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SHIFTING LITERACY METHODS AND TEACHING PRACTICES TO IMPROVE
EQUITY IN SCHOOLS FOR BLACK GIRLS

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Literacy Education.

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Dedication

To my mother, for being just a phone call away, for always being willing to drop everything to help, and being there through every single up and down in my life. You are the hardest working, most selfless person I have ever met. Your effort, support, encouragement, and love will never go unnoticed or unappreciated. I could not be more grateful to have you.

And to my other half for the endless laughs, the Cloud Town expertise, for being my partner and best friend in every way, and making this crazy year the most memorable of my life. With you, I always have something to look forward to. I am so lucky to have you as my person.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to the Project.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Personal Background.....	7
Definition of	
Literacy.....	10
The Importance of Literacy as a Provider of Agency for Black Women.....	10
Stylistic Notes and Choices.....	12
Summary.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	16
Introduction.....	16
Historical Discrimination and Identity Conservation of Black Women.....	18
Intersectionality.....	23
How Schools Discriminate Against Black Girls in Modern Times.....	25
Criminalization of Black Girls in School.....	29
Effective Literacy Practices.....	32
Effective Teaching Philosophies.....	34
Effective Teaching Practices.....	37
Summary.....	39
CHAPTER THREE: The Professional Development Project.....	41
Introduction.....	41
Project Overview.....	41

Research Frameworks and Theories.....	43
Choice of Method.....	45
Setting and Audience.....	47
Project Description.....	49
Timeline.....	50
Summary.....	51
CHAPTER FOUR: Reflection on the Project.....	52
Introduction.....	52
Revisit of the Literature.....	52
Implications and Benefits.....	53
Limitations.....	55
Future Projects.....	56
Conclusion.....	57
REFERENCES.....	58
PROJECT LINKS.....	65

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Project

Introduction

America's goal when schools were first conceived was to educate, cater to the needs of, and reproduce the culture of a white, homogeneous group of students - specifically male students (Paris & Alim, 2017). Today, schools have largely kept intact these same systems, expectations, curriculum, and teaching styles that were created for this homogeneous group (Paris & Alim, 2017). Over time, the whiteness of America changed and the United States became a hub for many different languages, races, and ethnicities to live and learn. 2014 became the first year students of color were the majority in U.S. public schools, as compared to in 1970, where 80% of students were white. In fact, it is predicted that by 2027, white students will make up only 45% of the school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Strauss, 2014).

Some would argue that many issues have arisen in education for students of color because America's schools were not developed to support and educate these students. Thus, there is a growing need for schools to honor the unique cultural identities and histories of students of color and their families. In fact, reformers often speak of educational inequity as being the civil rights issue of our time (Dahill-Brown, 2019). Equity is seen as such a paramount issue in modern times because when schools ignore these growing groups of students of color, it "continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools," which in return affects us as a nation (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). To combat this injustice in the

school system, educators and administrators must adopt an equitable mindset while also being intentional in the way they work with students of color. Educational inequity will only increase in importance as more and more people of color aim to maximize their potential, creativity, and uniqueness and rise to become political leaders, world-renowned scientists, legendary musicians, ground-breaking architects, and doctors that revolutionize modern medicine. It is my perspective that the collective consciousness of diverse groups in this country is growing; the demand for universal equality increases every day. Modernizing and expanding the scope of American education may serve as the most important factor in securing racial and cultural justice.

One group that our school systems repeatedly and often silently fail are Black girls. Black girls face complicated and multifaceted challenges in school due to their intersections of oppression: because they identify as girls and are racially marginalized, they face harsher rules and punishments, are expected to conform to certain ways of existing, and have to learn from a curriculum that largely ignores their voices (Morris, 2016). This systematic denial of the humanity and the needs of Black girls have perpetuated systems of injustices that began in times of slavery and continue today (Morris, 2016). Educators must use any means possible in order to close the opportunity and achievement gap created by systems of power in society (i.e., schools). I believe that alongside changing policies and teaching practices, promoting literacy for Black girls is one of the most powerful ways that educators and administrators can help close gaps that were created long ago. This being said, in this project I chose to explore the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black*

girls?

Personal Background

Throughout my life, I have always been concerned with equity. I grew up in a multiracial family, which caused me to see the world in a different way, rather than solely through a lens of white privilege. As a white woman, I have, of course, always lived with white privilege, but coming from a family that is filled with people of different skin colors and life experiences caused me to understand that people experience life differently when society deems them as an “other.” From my youngest years to my education in college, I always had friends of different races and ethnicities, and I often witnessed discrimination from police, racist comments from peers, different treatment from adults, and even the pressure to convert religions (directed towards some of my Hmong friends). Therefore, seeing discrimination against my friends and family helped me understand how society views and values people of color. I began to learn that the status quo in American society is only maintained by othering and oppressing others; it seems to me that in America, if there are no oppressed groups, there can be no elite groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). This understanding would continue to solidify in my mind as I learned more about critical race theory and have new experiences in college.

In college, I continued my equity journey by taking as many African American literature courses as I could, alongside diversity and inclusion courses for my education major. Works from African American authors became my favorite form of literature because of the window it granted me into new experiences. Reading these books was very humbling. I devoured books by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and - my

favorite - Toni Morrison. These books introduced me to the margins that Black women have been forced to exist in and the immense strength they must show to maintain agency and humanity against societal forces. These books also were an introduction to intersectionality, a topic that is extremely important to this project.

Later, as a first-year teacher, I started working at a charter school in North Minneapolis. The school was one hundred percent African American students. What drew me to the charter school was its mission - to provide a learning experience designed to empower African American students, rather than using a traditional, “one size fits all” approach that some conventional schools use. During my time there, I learned a lot about how the love of reading can lead to empowerment both in and out of the classroom. When students spent time engaging in literacy and reading books they enjoyed, they were happier and more confident in both their abilities and themselves. As students started to become more comfortable with reading, they became more comfortable using writing and speaking to express themselves and find agency in their words. Additionally, spending all day every day with people of a different race than me forced me to put everything I learned in college about microaggressions, racism, and systems of power into practice. It was another humbling experience that laid the groundwork for the next step in my career.

When I moved to a public school in a more racially diverse district, the disparities between students of color (especially Black students) and white students quickly became obvious. As the lunch detention supervisor, I noticed that there were far more Black students receiving lunch detention than any other student, despite the fact that half of all students were white. Additionally, when I asked students why they were in lunch

detention, I noticed that Black students were given longer punishments for the same offense. For example, for being tardy five times to class, a white student might receive one day of lunch detention, whereas a Black student might receive three days. Black girls were also treated unfavorably. I witnessed many incidents in the hall where Black girls would be stopped by teachers for having their phones out, while white girls walked by in groups on phones. I have seen teachers hold Black girls much more rigidly to the rules, assume the worst of them, and give way fewer chances than they do with white girls. In the hallways, Black girls talking or laughing loudly are met with suspicion and swift action. In the classroom, incidents that may have been left untouched (if they had been committed by another race of student) are blown completely out of proportion. Black girls are given less compassion, understanding, and effort when they may need it the most. Unfortunately, these experiences are not unique to my school; it is the same story across America (Morris, 2016). Black girls are receiving harsher punishments, are expelled at higher rates than any other groups of girls, and are held to stricter dress code standards - a few of the many reasons that schools should seek equity for Black girls (Morris, 2016).

While my time in schools has largely shaped my ideas about race, growing up as a woman in America has also impacted the way I view the world. Being a woman and experiencing discrimination on a personal and systemic basis has brought sexism to the forefront of my mind, and has introduced me to the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality has since become an extremely prominent issue to me. I find that intersectionality helps one conceptualize how those that are different from oneself might

experience the world, through their layers of oppression or lack thereof. Intersectionality is defined as “a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face” (Alemán, 2020, para. 5). Intersectionality is important to keep in mind when considering how particular subgroups of students interact within a system. In my opinion, intersectionality helps reveal layers of oppression and calls for a unique viewpoint which forces one to look more deeply.

