School-Related Barriers that might be Impeding Academic Success for African American Girls

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Abstract
This study explored African American girls' perceived racial/ethnic discrimination and teachers' perceptions to understand the unique impact of each on educational outcomes for African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups. The sample included 2,384 7th grade girls. In this multi-informant study, girls completed a survey that included ratings of perceived teacher discrimination, teachers rated the girls on academic engagement and anti-social behavior, and end-of-the-year GPA for each girl was gathered from school records data. One-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of race/ethnicity, such that African American girls reported higher levels of racial/ethnic discrimination, had a lower GPA, and were rated by their teachers as less engaged and more anti-social compared to Asian, Latinx, and white girls. Regression analysis revealed that, compared to white and Asian girls, low teacher perceived engagement was related to lower achievement for African American girls. These results highlight the need to analyze the educational experiences that African American girls are facing.

Keywords: academic achievement, African American girls, teacher perceptions, racial/ethnic discrimination, intersectionality

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Even though African American girls are graduating at higher rates compared to African American boys, they are graduating at lower rates compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups [1,2]. Some researchers have argued that school-related barriers might be impeding academic success for African American girls [3]. For example, African American girls are often mischaracterized by their dress, how they look, or the way that they speak and act [4]. These misperceptions could be due to society's rooted expectations of African American girls to fit particular gender norms of femininity [5]. When African American girls violate these gender norms or traditional expectations, this can lead to teachers negatively perceiving them and puts them at risk for experiencing higher instances of racial/ethnic discrimination [6-9]. Although these are not the sole reasons for poor educational outcomes for African American girls, they can impose significant barriers for them as compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a paucity of research examining how race and gender combine in the school setting to examine academic achievement among adolescent African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups. The current study aims to fill this gap in an effort to examine (1) how teachers perceive their African American girl students (2) how African American girls perceive racial/ethnic discrimination at their school (3) and lastly to compare African American girls' academic achievement to that of other girls (white, Asian, and Latinx girls)

Literature Review
Intersectionality
It is crucial to analyze research through an intersectional lens because it allows researchers to understand the complexities around certain social phenomena [10]. This framework requires researchers to examine social identities, disadvantages, and differences amongst groups [11]. The inclusion of multiple identifies is useful in understanding and answering complex questions about the relationships that different identities have with particular outcomes [11]. In studying different groups, individuals who might have been overlooked are now recognized. By focusing on groups that have been overlooked or misrepresented, researchers are better able to understand that particular group and their experiences, as opposed to comparing them to the dominant group and seeing how they depart from the dominant groups' norms [12].

Intersectionality is the appropriate framework for understanding the complex set of inequalities that African American girls face. Intersectionality looks at how the inequality of race and gender combine for African American girls and how either one can alter the effects of the other [13-15]. One way to understand how these two identities intersect is in reference to the double jeopardy hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that because African American females are

a part of two lower status groups, such as being a woman and being African American, this makes them more susceptible to sexism and racism [16]. Within the Black feminist literature, it is argued that for Black women, race and gender play an equally important role [17].

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach proposed a similar intersectional argument due to Black women having multiple subordinate identities; this could lead them to experience distinctive forms of oppression [18]. Goff, Thomas, and Jackson explain that this type of labeling could be occurring because Black women are seen as non-prototypical of a woman and non-prototypical of being Black [19]. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach define this experience as intersectional invisibility for Black women due to the ideologies of androcentrism that identify men as prototypical and ethnocentrism that identifies Whiteness as prototypical [18, 20, and 21]. The term intersectional invisibility refers to the ongoing struggle to be seen, heard, and understood as a result of being a non-prototypical subordinate group member [22]. The existing research on intersectionality for African American girls is starting to highlight their experience, but further research is needed to unpack the nuances of intersectionality for African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups in terms of perceived racial discrimination and lower academic performance.

