

# A Three Cord Strand: Three Generations of Black Women's Educational Experiences in Mississippi

Sandra C. Nichols  
University of Memphis

Citation: Nichols, S. C. (2021). A three cord strand: Three generations of Black women's educational experiences in Mississippi. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 37(7), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.26209/jrre3707-02>

*This article depicts a qualitative narrative study that reflects on the educational paths followed by three generations of Black women from rural Mississippi. The purpose of this study was to expand the documented footprint of Black women's educational experiences in the rural Deep South by exploring my own educational experiences as a researcher and as a participant as well as the experiences of women in my immediate family. Reflections, connections, and analyses address 20 years of lived experience in Mississippi school systems. The intersectionality of critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory provided the theoretical framework. The research questions addressed were: What are the similarities and differences among three generations of Black women educated in Mississippi? How can this information assist us to better understand the historical and present intersectional struggles of Black education in rural areas? The intersections of gender and race were explored. Mapping as inductive analysis using writing as inquiry allowed me to garner a deeper meaning of the stories. The approach to story analysis was iterative as I moved in and out of several steps. My insights and reflections depicted a supportive village that helped to guide the women through their studies. The overall finding was that these women's sustained success in rural Mississippi educational settings was linked to having a nurturing and supportive network of educators throughout their academic careers. We need to investigate other Black women's educational experiences in rural education settings to increase representation and to demonstrate the congruences and particularities of learning what matters to Black women in rural communities.*

Education in the Deep South, specifically Mississippi, has been riddled with inequities and blatant prejudice toward Black women since the state's inception. Black women in Mississippi were deemed invisible, disposable,

and unvaluable. This perspective was evident across eras, as Black women were often omitted from protections sanctioned by policy, rights, and privileges. Centuries of inhumane treatment of Black people in Mississippi greatly affected their access to education in a system deeply rooted in institutional racism (Cornelius, 1843; Davis, 1845; Mississippi Convention, 1861). The present study explores the rich history of three generations of Black American women's educational experiences in Mississippi. While comparable reflections can be found in oral histories, they are rapidly decreasing as our elders cross over. Moreover, the search for supporting artifacts for this study indicated that the need to document these experiences is increasingly urgent. Formally preserved artifacts and written accounts of schooling in Mississippi for Black women are scarce, especially for those who attended school prior to the 1960s.

This trigenerational mapping of Black women's access to education in Mississippi may be relevant to many educators, administrators, community leaders, politicians, and citizens. While geographically located in Mississippi, the story may connect with people across the globe in rural, suburban, and urban locales, as well as with people of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities. History is

---

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Ezekiel Joubert and Dr. Tim Lensmire for the grace given to me and your belief in my work. I extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Kakali Bhattacharya who provided a safe place for me to process my desire to share the voices of Black women educated in rural Mississippi. I greatly appreciate her wisdom and feedback. Additionally, Dr. Venus Evans-Winters served as my muse and walked me through the process of marrying my passion and my gifts. Lastly, I am grateful for my family. My mother's and my daughter's journeys provided the impetus for this work.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sandra C. Nichols, University of Memphis, 404 Ball Hall, Memphis, TN 38152-3570. Email: [smcooley@memphis.edu](mailto:smcooley@memphis.edu)

This article is part of a special issue of JRRE that explores Black Lives Matter and rural education. Click [here](#) to see the full issue.

JRRE is associated with the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State, and is a publication of Penn State Libraries Open Publishing.

seldom told from the perspective of the Black woman. It is *herstory* that has been almost erased.

This article draws from a qualitative narrative study that reflects the educational paths of three generations of Black women with 20 years of lived experience in Mississippi school systems. The purpose of this study was to expand the documented footprint of Black women's educational experiences in the Deep South. By exploring my own educational experiences as the researcher and a participant as well as the experiences of women in my immediate family, I was able to begin the process. Critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory provided the theoretical framework of this study. The research questions addressed were:

1. What are the similarities and differences among three generations of Black women educated in Mississippi?
2. How can this information assist us to better understand the historical and present intersectional struggles of Black education in rural areas?

This article begins with a description of my theoretical framework. Next is a statement identifying the context—historical and cultural aspects—of this study. Following this overview are vignettes, including my deeply personal account of the three generations of Black women's educational experience in Mississippi schools. The three women whom I selected for this study are my mother, my daughter, and myself. I chose to study our experiences and connections because autoethnography is powerful, and our intimate relationships allowed me to explore and understand the content and context with greater depth and clarity. This article concludes with findings and next steps for future research. The methodology employed is explained in the appendix.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this trigenerational study of Black women's education in Mississippi draws from Critical Race Theory rooted in Black feminist theory. The counternarrative represents my perspective as a Black woman educated in Mississippi (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The struggles of the Black women represented in this narrative and the empowering actions that they took in response to their experiences of oppression are highlighted throughout the text. Reflective of bell hooks's (1984) insightful synthesis, connections were made between these Black women's space and "place" related to being educated in Mississippi from slavery to present day.

