"Why Are You Here?": Black Students' Perceptions of the Achievement and Discipline Gap in a Predominantly White Urban-Suburban High School

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Abstract: *Though significant gains have been made in academic achievement in the last 45 years, these gains have not been realized for all students in the United States. Consistently, research has shown significant differences in reading and math scores along with disparate disciplinary sanctions between Black and White students. Using grounded theory methodology, this study aimed to understand factors that, through students' voices, they believed contributed to their lower academic achievement and disproportionately higher disciplinary sanctions while attending a predominantly White school. Data analysis revealed that a sense of belonging affected Black students academically and contributed to disciplinary sanctions resulting from disgruntled reactions toward teachers, administrators, and staff who they believed did not want them in the Crest Academy High School (i.e., Grades 9–12). A lack of belonging had four primary components: an unwelcoming environment, lack of mattering, racial insensitivity, and not seeing themselves reflected. This study illuminated the importance of belonging among Black students. Culturally responsive educational practices have the potential to create a welcoming environment, generate feelings of mattering, saturate school culture with racial sensitivity, allow each student to see themselves reflected, and ultimately provide children with opportunities to feel a sense of belongingness in their schools and communities.*

Keywords*: Belonging; Black students; academic achievement*

Though significant gains have been made in academic achievement in the last 45 years, these gains have not been realized for all students in the United States (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). Consistently, research has shown significant academic-related differences and disparate disciplinary sanctions between Black and White students (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). According to the Children's Defense Fund's (CDF, 2023) *State of America's Children Annual Report-Education*, Black children often enter school behind their wealthier, White counterparts. Black children tend to have lower test scores, are given lower grades, and have higher failure and dropout rates than all other student groups (Johnson, 2018).

More than 79% of Black children, compared to less than 60% of White children, were not proficient in reading or math in 2019 (CDF, 2021). Black children are less likely to be recommended or enrolled in honors or advanced placement classes (Darling-Hammond,

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2010; Johnson, 2018). In the 2017-2018 school year, 19% of Black students did not graduate on time, compared with 11% of White students (CDF, 2021). Black students are less likely to apply and be accepted to competitive 4-year colleges (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Johnson, 2018). Finally, suspension rates for Black students are 2-4 times that for White students (Chu & Ready, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010; Huang, 2018). Although education is supposed to be the great equalizer (Hung et al., 2020), Johnson (2018) noted, "Our national data on the academic achievement of African American students is telling us that African American students are being eaten alive…in our nation's schools" (Johnson, 2018, p. 35).

This study explored the factors that Black students attending an urban-suburban high school identified as affecting their academic experience, contributing to lower academic achievement, and leading to disproportionately higher disciplinary sanctions. The literature review will examine previous research that identifies micro, mezzo, and macro factors that influence academic achievement. Finally, we highlight four factors (i.e., unwelcoming environment, lack of mattering, racial insensitivity, and not seeing yourself reflected) that created a lack of belonging among Black high school students.

Literature Review

There are myriad explanations for the significant differences in achievement and discipline between Black and White students (Gregory et al., 2010; Sulé et al., 2018). Many studies have identified factors at the micro (i.e., individual), mezzo (i.e., family and school), and macro (i.e., community) levels that contribute to the differential rate of achievement and disciplinary sanctions between Black and White students.

Micro Level Factors: Student Related

Studies have identified student-related factors, including student behaviors relating to their academic performance, student effort, parent-child discussions, interpersonal relationships, and extracurricular activities (Assari et al., 2021; Rowley & Wright, 2011). High frustration and low self-confidence in students also contribute to lower academic achievement (Martin et al., 2007; Miles & Stipek, 2006). Rowley and Wright (2011) suggested lower self-confidence and self-esteem with respect to their studies may stem from Black students spending less time on homework than White students. Tus (2020) reports that "self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are significant determinants of the students' academic performance" (p. 56).

Additionally, Black men and special education students have higher rates of suspension than any other group of students (Chu & Ready, 2018; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Skiba et al., 1997). Chu and Ready (2018) found that Black students comprised more than half of the suspensions despite being less than one-third of the sample. Skiba et al. (2011) shared that Black students are more likely to be expelled or receive out-of-school suspensions for the same infractions as White students. Owen and McLanahan (2020) found that "Black children are four times more likely than White children to report having ever been suspended or expelled by age 9 (28% of Black children as compared to 7% of White

children)" (p. 1563). According to Chu and Ready (2018), "Suspended students had weaker attendance, course completion rates, and standardized test scores; were more likely to drop out; and were less likely to graduate within 4, 5, or 6 years" (p. 479).

