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## **By Any Means Necessary: A Brief Educational History of Black Women and Girls in the United States**

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*Lack of attention paid to the intersection of race and gender can cause the propensity to overlook the complexity in the stories of individuals. This phenomenon is evident in the history of the education of Black women and girls in the United States. This manuscript presents a brief overview of this history, parallel to the overarching history of the United States at three points in time spanning from the Revolutionary War through the present day. Through a succinct literature review and document analysis, this manuscript seeks to reveal a counternarrative to the whitewashed anecdotes within the context of educational history.*

*In addition, this manuscript briefly highlights the impact of racial trauma associated with the education of Black women and girls and will discuss trauma-informed practices that may be utilized to mitigate that impact. Finally, this manuscript suggests potential directions for policy and research, particularly trauma-informed policies grounded in the acknowledgment of the stress caused by discrimination and invisibility, in hopes Black women and girls eventually realize educational equity in the present and the future, despite the injustices of the past.*

**Keywords:** Black women | Black girls | educational history | education policy | race | gender | racial trauma | Intersectionality Theory | resilience| perseverance| Critical Race Theory

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with saying:

We must begin to tell Black women's stories because, without them, we cannot tell the story of Black men, white men, white women, or anyone else in this country. The story of Black women is critical because those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it (Owens, 2018, para. 7).

Black women in the United States, indeed, have a story to tell. It is a story often characterized by mistreatment, neglect, and trauma. Despite this frequently painful history, Black women and girls have historically committed themselves to educational attainment. The results of a survey administered by the National Center for Education Statistics measuring the attainment of degrees among post-secondary students indicates that that between the years of 2001 and 2016, Black women outpaced Black men in receiving bachelor's degrees, accounting for 64% of the degrees conferred to African Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics report additionally indicates that Black women are one of the most highly educated groups in the United States (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Despite a commitment to education and notable accomplishments, Black women still experience prolific opportunity gaps. Chavous and Cogburn (2007) note the lack of "research and frameworks" devoted specifically to Black women and girls and their educational pursuits (p. 25).

Crenshaw's words are particularly poignant and relevant considering the opportunity gaps that Black women and girls encounter are grounded in historical circumstances. From pejorative stereotypes such as the belief that Black women and girls exhibit unrestricted aggression to racialized trauma caused by the intersection of their identities and the invalidation of their experiences, Black women and girls have been traditionally compelled to overcome obstacles to earn an education (Morris, 2007). For example, Thomas and Jackson (2007) discovered that Black girls are more likely than their peers to feel uncomfortable within their school buildings.

Notwithstanding their perseverance, the stories and contributions of Black women and girls are often obscured or invalidated by history (Chateauvert, 1988; Frühworth, 2021; Shetterly & Smit, 2016). There is surprisingly little social science literature focused specifically on the education of Black women and girls (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). There is an urgent necessity for an intersectional lens in the study of educational history, particularly highlighting how history impacts the present. This manuscript is an attempt to heed Crenshaw's words and uplift the voices of Black women and girls in relation to education.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of Education in the United States – The Colonial Era and Slavery**

During the Colonial Era, from the arrival of European settlers through the Revolutionary War, education became an increasingly prominent part of life for white families. Opportunities for education varied throughout the country depending on status, wealth, and the way education was perceived (Jeynes, 2007). In New England, education was viewed differently than in the South. Southern states focused primarily on home education that was not legally required. On the contrary, compulsory education laws were conceptualized in New England in the 1600s (Katz, 1976). Though the first education laws were well established by the Colonial Era, education was still implemented inconsistently. Some historical scholars opine that much teaching occurred to perpetuate religion (Long, 1975; MacClellan, 1999).

Educational options started to evolve during this time. Private educational facilities became available to wealthy families (Madigan, 2009). Women were viewed by some patriarchs as an extension of men (DePauw, 1977). They had little power or control over their circumstances. There were few legal protections or opportunities for independence. DePauw (1977) states that even the undergarments of a woman “belonged to her husband” (p.109). Black women had the additional consideration of intersecting identities, further complicating their movements in society (Cooper, 1892; Hine & Thompson, 1998). Education for women was often positioned differently than it was for men (Madigan, 2009). Women, specifically affluent women, had some options for education, however, this education concentrated on preparing women for their stereotypical feminine roles (Long, 1975). Women were encouraged to learn skills associated with keeping house and caring for their future families (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Less affluent women were educated to aid in supporting familial vocations. There was recognition for the need to read and write to be successful (Madigan, 2009).

