My Hair is Lit: Teachers' Perceptions on Integrating Children's Literature Focused on Black and Black

Mixed-Race Hair in K-2 Classrooms

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Abstract

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<u>My Hair is Lit: Teachers' Perceptions on Integrating Children's Literature Focused on Black and Black Mixed-Raced Hair in K-2 Classrooms</u>

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Hair is important in the lives of most people, and it is especially valuable in the lives of Black people. Hair experiences have a much deeper meaning and are rooted in the Black experience. Many Black people have experienced hair discrimination in the workplace. So much so, that in recent years, measures have been taken to eradicate these discriminative practices. To date, many states within the United States have yet to pass legislative laws banning natural hair discrimination in workplace settings.

More recently, natural hair has gained a lot of attention in educational settings. In fact, students have been punished and/or disallowed to participate in educational and extracurricular activities alongside their peers due to their natural hair choices and the established social norms, which are indicative of both the past and the present experience of people of African descent. It is crucial that during these K-2 primary years, Black and Black Mixed-Race children be exposed to literature that celebrates their own features, but it is up to educators to meet their cultural needs. This research study examined educators' perceptions surrounding the implementation of Black and Black Mixed-Race culturally affirming natural hair literature in K-2 public classroom settings. The findings of this research study validate the need for more resources, training, and other supportive measures for educators to ensure that the cultural identities and assets of students are reflected in the selection of curriculum resources and/or instructional materials.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my husband, kids, mom, dad, and my grandparents

who have always encouraged me to pursue my goals. It is also dedicated to those who have supported

me along this journey. I am very grateful for all of your love and support.

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Chapter 1: Problem of Practice

Growing up, getting my hair done was a memorable experience. It was a time to connect, share ideas, and bond with my family. For many families of African descent, hairstyling or getting your hair done is seen as a milestone. This is an experience that most, if not all, African Americans can relate to culturally. However, my earliest experiences involved getting my hair oiled and combed by my mom; then, getting in trouble because I would not sit still. Most of my hair experiences were tied to home and not school; however, I do remember being embarrassed because I had to turn in greasy classwork and homework due to the large amount of oil that my mother would use in my hair the previous day. In reflecting, these embarrassing and sometimes painful moments have impacted who I am today; it was not until I was an adult that I decided to do what many call the "big chop;" it was then that I realized the true impact of these experiences. For that reason, this study is vital for both children and teachers because childhood educational experiences have a lasting impact on how we perceive, engage, and navigate the world around us as well as how we view or value the cultural experiences of others.

As a child, almost all of my hair experiences were related to home and not school. Today, this remains the narrative for many Black and Black Mixed-Race children — an individual of African descent or classified as African American who also comprises another race or ethnicity. Hair experiences are childhood experiences that should not be limited to the home. Hair should be a part of the regular classroom experience for all students because it is a large portion of their daily, lived experiences. However, hair knowledge, styles, and experiences are too often uninvited into classroom spaces. This is especially true for Black and Black Mixed-Race students; therefore, students are forced to negotiate their identity outside of the educational context as they rarely see positive literary or contextual reflections of their cultural identity and hair textures in the American Public School System.

Few studies have examined the importance of hair in the lives of African descent or Black individuals (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Edwards, 2005). To date, there are no studies that have specifically focus on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair literature in public, K-2 classroom settings. These unique and often memorable hair experiences have a long-lasting impact on children; ultimately, affecting how they connect with society (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Edwards, 2005).

In the United States, racial tensions have played a significant role in shaping how people of African descent view themselves in society, including their hair. Often, negatively charged narratives or associations define their Black identity; subsequently, words like "good," "bad," "kinky," or "nappy" hair are used to describe Black hair (Lester, 1999, p. 175). Words and perceptions like these that are both culturally and racially charged; yet, these expressions continue to perpetuate cultural biases and discriminative systems and practices (Lester, 1999). Current research suggests that established standards are representative of how people perceive themselves (Banks, 2000; Brooks & McNair, 2015; Gramsci, 1999); thus, these norms have significantly impacted how Black and Black Mixed-Race children view and value themselves outside of the home. These perceptions are carried with them throughout their lives, including in educational settings.

It is imperative that students feel a sense of belonging and acceptance because it impacts who they are and who they will become in the future. One avenue for building this sense of belonging is culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. Essentially, a culturally responsive curriculum seeks to connect students' academic success with their cultural awareness (Sharp & Johnson, 2016). In K-2 public classroom settings, educators choose literature that corresponds to the skill or standard. Although, educators have the liberty to select literary selections such as picture books, poetry books, and novels with different genres, educators must consider the identities and cultural needs of every student, including Black and Black Mixed-Race students.

Research suggests that in the early years, kindergarten through second grade, students learn at a substantially greater pace than in any other grade levels. As a result, these crucial years serve as indicators used to determine reading proficiency by grade three (Mead, 2016). Based on a review of the literature and my personal experiences as an educator, I purport that it is of great importance that all students, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students, be exposed to Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair literature that includes and/or esteems characters who have hair that has not been chemically altered or processed. These pictorial images connect students and their culture to the classroom by allowing them to see characters who resemble themselves and have similar, shared experiences. It also provides students with a safe or brave space to share their thoughts, ideas, and identity; as a result, students are able to relate to the presented characters or content personally. Hence, students can see themselves as beautiful, capable beings within the educational landscape. Furthermore, these representations provide students with a solid footing in terms of where they fit into society; due to the nature of self-empowerment via literature, individuals of African descent can boldly identify and challenge current societal norms. This is essential for Black and Black Mixed-Race students to feel like their cultural identity is valued and respected, but it should be equally important to all students.

For Black and Black Mixed-Race students, culturally responsive teaching, both curriculum and pedagogy, acknowledges and highlights the importance of African American hair, culture, traditions, values, and belief systems in safe, engaging, and meaningful ways. Exposure to literature that discusses and features characters and topics related to Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair provides all students with opportunities to build connections and share their narratives through relatable, lived experiences. By sharing these experiences, students can openly acknowledge, contribute, and celebrate cultural differences. Leveraging literature, as a vehicle for self-assurance or pride, students can also begin to understand their individuality and the uniqueness of others to harness the power of their collective voice

to both challenge and dissect societal norms that have stigmatized and traumatized Black and Black Mixed-Race people. Literature affords students with an opportunity to dream and envision success as a tangible reality — but only if they are able to see reflections of their cultural identities in the texts that they read or explore in educational settings.

Problem Statement

Until recently, social norms that negatively identify Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair have been left unchallenged in educational settings. The problem is that there is a research gap in educational settings and practice in understanding how educators truly feel about considering and implementing culturally affirming literature or literature that includes and/or specifically focuses on Black or Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Many educators are unaware of how these perceptions impact the implementation of culturally affirming literature, particularly literature that focuses on and/or includes characters with Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Therefore, Black and Black Mixed-Race students are left to figure out how they fit in society because the education system does not offer them a mirror into the lesson. When culturally affirming books such as *I Love My Hair* by Natasha Tarpley and *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry are shared with children of any race, it allows both readers and listeners to enjoy the journey that books can take them on (Giorgis & Johnson, 2003). It is essential that culturally relevant narratives, specifically books with natural hair characters, are shared with students and included in their educational experience; thus, how educators interpret and present these literary works is a pre-condition for all students' self-image and literacy development, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race children. In recognizing its impact, it is important to dissect or assess how educators feel about implementing and sharing books that include and/or focus explicitly on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 public classroom settings. By fully comprehending how educators truly feel, educators, in both classroom and leadership spaces, can begin taking steps towards a more culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

The fruit of this responsiveness in the lives of Black and Black Mixed-Race children as they grow into adulthood will hopefully be evident.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine and recognize the attitudes and challenges that K-2 public educators experience when implementing culturally affirming literature. More specifically, this research study seeks to address literature that explicitly includes and/or focuses on the inclusion of Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. This case study is relevant because currently this specific type of research does not exist, and there is a lack of culturally affirming literature in K-2 classrooms. In this research study, I explore how these perceptions potentially impact the delivery and/or presentation of culturally affirming literature as it relates to Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair as well as its impact on student outcomes. These outcomes include but are not limited to belonging, student achievement, social-emotional well-being, and affiliation. When students feel a sense of belonging, they learn more; they are more engaged and are more likely to interact with peers. Overall, students genuinely feel accepted and valued.

To better understand teachers' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming literature that focuses on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair, I conducted a case study. This study included four educators with varying years of teaching experience who currently teach in K-2 public education classrooms in the Midwest region of the United States. Participants were asked to participate in two interviews and respond to four journal prompts relating to their experiences with Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair literature over five weeks. Participants were asked to communicate their thoughts and feelings throughout the study, via written and verbal means, so that I could gain a better understanding of how their perceptions impact the implementation of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy in their respective classroom settings.

Significance of the Study

In this research study, I examine the broader context of the everyday challenges faced by people of African descent and anyone who chooses to wear a hairstyle that is considered to be African derived or Black. The Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act, originating in California, was established in 2019 to address discriminatory practices as it relates to the wearing of natural hairstyles in workplace settings (The Crown Coalition, 2021). Currently, fourteen of fifty states have passed laws banning discriminatory practices of this nature in the workplace. Currently, no research specifically addresses the acceptance of natural hair in K-2 public classroom settings. By understanding the perceptions and challenges that educators face when considering implementing culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race hair, people of varying cultural identities can begin to have a much broader conversation about the dominant social norms that currently exist in the United States.

This study could benefit several stakeholders, including educators, administrators, educational policymakers, and the general public. For educators, findings from this study could result in heightened discourse which, in turn, could be leveraged to engage in the upheaval of more significant societal issues that define or plague the identities of Black and Black Mixed-Race people. It will allow educators to have productive discussions with colleagues and others about culturally affirming literature; as a result, it will enhance instructional decision-making and curricular practices. For administrators, this study will prompt leaders to examine the utility and frequency of instructional resources and dissect subgroup data to engage in reflective practices so that they can begin to collectively initiate conversations about culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy; while policymakers can start to see the importance of culturally affirming literature and its potential impact on society. As a result, the evaluation of its systems or structures could lead to the creation of culturally responsive classrooms and discourse at the district level;

thus, the implications of these policies could potentially include, but are not limited to, school dress code policies and policies related to state educational standards or curriculum adoptions.

Theoretical Framework

Historically, people of African descent or Black people have been marginalized in schools. During slavery, Black people were not allowed to read. When desegregation occurred, Black students were given limited materials and/or neglected resources (Brown & Valk, 2004). Many Black people have experienced disproportionalities in unfair tracking systems, the penal system, housing biases or discrimination, limited employment opportunities, and hair discrimination; these are just some areas in which African Americans have been marginalized by systems and institutions where Black people should feel safe (Sleeter & Grant, 2008).

Coined as the founder of Multicultural Education, James Banks sought to meet students' needs by creating spaces where all students could flourish. This space is created by changing the environment to reflect the composition within it, which simply means that the space creator must intentionally consider the cultural needs of the students who occupy the space. The goal of multicultural education is to ensure that all students have equal opportunities. This should not be contingent on their ethnicity, race, or social class (Banks, 1997). Geneva Gay expounds on the work of Banks to provoke educators and other stakeholders to consider a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. She recognized the need for educators to be aware of what was happening around them and respond appropriately. She also saw the student's need for avenues to enjoy learning with the increasing gaps in student achievement (Gay, 2000). One writer supports Cultural Responsiveness wrote that "education should be closely connected to the community that students live in and connect to the students' cultural needs" (Dessources, et al., 2020, p. 183). The forerunner of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Gloria Ladson-Billings, emphasizes the importance of civic engagement in which she noted that providing education in this way supports the growth and

development of healthy citizens who will, in turn, strengthen their communities and dismantle injustices (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Educators are also looking for ways to engage and meet the needs of their students. One way is through culturally affirming literature. There have been attempts to understand the significance of implementing culturally affirming literature; however, many of these attempts have been of a small-scale thus limiting its potential impact. Today, students are still looking for ways to be included in their educational experiences (Page, 2021). Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as a framework highlights the need to acknowledge students' culture in the learning process and it juxtaposes these experiences, ensuring that students' strengths and/or assets are fully nurtured (Gay, 2000). It is often characterized as inclusive of the following characteristics: student-focused, culturally relevant, educators act as facilitators of learning, positive environment, effective communication, and revising curriculum based on student needs (Gay, 2000). If these characteristics are present, then all students will have the opportunity for optimal growth and development.

