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## International Journal of Student Voice

A peer-reviewed, independent, open-access journal

Pennsylvania State University

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Volume 7

IJSV

Spring 2020

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# The New Jane Crow: Using Black Girls' Voices to Make Meaning of Disciplinary Interactions in an Urban Alternative School

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**Citation:** Mathies, L. M., Dawson-Edwards, C., & Carpenter, B. W. (2020). The new Jane Crow: Using Black girls' voices to make meaning of disciplinary interactions in an urban alternative school. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 7(1). Article 3  
<https://sites.psu.edu/ijsv/volume-7-special-issue/>

**Abstract:** This collective case study examined perceptions of discipline interactions for three adolescent Black girls who attend an alternative school in Metro City School District. Participants were identified through purposeful sampling, and three semistructured interviews were conducted and audio recorded with each student. The researcher also collected journal entries and drawings from the students reflecting on self, peer, and teacher interactions and their experiences with the discipline process. The voices of middle school Black girls magnify the sense of urgency needed in revamping policies and practices concerning school discipline. They provide the firsthand perspective of how school suspension and placement in an alternative school

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affects students' personal identity, their expectations of education, and future aspirations.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, exclusionary discipline, student voice

## Introduction

Racial bias in the practice of school discipline is part of a broader discourse concerning the continuing presence of institutional racism (Hanssen, 1998) or structural inequity (Nieto, 2000; Skiba et al., 2002) in education. Exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and alternative school placement, reflect disconnected relationships framed by racial micro-aggressions negatively influencing social spaces.

In the case of Black girls, a racial and gendered lens of social spaces characterizes a concept called *Jane Crow*. Murray and Eastwood (1965) brought a historical context to the dual realities of intersectional oppression of racism and sexism experienced by Black girls during discipline interactions. Murray's own experience of racism and sexism influenced her conceptualization of Jane Crow, which she called the sister of Jim Crow. She argued that Jim Crow infringed differently upon the lives of African American males and females, and its differentiated effects were reflected in the ways in which females were marginalized in, excluded from, or included only anonymously in social, political, identity, and economic narratives. She noted the quest for women's and Black Americans' rights had historically run parallel and were in fact part of the same larger struggle for human rights.

Murray affirmed that race and sex discrimination were connected, and she invoked the experiences of Black women to demonstrate overlapping and interconnected forms of inequality. At the 2016 Anna Julia Cooper Center Conference, Harris-Perry (2016) tweeted, "The pathologies causing inequality are not located in girls of color, the pathologies are in unjust systems." Currently, Black girls are experiencing an educational Jane Crow in school discipline: *The New Jane Crow*.

In the case of Black girls, institutional racism and sexism levy the power dynamics of discipline interactions in urban public schools. Within the constructs of female behavior is the perception of femininity shaped by possible biases and stereotypes that cultivate labels fostering oppressed student agency in exclusionary discipline. Research on Black female achievement identifies disproportionate interactions with the school-to-prison pipeline metaphor through teacher biases (Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Grant, 1992; Morris, 2007; Murphy et al., 2013; Thornberg, 2007). There is a critical need for research that specifically addresses discipline experiences of urban middle school Black girls independent of the boys in the school-to-prison pipeline literature.

Many educational settings are not designed to promote deep, meaningful student engagement. The inclusion of student voice bridges the "engagement gap" that requires students to make sense of their world and their place in it. In its most meaningful form, student voice in education opens school spaces to the presence and power of students'

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lived experiences. The question of to be asked is: Where are Black girls' voices in conversations about racial achievement and discipline gaps? Initiatives aimed at improving school outcomes for marginalized youth have been castigated for their gender exclusivity. Most recently, funding and public policy designed to interrupt the Black boy's trajectory into the school-to-prison pipeline has been lauded by President Obama and supporters of the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/my-brothers-keeper>). However, critics claim this initiative "forgot" the Black girls (Crenshaw, 1991).

The current study seeks to fill the gap in literature of racialized and gendered school discipline, specifically through empowerment of student voice to address these disparities. While studies have begun to establish how school and classroom contexts, including teachers' implicit biases and culturally based miscommunications between educators and students, contribute to discipline events (see Bowditch, 1993; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Collins, 2011; Vavrus & Cole, 2002), few focus on students' own descriptions of the process of being labeled as "bad."

### **Literature Review**

Exclusionary discipline practices precipitate dropping out of school, which in turn is a significant link to the school-to-prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003). The pipeline consists of "zero tolerance" policies and practices that remain major contributors to the dramatic increase in suspensions, expulsions, and placement to alternative schools. Thus, zero tolerance results in suspensions that increase the likelihood of dropping out and involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system. Dropping out of school not only diminishes employment prospects; it increases the likelihood of ending up in jail or prison. In addition.

While Black students represent 16% of student enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a schoolrelated arrest. In comparison, White students represent 51% of enrollment, 41% of students referred to law enforcement, and 39% of those arrested (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The discipline gap foreshadows a school-to-prison pipeline documenting school decisions and policies that push Black students out of school and funnels them into the criminal justice system.

Despite the ubiquity of findings concerning the relationship between race and behavior-related consequences, investigations of behavior, race, and discipline have yet to provide evidence that Black students misbehave at a significantly higher rate.

Whether based on school surveys (Welch & Payne, 2010) or student interviews (A. Gregory & Mosely, 2004), studies have failed to find racial disparities in misbehavior

sufficient to account for the typically wide racial differences in school punishment. Currently, no empirical data support factors internal to the student (e.g., severity of behavior). If anything, Black students appear to receive more severe school punishments for less severe behavior (McFadden et al., 1992; Shaw & Braden, 1990).