Educational opportunities for young men varied. Some received private tutoring at home. Others attended private academies to enhance their educational opportunities (Madigan, 2009). Still, others might have the option to learn a trade to contribute to the family income or gain an apprenticeship with a laborer who could teach their craft (Long, 1975; Middlekauff, 1961; Snyder, 2007). The extraordinarily wealthy could afford grammar schools, which were private

institutions modeled after European or Latin schools (Madigan, 2009). These institutions were exclusively created for male students whose families could afford the tuition (Middlekauff, 1961). Unsurprisingly, these opportunities were largely inaccessible for Children of Color, both Black and Indigenous. To that end, those who were enslaved had to find alternative means to receive their education, leading to instruction at night prior to or after working in the fields or the house of their oppressor.

### **Education for Black Women During the Colonial Era and Slavery**

The Colonial Era was a time in history when slavery was still a prominent part of the tapestry of the United States. By 1860, approximately four million Black Americans were enslaved (Takaki, 1993). This represented 35% of the country's population at that time (Takaki, 1993). Harmful stereotypes abounded of Black Americans being “intellectually inferior” and “childlike” (Jacobs, 1861; Takaki, 1993, p. 100). Van Evrie (1861) penned an entire book on his perception of the inferiority of Black Americans, utilizing such descriptors as “heathens” (p. 15). Education was largely withheld from Black Americans, including Black women and girls. In the rare instances when literacy was encouraged for Black Americans by the dominating culture, it was to spread the Christian religion as opposed to educating the enslaved (Monaghan, 2005). Many of those who were enslaved took it upon themselves to instruct themselves to read and write when other education opportunities were unavailable to them. This was often a dangerous endeavor for enslaved people (Sistrunk, 1980). Privilege allowed white families to have more options for education regarding how and if they desired to educate their children. Those who were enslaved were often compelled to learn in secret.

Black women often assumed the role of teachers in the slave quarters, partially due to their proximity to literacy (Arao, 2016). As a result of their domestic work within the houses, some learned to read and write from the white children they cared for; some learned as they carried out daily tasks like fanning their slaveowners. In the case of Phillis Wheatley, the first Black woman to have a book of poetry published in the United States, her intelligence was recognized by her mistress due to her proximity. She was able to receive literacy education as a result and went on to advocate through her poetry.

Wheatley's story, however, was a unique one, and Black women and girls often were not encouraged to embrace literacy. As such, when a Black woman or girl learned to read or write, she often passed these lessons on and prioritized the education of those close to her (Jacobs, 1861). In her autobiographical text, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (1861) discusses this as she explains her commitment to the education of her children. She explains that the wages she earned went to improving their lives. Education and the desire for it was often passed through generations in this respect. Grandmothers, mothers, and aunts were able to instruct children in the family and educate others in their circle. This was by no means a riskless endeavor. Slaves were severely beaten or in some cases had appendages or limbs removed for teaching other slaves to read and write (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Educating other slaves could be punishable by death (Thomas & Jackson, 2007).

Extant literature on the subject reveals that in addition to education being a priority for Black women and girls during enslavement, it was also a communal process. (Hine & Thompson, 1998). In the deep South, where the stakes were particularly high, someone would stand guard to ensure that no one would get caught and subsequently punished. The women would make time in the slave quarters, sometimes well into the night, to educate their loved

ones. Hine and Thompson (1998) recounted the story of a slave named Milla Granson, who would teach her peers on the plantation from “11 pm to 2 am,” after a long day in the fields (p. 95). Hine and Thompson (1998) argued that Black women often had greater challenges than Black men. Despite doing the same work for the same hours, Black women were given less food (Hine & Thompson, 1998). The clothing supplied was not sufficient for work in the fields. Skirts and tops made of heavy, rough fabric were cumbersome and uncomfortable to work in (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Further, enslaved people were only given a small amount of fabric per year. It was not uncommon for their clothing to wear out before the end of the year, forcing those who were enslaved to work in rags or without clothing (Weaver, 2012). Furthermore, after Black women worked, they were expected to attend to traditional gender responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and sewing after their work in the field or the main house was complete (Hine & Thompson, 1998; Perkins, 1993).