This research study does not seek to diminish another race because all children are relevant and should have access to an equitable educational experience. Instead, this research study aims to highlight the importance of including culturally affirming literature, such as books about and/or including Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair, in the implementation of curriculum or curricular resources; often times, it is left out. All children, regardless of ethnicity, race, or cultural identification, should be able to identify and connect with literature that is shared with them in a classroom setting in some form or facet; unfortunately, this is not always the case for many Black and Mixed-Race students.

Research Questions

The research study analyzes the following questions: How comfortable are public K-2 early childhood educators with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically includes and/or focuses on

Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in K - 2 classrooms? I seek to further explore the following sub-questions: (a) What are educators' perceptions about explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms? (b) In what ways, do these perceptions differ depending on an educators' race or ethnicity? (c) What are the challenges, identified by educators, when considering explicitly teaching children's literature focused on the Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

By asking these questions about educators' perceptions, comfort, and challenges related to Black hair through a case study design, I hope to better formulate the rationale for the prevalence of the research gap as it relates to the implementation of culturally affirming literature. The avenue in which I am seeking this understanding is situated in culturally affirming literature that explicitly includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in public K-2 classroom settings and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

Assumptions, Delimitations, Limitations

Several assumptions were made regarding this research study: it was presupposed that all participants answered every question honestly and without bias or prejudice; all participants completed their weekly journal prompts honestly, fully, and in its entirety; all participants' motivation or motives for the study were the same. I later discovered that their motivations varied from what I initially presumed.

There were some limitations associated with this study. The research was conducted over five consecutive weeks that began October 2021 and concluded the first week of November 2021. Each participant spent approximately six hours participating in the research study. The sample size was small and consisted of four participants. Participants were selected for this study using convenience sampling due to the number of volunteers. Using a sample this small may have impacted the findings of this research study. However, having a smaller group allowed me to ask research questions and offer clarity, if needed. The data obtained through interviews and journal prompts provided an in-depth look into the

case study. Therefore, the research scope is restricted to the number of participants involved, limiting my ability to generalize from a broader perspective.

I also acknowledge possible subjectivity. As a Black woman with natural hair who is also a wife, a parent, grandmother, administrator, and former educator, I have had many natural hair experiences. In response to my positionality, I considered my reflexivity by acknowledging my position as a researcher (Haynes, 2012). I also recognize that my race and natural hair may have impacted the responses of some participants.

Summary

This research study represents an organized attempt to better understand educators' perceptions regarding culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 public classrooms. This study is unique in that an area not previously explored is the primary focus of the research. Educators are often told what to teach but are not always asked how comfortable they feel about what they are teaching. They are also often given limited flexibility in choosing the resources that they implement. This is problematic and validates the relevance and need for this qualitative research study. Understanding educators' perceptions, opinions, and thoughts about these issues will set the stage for a positive outcome that is rooted in acknowledgement and action. This, in turn, will correlate to student success deliverables, especially for Black and/or Black Mixed-Race students.

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

Historically, Black people have been marginalized. This marginalization occurs through unfair tracking systems, disproportionality in the penal system, housing biases or discrimination, limited employment opportunities, and school dress code policies (Sleeter & Grant, 2008). These unjustifiable practices include natural hair discrimination. These are just some of the areas in which African Americans have been disadvantaged by systems and institutions where Black people should feel safe (Sleeter & Grant, 2008). This still happens, throughout society, even in schools. Black students are still looking for ways to be included in educational experiences (Page, 2021); as a result, this leaves educators searching for new, innovative strategies to engage and meet the needs of Black and Black Mixed-Race students.

This literature review seeks to examine the natural hair style choices of Black people, particularly African Americans, and the implications/connotations of said choices. This literature review includes a discussion about the importance of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy by highlighting the research gaps that still exist as it relates to the implementation of culturally affirming literature. There is limited to no research about teachers' perceptions when considering implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in public K-2 classroom settings. Furthermore, it explores racial barriers associated with natural hair, the settings in which natural hair matters, hair aggression in schools, hair in classrooms, and why natural hair representation matters in all spaces as well as how these characterizations translate in K-2 educational environments.

Research Collection Sources Used Within the Study

Platforms used to conduct this research include, but are not limited to, EBSCOHost, ERIC, and Google Searches. These platforms were used to provide context and gather relevant information for this research study. Internet articles, peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, books, and data from multiple websites were used to support this case study. Some of the keywords searched include but are

not limited to: *race, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy,* and *multicultural education*. Historical and current data was obtained to provide contextual support for this research study. In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks that validate the need for this research study.

Theoretical Framework

James Banks (1997) is credited for his extensive work in the field of Multicultural Education. Multicultural theoretical frameworks such as: Conservative, Liberal, and Critical Multiculturalism are referenced to support the argument that all students should have an equal and equitable educational experience (Jenks, et al., 2001). Multicultural education aims to create spaces where all students can flourish. This space is fashioned by changing the environment so that it reflects the composition within it. The goal of multicultural education is to ensure that all students have equal opportunities. This should not be contingent on their ethnicity, race, or social class (Banks, 1997).

In a study, Bradley-Levine (2018) sought to bridge the gap between advocacy and the classroom. The author suggests that teacher leadership happens when advocacy is in action. To further validate this claim, the author used multiple theories; these theories include: "critical pedagogy, collaborative leadership, and ethical leadership to frame teacher advocacy on behalf of students who are traditionally marginalized" (Bradley, 2018, p. 47). The focus groups of this research study included male minority students, particularly Hispanic and African American students, English Language Learners, and students with special needs. Levine (2018) wanted to observe educators' interactions when dealing with these groups and their distinct situations and needs. The researcher concluded that "teacher advocacy is not only a practice of critical pedagogy and teacher leadership, but it is also a practice of ethical leadership. It is a way of practicing critical teacher leadership" (Bradley, 2018, p. 47).

Gloria Ladson-Billings is credited for the introduction of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP). Ladson-Billings (1994) noted the importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in which she highlights the

need to understand students' culture in learning. Early on, she was intrigued by how Au and Jordan (1983) used the term "culturally appropriate" pedagogy in their work to describe literacy instruction in Hawaiian schools. In those schools, students' backgrounds — particularly their cultural backgrounds — were intentionally considered to enhance instructional practices (Au & Jordan 1981, p. 139 in Ladson-Billings, 1995). In defining practices, involving students of various cultures, Billings (1995) recognized that Black students were often marginalized and did not receive adequate educational opportunities to be engaged and learn productively (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For this reason, she sought to highlight these discrepancies and work towards a culturally responsive approach to counter the injustices that she noticed.

Geneva Gay (2010) has done extensive work around Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). She expounds on the work of Banks to provoke educators and other stakeholders to consider a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. She observed the curricular needs of Black students who were traditionally disparaged and sought to identify avenues for these students to enjoy learning and experience success (Gay, 2000). She supports the notion that students will more than likely be empowered when CRP is implemented correctly, in which students' cultural needs are used as a reference point for instructional outcomes. Via the promotion of this sense of empowerment, students will begin to develop "intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (Gay, 2010 p.2). Furthermore, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy highlights the need to intertwine students' culture via an instructional lens while championing families and community members to help encourage, support, and build up students (Gay, 2000; Waly, 2020). Hence, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy prepares educators to be aware of what is happening around them as well as how to appropriately respond to those events (Dessources, 2020). The teacher who aims to be culturally responsive always seeks to meet the needs of all students, and this includes both their cultural and academic needs.

In the past, attempts have been made to steer educators toward implementing culturally relevant and culturally responsive curriculum that promotes the acceptance of all students. Until recently, social norms that identify Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair has been endorsed, with prejudice, as the norm; it has been left unchallenged even in educational settings. Leaders, whether at the district or school level, have often stated that educators have the mindset to teach well but have a limited understanding of the cultural backgrounds and the cultural needs of the students that they teach (Waly, 2020). In response to these internal limitations, educators sometimes shy away from implementing new content or curriculum that they are not familiar with. Statistics contend that many educators do not share the same demographic background as the students that they teach (Waly, 2020). The problem is that there is a research gap in educational settings and practice in understanding how educators truly feel about implementing culturally affirming literature that includes and/or specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Previous studies have been conducted in a much broader scope and do not specifically focus on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair; however, an in-depth study has not been conducted to assess how educators truly feel about implementing such literary works.

Racial Barriers for Natural Hair

The world got along without race for the overwhelming majority of its history. The U.S. has never been without it. (David R. Roediger, n.d.)

Being Black with natural hair was far from what society considered beautiful in the past. In the United States, hair discrimination has always been deeply rooted; embedded within it are issues regarding the color of one's skin. Before the 1500s, race had a different meaning. During those times, the term was used to display association or relation to a particular group or groups of people. Today, race has very much evolved. It is used to describe both the attributes and characteristics of groups of people (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2021). According to the National Museum of African

American History and Culture (NMAAHC), the term race is a made-up term that is derived from human design; particularly in the United States.

The history of race in the U.S. is a tumultuous one. Racism existed in nearly every aspect of human life and impacted the quality of life for many African Americans (Brown & Valk, 2004). From the rise of slavery, the Civil War to the Civil Rights era, Black people constantly sought their liberty from oppression due to unfair practices and laws (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2021). For example, they organized and participated in protests and boycotts to show their disagreement with how they were being treated (Orfield & Lee, 2005). These laws, known as Jim Crow laws, caused a multitude of problems for Black people; Jim Crow laws were designed to restrict and exclude African Americans from enjoying freedoms that white people were privy to (Brown & Valk, 2004). Segregation laws were structured in such a way that African Americans found themselves being discriminated against in systematic and institutionalized ways, including housing, healthcare, employment opportunities, resources, and voting (History.com Editors, 2018). One major example of this type of discrimination involved the bus boycott in 1955 (History.com Editors, 2009); subsequently, people who were not white had limited access to many of the things that white people enjoyed freely. In the same sense, Black people were treated unfairly with regards to education. For many years, schools were segregated which meant that Black students could not attend the same schools as white students. Under these circumstances, many African Americans were not provided equitable access to resources among many other things needed for a proper education. In response, many people opposed this biased treatment by speaking out; often times in the form of protests. Many people decided to take legal action in opposition to such treatment; thus, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, a landmark case, set the stage for educational change. This case was very complex in that it consolidated five cases into one. The 1954 ruling concluded that it was unconstitutional to segregate public schools in the United States (Brown & Valk, 2004). For

many, this historic, monumental case is known today as the cornerstone or turning point for educational equality in the United States. The first students to ever enter a segregated high school after this legislative change were nine students from Little Rock who became known as the "Little Rock Nine." Later, Ruby Bridges became the first student to enter a segregated elementary school. This integration resulted in protests from multiple races (Brown & Valk, 2004). This was a move, for some, in the right direction but it would not come without its future challenges.

The impact of the long history of racism in the United States has played a substantial role in shaping today's societal norms; some, of which, are still present today. Societal norms refer to the beliefs and criterion that society heralds as being of great value and/or importance; these beliefs govern individual attitudes, perceptions, and the actions. Thus, it is no surprise that recent statistics acknowledge that Black people are treated unjustly in comparison to white people (Hurtado, 2019; Sleeter & Grant, 2008). African Americans continue to be marginalized in many ways such as employment, education, access to healthcare, housing, and politics (Sleeter & Grant, 2008). Time (2020) reported the disproportionality in penal systems, highlighting the fact that Black people account for thirty-three percent of those incarcerated while White people make-up thirty percent. This statistic does not seem alarming until it is revealed that Black people only account for about thirteen percent of the United States (US) population; in contrast, White people reflect sixty-four percent (Bridges, 2020). These statistics contribute to an overwhelming portion of the school-to-prison pipeline data that plagues Black people in the United States; the prison-to-school pipeline references the disproportionality of minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose disciplinary practices push these individuals out of school and into prisons. To move from years of marginalization along the same trajectory seems asinine; however, society must be open to examining and challenging their own perceptions about the world that we live in, including views about race and natural hair as it relates to Black and Black Mixed-Race students.