Definition of Literacy

Literacy is the ability to read, write, interact with, and understand texts. It asks students to move beyond the simple task of pronouncing words correctly and enters the world of comprehension, understanding, and learning. It is a process that one never stops participating in and may never stop working to improve. Literacy “involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (Montoya, 2017, p. 2). This ability to participate in the community fully is something that has historically been denied to Black women and girls, which is a reason that promoting literacy for these girls is so important.

The Importance of Literacy as a Provider of Agency for Black Women

Since the first enslaved people were brought to America from Angola in Africa, Black women have struggled to navigate America’s racist social systems and thrive despite the multiple systems of oppression that dictated their lives (Waxman, 2019;

Mann, 2011). Whether or not some white Americans chose to acknowledge it, slavery and its underlying racism was a burden on the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health of Black people. As slavery dissolved, it became apparent that the racist and patriarchal skeleton upon which slavery was built would not be dismantled quite so easily (Feagin, 2014). While laws slowly changed and some Americans naïvely came to believe that they lived in a nation ruled by the decree “all men are created equal,” it became increasingly clear that traditionally oppressed groups were hardly in any better condition than they were before (Jones, 2010). Although Black men felt elevated for the first time ever, Black women still lived in the margins, were denied subjectivity and were suffocated by the intersectional nature of both their Black and female identities (Mann, 2011). Quickly, Black women became the members of the lowest caste in American society, forced to navigate the world under the scrutiny and objectification of those that were white and those that were male (Morris, 2016).

The only way Black women could exist in a racist and patriarchal society is by carefully constructing how they interacted with white and male communities. Acts, speech, and writing that challenged or criticized the way Black women were treated by other communities were perceived as threats to the “natural order,” and were quickly suppressed. Mann (2011) reminds us:

The shadow obscuring [the] complex Black women’s intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their

own victimization. (p. 575)

Not surprisingly, this intersectionality of oppression and marginalization robbed many Black women of their subjectivity and framed them as an object in society's eyes. The lack of ability to pursue traditional means, like publishing or speaking against their wrongful oppression in society, required that Black women find new ways to create their own agency outside of patriarchal and racist definitions. Reading, writing, and speaking - literacy, that is - provided a way for Black women to express themselves. Literacy today still functions as a powerful tool to fight against oppression and maintain humanity for Black girls, but the power of literacy cannot be used to its fullest potential unless girls are receiving an authentic education that honors who they are.

Stylistic Notes and Choices

A Note on Gender and Race

In this text, I have chosen to focus on Black girls specifically. This is not a choice that I have made flippantly. I am aware that girls of all races experience their own unique discriminatory practices, which is, of course, exacerbated by being a girl of color. Additionally, as supported by research, I am aware that gender is a social construct and focusing on Black "girls" accepts those constructs (Risman, 2004). This is not to deny the existence or legitimacy of Black non-binary, intersexed, or transgender individuals or to ignore how the school system creates and exacerbates problems for them. In fact, many of the problems and solutions described in this text apply to Black transgender girls. However, because of the added intersection(s) of oppression that would need to be taken into consideration, I have for the sake of length and clarity, chosen to explore only the

intersection of being Black and female and how it relates to literacy and equity. I believe that there is great value in exploring other intersections of oppression and it could revolutionize the way educators and administrators interact with and teach students - but this is best left for other future research projects. Additionally, I will be using she/her/hers pronouns throughout this text for the sake of clarity.

A Note on Black vs. African American

In her book, *Pushout* (2016), which this capstone largely draws from, Monique W. Morris writes a note about the usage of Black vs. African American. She writes:

People of African descent are referred to as Black and African American. While African American refers to people of African descent who reside in the United States, Black is a larger umbrella term that captures individuals throughout the African diaspora (e.g., those of Caribbean and/or Latino descent who belong to the racial group indigenous to Africa). ... I prioritize the use of Black but also occasionally use African American, as data sources use these terms interchangeably. (p. 248)

I recognize that each Black or African American individual has their own preference for how they identify and I believe that that should be respected. I, like Morris, prioritize the use of “Black” for the sake of clarity and consistency.

A Note on Capitalization

In this capstone, I have made the choice to capitalize the race of Black, but not white. There is a current belief that it is best to capitalize the term “Black” when referring to the race because it “is not a natural category but a social one—a collective

identity—with a particular history” (Appiah, 2020, para. 5). Additionally, it is also a proper noun, which should be capitalized. The more controversial topic is whether or not “white” should be capitalized. Price, of the Insight Center, wrote, ““We strongly believe that leaving white in lowercase represents a righting of a long-standing wrong and a demand for dignity and racial equity. ... Until the wrongs against black people have been righted, ... we cannot embrace equal treatment in our language”” (qtd. in Appiah, 2020, para. 9). As someone who strongly believes in doing what it takes to right wrongs, I will also be following this guide. Furthermore, in simple terms, “Black” is a culture while “white” is a descriptor, creating the need to capitalize one, but not the other.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced my research question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* I provided background for how schools were created for a white heterogeneous community and how that has negatively impacted students of color in modern times. Then, I gave personal background about my experiences surrounding equity and explained why that made me interested in this topic of literacy and equity. Also, I have provided definitions for intersectionality and literacy. I began exploring the importance of literacy for Black women throughout history, which will be expanded on in Chapter Two. Lastly, the rationale was provided for my exploration of literacy as it relates to Black girls, and not any other group of people.

Chapter Two delves into the history of oppression against Black girls. I examined the ways in which Black women have been systematically oppressed through slavery to

modern times. I defined and explored intersectionality, an essential topic in this project. I looked at how the research points to schools discriminating against Black girls in many schools today, as well as how they criminalize Black girls, creating a school-to-prison pipeline. Then, I looked at different ways that teachers can create equity for Black girls in school, through their literacy methods, educational philosophies, and teaching practices. I finish with a reflection on how these new literacies help support and create equity for Black girls.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter Two dives into some of the research that helps inform and answer the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* This chapter is structured into sections that begin in the past and work their way to more modern issues. The beginning sections of this chapter provide background information on topics that hold weight in answering the research question then transitions into more theoretical concepts.

This chapter begins by examining some of the ways that Black women have been historically discriminated against and also discusses how literacy has functioned as a way for Black women to assert and conserve their identities.

Next, the important concept of intersectionality is expanded on from Chapter One. It is essential to have an understanding of intersectionality if one is to understand why this topic focuses on equity for Black girls specifically.

The two sections that follow transition from the treatment of Black females throughout history to the way Black females are treated in schools in modern times. In schools today, there are many practices that systematically discriminate against Black girls. Black girls are largely denied the opportunity to exist authentically in their culture and are instead expected to assimilate to the dominant culture, as mentioned in Chapter One. Denial of one's culture can lead to mental health issues and contempt for the system, which in turn leads to less learning and higher dropout rates (James, 2017). In a

similar way, when the curriculum does not fit one's interests or does not reflect the student, they grow disinterested in school and have a more difficult time learning. Additionally, Black girls are targeted in serious ways, such as experiencing unfair dress code practices and higher suspension/expulsion rates. These practices inform the school-to-prison pipeline, which begins in our school system, and bit by bit, allows some of our Black girls slip through the cracks, eventually leading to incarceration.

Chapter Two then transitions from the treatment of Black girls in school to practices that promote equity: literacy practices, teaching philosophies, and teaching practices. The first section focuses on literacy. The study of literacy has certainly helped boost understanding of how to teach so that students can better express themselves through speaking and writing and can learn more through reading. As the landscape of American students changes and continues to support more students of color, there is a growing need for new ways of promoting literacy in the classroom for students that do not fit the mold of a "traditional" student. Using methods like metacognition can help boost the literacy of students of color, specifically Black girls.

Next, teaching philosophies are addressed. This literature review specifically focuses on the Funds of Knowledge philosophy, which in the case of this capstone, frames Black girls as having additive knowledge, rather than a deficit of any kind. Adopting new philosophies can help educators create equity in their classrooms and throughout the school.

