholarships or entry into higher education institutions because they are often pushed out into juvenile justice systems, low wage economies, and sometimes they even die while in the hands of police (Paul, 2002; Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015; Smith, 2015). These punishments caused students to feel disrespected and devalued.

#### Restorative Justice and the School to Prison Pipeline

Restorative justice activities can shift schools' focus from discipline to community building. They encourage students and teachers to share stories about their life experiences and feelings and engage in thoughtful, respectful, and honest discussions about conflict resolution and empathy. Restorative justice activities often include peer mediation, restorative conversations, problem solving classroom circles, thinking plans, check-in and check-out circles, small and large group restorative meetings, and formal restorative conferences (Macready, 2009).

The literature suggests that restorative justice programs have helped improve school climate, peer to peer and teacher to student conflict resolution skills, and helped teachers to feel closer to students and engage in more caring and respectful conversations (McCluskey, 2008; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). These studies emphasize the importance of students and teachers taking personal

responsibility for their actions and working together to find peaceful solutions (Zehr, 2002; Varnham, 2005; Zaslow, 2009).

In school tensions have led to disproportionate amounts of black girls being suspended and expelled from schools and pushed into the juvenile justice system across the United States of America. This phenomenon is described as the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a framework that describes the ways that “punitive school policies lead to low achievement, system involvement, and other negative outcomes” (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015. p.7). The school to prison pipeline harshly punishes black girls who grow up in poor and working-class communities, taking away their freedom and greatly reducing their chances of achieving personal, academic, and economic success.

The Black Girls Matter Report (2015) revealed that black adolescent girls living in urban hubs in the U.S. described feeling unsafe and disengaged from learning and school altogether at zero-tolerance schools (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015). When schools placed more emphasis on discipline than education, self-expression, play, and community building the girls did not feel supported and affirmed.

To better understand black girls’ resilience strategies, we can ask them “what did you do to get through that situation?” “How did you feel?” “What can I, the school, your friends, and loved ones do to help?” These questions allow girls to reflect on what they already do well and can help them cultivate even better resilience strategies, self-efficacy, and pride. Listening to black girls’ stories can help the adults and students to develop more empathy for black girls and help destroy school cultures

of shame and stigmatization. These conversations may help social institutions shift the narrative around black girls from risk to resilience and help black girls learn even more self and community care strategies and play the game of life to win on their own terms.

The girls' stories suggested that they wanted to earn and reciprocally give respect. Although loud and hysterical outbursts by students are not conducive to teachers effectively delivering classroom instruction, the literature suggests that students might benefit from fun, innovative, and supportive outlets for student expression and self-inquiry. Even though many of the schools' administrators, faculty, and staff described caring about their students' academic success and wellbeing, students explained that they primarily showed it to students who performed roles that aligned with middle class respectability politics.

Respectability politics are the social rules and regulations that aim to police black girls' and women's modes of self-expression and understandings of "appropriate" gender and sex roles in public and private domains. Carby (1992) describes how multifaceted processes of urbanization, settlement, and class tensions between black American bourgeoisie of the North and working class and poor black female migrants of the South, led to urban black females' bodies and actions being policed and marked as "social and political problem[s]" (Carby, 1992. p.739-740). Urban black females were often characterized as hyper-sexual, licentious, uneducated, and lazy (Carby, 1992). These labels largely identified new, urban black female settlers as threats to the facade of rigid black middle-class respectability; and

more importantly black citizens' chances of gaining cultural, political, and economic citizenship.

Even when black migrants to the North were described as strong and resilient, they were often understood as being able to endure pain and suffering that their white counterparts were incapable of (Bernstein, 2011; Kendi, 2016; Casiano, 2018). Casiano (2018) notes that black Baltimoreans were often denied access to housing and quality education due to racist assumptions that black residents were “uniquely capable” of dealing with “abhorrent living conditions” of racially and economically segregated slums and horrendous pain and suffering from slavery (Kendi, 2016; Casiano, 2018, p.222). These understandings limited black families' ability to end intergenerational struggles with poverty, but also limited their access quality public resources.

Expanding upon Carby's (1992) argument, I assert that today poor and working class urban black girls' bodies, thoughts, and actions are still understood through the lenses of poverty, protection, and sexual risk. They are still policed by national and local political narratives, public policies, and individual interactions with parents, school administrators, teachers, peers, and sometimes romantic partners.

My research reveals that when given the opportunity the girls in the study used storytelling, self-assertion, play, creativity, and community building as resilience strategies to resolve personal challenges and social conflicts. These resilience strategies helped them to cope with hardships that they faced in life and school, affirm their own identity and self-worth, and navigate relationships with individuals who showed them loyalty and respect.

Following and adapting traditional models of black middle-class respectability, the school's officials and parents often used discourses that called for poor and working class, urban, black girls to empower themselves through academic success, limited social and romantic involvement with peers, and abstinence. This approach was rooted in fears of the girls missing out on opportunities for future economic and personal success due to teen pregnancy, STDs, and HIV/AIDS.

During the observation period, some girls were chastised and punished for bringing up sexual topics in school, wearing uniform skirts that were viewed as too short, makeup, or jewelry that was understood as too adult such as large golden hoop earrings. They did not ask school faculty, staff, or peers about ways to deal with relationships because they knew that they would be seen as "too fast" (i.e. too concerned about romantic relationships and sex). The stigmatization taught the girls to reproduce these narratives and use them to critique themselves, their black female peers, and even family members who were seen as too "grown" or too sexual.

This ethnographic study supports Weekes' (2002) findings that "through engaging in complex processes of disparaging the sexual activity of their peers, young Black women attempt to portray themselves as sexually respectable and become entangled in the tensions created by such positions within the school-based discourses of heterosexism" (p. 25). This stigmatization of adolescent sexuality often discouraged the girls from asking questions about relationships and sex or openly discussing their desires, sexual identities, embracing their bodily agency, and sexual citizenship.

School leaders and parents' efforts to teach the girls to value sexual respectability contributed to their discursive policing and their "material and ideological oppression (Collins, 2000, p. 5). If girls were given medically accurate information and caring support systems to discuss how to engage in healthy peer, romantic, and sexual relationships they could cultivate resilience strategies and make decisions that supported their physical, emotional, and mental health.

The school partnered with many non-profit organizations to provide after-school studies geared toward cultural enrichment, environmentalism, and sports, but they did not provide enough in-school opportunities for students to confidently express themselves or calmly resolve conflicts with peers and romantic and sexual partners. Nor did they provide students with spaces to effectively learn comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education, and participate in respectful conversations and activities with peers about dating, love, sex, pleasure, boundaries, sexual assertiveness, and respect.

The girls' stories suggested that this in fact led to more outbursts and fights, and cases of sexual harassment (during class time and the school day), instances of sexual coercion, STIs, and heartbreak than school administrators imagined. This study provided girls with a space to ask questions, learn, and share knowledge about life, love, romance, sex, and reproductive health. Instead of encouraging girls to embrace respectability, I helped them create an open environment for participants to express their feelings and respect others.

## Conclusion

This chapter highlights the black early adolescent female participants' perceptions of their social experiences and what they felt they needed and desired from their friends, family members, and teachers to support their positive social development. It explores the ways that the participants in this study utilized self-assertion, storytelling, and community building as resilience strategies to cope with the rumors, fights, bullying, and other traumatic life events that they experienced in middle school.

This chapter also examines connections between relational aggression, adverse childhood experiences, and peer-to-peer social conflicts, but focuses on the strategies that some black early adolescent girls used to cope with and overcome these issues. This chapter also explores the ways that some American public schools have engaged with black girls who are frequently involved in social conflicts at school. The girls' stories suggest that they can benefit from socioemotional learning opportunities to enhance the resilience and emotional intelligence they already have. Using ethnography and participant action research can help educators better understand how social conflicts operate in schools and the great impact that they have on the girls' everyday lives.

This chapter highlights the black early adolescent female participants' perceptions of their social experiences and what they felt they needed and desired from their friends, family members, and teachers to support their positive social development. Even more it explored the girls' stories and highlighted connections between adolescent development, relational aggression, adverse childhood

experiences, conflict resolution, neuroplasticity, and resilience. It suggested that mindfulness and play based therapy, socioemotional learning opportunities, restorative justice, facilitated intergroup dialogue, story exchange, participant action research could be helpful tools for schools to utilize to help students improve the resilience strategies that they already have.

## Chapter 5: Navigating Love, Friendships, Sex, and Consent

Building intimate and sexual relationships is a normal and crucial developmental task for adolescents. This chapter explores the resilience strategies that the black early adolescent girls in this study used to navigate peer, romantic, and sexual relationships in Baltimore City. It also examines the history and current state of comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education interventions in Baltimore City and the nation. It suggests that these interventions should be created with black girls in mind. Program creators should listen to black girls' perceptions of their own experiences and needs so that they can more effectively promote health equity among adolescents in Baltimore City, the United States, and the world. The girls' stories offer a way to reimagine resilience strategies as the intellectual and emotional labor required to create strategies that will help adolescents cope with feelings of betrayal, disrespect, neglect, bullying, or violation from a once trusted peer, romantic, or sexual partner.

The girls' stories suggest that utilizing self-assertion, play, creativity, storytelling, and community building were key resilience strategies that helped them to overcome any challenge that threatened their sexual values or boundaries. The literature proposes that trusted adults and sexual health educators help girls to foster self-efficacy (a belief in one's ability to successfully achieve any task) and build sexual self-esteem (healthy attitudes about one's self-worth and sexual desires) so they can cultivate decision-making skills that will help them thrive (Hunter, Guerrero, Cohen, 2011).

Lastly, this chapter examines how Baltimore City, national, and international political narratives, sexual education policies, school policies, and interpersonal relationships (with family, peers, romantic and sexual partners, teachers, administrators, and staff) have policed the ways that youth and particularly black girls are able to gain access to unbiased facts about the ways their bodies and minds function and various understandings of sex, gender roles, sexual expression, intimacy, desire, communication skills, and relationship development.

### *Coping with Betrayal*

One day Felicia, an eighth grader in the 2012-2013 school year, read the focus group participants a direct message that her old friend Zara sent to her on Facebook. Zara was also a participant in a separate seventh grade cohort that year. Zara was upset with Felicia because she found out that she had sex with her boyfriend, Joshua, even though they were still dating. Felicia read Zara's message:

I hate shady bitches. If you know that I go with somebody and still got feelings for him, why act like a slut? Why be a dummy and do something that would make me mad and stop giving a fuck about you? It's crazy how you can forget the person who always had your back when bitches was calling you a dummy. I was the only one you hanged with that didn't call you a dummy, but I'm starting to be. Fuck Joshua and Jumpy (which is me) they both sneaky, shady, and nasty. I know you a dummy I heard that you got 10-11 bodies (i.e. sexual partners). She do whatever she wants to get a nigga she wants, but never did I think that she would do this to a girl that had her back. When Kelly, Janay, and Yasmine, all of them called her a dummy and said her pussy ain't got no walls (i.e. a misogynistic and scientifically unfounded sexual joke that describes a girl whose vagina is "loose" and "too wide" because she is too sexually promiscuous) but now Fuck Destiny I think she has made the love of my life hate me. I know that he will never talk to me again. I hate all the things that have happened to me. I have been lied to and cheated on.