Research on Black student achievement (J. F. Gregory, 1997; Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002) shed light on the discipline gap, but only to emphasize inequitable discipline experiences of Black males' disproportionate interactions with the "pipeline" metaphor. While Black males are suspended or expelled more than any other group, punitive disciplinary policies have a disproportionate, negative impact on Black females as well. Epstein and colleagues (2017) have suggested that Black girls' voices should be centered in research that examines their disproportionate contact with public systems (i.e., education, juvenile justice, and child welfare).

### **Black Girls and Exclusionary Discipline**

With respect to Black girls, studies show patterns of exclusionary discipline that produced similar outcomes among Black girls and Black boys (Losen et al., 2012; Wallace et al., 2008). Others found Black female disengagement from school to be a function of intersecting structures of inequality (Blake et al., 2011; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). In an examination into the nature of girls' infractions, Skiba and associates (2002) revealed educators most often disciplined Black girls for defiance, improper dress, and fighting with another student.

Blake et al. (2011) produced one of few studies that built on Skiba and colleagues' (2002) work by disaggregating discipline data by race to inform the scholarly community about the impact of discipline practices on students of color. They focused on how discipline practices of Black girls are disproportionate relative to White and Hispanic girls across primary and secondary school. These findings demonstrate the necessity of comprehending race and gender simultaneously. Particular combinations of these factors tend to result in distinct educational perceptions and experiences that influence the perceptions and discipline of Black girls.

Grant's (1992) examination of the intersections of race and gender for Black girls in classrooms showed how teachers tend to treat Black girls differently than White girls or Black boys. Grant highlighted how educators express more interest in promoting the social, rather than academic, skills of Black girls. Jones (2009) examined how Black females are affected by the stigma of having to participate in identity politics. This stigma marginalizes them or places them into polarizing categories—"good" girls vs. girls that behave in a "ghetto" fashion. Stereotypes about Black femininity are exacerbated, particularly in the context of socioeconomic status, crime, and punishment.

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More recent research continues to prove that Black girls are perceived and treated differently. Morris and Perry (2017) found that in Kentucky Black girls are approximately three times more likely to get disciplined than their White female classmates. As it related to offense severity, Black girls were 3.6 times more likely to be disciplined for a minor offense compared to White girls (Morris & Perry, 2017).

The extent to which Black girls perceive themselves to be driven out of urban schools and possibly into the justice system offers insight into the application of zero tolerance policies that contribute to the discipline gap. There is limited research in how Black girls themselves experience and give meaning to interactions leading to exclusionary discipline in urban schools and, more specifically, whether they view exclusionary discipline as step toward the pipeline to prison. Thus, there is a need to examine causes and responses to behavior infractions through the student voices of Black girls.

### **The Importance of Student Voice**

Seeking student voice to improve educational practice is supported by the literature in student development, motivation theory, self-determination theory, and constructivist learning theory (Sands et al., 2007). These fields recognize the significance of active student engagement and feedback to the educational process. Rather than adult stakeholders' positioning students as "the problem" and thinking of ways to "fix" students, students are given the opportunity to identify issues and offer solutions (Irizarry, 2009).

The deepest level of student voice includes engaging students in the design of their educational experiences. Students must be given genuine authority and autonomy in order to engage in their education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Freire, 1970; Kohl, 1994; Oldfather & West, 1999). The student voice literature refers to a "Pyramid of Student Voice" framework that integrates progressive inclusion of student voice in school reform efforts while also capitalizing on developmentally appropriate learning (Fielding, 2001; Mansfield et al., 2012; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

The Pyramid of Student Voice begins at the bottom, with the most common and most basic form of student voice: "being heard." At the bottom level, school staff listen to students to learn about their perspectives. The next level, "collaborating with adults," involves students' and adults' working together to make changes in the school, including collecting data on school problems and implementing solutions. At the middle level of the Pyramid of Student Voice, students partner with staff to identify school problems and possible solutions. The final (and smallest) level at the top of the pyramid, "building capacity for leadership," includes an explicit focus on enabling youth to share in the leadership of the student voice initiative. This final level is the least common form of student voice. At this level, students can serve as a source of criticism and protest in

schools by questioning issues such as structural and cultural injustices within schools (Fine, 1991; Mitra, 2007). The current study represents the first layer of the pyramid, with the intention of expressing how intersectional student voice can lead to informing educational reform strategies.

The Pyramid of Student Voice includes school intervention decisions in a social space where youth are active participants in the process. All the girls in this study describe acts of “resistance” to excluded spaces that resemble a void in student voice. Each girl describes social spaces where she is silenced through perceived “bad” behavior found in labeling theory (Bernburg, 2009) and belonging in the Pyramid of Student Voice. Literature regarding labeling identifies Black and Brown students as being more likely to be punished and more likely to be labeled as “frequent flyers,” or students who accumulate multiple disciplinary actions within a year, than their White counterparts (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016, p. 2).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

A review of the literature on the discipline experiences of Black females in K-12 schools reveals how Black girls’ violations of traditional standards of femininity can influence their involvement in the school discipline system (Blake et al., 2011; EvansWinters, 2005; Grant, 1992; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005; Jones, 2009; Morris, 2007). Although any group of people has the potential to be negatively stereotyped, research has shown that Black Americans suffer from more negative stereotypes than White Americans (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1982). More specifically, research findings have indicated that White American students endorsed the belief that Black women were loud, talkative, aggressive, antagonistic, unmannerly, argumentative, and straightforward. Black women were viewed as holding more negative traits than women in general (Niemann et al., 1998; Weitz & Gordon, 1993).