Lastly, I explore effective teaching practices. In this capstone, the concept of culturally responsive and relevant teaching is addressed. A teacher that is skilled in

culturally responsive teaching creates a welcoming classroom environment that addresses the needs of Black girls and does not require them to give up part of who they are in order to be successful.

New literacies, philosophies, and practices have long-term effects that create better educated students that feel that their identity is respected and preserved, leading to higher self-esteem and helping to create a more equitable society. These girls go on to become women that then continue to address inequities and discrimination in society, and help to end the generational trauma caused by racism and sexism dating all the way back to slavery.

Historical Discrimination and Identity Conservation of Black Women

Through times of slavery and continuing on through Jim Crow and beyond, many Black women have been expected to be submissive to white men, white women, and Black men - and have always been given the lowest social standing of these groups in America. Black women have had to fight longer for things that others were already granted, such as voting rights. Additionally, Black women suffered through many inequities and discriminatory practices at a higher rate than white women or Black men, such as the wage gap and higher levels of sex trafficking. Considering the persistence of oppression for Black women, it was essential to maintain their identity through any means possible - namely, through participation in literacy and education (Mann, 2011). Moving chronologically, this section overviews some of the ways that Black women have been oppressed and how they conserved their identity and humanity.

Slavery

During the era of slavery, it was illegal for those of African descent to be educated or to read and write. Literacy was forbidden because it undermined the opinion that Black people were inhuman with inferior intellect, potential, and morals. Participating in academia was a threat to the entire structure of slavery - and therefore the structure of the United States - because it would disprove the false narrative that enslaved people were less-than, which had been created to keep Black bodies in a position of subordination. Despite the possibility of severe punishments if caught, Black women found ways to educate themselves in order to subvert the system and assert their humanity. Morris (2016) writes, “For many enslaved Black women, learning to read represented a reclamation of human dignity and provided an opportunity to ground their challenges to the institution in scholarship, literature, and biblical scripture” (p. 5). Literacy provided such an important means of escape, expression, and a way to preserve one's humanity in a time period where it was otherwise destroyed. In fact, literacy gave enslaved people an artistic medium to voice dissatisfaction, frustration, melancholy, and anger over the injustices they constantly faced living in a racist and patriarchal society. One chance enslaved people had to express their emotions in a situation in which they were perpetually silenced was through artistic means like storytelling. The sharing of stories and memories functioned as a sort of therapy wherein disenfranchised individuals could finally have a voice and share the injustices that haunted them. “Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have argued that vernacular art accounts, to a large degree, for the Black American’s legacy of self-awareness and endurance” (Gates et al., 2004, p. 4): when two individuals connect and find sympathy in each other’s struggles, they begin to form a

community that validates the negative feelings that have haunted Black individuals, allowing their survival. The validation that develops when Black individuals find sympathy in each other's stories is the first step towards regaining agency after a lifetime of dehumanizing oppression.

Jim Crow Era

After slavery dissolved, Black women were still subjected to oppression under segregation. Black men began to slowly gain more freedoms in society, such as the ability to choose a job, while Black women remained largely oppressed. As mentioned earlier, Black women became the members of the lowest caste in American society, and were forced to navigate the world under the scrutiny and objectification of all other groups in society - from those that were white and those that were male. Black women were subjected to the same type of dehumanizing conditions as Black men were during this time, like being whipped, flogged, and mutilated. However, because of the added layer of gender, Black women were also the targets of additional oppression and inhumane treatment, such as being raped and being forced to be wet nurses (Morris, 2016). During this time period, it remained essential for Black women to create and maintain an identity through literacy and community, especially as Black men began to have new opportunities for outlets such as music and performing long before women were able to. Black women continued to have to work harder to express themselves in a public and private setting than nearly any other groups of people.

Continued Segregation in Schools

Black Americans and other allies worked tirelessly to fight to end Jim Crow laws

and segregation in schools for nearly one hundred years. Many consider *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to be the ending of segregation in schools and the genesis of equal educational opportunities for Black girls. However, while the case and following laws ended de jure segregation (*de jure* meaning legal segregation), it was not exactly the answer to the cry for equitable literacy and education that enslaved women longed for decades earlier. Morris (2016) explains:

While de jure segregation may have ended in many ways with the Brown decision, affecting public policy well beyond the issue of education, it did not address the ways in which enduring xenophobia, tribalism, and the intersections between race and poverty would sustain de facto segregation—expanded residential racial isolation that by extension kept schools highly segregated. (p. 8)

The persistence of oppression and de facto segregation (*de facto* meaning not legally sanctioned, but still persisting in practice), like Jim Crow or gerrymandered school borders, created a school system that was rooted in discrimination, which has, since then, led to Black girls being underserved in education.

Sex Trafficking and Abuse Against Black Girls

Intersectionality of oppression unfortunately makes Black women a prime target for many types of abuse and mistreatment. Sex trafficking is one of the ways historical oppression against Black women has morphed into more modern issues surrounding gender and race: “The sex trafficking of African American girls and women cannot be divorced from the historical trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in which white slave owners systematically and legally sexually exploited African American girls and women”

(Bryant-Davis & Gobin, 2019, p. 386). In the United States, an estimated 43% of the 300,000 minors that are sex trafficked are Black girls (Harrell, 2015). Bryant-Davis and Gobin (2019) speak to the connectedness of intersectionality and sex trafficking:

Examining sex trafficking from an intersectional, feminist perspective reveals that ... African American youth are at increased risk for domestic minor sex trafficking, with being female, living in an urban area, and experiencing abuse prior to trafficking ... [and] many trafficking victims have a history of sociopolitical oppression. (p. 387)

The major implication of this is that lasting channels of oppression dating back to slavery times have impacts on the health, safety, and mental stability of Black girls and women today. In fact, sex trafficking survivors are known to suffer from a series of mental disorders and conditions as a result of their treatment, including: depression, anxiety disorders, distrust, suicidal thoughts and actions, addiction, and complex trauma, which only exacerbates the mental trauma brought on by racism (Andretta et al., 2016).

Lasting Impacts

According to the American Psychological Association, approximately 2.7 million Black Americans are at risk for negative outcomes related to racism-related stressors (American Psychological Association, 2016). Many studies over the past decade have uncovered strong connections between depression, mental health issues, and racism (James, 2017; Luoma, Kohlenberg, Hayes & Fletcher, 2012; Szymanski & Henrichs-Beck, 2014; Velez, Moradi, & DeBlaere, 2015). The constant feeling of being less-than and targeted over the course of a lifetime (and passed from generation to

generation) causes mental stress. These mental effects are only furthered as intersections of oppression are added: Black women also have to deal with discrimination as a female, along with oppression from being a part of any other nondominant group. Unfortunately, our current public school system is not designed to acknowledge, combat, or heal intergenerational and racial trauma.

No matter what the time period, it has been clear that literacy has helped Black women cope and deal with the mental effects of oppression, demonstrating that education and literacy need to be fundamental human rights that cater to the people they serve because they help destroy these inequities in society.

Intersectionality

As mentioned earlier, intersectionality is defined as “a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face” (Alemán, 2020, para. 5). These concepts of intersectionality and intersectional identities are increasing in importance as time goes on and more and more students find themselves as a part of multiple oppressed groups, whether it be through their race, class, gender, sexuality, or physical and mental abilities and disabilities (Strauss, 2014).

Legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, first brought intersectionality into the public eye in 1989 to address the gray area created in the legal system for Black women who were either grouped with Black men because of their race, or with white women because of their gender. Researchers Harris and Patton (2017) wrote:

The courts saw no need to recognize Black women as a group because their experiences were similar to Black men's and white women's experiences.

Conversely, the courts denied Black women the right to represent Black men or white women because their experiences were viewed as substantively different.

(p. 335)

Crenshaw found this significant because it leads to Black women holding very little power in both the legal and educational systems. She saw there was a growing need for a theory of intersectionality in both of these structural systems to recognize Black women as their own group with a unique set of shared experiences. The lack of power in education and the law only further solidifies Black women's place at the bottom rung in American society, due to the fact that they do not get a platform to advocate for themselves in legal or educational matters, and are therefore stripped of their power.