Mezzo Level Factors: Family, Peer, and School Related

In terms of family-related factors, studies have reported that students who come from families with low socioeconomic status are more likely to struggle academically because these households tend to have fewer resources; often, parents may be unable to be as involved in helping with homework and other school-related activities as other parents due to demanding work schedules in low-wage jobs (Assari et al., 2021; Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Gregory et al., 2010; Rowley & Wright, 2011). Students from families of low socioeconomic status are also more likely to attend schools with lower-quality resources and facilities and higher teacher turnover rates with a lower quality teacher. However, Black students are at a higher risk of suspension in more richly resourced suburban schools than White students (Gregory et al., 2010). Finally, Assari et al. (2021) found parents' educational attainment was related to academic achievement, with higher educational attainment correlated with higher math and reading scores.

As for peer-related factors, students' peer groups often played a role in dropout rates and lower academic achievement. For example, students with friends who dropped out of high school were at a higher risk of dropping out, while those who were achieving academically may have felt the need to hide their academic achievements to fit in with peers (Rowley & Wright, 2011). Victimization by peers was also related to lower academic achievement (Wang et al., 2014). Additionally, Ngui et al. (2024) found that racial microaggressions, such as using the "N" word, were harmful and stress-inducing experiences that impacted Black students' mental well-being, academic achievement, and engagement.

In terms of school-level factors, several factors contribute to the achievement gap, including lack of access to resources like technology-assisted instruction, less-qualified teachers, lack of feelings of safety at school, and the lack of rigor in school curriculum (Barton, 2003). Staff members' implicit biases, perceptions, and low expectations of students also contribute to the differences in achievement rates (Card & Giuliano, 2016). Studies have found that school and district racial climates, particularly in recently desegregated schools, contribute to the achievement gap (Rowley & Wright, 2011; Wang et al., 2014). Black students' willingness to question classroom practices or challenge teachers' authority has led to disproportionate discipline up to and including suspension (Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Skiba et al., 2012). Moreover, relationships with Black students were an important factor that contributed to academic achievement. Baker et al. (2008) found that failing to establish positive relationships with Black students affected their ability to engage fully in the educational process.

Macro Level Factors: Community and Systems Related

Students living in impoverished neighborhoods are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources (Reardon et al., 2019). Because schools are still primarily funded by property taxes (Smith & Campbell, 2022; Wen et al., 2020), schools in resource-poor communities often have lower achievement and wider opportunity gaps than higher-resourced communities. Moreover, many schools in poor communities also have higher exposure to violence, which may necessitate that students prove they are tough. Some researchers have indicated students needing to prove they are tough may partly explain the disproportionate disciplinary outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Rowley & Wright, 2011).

Structural racism also plays a role in the achievement gap. Merolla and Jackson (2019) found structural racism is the fundamental cause of the achievement gap. Systems have historically and continually privileged White students and disadvantaged Black students. Other systems intersecting with the educational system have impacted achievement rates. For example, according to Barton (2003), health-related factors such as higher rates of low birth weight, higher rates of lead poisoning, and poor health and nutrition among Black students are contributing factors to the differential achievement of students. According to Ladson-Billings (2006), addressing structural inequalities stemming from discrimination and racism is critical to addressing the achievement gap.

Gaps in Literature

A great deal of studies have identified student, peer, family, community, and structural factors that contribute to the achievement gap. Understanding what Black students believe affects their ability to excel in school is necessary. A dearth of empirical studies has privileged Black students' perceptions of school-based factors that influence their academic achievement. Hearing from Black students about their experiences interacting with school personnel, navigating the curriculum, engaging in extracurricular activities, and attending schools in predominantly White communities is critical to addressing the problem. The research question guiding this study was: What factors influence academic achievement among Black students attending an urban-suburban, predominantly White high school?

Methods

This study used grounded theory, which is used to develop a broad conceptual theory to explain a phenomenon, process, action, or interaction (Oktay, 2012). Grounded theory is used to construct a theory emerging from data to highlight participants' experiences and generate, inform, extend, expand, and refine knowledge in various fields (Charmaz, 2014; Gilgun, 1994; Orlikowski, 1993). Grounded theory methodology is ideal with theory-to-practice gaps, particularly related to processes or actions (Oktay, 2012; Orlikowski, 1993). Filling a major theory-to-practice gap, this study identified theoretical concepts that operationalize a sense of belonging. Given the overall goal of this study, a grounded theory approach was appropriate because it gives voice to the voiceless by privileging the

participants' experiences, placing value on their experiences, and including them in the process to ensure the theory accurately captures their experience (Oktay, 2012).

Sample

The Crest community (pseudonym) is the first suburb north of a large midwestern city. Crest is self-described as an urban-suburban village with a European flair. The community is known for its liberal arts education. The school district in the Crest community serves around 2,000 students annually spread across its four schools: two primary schools (Grades K-6), one junior high school (Grades 7 and 8 primary), and one high school (i.e., Grades 9-12). The school district is ranked among the top public schools in the state, with almost 90% of its students going to colleges and universities across the country after graduation.