Stereotypes of Black women are often perpetrated on the interpersonal level in the form of gendered racial microaggressions—everyday exchanges, usually brief, that deliver demeaning messages or subtle reminders about racial stereotypes and often enacted automatically and unconsciously (Sue, 2010). Essed (1991) originally coined the term *gendered racism* to capture the complexity of oppression experienced by Black women on the basis of racist perceptions of gender roles. The concept of gendered racism is an intersectional framework consistent with contemporary microaggressions research that specifically examines the interconnection of racism and sexism. Harrison (2017) acknowledged that intersectionality theory is uncommonly used to study youth experiences. In her qualitative study, she sought to use an intersectional framework and methodology to explore the multiple identities of sixth-grade Black girls. She argued that, while race, class, and gender are dominant in intersectional research, age is also a

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“unique identity” (Harrison, 2017, p. 1034) to consider. Further she proclaimed that the youth voice is “objectified,” “silenced,” and often seen as “irrational” (Harrison, 2017, p. 1034). Similar to Harrison’s (2017) work, the current study considers intersectionality in both its theoretical and methodological frameworks.

In addition to intersectionality, labeling theory (Bernburg, 2009) is applicable for understanding how girls experience being labeled “bad kids” as well as how they respond to educators who label them. It asserts that the social process of labeling people as deviants or delinquents impacts their future behavior through both self-exclusion and exclusion by others. Individuals labeled as deviants may face exclusion based on others’ preconceived notions of those who have been labeled similarly. Individuals may also exclude themselves from social participation in anticipation of rejection.

Labeling theory contends that not all individuals are equally susceptible to negative social labels; marginalized populations are more likely to be labeled as a group, and more frequently labeled than others (Matsueda, 1992). Some educators’ inequitable application of exclusionary discipline in schools constitutes responses to and factors promoting the labeling of student groups (Glass, 2014).

To illustrate, Rios (2011) documented how these disciplinary acts at school intersect with criminalization by police to result in a “labeling hype” (p. 45). Labeling hype refers to labeling as a process that can actually contribute to further misbehavior that becomes a “vicious cycle” that exacerbates criminalization experiences (Rios, 2011, p. 44). Labeling hype plays a key role in the school-to-prison pipeline for girls of color (Blake et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2013). In studying the moments in which students get suspended in class, Vavrus and Cole (2002) found when an entire class was noncompliant, girls of color who tended to speak up for the group were the recipients of the teacher’s reprimand. The girls of color featured in this study were more likely to be labeled and treated as “bad” by school personnel, who then gave out even harsher punishments to these students.

Basing this work on the tradition of labeling theorists who examine labeling and its relation to deviance from the perspectives of those who are labeled (Herman-Kinney, 2003), this study focuses on students’ perceptions and descriptions of the process by which this labeling and punishment occur. In accounting for students’ responses to labeling and punishment, this study draws from reflected appraisals (Bernburg, 2009; Matsueda, 1992) and build upon Cooley’s (1902) metaphor of the looking-glass self. Cooley observed that the reactions of others provide the viewpoint from which we come to define our performances and attributes process: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (p. 184). Just like the reflection in a mirror,



reflected appraisals are centered on the processes by which experiences of self are formed and changed in social transactions.

In studies examining correlations between reflected appraisals and delinquency the perceived opinions of caregivers and peers play key roles in influencing students' behavior (Brownfield & Thompson, 2005). Reflected appraisals assert people respond to others based on what they believe others think of them. The reflected appraisals of others may shape students' self-appraisals, or beliefs about their own characters and abilities, which also affect how they make sense of the choices they make. True to the theory of reflected appraisals, children "act" in order to maintain the respect of their peers and to be thought of as part of the group. The children's "acting" takes on the nature of resistance when the style of instructional activities do not match the children's cultural styles.

D'Amato (1993) frames resistance as children's responses to "intermediate cultural discontinuities between the worlds of school as defined by adults and the world of school as defined by the children themselves" (pp. 187-188). In the context of classrooms, resistance may maintain cultural structures that differ from dominant institutional forms. While this study does not examine long-term consequences of students' behaviors, here the construct of resistance is used to understand students' descriptions of their behaviors in moments of conflict with adults at school.

Understanding students' perceptions can potentially influence the choices educators make in their interactions with students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Out-of-school suspensions are one of the most commonly used types of exclusionary discipline in the United States (Raffaele-Mendez & Knoff, 2003), and middle school students are the most likely recipients (Losen & Skiba, 2010; RaffaeleMendez & Knoff, 2003). Middle school and early high school years present important opportunities for fashioning interventions to prevent dropping out of school and criminal justice system involvement. Preventing school suspensions and expulsions can reduce juvenile justice system involvement that becomes a gateway to incarceration.

In some states and districts, alternative placements are often touted by educators as desirable ways to remove challenging students from comprehensive schools while still keeping these students in a school setting (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Since disciplined students are generally regarded as being at fault in disciplinary incidents and as having forfeited their rights to an education (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014), little attention has been

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given to the conditions of their schooling after exclusionary discipline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Kennedy-Lewis, 2014).

Vanderhaar and associates (2015) emphasized the link between exclusionary discipline in the form of alternative school placement and involvement in juvenile detention. Their longitudinal study found alternative school placement to have significantly more influence on juvenile justice involvement for Black students. Black youth were five times more likely than White youth to be involved in juvenile detention after being placed in a disciplinary alternative school (Vanderhaar et al., 2015). Research makes clear that expulsions and out-of-school suspensions are strongly associated with subsequent participation in juvenile and criminal justice systems (Fabelo et al., 2011; Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2011; Vanderhaar et al., 2015).

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of urban, public school discipline by giving voice to middle school Black girls who have experienced exclusionary school discipline in the form of alternative school placement. Greater insight into Black girls' perspectives of discipline experiences could prepare better designed learning environments and educational experiences that will help decrease the racialized and gendered discipline gap. Inquiry into adolescent Black girls' perceptions of discipline centers a student voice in why and how students are pushed from, or jump out of, urban public schools. Even more importantly, student voices in educational research are increasingly being used to address explicit questions about whether they see the school environment as facilitating their move toward prison or jail incarceration (see Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016). Student voices in educational research have too often been ignored or simply reported through the perspective of the researcher, yet students are the ones who are living the schooling experience (Fine, 1991).