Zara used self-assertion and storytelling (i.e. writing this direct message online) as resilience strategies to cope with her feelings of betrayal and violation. Sharing this passionate message enabled her to tell Felicia exactly how she felt without resorting to arguing in person or physically fighting. These resilience strategies are important because they reveal early adolescents' ability to harness emotional intelligence to stay true to one's needs for self-expression and justice without resorting to violence.

Although Felicia used a lot of posturing to tell this story, it seemed that she wanted to get ahead of the story before it spread throughout the entire middle school. She also used self-assertion and storytelling as resilience strategies to manage, cope with, and possibly avert social stigma in her peer group circles. Since Zara shared this message with Felicia on Facebook, Felicia or Zara could have decided to send it to other friends, share it on their timelines and tag each other, or take a screenshot of the message and correspondence and share it on other social media platforms. The girls frequently noted how these tactics were used when students wanted to get revenge. Neither party chose to engage with each other this way.

Felicia did not seem remorseful about starting a relationship with Joshua, but she also did not suggest that she was interested in actually dating him. She was a bit offended that Zara called her a "bitch," "slut," and "dummy," but tried to not seem embarrassed by this letter. Felicia also did not refute Zara's allegations that she engaged in sexual activities with ten to eleven other people. When Felicia read Zara's statement that "[she] got 10-11 bodies (i.e. had sex with 10-11 people)" her tone revealed a sense of pride and pleasure in her sexual prowess. She repeated this statement as if her sexual encounters were badges of honor.

Here the term “getting bodies” was described as a transaction where sex was all about keeping score of the number of sexual encounters (i.e. like a body count) that Felicia had. Felicia did not discuss her perceptions of the quality of intimacy, pleasure, or love that she may or may not have experienced during these encounters or in these relationships. Zara asserted that she was upset because Felicia knew that she “still had feelings” for Joshua when she pursued him. Her message revealed that she was very invested in improving the quality of her romantic relationship. She noted that she was frustrated because she felt that Felicia did not consider her feelings at all when deciding to have sex with her boyfriend.

She emphasized that she knew Felicia pursued boys “whenever she wanted to,” but she was upset because she felt that she had proven her loyalty to Felicia even when others in the focus group tried to “call her out” (i.e. chastise her) for these same behaviors and qualities. Zara noted how Kelly, Janay, and Yasmine alluded to her being too sexually promiscuous in the past by saying that she had a “pussy without any walls” (i.e. that she was sexually promiscuous). Kelly was in the room while Felicia read Zara’s letter and denied that she said anything of that nature. Felicia tried to act as if this didn’t bother her.

When Felicia began her story, it seemed that she wanted the group to give her advice about how to handle the situation, but when she read the letter she constantly tried to alter her voice to sound humorous. At one point she even tried to humiliate her old friend. Felicia used play and humor as a resilience strategy in hopes of rising above the social stigma about entering a romantic relationship with her best-friend’s boyfriend.

Felicia: She comes to his house every day and waits on his front. How can you say you love somebody after the second day you went together?

Mariah: Because she was in love with him before they went together that's why!

Felicia: She too young to be in love!

Me: That's easy to say just because she is younger than you. You ever been in love with somebody before?

Felicia: No not yet but...They don't even go together! She'll come over there and she'll go to the next spot.

Felicia tried to characterize Zara as too emotional and too young to be in love. She even made fun of the fact that she waited outside of Joshua's house every day after school in hopes of talking to him again. When Mariah stood up for Zara, Felicia's faced changed. She expected everyone to vouch for her.

Felicia underestimated Zara's ability to be in love. When I asked Felicia if she had ever been in love, her voice dropped an octave as she said, "not yet." She was convinced that Zara could not have really been in love. At this point it seemed like Felicia realized that she underestimated how much her actions could affect Zara's feelings. I asked the girls what could be done to resolve this situation, and many said that Felicia should apologize to Zara since they were friends for such a long time. Instead of shaming Felicia, the girls reflected on the ways that their own actions helped them to build stronger friendships or destroy them.

Zara and Felicia used different approaches to share their perceptions of their dispute, feelings, and the quality of their peer and romantic relationships. Nonetheless, they both used storytelling and self-assertion to help them to cope with

this challenging interpersonal conflict. These strategies helped them to navigate the drama that they faced and to search for solutions to mend broken hearts, save reputations, and find peaceful resolutions.

*The Politics of “Being Too Fast.” Moving Beyond Respectability Politics and the Slut-Shaming of Early Adolescent Girls*

The last two cohorts of this study engaged in more frequent discussions about romantic relationships and sex when they reached the seventh and eighth grades. It was clear that self-assertion, storytelling, play, creativity, and community building were key resilience strategies that they used to deal with the challenges they faced navigating peer, romantic, and sexual relationships. They used self-assertion to express themselves confidently and stand by their ideas or values. They used storytelling, play, and creativity to tell interesting and compelling stories that were usually infused with humor and sarcasm to describe their experiences or with love, sex, trust, friendship, and consent. The girls used a spirit of community building, care, and respect by offering each other valuable advice and engaging with their peers in meaningful conversations. These resilience strategies helped the participants to feel safe sharing their experiences, so they used the focus group sessions to gain answers to many questions and fears that they had about love, sex, friendship, trust and consent.

During the first year of the study I recognized common themes surrounding each cohort’s discussions of love, romance, and sex. The girls described other girls in their peer and family circles as “too fast” when they frequently discussed their attraction to boys, interest in dating or having sex, or actual experiences with dating

and sex. One day Kelis, a seventh grader during the 2011-2012, school year said, “To me those fast girls don’t have enough self-esteem. They must not be getting enough attention at home! They are so obsessed with boys they would do anything to get their attention.” She noted that even young girls were “too fast” and “started at an early age.”

Another participant in this cohort, Kandice, described her six-year-old cousin as “fast” too. She said that her little cousin loved to be “noticed” by her sister’s boyfriend and receive compliments on her clothes. Although this participant may have been seeking attention from the group, this may suggest that some black girls have even been socialized to label pre-pubescent black girls’ as sexually deviant. Historically black girls have been stereotyped as sexually promiscuous and “wild” from a young age (Ladner, 1971; Wanzo, 2009; Bernstein, 2011). Here black girlhood is not marked by innocence, but more importantly is not described to acknowledge and respect black girls’ full personhood (including self-confidence and sexual desire) without stigma.

Discussions around love and romance were often policed and narrated differently than sex, as they were seen as more acceptable to speak about. The girls especially spoke with disdain for “fast” girls that engaged in “adult activities” in public such as kissing, fondling, and having sex. The girls seemed to chastise their peers’ public and online displays of love, romance, or sex more than their private actions that were only shared through stories. Banister and Leadbeater (2007) highlight how “social norms privatize intimacy” and “create walls of silence around what it means to love and be loved” (p. 121). This influenced the ways in which the

girls felt comfortable publicly expressing their romantic and sexual desires before they built rapport with each other.

Although “discourse[s] of desire” are missing in several official in-school sexual education programs due to federal and state guidelines “[they are] by no means missing from the lived experiences or commentaries of young women” (Fine, 1988, p. 35). The girls in this study shared several stories with their close friends and the larger focus group about liking their peers, falling in love, and wanting to wait or wanting to engage in sexual activities. Even though they shared their stories they also stigmatized girls who were perceived as “too fast” when they verbalized romantic and sexual thoughts, desires, and actions. These girls were called “dirty” and “nasty” because they embraced their sexual agency.

The girls described a sense of frustration with the process of negotiating how to appropriately navigate performances of black femininity and sexuality at school. The research participants constantly labeled girls who rebelled against the slippery slope of these culturally accepted performances of respectability as “fast.” Once labeled, “fast,” girls were left to manage their romantic and sexual relationships on their own as many of their parents, family members, mentors, and teachers restricted their ability to discuss these issues or to openly date in school or at home. As a result, girls often felt the need to hide their relationships from their parents, guardians, and teachers and “sneak around.”

Halfner (1998) notes that adolescents may refrain from seeking protection, contraception, or STI testing in order to hide their sexual activities from adults and

guardians who they may have otherwise turned to for advice. This lack of support often placed the girls in the study in precarious situations where they were not able to discuss how to manage and satisfy their romantic interests and sexual desires safely. They always strategically dis-identified with this social category. Like the girls in Weekes' (2002) study, the girls in the study constantly looked down on the sexual activity of their peers while "attempting to portray themselves as sexually respectable and [became] entangled in the tensions created by such positions within the school-based discourses of heterosexism" (2002, p. 25). As previously mentioned the girls in this study noted that the boys often spread rumors about girls' sexual behaviors and partnerships which caused the girls to spread more rumors about other girls.

These discourses shape the girls' every day engagements with possible romantic interests at school and in their communities and can often cause the girls to feel shame and guilt. This is often referred to as slut shaming, the practice of stigmatizing women and girls based on assumptions and rumors about their sexual activities, clothing, friends, romantic and sexual partners, and gender performances. Slut shaming is one of the most common forms of sexual harassment that students in middle and high school face (Kohli, 2016). Girls and boys are given conflicting messages early on about how, why, when, and where to be sexy. The literature suggests that all youth can engage in healthy relationships with themselves and others if they are given the tools to make sense of and celebrate their early feelings of self-assertiveness, self-esteem, desires for love and intimacy (Fine, 1988; Hunter, Guerrero, Cohen, 2010; UNFPA, 2010).

*Building Rapport and Resilience While Discussing Love, Friendship, Sex, and Consent*

When the girls first entered the study, they were a bit hesitant to speak about their own stories with attraction, love, dating, and sex as they feared the judgement of other girls. Many of the girls were not used to speaking about issues that were so personal with their peers as the school did not offer many opportunities to do so. Before the girls-built rapport with each other in the focus group, many used silence and strategic storytelling as a resilience strategy. They often stated that “reputation was everything.” They often said, “they did not want everyone knowing their business.” They did not want rumors to spread their “love lives.”

When they became comfortable enough to share their experiences with love, friendship, sex, trust, and consent many of them disclosed that they were “in love” with a boy at some point in time, interacted and flirted with boys in their neighborhoods and school, kissed or were kissed by a boy, or entered a boy’s home and engaged in kissing, fondling, or other sexual activities. Through analyzing the girls’ stories of intimate emotional and/or physical experiences with boys, it is clear that they police other girls’ bodies in public and private spaces, but only thoroughly police their own bodies in public spaces.