"My hair doesn't need to be fixed. Society's view of beauty is what's broken" *(*napturallycurly.com); according to Owusu-Kwarteng, "hair' is something we all relate to regardless of gender, ethnicity, and/or social class" (2020, p.1). Conversely, for many African Americans, their natural hair has been seen as unprofessional and offensive. For example, according to one man's account of a particular incident at work, a White woman alluded to the fact that having a certain kind of hairline makes a person appear to be aggressive. These conclusions are biased and discriminative towards African Americans. The consequence of these prejudiced views has resulted in the unemployability of many Black people; hence, these individuals are left to choose between their natural hairstyles choices and employment. Workplace hair discrimination is important to discuss because if there is intolerance in the workplace, then we must consider how this affects other employees as well as other sectors like educational settings. Dove notes that "race-based hair discrimination starts as early as five years old (The Crown Coalition, 2021)." In 2019, a Dove Crown Research Study that consisted of 2000 women: fifty percent Black and fifty percent White, Dove reported the following findings:

> A Black woman is 80% more likely to change her natural hair to meet social norms or expectations at work. Black women are 1.5 times more likely to be sent home or know of a Black woman sent home from the workplace because of her hair (The Crown Coalition, 2021).

In an initiative to counter these narratives, the Crown Act, which stands for Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair, began in California in 2019 to assist in establishing fair rights regarding Black natural hair in workplace settings. This was the first legislative law that was enacted to ban natural hair discrimination; since its enactment, several states have not followed suit in the push towards natural hair equality. Currently, only fourteen states have banned natural hair discrimination in the workplace (The Crown Coalition, 2021). The fight for natural hair agency and autonomy further validates the need for a

societal awareness as well as the derobing of the systematic inequitable practices that are still prevalent today.

Black Hair vs. Media

Truth is, I cut my hair for freedom, not for beauty. (Chrisette Michele, n.d.)

Media plays a major role in what is portrayed to society and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair (Crenshaw, 1991; Phelps-Ward, 2016; Laura, 2016; West, 2002). In a survey conducted by Cheskin/Added Value, released by the *Washington Post*, Black women were shown various media projections and were prompted to share their feedback. The survey revealed that many Black women felt a negative connection to the media; many of these women cited feeling negative thoughts and emotions (Thompson, 2013). The notion of having natural hair that is defined as being either *bad*, *nappy*, or *coarse* is not all due to the media, but it certainly has had a major influence on what these terms insinuate (Laura & Phelps-Ward, 2016; Lester, 1999). In September of 2020, TRESemme hair products shared an advertisement in South Africa portraying distinct pictorial differences between black women having either "frizzy and dull" or "dry and damaged'' hair as opposed to white women having "normal, fine, and flat" hair (BBC, 2020). Although TRESemme suspended several employees, offered one resignation, and issued an apology, the damage had already been done.

The rhetoric portrayed through the media has the power to captivate audiences and influence their thinking. However, attempts have been made to address the unfavorable portrayals of Black people in the media. In the 1960s, a group called the Black Panther Party, sported afros in celebration of Black pride and natural hair. The late singer James Brown exclaimed in his famous song in 1968: "Say it loud, I'm Black, and I'm Proud." More recently, the Marvel box office hit, The Black Panther (2018) featured an almost all-Black cast; most of the cast members were portrayed as strong, powerful, beautiful, brilliant, and resilient. These cast members wore their natural hair and many of them wore no makeup. On the

contrary, in movies, it is atypical to see Black people portrayed in a dominant or positive role. After starring in this movie, Lupita N'yongo, a dark-skinned woman of African descent, became the face and symbol of natural beauty and culture (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2020). In one of her statements N'yongo (n.d.) affirmed, "There's room in this world for beauty to be diverse."

Natural Hair Matters

Diversity of hair choices has not always been afforded to Black people. When Black people style their hair, they must consider where they are going and what they are doing. For instance, when going swimming, most Black people think about how their natural hair will fair after they swim. When the weather is humid or it is raining outside, most Black people must consider whether they will cover their hair or wait for the rain to subside. They often ask themselves questions like: *Should I wear my hair the way I want to or the way that I am expected to?* These considerations are made by Black people regularly. When Black people are going to work and other settings, they must consider their hairstyle choices while others may not. These nuances speak to the intricacies of the daily, lived Black experience and their hair.

Roderick Carey (2020) identifies how Black boys are depicted and how they matter: Marginal, Partial, and Comprehensive. Marginal Mattering explores the issues related to the treatment of Black boys as it relates to unfair disciplinary practices, including hair discipline; whereas, Partial Mattering focuses on the situational acceptance of Black boys (Carey, 2020). For example, many Black boys are only acknowledged in settings where it is advantageous to support them such as sporting events and/or in instances where they are needed to do certain things like take an assessment and perform well. On the other hand, Comprehensive Mattering urges people to really consider Black boys and how they matter both holistically and completely (Carey, 2020). This approach causes Black boys to engage in reflective practice to identify their societal fit or mattering, especially in a society where stigmatizing social norms,

including politically correct subtleties, have a major impact on their lives. It is in this space that Black boys can begin to tell their own stories and open the door for deeper reflection (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993).

Cotterill & Letherby (1993), referenced sociological auto/biographies as means of reflection. One woman who described her hair experiences as a young child into adulthood realized the significance of how her personal hairstyle choices were impacted by her experiences throughout her life. She noted that her previous experiences had a major impact on her trajectory (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2020). According to Owusu-Kwarteng (2020), Black people choose their hairstyle choices depending on the situation. These hairstyle choices are often made based on the setting as well.

Natural Hair Aggression in Schools

Natural hair aggression is common in schools today. In recent years, places such as schools, where students are supposed to flourish have become restrictive. Many African American students have been scrutinized because of their outward appearance, particularly their natural hair choices. Over the years, this has been evident in iniquitous tracking systems, zero-tolerance policies, curriculum inadequacies, and school dress code policies (Dumas, 2018; Hotchkins, 2016); there are several documented instances where students were disciplined for not adhering to school dress code policies. More recently, media outlets have reported several instances of students being treated harshly because of their natural hair choices (Blackistone, 2018; The Grio, 2018; Jackman, 2018; Morgan-Smith, 2018). These policies have made it almost impossible for students to wear durags or bonnets — a type of head covering that is traditionally worn in the Black community to protect, preserve, or enhance one's natural hair or hair style— to school without facing some form of discipline; students have been excluded, suspended, expelled, or disallowed (Dumas, 2018; Hotchkins, 2016). Nevertheless, the effects of such actions have been overwhelmingly disproportionate and have a significantly negative impact, triggering feelings of frustration and isolation. Many Black students have been unjustly punished due to biased dress code policies, unfair tracking

systems, and their natural hairstyle choices. Reform measures have not been successful in the past because school-to-prison pipeline data suggests otherwise; therefore, it is important to understand the implications of student hair selections. In essence, it is about understanding culture; Yara Shahidi (n.d.), a Black Mixed-Race actress from the television sitcom, "Grown-ish," echoes this sentiment: "my curls are an outward manifestation of my culture." In hair, specifically referencing Black and Black Mixed-Race students, individuals find their identity and cultural belonging; thus, hair is more than just a style, but it affords students with a place of security and validation to share their culture in a non-threatening environment that is both liberating and empowering (Waly, 2020). This should be at the core of the educational experience and the mission of all educational leaders which, in turn, will elevate Black identity, value, and worth in educational spaces.

A school's staff is only as strong as its leader. Solid leadership is essential because it has a significant impact (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Educational leaders must have a clear vision for their school, rigorous expectations, and a defined mission. Educational leaders must also make sure that educators are prepared, especially new teachers, and intentional in their utility of instructional best practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995); thus, these individuals have an obligation to provide teachers with a professional learning toolkit that is rooted in culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices. Culturally responsive leaders are responsible for the climate and culture that they design within their schools; they must consider students who have traditionally been marginalized (Gay, 2010; Waly, 2016) and foster the instructional conditions that support equitable access and brave spaces for students to be their authentic selves.

Hair in the Classroom

Attempts at inclusivity, in practice, have been made to include Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in an educational context (Leyden, 1998); for example, in Brooklyn, New York, a white schoolteacher, Ruth Sherman, shared a book entitled, "Nappy Hair" by Carolivia Herron with her third-grade class. What

she thought was going to be a joyful, engaging experience with her students turned out to be a disaster. Due to her presentation of the literary content, which involved culturally intended dialogue, she faced major scrutiny and backlash from the community that she served. She once stated that "[she] was trying to teach [students] about getting along and loving each other, no matter what color [their] skin was" (Leyden, 1998). Based on this incident, it can be inferred that public educators should be cognizant and fully trained to implement the curriculum in a way that adds value to students' cultural experiences.

In the past, very few culturally affirming books that focused on and/or included Black natural hair existed. Recently, this has changed. Now, there are several natural hair books available for teachers and students to utilize. Below is a list of some of these books with links to YouTube video read alouds.

1. *Hair Love* by Matthew A. Cherry

2. *I am Enough* by Grace Byers

3. *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut* by Derrick Barnes

4. *Don't Touch My Hair* by Sharee Miller

5. *I Love My Hair* by Natasha Tarpley

6. *Cool Cuts* by Mechal Renee Roe

7. *Curlilocks and the Big Bad Hairbrush* by Yolanda King

Natural hair literature is continuing to gain public attention. In 2019, a book that was also made into a short film, *Hair Love* was released by author Matthew A. Cherry. Cherry juxtaposes the experiences of a Black girl with natural hair and her father styling her natural hair. This story offers a counter-narrative to the current social stigmas that characterize Black boys and men (Carey, 2020); the traditional gender normative references to the father as being gentle and loving conveys a series of child-like messages: natural hair is okay, a man styling his daughter's hair is okay, and having healthy relationships is okay.

Natural Hair Representation Matters

Children must see themselves in the literature that they read. At a young age, girls begin to look at the images portrayed in mainstream media that highlight or glorify features that may be different from their own (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Edwards, 2005). One of those features is natural hair; it has brought to the forefront the extrinsic and intrinsic beliefs that have been taught directly or indirectly through media and social interactions (Hurtado, 2019; Jefferies, 2014). When students do not see themselves in stories and/or educational apps, they begin to question their own identity and look for ways to belong. One student recently advocated for changes for underrepresented Black students. Recently, Morgan Bugg, an African American seven-year-old girl from Brentwood, Tennessee, persuaded Freckle, a common educational app, to adjust their representation of the children it serves. To play the games included on the educational site, each child had to create an avatar. After noticing that there were no avatars made to look like her, she contacted them. As a result, Freckle added more hairstyle options for students who look like Bugg (Page, 2021). It is important not to discount the cultural experiences of all children, including the Black and Black Mixed-Race child; it is through these unique, inclusive experiences and encounters that students are able to connect, embrace, and celebrate their uniqueness. For Bugg, having an avatar that looked like her connected her to the learning experiences that were embedded in Freckle.