## **Research Questions**

The voices of Black girls who are experiencing exclusionary school practices can illuminate how suspension and alternative school placement are viewed from the student perspective. Growing quantitative evidence of the connections between school suspensions, dropouts, and incarceration is lacking the voices of youth and their perceptions of the public school discipline experience. Most studies that explore the discipline gap apply a quantitative approach (Blake et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 1997, 2011; Wallace et al., 2008); there are only a few qualitative studies that explore the experiences of disciplined Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Grant, 1992; Morris, 2007; Murphy et al., 2013). While these studies examine Black girls' perceptions of disciplinary events, prior research has been less rigorous or critical in its attention to issues of power and privilege.

This study also focuses on middle school, a time when educators consistently increase their reliance on office referrals and other exclusionary discipline strategies to respond to students' challenging behaviors (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Murphy et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2011, 1997). The current study seeks to fill the gap in literature of school discipline that includes the concept of student voice, but more specifically, empowerment of student voice. While studies have begun to establish how school and classroom contexts, including teachers' implicit biases and culturally based miscommunication between educators and students contribute to discipline events (see Bowditch, 1993; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Collins, 2011; Vavrus & Cole, 2002), few focus on students' own descriptions of the process of being labeled "bad." This study investigates Black girls' experiences with be labeled bad to understand how they adopt educators' labels and how this label may shape their educational experiences. The following research questions attempt to address these issues.

1. How do middle school Black girls attending an urban, alternative public school perceive themselves?
2. How do middle school Black girls attending an urban, alternative public school perceive their behavior with peers and teachers?
3. How do middle school Black girls attending an urban, alternative public school perceive school discipline?

## **Methods**

This qualitative study highlights voices of middle school Black girls who demonstrate a trajectory toward the school-to-prison pipeline. A collective case study design (Stake, 2006) was selected for this study because it allowed for the examination of multiple cases focused on adolescent Black girls' perceptions of discipline interactions. These students are bounded by their alternative school placement in the same school, in their removal from their home (or reside) schools and in their prescribed at-risk labels (Glesne, 2011). Each student has a unique story to tell, but there is a common experience of school among each participant (Stake, 2006). The case study also allows exploration "over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1998, p. 61).

## **Setting**

The school district is located Metro City, a large urban city located in the southeast United States. Metro City has nearly 700,000 residents and over 60 neighborhoods, with 92% of population speaking English and 4% speaking Spanish. Almost 72% of the residents of Metro City identify as White, with 22% identifying as Black. Approximately eight Metro City neighborhoods have a Black majority

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demographic, ranging from 75% to 90%. All eight neighborhoods are in close proximity to each other on the “north side” of Metro City. North Metro has the highest levels of poverty, dropouts, unemployment, and percentages of Metro City School District (MCSD) students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch.

## **Population**

The target population for this study is adolescent Black female students who reside in urban neighborhoods and attend an alternative middle school in MCSD. MCSD enrolls just over 100,000 students, with 64% of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. While public data for MCSD do not include the alternative schools, the data did reveal there were approximately 20,000 general education, middle school students during the 2015-2016 school year, and of those students, 9,500 (47%) were girls. Middle school female enrollment included approximately 4,800 (51%) White females and 3,800 (40%) Black females.

In the 2014-2015 school year, MCSD was comprised of 26 middle schools that included sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Only four of the 26 middle schools had more Black female students than White female students. However, in all 26 middle schools, Black girls led the female suspension rate. Suspension data for MCSD middle schools across gender reported that 3,000 girls were suspended in the 2014-2015 school year. Black girls were assigned 2,000 out-of-school suspensions compared to 300 White girls. While Black girls only made up 40% of the middle school female population, almost 70% of out-of-school suspensions were given to Black girls.

## **Sampling**

This study used purposive sampling strategies (Glesne, 2011) to identify middle school Black girls who attend an urban, alternative public school. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select information-rich cases “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Glesne, 2011, p. 169). A university institutional review board (IRB) approved the recruitment of participants and interview protocols. After IRB approval was obtained, students enrolled in an alternative middle school during the 2015-2016 school year were chosen. Recruitment of alternative school students was significant because placement in alternative schools is often the last step before youth drop out of school completely, increasing the likelihood that they will get arrested and incarcerated (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Snowball sampling (Patton, 1990) was conducted to identify gatekeepers for targeted participants. Two local community advocates for diversity and equity in public education were determined to be key informants. Both were identified as informants because each has personal relationships with families with children attending

alternative school. The community members used parent letters to recruit parents of participants who met these criteria: suspended or expelled from their current reside school (school assigned to students based upon their address), middle school student, and identify as both Black and a girl. After parental consent was given, student assent was obtained directly before beginning the interviews. Table 1 provides participant demographics.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Grade	Gender	Race
1	12	7	Girl	Black
2	13	8	Girl	Black
3	13	8	Girl	Black

**Data Collection**

Data were collected from multiple sources, including audio recorded interviews, surveys, student drawings, student journal entries, school district data books, and transcription. The semi-structured interviews were guided by Kvale's (1996) recommendations that interview questions should have thematic and dynamic dimensions allowing the interview to capture information relevant to the research topic in a way that "promotes good interview interaction" and will generate "spontaneous, lively, and unexpected answers from the interviewees" (p. 129).

Early in the interview process, the interviewer established rapport with participants by explaining her role as a teacher and a researcher with the hope of making schools better places for all students. The students were informed that although the interviewer was also a teacher, she was not acting as an informant and would not repeat anything they said to other teachers, their parents, or to anyone else.