This assumption of risks and the sacrifice of self to educate others speaks to the dedication to education and literacy among Black women and girls. Hine and Thompson (1998) state that many, like Milla Granson, equated literacy and learning with freedom. The literature reveals that Black women were not only relied upon for their ability to educate, but they were the force that held families and communities together by providing support, encouragement, and activism (Hine & Thompson, 1998). This is a sentiment that carries into the modern era. The intersecting identities of Black women and girls heavily influenced their experiences (Monaghan, 2005; Perkins, 1993). This is a theme that will weave throughout the history of the education of Black women and girls. This illuminates the need for an intersectional lens when analyzing historical events and the ways in which they impact the present and future. In the words of Anna Julia Cooper (1892):

The Colored Woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both (p. 112).

### **Segregation, the Progressive Era, and the Jim Crow Era**

During the time of slavery and the subsequent Civil War that abolished enslavement, education in the United States evolved. In the mid-1800s, the United States began to shift towards the application of mandatory schooling for all students. The beginning concept of public schools as they are currently structured took root during this era (Thattai, 2001). Schools began to shift to a common model in which money from taxes funded their operation (Uretsky & Andrews, 2014). Despite the pushback received from citizens who did not agree with paying for education for all students, the common school model prevailed (Uretsky & Andrews, 2014). This model was prevalent throughout the country prior to the turn of the century (Thattai, 2001; Thattai, 2014).

Between the mid-1800s and the turn of the century, high schools and junior high schools were created (Thattai, 2001). Additionally, the country became more serious about the role of teachers and established schools to train them in their craft. By the turn of the century, the public school system as we see it today began to take shape with laws requiring that all students attend school. Formal education was available to students funded by taxpayers. Schools became places to produce adults who could add to the global competitiveness that emerged during the latter portion of this era (Johanningmeier, 2006). As time progressed and the World Wars became a focal point of society, the conversation turned to the quality of schools and whether schools were

grooming students properly for distinction, as well as participation in society (Cremin, 1968). Examination of the conversations and criticisms from this era reveal what could be the foundations of later rhetoric around school quality and school reform.

Despite the growing accessibility of education for students, students of color were still routinely shortchanged. The school buildings available to students of color were subpar to that of their white peers (Johanningmeier, 2006). Though the 1836 Plessy v. Ferguson court case determined that facilities be “separate but equal,” there was nothing equal about the educational resources available to Black and Brown students. Furthermore, education was utilized as a tool to force assimilation on students who immigrated to the United States from other countries (Uretsky & Andrews, 2014).

The World Wars additionally brought forth a strong feeling of requiring allegiance to the United States, particularly during the progressive era (Tyek, 1993). Schools were not only places for education but institutions which inspired strong loyalism. This paved the way for requiring students to assimilate to the norms of the dominating culture (Tyek, 1993). Thus, difference was not accepted and embraced.

The Jim Crow era gave way to the conversations about school segregation and the fashion in which Black American students were educated. *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was one of the defining cases of the latter part of this era, like the way *Plessey v. Ferguson* in 1896 was a pivotal part of the post-enslavement era. It was evident that though segregation laws stated that facilities must be “separate, but equal,” that equality did not exist (Uretsky & Andrews, 2014). The segregation laws provided additional burdens for Black families who desired for their daughters to be educated. The Brown family, who brought *Brown v. Board of Education*, was one such family. Linda Brown, a third grader, had to travel a distance via bus and walk to reach the school in her area that was designated for Black children (Tilman, 2004). However, there was a school near her home that was far closer. The family sued the Board of Education and won, opening the opportunity for the integration of schools. However, Tyek (1993) observes that Black American children were often shifted to historically white schools without the opposite being true. The desegregation of schools through *Brown v. Board of Education* was not without its challenges. Some of these effects still exist today and will be discussed later in this section.