African American Girls
When African American girls are compared to girls from other racial/ethnic group academically, it is clear that African American girls are doing more poorly. In a national assessment, African American girls consistently performed below the basic achievement level in math and reading when compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups [23]. When comparing SAT scores, African American girls scored lower compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups. When comparing students being held back a grade, African American girls are held back at a higher rate compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups [23].

One reason for these disparities could extend to how African American girls are perceived. In the media, African American girls are often portrayed as angry, hostile, and even hypersexualized [7]. In the literature on African American girls, aggression is widely studied as a problem behavior for them [4]. In the classroom, teachers and peers often perceive African American girls to be physically aggressive [24]. These misperceptions could be due to society's rooted expectations of African American girls to fit particular gender norms of femininity [5]. These gender norms are usually defined by white womanhood standards [25]. These standards imply that in order to be feminine, a girl must be passive and silent [3]. However, African American girls often violate these gender norms by taking on masculine behaviors. These behaviors include being too independent and having an aggressive demeanor. These types of masculine behaviors, as George defines them, are seen as unnaturally strong [5]. Unfortunately, when African American girls violate gender norms or traditional expectations, they are penalized for these actions in ways that are not the same for white girls [26]. For example, when African American girls show assertiveness, it is often misunderstood as being confrontational, and they are punished harshly for it [7].

When African American girls are disciplined for nonconforming, they receive more suspensions for these actions compared to their Latinx, Asian, and white peers [27, 28]. More research is needed on the school experiences of African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups to understand the role these experiences have on African American girls' academic achievement. Wun contends that the disparities of the experiences that African American girls face might exist in the school system due to race and gender biases [29].

Why Teacher Perspectives Matter
For African American girls, stereotypes of them being aggressive might influence implicit biases that teachers might have of them, which triggers teachers to have an adverse reaction to them [2]. Likewise, teachers' expectations and how they perceive their students can affect their students' academic achievement [30]. The research on implicit bias reveals that specific ideas, even racial stereotypes or breaking of norms, can affect the way certain people make decisions about other people [31]. When teachers have an implicit bias, this can lower their expectations for their students [7]. This way of thinking can also lead to teacher discrimination, implicit racist practices, and eventually, disparities in achievement [32].

A number of studies using different methods report that African American girls perceive unfair treatment from teachers. Hughes et al. conducted a qualitative study and found that black female students felt that their teacher treated them differently than their classmates. They also felt that their teachers had lower academic expectations for them. Showunmi conducted a focus group with 14-15-year-old black girls [33,34]. The girls shared instances within the classroom where the teacher would punish only them for making noise when the entire class was being disruptive. The black female students also reported that they felt their teachers only showed positive attention to the white female students in their classes. A study done in Seattle looked at the differences between GPA for black and white female students. Results found that black girls, compared to white girls, were less likely to earn a high GPA. This even occurred when Black female students tried hard in the class [35]. Morris did multiple interviews with black girls from different cities and found similar experiences. Some girls perceived that their teachers were treating them unfairly, and others felt that their teacher did not want them to succeed. Most of the girls felt that their teachers were disrespectful towards them, which triggered them to display bad behavior [4]. The Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS) held a focus group in New York City and Boston that focused on the experiences of African American girls. Results indicated that African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups felt their teachers were not culturally competent, did not acknowledged their achievements, and were disinterested in teaching them [36].

Perceived Racial/Ethnic Discrimination
Another school-related barrier for African American girls is perceived discrimination at school. Research documents that for African American adolescents, racial discrimination is a significant risk factor [37,38]. When African American adolescents are compared with

adolescents from other races/ethnicities, the risk of experiencing racial discrimination is greater for African American adolescents [9]. Few studies concurrently study race and gender in regards to perceptions of racial/ethnic discrimination for African American girls [39-41]. Moreover, even fewer explore how African American girls' perceived racial/ethnic discrimination influences their academic achievement using the comparison group of girls from other racial/ethnic groups.