Culturally responsive practices go beyond the doors of a classroom (Waly, 2020). It is important that people of African descent experience freedom of expression when it comes to their natural hair. Natural hair is a huge part of the Black experience because it is what people of African descent or African Americans are born with. In African American communities, hair has been credited for starting conversations and building relational capacity (Edwards, 2005). Many of these conversations take place in barbershops, hair salons, across dinner tables, and in other social gatherings. It is more than a fashion statement or social function; it is part of the Black experience. For many Black people, the barbershop is

seen as the place for grooming and conversation, but it is also seen as a place for social gathering, relationship-building, and networking. Young children have been known to receive a free book after getting their haircut. Young girls come out of the salon after getting their hair styled feeling confident and beautiful. In this space, people socialize, connect and feel like family. The relationship between a barber and their client is one of the most important relationships a Black person will ever have. In a barbershop, very few topics are off limits, meaning that one can talk about topics such as health, movies, music, food, or the day-to-day life. Often, Black people leave barber shops feeling uplifted and encouraged. While other people walk away feeling discouraged, especially when they have a bad hair experience (Owusu-Kwareng, 2020); a bad hair experience occurs when a person goes into a salon to get their hair styled, but they feel undervalued and/or receive negative comments from their hairstylist and/or people in the salon due to the nature of their hair in which some would ridicule and call *unmanageable*, *nappy*, or *not straight*. One woman described how she watched these encounters happening to others while at the hair salon; she noted that some people behaved in that manner because of their desire to be seen in a positive light by their clientele and peers (Owusu-Kwareng, 2020). Similarly, Black and Black Mixed-Raced individuals desire to be seen in a positive light; one that allows them to unapologetically reflect their true heritage, identity, and cultural traditions.

Conclusion

I decided to conduct this research study because currently there is a research gap in educational settings and practice in understanding how educators truly feel about considering and implementing culturally affirming literature, or literature that includes and/or specifically focuses on Black or Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Throughout the literature review, I examined racial barriers associated with natural hair, the settings in which natural hair matters, hair aggression in schools, hair in classrooms, and why natural hair representation matters in all spaces. This research is relevant and of great importance

because it provides information for educators and other stakeholders to examine issues deeply rooted in society — issues that are still impacting Black and Black Mixed-Race students today.

It is necessary to assess the feelings of educators who are in classrooms everyday teaching children because it is up to educators to provide avenues for students to connect to instructional content. When educators effectively create a climate where Black and Black Mixed-Race students' cultural needs are met, students will begin to freely operate in spaces of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2019). Including culturally affirming literature provides an avenue for a sense of belonging for Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair students. These intentional educational experiences should be closely connected to the community that students live in (Dessources, et al., 2020). Educators must ensure that students have places where they feel that they are both acknowledged and validated (Waly, 2020).

This research will open the door for further research in this current field of study involving natural hair. This study could help inform decision-making regarding policies and laws that are non-tolerant of natural hair. One policy example is dress code policies. This research contributes to the repertoire of growing knowledge supporting culturally affirming pedagogical practices. Ultimately, this research supports the growth of all students both personally and academically using Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as a framework. This experience also belongs in classrooms.

This research study seeks to examine and understand the attitudes and challenges that K-2 public educators experience when implementing culturally affirming literature. More specifically, literature that explicitly includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in classroom settings because it is often left out. All children should be able to identify and connect with literature that is shared with them in a classroom setting in some form or facet and relate it to their role as citizens in their own communities. Culturally Relevant and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy provides an avenue for this type of intentional cultivation. Gauging how educators feel about implementing culturally affirming literature

that explicitly includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 public classrooms will allow for important conversations in the future surrounding the education of Black and Black Mixed-Race children. The following chapter contains a detailed description of the methods used to conduct this research study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In this case study, I examined the social norms associated with Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in public educational settings by exploring the challenges faced by educators and society when conceptualizing and implementing culturally affirming literature, particularly, literature that explicitly includes and focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 classrooms. While conducting this qualitative research study, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How comfortable were K-2 early childhood educators with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

    (a) What were educators' perceptions about explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

    (b) In what ways, did these perceptions differ depending on an educator's race or ethnicity?

    (c) What were the challenges, identified by educators, when considering explicitly teaching children's literature focused on the Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

Research Design and Methods

I chose a qualitative design to conduct this research study to appropriately examine participants' thoughts and feelings about implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. The research design for this qualitative study was a multiple case study. Multiple case studies involve cases that are happening in real-time and that can be compared with other cases (Cresswell, 2013). Choosing this type of study allowed the researcher to examine these cases in real-time and collect data using multiple sources such as interviews, journals, observations, and other sources (Cresswell, 2013). The next sections include the following: sampling

procedures data collection methods, data analysis techniques, scheduling, and limitations associated with this qualitative research study.

Data Collection/Instruments

I collected data using instruments such as pre and post interviews, reflective journals, and artifacts provided by K-2 public educators. Pre- and post-interview questions and reflective journal prompts were designed to underscore the research questions and gain clarity as it relates to participant responses. Yin (2009) recommended six types of data collection which include "documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts" (p.101). The use of the chosen data collection methods allowed me to attain a deeper understanding of each participant's thoughts, feelings, and processes while engaging in this study. The Data collection process was conducted over a five-week period.

Interviews

In case studies, interviews are used to capture respondents' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Cresswell, 2013). Each participant was asked to watch a thirty-eight-minute video/documentary about natural hair and its importance in literary works. The documentary, available on YouTube, included the stories of children between the ages of thirteen and seventeen. After watching the documentary, I interviewed participants using Google Meet, a video conference platform. These pre-interviews occurred after participants watched the video documentary, and the post-interview occurred following the completion of the fourth weekly journal prompt. I began the overall study during the first full week in October 2021 and concluded five weeks later in early November. All participants were asked the same questions to obtain an in-depth account of participants' background experiences, thoughts, and feelings. More than half of the pre-and post-interview questions were created to attain a better understanding of each participant's current and prior experiences, such as the number of years taught, subjects taught, and

educational experiences. The remainder of the questions focused primarily on participants' use of culturally affirming literature and their feelings about it (See appendices for full interview protocol). I used semi-structured open-ended questions to allow respondents to share their thoughts and feelings freely (Cresswell, 2013; See Appendix D). These semi-structured interviews consisted of two recorded one-on-one conversations with each participant virtually using the digital video platform, Google Meet. I chose this method due to public health and safety concerns associated with Covid-19. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed using Scribbl, a Google Meet transcription software. I, then, listened to the recordings and edited any transcription errors manually. Participants sent their weekly journal reflections via email. All transcripts and journal reflections were labeled and included on a Google Spreadsheet.

Reflective Journaling/Artifacts

To gain a better understanding of teachers' thoughts and feelings throughout this study, participants were asked to complete a series of four weekly journal prompts. In these journals, participants provided details about their experiences during the study. Participants were given the option to voluntarily collect and share pictures of artifacts via email. Examples of such artifacts included but were not limited to writing samples, drawings, reading lists, lesson plans, and other artifacts deemed viable by the participant. Each participant contributed to this research by answering all of the pre- and post-interview questions and responding to all of the prompts given. Individual participants were contacted, if more clarity was needed, regarding their responses.

Recruitment

Public educators within a Midwest state of the United States who taught grades K-2 were eligible for this study. It was determined that the minimum number of participants for this study would be four; however, a maximum of eight participants would be permitted to participate in this research study.

Recruitment materials, such as flyers, were sent to principals and/or administrators via email within the specified Midwest region.

On the flyer, participants were prompted to express their interest in participating in the research study by emailing the researcher directly. The initial plan was to use purposive sampling to obtain a more diverse sample of the population group that the study would focus on; however, convenience sampling occurred because only four participants volunteered for the study. Upon volunteering, all participants were informed about how the data would be collected, used, and stored. Participants were also notified that the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) approval was obtained to conduct this research study.

Data Analysis/Presentation

The primary data collection instruments used in this research study were pre- and post-interviews, reflective journals, and artifacts. To interpret the results of this multiple case study, I conducted a thematic analysis examining each case. The thematic analysis involves examining connections amongst information provided and determining how it relates to the overall research (Onwuegbuzie, et al., 2012). The data from the pre- and post-interviews and reflective journals were transcribed and analyzed using inductive coding techniques. Data was then sorted into common themes. All information was manually recorded using a Google Spreadsheet. The codes: *perceived challenges and barriers* and *comfortability and connections to learning* were ascribed to the following example shown below. Participant One wrote:

> *The biggest barrier is just trying to make sure that it fits in with what you're doing in the classroom. But I do think that kindergarten is a little more of an acceptable place to do that because you know, we have liberty to, you know, to tweak our curriculum; and I think especially in the age we live in right now where you're trying to teach social-emotional learning and self-love and all of this kind of stuff. It's more important to, you know, give students a chance to talk about, you know,*

what they look like, who they identify with [and] what their families' like; and that in itself, giv[es]

them a chance to talk about it. I think it just makes them more comfortable with the people they're

around, and when you're more comfortable, you're going to learn more in the end. So, I think it's

a good thing.

I stored all interview transcriptions, coded files, recordings, and artifacts electronically in a file on my

computer and an external hard drive in a locked secure location within my home. A cross-case analysis

was constructed. Table 1 includes the steps that were taken to complete this research process.

Table 1

Data Analysis Process

Steps	Type of Data Analysis Process	Description
1.	Coding pre and post interviews, reflective journals and artifacts)	Inductive coding techniques involved using raw data and creating common themes and concepts (Cresswell, 2013).
2.	Thematic Analysis	Grouping data into themes allowed the researcher to obtain a complete description of the cases and recognize emerging themes (Cresswell, 2013).
Steps	Type of Data Analysis Process	Description
3.	Cross-Case Analysis	A cross-case analysis was conducted to allow the researcher to get a clear representation of the resonating themes that are apparent amongst all the participants in the study (Cresswell, 2013).

Validity and Reliability of Data

To provide validity and reliability throughout this research study, I used methods such as triangulation of data (*i.e., pre- and post-interviews, reflective journals*) and reflexivity by acknowledging my position as a researcher (Haynes, 2012). Triangulation involves "using multiple sources of data or multiple approaches to analyze data to enhance the credibility of a research study" (Salkind, 2010). Throughout the research study, I challenged my assumptions, biases, and judgments by asking questions during the pre- and post-interviews. To obtain clarity of participants' statements, within the journal prompts, participants were asked the same semi-structured open-ended questions during both the pre- and post-interviews. This was done to ensure that there was reliability and validity in the statements made by participants. Reflective journal notes shared by participants were utilized to generate meaning and provide additional context. (See Appendix E for Weekly Reflective Journal Prompts)

Confidentiality

To ensure that the identity of all participants remained anonymous including data obtained from the interviews and reflective journals, specific measures were taken to maintain strict confidentiality. Since the interview recordings included identifiable information, measures were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants by assigning pseudonyms to all participants. All recorded files were password protected. Recordings were stored on a secure personal computer, on an external hard drive, and then kept in a locked secure location. The recordings were used only for transcription purposes. Each interview was transcribed and then coded into themes to determine if there were any resonating commonalities amongst participants in the research study.

Positionality

The origin of this research study stems from my own experiences: I decided to "go natural" while I was teaching in a first-grade classroom. It was at that point that I realized that there was relevance in

considering natural hair and how it underscores the day-to-day lives of school-aged children. I reflected on my struggles with accepting my natural hair; I was also determined not to allow this same experience to happen to other teachers and students who want to wear their natural hair.

I am an African American woman who has natural hair, which is hair that has not been chemically processed. I am married with four children: one is an adult, and I have three school-age children; I am also a first-time grandmother. I am a school administrator and former elementary school classroom teacher with over ten years of teaching experience ranging from grades K-4. As a Black woman, a former classroom teacher, administrator, parent, and grandparent, I could relate with many of the experiences described by the participants and sought to ensure that no biases or self-opinions were imposed on participants in the study. I, however, put my feelings and views aside to more adequately examine and listen to the thoughts and feelings of the participants involved in this research study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Description of Study

In educational settings, social norms that identify Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in a derogatory manner have been prevalent across industries, especially in educational settings. The purpose of this research study is to examine this issue by exploring educators' feelings about implementing culturally affirming literature that includes and/or specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in hopes of understanding why it is limited and/or non-existent in schools, particularly K-2 classrooms. The main question that I sought to understand was the comfort level of public, early childhood K-2 educators with teaching literature and curriculum specifically including and/or focusing on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. To answer the main question, information was divided into several sub-questions as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Research Questions

Main Question: How comfortable were K-2 early childhood educators with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?	
Sub-Question A.	What were educators' perceptions about explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?
Sub-Question B.	In what ways, did these perceptions differ depending on an educators' race or ethnicity?
Main Question: How comfortable were K-2 early childhood educators with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?	
Sub-Question C.	What were the challenges, identified by educators, when considering explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in K -2 classrooms?