This study used a criterion sample, a type of purposive sample. To participate in this study, students had to be Black, attend Crest Academy High School (i.e., Grades 9-12), have parental consent (if under 18 years old), and voluntarily agree to participate in the study. Table 1 contains the study participants' demographics. The entire sample reported being Black, but 23% reported being multiracial, and 8% reported Hispanic ethnicity. Of the 38 students, 60.5% were female students, and 39.5% were male students. The mean age of the sample was 16 years old, with students ranging from 15-18 years old. Over half (52.6%) lived with both parents, 44.7% lived with their mothers, and less than 3% lived with their fathers only or in foster care.

Study Participant Demographics

Table 1. *Student Demographic Characteristics (n=38)*

Demographic Characteristics	**n (%)**
Gender	
Female	23 (60.5%)
Male	15 (39.5%)
Age in years (Mean = 16.2)	
15	10 (26.3%)
16	13 (34.2%)
17	12 (31.6%)
18	3 (7.9%)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	26 (68.4%)
Black & Hispanic ethnicity	4 (10.5%)
Multi-racial	8 (21.1%)
School Attended	
Crest Academy High School (Grades 9-12)	38 (100%)
Family Structure: Lived with…	
Both parents	20 (52.6%)
Mother	17 (44.7%)
Father only or foster care	1 (2.6%)

Recruitment

Students were recruited for the study using a flyer mailed to the homes of all Black students who attended Crest Academy High School. School staff collected consent forms after they were completed. Focus group sessions were scheduled once five or more students submitted consent forms. The sessions were held in an available room or classroom, and the only Black counselor working at the high school identified them. All focus groups were held over the lunch period, as this period was identified by the superintendent as the least disruptive time. The research team gave a brief overview of the study and answered any questions before each focus group started. All focus group interviews were conducted in person, audiotaped using a digital recorder, and professionally transcribed. The sessions lasted 45-60 minutes. Students received a $20 Walmart gift card, and we ordered pizza for their participation. All study protocols were approved by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which oversees research with human subjects. Study protocols consisted of a complete explanation of the study, consent forms, recruitment materials, and interview guides.

Data Collection Methods

Focus groups were used for three primary reasons. Focus groups are an efficient way of collecting a lot of information on perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes in a short time (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). The research team could only meet with students during their lunch periods because many students had practice or school-related commitments before and after school. Some issues are better suited for group dialogue as they tend to create rich information and insights, which may be triggered by something someone else says (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). Finally, researchers can pick up on nuances, competing perspectives, and conflicting tensions, which may be more difficult to obtain in individual interviews.

There were eight focus groups conducted. Three focus groups were with grades 7-8 primary school students, and five were with high school students. The findings of this manuscript focus on the high school student participants. In the focus groups, students were asked to reflect on their experiences at Crest Academy High School and how these experiences impacted their educational experiences. An approved (IRB) list of a priori interview questions was used; however, each focus group differed slightly because participants highlighted the issues and concerns they deemed relevant based on the subject matter.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the focus group interviews included the following steps. The first step involved taking memos or notes about early impressions and possible topics participants raised in subsequent interviews were noted. Keeping memos is a technique that documents early analytic reflections, examines data from multiple vantage points, links the data conceptually, and identifies potential new insights to incorporate into subsequent interviews (Qureshi & Unlu, 2020). Second, researchers reviewed transcripts to begin to

generate codes. According to Charmaz (2014), "coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain the data" (p. 113). Next, similar codes were combined to develop categories using the constant comparison method (Birks & Mills, 2015). Linkages made between categories included looking for relationships between the data and following hunches against the data. Finally, theoretical coding—a continuous process of refining hypotheses until a theory reflective of the data is developed—was used to establish connections between categories of codes (Charmaz, 2014).

All research team members identified as persons of color and had either gone through the U.S. educational system or had offspring who had gone through the U.S. educational system. This situatedness provided a sense of safety for the youth in the focus groups, allowing them to see themselves reflected in the research team. Although the students were not previously known to the research team, the identification of the research team members as people of color provided a sense of understanding and perspective that may not have been otherwise available to nonpersons of color in research settings with students of color.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Two strategies—triangulation and member checking—were used to increase the rigor and trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 2008). Triangulation, which uses two or more ways to obtain a complete picture of the topic of interest, provides a more robust substantiation of constructs and hypotheses (Padgett, 2008). In this study, triangulation consisted of multiple researchers from different disciplines (i.e., social work, public health, and education) gathering data, conducting interviews, and analyzing data (Denzin, 1978). Triangulation challenges researchers to analyze data from various perspectives and look for plausible reasons for discrepancies (Padgett, 2008). The second strategy to increase rigor included member checking. We presented the overall findings to a subset of students who participated in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The subset of students reported that the data presented accurately reflected their experience and encouraged us to share the findings with the school board and parents. The research team members' identities as persons of color provided insider perspectives, which may have increased bias in data analysis and rigor; however, member checking decreased the risk of bias in data analysis and ensured the perspectives and words of the youth were centered in the research.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors Black students attending an urban-suburban high school identified as contributing to lower academic achievement and disproportionately higher disciplinary sanctions. Data analysis revealed four prevailing experiences Black students attributed to having lower academic achievement and higher disciplinary sanctions: unwelcoming environment, lack of mattering, racial insensitivity, and not seeing themselves reflected.