The girls’ smiles and upbeat tones revealed a sense of relief that they could now share and hear their classmates’ similar experiences with boys and romantic and sexual relationships. Some girls in the study described feeling conflicted about engaging in sexual activities even when they had the urge to. They noted that they

were worried about peers finding out, being labeled a “slut,” being caught by their sexual partner’s siblings, cousins, or guardians, becoming pregnant, getting an STI, HIV, or AIDS, and sinning.

Diamond, a seventh grader during the 2010-2011 school year, described how a boy propositioned one of her friends for sex by sending a private message on Facebook. The message said, “Wanna Fuck? I'll pop your cherry.” Diamond noted that her friend was frustrated by the boy’s bluntness, but because she really liked the him, she sent him a message back saying yes. Diamond explained how her friend’s love interest took this opportunity to humiliate her online by sharing the conversation with other friends from school.

Sexuality education and socioemotional learning courses can potentially help girls navigate these situations. Many of the girls explained how some of their friends engaged in sexual activities that they did not really want to and “tolerated disrespect from boys” in hopes of “keeping,” or “satisfying” their potential or current romantic or sexual partners. The more the girls openly reflected on their own sexual experiences, needs, values and desires, they more confidently they began discussing the boundaries they were creating for themselves, what made them happy, how they do and do not want to be treated, and how they celebrated and honored their worth.

#### Deciding What Counts as Sex

Conversations with the girls helped me to realize that the some of the girls did not have a clear consensus on what sex was and was not. It was clear that this could lead to larger repercussions for their physical, mental, socioemotional, and sexual health and wellbeing. Two girls from the 2010-2011 eighth grade cohort

engaged in this discussion. Felicia asked Latavia the very direct question of “How many times you had sex?” Once again it seemed that Felicia wanted to get her peer’s attention and possibly humiliate Latavia, just like she did by reading Zara’s letter about her relationship troubles. Again, Latavia denied that she ever had sex. She said, “None!” and the girls in the study laughed.

Felicia: But you just said that you had two bodies! Do you know what bodies mean? You know that means you were in 2 boys?

Latavia: Yeah but...I almost did...

Me: How do you define sex?

I saw that Felicia wanted to prove that Latavia was either exaggerating her sexual experiences or that she did not understand what sex really was. I saw this as an opportunity to have the girls define what sex meant to them.

Camille: I think sex is when his duhhh go in your uhhh or it didn't happen! (Referring to a penis entering a vagina.)

Me: So, what about oral sex? Do you consider that sex?

Eva: No... Well.

Felicia: You don't remember? (Asking again if she now knows if Latavia has had sex before again).

Latavia: I was younger though. Oral sex is different! The only way that I'm gonna do oral sex is if I'm married to my boyfriend or we've been together for like 7 years! Oral sex is like sexting! I don't do it!

Camille: If you didn't put uhhh in uhhhh you didn't do it! (Repeats and stands affirmed by her first definition.)

The girls were under the impression that sex primarily consisted of a man inserting his penis inside of a woman's vagina. They considered oral sex to be something different, something that should only be reserved for a boy who was committed to them. When I asked them what age they thought was too early to engage in sexual activities? Kelly immediately remembered how her first experience felt.

Me: What do you think is too early?

Kelly: It hurted ...

Me: You said it hurt?

Kelly: Yeah the first time that shit hurted!

Felicia: Well you're never really too young!

Kory: Yes you are!

Kelly reflected on her first experience with sex and noted how it hurt. This possibility meant that she felt she started too early, thus making it an uncomfortable experience. Everyone's first sexual experiences are different depending on their comfort levels.

Felicia who once said that Zara was too young to be in love, now said that one was never really too young to have sex. This may suggest that she had more pleasurable experiences with sex, and as she did not describe herself as being in love. The girls went on to describe how being exposed to sex too early can be a problem when young children imitate what they see adults and other teens do. I asked the girls if they thought that boys were having more sex than girls, and they said yes because they were scared to engage. This shows that the girls felt they had more to risk when engaging in sexual activities.

Arielle, a seventh grader from the 2012-2013 school year asked, “Can you get pregnant if you’re doing it in the shower?” It seemed that she and most of the other girls in her group were convinced that you could not, but they wanted confirmation. Some noted how they always thought that girls could not get pregnant this way because they often saw shower sex scenes in movies and shows. The girls shared that they gained most of their sexual knowledge from friends, cable television shows, online pornographic video clips on social media websites, movies, and music videos. Some girls described how they actually wanted to have sex, but were scared of getting pregnant, contracting STIs or HIV/AIDS, or getting “played” by potential partners (i.e. cheated on).

On another occasion, Janay, a seventh grader during the 2011-2012 school year, asked the group “can you get big lips from...” She laughed as she stopped herself from completing her question. She was too nervous to say oral sex, but the girls understood what she was referring to. Victoria smiled and said “no, but you can get an STI if your boyfriend don’t use a condom!” Next, another participant named Natalie asked the group, “What are condoms?” The group paused and stared in disbelief. Saniyah quickly responded in an annoyed tone, “How can you not know what condoms are?” Natalie had a learning difference and the stories that she shared with the group revealed that she was very sheltered from every day knowledge about romantic relationships in relation to the other girls in the study. She did share stories about boys that she liked during her time in the study and how excited she was when a boy kissed her for the first time.

The school did have a school health center, but it did not offer students reproductive and sexual health services or contraception. It only offered students immediate medical care for minor injuries and illness where a band-aid or painkillers such as Advil or Tylenol could be offered if parents previously signed consent forms. Many of the girls went there when they had menstrual pain or a headache. Some of them were able to get sanitary pads as well, but condoms were not offered. The health center was not in a private area as it was located in an open room with the vice principal's desk and computer inside. It only had one cot for students to lie down on. This shows a lack of investment in poor and working-class students' health, wellness, and privacy from the city. The administrators often tried their best to gain resources to improve the quality of life for students at the school. I am not sure if they did not feel that this was a priority.

The girls may not have had a clear consensus on the value that certain sex acts had and did not have a designated course to have these conversations, comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education and socioemotional learning courses like these can potentially help students to begin life changing discussions about navigating romantic and sexual relationships.

#### Rape, Pressure, and Consent

During one of our sessions, Toya, an eighth grader during the 2010-2011 school year, described how her boyfriend kept "playing around" and pushing her head toward his lap whenever they were alone at either of their homes. She said, "he wanted me to give him a ..." Tonya was so embarrassed that she could not bring

herself to say the words aloud in front of the group. She was hinting at the fact that he wanted her to perform fellatio on him. The girls and I tried to be as respectful as possible when asking her questions. Their faces and bodies were still as she recounted her story. Michelle tried to ask her what happened after he pushed her head toward his lap, but Toya slumped her body into the chair, and mumbled some words until she reached a vague silence. The girls looked concerned because it seemed that Toya was coerced to continue each time.

Janay, one of the most confident and vocal girls in the group told Toya, “You shouldn’t do it anymore if you don’t want to!” The other girls and I shook our heads in agreement. Toya was courageous to tell her story to the group. She seemed grateful to receive caring and respectful advice from the group and a non-judgmental judgmental space to reflect on her experience. Toya said that the first time her boyfriend did this, it surprised her, and she did not know what to do. The following times, she felt that she could not say no, because she did it before. Here she decided to put his sexual desires and expectations before her own. She stated that she regretted doing it since she really did not want to.

The girls told her that she should not settle for anything less. Many girls in the study described having oral sex as a way to satisfy their partners, yet not risk pregnancy. Our group conversation helped the girls to reconsider the importance of using protection. These discussions suggest that socioemotional and sexual education resources must provide youth with opportunities to discuss real life scenarios that they and their peers experience, not just information about the risks of pregnancy, STIs, and HIV/AIDS. Many students were already engaging in these discussions but

needed the knowledge and tools to maintain their physical, sexual, and emotional health.

Some girls stated that they wanted to speak up for themselves, but often felt that they would put their relationships in jeopardy. In some cases, girls even feared physical and verbal abuse from their partners. It takes a lot of courage and self-awareness to be assertive and even more sexually assertive. Building resilience strategies to overcome the challenges that girls may face in romantic and sexual relationships can help them seek help to end disrespectful treatment and violence from their partners.

#### Rape, Sexual Coercion, and Desire

Latavia, a seventh grader during the 2011-2012 school year, tried to use humor to jokingly recount a time where the boundaries between rape, sexual assault, coercion, and sexual playfulness, desire, and consent would seem blurry to the average listener.

Latavia: I remember when I almost got raped though!

Me: Oh goodness was it at your house?

Latavia: No, it was at this boy's house.

Me: He took my phone and he pushed me on the couch! And he tried to unsnap my pants! I ran out the house!

Me: That's why your mom doesn't want you going out the house, not because she doesn't trust you, but because she doesn't trust the boys!

Even though she stated that she "almost got raped" in a joking tone, it seemed that she was in a very precarious position during the time of this event. Some would have

automatically assumed that Latavia made a bad decision by going to a boy's house at such a young age. Someone might ask: What was she thinking? Who was this boy? How old was he? How long did she know him? Why did she think he was trustworthy? She should have known that all boys were the same! They're only concerned about one thing. Sex! And look he successfully took your phone from you, overpowered you, and unbuttoned your pants.

This approach is one that blames rape and sexual assault victims, but also calls for potential victims to be aware of the dangers that they might encounter in certain situations. Nonetheless it is one that places too much emphasis on traditional gender roles, denies girls agency, excuses boys who do not ask for consent before making sexual advances. Popular culture often depicts boys taking the lead in sexual relations. They are supposed to be spontaneous, dominant, and sexually confident. This is often portrayed as a turn on to girls, who may be too shy to initiate kissing, fondling, oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Although this media stereotype is overused and shows a monolithic view of heterosexual sexual advances, in this case and others, girls may find this type of male behavior sexually arousing.

After the group meeting was over, Shana told me that she did want to have sex with her love interest. I just had to give her the time and space to open up and tell me how she really felt. I could not be judgmental but had to be honest and embrace her with an ethic of care. She continued:

Latavia: What if the girl wants to do it so bad, but she leaves because she don't know how to....

Me: Oh, so you want to, but you feel like you shouldn't, or don't want to at the time...

Latavia: Right!

Me: What would you all do in this situation? Like...you know you want to have sex, but you're not ready, or you don't want to... Maybe you don't have a condom. Which you should be always using!

It was important to me that I did not put words in her mouth but facilitate the conversation to learn about their girls' resilience strategies. If girls had trouble telling their partner whether they really wanted to engage in sexual activities they really might have a hard time requesting that they use a condom, especially during spontaneous encounters.