Three adolescent Black girls placed at the same behavioral alternative school participated in three interviews each. The interview questions were aligned to the current study's research questions and conceptual framework. Each interview was conducted after school, in person, at a time most convenient for the participant. The researcher also collected drawings and journal reflections from the participants. Prior to being interviewed, each student participant was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire of self-reported information that also included academic and behavior

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questions. The participants identified themselves as a middle school student, Black, female, Metro north side resident, and suspended from their reside school.

Each of the three girls was interviewed three times over a one-month period, with each interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. To protect anonymity, all names are pseudonyms, and the girls were told pseudonyms would be used. The interview protocol was divided into three sets of interviews with focus topics that included: (a) perception of self, (b) perception of school, and (c) perception of school discipline. All interviews with the girls were audio recorded (consent to record the interviews was obtained) and transcribed verbatim. The audio-recorded interviews were reviewed for specific variations in emotional responses, such as laughter or raised voices, as well as the words themselves.

Interviews with the girls were supplemented by visuals describing the aforementioned key focus topics. At the end of each interview participants were asked to document written and/or visual reflections of their daily school experiences in a journal. The journal and visual interpretations were used in triangulation of data sources. Koppitz's (1984) work on interpreting human figure drawings was used to analyze the emotions present in the girls' drawings, along with the girls' explanations of the drawings. For the purposes of this article, only interview and journaling data are reported.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred from April 2016 through May 2016, after data collection was completed. While the interview questions were used as the backdrop for coding, the themes emerged through a careful, line-by-line reading and review of transcripts. Transcripts from each individual interview were read multiple times to create a detailed description of the participant's perspectives. The coding process was augmented with notes and memos to help capture and interpret ideas that appear in the interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As suggested by Creswell (1998), data analysis was done in three stages: classification, interpretation, and representation.

Classification was done by reading through the interview transcripts and by studying the collected documents. This process provided an opportunity to clearly develop the themes discovered during the transcription phase of data collection. Thematic interpretation was employed to develop naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 2006), which allowed the researcher to seek out patterns of instances that develop a framework characterizing the participants' responses.

Initial in vivo coding documented direct quotes that captured the exact words of the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2013). The coding process involved a line-by-line review of the transcript of each interview. Thinking about what information was

imparted, a code was created based upon key concepts directly articulated or implied by the girls' answers and comments. After the in vivo coding process was complete, the coding reports, memos, and identified interpretive codes to be used in the second, conceptual, phase of the coding process were reviewed.

Narrative was a second coding phase that expanded contextual issues of student voice. The inclusion of narratives brings out relevant issues of school discipline through the student perspective (Stake, 2006). During the second round of coding, emerging codes were added to the original list. Josselson's (2011) approach to narrative analysis was used to analyze the data. Each girl's narrative collection was analyzed as a cohesive autobiographical account. Inductive coding of each participant's set of interviews was used to identify the tensions of each case and how they ultimately formulated a coherent whole.

After coding all data sets, themes were created and organized into categories of self-appraisals, reflected appraisals, resistance, or acceptance. Organizing the data across these concepts highlighted the relationships between students' self-perceptions, their perceptions of being singled out for punishment by educators, and their subsequent responses. After establishing themes and organizing categories, data from the girls' drawings and journals was triangulated to promote trustworthiness. At the conclusion of the individual case analysis, cross-case analysis techniques were used. After descriptions of each layer of the case studies were written, the themes analyzed, the data were interpreted and presented holistically.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Data were collected by a Black woman who grew up in poverty. She was considered a discipline problem and was indoctrinated at a very young age with the notion that education is accessible to all and is the only path to a quality lifestyle. As an educator who has taught in urban, public schools for over a decade, she brings to her classrooms childhood perspectives about educating Black students from poverty. Through her experiences she has challenged the dominant deficit perspective that blames persistently disciplined Black youth for their failures (Valencia, 1997).

While her varied schooling and cultural experiences shape perceptions and interpretations of the students' stories, the objective is to present the collective experiences of middle school Black girls for whom school has been a challenging place to navigate. This research is somewhere between a voice for adolescent Black girls who are tracked into the pipeline to prison and activism to abolish these practices.

An interpretivist theoretical approach recognizes the role that the researcher's subjectivities play, and that interpretations are "culturally derived and historically

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situated” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). The questions guiding this study emerge from various personal and professional experiences and are sharpened by recent scholarship and advocacy to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. As part of the solution, following Burawoy (2003), this research is a “revisit” of previous experiences, and in this way manages the inescapable difficulties of balancing one’s involvement in the world as an activist and one’s efforts to interpret that world as a researcher. This embedded, practitioner and activist experience poses challenges, specifically the need to extricate from this project the researcher’s previous experiences with the teaching in lowperforming, urban, public schools (Burawoy, 2003).

## Findings

The findings of this study are presented in a cross-case analysis of the narratives of all three girls, referred to as Jane 1, Jane 2 and Jane 3. The narrative of each student is presented below. Following each narrative, there is a summary of how central tensions of that case were identified and analyzed. In the subsequent discussion, we elaborate upon the importance of using qualitative interviewing as a method for extracting student voice and using it to address the discipline gap in schools.

### Jane 1

Jane 1 lived with her maternal grandmother, five siblings, and a dog in a small three-bedroom home in a low socioeconomic neighborhood. Jane 1’s perception of discipline was to replace exclusionary practice with de-escalation. She said, “They tell me go to office or go write sentences, but I would tell kid calm down or put in corner to do they work.” While she understood “losing control” is inappropriate, she felt as if she was not given the chance to channel her emotions and “calm down.” She described the school discipline process as a judicial process, as if suspension were a hearing in a courtroom. She even referenced the term “going downtown” when she was sent to a juvenile correctional detention center because of her behavior. While Jane 1 described multiple suspensions (school and bus) between sixth and seventh grades, she believed her behavior was just an adolescent phase. Table 2 displays Jane 1’s data examples for the inductive codes and themes.