Table 2 illustrates key themes related to Black students' experiences within Crestview High School, highlighting feelings of exclusion, lack of significance, and cultural dissonance. Each theme is paired with representative examples that capture the types of statements or attitudes encountered by Black students, illustrating the unwelcoming environment, racial insensitivity, and challenges of motivation when students do not see themselves reflected. This table underscores the impact of these themes on Black students' sense of belonging and identity within the school environment.

Table 2. *Themes and Examples*

Theme	Example
Unwelcoming environment	"Why are you here?"
Lack of mattering	"Go! Get out. Go to the office!"
Racial insensitivity	"You should reconsider how you feel about the Confederate flag"
Not seeing themselves reflected	"It takes a lot to be motivated when you don't see yourself"

Unwelcoming Environment — "Why are you Here?"

An unwelcoming environment was described by Black students as not feeling like they belonged, even though many of them have grown up in the Crest community all or most of their lives. Amara confirmed this sentiment by saying,

> *I feel like a guest in this school versus it being my school. I even feel like that, and I have lived in Crest most of my life…I'm still looked at differently regardless because they don't know where we're coming from. They assume that we come from somewhere else, that's not here.*

Amara's quote highlighted the fact that no matter what Black students did, they always felt like outsiders. Amara had grown up in this community, which meant that this school was just as much her school as any other student. Yet, many Black students did not feel that way.

Crest Academy High School is patterned after a college environment. It is an open campus where students can come and go based on their class schedules. Students who live in the community can go home or visit local establishments for lunch or during their free periods. However, many Black students noted that leaving school was not an option, particularly if they did not live in the Crest community because the community was not a welcoming environment. According to Kellan, a male:

> *When you have open periods, sometimes, you know, you think twice about whether or not you wanna go out, because, you know, you don't wanna deal with being stopped [by the police], stares or made to feel of "Why are you here?"*

Students described encountering the police frequently or experiencing racism in nearby stores. Abena, a biracial high school student, indicated her experiences of harassment were dependent on whether she was with her Black or White friends. She stated:

> *Because I'm mixed. I just blend in with my white friends. But, if I'm walking with Jabari, Kellan, and Kwame, we get stopped by the police...and they ask us what*

we are doing and where we are going. It's like Crest police really don't have anything better to do than harass Black students.

Many Black students described experiences of being racially profiled by community members as well. Haji, a male high school student, confirmed feeling unwelcomed by Crest residents. In reference to the Crest community, he stated: "There have been instances where friends of mine and I are walking down the street, and a lady calls the cops on us because we looked suspicious." The students also discussed incidents in school that made them feel unwelcome. Amina, a female high school student, shared: "My hand can be raised, and I can be the only person raising my hand, and the teacher will be like, 'Anyone else?' She'll go to another problem." Unwelcoming behavior also involved teachers not getting to know their Black students personally. Black students felt the onus for a relationship was on them. Abdullah, a male high school student, remarked, "I think they should stop this one-sided approach...I notice that—like a lot of teachers won't try to get personal with their Black students."

Students identified a variety of things that made them feel unwelcome in the school and surrounding community, such as the inability to move freely in the community without being stopped and harassed by the police, having the police called because of their mere presence, and being asked to leave stores. The teachers also contributed to creating an unwelcoming environment by (a) not calling on the Black students despite their hands being raised and (b) not trying to develop a relationship with them in the same ways they did with White students. The behaviors exhibited by school personnel contributed largely to the students feeling unwelcome in this school, which impacted their school experiences.

Lack of Mattering — "Go! Get Out. Go To the Office!"

Mattering is the extent to which individuals believe their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are important and listened to by authority figures (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Black students described several instances when administrators and teachers treated them disrespectfully, did not listen to them, and disregarded their feelings or what they had to say. Jamilia explained how Black students believe teachers looked for any excuse to send Black students to the office. They noted that teachers often refused to listen or allow them to explain themselves. If they tried to ask questions or defend themselves, they were seen as being disrespectful and sent to the office. Once in the office, administrators also tended not to let them explain themselves. Jamila stated:

The teacher just assumes, "You were doing something bad! They say, go! Get out. Go to the office. I don't care." And then when you get to the office, you don't get to explain why you're out of class…I have never seen them treat White students that way. They get to explain themselves. They even talk crazy to them, and nothing happens to them.