### **Education of Black Women During Segregation and the Jim Crow Era**

Black women’s dedication to education, and their desire for the freedom they believed education could provide for themselves and their families, continued through Antebellum and into the days of segregation and Jim Crow (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Mamie Till Mobley was representative of this concept. After the tragic, racially motivated death of her son Emmitt Till, Till Mobley decided to be trained to become a teacher (Hine & Thompson, 1998). She saw education as the way to liberation and a way to make sense of her loss (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Till Mobley stated:

That’s how I was able to start over. I was going to go to college. I was going to become a teacher. I would be able to work with children, to teach them, to help shape them, to introduce them to a whole world of possibilities. In the process, a whole world of possibilities was opening up to me (Till Mobley & Benson, 2003, p. 217).

On the other hand, Black women were becoming increasingly aware that education alone was not the answer. They strove to create equal educational opportunities for all by taking up the

mantel of desegregation. Like Till Mobley, Black women did not exclusively desire education for themselves, but many of them assumed the roles of teachers as well (Arao, 2016). Education, particularly literacy, provided freedom in the eyes of many Black women.

It is notable that during this time, Black women were not recognized as fully human (Perkins, 1993). However, Black women and their families persevered in pursuing their education. It was common for a family to relocate to be near schools that would provide education for their daughters (Perkins, 1993). There was mixed support for Black women during this era. Some believed that the education of Black women was necessary. Others believed that Black women should take on more traditional gender roles and advocate for the education of their sons. To that end, not only did Black women attempt to fight for the right to be educated based on their race, but they also faced resistance regarding their gender as well. Black women were called to be teachers and activists simultaneously. Even as educational opportunities expanded for white women near the turn of the century, the educational opportunities for Black women remained stagnant (Perkins, 1993).

Given the prominent role Black women played in the education of Black children in the United States, it is unsurprising that the people leading the movement to dismantle education segregation laws were Black women and girls. Like other points in history, many women involved in these educational movements were hidden figures (Shetterly, 2016). The push to desegregate schools and get Black and Brown children educated in integrated facilities happened at all levels of education (Perkins, 1993). For example, Dr. Pauli Murray, the first Black woman to receive a J.D. from Yale Law School, was a first in the movement (Gilmore, 2004). Denial of admission from both the University of North Carolina and Harvard University fueled her passion for obtaining a law degree. Her arguments and experiences inspired her written work and were instrumental in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

Notably, integrating schools brought a complicated set of circumstances into view. Guiner (2004) discussed the way *Brown v. Board of Education* focused on “desegregation” as opposed to working towards “educational equity,” which simply could not be addressed solely by changing the law (p. 95). The result is still seen today, where the complications that were supposed to be addressed by the law were not. Bell (1983) noted that desegregation of schools helped to spurn the concept of “tracking,” or placing students on academic levels according to often subjective and biased perceptions of ability. Bell (1983) additionally posits that desegregation caused many Black American educators to lose their jobs. This would have been a blow to Black women economically, as many were employed as teachers. These “unintended” consequences come to fruition in the modern era, impacting the education of Black women and girls in both sudden and profound ways. The following section will discuss how these common themes impact Black women and girls today.

## **Schooling in the Modern Era**

After desegregation, public education moved into an era of increased motivation to compete on a global scale. As countries progressed in their scientific advancements, the United States felt compelled to maintain its perceived global dominance and competitiveness (United States Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The governing bodies achieved this by encouraging schools to be places where students prepare to advance the United States agenda. The 1980s ushered in the era of school accountability with the Nation at Risk Report under the Reagan administration (Cooper, 2015). The report asserted that public schools were declining in

the quality of content delivered and were not adequately preparing students for the future (United States Commission on Education, 1983). The report additionally alluded to a movement towards mediocrity and an inability for United States students to compete on a global level. The report concluded that the only way to maintain the status of the United States was to improve public schools (United States Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This rhetoric characterized the school reform movements that exist today, with every president adopting their own version. These movements are defined by standardized testing and monitoring of teachers (United States Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

While there is mention of closing the opportunity gap and providing equitable education opportunities in, for example, *Benchmarking for Success* (Gerald, 2008), a 2008 report advocating for school reform, little is being done in practice. I would argue that lawmakers provide stopgaps for persistent educational challenges as opposed to enacting meaningful changes that can lead to true transformation. For example, it is common knowledge that public school funding is inequitable, yet instead of investing more time and money in making public schools equitable for all students, for-profit charter schools have been presented as an alternative solution. The political commitment to educational equity is largely performative, and what is politically expedient, at times, overshadows what is in the best interest of students.