Willow: I would tell the person I'm not ready!

Me: Did you all hear that? She would tell them that she was not ready!

Willow felt comfortable enough to voice her opinion to the group as she was usually quiet and observant. She seemed very adamant that this was the stance that she would take. Telling a partner that one was not ready would be a very bold and courageous move, especially in a situation where there was an expectation and possibly pressure that one would undoubtedly consent.

Mariah then addressed the fact that telling boys that one was not ready did not always matter if they did not care about a girl's feelings.

Mariah: But boys are stronger than girls!

Kelis: So if you're being attacked you should try to kick them in their private areas or poke them in their eyes.

The girls laughed but knew that these were viable options, hopefully that they would never have to use. Latavia agreed with what we said but her face showed that she still

was not satisfied with our advice. She exhaled and continued to explain what she really meant.

Latavia: But what if you really want to do it, but you want to like...leave?

Me: Oh you mean like leave to go somewhere else...to do it!

Latavia: Yeah!!! (Visibly excited that we finally understood what she was trying to communicate).

Latavia: I told him one day I want to have your babies (says endearingly) and he said, "oh I don't think I'm ready for no baby yet" and I said, "ok alright I'll wait."

Me: Were you trying to have one right now?

Latavia: I don't mean right now! I mean later on!

Me: I see!

Here we can see that Latavia really wanted to have sex, but something made her feel uncomfortable about having sex at her love interest's house. It's unclear if they were in a committed relationship at the time as she did not refer to him as her boyfriend. She had strong feelings for him as she revealed that she wanted to have children with him.

Latavia was only 12.5 years old at the time of this conversation. When she described her discussion about building a family with him, you could hear the genuine excitement and love that she felt for him when considering the idea of "giving" him children. She described it as if it would be the ultimate gift and expression of her love. Although she sounded disappointed, she accepted the fact that he was not ready for children at that time. She seemed to respect the fact that he was honest with her and she was therefore willing to wait. I was a bit shocked that she

stated that she wanted children at this time of her life. In the past she mentioned this once but based on Latavia's discussions of feeling misunderstood in the past, it is possible that she felt that having a baby and family of her own would provide her with more love and security.

#### Navigating Parental Restrictions, Sex, and Desire

I asked the girls if they felt that they could speak with their mothers about the best ways to handle dating and unwanted sexual encounters. They noted how they were apprehensive about speaking with their mothers about love and sex. ‘

Latavia: So the only way that I would go to my mother about a relationship, is if it was a long lasting one, and he wasn't like...on the streets...

Here Latavia explains that she would only discuss her relationship with her mom if she'd been with a boy for a long time. This alludes to her desire to show that she is in fact ready for a romantic and/or sexual relationship. She also knows that her mom would only approve of someone who was not selling drugs “on the streets.” This suggests that boys that she's dated in the past did in fact sell drugs or that she knows that this is a common profession for most of her potential dating partners.

Felicia: but you already done the “dirty double dirty” (referring to having sex)

Latavia: No, I have not! My mother...mother she never said anything! [She did say] like you know... use protection...you know and stuff! She don't even let me go nowhere! She's too overprotective! I mean, but I ain't gonna have no baby!

Me: So it sounds like your parents are talking with you about this too late, but you should talk to your mom!

Latavia: I do go places with my friends, but she's terrified that something might happen to me!

Like my oldest sister when she was my age she went everywhere. The mall... everywhere she lost her virginity to this dirty boy around the way, and my mother she beat the crap out of her and she ran away, and my mother went to go look for her. She told her at least don't do it in front of me! But I did tell her!

Felicia accused Latavia of having sex, but she quickly denied it in an attempt to disidentify with the label of sexual promiscuity that her classmate jokingly labeled her with. Even though she was allowed to go out with friends, Latavia was a bit frustrated that she was not able to date like her older sister (who was 16) did. Even though she disapproved of her sister's boyfriend, it seems like she did not agree with her mother beating her sister in response to getting caught having sex in their home.

Her sister ran away from home before her mom looked for her and brought her back. Latavia had mixed feelings about where she could engage in intimate relationships. She knows that she had very little options. She noted that she thought her mother was too overprotective, but it seems that her mother might have been more protective of Latavia due to her older daughter's actions. In previous conversations, Latavia noted that she also had an older sister who was in college somewhere in York, Pennsylvania and that her mother wanted she and her other sister to be like the eldest. When telling this story, it sounded like she did not feel that she could live up to this expectation. Nonetheless, Latavia understood that her mom wanted the best for she and her sister but was navigating how to live her life.

## “Facebook, Sexbook, Pornbook” Navigating Sexualized Online Communities

The girls explained how they often saw pornographic videos that randomly appeared on their Facebook timelines and even on their televisions at night while leaving it on certain cable stations. Awnya and Mya jokingly described Facebook by saying, “Facebook, Sexbook, Pornbook.” Awnya stated that “Facebook was not the same anymore” as so many people posted pictures of themselves or others with very little clothes on, in sexual positions, and sometimes actually having sex.

Mya highlighted that she also saw a lot of videos that would be categorized as “revenge” porn, where disgruntled partners would post videos or pictures of their partners after they broke up. The girls said that their Facebook timelines felt like an online site for sexual and pornographic images. They felt bombarded by these videos, especially on Facebook and other social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. Nonetheless the girls described how they chose to keep scrolling down if they were bothered by what they saw, but sometimes they continued to watch the videos if they were interested, intrigued, or aroused. This implies that the girls and their parents did not use age filters when setting up their social media accounts.

The girls described that they knew that they could potentially get in trouble with their parents, guardians, or teachers if they were caught watching this content, but many pornographic videos left them confused, amazed, and disgusted all at the same time. After seeing a video where a girl was having sex with two men, Felicia asked “how can she fit two dicks in there? That doesn’t make any sense.” She then shook her head in disapproval of the act. These accounts show that youth are exposed to and are actively questioning the complexities of pornographic media yet have no

one to help them make sense of what they are viewing. The girls expressed that they were scared to ask questions for fear of punishment and social stigma.

During one of our sessions, Rose, a new eighth grader during the 2012-2013 school year, joked that she wanted to be a porn-star, so she could “get paid!” During this time Kim Kardashian and many others became notably famous after their sex tapes were leaked. This created a popular conception that becoming a porn-star could be a glamorous and profitable profession. It was important for me to foster a study and environment where students were free to ask these and many other questions without punishment. If students are less embarrassed about these topics they are more likely to ask them in a way that causes less disruption to the class. The *Need for Comprehensive and Medically Accurate Sex Education in Baltimore*

Some organizations distinguish between sexuality education and sex education, but at their core they provide opportunities for youth to have clear, open, honest, and medically accurate conversations about love, relationships, intimacy, safety, respect, sexual, reproductive, and socioemotional health (de Mekler, 2015). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) notes that comprehensive sexuality education uses participatory and age appropriate materials to teach youth about: using critical thinking and decision-making skills, respect, human rights, diversity, gender equality, and inclusion, a life-cycle approach to sexuality, and how to combat sexual coercion, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse (UNFPA, 2010). Examining an international perspective on approaches to sexuality education, particularly a study in the Netherlands, provides a model of this that promotes youth’s self-awareness,

sexual education, and sexual assertiveness in hopes of helping them build healthy peer and romantic relationships.

Baltimore City Public Schools are required by the state and the city's school board to teach comprehensive sexual education to middle and high school students. Shockingly, interviews with teachers, students, and Assistant Commissioner for the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health at Baltimore City Health Department, Rebecca Dineen, revealed that less than 50 percent of schools are actually teaching comprehensive sex education or reproductive health education (Houppert, 2016). Dineen explains that middle and high schools "have not been using one curriculum. There is known to be a big gap... In many, many schools there was nothing at all." (Houppert, 2016). Dineen emphasized, "We've been working really hard to develop partnerships to get something in place that makes sense for everyone, that reaches everyone" (Houppert, 2016).

Baltimore City public middle and high schools have not been held accountable by the Baltimore City Public School System to provide adequate lessons. BCPS's Janise Lane, executive director of Teaching and Learning, did not refute these facts. She noted that the district provided continued sexual education study implementation support that complied with state mandates and professional development (Houppert, 2016). She ultimately stated that representatives at the school system office "can't monitor what happens every day" in schools (Houppert, 2016).

U.S. federal government awarded Baltimore \$8.5 million to improve its sexual education curriculum in 2015. The Baltimore City Health Department and the

U Choose Coalition, a group that includes the Baltimore City Schools, Planned Parenthood of Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Center for Adolescent Health, Healthy Teen Network, Family League of Baltimore, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, Behavioral Health System Baltimore, and a network of seven Title X clinics will be working to implement evidence based curriculums that were approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Adolescent Health. This will occur in eight pilot middle and high schools before 2020 (Houppert, 2016). Ultimately federal guidelines control what can be taught on the state and local levels.

Although these improvements are needed, the subject matter of the new curriculum seems to be lacking and not rooted in the realities of teen sexual activities today. The city will be testing out three different curriculums for middle schools which focus on helping middle schoolers discuss “body image, abstinence, and delay of sexual activity.” The curriculum, “Making Proud Choices” teaches students about contraceptives, “basic information about biology, genitalia, hormones, pregnancy, and birth” (Houppert, 2016).

The lessons in “Making Proud Choices” are straightforward and give students a chance to talk about how they feel—and this is something students complained was lacking in existing sex-ed studies. Dineen says the new curriculum will dovetail nicely with other citywide health efforts, such as making sure local city clinics and school nurses are providing “youth friendly” information. Dineen noted that this new initiative wants students to know that “any question is OK to ask.” This may suggest that sexual education classes will benefit from cultivating climates that

encourage open discussion. Dineen stated that this study is “all about healthy decision-making,” but this curriculum does not provide middle school youth with the tools to do so (Houppert, 2016).

On September 17, 2010, several Baltimore agencies collaborated with researchers at Johns Hopkins University to publish a Strategic Plan to Reduce Teen Births in Baltimore City. This strategic plan primarily focused on teen birth rates and not adolescent girls’ perceptions of their everyday experiences, sexual encounters, sexual desires, access to contraception, and their desires or how prepared they were for parenthood. This information could potentially inform why the rates were so high in Baltimore and the creation of solutions that could help girls receive access to needed social and medical supports.

The study found that Baltimore’s general teen birth rate was 66.4 births/1000 females ages 15-19 in 2007, which was higher than the national birth rate average of 42.5 births/1000 teen mothers during that time (Healthy Teen Network, 2010, p.10). During this time the black teen pregnancy rate in Baltimore City was still 80.2 births/1000 teens (Healthy Teen Network, 2012, p.10). The same study found that Baltimore City only had five reproductive health care clinics, 15 school-based health centers (SBHC), and no evidence-based or proven effective sexuality education curricula programs that were offered by Baltimore City Public School System (Healthy Teen Network, 2010).