The research design for this qualitative study is a multiple case study. This research design was chosen because multiple case studies involve cases that are currently taking place and that can be compared and analyzed with other cases (Cresswell, 2013). This allowed me to better understand each of the four individual cases and conduct a cross case analysis. Using data collection techniques such as interviews and journals, an in-depth study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the use of

culturally affirming literature that includes and/or specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Using the prescribed data collection techniques, participants were asked to watch a documentary before completing a pre-interview and a post-interview at the end of the research study period. The pre- and post-interview questions are shown below.

1. Describe your educational experiences as a child?

2. Describe your educational experiences (education)?

3. How many years have you been teaching?

4. Describe your teaching experience (grade levels taught)?

5. What content areas/subjects do you currently teach? Are there any content areas/subjects that you could see yourself teaching in the future?

6. Have you taught other grade levels and subject areas? If so, please explain.

7. Describe the demographic composition of your school.

   a. Race/Ethnicity of students and staff

   b. Approximate number or percentage of students and staff

8. Do you use culturally relevant books in your classroom? If so, explain.

9. Have you ever used books related specifically to Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair? If so please, please explain.

10. How do you feel about teaching using books that explicitly focus on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair? Please share your thoughts and feelings.

11. Are there any barriers or challenges that you face when considering implementing books about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair?

12. Do you feel that race/ethnicity will have an impact on the presentation of such books about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair?

Over a four-week period, participants received a weekly prompt. Participants were asked to read and respond to each prompt accordingly. A sample of the weekly prompts is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Weekly Journal Prompts

Week	Journal Prompt Question
1	Currently, in your classroom, do you have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.
Week	Journal Prompt Question
2	Take a visit to your school library. Does your school library have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.
3	Read a book to your class that focuses explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair or a book that has Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair. Record and share your experiences.
4	Read a book to your class that focuses explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair or a book that has Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair. Record and share your experiences.

Data from both the pre- and post-interviews and journal samples were collected and transcribed. Once transcribed, data was then coded into emerging themes using thematic analysis. To establish validity and reliability, a cross-case analysis was conducted to attain a better assessment of the resonating themes or shared themes that were apparent amongst all of the participants in the research study (Cresswell, 2013).

The purpose of this chapter is to report the results and findings of this research study. The following information discusses these findings based on participants' responses throughout the research study. This chapter is organized into three main sections: description of participants, results and findings, and summary.

Description of Participants

Data was collected from a total of four K-2 public educators who currently teach and reside in the Midwest. All participants were given pseudonyms in order to maintain their confidentiality. Of the four participants, 50% of them are Black. The other fifty percent are White. Participants' ages range from thirty-eight to fifty-seven years old. All participants in this research study are women. All participants in this research study have obtained a masters' degree or higher. Participant experience varied, ranging from a current total of eleven to thirty-four years of teaching experience. Participants' grade levels spanned across grades K-6. Currently, all participants reported teaching all subject areas — with an emphasis on both reading and math. In the future, all participants could see themselves continuing to teach, but the capacity in which they would teach varied. All participants reported some form of diversity at their current schools, but the degree of diversity differed based on the information given by participants; three of the four participants described their schools as racially and ethnically diverse while one participant referenced the limited diversity within her school. All participants reported that there was very little to no diversity

amongst staff at their current and/or previous schools. Table 4 provides a more in-depth individual description of each research study participant's educational background and demographic information.

Table 4

Individual Description of Each Participant

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Current Grade Level	Total Years Teaching	Grades Previously Taught	Educational Attainment
Kim	Late 30's	Female	White	K	10+	K, 6	Masters
Amy	Late 30's	Female	White	2	15+	Pre-K, 1,2,3	Masters
Michelle	Early 50's	Female	Black	2	25+	1,2,3,5	Masters
Participant	**Age**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Current Grade Level**	**Total Years Teaching**	**Grades Previously Taught**	**Educational Attainment**
Erika	Late 50's	Female	Black	2	30+	K,1,2	Doctorate

It is important to note that although most of the participants have first grade teaching experience, none of them currently teach first grade.

Results and Findings

To understand how comfortable early childhood public educators are with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 classrooms, this research study is organized into three sections by sub-questions. It is organized in this manner because each sub-question serves as a prerequisite in helping to answer the main research question. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of participants' thoughts and feelings during this research study about the main research question as categorized by each sub-question. Emerging themes are embedded within each section. Data from interviews and journal prompts are shared,

including direct quotes which were used to provide both context and meaning of the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout the research study.

What were educators' perceptions about explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

Educators' prior experiences and their motivation and/or desire to use culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in their classrooms are more than likely connected. These perceptions are associated with educators' previous experiences which, in turn, impacts their overall desire and/or motivation to include diverse literature in their classrooms. During the pre and post interviews, participants were asked to share some of their life experiences. Examples of these statements are listed below:

1. Describe your educational experiences as a child (childhood).

2. Describe your educational experiences (education).

Erika, a Black woman in her late fifties, provides an account of her childhood experience which offers added contextual support and clarity as it relates to her feelings regarding Black hair styles:

So, in fact, some of my experiences with the black natural hair and braids. And all of that was very uncomfortable, even wearing my hair in braids; I grew up with my hair in braids.

Upon further investigation, I learned that Erika moved from state to state and school to school during her earlier educational years. She mentioned that she had encounters with teachers who were unfair to her during these critical years. As a result of these encounters, she felt uncomfortable wearing her natural hair in the presence of her colleagues. It was not until she moved to another school that her feelings changed:

And then, when I went to [another school] and was working with a black principal who wore her

hair in braids. I felt more comfortable when I saw her embrace her hair. So, I started about four

years ago, wearing my hair in braids. And I just cannot seem to stop. (Black, Late 50s)

Erika explained that she eventually moved to another school, and this changed her thoughts about her

natural hair; ultimately, impacting how she engaged with her students instructionally. Based on her

statement, I recognized that Erika's previous negative experiences had a significant effect on how she

interacted with her colleagues and supported her students educationally. During her interviews, she

expressed how uncomfortable she felt about wearing her natural hair because the staff at the school

where she taught was primarily white. She explained that she did not feel that they would understand her

position as a Black educator. She also mentioned that it was the climate and culture created by school

leaders that also contributed to this uneasiness. Erika shared her experience after leaving that school:

Where I teach now, I don't see that there are any barriers at all because everyone in the school

that I work in, they're comfortable with that. And so am I, as a black teacher. So, I don't see any

barriers. But, you know, I have in the past; because the majority of the students were white, and

the majority of the staff was white. So, they didn't understand that. In fact, I was embarrassed to

wear braids when I was there because I felt like I would be judged. Because I saw the way they

judged the students. Now, there's no problem at all because those kids come to school in braids

and are pushed out and natural and all of that. (Erika, Black, late 50's)

Erika expressed her happiness regarding her freedom to wear her natural hair and her ability to support

students in wearing their natural hair. When asked about her feelings about Black and Black Mixed-Race

natural hair literature, she was thrilled. She attributed this new freedom to her new work location; she

felt that Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair was more acceptable for both students and staff. She

explained that she was comfortable doing this because there was an administrator and staff members

who also wore natural hairstyles. She also noted that her participation in the research study afforded her a sense of belonging; she could now identify with colleagues who looked like her.

Another example of how previous life experiences impact teacher motivations and/desire to support Black and Black Mixed-Race students was expressed by Amy, a white woman in her late thirties, was willing to help a student with Black Mixed-Race natural hair, on picture day, by offering to style the student's hair if the parent did not style it. Her reasoning for wanting to help this student was that she wanted all students to look nice and feel included on picture day. Amy expressed her enthusiasm to learn how to do Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in hopes of helping that child and other children feel included. She was guided by her desire to include all students. Based on our conversations and her previous experiences, as a child and young adult, she mentioned several childhood instances and encounters with individuals and groups of people who were intolerant of Black people. She described several incidents where Black people were treated unfairly. She also shared her attempts to counter these narratives by being kind and friendly to the students who were being mistreated. These previous experiences likely impacted her overall eagerness to help a student in her class on picture day.

Erika and Amy's accounts highlight that educators' motivations and/or desires are closely related to their prior life experiences. This is significant because educators need to reflect on how these experiences can consequently affect them and their students. It is through deep reflection that educators can begin to see themselves through a different lens. Educators must fully evaluate their motivations and how these motives impact the social and academic well-being of Black and Black Mix-Race students. Educators are responsible for creating a climate and culture that is rooted in self-empowerment; a space where all students feel empowered and can both thrive and flourish.

In what ways, did these perceptions differ depending on an educators' race or ethnicity?

Cultural representation must be an essential part of the daily lives of all students, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students. This is congruent with the statement: some Black and Black Mixed-Race students will never encounter a Black educator during their educational experience (Darwich, 2020). Furthermore, the majority of teachers who participated in the aforementioned study reported that they were the only Black teacher in the school building; consequently, there was very little to no support from colleagues who were not of the same racial composition. Thus, the educators relied on other sources for support. In an article shared by EdWeek (2020) the typical teacher is a forty-year-old white woman with approximately fifteen years of professional teaching experience (Will, 2020).

Based on the information gathered by participants and related research, three out of four participants expressed that educators' race/ethnicity impacts the presentation of books about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. They all shared their reasons for their beliefs. Two of the three who expressed this sentiment are Black. Amy, a white woman in her late thirties, wrote:

> I think so. I think it's more about how much knowledge they have and how willing they are to share because I definitely share[d] my own experiences with the kids when I read. So, I think that an African American person reading those books would probably have more little tidbits to add to the story to get the kids more engaged than I would. But I think it's just more of the knowledge, -- the openness.

Amy reiterated that it has a lot to do with the educators' knowledge and connection to students' culture. She also cited openness as a way to connect Black and Black Mixed-Race students. She later provided more meaning to her pre-interview statement during the post-interview by sharing her experiences while teaching in another state.

> At this school, I haven't felt that way. Now, if I had presented it at the school where I taught for the first 10 years: yes, because most years, I may have only had one student of color. In fact, one

of those years, I had a boy who was mixed, and we did a Martin Luther King project. And it was

two shapes of bodies, and [students] were supposed to draw a picture of someone who back in

civil rights times, you couldn't have gone to a restaurant with and sat down; they all drew this boy

[a student in my class], and he was like: *Why is everyone drawing me with them?* And he didn't

like, he didn't even really realize that he was [a person] of color, I guess. His mom was white, and

he never knew his dad. So, he just really did [not] understand. But that was in [an] area that still

[struggles with] racism. And I think at that school I wouldn't have been able to read maybe

specifically about hair, you know, or that cultural type thing. But at this school, I feel very

comfortable, and the students are comfortable. …No, not here. I don't feel like that; now, [fifteen]

years ago where I taught, I feel like I would have; I would have had some pushback with maybe

other kids or, maybe some bullying or things like that just because it wasn't as diverse, and they

were in an area where they did [not] see a lot of diversity. (Amy, White, late 30's)

Amy mentioned that her previous working environment would have made a difference in her

consideration to implement culturally affirming literature. In this scenario, she expresses that because the

student did not have a racial frame of reference, he could not comprehend the gravitas of the situation

nor did the students have a proper understanding of how their actions influenced the student. *What if*

the teacher was Black? Would the outcome have been similar? Two Black participants, Michelle and Erika,

shared their perspectives about the impact of race and ethnicity on presentation of culturally affirming

literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair:

…Maybe. Because I'm, you know, just for me what I see sometimes. Some of the children in the

classroom; some children may look upon other kids in the classroom. You know, as their hair is

different. Not saying it's negative but they see the difference. So [for] me, as far as different

people being represented in the book and their types of hair. …I can see how it could be, but I

always use them. If I'm reading that book, you know, I may use myself as an example because my

hair may be different on any given day. So, I'll say: well, Ms. Michelle's hair is curly like her hair,

you know. But tomorrow Ms. Michelle's hair, may be straight, you know, and they're like, yeah,

you know. So, I use [this] and that may impact you know, and they're like: we can be different. It

doesn't matter, you know. It's still positive, it's still pretty. (Michelle, Black, Early 50s)

Later Michelle shared what seemed like a different response during her post-interview.