I used *intersectionality* as an interpretative framework to address the oppression we experienced as Black women. The concept of intersectionality emerged from legal studies and was used to describe the "location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1265). Race and gender intertwined, informing each other on how school structures affected the Black women in this study differently across generations. Applying intersectionality allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my interpretation of racism and sexism within Mississippi's educational and legal systems over time. The next section describes the historical context for the vignettes that follow.

### Three Generations of Black Women

The Jim Crow system maliciously attacked Black Americans' access to education by establishing and executing a racial caste system shortly after the 14th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution. Primarily in Southern states, Black people were relegated to the status of second-class citizens, and the 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution became defunct between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Even more, the U.S. Supreme Court supported the Jim Crow system by upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation under the "separate but equal" tenet in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896.

Following the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights movement (1954–1968) sought to end legalized racial discrimination, disenfranchisement, and segregation in the United States. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* mandated school integration. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In the post-Civil Rights era, many believed that equality was established, especially after Barack Obama was elected president of the United States for two terms. However, the current Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.) is illuminating persistent disparities and calling for acceptance and justice. The Black Lives Matter movement is founded upon 13 basic principles: restorative justice, empathy, loving engagement, diversity, globalism, queer affirming, trans affirming, collective value, intergenerational, Black families, Black villages, unapologetically Black, and Black women.

The following vignettes reflect Cynthia Dillard's (2000) conceptualization of epistemology. They are documented accounts of "culturally engaged explanations of being human" (Dillard, 2000, p. 2). Grounded in the ethos of the community where the research was conducted were the language; the "tribe" or village; the sights and sounds; the spirituality; and the communal fellowship,

celebration, and mourning of a collective people. These vignettes also connected how I, the participant-researcher, was a part of the research process and what I learned about the human condition via my relationship with the research and the other participants. In this journey, I pondered my understanding in relation to others' understanding of their encounters. Additionally, the following vignettes (offset and in italics) align with the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.).

### **Herstory: Grace's Access to Education in the 1940s and 1950s**

Grace is the great-granddaughter of an enslaved African. She is the granddaughter of a sharecropper. She is the daughter of a biracial, Black and Indigenous, third-grade educated mother. She is a first-generation high school graduate. She is the sister of two first-generation high school educated women. She is the mother of an equity-minded, first-generation doctoral program completer, and teacher educator. She is the grandmother of a social justice advocate and high school student.

Coming of age in the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, Grace played an active part in local sit-ins and attended informational/planning meetings at area churches. She was a year older than Emmett Louis Till and a rising ninth grader at the time of his murder in 1955. In the same year, Rosa Parks took a *seat* that resulted in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

*Day breaks. Grace and Mary, twin sisters, rise early to prepare for the school day. Aboard a bus discarded by the White community school—with tattered seats, broken windows, and barely working mechanical systems—they made the trek to school. In 1947, at seven years of age, Mary and Grace attended Shady Grove School. Light peeked through the slats of a one-room schoolhouse that was shared by students from primary to secondary levels. Frigid winds ripped through the space during winter, and droplets of rain bead down during showers. Empty pails collected the streams of rainwater in random locations throughout the room. From December to February a fire blazed in the cast-iron heater that warmed the room and the bones. Shady Grove School, housed in a rickety, dilapidated building, was where they learned to read, write, and complete basic mathematical processes.*

Schooling in Mississippi for Grace in the 1940s and 1950s was racially segregated and less than equal. Maintaining and expanding the wealth of White

Mississippians was the premise upon which schools were established. An example of this priority was demonstrated in the school's academic calendar. The academic year accommodated cotton harvesting season in late September, as many Black students were cultivators of one of Mississippi's prized industries. School, therefore, met from October through April. Black students as young as five years of age would accompany their guardians to the cotton fields for harvesting. As young children of six, Grace and Mary worked alongside their grandmother Babe in the cotton fields. They experienced the tolling work of picking cotton before they enrolled in school.

Within these oral histories, Grace most frequently expressed that her most memorable elementary school academic accomplishment was learning the multiplication table. By the end of third grade, she could recite the one through twelve multiplication facts with ease. However, it was the educators whom she held in highest esteem. Grace reminisced about educators who were kind, compassionate, and vested in her overall well-being. Deep grin lines, toothy smiles, sparkling eyes, and a higher pitched voice abounded when she shared memories of a teacher who transported a small group of children to various events in his personal vehicle. One of Grace's most memorable educational events happened when this teacher took a group of four students, including the twins, to a classmate's funeral. Indubitably, she valued her knowledge and skill development, but it was the village within Shady Grove School that was most impactful.