**Table 2**

*Jane 1 Inductive Codes and Themes*

Focus Topics	Codes	Themes	Data Examples
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Self-Perception	Self-Esteem	Introvert	"don't like talking about stuff, I have friends, I just don't talk to them" "I like to be quiet, I don't like talking"
	Emotion	Anger	"I get mad and react"
	Decision Making	Violence Poor Choices	"I'll fight...and start throwing stuff" "I'm smart, but I just do bad stuff"
School Perception	Social Interactions	Negative Conflicts	"This girl walked up on me and we already had beef" "I fixed my mouth and attitude/cause my mouth and attitudes bad"
Discipline Perception	Consequences	Exclusion	"ISAP or detention afterschool" "They said you are suspended 10 days"

## Jane 2

Jane 2 lived with her mother, grandmother, and a high school-aged sister in a community of working-class families. She described memories of the MCSD alternative school in terms of best and worst. Her best memory was related to a classmate at the alternative school who "got out." She stated:

She was like my best friend at that school. It's like we had each other's back. And I really love her cause she got out. I was proud of her for doing what she had to do to get out. And we still kept in contact.

Jane 2's journal entries recorded only negative occurrences at school, as well as at home, and gave details about being "picked on" while riding the bus:

Last week was horrible because I was getting picked on, on my bus. I upset and felt like hitting him back, then I thought and I said tell my momma. So, after I told her, she called up to the school and no AP was there. So when I came to see the next day they said I would not have a problem out of him anymore. But now my momma pick me up and drop me off to school.

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When Jane 2 explained the event that led to her alternative placement, she described herself as someone who was misunderstood and unfairly treated. When asked how she was treated during discipline process, Jane 2 wrote examples of comments she heard when she was disciplined, such as, “get your behavior together” and “you’re too pretty for that.” Jane 2 connected the discipline process with conferencing that could be considered positive reinforcement, but no concrete replacement strategies were mentioned. Jane 2 highlighted a need for discipline that rehabilitates and reforms. Table 3 displays Jane 2’s data examples for the inductive codes and themes regarding self-perception, school perception and discipline perception.

**Table 3**

*Jane 2 Inductive Codes and Themes*

Focus Topics	Codes	Themes	Data Examples
			Self-Perception Self-Esteem Confidence “I think I am very beautiful, intelligent and unique—I am intelligent and outstanding”
	Emotion	Anger	“I “got upset” “I was taking a test and they kept talking”
	Decision Making	Poor Choices	“She got me upset when she said she was gonna suspend”
School Perception	Social Interactions	Negative Conflicts	“I been trynna stop but I do play a lot. Just me not knowing when to shut up”
Discipline Perception	Consequences	Violence	“My mouth talking, constantly talking back, thinking I have the last word” “Some think I’m mean, but I’m a sweet person” “The security guard came and apologized because he took me down”

**Jane 3**

Jane 3 lived with her mother and 16-year-old sister in an apartment complex.

The demographic of children playing outside reflected a diverse international population. Jane 3 reported she has been suspended over 20 times for fighting, dress code violations, and “talking too much” because she has a “temper.” Jane 3 did not acknowledge being noncompliant because she viewed her behavior as defending herself by “getting at the truth” when she confronted peers. Her bottled-up anger, coupled with a sense that nothing would be done if she complained, led her to take matters into her own hands.

When asked about her future success, Jane 3 was the only participant who considered incarceration as a possible pathway. Jane 3 contemplated how her temper could jeopardize getting a good job because “maybe somebody gonna try me and I’m going to really hurt them.” Regardless of her positive self-esteem, self-proclaimed talents, and potential to excel academically, Jane 3 still perceived school as a channel to prison. Table 4 summarizes Jane 3’s data examples for the inductive codes and themes and frames her attitudes regarding self-perception, school perception, and discipline perception.

**Table 4**

*Jane 3 Inductive Codes and Themes*

Focus Topics	Codes	Themes	Data Examples
Self-Perception	Self-Esteem	Introvert	“don’t like talking about stuff. I have friends, I just don’t talk to them” “I like to be quiet, I don’t like talking”
	Emotion	Anger	“I get mad and react”
		Violent	“I’ll fight and start throwing stuff”
School Perception	Decision Making	Poor Choices	“I’m smart, but I just do bad stuff”
	Social Interactions	Negative Conflicts	“This girl walked up on me and we already had beef” “that I fixed my mouth and attitude/cause my mouth and attitudes bad”

Discipline Perception	Consequences	Exclusion	“ISAP or detention after school” “They said you are suspended for 10 days”
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### **Cross-Case Analysis**

The narratives of Jane 1, Jane 2, and Jane 3, offer a range of perspectives regarding their own identities, school interactions, and discipline. A cross-case analysis of the narratives (see Table 5) includes the application of concepts found in Labeling theory; self-appraisals, reflected appraisals, resistance and acceptance.

**Table**

**5**

#### *Cross-Case Analysis*

Theoretical Concepts	Codes	Themes
Self-Appraisals	Self-Esteem	Confidence
Reflected Appraisals	Decision-Making	Poor Choices
Resistance	Social Interactions	Conflicts
Acceptance	Relationships	Affirmations

Thematically, the girls collectively depicted confidence, poor choices, and negative conflicts in their narratives. Their resistance to that oppression is often misread as combative, angry behavior. The discussion of discipline and Black girls must have a central focus of oppression to explore the cultural conditions that renders Black girls uniquely vulnerable to having their behaviors read as loud, aggressive, and dangerous to the school environment.