Current Study
To address gaps in the literature, this study capitalized on a large sample of African American, Latinx, Asian, and white 7th grade girls to examine race/ethnic differences in mean levels and relationships between perceived racial/ethnic discrimination, teacher perceptions' of academic engagement and anti-social behavior, and academic achievement. There were three main research questions: (1) How do African American girls' perception of racial/ethnic discrimination, teacher ratings of engagement, and teachers' ratings of anti-social behavior affect African American girls' academic achievement? (2) How do African American girls' perception of racial/ethnic discrimination, teacher's ratings, and academic achievement compare to those of Latinx, Asian, and white girls?; and (3) Do African American girls' perception of racial/ethnic discrimination, teacher's ratings of student engagement, and teacher's ratings of anti-social behavior predict academic achievement the same for African American girls compared to Latinx, Asian, and white girls? Given previous research on the particular challenges that African American girls might face, we hypothesized that African American girls would be lower on academic achievement than the other racial/ethnic groups and would perceive more racial discrimination from teachers. Given stereotypes about African American girls, we also anticipated that teachers would perceive them as more anti-social. Regarding relationships among variables, we had no specific hypotheses about whether perceived discrimination and teacher beliefs would be a stronger predictor of achievement for African American girls compared to the other racial/ethnic groups.

Methods
Participants
The data for this study comes from the UCLA Middle School Diversity Project, an ongoing longitudinal study of 5,991 adolescent students recruited from 26 urban middle schools in California during the fall of their 6th grade year. For the purpose of this study, the analytic sample included 2,384 female students who self-reported their gender and race/ethnicity. Based upon these self-reports, the subsample consisted of 329 African American, 553 Asian, 959 Latinx, and 543 white girls.

Students were drawn from 26 urban middle schools in northern and southern California. Schools were selected to represent a range of ethnic compositions, including non-diverse schools (i.e., majority Latinx, majority African-American, majority Asian, and majority white) and ethnically diverse schools (i.e., no single ethnic group comprised a majority of the population). To avoid confounding ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) in school selection, the sample was restricted to lower-middle/ lower-SES (working class) communities. This was based on the percentage of

students receiving free/reduced lunch (our school-level proxy for SES) and census data (e.g., median income, number of males and females in the workforce) for the neighborhoods in which the selected schools were located.

Procedure
Students with both written parental consent and student assent completed confidential surveys during the spring semesters of seventh grade. Students were instructed to answer survey questions on their own as a trained research assistant read the survey items aloud. A second research assistant circulated around the classroom to help students as needed. Students were compensated $10 when they completed their survey. Teachers were also given a survey to complete for each student in their English class. Student surveys were collected as teachers completed them. Teachers were compensated $2 per survey completed.

Measures
The measures reported below were adapted from well-established instruments that are widely used with racially and ethnically divisive middle school students. Average mean and standard deviations across all four racial groups are shown in Table 2. Reliabilities reported below are consistent with those reported in the cited studies from which the measure was adapted.

Teacher ratings of student engagement
Teachers rated each student's engagement using six items from the Teacher Report of Engagement Questionnaire [42]. These items assessed the degree to which students were perceived as engaged (e.g., "Works hard in my class"; "Does more work than is required of him/her". Items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = "Never" to 4 = "Always") (α = .76) (M = 2.85) (SD = .137).

Teacher ratings of anti-social behavior
Teachers rated each student's anti-social behavior using two items from the Interpersonal Competence Scale [43]. Two items were used "always mean to others" and "always starting fights." Teachers were asked to rate their answer on a 7-point response scale ranging from (1 = "Never" to 7 = "Always") (α = .85) (M = 1.54) (SD = .032).

Racial/ethnic discrimination
Students reported on perceived discrimination from teachers Racial/ethnic discrimination using four items from the Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index, this measure assessed the frequency of race/ethnic discrimination by adults at school since the beginning of middle school [9]. (e.g., "Were you disciplined unfairly at school because of your race/ethnic group?", "Were you given a lower grade than you deserve because of your race/ethnic group?"). Items were rated on a 5-point response scale ranging from (1 = "Never" to 5 = "A Whole Lot") (α =. 81) (M = 1.20) (SD = .001).