### **Education of Black Women in the Modern Era**

In the modern era, we see problems that have their roots in the history of educational inequity still affecting Black women to this day. Young (2020) noted the lack of academic literature centering around the educational experiences of Black girls, particularly at the K-12 grade levels. However, schools in areas that primarily educate Children of Color are still grossly underfunded in comparison to their peers. Headlines of inadequate educational facilities still make the news more frequently than should be comfortable. Black women and girls are still leading movements for justice and equity while not being the primary beneficiaries of any shifts or movement in policy or practice (Patton et al., 2016).

It is easy to view the tremendous educational accomplishments of Black women and assume that there is no work to be done (Arao, 2016). A review of the empirical evidence would reveal this conclusion is questionable at best. Black women and girls have persisted and persevered despite the numerous challenges they have encountered, from violence to “superinvisibility” (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007, p. 45). However, it should not be assumed that Black women require support in achieving the magnitude of educational success they are capable of. Black women and girls still need to push through barriers to receive an equitable education. Some of these barriers include misunderstanding of behaviors based on stereotypes, lack of teacher belief in their abilities (Collins & Jones, 2015), and underrepresentation in advanced placement classes (Clark et al., 2012). At this point in history, these barriers arguably should not exist.

We must not forget that there are Black women and girls trapped in a cycle of poverty exacerbated by systemic issues that can alter the opportunities available to them (Bell, 2004). We must not forget that, though Black girls have been able to persevere, some of them are still at risk for underachieving due to systemic oppression (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Likewise, schools and social science research do not always pay attention to the holistic education of Black girls, which can additionally impact their ability to reach their fullest potential (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). The dropout rate for Black girls was 3% higher than their white counterparts in 2001



(Thomas & Jackson, 2007). The intersection of their race and gender can cause Black women and girls to fall through the cracks as it relates to their education.

Epstein et al. (2017) found that people viewed Black girls as less in need of nurture than other children and further discovered that people believed Black girls were “more independent” and in “less need of comfort” than other children (p. 2). In this view, Black girls are not looked upon as children and may be required to exhibit a level of maturity that does not allow them to have their emotional needs met. Love (2019) discusses the “spirit murder” on Black children within schools (p. 34). Gambles (2020) similarly found that Black girls were “adultified” by the adults they met, particularly at school (p. 36). This could explain why a report found that 12% of Black girls nationwide were suspended during the 2011-2012 school year (House Committee on Education and Workforce, 2016). Gambles (2020) additionally found that Black girls were “criminalized” by school personnel (p. 36). Wun (2006) discussed the paradox of schools incorporating policies that discriminate against Black girls and then penalize and further criminalize their subconscious or conscious “anger” and “resistance” to this treatment (p. 424). Gambles (2020) characterizes this as a public health issue. These burdens faced by Black women and girls in pursuit of their education should not inspire admiration for their resilience and grit; it should be an unmistakable call to action.

## Discussion

As evident throughout these three distinct points in history, Black women and girls persevered to receive their education despite persistent and pervasive messages that they were not entitled to an education. From severe punishment for teaching and learning during slavery, racial terrorism and job loss during segregation, and the neglect and criminalization of Black girls in the modern era, the education system has continuously indicated to Black women and girls that their efforts are futile. Black women and girls are consistently “spirit murdered” in their education (Love, 2019, p. 34).

Educational accounts from these three eras illustrate that Black women and girls have maintained a deep commitment to education, no matter the cost. It is additionally evident that despite this unshakeable dedication, Black women and girls do not yield the same outcomes as their white counterparts. Black women still receive less pay for equal work (Budig et al., 2021). Black women still must navigate discrimination in the workplace (Bell, 2004). Black women still must manage family and are still viewed as the glue that keeps the community together, sometimes to their own detriment (Lewis et al., 2013). The *strong Black woman* archetype at the expense of self-care is a common theme among Black women and can cause a variety of physical and health challenges as a result (Jones et al., 2019). What is additionally evident is the presence of racial stress and trauma, which may go unacknowledged (Kholi, 2017). The subsequent discussion analyzes the impact of these phenomena on Black women and girls and suggests some potential policy shifts that can allow for change.