Boonstra (2015) notes that school-based health centers are an important resource for youth and have provided low-income and uninsured teens with

reproductive health resources since the 1970s to help them prevent pregnancy, STIs, HIV, and AIDS. These centers are usually sponsored and funded by hospitals, local and state health departments, private foundations, or federally qualified health centers that help students gain access to culturally competent medical health services (Boonstra, 2015).

In addition to reproductive and sexual health services they usually provide mental health professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and health educators, dentists and nutritionists as well (Boonstra, 2015; Council on School Health, 2012; Reckling, 2013). From 2010-2011, more than 1,900 of SBHCs were in operation in the United States (Lofink et al, 2013; Boonstra, 2015). Most SBHCs (54%) serve poor and working class urban students of color, but 28% are in rural areas, 83% of which are in grades 6–12 (Boonstra, 2015).

Due to controversies over providing youth with contraception, some state and local laws prohibit some SBHCs from doing so. However, research shows that declines in teen pregnancy are directly correlated to teens' improvements in contraception use and ultimately their access to it (Boonstra, 2014). U.S. teen pregnancy rates have declined 51% since 1990, (including a 15% drop between 2008-2010) (Boonstra, 2014).

Sexual desire is often labeled as a distraction to girls achieving academic success, but youth must learn to balance the demands of everyday life and their sexual desires (Buirns and Torre, 2005). Sexuality education and socioemotional learning opportunities can help fill this gap by providing a dedicated time and space

to discuss students' everyday life questions, struggles, joys, and accomplishments so that conflicts will not arise in class.

During the time of the study, the Baltimore Sun noted that only 66% of Baltimore City's high school residents graduated compared to 86.5% of high-school graduations in the state of Maryland (Bowie, 2010). The number of black female Baltimore City high-school graduates did see improvements from previous years, as it rose from 67% in 2007 to 74% in 2010 (Bowie, 2010). Although black girls' high school graduation rates are improving over time and are higher than black boys, these disparities invoke fears that distractions from academics will place girls at risk for negative social and economic outcomes such as: academic failure, lowered social reputation, emotional scarring, sexual harassment, sexual coercion, sexual abuse, rape, pregnancy, and/or STD and HIV/AIDS contractions.

On January 27, 2017, Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Dr. Sonja Santelises noted that she was prepared to lay off more than 1,000 employees from teachers to custodians, institute furlough days, cut art classes, electives, enrichment studies, and increase class sizes by up to 10 students to close a \$130 million gap in the school system's \$1.3 billion budget (Prudente and Green, 2017). Although Baltimore City Public Schools have historically been underfunded, overcrowded, and lacking faculty, staff, and social resources to fully support every student's educational and socioemotional needs, this budget cut has been noted as the largest in recent history (Prudente and Green, 2017).

Dr. Santelises admitted, "This is going to hit everything kids love about coming to school...We're talking about severe impact to school studying, which then

impacts all of our efforts to try to recruit new families" (Prudente and Green, 2017). What is more concerning is that students will receive less attention during class time, and the diversity of courses that actually teach students about life and social skills, provide them with opportunities for self-expression, personal development, and relationship building will drastically decrease.

Many schools already struggle to provide their student bodies with these opportunities as Baltimore City Public Schools often rely on federally funded grants and nonprofit organizations for services. Even more meeting and maintaining academic rigor is often emphasized to meet requirements for state standardized testing, without considering the direct impact that students' health and wellbeing have on their ability to achieve academic success. It would be helpful if students at each middle and high school could be interviewed to learn what questions and experiences they really had.

#### Reframing Notions of Healthy Sexuality for Black Girls

We can observe how structural inequalities such as poverty and the lack of access to teen health clinics, school-based health centers, affordable health-care, birth-control, in-school sex-education classes, and community support systems may greatly contribute to the disproportionately high rates of teen births among black girls in Baltimore, and all-American teen girls in the nations.

In March 2012, the John Hopkins School of Medicine found that urban black female Baltimoreans were increasingly falling victim to HIV at rates five times higher than expected by the CDC (Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, 2012). I assert that the veil of silence over romantic and sexual desire in schools and

homes has negatively contributed to the high number of HIV/AIDS contractions among black females and high rates of teen pregnancy in Baltimore City. When we do not invest in our youth's health and wellbeing, including their sexual health we contribute to a public health crisis.

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (WHO, 2017). This definition can help us to create a better framework for understanding of black early adolescent girls' romantic and sexual relationships, sexual decision making, and understandings of sexuality will undoubtedly affect their mental health and socioemotional well-being not just their rates of pregnancy and STI, HIV, or AIDS contraction rates. Schools and caregivers should provide youth with more outlets to help them deal with issues that they face in all areas of life: academics, career goals, dating, love, romance, sex, and reproductive health.

From 2009-2010, Johns Hopkins University asked 40 diverse, but predominantly black, Baltimorean youth between the ages of 13-19, “what's missing for youth in their communities that would help them wait to have sex?” Their responses ranged from: “someone to talk to that you can trust, to support groups, to free condoms, to sex education” (p. 32). This forces youth to depend on peers, romantic/sexual partners, and online resources to learn to how to navigate every day challenges, responsibilities, engage in safe and pleasurable romantic and sexual activities pleasures, and achieve their goals. Most of the youth in the Johns Hopkins study reported early engagement in sexual intercourse (girls average 13-14 years and boys average 10-12 years old. Between 44% -100% had sex depending on the focus

group). The youth reported a high use of condoms when participating in sex acts, but four participants were teen mothers; one was a teen father, and one was pregnant (Healthy Teens, 2010, p. 32).

Sexuality education uses participatory and age appropriate materials to teach youth: critical thinking and decision-making skills, respect, human rights, diversity, gender equality, and inclusion, a life-cycle approach to sexuality, and how to combat sexual coercion, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse (UNFPA, 2010). These courses combat inaccurate and fear-based abstinence-until marriage sex education courses that are prevalent in the United States. This approach is not rooted in reality, nor is it supported by the knowledge that we have about the biological, psychological, and social functions of stress and sex throughout the life cycle.

Research shows that comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education that promotes abstinence in addition to the use of condoms and contraception help students from all school settings, genders, ethnicities, residential communities, and levels of sexual experiences delay and reduce their sexual activity, reduce their number of sexual partners, and increase their condom and contraceptive use (Kirby, 2007). Even more these courses have helped reduce teen pregnancy and teen STI, HIV, and AIDS contraction rates in the United States (Boonstra, 2016; Advocates for Youth, 2009).

These courses can foster girls' resilience and help them gain a better self-concept which leads to having higher self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sexual assertiveness, (Hunter, Guerrero, Cohen, 2010; UNFPA, 2010). Lessons on these principles teach students how to build healthy interpersonal, romantic, and sexual

relationships, “protect themselves against sexual coercion, intimidation, and abuse,” and stand up for their rights in any situation, not just sexual ones (de Melker, 2015). These tools will help black early adolescent girls cultivate resilience strategies when they might be emotionally vulnerable. They are learning who they are.

### The Need for National Sexuality Education

The current state of sexual education in American schools is a public health issue and a human rights issue as well. Sharing this information could not only save youth’s lives, but also improve the quality of their lives. In the United States sex education in public schools is a rarity as only 22 states and the District of Columbia mandate both sex education and HIV education and only 13 states require that the instruction be medically accurate (Guttmacher, 2015). This means that more than half of the nation’s youth are receiving no information or extremely incorrect and biased information about sexual interactions and the consequences of sexual engagement because of politicians’ and school board members’ desires to focus on abstinence and limited ideas about appropriate forms of intimacy and sex.

When public schools do offer sexual education programs they have to work within federal and state guidelines. They are often required to promote abstinence as the only or main method to prevent pregnancy, STIs, HIV, and AIDS. Thirty-seven states require that information on abstinence be provided, while 26 states require that abstinence be stressed, and 11 states require that abstinence be covered (Guttmacher, 2015). Even more 19 states require that instruction emphasizes the importance of engaging in sexual activity only within marriage (Guttmacher, 2016 b).

Abstinence-until-marriage studies are often not tailored to the everyday realities or desires of youth. Nor are they supported by the knowledge that we have about the biological, psychological, and social functions of sex throughout the life cycle. These courses teach youth that sex before marriage is immoral and impure (Alford, 2001). This approach is dangerous as it often does not teach students about the effectiveness of condoms and other contraceptive options (Alford, 2001).

Abstinence-Plus Education studies do include information about contraception and condoms, but often provide youth with exaggerated statistics about their failure rates and inaccurate information. They also emphasize that sex outside of marriage causes “harmful social, psychological, and physical consequences” such as STIs, HIV, or AIDS and pregnancy (Alford, 2001).

Research shows that abstinence only studies do not work. Although they were proven to be ineffective and medically inaccurate, the federal government still invested more than \$1.5 billion dollars in abstinence-only studies from 1997-2009 (Advocates for Youth, 2009). During this time, Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage studies, which are also called Abstinence-Centered Education, and Sexual Risk Avoidance studies, were the only types of sex education studies that received federal funding (Advocates for Youth 2009).

#### A National Investment in Sexual Education: Personal Responsibility Education Programs

On March 23, 2010 the Personal Responsibility Education study (PREP) was signed into law under Obama’s controversial Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148). This legislation provided \$75 million per year in mandatory

funding nationally between 2010–2014 but allocated a minimum of \$250,000 to individual states for comprehensive, medically accurate, and age appropriate sex education studies. These studies aimed to reduce sexually active and non-sexually active youth’s “risk of unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other STDs” and help them develop “life skills so that [they] can make responsible decisions and lead safe and healthy lives” (SEICUS, 2017).

PREP was important because it required states to fund studies that covered both abstinence and contraception for pregnancy and STI. HIV, AIDS prevention (SEICUS, 2017). These studies also needed to cover at least three: adulthood preparation subjects which could range from healthy relationships, such as positive self-esteem and relationship dynamics, friendships, dating, romantic involvement, marriage, and family interactions; adolescent development, such as promoting healthy attitudes and values regarding growth and development, body image, and racial and ethnic diversity; financial literacy; educational and career success, for employment preparation, job seeking, independent living, financial self-sufficiency, and workplace productivity; and, healthy life skills, such as goal-setting, decision-making, negotiation, communication and interpersonal skills, and stress management (U.S. Government Publishing Office; 2010).

Despite research noting the ineffectiveness of abstinence until marriage sexual education courses, Congress still increased funding for them in April 2015, to \$75 million a year (Advocates for Youth, 2016). Politicians are literally investing in the “mis-education” of the nation’s youth to ensure votes from socially conservative constituents. Although unacceptable, this is not shocking.