Academic achievement
Academic achievement was defined using grade point average (GPA) from students' 7th grade transcripts. Grades for each course were coded on a 5-point scale (A = 4 to F= 0) and then averaged into a composite GPA.

Covariate

Parent education served as a proxy for student socioeconomic status (SES). Parents or guardians who signed the parent permission form also completed a parent questionnaire in which they indicated their highest level of education on a 6-point scale (1= "elementary/junior high school" to 6= "graduate degree") (M=3.78, SD=1.57).

Results

Prior to analysis, linearity, independence, homoscedasticity, and normality were tested, and all assumptions were met. Focusing first on African American girls, multiple regressions were used to examine the relationship between African American girls' perception of racial/ethnic discrimination, teachers' ratings of engagement, and teachers' ratings of anti-social behavior on African American girls' academic achievement. In Table 1, the analysis was significant F (3, 2312) = 207.3, p < .05, R^2 = .21 controlling for parent education. When African American girls perceived greater racial/ethnic discrimination, received lower teacher ratings of student engagement, and higher teacher ratings of anti-social behavior, this significantly predicted a lower GPA for them.

Table 1: Multiple Regression analysis for variables predicting academic achievement for African American girls

Variable	B	SE	P
Discrimination	-.132	*037*	-.070*
Student Engagement	.512	.032	.350*
Anti-Social Behavior	-.129	.020	-.143*
Parent Education	-.036	.011	-.063*

*p < .05.

Next, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated on African American girls' perception of racial/ethnic discrimination, teachers' ratings of student engagement, and teachers' ratings of anti-social behavior compared to these same ratings for Asian, Latinx, and white girls. The analysis was significant for racial/ethnic discrimination $F(4,2552)=19.24$; teachers' ratings of student engagement $F(4,2512)=53.34$; and teachers' ratings of anti-social behavior $F(4, 2494)=52.44$ (all ps < =.001 (see Table 2). In order to identify the significant group differences between these variables, post hoc Tukey tests were conducted. As hypothesized, African American girls (M=1.36) reported significantly more perceived racial/ethnic discrimination compared to Asians (M=1.14), Latinx (M=1.24), and white girls (M=1.09). For teachers' ratings of student engagement, there was a significant difference in which teachers rated student engagement lower for African American girls (M=2.61) compared to Asian (M=3.13), Latinx (M=2.74), and white girls (M=2.99). Teachers rated African American girls' behavior as more anti-social (M=2.13) compared to Asian (M=1.17), Latinx (M=1.58), and white girls (M=1.32). Lastly, African American girls had lower GPA's (M=2.66) compared to Asian (M=3.51) and white girls (M=3.38).

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Racial/Ethnic Discrimination, GPA, Teacher's Ratings Student Engagement, and Anti-Social Behavior

Variable	Black		Asian		Latinx		white		F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Discrimination	1.36[a]	.54	1.14[b]	.38	1.24[b]	.48	1.09[b]	.35	19.24***
Engagement	2.61[a]	.59	3.13[b]	.53	2.74[b]	.59	2.99[b]	.57	53.31***
Behavior	2.13[a]	1.4	1.17[b]	.46	1.58[b]	.98	1.32[b]	.71	52.44***
GPA	2.66[a]	1.0	3.51[b]	.69	2.77[a]	.89	3.38[b]	.72	95.74***

Note: Row means with different superscripts differ significantly p<.05.
***p < .001.

A linear regression tested whether teachers' ratings of student engagement predicted academic achievement the same for African American girls compared to Asian, Latinx, and white girls. A significant interaction was found between GPA and teachers' ratings of student engagement for white (B=-.277, SE=.102, p<.05), Latinx (B=-.277, SE=.093, p<.05), and Asian girls (B=-.495, SE=.107, p<.05) using African American girls as the reference group (see Table 3). The top panel shows the data for African American and Asian girls. The second panel shows the data for African American and white girls, and the third panel shows the data for African American and Latinx girls. Simple slope analysis was done and found a significant difference for African American girls compared to white, Latinx, and Asian girls, suggesting that low teacher perceived engagement is related to lower achievement for African American girls more so than for white Latinx, and Asian girls. This interaction is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis for Teachers' Ratings of Student Engagement Predicting Academic Achievement