The education system does not allow space for students to identify and process these messages within the school setting. Despite the research that confirms that racial trauma is a real phenomenon that affects the brain, schools have done little to address this issue within their walls. Barlow (2018) states that trauma due to gender and trauma due to race can intersect and cause a compounded physiological response in Black women and girls. Barlow (2018) additionally theorizes that trauma can transcend generations, causing biological changes in the body. Children of Color encounter persistent incidents grounded in bias, such as being

stereotyped, that have a cumulative effect on their cognitive functioning. Research suggests that their memory and self-control can be impacted (Levy & Richeson, 2018), functions that are necessary to perform successfully in a school setting. For this reason, it would behoove schools, as they move towards trauma-conscious service delivery, to consider exploring the effects of racism in the classroom. Trauma-informed spaces are built to consider detrimental experiences in their services (Paccione-Dyslewski, 2016). Thus, trauma-informed classrooms, in theory, provide emotionally safe places for students to engage in learning despite these detrimental experiences. While the effects of adverse childhood experiences are a critical component of racial trauma in Black women and girls, I would argue that racial trauma requires even greater care because of its insidious nature. The very existence of racial trauma can be denied, which can contribute to the damage inflicted. If schools are to truly address trauma within schools, a holistic approach that does not encourage cyclical re-traumatization is necessary.

### **Implications for the PK-20 System and Policymakers Creative Strategies to encourage Dialogue Between Lawmakers and the Community**

To enter a necessary era of educational equity, particularly for Black women and girls, the United States must come to acknowledge and accept its history. I posit that the current political climate in which politicians vilify Critical Race Theory and desire to limit classroom conversation around race are the antithesis of what is needed. I encourage political entities to recognize that they are complicit in upholding systems of injustice. Policymakers and educators alike must make a concerted effort to learn history, so as not to repeat it.

Community dialogue is a promising strategy in both building capacity and creating opportunities for policy change. There might be opportunities to bring classroom pedagogical approaches to the realm of politics. Not only would this strategy be beneficial from a knowledge building and political perspective, but it can be a tool for mitigating the effects of racial and discrimination trauma. Freire (1972) discusses the way critical dialogue can be a step towards healing. Incorporating established communication techniques, such as responsive listening, into the structure of town hall meetings could provide some insight into the experiences of Black women and girls and enhance the opportunity for collaboration between lawmakers and the community.

### **Evaluating the Historical Inequity of the PK-20 Education System**

Historically, public schools have been both separate and unequal. This has continued with inequitable funding formulas that funnel money away from public school districts that need it most (Darling-Hammond, 2007). These inequities may be more subtle than they were in the 1800s but they still harm Black and Brown children who should receive the same education as their peers. I would argue that politicians and policymakers see these inequities but lack the political will to address the problem with the urgency that is necessary. Take for example, COVID-19 funding distribution in the State of Pennsylvania in the early part of 2020. The Pennsylvania governor disagreed with the “inequitable distribution” of funds, which arguably would have impacted underfunded districts, however, in the “spirit of compromise,” he opted not to act on it (Hanna, 2020). Bourdeiu and Passeron (1990) discuss the way that schools can often “reproduce” the dominating culture of a society (p. 21). I opine that this is a phenomenon that occurs currently in public schools. To paraphrase Crenshaw (Owens, 2018), the United States is

repeating its history. I would argue that few demographics have been affected by this repetition of history like Black women and girls have. Black women still live out racial and generational trauma in a similar fashion to that of their ancestors (Baack, 2017) and must overcome the compounded effects of that trauma. Healing must take place. I believe this begins with an acknowledgment of the past four centuries of pain and an earnest attempt at repairing the consequential damage.