### **Self-Appraisals**

#### ***Similarities***

Self-appraisals refer to individuals' beliefs about their own characters and abilities, which also impact how they make sense of the choices they make. While each girl admitted engaging in undesirable behaviors at school, they all were resistant to being labeled “bad.” Since they all felt a part of loving familial relationships, their strong support system has shaped a positive self-perception. All three provided depictions of self-esteem in relation to being “smart” and “pretty.” Their self-portraits were explicitly defined by how much they knew and what they looked like. Additionally, the group self-perception was accompanied by “mouth” and/or “attitude” as proponents that cause trouble with peers and/or adults. The group self-appraisal embraced a negative label,

but the girls did not internalize their behavior as something inherent to their identity.

### **Differences**

Jane 1 affirmed having a quiet demeanor as a loner who mainly spent time at home. Jane 2 described relationships with both family and friends. Jane 2 was explicit in describing close peer relationships at school and outside school through extra-curricular activities. Jane 3 was the only girl who emphasized pride in physical beauty, discussed her father, and addressed poverty. While Jane 1 was a soft spoken introvert, Jane 2

was an outgoing extrovert, and Jane 3 was an extrovert who expressed significant concern for her outward appearance.

### **Reflected Appraisals**

#### **Similarities**

According to Bernburg (2009) and Matsueda (1992), reflected appraisals are individuals' responses to others based on what they believe those others think of them. Based upon the reflected appraisal literature, reflected appraisals become apparent when each girl perceived their "talking back" projected during conflicts. True to the theory of reflected appraisals, children "act" in order to maintain the respect of their peers and to be thought of as part of the group, which is defined in opposition to teachers whom the students do not respect. All the girls embraced the characterization of their "mouth" and "attitude" as conduits of "talking back," but only as a means of defense. The group's reflected appraisal is defined by agency during moments of conflict.

#### **Differences**

While all the girls described the same reflected appraisals of "mouth" and "attitude," there were variations in how "mouth" and "attitude" were barriers to positive relationships with peers and adults. Since Jane 1 did not cultivate relationships, she described reflected appraisals occurring involuntarily. Jane 1 described interactions occurring because others engaged her in conflict. Jane 1 was the only girl who mainly described having issues with peers. Both Jane 2 and Jane 3 described conflicts with peers and adults, but Jane 3 focused on "girl drama." While Jane 1 asserted reflected appraisal mostly with peers, Jane 2 and Jane 3 affirmed conflicts with peer and adults, with Jane 3 identifying female peers as primary adversaries.

## **Resistance**

### ***Similarities***

According to D'Amato (1993), resistance happens through children's responses to "intermediate cultural discontinuities" between school defined by adults and school defined by children themselves. Based upon resistance literature, the girls' resistance differed from, and existed in tension with, dominant institutional forms. During moments of conflict at school, each girl described a form of resistance. While all the girls referenced their participation in fighting, they described it as a necessity. Acts of physical aggression occur when verbal altercations are escalated during moments of self-defense. All the girls described their fights as temporary poor decision making that did not reflect their identity as "smart and pretty." During the discipline process, every girl described accusations of hurting and/or intent to harm an adult as an additional reason for their suspension to the alternative school. Subsequently, their discipline descriptions included adult injuries and/or adult feelings of being endangered, along with law enforcement and/or judicial system interactions.

### ***Differences***

While all the girls described an act of resistance against oppression of student agency, there were variations in how they resisted. Jane 1 believed assuming close proximity to her personal space or saying "disrespectful" words warranted a fight. The feeling of being provoked kept reoccurring in her justification to fight. Jane 2 was the only participant who used the term "bullying" to describe her acts of resistance. The feeling of being victimized kept reoccurring in her justification to fight. Jane 3 focused on "girl drama" that inspired acts of resistance in her pursuits to "get at the truth." The feeling of being slandered in gossip justified protecting her reputation. While Jane 1 described resistance involving peer conflicts, Jane 2 and Jane 3 affirmed resistance involving peers and adults.

## **Acceptance**

### ***Similarities***

Jane 2 and Jane 3 described school relationships with peers that were interpersonal. Jane 2 and Jane 3 recognized feelings of acceptance in school through positive affirmations from both peers and adults. Jane 2 and Jane 3 identified adults associated with discipline, such as administrators or security guards, not identifying teachers. Jane 2 and Jane 3 also described adult affirmations through the use of "pretty" as a benchmark for good behavior.

## **Differences**

While Jane 1 and Jane 2 described acts of acceptance through positive affirmations, Jane 1 depicted acceptance experienced through familial relationships. Jane 1 was also the only girl with multiple siblings. Jane 1's feelings of acceptance could be explained by having primary interpersonal interactions with siblings. Jane 2 and Jane 3 also had caretaker mothers who ensured involvement in afterschool activities. Since Jane 2 and Jane 3 had social networks with peers and adults outside school, these positive interactions could influence school relationships. In contrast, Jane 1 did not participate in activities and had a caretaker grandmother who divided time and energy between many children. Jane 1's lack of involvement and sharing of a caretaker could create peer and adult relationships void of school acceptance.

In the cases of Jane 1, Jane 2, and Jane 3, we see students who perceive school through disconnected interactions with teachers who rely on zero tolerance to resolve conflicts. The student narratives describe school decisions made without the inclusion of student voice and constructed by adults with the power to stigmatize with negative labeling. A set of conditions reveals itself and presents disproportionate contact with the criminal legal system and school disciplinarians or policies and practices. A paradigm shift in school discipline is needed to illuminate how school structures contribute to discipline interactions.