Girl Participants	B	SE	P
white	-.277	.102	.007*
Latinx	-.277	.093	.003*
Asian	-.495	.107	.000*
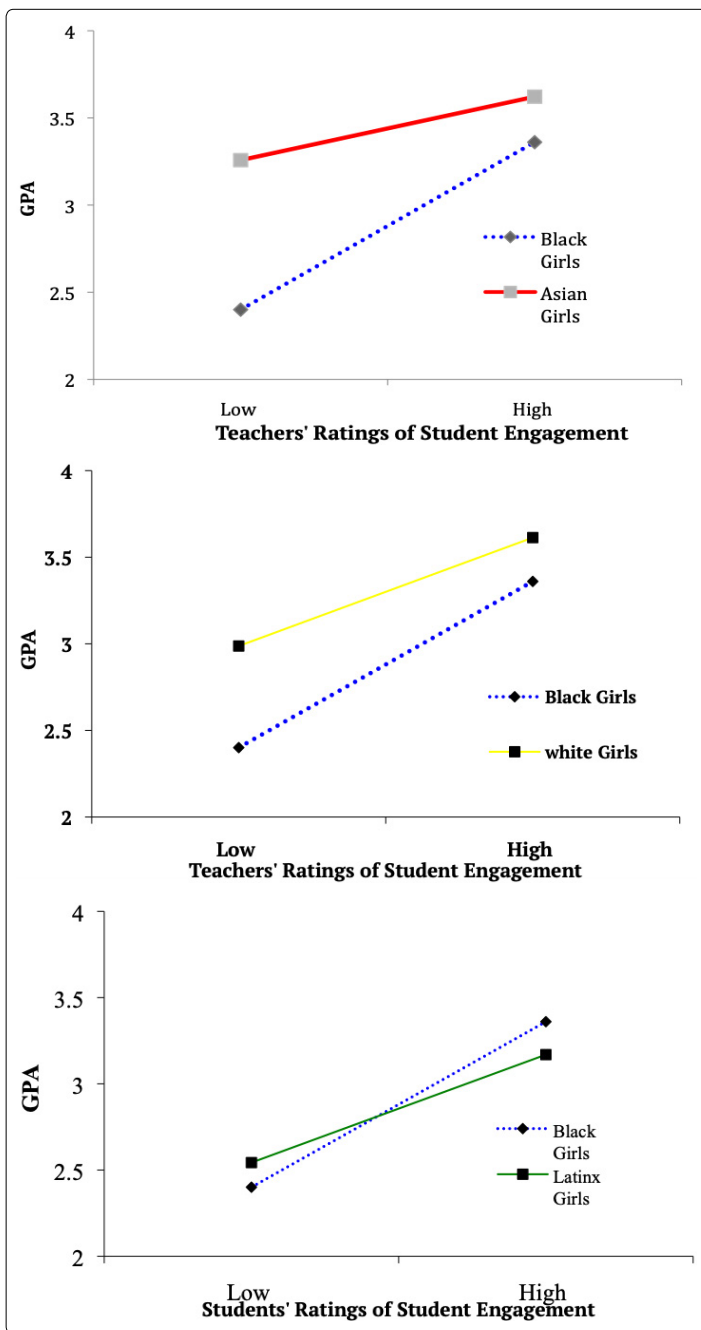
Figure 1: The Moderating Effect of Ethnicity on the Relationship Between Teacher's Ratings of Student Engagement and GPA

Discussion

Using intersectionality as a framework to explore the school experiences of African American girls reveals that they, as the literature suggests, are not doing well academically. The reason for their lower academic achievement may stem in part from having teachers who perceive them as anti-social and not academically engaged. This study also supports the previous literature documenting that African American girls are experiencing higher levels of racial/ethnic discrimination at school compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups. Based upon the measures used in this study, African American girls feel that they are

disciplined unfairly at school that adults do not view them as smart, and that adults at their school disrespect them because of their race/ethnic group. Other studies report that African American girls are reprimanded due to violations of dress codes and inappropriate hairstyles [2, 36, 44].