In the quest for equity, liberation, and repairing the wounds of the past, society must ensure that the harm done to Black women throughout history is not represented as “primarily emotional;” this is not just about “healing” (Johnson, 2018, p. 59). We cannot “deny the trouble we are in” through encouraging Black women and girls to “heal” (Johnson, 2018, p. 59). There must be a concerted effort among policymakers to ensure Black women and girls receive the support and nurturing they are often denied as children and true tangible solutions for the challenges they face. This includes extensive anti-bias training for lawmakers and educators alike. This would allow stakeholders to recognize the “adultification” that causes Black, female-identifying students to be suspended more often than their white peers (Gambles, 2020, p. 36). Black women and girls need acknowledgment and validation of their painful past by those who have perpetuated and upheld these harmful systems.

The word *trauma* in legislation must be defined, and I believe it is necessary to include institutional and interpersonal racism in that definition. The United States has minimized the detrimental impact of the abuse of power and privilege for far too long. Even now, Critical Race Theory, which highlights how the structure of institutions affects the lives of BIPOC, is a controversial political topic. This invalidation of experience is psychologically harmful (Carter, 2007; Williams, 2018). It is my assessment that students should be equipped within and outside of the classroom to reveal and process their pain. In the classroom, this might look like critical discussion groups or writing assignments that explore the concepts of identity and belonging or the phenomenon of feeling excluded based on uncontrollable circumstances. I posit that it is important to normalize the need for these discussions and emotional processing. Students may not be equipped to identify trauma and stress associated with racism. Likewise, trauma-informed spaces should include guidelines for creating spaces that are culturally safe and relevant for Black women and girls. Comas-Diaz (2016), a leading researcher on the treatment of racialized trauma, opines that part of healing from racial trauma is acknowledging that it exists and taking steps to critically analyze harmful and oppressive systems. Creating spaces within schools where this portion of the healing process is possible can allow for movement towards social action, which is the culminating stage of healing.

It is critical for policymakers to address the systemic inequities that disproportionately affect Black women and girls and affect their education. For example, Black girls are less likely to be exposed to teachers of the same demographics than their white peers (Graham, 1987). This can alter the way Black girls see themselves and can cause long-lasting impacts. As Bell (1983) theorizes, this might be partially attributed to the mass exodus and expulsion of Black teachers during desegregation. Educational stakeholders can do a far better job incentivizing teachers of color to enter the field by providing support. Offering subsidies for test preparation and teaching certification exams is one potential solution. This can be done at a minimal cost yet can have an extraordinary impact on educational outcomes for Black women and girls.

Finally, society must collectively recognize that the concepts of resilience and grit may cause additional harm to Black women and girls. Resilience and grit are often discussed as admirable qualities. However, with a particularly fraught history, it might be time for these

concepts to be questioned. The tenacity of Black women and girls should be lauded. However, this admiration should not be at the expense of their emotional and mental well-being. Acknowledging that schools are a system where the minoritized can feel unwelcome due to the reproduction of power structures within schools is a start (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As illustrated in this manuscript and confirmed by Comas-Diaz (2016), inequity is built into the United States and its education. It would be beneficial to acknowledge that society can both celebrate the strength of Black women and girls, while simultaneously acknowledging and remedying their need to be resilient and persevere through socially constructed injustices.

### **Conclusion**

In 1937, Zora Neale Hurston suggested that Black women were “the mules of the world” (p. 14). In 2021, this should no longer ring so true. The current political climate is emotionally charged but is ripe with opportunity. There is an opportunity for critical dialogue that can lead to first steps in dismantling systems that have caused such pain. It begins with discussion and acknowledgment. Effective communication might seem challenging in this current political climate, but it does not have to be. Even conceding the role that politics play in influencing the movement of education is a step towards addressing the systemic challenges that cause Black women and girls such resistance. Saluting and revering the contributions of Black women and girls throughout history is an additional step in the right direction. Honoring a commitment to education that may not have been uncomplicated to obtain might spark discussion about how to make schools a less challenging place for Black women and girls.

Researchers in the academy, particularly those who align with a critical paradigm, can use their voices and research to raise awareness about the plight of Black women and girls in this nation, particularly relating to education. Monique Morris is an example of a scholar who advocates strongly for Black women and girls and raises awareness around their circumstances. This effort must cease to be performative; substantive changes need to occur. The United States will never achieve true freedom or liberation until ALL citizens are treated with equity. This includes Black women and girls. After years of being forced to persevere to receive a basic education, Black women and girls more than deserve to be seen, heard, validated, and equitably educated without resistance.

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