I'm going to say no because my class is, you know; I built my class so that race is not an issue. So,

you know, they can easily talk about their hair where it's not a problem or you know, no one said

anything negative. You know, so it wasn't a problem in my classroom. (Michelle, Black, Early 50s)

Both statements support the fact that Michelle understood the importance of cultural representation.

During the pre-interview, she saw herself as a contributor to the classroom culture; during the post-

interview, she took full ownership of the climate and culture in her classroom. Michelle was explaining

her perspective while taking into consideration her own positionality as a Black educator. She later

contended that she has successfully created a positive climate and culture in her classroom. These findings

are relevant because most participants' responses acknowledge the importance of cultural

representation.

The absence of Black people is apparent in other educational spaces and digital resources.

Previous research supports the assertion that cultural representation matters, even in media (Fursich,

2020). It is important not to forget the media's role in society (Crenshaw, 1991; Phelps-Ward, 2016; Laura,

2016; West, 2002). Negativities portrayed about Black people and the perpetuation of these narratives

thrive as a result of media representations that exclude and/or do not highlight features of Black people

as desirable. It does not allow for inclusivity or for students to develop a sense of belonging. As a result,

students are placed in an environment where they are not permitted to fully thrive and flourish. This same

representation is missing in educational resources such as digital learning apps. For students like Morgan Bugg (2021), who had to appeal to the company Freckle to include avatars that represented Black students who look like her; this is the everyday struggle that many Black and Black Mixed-Race students and teachers face when trying to educate Black and Black Mixed-Race students.

It is also important to acknowledge the statement provided by Kim (White, Late 30s). When she was asked: whether she thought that race or ethnicity impacts the implementation of culturally affirming Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair literature, she stated: "No, I don't think so. I think I would read the story, and let the story be the story;" however, she later went on to explain:

…I don't know if it would have made a difference; you know, if someone else would have read it to them. Like I said before, they truly were all focused on the book. I was just amazed at how focused on it that they were, and I don't know that it mattered, you know - that I didn't look like the characters in the story. I truly don't think that mattered.

This is a noteworthy reflection because Kim reaffirms the students' level of textual engagement and juxtaposes this with her own whiteness as a reader. This shows the impact of allowing culturally affirming texts to exist freely without feeling like an individual must compensate for their own innate racial deficits, specifically referencing one's cultural identity and background. In contrast, Carolivia Herron's experience provides a contextual example of what happens when relationships are misunderstood: one day in class, Herron decided to read a book entitled, Nappy *Hair* to her third-grade class in an attempt to validate her students. By sharing this book, she believed that she would engage and connect with her students. Ultimately, she found out that it was not the students who did not connect, but the families and the community members who had reservations regarding her presentation to her students (Leyden, 1998). In her classroom, she perceived the climate and culture in a positive light, but from the lens of outsiders, it was perceived very differently.

These conflicting narratives spark a much broader discussion about how and to what extent an educators' race/ethnicity can positively and/or negatively impact educational outcomes for Black and Black Mixed-Race students. Understanding race as a potential barrier that teachers face when implementing culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair is necessary. The following section provides an in-depth look into the barriers that educators face when trying to implement culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair.

What were the challenges named by educators when considering explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in classrooms?

In a statement regarding culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair, Erika, a Black woman in her late fifties, stated, "…so, I wasn't even aware that they had books, you know, on that subject." Thus, educators' perceptions and awareness and/or lack thereof about the curricular content that they teach and/or is available to them limits opportunities for student engagement and inclusivity. During the research study, many participants reported that they were unaware of the resources available to them regarding Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Some participants expressed that they did not really think about it until it was posed to them during their participation in the research study. Similarly, studies support the need for such an awareness; ultimately, this may be attributed to the fact that many educators may feel unprepared to teach students of color (Picower, 2004).

Use of Culturally Relevant/Responsive Literature

To enhance students' feelings of belonging, teachers need to be more cognizant of the curricular needs of their students; cognizance is essential to the development of all students. For the purpose of this research study, as described in Table 5, participants were asked to conduct a book inventory. Participants were to make note of Black and Black Mixed-Race literature that *solely focused on natural hair* and did

not *solely focused on natural hair.* The results indicated that seventy-five percent of the current participants had books that focus solely on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Two teachers reported having the book *Hair Love* by Matthew Cherry in their classroom library. All teachers reported having books that have characters with natural hair in them. Table 5 chronicles the books that educators reported in their classroom libraries. It is important to note that the table includes all the books that were collectively reported by the participants; for example, while two educators may have *Hair Love* by Mathew Cherry, other educators did not have the book as a resource in their classroom library.

Table 5

Comparison of Black and Black-Mixed Race Literature Classroom Inventories

Black and Black Mixed-Race Natural Hair Books	
Solely Focused on Natural Hair	**Not Solely Focused on Natural Hair**
Hair Love by Matthew Cherry	*I Like Myself* by Karen Beaumont
I Love My Hair by Natasha Tarpley	*Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman
Braids by Robert Munsch	*Lola Plants a Garden* by Anna McQuinn
	The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats
	Lola at the Library by Anna McQuinn
	The Energy Bus for Kids by Jon Gordon
	Fall Changes (author unknown)
	'Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving by Dav Pilkey
	Just Us Women by Jeanette Caines
	Meet Addy by Connie Porter
	All Are Welcome by Alexandra Penfold

Based on the information provided in Table 5, it is very apparent that books about Black and Black Mixed-Race hair are limited in the classroom libraries of participants. Their inventory of books focused solely on Black and Black Mixed natural hair was even scarcer.

After visiting the library to do an inventory of the resources available to students and teachers, three of the four participants reported similar sentiments that enveloped amazement, pride, and joy as it relates to the resources that were available to students in the libraries at their respective schools. Michelle, a Black woman in her early fifties, shared her experience which echoed these sentiments:

These are some of the books that our library has. I was impressed with the books that are offered. Positively focuses on Black or Mixed-Race natural hair and Black or Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair! I did talk with the librarian about displaying these books at various times for students to visibly see that they are offered. *Hair Love* (3 copies), *My Colors, My world, Don't Touch My Hair, Curlilocks & the Big Bad Hairbrush, Nappy Hair, Not Quite Snow White, Crown: an Ode to the Fresh Cut* (2 copies), *Ways to Make Sunshine, My Colors, My world, LuLu the One & Only.*

Erika, who identifies as Black or African American woman and in her late fifties, reported her findings in which she noted: "I visited my library and did not find any books that focus on Black or Mixed-Race natural hair, but the library did have a section with Black History Month books." Although Erika reported a higher population of African American students at her school than any of the other participants, the literature, specifically focused on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair was minimal at best. It is interesting to note that participants cited administrators, teachers, and other support staff as contributors to the climate of a school as well as access to Black and Black Mixed-Race literature and/or resources. Once participants realized what resources were available to them, it was easy for them to gain access to a book to share with their class during week three. During week three, participants were asked to read a book to

their class that focuses explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair or a book that has Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair. Participants were to record and share their experiences. When prompted, all four educators gladly shared a book with their students. The following excerpts include participants' experiences and responses to the reading of Black and Black Mixed-Race literature to their students:

> I read, *"Hair Love"* to my kids. I gave them time to reflect on the story afterward[s], and I loved hearing what the kids had to say to each other. I asked the kids how they identified with the characters. Many of them said: "She looks like me." I talked about my struggle with my hair and asked them about [their] hair trouble. It was a great bonding conversation! (Kim, White, Late 30s)

> *I Got the Rhythm* Hardcover – Picture Book, June 3, 2014, by Connie Schofield-Morrison (Author, Contributor), Frank Morrison (Illustrator). We read this book to showcase the illustrator, Frank Morrison; Morrison is an expert at capturing the natural hair look of all hair types. The students enjoyed the story and spoke about the colors, shapes, and characters on the pages as we went along. They were able to identify a character in the book who they thought looked like themselves or a classmate. They wanted to know how to mix colors to draw/paint and create hair illustrations. The students enjoyed the book so much; I shared a google slide deck that had more of Frank's illustrations. They are so interested they wanted to know the other books he has illustrated. All students were positive and felt safe to talk about how the characters looked different and came together as a neighborhood. (Amy, White, Late 30s)

> I read the story *Mixed Me!* By Taye Diggs; my class loved this story! The character, Mike, has awesome hair. He has lots of energy! His parents love him. And Mike is a perfect blend of the two

of them. Still, Mike has to answer lots of questions about being mixed. And he does, with lots of energy and joy in this charming story about a day in the life of a mixed-race child. This story included a mixed-race character as well as a character with natural hair. It was amazing the comments I received from my students [before, during, and after the reading phase]. The book encouraged [students] to raise their hand to say: "I'm mixed!" The most valuable comment was: "That boy is just like me: my dad is Black, my mom is white, and I have curly hair like him! And I am the perfect blend just like he says!" I loved it! I re-emphasized how true that statement was and that we are all perfect just the way we are. Our skin as well as our hair is unique in its own way….and perfect! (Michelle, Black, Early 50s)

I read the book *"Braids"* by Robert Munsch. Many of my students are black girls with natural hair. In the story, the mom took forever braiding the daughter's hair and my students could relate to that. The girls thought it was very funny when the mom got braids from her mom, who is the girl's grandmother. The girls told of times when it took forever for their hair to be done. (Erika, Black, Late 50s)

These statements provide meaning to the value of implementing culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in classroom settings. As a result, all teachers reported a pleasant experience. Many of them shared student reactions and responses. Participants noted that all students were engaged. This experience was meaningful for both the students and the educators. Educators' experiences with their students clearly show the value of meeting the cultural needs of students. This is supportive of the statement that educators often have the mindset to teach well, but have a limited understanding of the cultural backgrounds and the cultural needs of the students that they teach (Waly,

2020). It is also indicative of what happens when teachers create a climate and space for powerful and connected learning experiences that is underscored by the context of the classroom's demographics.

Educators play a major role in creating a climate where Black and Black Mixed-Race students have a sense of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2019). As part of this research study, educators were able to intentionally foster a climate where students felt safe to share their experiences and purely enjoy learning. Accounts like these, as vocalized by the participants, should be the norm for all students within the American Public School System; unfortunately, this is not indicative of the schooling experiences of many Black and Black Mixed-Race students. Many classrooms do not include culturally relevant or culturally responsive resources for students; consequently, students become disengaged. This disengagement is typically viewed negatively; this often results in the misidentification and placement of Black students into remedial and/or special education programs (Wood & Jocius, 2013; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). Therefore, educators and administrators must consider the climate and culture of their schools. To better support all students, culturally responsive leaders must begin to assess their school's culture and devise strategies to support the unique assets or strengths that each student brings to the classroom setting.

Curriculum

It is essential that all students are provided with avenues to enjoy learning. Education should be closely connected to the community that students live in (Dessources, et al., 2020). The ownness of this responsibility resides with all educators; thus, it is the duty of educators to advocate for the equitable needs of their students via an instructional lens. When educators understand how the curricular content that they teach relates to the curriculum goals/standards, only then are these individuals able to connect their content to the actual lived experiences of students. However, many educators have the desire to use culturally responsive resources, but there are many reasons why they may or may not elect to use these resources; however, the account of one of the participants may offer some conjecture. In this

excerpt, Kim (White, Late 30s), shares her thoughts about the current curriculum regarding the absence

of Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair books as a space for curriculum integration:

> I really truly didn't think much about it, and I have never really. Like again, because of our
>
> curriculum, I've never really focused on books that have, you know, actual characters, you know.
>
> The biggest barrier is just trying to make sure that it fits in with what you're doing in the classroom.
>
> But I do think that kindergarten is a little more of an acceptable place to do that because you
>
> know, we have [the] liberty to, you know, to tweak our curriculum. I think, especially in the age
>
> we live in right now, where you're trying to teach social-emotional learning and self-love and all
>
> of this kind of stuff. It's more important to, you know, give students a chance to talk about, you
>
> know, what they look like, who they identify with what their families are like; that in itself, giv[es]
>
> them a chance to talk about it. I think it just makes them more comfortable with the people
>
> they're around, and when you're more comfortable, you're going to learn more in the end. So, I
>
> think it's a good thing.