In the United States many states ban schools from providing youth with contraceptives. Only 37% of school-based health centers provide students with free contraceptives (Boonstra, 2015; Guttmacher, 2016 a). Latavia told the group that if she needed condoms she usually took them from her mother's room, but she did not say if she and her mother ever made an agreement stating that she could do that or if she assumed that her mother would not keep count of how many she was sneaking from her room. Some students do not have even have this option and need access to contraceptive methods to prevent pregnancy and disease.

Most government, school, and nonprofit adolescent health data focus on the sexual and reproductive health of high school students and teens from the ages 15-19 years old. Early adolescents' needs for contraception and comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education studies are often ignored, overlooked and avoided as they are seen as too young to receive comprehensive sexuality education resources. Although more data is needed, research shows that nationally less than one percent of girls have had sex before 14 years old, but when they do it is often involuntary (Finer & Philbin, 2013; Guttmacher, 2016 a). Most teens in the U.S. start having sex at age 17 and most pregnancies (69%) occur among 18–19-year-olds (Guttmacher, 2016 a). Nonetheless teens of all ages need access to information about navigating healthy romantic and sexual relationships and emotional, sexual, and reproductive health.

#### A History of Sexual Miseducation

Upon inception, sex education, as a social movement and practice, did not focus on educating youth and adults about sexual acts and desires, for fear of

encouraging premarital sex. They aimed to control the way the masses acted on their sexual desires after marriage (Fine, 1988; Carter, 2001). Many social reformers believed that the demise of the American family and declining birth rates of white middle class, native-born citizens were a result of their “enforced ignorance” about sex and venereal diseases and increasing participation in sexual vices in urban hubs (Carter, 2001). Sex education was seen as a remedy.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century adults tried to curb adolescent sexual desire with stories of venereal diseases (Carter, 2001; Moran, 2000). In the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a large focus on the benefits of family life, and more recently there has been an updated concern with preventing venereal diseases (Carter, 2001; Moran, 2000). Although there was a push to dispel myths about the harmlessness of venereal diseases, men’s necessity to have sex, the impure nature of sex, and how babies were conceived, there was a fear that providing children and adolescents with sexual knowledge would foster sexual consciousness and desire (Carter, 2001; Moran, 2000). Over time more researchers asserted that sex was a natural and healthy part of human development that was important for the evolution of the human race (Carter, 2001). Catholics, Protestants, and other religious fundamentalists saw this approach to sex education as immoral as they believed it would sanction promiscuity (Carter, 2001).

### *Pushing for a Sexual Education Revolution*

By the 1960s there was a large push for comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education to be available in schools. In 1964, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) was formed to

help schools address, but also move beyond narrow discussions of disease, pregnancy prevention, and promiscuity. Debates between progressive and conservative social reformers continued as conservatives pushed for sexual education to stay out of schools, or at the very least focus on abstinence until marriage.

In 1988, then U.S. Secretary of Education, William Bennett insisted that public schools only teach "‘morality literacy’ and...educate towards ‘modesty,’ ‘chastity,’ and ‘abstinence’ until marriage” (Fine, 1988, p. 32). This form of political rhetoric fueled debates about the dangers of providing youth with too much information about sex as it may encourage them to have more unprotected and premarital sex.

Research shows that comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education that focuses on abstinence and the use of condoms and contraception helps students from all school settings, genders, ethnicities, residential communities, and levels of sexual experiences delay and reduce their sexual activity, reduce their number of sexual partners, and increase their condom and contraceptive use (Kirby, 2007). Even more these courses helped reduce teen pregnancy and teen STI, HIV, and AIDS contraction rates (Boonstra, 2016; Advocates for Youth, 2009). Nonetheless, the debate for comprehensive and medically sexual education still rages on as U.S. Senators still try to ban it from their state's school systems.

Hunter, Guerrero & Cohen (2010) emphasize that healthy sexual development encompasses “development of sexual self-esteem and self-efficacy to foster safe-sex behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making both in adolescence and throughout the life course” (p. 388). Embracing a sex positive mindset is crucial for

health and wellbeing. This mindset allows youth and adults to focus on the positive and natural aspects of human sexuality.

#### Limited In-School Opportunities to Educate Middle Schoolers About Sex

Lakely Elementary Middle School like many Baltimore City Public Schools did not offer official sexual education courses. The girls reported that the topic was only addressed a few times before in their health education class. These brief discussions mainly focused on abstinence and using condoms to prevent HIV and AIDS. This course was taught by the gym teacher to complement physical education. The city's youth have very limited official spaces to gain medically accurate and comprehensive sexual education, seek out help, advice, mentorship, or solidarity about their relationships and decisions to engage in sexual activities. If urban black youth do not have access to key structural resources such as health clinics, school-based health centers (SBHC), or after school studies that focus on teen pregnancy and sexual development from an early age, they may be more likely to make sexual decisions that can negatively affect their health.

#### Conclusion

If girls are provided with the tools, time, and space to think about what being sexually assertive means to them, they can utilize these skills to have safer and satisfying sexual experiences (Rosenthal and Lewis, 1996). This study provided the girls with a relatively safe outlet to voice out their experiences with conflicts in their relationships and brainstorm solutions. Sex education can be reframed to discuss the importance of the socioemotional aspects of relationships and sex such as: self-

esteem, self-worth, happiness, intimacy, care, trust, respect, pleasure, desire, attraction, redefining gender and sex roles, consent, agency, self-regulation, impulses, fear, discomfort, coercion. I felt that it was important to ask black girls how they navigated love, friendship, sex, trust, and consent. Their responses can offer great insights to understand early adolescent sexual development especially as they experience several physical, cognitive, socioemotional, and environmental changes after the onset of puberty.

Whenever one of the girls shared a story about their experiences with disrespectful partners, sexual coercion, verbal, or sexual abuse, we worked as a group to identify the challenges that the student faced, what strategies they used to protect themselves, their values, their feelings during the traumatic event or conflict, what support they relied on or had access to cope with the ordeal, what strategies they could use to resolve the problem, and what advice we could give other girls who might have similar experiences. When the girls shared their stories, perceptions of their past relationships and dreams for future romantic and sexual relationships, they built new critical thinking skills, expanded their world-views, embraced new strategies to become more assertive, and became more resilient.

## Chapter 6: Pushing for Health Equity in Baltimore: The Need for Socioemotional Learning Opportunities and Comprehensive and Medically Accurate Sexual Education Courses

This dissertation asserts that listening to black early adolescent girls' perceptions of their own resilience strategies, life experiences, desires, needs, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships can improve the ways that schools, local governments, and community stakeholders push for health equity in Baltimore City. The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (WHO, 2017). This definition can help us to specifically rethink limited narratives created about what poor and working class, urban, black early adolescent girls' need to achieve and maintain health and wellbeing.

This dissertation is informed by a three-year longitudinal ethnographic and participant action research study, conducted from 2010-2013, at a Baltimore City public school. Eighty-five, hour-long, weekly and biweekly workshops were conducted with 55 black middle school girls between the ages of 11-14 years old, who were in three different grade-based cohorts, until their respective eighth grade graduations.

The black early adolescent girls in this study shared that their major stressors were feeling misunderstood, increased domestic and academic responsibilities as they transitioned into adolescence, conflicts with peers and adults, cyberbullying on popular social media sites, race, gender, and class stigmatization and policing at school, a lack of social supports, pressure to engage in sexual activities, physical and

sexual violation, navigating structurally decaying neighborhoods, and community violence.

This interdisciplinary study explores relevant literature on adolescent development, relational aggression, adverse childhood experiences, emotional intelligence, neuroplasticity, and resilience in hopes of offering evidence backed suggestions for interventions that can help black early adolescents living in poor and working-class schools and communities thrive. This study highlights the importance of understanding the ways that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can affect black early adolescent girls' cognitive, social, emotional, and sexual development, but also how understanding evidence-based resilience strategies can help families begin to heal (Burke Harris, 2014; Burke Harris, 2018; Hunter, Cohen, and Guerrero, 2010).

This dissertation argues that black early adolescent girls utilize resilience strategies, particularly, self-assertion, storytelling, creativity, play, and community building to cope with the aforementioned daily stressors and other traumatic life events. It also suggests that holistic wellness approaches such as mindfulness and play based therapy, socioemotional learning opportunities, restorative justice, facilitated intergroup dialogue, story exchange, participant action research, and comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education interventions that listen to black girls' perceptions of their own experiences and needs can help schools promote health equity among black early adolescent girls in Baltimore City, the United States, and the world.

### *Holistic Wellness Approaches to Combat Trauma*

One's home address should not determine their access to life-saving information and resources. In November 2016, the Baltimore City Health Department created a Youth Holistic Wellness Strategy which emphasized the importance of fostering "Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies, Healthy Communities, and Healthy Systems" for youth ages 5-19 (BCHD, 2016 b). Baltimore City Public Schools do not require schools to provide socioemotional learning courses (BCPS, 2017) and although the state of Maryland requires that all of its schools offer comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education courses, a recent report revealed that less than 50 percent of schools are actually teaching comprehensive sexual education in Baltimore (Houppert, 2016).

The Baltimore City Health Department noted that their strategy's success will be measured through "high impact" outcomes, such as reduced teen births, reduced child fatalities, and reduced missed school days (BCHD, 2016 b). This study suggests that BCHD might be able to reach its long-term goals by hiring ethnographers to facilitate longitudinal participant action research focus groups that follow urban black elementary school students from the highest performing and lowest performing schools in the city until they graduate from middle school and again from high school to learn the students' perceptions of their resilience strategies, needs, desires, and the quality of their interpersonal relationships. This would provide practitioners with deeper insights into the experiences and needs of poor and working-class students in specific Baltimore communities at a very young age. It may be beneficial to observe how students' perceptions of their needs change as they age.

This qualitative data might then be used to cultivate customized yet evidence-based interventions and mentoring programs that can improve health equity and socioemotional and sexual health education in the city.

Creating more in-school spaces where early adolescent girls can freely express themselves, ask questions, and gain resources that can potentially support not only their academic success but their physical safety, socio-emotional well-being, mental, and sexual health. Black youth in Baltimore are often pathologized and criminalized in the media and in public discourse. More recently city agencies such as the Baltimore City Public School System and Health Department have taken more holistic approaches to helping black youth thrive after the nationally publicized murder of Freddie Gray.

In April 2015, Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old black man, was arrested and died from a severe spinal cord injury while in police custody. Many in Baltimore, the nation, and the world were outraged because the case appeared to be yet another instance where police were not punished for committing acts of violence against young black men and women. Recognizing the impact of structural racism, injustice, violence, and trauma especially in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death the Baltimore City Health Department in collaboration with Baltimore City Public Schools and other local nonprofits applied for and were awarded a five-year, \$5 million grant by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Center for Mental Health Services for the Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma (ReCAST) program (BCHD, 2016 a).