During most of middle school, the twins lived with their parents and brothers in Louisiana, but they returned to Heidelberg, Mississippi, during their eighth-grade year. Grace and Mary attended Husband School, which was a short walk through the woods from their house. The school, although in a state of disrepair, was warm and welcoming. They were embraced and given access to all aspects of the academic curriculum and extracurricular activities. Although enrolled for less than half the school year, Grace and Mary were given leadership roles. The next year they were promoted to high school.

Grace and Mary completed their secondary education at Southside High School. A newly constructed school with modern amenities in Heidelberg, Mississippi, Southside enrolled the Black students in East Jasper County. The school was built quickly as the call for integration loomed. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal ruling of 1896. The officials in Heidelberg, Mississippi, White men, had not previously addressed the separate but equal ruling. Thus, they decided to build Southside High School to prevent Black students from attending Heidelberg High School. Heidelberg High School had been in existence for years but was a "Whites only" school.

Again, Grace excelled academically. A first-generation high school graduate, she successfully completed high school in 1959. While proud of her academic accomplishments, the school-community partnership was Grace's most lauded aspect of her secondary experience. Early one morning after the children had left for school, an ember ignited a blaze that consumed her family's house, leaving them homeless. The community, including the twins' high school math teacher, rallied around the family. They were given temporary housing, clothing, household items, etc., and Grace and Mary's math teacher gave them handmade quilts. Grace reflected on her teacher's generosity often. And 60 years later, she still had the quilt.

### **Herstory: Sandra's Access to Education in the 1970s and 1980s**

I am the great-great-granddaughter of an enslaved African; the great-granddaughter of a sharecropper; the granddaughter of a third-grade educated Black and Indigenous woman; the daughter of a first-generation high school graduate; the mother of a Black change agent and teenager who attended school in Mississippi; and a Mississippi public school-educated, special education teacher educator, university professor and administrator, developer of change agents, and social justice advocate. I came of age during a time when many ascertained that racism no longer existed. Overt crude crimes were being replaced with more covert institutionalized forms of racism. Systems designed for White people effectively refused equal access to Black Americans. During this time, in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race could be used as a factor in professional schools' admissions processes, but quotas were found to be unconstitutional. A decade later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, which extended the effect of discrimination laws to private institutions that receive federal funding. Black feminist theory grew during this time and called for strong theoretical frameworks that included firsthand experiences (bell hooks, 1984).

I was actively engaging in circles from which Black Americans had been excluded in my local area. I learned to navigate institutions, advocate for change, and bring other Black women along with me. During my K–12 education the foundation for advocacy and developing change agents was laid.

*Shadows befall the room. Orange tones dance with the shadows. Though dim, I can see and have no idea that the setting is less than ideal. Smiles, giggles, chants, music, fragrant scents,*

*and warmth provided the light that was physically absent. At two years of age, King Star Head Start Center was where I had my first experience with formal education. Each day was an adventure. We played outside. Mud pies and hopscotch were playground staples as well as tag and ring around the rosie. Vibrant colors and sounds filled the playground. Children squealed, laughed, ran, tumbled, fell, and lived to see another day. The school was not in my neighborhood, yet I felt safe and at home. I was enough.*

*All hues and shades of Black people, my teachers were Black. My peers were Black. The cafeteria staff and custodial workers were all Black. A mantra was not needed here, we all knew that at King Star Head Start Center our Black lives mattered. Now an abandoned building on the edge of town, artifacts from a once lively place remain. It felt big and welcoming when I was a child. Now it is a relic. The setting for my early childhood education was a cinderblock building with small, high windows through which slithers of light peeked. As a child the playground felt huge, but it was small, tight, and semi-enclosed with a steel fence. All the same, it was a haven that allowed me to be just me. Standing on this soil in southern Mississippi, random thoughts zoomed through my psyche, including a sea of Black faces, love and protection, the beginning of friendships, a place to learn to respect others and to be respected, and love of community.*

*Returning to my vehicle as drenching rain fell from the sky, I also remembered that the building flooded every time it rained heavily. I am grateful for the time I spent at King Star Head Start Center, but it is evident that our resources were subpar. We were given space in an area that White men did not value. Leaving this phase of my journey I simply thought that it was not the things at King Star Head Start Center that were most impactful for me; it was the people.*

Socially and culturally Nora Davis Elementary School was an extension of King Star Head Start Center. Many of my former classmates were enrolled at Nora Davis Elementary School. Again, most of my teachers looked like me. Not only that, but they also lived in my community and knew my family, neighbors, church members ... me. It was more than an academic exercise for these educators;

it was an investment in the future. While I blossomed academically, the most memorable aspects of my time at Nora Davis Elementary School were rooted in safety, security, confidence, discipline, and excellence.