Furthermore, Michelle, a Black woman in her early fifties, elaborates on how she includes culturally

affirming literature in her classroom.

> I try to make sure that it is infused into my curriculum. I'm always looking for different books to
>
> put in with whatever subject that I have, that I'm teaching — not always — not every time with
>
> the unit, or into my curriculum; it's a lot, but that's just me. I mean, that's my passion; I'm not
>
> saying that no other teacher does that, but there are books out there that are on everything that
>
> you can relate to your different subjects. So, I kind of find those books, and use everything.
>
> *Culturally responsive teaching is not a quick fix, nor is it a simple strategy to add to your lessons.*

Barbara Leilani Brazil Keys (2021); in previous years, studies have been done to eradicate curriculum

barriers. Studies, spanning over two decades, have shown the benefits of students having the opportunity

to utilize books that are considered of high value. High value means high in contextual value, not in monetary value. The study revealed that there was a positive impact on students who had these same experiences. It is important to note that most of the books that were acquired by students were outside of their classroom spaces or even school libraries. Some students reported their classrooms as an unfavorable place to get books (Stack et al., 2015).

The responsibility of inclusion and the teaching of culturally relevant pedagogy resides with educators at every level; thus, the intentionally that comes with planning must be embedded within the school's day-to-day instructional and reflective practices. Educators must consider the resources that they use; educators should also seek to assess their classroom libraries to identify resources that are currently in circulation at their school and/or site (Waly, 2020). In seeking to extend beyond the classroom, college educational programs/departments should begin to examine how they model teaching best practices to future educators as well as how students, within the School of Education, should utilize resources to plan for purposefully, culturally responsive instruction (Haddix & Price-Dennis, 2013; Waly, 2020). Educators must be the forerunners in breaking down racial barriers. They must always advocate for their students.

In this research study, participants highlighted some of their own challenges. One participant cited the lack of comfortability as a barrier to the implementation of culturally affirming literature. Michelle, a Black woman in her early fifties, wrote: "I would just want to make sure I read through that book to make sure it doesn't bring a negative feeling to any of the kids that are in my room;" she later shared her frustration in searching for culturally affirming literature that focuses and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair during her pre-interview in which she esteemed: "You can't. You can't find them, but you almost have to kind of look for them. You know, they're not as easy to find. You have to kind of seek it out. I think."

Benefits of Participation

As a result of participating in this research study, teachers' attitudes towards implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair had a positive impact as shown by excerpts taken from the week four journal prompts. Participants reflected:

I am glad to have had an opportunity to be a part of this study. I was enlightened to the fact that I do not have enough books in my classroom to reflect the cultures of the students in the room. I'm walking away realizing that rather than "glazing over" the fact that we look different and struggle with different things, it can be a bonding experience to actually talk about these things with each other. And... the more comfortable students feel in the classroom, the more they can potentially learn. My goal in the future is to be more intentional about picking and reading books to the kids with characters that look like them and that face the same problems that they do. My goal is for each child in the room to feel unique - yet special. (Kim, White, Late 30s)

I am excited to see my classroom and my school both have a variety of books and materials that represent students of different backgrounds and cultures. I am appreciative of our building teachers pushing to add more books to the library to reach the students that are represented in our population. Second graders have been open to all books [that were] shared. (Amy, White, Late 30s)

I have truly enjoyed this opportunity to participate in this study. I have always been very proud of the large number of diverse children's books that I have; however, I have never specifically thought of books that focus on Black or Mixed-Race characters with natural hair. This puts an entirely different direction or focus within the book/story. This opens other discussions with my

students that can promote self-esteem and pride. My participation in this study encouraged me to further think about including more books with Mixed-Race characters. I want all of my students to feel included. (Michelle, Black, Early 50s)

I think it is very neat to do research on black, natural hair and how it affects the school experiences of students. I recall being embarrassed to wear braids to school, as an adult, out of fear of being judged. It wasn't until I transferred to a school where my principal was Black and wore her hair naturally that I built up enough courage to wear braids without being concerned about what others felt. In fact, I wear braids quite often now, and I Love It! (Erika, Black, Late 50s)

These statements support the need for more studies of this nature. It also provides evidence of what happens when educators are asked about their perceptions. Furthermore, it shows the implications of culturally affirming literature on student engagement and achievement; it also emphasizes the direct impact of educator awareness and inclusion of curricular resources and its impact on all students.

Summary

To make sense of all the data collected and gathered during this research study, it is important to reference the main research question; thus, I sought to understand how comfortable K-2 early childhood educators are with teaching literature and curriculum that specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in classrooms. I learned that educators' degree of comfortability was contingent upon their prior experiences, motivations and desires, cultural representation, cognizance, their positionality in respect to their roles, and their understanding of the curriculum and content.

The findings of this research study provides a great starting point but are indicative of the need for more in-depth research in the future surrounding educators' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming children's literature that focuses explicitly on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-

Race natural hair in classroom settings. The following chapter provides a detailed review of these findings.

Implications are shared and recommendations for future research are given.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine social norms about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 public classroom settings. This study explored educators' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. The origin of this research study stemmed from my personal experiences — when I decided to "go natural" — while I was teaching in a first-grade classroom years ago. It was in this space that I realized that there was relevance in considering natural hair and the role it plays in the day-to-day lives of school-aged children during their early years. I reflected on my internal struggle with accepting my natural hair; however, I was determined not to allow these same experiences to happen to other Black and Black Mixed-Race students who wanted to wear their natural hair.

Research Questions

For this study, I sought to answer one main question: How comfortable were K-2 early childhood educators with implementing literature and curriculum that specifically focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in the classroom? To answer this question, I created three sub-questions to gain an in-depth understanding of educators' perceptions regarding this topic. The sub-questions are listed below.

(a) What were educators' perceptions about explicitly teaching children's literature focused on Black and Black Mixed-Raced hair in classrooms?

(b) In what ways, did these perceptions differ depending on an educators' race or ethnicity?

(c) What were the challenges, named by educators, when considering explicitly teaching children's literature focused on the Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms?

As a result of this study, I hoped to understand educators' perceptions about culturally affirming literature in K-2 classrooms, specifically literature that explicitly focuses on and/or includes Black and

Black Mixed-Race natural hair and how it impacts educators' instructional pedagogy and practice. In the following section, I explain the methods that were utilized and adopted to conduct this research study.

Methodology

The research design for this research study was a multiple case study. I initially chose this design because it granted a more in-depth understanding of participants' thoughts and feelings during the research study (Cresswell, 2013). If more than eight participants volunteered, the plan was to use purposive sampling to get a more diverse sample of the population group that the study would focus on; however, convenience sampling occurred because only four participants volunteered to participate.

All participants were women and K-2 educators from a Midwestern state. Educators' years of experience ranged from eleven to thirty-four years in a classroom or educational space. All participants taught the same subject areas, which are the core areas — English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies — that most K-2 public educators teach. During this research study, all participants were actively teaching in public K-2 classrooms. Participants' overall teaching experiences ranged from kindergarten through sixth grade. Knowing this information allowed me to gain a better understanding of participants' perceptions surrounding Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair.

Once participants were selected, all participants were asked to watch a video documentary that was sent to them via email. After watching the documentary, a pre-interview was conducted for all participants. During the pre-interview, participants answered questions regarding their demographic area, years of experience, past experiences, including their childhood and educational experiences. Participants were then asked questions related to their experiences in the classroom, which included resources that they currently have, resources available in their buildings, their feelings about culturally affirming resources, and their overall thoughts and feelings about race and curriculum implementation. Once participants completed their pre-interview, they were asked to engage in weekly discussions that I

sent to them via email. Participants were voluntarily directed to respond to the weekly prompts by sharing

their experiences. Samples of the weekly prompts are shown below in Table 6.

Table 6

Sample of Weekly Journal Prompts for Week One and Week Two

Week	Journal Prompt Question
1	Currently, in your classroom, do you have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.
2	Take a visit to your school library. Does your school library have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.

Over the course of this research study, participants responded to a series of prompts each week. At the

conclusion of the four-week research period, participants were asked to participate in a post-interview.

During the post-interview, participants were asked the same questions that they were asked during the

pre-interview. A sample of question ten is shown below.

10. How do you feel about teaching using books that explicitly focus on Black and Black Mixed-

Race hair? Please share your thoughts and feelings.

This was done to ensure that there was reliability and validity in the statements made by participants. It

also aimed to provide clarity which afforded the researcher an in-depth summary of participants' true

thoughts and feelings over the course of this research study.

After the post-interview, all of the collected data were transcribed. Once it was transcribed, it was coded into emergent themes. While dissecting the data, I also made note of any outliers for future reference based on the responses given in the pre- and post-interviews and the weekly journal prompts. Data was subsequently analyzed and compared in relation to the research questions using cross-case analysis. Once the cross-case analysis was completed, all findings were compiled. (See Chapter Four)

This chapter includes a summary of findings and a discussion of the implications for practice. I acknowledge the limitations surrounding this research study. Recommendations for future research studies are also provided.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this research study revealed participants' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focused on and/or included Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. The following subsequent statements represent the conclusions drawn based on the data collected from participants' interviews, journals, and research surrounding the implementation of culturally affirming literature that highlights Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. I assert that (a) educators' prior experiences impact their overall motivation and desire to include diverse literature in their classrooms, (b) cultural representation must be an essential part of the daily lives of all students, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students, and (c) educators' perceptions and awareness and/or lack thereof about the curricular content that they teach limits opportunities for student engagement and inclusivity, (d) educators must play a major role in creating a climate where Black and Black Mixed-Race students can have a sense of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2019), and (e) educators must understand the curriculum that they present to students.

Educators' Feelings about Black and Black Mixed-Race Natural Hair Literature

Educators' prior experiences had a significant impact on their overall motivation and desire to include diverse literature in their classrooms. This study revealed that it is important to carefully examine the background of each educator regardless of their race and ethnicity. By understanding educators' previous experiences, issues regarding the implementation of culturally affirming literature are more easily identifiable, especially as it relates to the integration of Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair literature into K-2 public classroom spaces. Subsequently, by addressing societal issues that have plagued the United States for years, which is rooted in race and social norms, all children will have an opportunity to partake in a more equitable educational experience. As a result of this study, readers are provided with an understanding of how these prior experiences impact educators' relationships with their administrators, colleagues, and students. These all stem from participants' feelings of acceptance and their sense of affiliation. Students who feel excluded from literary works that reflect who they are will have ongoing issues with accepting themselves as well as with the identification of their place in society.

In my reflection, I thought about my previous experiences and how they have helped to frame who I am and who I was as a classroom teacher. I remember when I first decided to "go natural" and how I felt: for the longest time, I could not pinpoint my sadness or anger regarding my natural hair. It was not until I began to unpack all of the narratives or messages that were created in my mind from media sources, school, and other places that really made me think about my own natural hair experiences. This is very important because when I began to think about my own experiences and how they challenged my perceptions and my existence in certain spaces, I immediately connected to my students, in which I pondered this same question: *How would their lives be impacted if they, too, had the same experiences that I had?* This reflective, internal discourse prompted me to change the narrative first for myself and then for my students, especially those students with Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. I

determined that these students would understand that natural hair is acceptable, and that each person is unique; their uniqueness is what makes them beautiful.

This discussion is so critical to the development of the Black identity; the media has often portrayed Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair within a negative light. In addition, these negative images showcase the attitudes and policies associated with Black expression via their natural hair; in the past, news outlets have depicted students being unfairly penalized for wearing their natural hair at school (Blackistone, 2018; The Grio, 2018; Jackman, 2018; Morgan-Smith, 2018). All of these pictorial images have contributed to students' lack of value and acceptance in American society or the United States.