ReCAST's mission is to provide adults in schools and community centers with a trauma informed approach that can help students navigate their feelings and resolve conflicts calmly so that they can succeed. Unfortunately, Gray's death was not the first time that Baltimore youth were exposed to the violence. A 2014 Baltimore Sun series "Collateral Damage" described the results from Promise Heights, a program run by the University of Maryland School of Social Work in the Upton-Druid Heights community (McDaniels, 2014). My research suggests that programs that address the needs of girls and boys separately are an effective way for participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with less posturing.

McDaniels (2014) notes that "nearly a third of children exposed to violence will develop PTSD." The report revealed that 43% of students at Booker T. Washington Middle School for the Arts in Baltimore City said they witnessed physical violence at least once a week, 39% stated that they knew someone who had been killed at a young age, 40% said they knew someone who possessed a gun, and nearly 19% said they could easily get one (BCHD, 2016 a).

As we see with ACEs, constant exposure to violence and trauma affect children's mental health, but also their physical health. McDaniels (2014) reports that "as the children age, the impact of violence can translate into serious health problems, including hypertension and diabetes. Some early research shows that stress may even alter their DNA." Literature in the field of neuroscience shows us that ACEs such as poverty, violence, and trauma often increase youth stress levels (Wade et al., 2014; Mendelson et al., 2010). If children are not taught to regulate their stress responses, their ability to do so will be greatly impaired as they are not born with executive

function skills (Mendelson et al., 2010). The brain works tirelessly to ward off stress, but as a result of constant exposure “other key areas don't develop properly” (McDaniels, 2014).

Stressed children have been found to have smaller and sometimes inactive prefrontal cortexes, “the part of the brain responsible for executive functions such as attention span, planning and organizing, goal-setting and behavior control” (McDaniels, 2014). Even more some brain scan studies reveal “stunted growth of the hippocampus, which may inhibit a child's ability to form new memories, learn or control emotions. The symptoms were worse for kids who experienced trauma more directly” (McDaniels, 2014).

This report suggested that there is a great need to understand the impact of violence and stress on our youth. Schools can benefit from understanding how the effects of stress on a child may manifest as anger and frustration. This knowledge can help administrators and teachers to implement restorative justice approaches to handle their outbursts. Practitioners can use evidence based, scientific approaches to find real and effective solutions to students’ problems. The literature suggests that further punishing youth for behaviors that at the root are beyond their control only exacerbates the problems that they and their communities face.

This dissertation suggests that youth could benefit from proper medical, psychological, and social supports to cope with trauma and violence. Two girls in the study revealed that they witnessed the murders of their brother and cousin respectively. Many others noted that they witnessed their family members being beat up and being arrested. Some of the girls were even involved in fights themselves. One

eighth grade girl admitted that one altercation she was involved in resulted in her being ordered to appear in a juvenile court.

In the fall of 2016, BCPS CEO Dr. Sonja Santelises stated that the city's push for implementing in-school trauma-based interventions “doesn't mean third-grade teachers have to become licensed clinicians," but instead that they will “increase the number of clinicians and mental health screenings for students and launch stress-reduction and mindfulness groups” (Green, 2016). Punitive measures implemented by public schools often do not promote mindfulness, executive function, or self-regulation skills. Restorative justice, mindfulness, and meditation programs have been used as peaceful alternatives, across the nation and the world, to help students gain the lifelong tools they need to thrive, build relationships, and be resilient.

Restorative justice programs in schools focus on repairing relationships once someone has been offended or harmed instead of punishing them (Hopkins, 2003; Fronius et al., 2016). Many of these programs began in and have been more popular in Canada and the United Kingdom, but many schools in the United States are beginning to realize the positive effect of these peaceful measures on their students.

In Baltimore one of ReCast’s current partners, the Holistic Life Foundation, has already started a socioemotional learning program with Baltimore City Public Schools. They worked with researchers at John Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Adolescent Health in 2010 to investigate the effects of mindfulness and meditation practices on poor and working class black urban youth at

Robert W. Coleman Elementary School. The study demonstrated that mindfulness and meditation practices can help children, even as young as those in the 4th and 5th grades, cope with previous experiences with trauma, regulate their emotions, decrease stress, and even teach their families how to reduce stress as well (Holistic Life Foundation, 2017; Mendelson et al., 2010).

The Holistic Life Foundation's intervention program began in 2001 and uses "yoga-based physical activity, breathing techniques, and guided mindfulness practices" to train youth to breath, center, and calm themselves (Dariotis, Mendelson, and Blanchard, 2011). In addition to the yoga in-school and after-school programs, the foundation also offers mentoring, tutoring, homework assistance, and environmental advocacy projects (Dariotis, Mendelson, and Blanchard, 2011).

Mindfulness is a state of awareness that helps individuals be intentional about embracing present moments, situations, and emotions that they are experiencing, instead of ruminating about the past through brooding thoughts, self-criticism, and negative emotions (Hooker and Fodor, 2008; Im and Follette, 2016). The earlier discussed trauma-based counseling approaches such as PACE also use mindfulness as a strategy to promote more calming environments for students to build socioemotional intelligence and executive function skills. Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist tradition, through Eastern practices of meditation, but it is important to note that it is not meditation since mindfulness is to have an "increased awareness of the present moment, not to achieve a higher state of consciousness" (Hooker and Fodor, 2008; Dariotis, Mendelson, and Blanchard, 2011). Research suggests that mindfulness practices are especially important as they help youth to regulate their

responses to stress, especially when they may experience it so regularly while living in poverty (Mendelson et al., 2010).

The Holistic Life Foundation's community mentoring and health program is a model for participant action research and youth centered public health intervention. In an interview with Wisdom 2.0 cofounders of the program, Ali and Atman Smith note that getting to know their participants on a personal level was key to the effectiveness of the intervention. They asserted that above all their students wanted to feel loved, respected, and cared for (Wisdom 2.0, 2013). Even when they had a stable guardian in their lives they yearned for more social connections. When this bond was established students were receptive to learning new skills and opening up about their stories.

Although these programs are important, there are risks in approaching youth wellness from the lens of violence and trauma. Calling something a "trauma-based approach" can cloud youth program developers, facilitators, clinicians' assumptions about the impact that interventions can make in the lives of youth. Asking youth what issues are most important to them and which topics they feel they need help navigating is foundational to conducting participant action. Including youth in the research and programming process is a powerful tool for ensuring that they are provided the service that they need.

The label of "at-risk" carries the weight of associations with dysfunction, predisposition for criminality, and victimhood. Even though many youth experience violence and trauma, these aspects of their lives do not fully portray the complexity of all youth experiences in poor and working-class communities in Baltimore. The girls'

stories show that black early adolescent girls from poor and low-income homes experience love, support, fun, joy, fulfillment and success.

Black youth from poor and working-class communities are often “managed” in schools. Socioemotional learning tools such as restorative justice activities can help students and teachers avoid traditional disciplinary strategies and provide students and teachers with skills to resolve any conflict. These opportunities help girls to build on the resilience strategies that they already have in and out of the classroom.

This dissertation also examines the ways that the girls navigate peer, romantic, and sexual relationships and their perceptions of the quality of these relationships. Their stories suggest that there is a great need for comprehensive and medically accurate socioemotional learning opportunities and sexual health resources in Baltimore City. Due to federal and state guidelines, schools often avoid and sometimes are prohibited from teaching students age appropriate material to help them productively engage in courageous conversations around identity, values, and romantic and sexual relationships.

The participants’ stories showed that too often young girls felt unequipped to deal with sexual coercion that emerged in and outside of their official romantic and sexual relationships. Even girls who constantly emphasized that they were taught to be “strong” and assertive in many of their social and familial circles struggled with making decisions that put their feelings of safety, wellbeing, and pleasure first sexually. The middle school girls in the study described several scenarios where boys tried to forcibly pressure and coerce them into having vaginal, oral, and anal sex.

Some girls noted that they wanted to delay intimacy, romance, or sexual relations because they felt that it would interrupt their educational and future economic success. The delay in providing comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education paired with socioemotional learning opportunities to middle school students may not be consistent with their ability to: understand how their bodies, minds, and emotions function, critically analyze their own sexual values, desires, and boundaries, and develop a sense of sexual assertiveness. Providing youth with these opportunities has the potential to inform their engagements in sexual decision-making processes and reduce their risk of contracting STIs, HIV, and AIDS, becoming pregnant, being coerced into sexual activities, and remaining in emotionally abusive relationships.

Black early adolescent girls can benefit from gaining the life skills and resilience strategies to enjoy positive and healthy romantic and sexual experiences and improving the resilience strategies that they already have. Many girls in the study had a hard time making these distinctions and decisions and often felt ashamed for even being in situations that demanded they make sexual decisions of which they were unsure. These learning opportunities can provide them with tools to critically analyze the intersections between friendship, empathy, intimacy, romance, love, and sexual arousal. They can also help them cultivate sexual assertiveness and sexual self-esteem that can help them understand the differences between pleasure, consent, sexual coercion, rape, and healthy ways to engage in intimate relationships with romantic and or sexual partners.

## Bibliography

- Adams, M. (2007.) "Pedagogical frameworks for social justice education". In Teaching for diversity and social justice, 2nd ed., Edited by: Adams, M., Bell, L. A. and Griffin, p. 15–33. New York, NY: Routledge.
- American Psychological Association, Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents. (2008). Resilience in African American children and adolescents: A vision for optimal development. Washington, DC: Author.  
<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/resiliencrpt.pdf>
- Annunziata, D. Hogue, A., Faw, L., Liddle, H.A. (2006). Family Functioning and School Success in At-Risk, Inner-City Adolescents. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*. 35(1) :100-108.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21394228>
- Anderson, E. (1999). Code of the streets: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city. New York: Norton.
- Banister, E. and Leadbeater, B.J. (2007) To stay or to leave? How do mentoring groups support healthy dating during relationships in high-risk girls? in B.J. Leadbeater and N.Way (Eds.), Urban girls revisited: Building strengths. (p.177-201). New York: New York University Press.
- Bethell, C, Newacheck, P, Hawes, E, Halfon, N. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences: assessing the impact on health and school engagement and the mitigating role of resilience. *Health Affairs*. 33(12): 210-2016.