Remarkable teachers were at the helm of my academic journey, navigating the way. Ms. Henry stands out as she taught one simple, intentional lesson that I will never forget. She formally introduced the concept of “code switching” and explained the relevance of mastering these skills. Both beneficial and cruel, this lesson opened my eyes to the reality that I was a visitor in my own land.

Saddled with making White people feel comfortable as I developed, learned, and navigated my path was draining.

Furthermore, it was not only the licensed educators who made Nora Davis Elementary School a safe haven. The support staff were also invested in our wellbeing. The custodian held us accountable for our actions, took pride in her work, and taught us to respect our surroundings. We looked up to her and honored her. The crossing guard took time out of her day to hold conversations with us while ensuring that we safely crossed a major intersection. Her chats in the morning helped me start the day positively, and her afternoon conversations could change my perspective on an otherwise bad day.

Nora Davis Elementary School provided me with many opportunities. For example, I presented the colors during ceremonies, spoke before hundreds of people, and delivered an award to former Governor William Winter. I learned to navigate conflict. I established new friendships and walked away from unhealthy ones. In short, Nora Davis Elementary School was the educational setting where I became rooted and grounded in being confident in myself and found joy in being me.

Unlike Nora Davis Elementary, a school in my community, William H. Mason Elementary School was the only grade school to which I was bused out of my community to attend. It was also the only school for which I had to use GPS navigation to locate during artifact collection. Standing on the grounds of William H. Mason Elementary School, I felt rigid. Overall, I remembered it being very formal and not very nurturing. However, in third grade, Mrs. Moore was my teacher. She lived down the street from the church we attended and was a thread in the community’s fabric. We have maintained a relationship.

Additionally, my first friendships with children who did not look like me developed at William H. Mason Elementary School. We talked on the phone and played with the same kids. They were genuinely nice to me. This school introduced me to navigating paths with White people in a system built on racism.

Gardiner Junior High School was akin to William H. Mason Elementary school in culture and climate. It was not inviting or welcoming; very few authority figures looked like

me. I only recalled two educators’ names, Mrs. Hicks and Ms. Welch. Mrs. Hicks, my physical education teacher, was my one Black teacher. She exuded the same energy as my teachers at Nora Davis Elementary. Invested, encouraging, and disciplined, I knew that she had my best interest in mind. Ms. Welch was also committed to ensuring that I had access to a quality education in a nurturing environment.

During the summer before my eighth-grade year, we moved to Ellisville, Mississippi. There I attended South Jones Middle School, the highest performing school in the county at that time. For the first time, I was in the noticeable minority. In some ways, as an outsider, I was more welcomed by teachers and administrators than by my Black peers from the area. Maybe I was better prepared to navigate the system—that is, acculturate to the norms of the majority. My father preached the importance of making White people feel comfortable. Regardless of the cause, an educator at South Jones Middle School—my eighth-grade English teacher, a White woman—favored me. Because of her, I became a member of the Student Council in eighth grade, although elections had been during the spring before I arrived. I was reelected each year until I finished high school.

Door after door opened. Oftentimes, I was the only Black person at the table. In classes, I was regularly one of no more than three Black individuals in a class of more than 20 students. By my senior year, my picture was in the yearbook 22 times. I was a member of the inaugural Mayor’s Youth Council of Jones County. My first year, I was one of two Black students selected across the county. We had to submit written applications, letters of recommendation, and interview. I was the only Black student representative during my senior year. Among school-based organizations, however, I was never selected to be a member of a content-specific academic honors club, although I was a member of the junior and senior Beta Club and an honor roll student. Participation was by invitation only. My friend, a Black student, requested to be a part of the science club and was told that she could not join. She was a straight A student who completed advanced courses.

Though I am grateful for these opportunities, I often felt isolated among both my Black and White peers. Between grades 8 and 12, I had two Black teachers. It was one of the librarians, a Black female, with whom I built a relationship and on whom I relied to help me navigate this space. There were some overtly racist actions that plagued South Jones High School. Denial in elite academic clubs was merely the beginning. During my 11th-grade year, I was placed in a general English class. The class consisted of approximately 95% Black students. After several weeks passed, the school counselor found that I was in the wrong class and moved me to an advanced setting. The difference in expectations was incomparable. While the advanced students had to

complete a 10-page research paper, which required that I search for supporting documents at the local junior college and university, the general students only completed 10 note cards for the year. Underprepared, unchallenged, ridiculed, deemed unworthy or incapable, systemic racism allowed those in authority to believe that it was within reason to leave these Black students behind.

Furthermore, I remember that when a popular White football player began dating a Black female student, he was ostracized by his White peers. Sitting in a small group of Black students, almost in tears, he was supported. I supported him while suffering from being told that I was less than by those who were friends and peers. These White students carried their Bibles and quoted scriptures out of context to justify their position. He stopped dating the young lady and was welcomed back into the fold.