In a school setting, it is important to understand intersectionality because it allows teachers and administrators to take a look at their practices in a critical way and see how they may be unknowingly impacting oppressed groups, especially Black females.

Researchers Harris and Patton (2017) explain: "Approaching students' development through an intersectional lens allows [education] professionals to account for students' identity-specific experiences and the social processes that shape these experiences" (p. 336). According to Harris and Patton, intersectionality helps teachers shift their framework to see students that are not part of the dominant group as having a wealth of knowledge and life experiences, rather than having a deficit (this concept will be expanded on in a later section in this chapter). Intersectionality also allows them to see

areas in which they support some groups but ignore others. When it comes to using literacy and teaching practices to improve equity for Black girls, intersectionality is extremely important because it helps educators more fully understand how to use classroom practices and curriculum to support these girls in a way that authentically fits them. Researchers Patton and Chang (2011) stated:

Students - particularly those occupying multiple locations of oppression - are not content with identifying themselves in simple, one-dimensional ways. Thus identity center administrators will need to shift their mission and programming to move beyond a single identity and address the overlapping, intersecting nature of identities. (p. 258)

Therefore, an intersectional point of view allows teachers to change the school and classroom experience into one that honors the identities of all students, including Black girls, rather than just the dominant group.

How Schools Discriminate Against Black Girls in Modern Times

While the eras of slavery and Jim Crow may be over, discrimination against Black women and girls has morphed into new and insidious forms that are potentially less violent, but just as damaging to Black girls. These practices cause a rift between Black girls and the school system and lead to an association between being in school and being disrespected, leading to further issues that impact Black girls in society. Morris (2016) asserts: “One of the most persistent and salient traits among girls who have been labeled ‘delinquent’ is that they have failed to establish a meaningful and sustainable connection with schools” (p. 2). Many instances of overt and covert racism can be seen in the

policies and practices both at the school, district, and state/federal level.

At the school level, dress codes are enforced that specifically target Black girls. One particular dress code rule that has been an issue nationwide are rules against Black hairstyles. There are many documented incidents about girls being punished for wearing their hair in traditional cultural styles or wearing it as it naturally grows out of their head. For example, in Orlando, Florida, twelve-year-old Vanessa VanDyke, faced expulsion from school for wearing her hair in an afro. In 2013, Tiana Parker, a seven-year-old, was sent home for wearing her hair in dreadlocks because her school's dress code had a policy against "faddish hairstyles" such as afros, dreadlocks, and mohawks - despite the fact that dreadlocks date back to biblical times (Morris, 2016; Johnson, 2004). These policies against Black hair are written and distributed to every child in the school, which shows all students and teachers that Black students are innately bad. They do not need to *do* anything to be breaking rules, they just need to show up to the building with their natural bodies to be considered deviant. Morris (2016) adds, "characterizations of kinky hair as unmanageable, wild, and ultimately 'bad hair' are all signals (spoken and unspoken) that Black girls are inferior and unkempt when left in their natural state" (p. 93). Teaching Black girls that they are, by their very nature, a problem or are not welcome in school, immediately alienates them and creates a disdain for the school system.

Black girls are further alienated by schools in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, schools were first created to serve white, male students. In recent times, the curriculum expanded to make room for other types of students, but it still largely

excluded Black girls. The goal of schools has always been to continue tradition and to reproduce the status quo of society, namely the traditions of who schools were originally created for - white men (Martusewicz et al., p. 21). Not only do classroom practices and curriculum choices highly favor white ways of learning and understanding, it also focuses on white bodies and figures in history. It explores the stories, achievements, and interests of people that represent the dominant group while addressing other groups at a mere surface level, or worse, excluding them completely. Morris (2016) asks of our schools' curriculum:

If schools are teaching curricula that have erased the presence of Black females from the heroic narrative of American exceptionalism (save for a few references during Black History Month in February), are they not implicitly constructing a narrative of exclusion? In a world of normalized exclusion, how and where, then, do Black girls situate themselves as Americans and as global citizens? (p. 26)

Morris reminds us that a curriculum that excludes Black girls has greater impacts on them than just losing interest in school and feeling disconnected from it; it also damages their self-esteem by showing them that they are not part of what schools and society consider important. They grow up believing that they are secondary citizens and that idea is solidified every day they enter the school building.

At the state and federal level, inequity for Black girls persists in the way that funds are allocated and schools are held to academic and equity standards. Dahill-Brown (2019) explained the inequity that exists due to small, fragmented school districts, which is the result of gerrymandering school borders:

Fragmented systems establish institutional boundaries that perpetuate - and in many cases exacerbate - racial and socioeconomic segregation. This means that the institutional underpinnings of educational inequality, and consequently the stubbornness of achievement gaps linked to segregation, vary systematically. And though fragmentation appears to contribute to higher levels of segregation overall, school district borders have proven to be remarkably durable over the last thirty years, due in part to Supreme Court decisions that required racial integration within school districts, but not between them. (p. 108)

Inequity is also perpetuated by the way that these district schools are funded. Local taxes pay for the school, and because the districts are fragmented, more funds are allocated for the wealthier, whiter school districts. Dahill-Brown (2019) expands on this:

Districts with high property values easily outspent their neighbors, sometimes multiplying several times over what was spent per pupil in the poorest districts. These disparities persisted in spite of the fact that poorer communities often taxed themselves at higher rates. (p. 85)

With this, a cyclical problem of equity arises: poorer districts have less money to spend on each student and less money to hire good teachers, leading to a less educated population. This eventually leads to a less-educated workforce making less money, which is then taxed at a higher rate to make up for the gap in the schools, leaving the population with even less money. This lack of funding is another way that schools fail Black girls. Morris (2016) reminds us that this lack of funding is not without consequence: “nearly 48 percent of Black girls who are expelled nationwide do not have access to educational

services” (p. 3). Members of oppressed groups, especially those that belong to multiple oppressed groups, need more resources to help support them. When district borders are gerrymandered to provide funding to whiter districts, inequity is furthered and Black girls do not get the opportunities they need to gain traction in education and, later on, in society.

Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools

While racist dress codes, ill-fitting curriculum, and segregated school boundaries decrease the interest Black girls have in school and their access to a quality education, disproportionate discipline rates perpetuate systemic inequalities for them. While the problem of the disparity in discipline rates between white and Black students is far more overt than curriculum issues, there is still a large number of people that do not understand or acknowledge the school-to-prison pipeline for Black girls.

There is a continued and dangerous targeting of Black girls in our school. Black girls as young as kindergarten have had police called on them and then been handcuffed and arrested for throwing temper tantrums (Morris, 2016, p. xiii; p. 3). Additionally, a situation with a white girl that would have been handled with a quick talk is escalated to the point of violence for a Black girl. For example, in 2013, a sixteen-year-old diabetic girl in Alabama, Ashlynn Avery, fell asleep at school while reading a book. After not responding to the teacher, she was told to leave the room and an officer “slammed her face into a file cabinet and then arrested her” (p. 3). These are not uncommon occurrences and many Black girls feel threatened and targeted by teachers, administrators, and school resource officers. In fact, nationwide, Black girls are so much

more targeted by school staff that they make up only 16 percent of female students nationwide, but account for one-third of female students arrested at school (Morris, 2016). Morris reminds us that our schools are filled with officers and other officials who know little to nothing about the development of children or adolescents, intersectionality, or racial trauma, and are instead trained to deal with actual adult criminals. This only increases the number of incidents and aggravates their severity (Morris, 2016).