Teachers and administrators had no tolerance for what they perceived as disrespect by Black students, even though they tended to view the same behaviors by White students differently and often overlooked their behavior.

According to the participants, teachers and administrators would only listen to the Black students if their parents came to school and demanded administrators listen to their children. Rashid said,

> "I was about to get suspended, but I didn't get to tell my side of the story. My dad came in, he said, 'You're gonna listen to my son, and you're gonna listen to what he has to say.' I didn't get suspended. But why does my dad have to come up here to get respect?"

Since this incident happened, Rashid indicated he ensures he gets respect.

Other ways Black students felt they did not matter were related to the lack of support they received from the school. Diallo, Taraji, Femi, and Zuri discussed how the school supports White activities and programs but often fails to provide the same level of support to Black activities and programs. They said:

> *We had a Black History Month program that was terrible. It just didn't go well. All of a sudden, the lights stopped working as soon as we got on stage. I was performing, and then my microphone didn't work…The school did not let us rehearse during school hours. They provided no tech support. Students were allowed to be on their phones and not paying attention. But White organized activities are not like that. They are so professional, they get time to rehearse during school, and everybody must pay attention…It feels like the stuff that is important to us does not matter.*

Black History Month events were not the only time Black students felt unsupported or like things that affected them did not matter. For example, during the height of police shootings of Black people in 2020, the school did not acknowledge nor ask the school community to pause for a moment of silence once. Zane, Lulu, Asha, and Haji recalled how the school reacted to the mass school shooting in Florida. Zane shared:

> *You know how we did the walkout for the school shootings. I feel like we should do walkouts when a Black guy or person gets shot by the police. I feel like we should be able to, like, protest that stuff too…I feel like that was unfair. How come we can acknowledge one and not the other?*

Black students did not feel that the school acknowledged public events that affected them or downplayed these incidents, but they felt events for White students were acknowledged and celebrated. There were many instances that made the Black students feel like they did not matter. Black students described instances when their events were not supported in the same way as the white-initiated events.

Racial Insensitivity — "You Should Reconsider How You Feel About the Confederate Flag"

According to Laszloffy and Hardy (2000), racial sensitivity is a step beyond awareness in that it requires individuals to try and imagine what it is like to be someone else and understand how race and racism shape reality for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. Many Black students described instances where teachers and

administrators lacked racial sensitivity. Some Black students identified experiences of explicit bias when teachers and staff were blatantly racist or discriminatory. Zoya described what happened when a teacher taught a unit on slavery and said:

> *We had a discussion about the Confederate flag of which I'm very much against. She said, I think you should reconsider your position. She gave me three articles—laminated articles—of why the confederate flag is important and why it's a symbol of heritage and all that. I should have spoken up, but I don't like being controversial with my teachers.*

The blatant racism did not just come from teachers but also from staff. Jabari, a male high school student, remarked how a staff member called the police on him as he waited for his mother to pick him up. He stated:

> *After a game, I was waiting on my mom. I was one of the last people to get picked up. It was cold outside…The janitor was like, "Can you please leave?" I told him, "My coach said it's okay for me to stay." He actually called the police on me for waiting on my mom in the hallway…As my mom and I were pulling off, three cop cars actually showed up.*

Black students also described more subtle or indirect experiences of racism. Lehana, a biracial student, said: "I am very smart. Teachers make assumptions that I must have cheated when they see my Black dad. But when they see my mom, they assume I got my brilliance from my mom because she is White." Hadiza also described a similar experience. She shared:

> *Well, I get told by a lot of teachers that tell me I talk very educated. That's basically telling me, "I expected you not to talk that way. I expected you to talk like a Black person." Like, that's basically what they're saying when they're like, "Oh, well, you talk very educated!" So, I feel their expectations are not for me to sound very smart or whatever.*

Many Black students felt teachers made assumptions about their intelligence based on their race. Kofi, a male high school student, described an experience with a teacher who insisted on "helping" his friend Kendi despite a lack of indication or need for help. Kofi stated:

> *She struck me as a little racist because she asked Kendi if she could help him with his homework. She's like, "Let me see what you're doing, just in case you need help." He got out his English book and he was gonna fill out his vocabulary* words *or whatever. He put his book away…She said, "Come out in the hallway with me." … All you could hear is him saying, "I didn't ask for your help." She sent him to the office. She does that a lot.*

The Black students expressed that these racist incidents made them feel disrespected, frustrated, and angry, often resulting in being sent to the office and suspended. They described the toll constantly having to deal with differential treatment, racism, and implicit and explicit bias had on them. Binta expressed that the racism and microaggressions she

felt limited her ability to excel in school. Additionally, Binta did not feel there was any place she could go in school to feel safe. She said:

> *I feel like Abena, and I experience it every day, and it makes me not wanna come back to class. But it's like—I don't have anywhere else to go...there really is no safe place in the school."*

This lack of safety contributed to the anger Black students felt toward the injustices they endured consistently, which often contributed to increased suspensions among Black students.