I was blessed with access to many outlets to which most of my Black peers were not privy, but just because I was at the table did not mean that I was a member of the party. My mother taught me that I did not have a *place to stay in* or limits on what I was able to do and that I was equivalent to my White counterparts. Therefore, I always knocked, applied, and walked through doors. *I didn't know that I couldn't, so I did.*

### **Herstory: Morgan's Access to Education in the 2010s**

Morgan is the 15-year-old great-great-great-granddaughter of an enslaved African; great-great-granddaughter of a sharecropper; great-granddaughter of a third-grade educated, biracial, Indigenous and Black, woman; granddaughter of a first-generation high school graduate; and daughter of a first-generation college graduate and first-generation doctoral program completer. She is a community activist who is actively engaged in systematic processes designed to positively effect change. Morgan has participated in social justice-oriented trainings, community service projects, and programs designed to have an immediate impact on societal injustices. Her commitments were reflections of the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.).

*Sappy sweetness followed by "bless your heart" often filled the air; both carrying a slight hint of deception. Apathy unchanged by multiple cups of coffee hung throughout the buildings in some educators' spaces. However, shining lights, educators appearing when most needed, encouraged Morgan to walk within her truth and follow her passion. A teacher who loved music, anime, manga, and writing like Morgan and who looked like her provided safety in a new and uninviting atmosphere. Journaling,*

*drawing, singing, videoing, and editing film became Morgan's canvases. During this time, while visiting the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, she had the opportunity to interact with Dr. Angela Davis. This chance encounter crystalized the work Morgan had been doing and started a conflagration that focused on injustice and prejudice. Thus, her passion connected with her truth, and she began to thread social justice and activism throughout her art. A metamorphosis of grandiose measure produced a fierce social justice advocate with a voice that she was unafraid to share.*

Attending public school in Mississippi 29 years after her mother and 59 years after her grandmother, Morgan entered the school doors dressed for battle daily. Microaggressions filled her middle school experience. The scratching of pencils on paper, doors closing, footsteps in the hall drew her attention. Despite knowing that it was distracting to some students, the mathematics teacher played hard rock frequently. Precious time was spent on various trending topics, but little focus was given to issues that Black students faced, such as police brutality. Yet wonderful opportunities were presented as well. Arriving after selections had been made, her voice and personality earned her a spot in the Oak Grove Middle School show choir, ensembles, and multiple chorales. Bright red lips, teased hair, makeup, sequins, and satin adorned each kick, twirl, and high note as she performed with a diverse group of students on stage night after night.

Meandering through the halls, picture after picture, row after row, countless Black faces incorporated into one after another—sports teams. And in images of students who had academic honors, row after row, year after year, one Black face, two Black faces, no Black faces. Approximately 1,700 students attended Oak Grove High School, and 47% were of minority status, mostly Black Americans. Yet, the number of academically high achieving students who graced the halls was minimal. Even more, each day a minority group, Indigenous people, were reduced to a half-clothed mascot. The symbol was immortalized in tile and trampled repetitively. Here was where one of Morgan's favorite teachers, who supported the development of her creativity, also found it imperative to articulate the N-word multiple times while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* aloud to the class. Wrestling with her emotions of genuine appreciation and disdain, Morgan navigated her feelings about this teacher.

Morgan actively engaged in designing activities and events that targeted social justice within her local community. During her time in Mississippi public schools, she participated in the BRIDGES program in Memphis, Tennessee. This program's purpose was to *bridge* youth

from different communities in the metropolitan Memphis area. This connection was intentional and provided safe space in which the participants could discuss sensitive subjects. Topics of gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual preferences, privilege, etc., were explored, dissected, and reimagined. In a BRIDGES-sponsored fellows program Morgan was also allowed to spread her wings even more while learning the foundational principles of social justice and activism.

An avid writer, Morgan has penned many poems, short stories, scripts, and spoken word pieces. “Black by Nature, Proud by Choice” is a descriptive piece that she wrote during her freshman year at Oak Grove High School. She first performed this piece of spoken word on February 23, 2020. A portion is shared below to provide a glimpse into her thoughts as a Black female student in Mississippi who faced educator and peer induced micro- and macro-aggressions daily, as well as to show how the charge of the Black Lives Matter movement was reflected in her expression of present-day oppression, which aligns with Evans-Winters and Esposito’s (2010) research.