The problem of criminalization of Black girls goes deeper than the unfair and unreasonable violence and punishment against them; it stems from a deep place of prejudice against Black girls; they receive prejudice on both accounts of being Black and being female. They exist at an intersection that makes many white educators feel very uncomfortable. Black girls' own set of specific experiences, culture, and worldviews cause them to subvert "traditional" femininity as defined by whiteness, as well as create their own form of Blackness that can differ from those that identify as male. Researchers speculate that "Black girls' nonconformity to traditional gender expectations may prompt educators to respond more harshly to the negative behaviors of Black girls" (Morris, 2016, p. 11). According to a 2007 study, teachers are likely to describe Black girls as being defiant, uncooperative, loud, insubordinate, disrespectful, uncontrollable, irate, and are more likely to punish Black girls for being "unladylike" - an egregiously sexist offense (Morris, 2016).

Again, Black girls are being taught time and time again from when they start kindergarten all the way through high school that they are a threat to those around them. They are shown through the words and actions of adults in the school that they are

less-than. In the words of Morris (2016), they “reflect a consciousness that refuses to honor the critical thinking and leadership skills of Black girls, casting them as social deviants rather than critical respondents to oppression - perceived and concrete” (p. 11). Black girls, starting at age five, walk into a building each day that forces them to polarize themselves and question their identity in every way - from the way they speak, the color of their skin, to the way their hair grows - and shows them that they are different from others in all the worst ways. From the time they begin school, they are forced to tiptoe around the prejudices of grown adults, lest they be disliked, distrusted, reprimanded, suspended, expelled, arrested, violently assaulted, or even incarcerated. Morris (2016) reminds us that “Black girls are greatly affected by the stigma of having to participate in identity politics that marginalize them or place them into polarizing categories: they are either ‘good’ girls or ‘ghetto’ girls” (p. 10). This kind of mental stress slowly causes them to adopt a self-image of being a “bad” kid, which then informs their actions in school as they grow up. They test limits which causes them to experience more incidents that, in their mind, only substantiate the idea that they are “bad.” In the end, this fuels the school-to-prison pipeline and provides an excuse for educators to continue in their prejudice and discrimination.

Literacy, Philosophies, and Practices to Improve Equity

Improving equity in the classroom for Black girls must be addressed at many levels in order to have a real, lasting impact against all of these deep, systemic issues explored earlier in this chapter. First, I address literacy practices that help Black girls better understand content and learn more deeply, creating a sense of self-efficacy and

improving their outlook on education and the school system. Then, I discuss teaching philosophies that must be adopted by teachers so that they can change the way they think about Black students. Lastly, I overview various effective teaching practices that improve schools for Black girls.

Effective Literacy Practices

There are a great number of effective literacy practices that a teacher can use such as teaching phonics, inquiry, check-ins, word walls, rhyming games, concept maps, list-group-label, and a variety of others that boost fluency, vocabulary, phonics, phonological awareness, and comprehension (Reading Rockets, n.d). However, because these have varying efficacy rates for Black girls and have not always proven to be effective for them, the focus of this section is on one strategy in particular that is useful for Black girls: metacognition.

Metacognition

In Flavell's Metacognition theory (1985), developmental psychologist John H. Flavell asserts that students can improve their reading comprehension by thinking about their thinking - specifically, choosing one of a variety of strategies in order to best work with and comprehend a text. In fact, research supports that students can make impressive gains when they are taught to think strategically. A 2016 study of 2,263 low-achieving adolescents showed that when "adolescents were taught to use an integrated set of reading strategies ... across one year, ninth graders' reading achievement grew significantly. As well, both sixth and ninth graders' motivation for reading was significantly impacted" (Cantrell, Almasi, Rintamaa & Carter, 2016, p.8). Considering

this, teaching metacognition can greatly improve the trajectory of Black girls in the classroom because it can increase the self-efficacy Black girls feel and can help create a positive self-image in a school system that largely strips Black girls of their self-esteem.

In the classroom, metacognition looks like teaching students a variety of strategies, then practicing each strategy in an authentic way. In previous decades, teachers taught each reading strategy separately, then instructed their students to practice using that strategy with a specific text (Almasi & Hart, 2018). Since Flavell first introduced his theory of metacognition and teachers began practicing it, researchers have discovered that teaching students reading strategies alone is not enough to boost reading ability. Almasi and Hart write, “Shifting the emphasis from ‘the strategy’ to ‘the student’ is critical. This shift requires teachers to move from focusing on the strategies that are taught to focusing on the context in which they are taught” (2018, p. 243). This means that over time and with practice, students must learn to choose their own strategy when they are struggling with reading, helping to create an independent, self-regulated learner. Also, in a classroom that is successfully creating equity for Black girls, a teacher must combine the explicit teaching of strategies along with a safe learning environment, time to interact with the text and with others, and chances to make decisions. Almasi and Hart (2018) expand upon the idea of adding these opportunities and processes to a classroom’s daily routine:

[These processes] enable [students] to become more metacognitively aware ...

Such metacognitive awareness enables readers to evaluate their reading progress and make decisions about what strategic processes may be needed. ... When

readers are active participants who make their own decisions about the reading process, they possess agency, which is the key to transformation. (p. 243)

The “transformation” Almasi and Hart speak of is that of uplifting struggling students to become self-reliant readers. Armed with modern metacognitive teaching strategies, teachers will be able to fight inequity, help close the achievement gap, and teach Black girls to be lifelong, independent, and self-regulated learners.

Effective Teaching Philosophies

Before equitable work can begin at a classroom or at a state level, individual educators must first change their mindset and teaching philosophies surrounding diverse groups of students and what they bring to the table, in this case, Black girls. The most essential philosophy to adopt is a funds of knowledge philosophy. The following section, reviews the philosophy and the theory behind it, then gives ways that educators can adopt it into their practice.

Funds of Knowledge Philosophy

At a philosophical level, what has traditionally been considered teaching and learning has been set by the homogeneous, dominant group, which unsurprisingly leaves students of color to scramble to meet these white expectations and simultaneously requires them to give up part of who they are to meet them. Davidson (2010) elaborated on this idea. She writes: “The cultural factors of diverse backgrounds have persistently been related to underachievement” (p. 251). To avoid underachievement and create equity for Black girls, teachers must first recognize the diversity of knowledge and worldviews already present in the classroom, which may differ from a white teacher’s

preconceived notion about what constitutes knowledge. When the dominant group chooses what it means to learn and be educated, it excludes the wealth of knowledge that is understood by a different culture, in this case, the culture that exists at the intersection of a Black and female identity. The rich knowledge amassed by a group of people in a similar culture is known as the funds of knowledge concept, first theorized by Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992). Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) elaborated on how an educational philosophy that neglects the funds of knowledge concept leads to an incorrect perception that brown and Black students lack proficiency: “Regardless of any socioeconomical and sociocultural ‘deficit’ that people may or may not have, all families accumulate bodies of beliefs, ideas, skills, and abilities based on their experiences” (p. 43). The funds of knowledge approach recognizes that students have a wealth of knowledge as a result of growing up in their culture, and they come to school already knowing a specific set of facts and experiences - even though a mainstream teacher (that is part of the dominant culture) may not see all the rich knowledge the student has to offer. Some scholars, including Lee (2017), argued that teachers need to alter the way they think about what it means to be educated, and start viewing “diverse funds of knowledge and culturally inherited ways of navigating the world need to be sustained as goods unto themselves” - instead of viewing students of color as less than (p. 261). Paris and Alim (2017) expanded by saying:

This fundamental shift argues that the cultural and linguistic practices and knowledges of communities of color are of value in their own right, and should be creatively foregrounded rather than merely viewed as resources to take students ...

from 'where they are at' to some presumably 'better' place. (p. 158)

This call to shift perceptions in educators is essential if there is to be equity in schools for Black girls. In order for there to be an equal playing field for Black girls, we must first recognize that Black girls come to school with their own unique worldview and we must accept that this worldview is not a deficit, rather it is a strength that allows all students to experience the world in a new way.