Not Seeing Themselves Reflected — "It Takes a Lot to Be Motivated When You Don't See Yourself"

Seeing oneself reflected involves seeing some representation of who they are and the culture from which they come in their environment. Seeing oneself reflected in their environment can include a variety of ways that influence individuals' experiences, such as pictures on the walls and artwork by people of color, ensuring the presence of administrators, teachers, and staff of color, reflective curriculum, library books, and school practices. Many Black students strongly desired to have at least one Black teacher or teacher of color. Azibo stated:

> *I've never had a Black teacher. I think that's like so messed up, because like we can do a lot more than people think we can……I don't think a lot of Black students have motivation, and it takes a lot to be motivated when you don't see yourself in the environment. All you see is just like white people.*

According to participants, the curriculum was also woefully inadequate and did not reflect the rich history of Black people or other people of color. Black people often were either excluded, superficially covered, or shown in a negative, racist light. Abena remarked, "our textbooks do not include anything about Black history in general. It's the same story over and over in textbooks. Like George Washington Carver, that's it...we should be learning about more than American (White) history."

Kwame talked about how a mural created by Black students was destroyed. The school chose to take the mural down and thought it was best not to replace it. Additionally, the students identified several examples where teachers and staff were oblivious to issues of race. For example, all the Black students were cast as animals in a school play. High school students Kalifa, Taj, and Kasim stated:

> *There have just been like many issues with race…I asked him [The Director] if we could change a part in the play about feeding monkeys. Most of the Black people were monkeys, and the White people were like throwing food. So, I brought it to his attention. He's like, "Yeah, okay, we'll see. I'll think about it." Yet, a White girl said that something in the play was sexist, and he literally changed it like on the spot. She's like, "I don't like that—" changed it on the spot, but I had to write a whole email, I had to bring my mom in, all type of stuff just so you could change the word monkey to crab.*

The next year, there was another incident with the school play where the "N-word" was used, and the school decided to move forward with the play. They met with some Black students and asked if they were comfortable with the use of the N-word. Even though students were uncomfortable, they ran the play because of all the hard work and time White students put into preparing for their roles. Instead of canceling the play, the school shortened the time the play would run and offered a talk-back discussion after the first night to discuss the implications of using the "N-word."

Students not seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, having experiences with school plays in which all Black students were cast as animals, and never having a Black teacher were just some of the experiences identified where Black students did not see themselves reflected in their school environment.

Discussion

Black students identified four prevailing experiences as contributing to their lower academic performance and disproportionately higher disciplinary sanctions: unwelcoming environment, lack of mattering, racial insensitivity, and not seeing themselves reflected in the environment. These four factors were components of a sense of belonging. Belonging is defined as "the extent to which students feel that they are personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61). Black students felt like they were allowed to attend Crest Academy High School, but the school failed to make them feel a sense of belonging or as included, important and vital parts of the school; instead, they were made to feel like interlopers and inconsequential to their White counterparts.

Unwelcoming Environment

An unwelcoming environment in this study pertained to the racial profiling Black students described encountering in the broader Crest community. Including the surrounding community as an extension of the school is an important study contribution because there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the communities where schools are located and the ways these communities might influence academic achievement and a sense of belonging among students. Additionally, Black students felt like their teachers were not interested in getting to know them personally, and failing to call on them when their hands were raised negatively affected their relationships with school personnel and overall academic achievement, and contributed to them feeling like they did not belong. Baker et al. (2008) found that Black students need positive relationships with their teachers and school personnel to engage fully and flourish in educational environments.

Lack of Mattering

A lack of mattering was the second component that Black students identified as contributing to lower academic achievement and higher discipline rates. Mattering is defined as "the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego extension exercises a powerful influence on our

actions" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165). Many Black students felt they did not matter to administrators and teachers because they were treated differently than White students. Black students were sent to the office and suspended, whereas nothing happened to White students for the same behavior. Skiba et al. (2011) and Owens and McLanahan (2020) confirmed these results, finding Black students were disproportionately referred to the office more than any other group of students. Overusing disciplinary action against Black children appears rooted in discrimination along the disciplinary process. A lack of mattering also included students being treated disrespectfully because they were not listened to unless their parents intervened. Participants also reported a lack of support and acknowledgment regarding what mattered to them. Mattering is an important part of belonging and contributes to academic achievement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006; Bjorklund-Young & Plasman, 2020; MacNeil et al., 2009; Tucker et al., 2010). Tucker et al. (2010) found that when Black male students felt valued and were given support at school, they succeeded in significant ways. According to Okello and Stewart (2021), showing Black students that they matter is humanizing, liberating, and life-giving for those students.