*Black by Nature Proud by Choice*

*Proud by choice. My brothers and sisters, do you believe in stereotypes?*

*Black girls are too ghetto and loud. We don't know how to speak fancy. We are too emotional. One moment, we want to be loved. The next moment, "don't touch me!"*

*Black boys are gangsters and will shoot up a place anytime. We cheat and all we want is that thing. We like puffing and are definitely addicted. Black boys do not have any self-control. Coming with no self-control, means we are a threat. My brother, my mother, my dad, and I am not the stereotype, and never will be. You are not the stereotype....*

*Black by nature proud by choice. We need to add the two up. I am black by nature, and I am proud by choice. I did not have a choice of being a Black young woman that is the shortest in her household, that has popping kinks that spring when I pull on them and flow effortlessly when I straighten or blowout them. I am a young woman trying to help young women like me, and I am proud.*

*Black by nature proud by choice.*

## Insights

While analyzing participants’ stories, themes emerged and were reviewed, sorted, chunked, and mapped to create common themes. A total of four reoccurring themes were identified: connections, impact of cultural appreciation, inequities of segregated schools, and attempt to erase the vulgarity of slavery.

## Connections

While recording memories at a school that I attended in Mississippi, I began to understand that the support and resources made available to me were more important than the formality of the educational setting. Being a part of a nurturing community, engaging with others who truly believed and invested in me, and knowing that the only limits on my life were self-inflicted gave me the courage to live outside of the box. My insights and reflections further revealed that Grace, Morgan, and I have been able to successfully navigate segregated and integrated educational spaces because of the supportive *village* that helped guide us through our studies and because of the empowering movements of the respective eras during which we came of age. This insight aligns with Dillard’s (2006) concept of *homeplace*. Homeplace is a place that is affirming of oneself and where Black women have dignity and self-respect. It is a place of rejuvenation from the daily battles encountered within a White supremacist society. We had a homeplace.

Additionally, we were self-advocates who worked within and across groups to develop skills and ideals that have been passed down throughout generations. Reflective of the Black Lives Matter movement’s (Teaching for Change, n.d.) principle of collective value, Morgan has worked with youth and community leaders to change the punitive treatment of students who have experienced trauma. This work focused on increasing the number of counselors and decreasing the number of police officers in schools in the city of Memphis (Bridge Builders Change, n.d.). Likewise, I have formally trained college students to be advocates and activists in their communities. Understanding the origins of their beliefs, how to interpret information, and the importance of taking a stance for themselves and others are undertakings that I have welcomed. We have continued the tradition of self-advocacy and working within and across groups to develop our personal leadership skills and ideals while uplifting the community.

## Impact of Cultural Appreciation

My initial survey of the stories and their embedded connections revealed a stark difference between the cultural impacts of segregated and integrated learning

environments—schools in Mississippi. Akin to Dillard’s (2006) depiction of community, Grace received elevated cultural support and resources in segregated schools. Surrounded by individuals who valued her as a Black girl, she developed educationally without concern of performing for those who did not have a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a Black female in Mississippi. This insight mirrored Dillard’s (2006) research on Black feminism. This study also found context and concrete examples relative to Grace’s community, home life, religious position, and relegated place in society integral elements of her homeplace. Moreover, these elements were integrated into the curriculum and design of assignments, activities, and events that my mother experienced in school.

During Grace’s schooling, students and teachers spoke without hesitation, not feeling the need to consider how their statements may have been taken out of context, considered unacceptable or offensive, or be interpreted as a measure of intelligence because of the inherent language presented. Grace spoke freely and respectfully. For example, the concepts of slang and Black vernacular were absurdities. She merely communicated her thoughts and ideas among people who understood her.

Learning from those who appreciated and lived within the same cultural context as she (East Jasper County, Mississippi) proved invaluable for Grace. Similarly, researchers have advocated for providing safe spaces that allow Black girls to fully develop (Evans-Winters, 2019). Grace benefitted from the safety of being surrounded by individuals who did not pass covert or subconscious judgment based on the color of her skin, kinkiness of her hair, fullness of her lips, hard sounds incorporated in her speech patterns, relegated position, and place in the American racialized caste system. This experience was immeasurable, freeing, and appreciated. School was a homeplace for her.

This comfort of being was diminished in the educational foundations of integrated learning environments—schools that Morgan and I attended in Mississippi during the post-Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter eras. I maintain profound appreciation for having had access to culturally rich early learning experiences at King Star Head Start and my years at Nora Davis Elementary School. Developing free from unintended ridicule and racialized micro- and macro-aggressions in Mississippi was liberating. I regret that this is a freedom that Morgan did not fully experience. The principles of loving engagement and empathy that are inherent to the Black Lives Matter movement (Teaching for Change, n.d.) were difficult to push forward when influential groups in the country failed to acknowledge that slavery was heinous and evil. This seemingly impossible shift was even more challenging for rural Southern states because they had histories of covert prejudice and inconsistent stances on equality. Furthermore, the Southern rural states were among

the first to pass legislation barring the teaching of CRT and accurate accounts of American history, including slavery in pre-K through 12th-grade curricula (“Map,” 2021). There was an illusion among conservative groups that ignoring or rewriting history would make it go away. On the contrary, what happened was a greater divide among the nation’s citizens.