## **Discussion**

Placement to alternative schools is often the last step before youth drop out of school completely, increasing the likelihood that they will get arrested and incarcerated (Wald & Losen, 2003). While each story is unique, each girl in this study described conflict with peers and adults that led to exclusionary discipline and alternative school placement. The narratives described discipline that would often recast their defiance as resistance to the context or situation. The girls did not claim being "bad" as part of their identities even though their responses, reactions, and resistance led them to play the role of a "bad girl" in some situations.

Acts of losing control and visibly or even physically expressing anger defy stereotypes about what is "ladylike." The angry Black woman portrayal or Sapphire caricature (West, 2008) is a negative perception of Black girls' behavior that potentially informs educators' stereotypes during discipline interactions. Educators are positioned as having the power to judge when students are "bad" and the authority to determine punitive consequences for students' "bad" behavior. In the identification of behavior labels, there exists an imbalance of power between educators and students. The

narratives of Jane 1, Jane 2, and Jane 3 reveal how an imbalanced power is present through their labels as “bad.”

Significantly, none of the interview questions included the word “bad,” but the participants used the word “bad” frequently to describe themselves and how adults perceive them. The girls in this study defended themselves against the label of “bad” by positioning their “badness” as a temporary status resulting from poor decisions. The application of resistance identifies “bad” behavior as situational rather than inherent to the students. Rather than adopting the deviant role, students enacted reactions, and resistance, within particular classroom contexts and relationships that either supported or alienated them (A. Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Educators’ inclinations to label students and withhold support from those perceived as bad further impairs the progress of disciplined students who want to make positive changes despite previous mistakes (Nicholl, 2007). In these situations, racial and gender stereotypes collide with discipline practices that portray Black girls as delinquents—social problems themselves—rather than as young girls affected by social problems.

In their narratives the girls described discipline events where adults were positioned as the objective decision makers. This relational dynamic maintains a power imbalance in the structure and culture of schools. The girls noted this imbalance through experiences of marginalization in exclusionary discipline events. Students resented being “kicked out” or going to the office as a disciplinary response that seemed to damage relationships between students and educators. Jane 1, Jane 2, and Jane 3 provided responses of “mouthing off” as a catalyst to receiving discipline consequences, illustrating how “standing up for themselves” or being “respected” justified the “mouthing off” to peers and adults. The narratives of the current study describe disconnected interactions that are not co-constructed, but exclusionary. The girls did not describe narratives that include their voice in the creation of safe spaces.

### **Implications**

While each girl referenced her participation in fighting, they all described such actions as a necessity. Acts of physical aggression occur when verbal altercations are escalated during moments of self-defense. All the girls described their fights as temporary poor decision making that did not reflect their identity as “smart and pretty.” When students seek attention, both explicitly and implicitly, through misbehavior, school officials should immediately engage them. It is a great opportunity to build relationships with students, helping them see the harm that was caused and teaching them how to address their problems. Within discipline events, educators who choose to exclude students in response to their challenging behaviors are missing opportunities to help students improve at negotiating difficulties.



Stevick and Levinson (2003) conclude that “the behavior that appears to teachers and administrators as misconduct or irrational violence may in fact be a rational student response to a variety of school conditions” (p. 346). Ultimately, teachers should use tactics inside the classroom, such as warnings and consequences (Romi & Roache, 2012), rather than sending a student out of class, which could contribute to the institutionalization of “bad” behavior and loss of academic time. Jane 1 and Jane 3 affirmed this notion by illustrating alternative solutions of “calm down” and “this is a warning” in response to how they would counter discipline exclusion.

Literature regarding exclusionary discipline also points to positive student-teacher interactions as a counterbalance to exclusionary discipline (Fabelo et al., 2011; Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2011). This study supports Mansfield’s (2014) suggestion that schools need to create safe spaces for girls. She defined it as “a girls-only space where girls have access to supportive environments” (p.61). Effective girls-only spaces foster relationships between teachers and students, provide access to mentorship and networking, facilitate “critical conversations,” offer a space for girls’ voices to be heard, and develop collaborations (Mansfield, 2014, p. 61).

Teachers’ understandings of students’ backgrounds and cultural assets are important to cultivating trusting student-teacher relationships. Similarly, by developing their relationships with marginalized students, teachers could help to reduce incidents of challenging behavior as well as contribute to students’ positive academic outcomes and self-concepts (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Pianta et al., 2003). The narrative of these persistently disciplined girls did not mention positive relationships with teachers—the adults who divvy out exclusionary discipline in classrooms. Just as students and teachers co-construct the role of “bad kid,” with a shift in educators’ responses to students, students and teachers could also co-construct students’ roles as “good kids”. While the students in this study did not adopt an identity as “bad,” positive relationships with teachers could empower students to play the role of “good kid” more frequently.

At the highest level, student voice operates through the lens of youth-adult partnerships on a classroom level and leadership on a school-wide level. According to the participants in the current study, discipline experiences occurred in excluded spaces during negative conflicts. The participants described school environments characterized by educator decisions that push them from classrooms. Scholarship examining how the structure of schools contributes to conflicts between students and teachers by way of student resistance recasts students as agents, arguing that their challenging behaviors seek empowerment, rather than reflecting a deficit (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Fine, 1991).

## **Conclusion**

Further research is needed to understand how educators can use student voices to develop behavior management strategies that avoid an overreliance on exclusionary discipline methods. Such policies require educators to rethink how they interact with and discipline students, as they will no longer have the option of simply “getting rid of troublemakers” (Bowditch, 1993, p. 494). This study provides a glimpse into the lives of Black girls’ living in an urban area, the challenges they face, and their efforts to overcome those challenges. In particular, it calls attention what happens to them when the educational system excludes them from reside schools. The illumination of Black girls’ lived experiences will elevate their voices so that adults—researchers, school teachers, administrators, policymakers and the general public - can perhaps be participants in the reduction of a school-to-prison pipeline trajectory.

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