Racial Insensitivity

Black students described implicit and explicit racist experiences and comments made by school personnel. For example, Josiah, a Black student, said,

> *I'm all for you being who you want to be and all that stuff, but before you decide to address LGBTQ students' safety, I just feel like you should address the racial issues. They made an announcement saying in every school 45 percent of LGBT people don't feel comfortable-are being bullied. What about Black students? Never once have they addressed the fact that many Black students don't feel comfortable in this school. White people will bring attention to a situation that applies to them before they look at a situation that just applies to us.*

Students also described remarks about their intelligence and academic ability based on their race. Additionally, Black students were given material to read that they felt was racist or racially insensitive. These kinds of interactions have been found to adversely affect Black students' educational experiences and contribute to a lack of belonging (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Racial insensitivity also included Black students being singularly and exclusively cast as animals in a school play and other racially insensitive experiences (e.g., being asked to tell the class what it was like to be on welfare and how welfare works, as the educator presumed all Black people were or had been on welfare). Similar racially insensitive racial epithets by peers have also adversely impacted Black students' educational experience (Ngui et al., 2024).

When Black students became frustrated, upset, or challenged these racist beliefs and interactions, they often were considered disrespectful and sent to the office. Skiba et al. (1997) similarly found that Black students were disproportionately sent to the office and suspended for noncompliance, defiance, and what teachers perceived as disrespect. A similar finding was more recently confirmed by Welsh and Little (2018), who reported, "Black students are disciplined more irrespective of behaviors, and the vast majority of disciplinary infractions for which students receive a disciplinary consequence are

subjective" (p. 780). A no-tolerance stance tended to be taken with the Black students, whereas White students routinely refused to comply with requests and "talked back" to teachers, staff, and administrators with little to no consequences. Moreover, White students often were allowed to explain themselves and were given the benefit of the doubt. This differential treatment reportedly angered Black students, sometimes to the point of wanting to lash out. Kwame reported being so mad that he wanted to turn over their desks. These experiences also affected Black students' desire and ability to excel in the classroom with teachers and administrators they deemed as racist or, at the very least, felt they did not care about them.

Not Seeing Themselves Reflected in the School Environment

Finally, findings suggested that Black students did not see themselves reflected at school, whether such representation included the art on the wall, the curriculum, the vantage point from which topics were discussed, critical events recognized, and interactions with administrators, teachers, and staff of color. Failing to see themselves reflected in a place where Black students spent a significant amount of time negatively impacted their desires to achieve and contributed to a lack of belonging.

Whether students described the larger community, curriculum, or interactions with administrators, teachers, and staff, all factors contributed to and reinforced a lack of belonging, influencing Black students' academic achievement. Abena noted:

> *I was in 8th grade and a teacher went around—it was science, and she was trying to figure out who should go into Bio (AP) or Physical Science (Regular), and she just said, "You should go into physical science." Like, I have excelled at science, she just said, "Hey, you Physical Science." I told my mom and she made them test me. So, now I'm in Bio, but last year, when I was a freshman, I started off in Physical Science…They make it difficult [for Black students] to be able to take AP classes that would boost your GPA, it makes it more difficult to be on par with my White peers who have access to those classes*.

Chenzi, a Black student, indicated that if he could do it all over again he would have chosen a different school. His experience made him dislike school. He said:

> *If I could rewind time, I would do my high school career over if I could choose to not go here, I would. Honestly, I would press that button and go to a different high school in a jiff, because I hate school, like it was just school. It was not fun. Do I feel like it prepared me for college? No! I feel like I was just here.*

Chenzi's quote reflected how Black students' experiences in school made them dislike school, affecting their current experience and influencing whether they pursued education post-high school.

The results of this study are important for three primary reasons. This study privileges Black students' voices and perspectives as to why they believed they were less likely to perform academically and more likely to be suspended. The findings increase our understanding of how lacking a sense of belonging might contribute to lower academic

achievement and disproportionately higher disciplinary sanctions among Black students. This study operationalized a sense of belonging into four critical components, which can serve as a guide to increasing belonging in schools. Increasingly, research has shown that a sense of belonging is a powerful predictor of students' success in academic environments (Booker, 2006; McCabe, 2009; Smith et al., 2020). Fong Lam et al. (2015) reported that higher rates of belonging increased feelings of happiness, hope, and relaxation among students, contributing to high rates of academic achievement.

Belonging is a fundamental basic need that must be fulfilled for students to thrive academically and socially (Finn, 1989; Fong Lam et al., 2015). Research has found students who do not feel a sense of belonging will have: (a) diminished motivation; (b) limited achievement; (c) poor academic performance; (d) feelings of alienation and isolation; (e) mental and physical impairments such as unhappiness, depression, and anxiety; (f) increased behavioral problems; (g) feelings of helplessness, fatigue, and boredom and (h) limited involvement in extracurricular activities (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Fong Lam et al., 2015; Ma, 2003; Osterman, 2000, 2023; Saleem et al., 2022). Increasingly, studies have suggested a sense of belonging is more predictive of academic achievement than individual, family, peer, and community-level factors (Montoro et al., 2021; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Rouse & Kemple, 2009).