### **Inequities of Segregated School**

Limited resources were the constitutionalized aspects of segregated schools that my mother and I attended in Mississippi (during the Jim Crow era and its remnants).

Awesome, engaging, and relevant cultural opportunities abounded in our culturally rich learning environments, but the materials, equipment, and human capital were not reflective of *Whites only* or integrated schools. The level of expertise and quality of craftsmanship provided to students in segregated schools waned in comparison. For example, while standing in the park adjacent to the historic Gardiner School building, I admired the ornate design and original bricks that were beautifully preserved. Yet the land where the original schools for Black people stood had no markings of recognition. Historic jewels have faded away. A clear distinction has been made in quality and respect for White people compared to Black Americans in Mississippi history.

Schools only for Black students in Mississippi were an afterthought provided because federal laws mandated them (Jackson, 2018). Since under Jim Crow Black people were at the bottom of the American caste system, quality was deemed unnecessary. My mom read books with unrelated cultural context—the *Dick and Jane* book series, which was almost 20 years old when she was in school in the 1950s. More than 20 years later, in the late 1970s, I read the same set of books, many of which were worn to tatters. It is important that the voices of intergenerational Black people, especially women, are freely shared (Evans-Winters, 2019). There are lessons to be learned and strategies to be uncovered that will help shape the future that is emerging from these previously silenced voices.

### **Attempt to Erase the Vulgarly of Slavery**

Anti-slavery laws forbade enslaved Africans from having access to literacy. In Mississippi during most of the Jim Crow era, Black people were criminalized for learning to read and write (Cornelius, 1983). These actions plagued the rural South, whether intentional or secondary, and manifested in an effort to forget or sterilize history in order to reduce the immense damage associated with this period.

These choices have resulted in gaps in the history of Black American women’s educational experiences in Mississippi. A lack of commitment to restorative justice



(Black Lives Matter, 2018) is also demonstrated through these actions. For example, each school Grace attended has closed or changed in purpose. The only school that I attended which closed is Nora Davis Elementary School, a learning environment constructed for Black American students. The history of schools for Black people prior to 1960 in rural areas is fading. Oral histories are quickly being forgotten, leaving behind no concept of the amazing work that shaped Black students' confidence, self-esteem, and belief in their abilities. The present historical records inadequately address the educational experiences especially of Black women, specifically in the rural South.

### Directions for Future Research

Recording the stories of Black women's educational experiences in rural Mississippi, which are rich in history, is necessary to have a true picture of our nation's development and survival. Voices of Black women in rural Mississippi, previously erased, invisible, and disregarded, must be given space. Those culturally relevant principles that support the academic development of Black girls in rural Mississippi must be intentionally incorporated into the curriculum and culture of schools.

Our experiences in rural learning environments in the Deep South must be told. We can learn from these stories and possibly avoid the same mistakes. The stories shared are intergenerational and align with the social justice movements of the eras in which each of us grew up. Yet possibly the most relevant connection was made to the present-day Black Lives Matter movement. Within each woman's experience was the need for restorative justice and a community bond (Teaching for Change, n.d.). The foundation of our success consisted of loving engagement within our rural educational systems, and those who were a part of this circle demonstrated belief in collective value. The most valuable nuggets provided by this circle of support were the approval to be unapologetically Black and the support given to us as Black women. This was a safe space to "just be" without fear of being labeled the "angry Black woman" or "playing the race card." All educational environments should always provide this level of safety and security to all students.

### References

- Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. Routledge.
- Bridge Builders Change. (n.d.). *The facts*. Retrieved October 23, 2021, from <http://www.bbchange.org/the-facts.html>
- Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
- Civil Rights Act of 1964, P.L. 88-353, 78 Stat. 241 (1964).
- Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, P.L. 100-259 Stat. 557 (1987).
- Cornelius, J. (1983). "We slipped and learned to read": Slave accounts of the literacy process, 1830–1865. *Phylon*, 44(3), 171–186. <https://doi.org/10.2307/274930>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dillard, C. B. (2000) The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(6), 661–681. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390050211565>
- Dillard, C. B. (2006). *On spiritual strivings: Transforming an African American woman's academic life*. State University of New York Press.
- Davis, E. M. (1845). *Extracts from the American slave code* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2019). *Black feminism in qualitative inquiry: A mosaic for writing our daughter's body*. Routledge.
- Evans-Winters, V. E., & Esposito, J. (2010). Other people's daughters: Critical race feminism and Black girls' education. *Educational Foundations*, 24(1–2), 11–24. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ885912.pdf>
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- Jackson, D. H., Jr. (2018). Segregation. In *Mississippi encyclopedia*. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <http://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/segregation/>
- Map: Where critical race theory is under attack. (2021, June 11). *Education Week*. Retrieved October 23, 2021, from <http://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>
- Mississippi Convention. (1861). *Ordinance of secession, January 9, 1861*. <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/generalgov/s0475>
- Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
- Regents of University of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an

analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>

Teaching for Change. (n.d.). *Black lives matter at school 13 guiding principles*. Retrieved December 2, 2021, from <https://www.dcareeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter/13-guiding-principles>

### Appendix: Methodology

As a Black woman reared in Mississippi and having attended public schools, each concept, event, and idea captured in this study influenced my current state of being. The ontological foundation was my quest to give Southern Black women space to share their voices and their lived experiences. My basic assumption was that something can be learned from everyone and every encounter. I value equitable access for all individuals regardless of ability, gender, race, geographical location, social class, or educational level. It is from this position that the constructionist epistemological approach informed my research.