A teacher hoping to adopt a funds of knowledge philosophy would need to think about their students in a different way. First, an educator would need to get to know their students on a personal level to discover the funds of knowledge that their students bring to the classroom. This can be done through surveys, projects, and writing assignments in any content area. A teacher should use a Funds of Knowledge Inventory Matrix to keep track of various elements of their students' lives that could be touched on in the classroom (National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness, n.d.). Spending time getting to know dynamic lives of Black girls allows a teacher to see the ways in which they add to the conversation, so to speak. Taking the time to learn about their lives has the added benefit of building a relationship with the student, which will only increase their feeling of belonging in the classroom. Adopting a Funds of Knowledge philosophy enriches the classroom experience, builds relationships, increases comfort, and ultimately builds equity for Black girls (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Scholars have warned that teachers must keep an open mind about equity and be willing to adjust practices as times, cultures, and students change. Paris and Alim (2017)

explain:

As youth continue to develop new, complex, and intersecting forms of racial/ethnic identification in a world where cultural and linguistic recombinations flow with purpose, we need pedagogies that speak to our shifting cultural realities or ... pedagogies that 'go with the flow.' (p. 9)

Changing philosophies from traditional ideas to more modern ones that honor the worldview of Black girls must happen before there are any real changes made in education. However, these changes are only viable when educators make conscious choices to enact change in the classroom.

Effective Teaching Practices

Culturally Responsive Teaching

After a teacher has adopted an equitable philosophy (such as the Funds of Knowledge philosophy) about the Black girls in their classroom, they should begin using equitable practices and pedagogies, such as culturally responsive teaching, to transform the classroom into an environment in which all students can learn in an authentic way. Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that culturally relevant pedagogy creates a space in which students can "maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (p. 476), in comparison to traditional instructional approaches, which "have underserved students who have already been disadvantaged with respect to social and economic capital" (Davidson, 2010, p. 252).

In order to successfully use culturally responsive teaching, teachers must be able to deconstruct, construct, and reconstruct the curriculum they use or have been given.

Culturally responsive teachers think deeply about what they teach and why they should teach it. They use a wide variety of teaching strategies and techniques to reach as many students as possible and realize that “some of the pedagogical strategies that teaching easier or more convenient for them [(such as tracking)] may be exactly the kind of instruction they should avoid” because it can widen gaps and further alienate struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 33). A teacher using culturally responsive teaching examines common practices to see how they reproduce the status quo and offer no support, or worse, harm Black girls. For example, when a teacher requires silence unless a student raises their hand, they are not being culturally responsive to the common “call out” (also known as call-and-response) culture common in Black communities (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 144). Essentially, they are actually reprimanding a child for behaving the way they were raised. To increase equity for Black girls, there should be some room for understanding that different students experience the world in different ways.

Culturally responsive teachers also help students recognize and critique current social inequities and help them understand how it applies to their own lives. Teachers should devote time to the following practices to better understand their students and promote equity in the classroom: home visits, communicating with parents to understand their expectations, allowing students to read texts relevant to their culture and interests, doing research on students’ cultures, and creating activities to better understand students’ linguistic and cultural histories, as well as their self-concepts.

In addition to examining the curriculum and teaching strategies, a culturally responsive teacher should adjust how they think about the Black girls in their classroom:

“Whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 31). They must also be willing to understand that boosting engagement will help students build self-esteem and efficacy in the classroom, raising their self-control. “They recognize that the outbursts and off-task behaviors are symptoms, not causes and as teachers the one thing they have at their disposal are pedagogical tools to draw students into the learning in meaningful ways” (p. 34). This means that a teacher that hopes to connect better with a student that seems to be “misbehaving” or is “off-task” should question whether or not the student is feeling valued in the classroom and in the school.

Overall, to promote equity at a classroom level, teachers should change their thinking about their diverse group of students and should start using equitable literacy methods, philosophies, and practices, including culturally responsive teaching, so that Black girls’ identities are honored in the classroom and do not have to change who they are to succeed in school.

Summary

Chapter Two explored the research of a number of scholars and theorists that help build a foundation when answering the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* This chapter reviewed some of the historic ways Black girls have been oppressed, then moved into the ways that schools continue that oppression in modern times. This chapter also looked at the concept of intersectionality as well as the criminalization of Black girls. After, I introduced and

explained the research and theories around effective literacy methods, teaching philosophies, and classroom practices, which when used, should increase the equity in schools for Black girls.

Chapter Three begins introducing the capstone project, which is a series of professional development sessions that hope to accomplish several goals for secondary teachers. The professional development sessions educate about the historical oppression of Black girls and the way Black girls are currently discriminated in school and criminalized. It teaches educators about intersectionality and then will give ways that educators can improve equity through literacy, teaching philosophies, and classroom practices. Chapter Three gives an overview of the project as well as a rationale for this type of project. After, there is a summary of the different research frameworks and theories that will be used to present this project. Then, there is an explanation of my choice of method. Lastly, there is a discussion of the setting and audience and a timeline for the major parts of the professional development sessions.

CHAPTER THREE

The Professional Development Project

Introduction

Chapter Two explored how the history of the treatment of Black women informs societal systems today, how schools treat Black girls in modern times, and discussed the criminalization of Black girls. It also defined intersectionality and explained its importance when discussing this topic. After, it examined the research surrounding literacy and teaching practices - both traditional and modern - and explained how they can help promote equity for Black girls. Chapter Three builds on the research in the previous chapter and goes further into ways to implement these practices to better answer the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?*

The goal of Chapter Three is to lay the foundation for the professional development portion of this capstone project. It gives an overview of the project and explains the rationale for creating this type of project. It then summarizes the different literacy and teaching practices that are discussed in the professional development presentation. After this, there is an explanation on the choice of method and the setting in which the project takes place. This chapter finishes with a description of the project and a timeline for completing it.

Project Overview

This project includes four professional development presentations with

accompanying activities to help educators understand how they can use literacy to create equitable schools for Black girls. Currently, our schools are structures that reinforce biases and oppression, or “structures of dominance,” and they maintain the status quo. Morris (2016) reminds us that, “Sadly, many schools are dominant structures, sustaining our society’s racial and gender hierarchy. Educational institutions that are not intentionally ‘learning organizations,’ ones that evolve through a quest for knowledge and social change, end up playing a reproductive role” (p. 26). If we are to challenge the status quo and break the cycle of oppression that is ingrained in our school systems and structures, it is essential that America’s educators participate in self-reflection and take steps to assure that their teaching practices are anti-racist and actively improve equity for Black girls in schools. This project seeks to provide information for educators about historical and modern oppression of Black girls and the theory of intersectionality so they can begin to understand the urgent need for creating equity. Then, gives philosophies, teaching practices, and literacy strategies for educators to adopt so that they can begin transforming schools to be a welcoming place of healing and transformation for Black girls.

The goals of the professional development sessions are:

1. Teachers will learn about the historic oppression of Black women, how schools maintain racist structures against Black girls, and how Black girls are criminalized.
2. Teachers will be able to make connections between historic oppression and current oppression.

3. Teachers will be able to define intersectionality and use it as a foundation in their own practices.
4. Teachers will engage in self-reflection about their own beliefs and practices.
5. Teachers will learn new teaching practices or literacy methods that help promote equity for Black girls.

Research Frameworks and Theories

The theories explored in these professional development sessions are those that were explored deeply in Chapter Two, such as intergenerational trauma, intersectionality, criminalization, culturally responsive teaching, and literacy. They are important to understand in order to meet the objectives of these professional development sessions.

Intergenerational Trauma

It is very important for educators to understand the history of oppression of Black women in the United States before moving on to current problems. Understanding the legacy of trauma that slavery, Jim Crow, continued school segregation, sex trafficking, and abuse is necessary if one is to understand how intergenerational trauma has had a lasting impact on the Black girls of today. Vivian M. Rakoff (1966) first used the term “intergenerational trauma” to describe the high rates of mental issues such as PTSD, anxiety and depression in the children (and grandchildren) of Holocaust survivors, and talked about how trauma can be passed on to the next generation (Rakoff et al., 1966). Williams, Printz, and DeLapp (2018) discovered that this same principle applies to generations of Black Americans - the descendants of enslaved people. Understanding that African Americans experience intergenerational trauma provides a foundation for

compassion on all of the other issues discussed in these professional development sessions.