- Bethell C., Gombojav N., Solloway M. and Wissow, L. (2015). Adverse Childhood Experiences, Resilience and Mindfulness Based Approaches: Common Denominator Issues for Children with Emotional, Mental, or Behavioral Problems. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*. 25(2): 139-56.
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: New York University Press.
- Burke Harris, N. (2014). How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime. Ted Med 2014.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime/transcript?language=en)
- Burke Harris, N. (2018). *The deepest well: Healing the long-term effects of childhood adversity*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Bochner, A. P. & Ellis, C. (2016). The ICQI and the Rise of Autoethnography: Solidarity Through Community. *International Review of Qualitative Research*. 9. 208-217.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305718183\\_The\\_ICQI\\_and\\_the\\_Rise\\_of\\_Autoethnography\\_Solidarity\\_Through\\_Community](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305718183_The_ICQI_and_the_Rise_of_Autoethnography_Solidarity_Through_Community)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015). *A Profile of the Working Poor, 2015*.  
<https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2015/home.htm>
- Brown, R.N. (2009). *Black girlhood celebration: Toward a hip hop feminist pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Cahill, S. (2011). Black sexual citizenship: Understanding the impact of political issues and those at the margins of race, sexuality, gender, and class. In J. Battle & S. L. Barnes (Eds.), *Black sexualities: Probing powers passions, practices, and policies*. (p.190-212). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Callier, D.M., Hill, D.C., Waters, H.L. (2017). Critical Collaborative Performance Autoethnography Reflecting on Collective Practice, Black Girlhood, Black Love and Accountability. (p. 37-44). In S.L. Pensonean-Conway et. al. (Eds.) *Doing Autoethnography*. New York:Sense Publishers.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-6351-158-2\\_5](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-6351-158-2_5)
- Casiano, M.R. (2018). *Broken city: Race, Property, and Culture*. (Dissertation). College Park: University of Maryland.
- Caughey, J. L. (1982). The ethnography of everyday life: Theories and Methods for American Culture. *American Quarterly* 34, 222-43.
- Cauthen, N. K. & Fass, S. (2008). *Measuring Income and Poverty in the United States*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health.
- Center for Youth Wellness. (2017). Childhood adversity increases risk for long-term health and behavioral issues.<https://centerforyouthwellness.org/health-impacts/>  
<https://centerforyouthwellness.org/health-impacts/>
- CDC. (2017). Young Teens (12-14 years of age): Developmental Milestones.  
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/adolescence.html>

- Chin, E. (2001). *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2003). *Safe and sound: An educational leader's guide to evidence-based social and emotional learning programs*. Retrieved October 1, 2002, from <http://www.casel.org>
- Corneille, M.A. and Belgrave, F. (2005). What's culture got to do with it? Prevention programs for African American adolescent girls. *Journal of Health Care Poor Underserved, 16*(4): 38-47.
- Cohen, C. J. (2010). *Democracy remixed: Black youth and the future of American politics (Transgressing boundaries: Studies in black politics and black communities)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought*. (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Costigan, C., Cauce, A.M., and Etchison, K. (2007). "Changes in African American Mother Daughter Relationships During Adolescence: Conflict, Autonomy, and Warmth," in B.J. Leadbeater and N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls revisited: Building strengths*. (p.177-201). New York: New York University Press.
- Crenshaw, K., Ocen, P., and Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, over policed, and under-protected*. Columbia Law School. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. African American Policy Forum.  
[http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter\\_Report.pdf](http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/app/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf)
- Crick, N. R., & Grotpeter, J. K. (1995). Relational aggression, gender, and social-

- psychological adjustment. *Child Development*, 66, 710–722.
- Cox, A. M. (2015). *Shapeshifters: Black girls and the choreography of citizenship*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press.
- Dariotis, J., Mendelson, T., and Blanchard, J. (2011). *Say Om: Mindfulness Makes a Difference in the Lives of Urban Youth*. Johns Hopkins University.  
<http://hlfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Yoga-Brief.pdf>
- Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P., Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14:245–258.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of Desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 29-53.
- Fordham, S. (1993). "Those Loud Black Girls": (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender "Passing" in the Academy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 3-32.
- Evans-Winters, V. (2005). *Teaching black girls: Resiliency in urban classrooms*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gaunt, Kyra. (2006). *The games black girls play: Learning the ropes from double dutch to hip-hop*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.
- Giovanelli, A., Reynolds, A. J., Mondri, C. F., & Ou, S.-R. (2016). Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Well-Being in a Low-Income, Urban Cohort. *Pediatrics*, 137(4), <http://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-4016>
- Girl Scouts of the USA. (2011). *The Resilience Factor: A Key to Leadership in*

African American and Hispanic Girls.

[http://www.girlscouts.org/content/dam/girlscouts-gsusa/forms-and-documents/about-girl-scouts/research/resilience\\_factor.pdf](http://www.girlscouts.org/content/dam/girlscouts-gsusa/forms-and-documents/about-girl-scouts/research/resilience_factor.pdf)

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Guthrie, B. J., Young, A.M., Boyd, C., Kitner. E.K. (2002). “Ebb and Flow When Navigating Adolescence: Predictors of Daily Hassles Among African-American Adolescent Girls.” *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, 7(4):143-152.

Henry, A (1998). “‘Invisible’ and ‘womanish’: Black girls negotiating their lives in an African centered school in the USA.” *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 1(2): 151-170.

hooks, b. (1996). *Bone black: Memories of girlhood*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Hooker, K. E. And Fodor, I. E. (2008). Teaching Mindfulness to Children. *Gestalt Review*. 12(1): 75-91.

Hunter, M.A., Guerrero, M., & Cohen, C. (2011). “Black youth sexuality: Established paradigms and new approaches.” In *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers Passions, Practices, and Policies*.” Edited by Juan Battle & Sandra L. Barnes, 377-400. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Im, S. And Follette, V.M. (2016). Rumination and mindfulness related to multiple types of trauma exposure. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(4),

395-407. <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-10606-004>

Jiang, Y., Ekono, M., Skinner, C. (2015). Basic Facts About Low-Income Children  
Children under 18 Years, 2013. National Center for Children in Poverty.

[http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_1100.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_1100.html)

Jones, N. (2010). *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City  
Violence*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Kaveney, K., & Drewery, W. (2011). Classroom meetings as a restorative practice: A  
study of teachers' responses to an extended professional development  
innovation. *International Journal On School Disaffection*, 8, 5-12.

Kendi, I.X. (2016). *Stamped from the beginning: The definitive history of racist  
ideas in America*. New York: Nation Book.

Ladner, J. A. (1971). *Tomorrow's tomorrow: The black woman*. Garden City, N.Y.:  
Doubleday.

Luthar, S.S., Doernberger, C. H., & Zigler, E. (1999). Resilience is not a  
unidimensional construct: Insights from a prospective study of inner-city  
adolescents. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5:703-717.

Luthar, S.S., Lyman, E. Crossman, E.J. (2014). Resilience and Positive Psychology.  
In M. Lewis and K.D. Rudolph (Eds.), *Handbook of Developmental  
Psychopathology*, Third Edition. Springer Science + Business Media: New  
York. p.125-140.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286526146\\_Resilience\\_and\\_Positive\\_Psychology](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286526146_Resilience_and_Positive_Psychology)

- Marwick, A. E. and Boyd, D. (2011). The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics. *Decade in Internet Time: Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society*.  
[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1926349](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1926349)
- Macready, T. (2009). Learning social responsibility in schools: A restorative practice. *Educational Psychology In Practice*, 25(3), 211-220.
- Master, A.S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227-238.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11315249>
- Maton, K., Shellenbach, C., Leadbeater, B.J., & Solarz, A. (Eds.) (2004). Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths-based research and policy. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Mayhew, M. and Fernandez, S. (2007). Pedagogical practices that contribute to social justice outcomes. *The Review of Higher Education*, 31(1), 55–80.
- McCabe, K.M., Clark, R., and Barnett, D. (1999). Family protective factors among urban African American youth. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 8(2), 137-50. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10353074>
- Mendelson, T., Greenberg, M.T., Dariotis, J.K., Feagans Gould, L., Rhoades, B.L. & Leaf, P.J. (2010). Feasibility and preliminary outcomes of a school-based mindfulness intervention for urban youth. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 38, 985-994. Retrieved on January 4, 2011 at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/y574726332407006/>
- Michigan State University Extension. (2016). 12- to 14-year-olds: Ages and stages of

youth development.

[http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/12 to 14 year olds ages and stages of youth development](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/12_to_14_year_old_ages_and_stages_of_youth_development)

- Miller, J. (2008). *Getting played: African American girls, urban inequality and gendered violence*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Morris, M. W. (2016). *Push Out: The criminalization of black girls in schools*. New York: The New Press.
- Morrison, B., & Vaandering, D. (2012). Restorative justice: Pedagogy, praxis, and discipline. *Journal Of School Violence, 11*(2), 138-155.
- Murray, C., & Zvoch, K. (2011). Teacher-student relationships among behaviorally at-risk African American youth from low-income backgrounds: Student perceptions, teacher perceptions, and socioemotional adjustment correlates. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 19*(1), 41-54.
- Narrative 4. (2018). *Our Work. Our Core Method: The Story Exchange*.  
<https://narrative4.com/about/our-work/>
- Parks, S. (2013). *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*. New York: One World Books.
- Pillow, W. (2000). "Exposed Methodology: The Body as a Deconstructive Practice" in *Working the Ruins*. New York: Routledge.
- Putallaz, M., Grimes, C. L., Foster, K. J., Kupersmidt, J. B., Coie, J. D., Dearing, K. (2007). Overt and relational aggression and victimization: Multiple perspectives within the school setting. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*, 523-547.

- Reid-Brinkley, Shanara R. (2008). The essence of re(sex)pectability: Black women's negotiation of black femininity in rap music and music videos. *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*. 8(1), 236-260.
- Rodriguez, D. (2010). Storytelling in the field: Race, method, and the empowerment of Latina college students. *Cultural Studies/critical Methodologies*, 10(6), 491-507.
- Rosenthal, S. L., Burklow, K. A., Lewis, L. M., Succop, P. A., & Biro, F. M. (1997). Heterosexual romantic relationships and sexual behaviors of young adolescent girls, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 21, 238-243.
- Sacks, V. and Murphey, D. (2018). The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, nationally, by state, and by race or ethnicity. *Child Trends*. .
- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 9, 185–211.
- Sears, S. D. (2010). *Imagining black womanhood: The negotiation of power and identity within the girls' empowerment project*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Schneider, F. & Erste, D. (2002). *Hiding in the shadows: The growth of the underground economy*. International Monetary Fund.  
<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/issues/issues30/>
- Shieler, D. K. (2005). *The working poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shonkoff, J. and Gardner, A. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood advers and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(232)



Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner-city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yelp, R. (2015). Baltimore's Demographic Divide. *Wall Street Journal*.

<http://graphics.wsj.com/baltimore-demographics/>

Zaslaw, J. (2009). *A restorative approach to resolving conflict*. Principal

(Reston, Va.), 48-49. Zehr, H. (2002). *The little book of restorative justice*.

Intercourse, PA: Good Books.