As participant-researcher, I used autoethnography to detail the concept of a personal, reflexive journey into my educational experiences in rural Mississippi and those disclosed to me by two generations of Black women within my family. The autoethnographic format informed my mapping approach, which allowed me to unpack and analyze the social tri-generational documentary of these Black women's educational experiences, aligned with critical race theory (CRT) rooted in Black feminist theory through the lens of race and gender. Additionally, it was used to analyze the effects of how Mississippi's legal system acted as a social structure of oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017).

### Participant-Researcher

I am the Black woman whose voice this study seeks to amplify. Growing up in rural Mississippi during the post-Civil Rights era and being educated in public schools, my lived experiences provided the knowledge base for this study. However, having earned a PhD in special education, being a teacher educator and change agent, and serving as an educator and administrator in institutions of higher education, I have learned how educational spaces erase stories of marginalized groups.

As a community activist, I wanted to share the voices and lived educational experiences of those who are often forgotten and counted out, specifically Black women in rural areas in the Deep South. The present study focused on the experiences of three generations of Black women who attended public school in Mississippi. As a special education teacher educator who was educated and who has served as a university professor in Mississippi, I have

considerable knowledge and skill related to this subject. For this study, I have written, analyzed, and reflected on stories composed from my memories/reflections, oral histories that were shared with me, artifacts, and notes of emotions and/or physical reactions to visits at public schools in Mississippi that I attended. My use of mapping as inductive analysis through writing as inquiry gave the stories greater meaning. The approach to analysis that I used was iterative and allowed me to move fluidly between steps.

### Story Development

The stories included in this study reflected 20 years across three generations of Black women's educational experiences in Mississippi public schools. The stories were conceived from oral histories gathered through conversations and shared reflections. These memories were recorded via journal entries or notes. Going through the process, I reviewed hundreds of photographs, awards, certificates, newspaper clippings, videos of television interviews, yearbooks, field artifacts, and field notes. Each item stirred emotions. Some reflected safety, acceptance, and support that caused broad smiles and warm feelings. Others opened dark, forgotten places that were piercing and painful, which at times reignited anger, sadness, and embarrassment. Multiple sources were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the collection of stories and to validate them through the convergence of information.

During story development, I enjoyed engaging with my memories of familial oral histories. Each moment was interesting and left me wanting to know more. At times, I felt joyous, angry, sad, disappointed, proud, ambivalent, confused, hurt, and more. However, it was grappling with my own experiences that I found most difficult. At times I became paralyzed and disengaged.

### Story Analysis

Mapping as inductive analysis using writing as inquiry allowed me to garner a deeper meaning of the stories. The artifacts used included journal entries consisting of oral histories reshared over the past six months and written memories of oral histories acquired over the past 40 years, captured in journals, scrapbooks, and notes. The approach to story analysis was iterative as I moved in and out of several steps. The first step was reflecting upon the oral histories. Next, I began reflexive exercises relating to my personal experiences in Mississippi public schools.

As part of my reflection, I wrote about related data and made connections. As I reviewed recorded oral histories I would stop to write as similarities emerged. When thoughts reached the forefront of my consciousness based on my reading, I would ask: What has occurred? What are the

connections? How does this align with my theoretical framework? What is the connection between the stories and existing literature? Is there a connection to the research purpose? What is my truth surrounding these stories? What tensions and contradictions are surfacing for me? How do I go further? What is my instinct telling me (Bhattacharya, 2017)? I reread the oral history records and repeated the process multiple times over nine months. Each time a new connection was made I would write about it. Eventually, my writings were grouped by school level—early childhood, elementary, middle/junior high, and secondary school.

After the process of writing as inquiry reached the point of a rough draft, I matched the photographs and other artifacts (e.g., awards, certificates, newspaper clippings, and yearbook entries) that represented times, places, and events with the connections made. During this process, I reread my writings and thought about the significance of the artifacts. Written on many artifacts were dates and locations, which allowed me to further contextualize my reflections. If a doubt of accuracy arose between the documents that could not be resolved, the reference was removed from the writings. As more clarity and detail surfaced, it was added to the writing when the quality of research was enhanced.