All of the measures used in this study suggest that African American 7th grade girls experienced school differently than their white Asian, and Latinx female peers. African American girls perceived more racial/ethnic discrimination than the other three groups. They were also perceived by teachers as meaner to others, more willing to start fights, and less academically engaged within the classroom. In addition, African American girls' GPA was lower than white, Asian, and Latinx girls. These findings reveal the harsh disparities that African American girls are facing within the school setting. In order to address these concerns, future studies should explore teachers' perceptions of their students and how engaged are African American girls in the classroom. The results suggest that if teachers view their African American girl students to be engaged within the classroom, this could lead to higher GPAs for them since we know from other studies that school engagement and academic achievement are correlated in African American girls [45,46]. Future studies should also examine how racial and gender stereotypes shape teachers' perspectives and if this influences how they treat their African American girl students compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups.

Limitations

There are a few limitations in this study that we acknowledge. First, the teacher reported measures in this study, such as teachers' ratings of student engagement and anti-social behavior, were not designed to measure teachers' discriminatory beliefs or behavior. Therefore, we exercise caution in interpreting their perceptions as indicative of bias. Second, previous research has shown that the race of a teacher matters because it can influence a student's academic achievement [47]. However, the ethnic make-up of the teachers from the sample was available and did not allow for inferences about a teachers' race in alignment with the findings. Third, the data analysis involved multiple regression and ANOVA, which did not account for school differences. In the future, multi-level modeling would be better suited to address school differences amongst the 26 urban middle schools surveyed.

Implications

In order to combat educational disparities that African American girls are facing, it is imperative to identify protective factors that can decrease perceptions of racial/ethnic discrimination for them. Wong et al. found that an increased racial/ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor for African American girls [48]. When African American girls have positive views of their racial group, this often is correlated with higher self-esteem, fewer psychological symptoms, and higher achievement [49, 50].

Several culturally relevant interventions shed light on ways schools can increase racial identity for African American girls. *Sisters of Nia* is one of those interventions that focus on teaching

5th grade African American girls about their cultural values and beliefs in order to increase their racial identity [51]. By the end of the program, African American girls had built strong connections with other members within the group, and positive behavior change was reported for all participants [26]. Jernigan [52] implemented a mentoring intervention called *Sankofa* to help African American girls to increase racial and gender identity. Results indicated an increase in school engagement and an understanding of the importance of school and an increase in positive regard for teachers. Lastly, *Young Empowered Sisters* (YES) is an intervention developed to promote a strong identity for African American girls, to provide a safe and supportive space, and to raise awareness about racism. Approximately 74 African American high school girls were involved with this study. After ten weeks, the girls who received the intervention had higher levels of racial/ethnic identity and were more knowledgeable about instances of racism [53].

For change to occur within the school setting, key stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, counselors, and members of the community must be included in the conversation. Key stakeholders must be knowledgeable about the welfare of African American girls in the school setting. They also must be invested in their success and be an active participant. Training on identifying implicit biases and how to address them must be developed [2]. This training also needs to be accessible and attended by all key stakeholders, not just teachers. More conversations about African American girls compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups must take place, replacing the narrative that African American girls are doing well [36]. In order to do this, research should be collected disaggregating data by race and gender [31]. Previous studies should be revisited, reviewed, and analyzed using an intersectional approach to include African American girls in the conversation.

The findings increase awareness about African American girls who are marginalized and are often an invisible group [14]. In 2019, it was reported that African American females were completing college at lower rates, compared to white, Latinx, and Asian girls [54]. Therefore, continuing to understand more about how racial/ethnic discrimination and perceived teacher bias impede academic success for middle school African American girls is essential. Not only is it essential for African American girls' academic success, but it could also mitigate some of the educational disparities they face along their academic journey [55].

Acknowledgment

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