Sense of belonging is believed to be important because when students feel connected to their academic environments, their learning is maximized, and they have increased motivation and engagement (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Fredricks et al., 2004; Osterman, 2000, 2023). Though no single factor influences academic success, teachers, administrators, and school personnel must bear some responsibility for these outcomes (Pitre, 2014; Quinn et al., 2019). A sense of belonging is something the school and school personnel must value. Thus, schools and school officials must review policies and practices that contribute to Black students not feeling like they belong or matter and work to increase a sense of belonging among Black students.

Limitations

Although this study has significant findings and implications for social work practice, some limitations should be considered. If a larger proportion of students had been interviewed, the findings might have been different. Although we are grateful to students for sharing their experiences with us, these experiences may not be representative of all students' experiences. The study did not include all Black students who attended Crest Academy. Approximately 202 Black students were enrolled in the high school at the time of this study, and we interviewed 40 students, which is about 20% of the Black student population. It is also possible that those who chose to participate may differ in perceptions from those who chose not to participate, given that individuals who choose to participate in studies may have strong feelings about the subject matter. It is worth noting that many students who chose to participate had strong negative feelings about their experiences at school.

We had a larger proportion of female students in the sample than male students. Research has found that Black male students have different educational experiences than

female students (Chu & Ready, 2018; Howard, 2013). The findings might have been different if we had more male student participation. According to Howard (2013), "loathed in various environments, applauded in others, perhaps no other group of people are emulated yet despised simultaneously to the extent that Black men are today" (p. 55).

Another limitation of the study is that the school is predominantly White and located in the Midwest. Though a sense of belonging is important no matter the school, what it looks like might differ slightly based on the school's racial makeup and whether the school is in another part of the country.

Implications for Practice

Much time, money, and effort have gone into equalizing educational opportunities; however, those investments have failed to reduce educational disparities as intended (Hung et al., 2020). Furthermore, current education policies and practices have not only failed to support children personally and academically, but they also have served as barriers to forging a sense of belonging. The findings from our study suggest culturally responsive educational practices have the potential to (a) create a welcoming environment, (b) generate feelings of mattering, (c) saturate school culture with racial sensitivity, (d) allow each student to see themselves reflected, and (e) ultimately provide children with opportunities to feel a sense of belongingness in their schools and communities. In turn, this can positively impact students' outcomes, improve academic achievement, and capture the attention of students who often disengage from the learning process (Gay, 2000; Howard & Terry, 2011; Nasir et al., 2009).

Previously, the goal of education has been to provide students with the skills needed to succeed in White mainstream society, not realizing that academic success came at the expense of their cultural and psychosocial well-being (Richards et al., 2007; Vavrus, 2008). It is imperative to move away from traditional practices that hinder, oppress, and perpetuate deficit narratives and move toward culturally responsive education. Culturally responsive education focuses on addressing the needs of all culturally and linguistically diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and contributes to students' sense of belongingness, which, in turn, contributes to improved academic achievement.

This work has implications for social workers, school psychologists, school staff, administration, and teachers, specifically the need to provide culturally responsive education, which in turn "provide[s] a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). When students are provided with optimal educational experiences, have high standards set for them, and are accountable to themselves and others, students excel regardless of their social class, race, gender, and family background (McDonald & Farrell, 2012). This can be achieved through more hands-on cultural responsivity training that focuses on increasing belongingness through community building, relationship building, and racial sensitivity. Moreover, schools must increase both the hiring and retention of diverse teachers. Greater diversity among teachers, staff, and administration will allow a greater number of students to see themselves reflected. Programs such as The Innocent Classroom (Innocent Technology, 2024), which have been implemented in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Omaha, have shown

improvement in educator job satisfaction, less frequent exclusionary discipline, increased individual attention, stronger relationships, and greater academic growth in teachers leading to better relationships between students and teachers. Implementation of policies that require partnership with agencies such as the Innocent Classroom would not only serve to alleviate the disparities experienced by Black students but would also alleviate disparities among other students of color and improve the educational system.

The implications for social work include greater education on cultural responsiveness through more specific cultural sensitivity training for school social workers, continuing education requirements for school social workers and child welfare workers, and cultural sensitivity training in social work programs. In order to uphold the core values of social work, social workers need a foundational understanding of the disparities students of color experience and ongoing continuing education to ensure the emotional safety of our children while ensuring an improved educational experience for students and teachers. Lastly, social worker practitioners should also ensure they are well trained in cultural sensitivity, specifically with students of color, in order to best support students in advocating for their emotional and educational needs and support them in coping with and managing stressors related to systemic oppression both inside and outside the classroom.

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