Intersectionality

First coined in 1989 by legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a topic essential to this project and professional development.

Teachers must be able to define intersectionality so that they can see the importance of creating equitable schools for Black girls, specifically. Teachers must also understand that Black girls hold a unique worldview due to their intersectional identities. This allows them to show more compassion and understanding, preventing many problems in the educational system, such as criminalization.

Criminalization

America is known for having the highest imprisonment rate in the world and its philosophies on incarceration certainly permeate into the school system (Lee, 2015).

With racist dress codes, strict discipline practices, zero tolerance policies, three strikes rules, and increased presence of law enforcement in schools, school policies and discipline practices have disproportionately targeted students of color (Advancement Project, 2016). In her text *Pushout*, Monique W. Morris (2016) describes the way in which these policies start targeting Black girls from as early as kindergarten, creating a negative self-image that is only reinforced as they get older.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote about culturally responsive teaching and how it helps close achievement gaps. Culturally responsive teaching honors a student's

worldview and sees a student's unique experiences as additive and an asset for the classroom, rather than it being a deficit or learning gap. For our Black girls, teachers should embed social justice and community-related topics into the curriculum to help close achievement gaps by making Black girls feel seen and by giving them an authentic purpose to participate in classroom activities. This professional development gives tips for teachers to best implement culturally responsive teaching practices into their classroom.

Literacy

As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, literacy is the ability to read, write, interact with, and understand texts. It includes comprehension, understanding, and learning. This ability to participate in the community fully is something that has historically been denied to Black women and girls, which is a reason that promoting literacy for these girls is so important. In order to truly improve literacy, it should be encouraged and practiced in every possible subject area, not just in Reading and ELA class, which is why this project encourages all subject area teachers to implement equitable literacy practices. The professional development sessions focus specifically on the metacognition literacy strategy.

Choice of Method

Because these professional development sessions only target adult teachers and paraprofessionals, it pulls from research about adult learning methods. Since the 1920s, it has been known that adults learn differently than children do. "Andragogy" is the practice of teaching adults using methods that best suit their cognitive needs. Malcolm S.

Knowles (1988) wrote about the differences between child learners and adult learners and what works best for adult learners. He describes several characteristics of adult learners that my professional development session draws from:

1. Adults need to know why they are learning and how it will affect them.
2. Adults are autonomous and self-directed.
3. Adults have a lifetime of experience.
4. Adults want to apply new knowledge and skills immediately.
5. Adults need to be shown respect.

All five of these characteristics were addressed in my sessions.

Adults need to know why they are learning and how it will affect them

The most important part was that the educators in the professional development session understand how essential this topic is and why it is worth taking the time to learn about. Without a solid rationale, there will be immediate disengagement because it is such a sensitive and heavy topic.

Adults are autonomous and self-directed

The session did not micromanage the adults as they worked through some of the difficult concepts. They had time to think on their own and come up with their own theories before they needed to share with anyone.

Adults have a lifetime of experience

The educators had a chance to reflect on their own experiences growing up, in their own classroom, and from what they had seen other people do - and how their experiences have shaped their own worldviews. They had an opportunity to connect the

concepts they are learning with current events, such as the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter.

Adults want to apply new knowledge and skills immediately

This concept was another one of the most important things to understand about adult learners (especially teachers) if one hopes that they will retain anything from a professional development session. Teachers are constantly overwhelmed with new strategies, practices, movements, and ideas, and it becomes impossible for them to implement them all. This project addressed something much more important than the latest trend in education; it is my hope that it addressed inequities and helped rectify systemic oppression in the school system. That being said, teachers needed solid and immediate ways to help promote equity for Black girls in their classroom.

Adults need to be shown respect

Lastly, if this session was to be at all effective, it was essential that they feel safe and respected while learning. While learning about sensitive topics, it was important that the teachers did not feel ashamed or attacked, lest they shut down and become unwilling to learn any new material. It was imperative that a safe space was established at the beginning of each professional development session by giving reminders and setting guidelines for speaking, listening, and conduct.

Setting and Audience

This professional development project was designed for a large group of public school teachers and paraprofessionals. This professional development was done at a large suburban middle school (grades 6-8) in a sizable district. The school mainly served two

Minnesotan cities: one that is mainly white (85%) and the other is over 50% people of color, creating a mix of races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), in the 2017-18 school year, there were 3.5 million full- and part-time teachers. Out of this 3.5 million, 76% were female and 24% were male; 79% were white, 9% Hispanic, 7% were Black, 2% were Asian, 2% were two or more races, 1% was American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander made up less than 1%. The particular school that I have created my professional development for was similar to the national average in gender, but different in race. It employs 74.5% female, 25.5% male; and the racial makeup is as follows: 97% white, 1.5% black, and 0.5% other races. The sex and race of the teachers that have participated in the professional development was important to consider because the topics were viewed from different lenses depending on the educator's race and gender.

According to the Minnesota Report Card (2020), the demographics of the student population in the middle school are as follows: 48.5% white, 19.6% black, 13.4% Asian, 9% Latinx, 8.7% two or more races, and 0.8% Native. Clearly, as is with many schools, there is a big discrepancy between the number of students of color and the number of teachers of color; more than half the students in the school are students of color, while only 3% of teachers are. This disconnect is part of the reason that it is so difficult to create equity in schools for Black students (and, of course, other students of color). In my experience, there are far too many teachers whose only real experience interacting and communicating with Black people is when they begin teaching. This can make it difficult for many teachers to relate to Black students, understand their different perspectives,

recognize trauma and systemic racism, and certainly to dismantle oppressive systems and practices within the school.

Project Description

This project consisted of four different professional development sessions exploring different concepts that are important to answering the research question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* The project was done through slideshow presentations using facts, videos, and reflection time. The four sessions guided educators through historic oppression of Black women and allowed them to make connections between historic racism, current events, and modern oppression. Then, they learned about the importance of understanding intersectionality and how schools reproduce oppression and maintain the status quo, as well as how school discipline serves as a catalyst for the school-to-prison pipeline.

During these sessions they watched videos from scholars and read statistics related to the incarceration of Black girls. Also, they learned strategies surrounding literacy and teaching practices that help fight oppression, racism, sexism, and help Black girls be their authentic self in the classroom. Teachers learned equitable philosophies and practical tips to help honor the identities of Black girls. A tip worksheet was given out so that teachers can immediately implement new learnings into their classrooms. They also had time to reflect on their own practices and think of ways that they could alter them to improve equity for Black girls.

A more detailed timeline of the content of each session is given in the following section.

Timeline

These professional development sessions were done over the course of the 2021-2022 school year, for several months at staff development meetings. Each session ran between an hour and two hours, depending on time allotted to other activities on staff development days. While there was an option to combine all the sessions into one three or four hour session, I believe that heavy topics such as these ones are best left in smaller, more digestible sessions that can be circled back to throughout the year.

The first session was done at the beginning of the year during the August back-to-school professional development week. This session mainly focused on the rationale and the history of oppression against Black girls. The goals of this session were to teach about the historic oppression of Black women and for teachers to make connections between historic oppression and modern oppression.

The second session was done during the September staff development day. The focus of this session was on the criminalization of Black girls in school. This session also taught about intersectionality and its importance. The goals of this session were for teachers to learn about how schools maintain racist structures against Black girls, how Black girls are criminalized, and for teachers to be able to define intersectionality.

The third session focused on takeaways, strategies, and reflections for teachers. This session took place during the October staff development day. During this day, teachers learned different teaching practices, education philosophies, and literacy strategies that helped promote equity for Black girls, and gave teachers a chance to reflect on their own practices. The goals of this session were to have teachers engage in

self-reflection about their own beliefs and practices and learn new teaching practices, philosophies, and literacy methods that help promote equity for Black girls.

The fourth session was done in January 2022. The purpose of this session was to remind educators of the strategies that were taught in earlier sessions. They also were given an opportunity to reflect on their progress and discuss any improvements in the daily interactions and success of their Black girl students. The goal of this session was to keep the momentum moving, keep teachers from getting discouraged, and to inspire them once more to make changes to improve equity for Black girls.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the professional development project and its importance. I summarized different literacy and teaching practices that are important when answering the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* I also gave background on adult learning methods and gave background information on the educators that would be participating in the professional development. Lastly, I provided a brief timeline for how the professional development would be implemented. Next, in Chapter Four, I reflect upon my learnings during the creation of this capstone project and professional development sessions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection on the Project

Introduction

Chapter Four is the final chapter of this capstone that seeks to answer the question: *How can we use literacy and teaching practices to create equitable schools for Black girls?* The last chapter gave the specifics of the project, while this one reflects upon both the capstone research and the professional development sessions. This chapter begins with a review of the literature that was most essential to the background of this project and creating the professional development sessions. After the review of the literature, there is a discussion of both the implications and the benefits of this project. In the following section, there is a brief overview of the limitations of the professional development sessions. Next, I think of some various avenues that could be explored in future projects that expand on other areas of intersectionality. This chapter ends with a brief reflection on the research and the professional development project.

Revisit of the Literature

This capstone would be nothing without the countless hours of research and discourse from many incredible scholars in the fields of both equity and literacy. The researcher I drew from the most was author Monique W. Morris and her book *Pushout* (2016). Morris explored the long legacy of oppression against Black women in America, from the earliest days of slavery, to modern systemic discrimination. Her research helped me discuss the prevalence of the school-to-prison pipeline for Black girls and how they are discriminated against in schools. Teaching the background of oppression for Black

girls in America helped develop the rationale for why teaching and literacy practices need to be altered in order to improve equity for Black girls.

Additionally, the concept of intersectionality was an important aspect of this research. Examining the intersection of oppressed identities helped illuminate the struggles of oppressed peoples as well as avenues to increase equity for these marginalized groups. In my opinion, without this framework, this research would not exist. Educators would simply teach as they did in the past - as though all students learned and experienced the world in the same way. Combining intersectionality with the Funds of Knowledge theory (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) allows teachers to honor their students as unique individuals while also understanding that people have different needs and strengths, and therefore should be treated equitably, rather than equally, in order to guarantee a good education.

This capstone also focused on literacy and teaching practices that could improve equity in schools for Black girls. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) described culturally relevant teaching practices that create a feeling of community for students and create spaces that honor the identities of Black girls. Flavell's (1985) theory of metacognition also can help Black girls overcome inequity by teaching them tools that help them understand their own thinking and learning, so that they are better able to participate in school and become lifelong learners.

Implications and Benefits

The implications of this research are quite straightforward. A long history of oppression of Black girls and systems of power shaped by white supremacy have led to

injustice and inequity in schools and in society. Research in Chapter Two shows that Black girls have suffered greatly due to the intersectionality of their oppression. Teachers can help rectify this injustice by employing a number of teaching and literacy philosophies and practices in the classroom. If more and more teachers were to adopt these practices and philosophies, over time, the quality of life and education would improve for Black girls. These would be the first steps to creating racial and gender justice for Black girls and women in America.

There are also great societal benefits to educating teachers about equity for Black girls. Teachers are in a position of great influence and potential to have a lasting impact on the future through the students they teach. I believe that designing more equitable schools will create a trickle down effect, which will in turn revolutionize the many political, social, and cultural systems in the United States. Revenga and Shetty (2012) remind us that closing gender gaps, especially for people of color, empowers a country in terms of its people's health, economics, and cultural values. By beginning a journey of creating equity for Black girls in schools, the United States could expect to experience an increase in the quality of life for all people, especially women of color.

As for my own school, considering that the student population is about half students of color, this project could greatly benefit the girls of color that attend. I believe that with these professional development sessions, teachers would be able to make the connections necessary for positive change to better educate Black girls. By knowing the history of Black oppression and some of the statistics surrounding it from both the past and present, they can see that this is a serious issue with real data to support it. Giving the

teachers the time to learn and reflect could ultimately create a school environment that honors and respects every student, recognizes their unique worldview, and changes policies to be more equitable for everyone. With teachers and administrators adjusting their philosophies and practices, there may be a change in the attitudes of white students as the adults in the building become more supportive of Black girls. Seeing adults treating Black students with dignity and respect could create positive examples for how they should treat them as well, even if the student is coming from a home that does not respect women and/or people of color. This could have the added benefit of creating a more understanding, welcoming, and inclusive community surrounding the school, especially as the students get older, graduate, and go on to raise their own children. It is my hope that this research and professional development sessions can have enough of a positive impact that it changes the way our community treats its people of color, especially Black girls and women.

Limitations

There were a few limitations to this project, specifically the professional development portion of it. The first comes from who I am as the researcher. Being a white, female educator limits my viewpoint on this topic. Even with solid research and understanding, there is only so much I can say and advocate for because I have never lived the experiences of a Black woman. Another major factor was the time limit. Although these sessions were spread throughout the school year, there was a chance that there was not enough time for some teachers to reflect deeply. Professional development sessions can sometimes feel a bit rushed or forced due to the time constraints and because

the teachers are busy and have about a thousand other things they could be working on during that time. Also, this was a sensitive topic to unpack. In my experience, it is common for people to shut down when they are discussing difficult topics, especially when they feel like they have been in the wrong or feel any sort of guilt or embarrassment. To combat this, I attempted to set the tone and establish expectations for the professional development session, but without an ample amount of time to build a safe space, there was a chance that some teachers felt too uncomfortable or vulnerable to truly gain enough from the sessions to make real changes. Additionally, there are, of course, the teachers that feel so uncomfortable that they may actively try to derail the session by making jokes, going on their phone, doing outside work, or changing the subject to something unrelated in order to avoid talking about it. Hopefully, the rationale for learning this content was explicit and convincing enough to promote buy-in for any reluctant teachers.

Future Projects

As mentioned in Chapter One, this project focused specifically on Black female students. While this was a conscious choice, it does not account for all of the different layers of identity that students possess. There are many future projects that could examine the best literacy practices and school policies for different intersections of identity. There are many different groups of girls of color that would benefit from a consideration of their unique cultural, racial, and ethnic background in school. For example, Latina girls face their own unique challenges and bring their distinct funds of knowledge to the classroom (Morris, 2016; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). It is my belief that girls of

color (no matter what race) would see an improved quality of education and of life if teachers were to be more cognizant and purposeful in their choice of literacy and teaching practices.

Additionally, this capstone did not focus on non-binary, intersexed, or transgender individuals. Being both a person of color and a non-binary, intersexed, or transgendered person creates an increasingly complex intersectional identity. In a future project, it would be beneficial to explore how the school system marginalizes and oppresses its transgendered and non-binary students. I feel that it is an extremely important and necessary topic to explore if we are to continue to make schools more inclusive and equitable for all students.

Conclusion

Throughout my life, I have had many experiences that have caused me to seek and advocate for change and justice. These experiences have led me to become an educator and dedicate my life to improving equity for all students, for education has long been described as a field that drives social justice and creates change in society (Spiel & Reich, n.d.). I hope that this capstone project, the research I have done, and the professional development sessions can be of assistance to educators and administrators hoping to take small steps to begin improving equity in their own classrooms and school buildings. It is my ultimate goal that anyone who reads this capstone project feels informed, inspired, and prepared to take steps to create equity in the classroom, the school system, and society for all students.

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PROJECT LINKS

Links to Important Pieces of the Project

Session Slideshow Presentations

[Session 1 Presentation](#)

[Session 2 Presentation](#)

[Session 3 Presentation](#)

[Session 4 Presentation](#)

Session Handouts

["Improving Equity Strategies Handout" \(Sessions 3 & 4\)](#)

Session Notes (For Presenter)

[Sessions 1-4 Notes](#)

Presentation References

[Presentations Reference List](#)

Additional Capstone Documents

[Project Abstract](#)

[Project Summary](#)