There have been attempts to counter narratives that inaccurately portray Black people. Movies such as the Black Panther (2018), depicted Black people and their features as important. Actors and actress in the movie wore their natural hair while playing characters who were strong, intelligent, and physically attractive. It gave Black viewers a sense of pride and value. This type of narrative helps to improve the self-esteem of Black and Black Mixed-Race students and adults who have been traditionally marginalized or unrepresented in the media. In workplace settings, attempts have been made to stop the unfair treatment and firing of Black people because of their natural hair. Studies have shown that Black women have to modify their natural hair to fit in with current societal norms (The Crown Coalition, 2021). These counter-narratives support the notion that cultural representation matters; yet, it is often negated.

The Impact of Race/Ethnicity in Implementing Culturally Affirming Literature

Cultural representation must be an essential part of the daily lives of all students, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students, and educators; thus, the inclusion of uplifting, relevant narratives or messages that supports Black and Black Mixed-Race students can be found in Black natural hair books. This culturally affirming literature speaks to the cultural needs of students, in a society where they have traditionally been marginalized, and offers a brave space for discourse and identity affirmation. These

books are rarely shared with Black and Black Mixed-Race students in classrooms; unfortunately, this is congruent with the statement that some Black and Black Mixed-Race students will never encounter a Black educator during their whole educational experience (Darwich, 2020). As a result, Black and Black Mixed Race students will continue to matriculate throughout the educational system without seeing themselves in the literature or within a context that extends beyond the historical references of slavery.

Growing up, I did not see many teachers that looked like me. I can count the number of Black teachers that I have had throughout my educational experience on one hand, and this includes all of my academic experiences, beginning in kindergarten to now as a doctoral student. This notion or idea was also reflected in the findings in this research study amongst the participants; many of them shared instances where they felt isolated or unsupported as educators. One teacher felt that she was not as knowledgeable because of her race. This is problematic because it aids in framing this question: if students are not exposed to positive cultural representations that reflect their own culture, where do they gather their values? Studies suggest that they are gathered from societal norms portrayed through mainstream media (Brooks & McNair, 2015; Edwards, 2005), which further accentuates the need for culturally affirming literature.

It is important to note that one participant felt that "the story should be the story." I agree with this sentiment when the educator can allow the story to be the story. In order for this to occur, the educator must understand the students that they teach as well as their cultural and academic needs (Gay, 2000). More research studies may be needed in the future to better assess this teacher's perspective and how it translates into classroom or educational contexts and influences students' identity/view of success.

Barriers to Implementation: Cognizance, Culture, Climate, and Curriculum

Teachers must be cognizant of the curricular needs of their students. Often times, educators' perceptions and awareness and/or lack thereof about the curricular content that they teach serve as a

barrier to student engagement and inclusivity. Studies support the need for such an awareness because today, many educators are not cognizant of the curricular resources that are available to them to enhance their instructional practice. The question is: why is this still happening today? This may be attributed to the fact that many educators may feel unprepared to teach students of color (Picower, 2004). Their previous experiences may also contribute to this issue. As a former educator, I understand this all too well. It was not until I included literature that depicted characters that looked like the students reflected in my classroom that I saw the biggest academic impact. In addition, that was also when I began to see students' personalities transform; hence, students became more engaged in the curricular content that I was teaching. It did not feel like we were "doing school;" instead, it felt like we were getting to know each other as individuals, as families, and as community members. This made everyone feel included.

In reflection, I hardly remember any childhood experiences of this nature. One book in particular that I do remember reading in class was *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman. Another story that I was exposed to during my primary years was *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* by John Steptoe; I believe it was an African folktale. This book was shared through a video series called *Reading Rainbow*. I remember watching the story one day in the library. My exposure to these books was not to highlight or celebrate natural hair in any way; in actuality, these books were used mostly as fillers or supplemental resources. Imagine the subtle message that this encapsulates for Black students. Based on my experience, I believe that the librarian had good intentions in sharing the story of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, but lacked the understanding or know-how to make it meaningful and engaging for me as a Black student. This is why educators must move away from this type or use of Black literary works, as substandard texts, because it was not designed to be a filler —just like many other books are not designed to be fillers. Educators must be intentional about how they understand and present culturally affirming literature. In both situations, opportunities were missed. Educators must be culturally present while seeking to meet the needs of

students. Had the librarian recognized my needs as a student, purposeful planning would have yielded a different experience; perhaps, one that affirmed my existence and calmed the vocalized narratives that I had internalized about my natural hair. At that age, I would have been ecstatic if someone would have told me that my hair was beautiful, and/or that my skin tone was to be valued and not feared.

Many classrooms do not include culturally relevant or culturally responsive resources for students. As a result, students become disengaged; forms of disengagement are often seen negatively which usually stems from the misidentification and the placement of Black students in remedial and/or special education programs (Wood & Jocius, 2013; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). It is from this lens that educators and administrators should reflect on their practices. Imagine being able to wear your natural hair in every other space except for the classroom. Imagine being able to wear your hair in every other space except for the workplace. The creation of the Crown Act (2019) by Dove reaffirms that racial barriers still exist in the United States; to date, only 14 states have banned natural hair discrimination in workplace settings (The Crown Coalition, 2021). This is relevant because teachers work in schools where natural hair is not readily accepted. It is not always blatantly written in unfair policies; sometimes, it is discovered during day-to-day interactions with administrators and colleagues as well as those that determine the societal norms or unspoken rules that individuals are expected to govern themselves by. Due to this reality, educators have to be at the center of the conversation. They are the ones who are responsible for the academic and social development of students during their primary years of life. The effects of not having these valuable experiences could impact a child for the rest of their lives. It is in this space that this collective work must be done to eliminate any barriers that exist. As an administrator and former educator, I included myself in this same charge because all students should feel respected and valued.

Limitations

Some limitations occurred during this research study. Only four participants volunteered to participate, which was the minimal number of participants prescribed to conduct this research study. All participants were women. Providing context from other genders would allow for a better understanding of participants' perceptions. All participants were from a Midwestern state. Including participants from other states and regions would offer a better understanding of educators' perceptions across geographic areas as well as their educational or cultural values. By expanding this study, via a multi-gender and regional lens, it would be important to identify if this gap still exists to the same extent in other places, such as in southern states. Moreover, novice educators were not included in this research study, and no participants were younger than thirty-seven years old; understanding these perceptions based on age could provide more meaning and context to this research study. For instance, participants ranging from twenty to thirty years of age could provide more depth and context. It would be important to examine the perspectives of educators who have less than five years of teaching experience. Time constraints did not allow data to be collected over a longer period of time so the possibility of a longitudinal study could be beneficial to future participants and those who may benefit from a study of this magnitude.

Implications for Practice

Many stakeholders will benefit from this research study because limited to no research has been done to understand educators' perceptions as it relates to the implementation of culturally affirming literature that explicitly includes and/or focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. Students, teachers, staff, administrators, and society will benefit from the findings of this research study. When more educators have an opportunity to experience teaching curricular content which features Black and Mixed-Race students, such as the ones presented in this research study, they will be more likely to be more reflective about their previous, current, and future educational practices. Participants in this

research study spoke about their experiences as a participant. They all reported satisfaction and gratefulness after participating in this research study.

As a result of this research study, more Black and Black Mixed-Race students will now have a voice to be able to express themselves freely without the fear of judgment. Students will have the opportunity to see themselves through featured characters and/or main characters in literary works and engage in powerful conversations. As a direct outcome of this research study, professionals will be able to engage in deeper conversations surrounding their curricular choices and whether these selections meet their students' needs. This study speaks to the importance of having conversations and how purposeful discourse could serve as a precursor, yielding changes in educators' instructional habits and practices.

It can be implied: in most schools, where administrators are supportive of their staff, educators are more comfortable with presenting curricular content that is diverse. When educators are supported by administrators, they have more confidence and are willing to try new things without the fear of reprimand. As a result of this research study, administrators will have to look at their current practices, established norms, and the climate and culture that they promote. This includes the engagement of their staff and also carrying out social norms through practice that contribute to the climate and culture of schools and workplace settings. Participants reported the significance of school libraries in cultivating an inclusive school climate and culture; a place in which culturally relevant and responsive resources are readily available and reflect the needs of their student populations. This positively impacted the participants who shared their experiences. This made the participants very happy, but it also made their schools' librarians feel valued and important. This acknowledgment is important to the climate and culture of a school; thus, it ultimately had a positive impact or effect on the school.

This research study offers a broader lens into societal norms and issues regarding cultural biases, prejudices, and preferences. Society needs to be aware that culturally affirming literature about Black and

Black Mixed-Race natural hair exists. In addition, people need spaces where they can come together and collectively ask questions about differences and similarities in non-judgmental ways. Societal norms that have depicted Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair derogatorily will need to be continually challenged and replaced with narratives that celebrate and are inclusive of Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair.

Future Research

The following are recommendations for future research that support a culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy prepares educators to be aware of what is happening around them and how to appropriately respond (Gay, 2018). Jeff Dessources (2020) wrote, "So when you understand the people, you understand the work" (p. 186). This rings true with students in the classroom as well. In the future, research should be done to understand the role of librarians in student development and in creating a culture that is both sustainable and engaging for Black and Black Mixed-Race students, who have or do not have natural hair. Further research should be conducted to determine whether educators know that culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair exists. In the future, it is important for administrators, and staff included, to appraise their school's climate and culture through the examination of past and current social norms. Professional development opportunities are needed surrounding culturally affirming literature, specifically literature that explicitly focuses on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair.

Research gaps still exist in understanding the true impact of including and/or excluding culturally affirming literature about Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in classrooms. Future research is needed to understand the long-term impact. A longitudinal study would be beneficial. In the past, research has been conducted on the impact of Black teachers in educational settings; however, research has not been conducted on the impact of culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in K-2 settings. Since this research study was conducted in K-2 public

schools, it would be beneficial to research teachers' perceptions when implementing culturally affirming literature that focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair in other public and non-public school settings, such as parochial, private, and charter schools. In addition, it would also be important to explore the potential impact of implementation of such literature in settings such as rural and urban spaces.

After conducting this research study, I concluded that many educators understand the essentialness of cultural representation. Professional development is needed to help educators become more aware of the curricular needs of their students. This will help educators identify how they can best meet the needs of their students. To truly meet the needs of students, teachers must be reflective. This means that teachers must understand how their prior experiences impact their presentation and delivery of instructional content. They must reflect on their motivations. They must recognize that they play a major role in creating a climate in which Black and Black Mixed-Race students can flourish and have a sense of belonging. Educators must acknowledge that they are the forerunners in breaking down racial barriers, stigmas, and stereotypes that have plagued Black and Black Mixed-Race people for many years.

As a researcher, I have gained a better understanding of educators' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focuses on and/or includes Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. As a former classroom teacher and current administrator who has natural hair, I know that this research study has benefited me first and foremost. In the future, I believe that it will benefit many others, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students. This research study was conducted not to exclude any other races, but it was conducted to include all students. It was designed to bring awareness by educating others about social norms that negatively impact Black and Black Mixed-Race, natural hair students. It is my earnest hope to see Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair become the accepted norm by providing counter-narratives to what is typically seen as valuable in mainstream media and societal representations.

The results of this research study revealed participants' perceptions about implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly focused on and/or included Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. The following subsequent statements represent the conclusions that I have drawn based on emerging themes gathered from participants' interviews, journals, and research surrounding the implementation of culturally affirming literature that highlights Black and Black Mixed-Race natural hair. I assert that a) educators' prior experiences impact their overall motivations and desire to include diverse literature in their classrooms, (b) cultural representation must be an essential part of the daily lives of all students, especially Black and Black Mixed-Race students, (c) educators' perceptions and awareness and/or lack thereof about the curricular content that they teach limits opportunities for student engagement and inclusivity, (d) educators must play a major role in creating a climate where Black and Black Mixed-Race students can have a sense of belonging (Allen & Kern, 2019), and (e) educators must understand the curriculum that they present to students.

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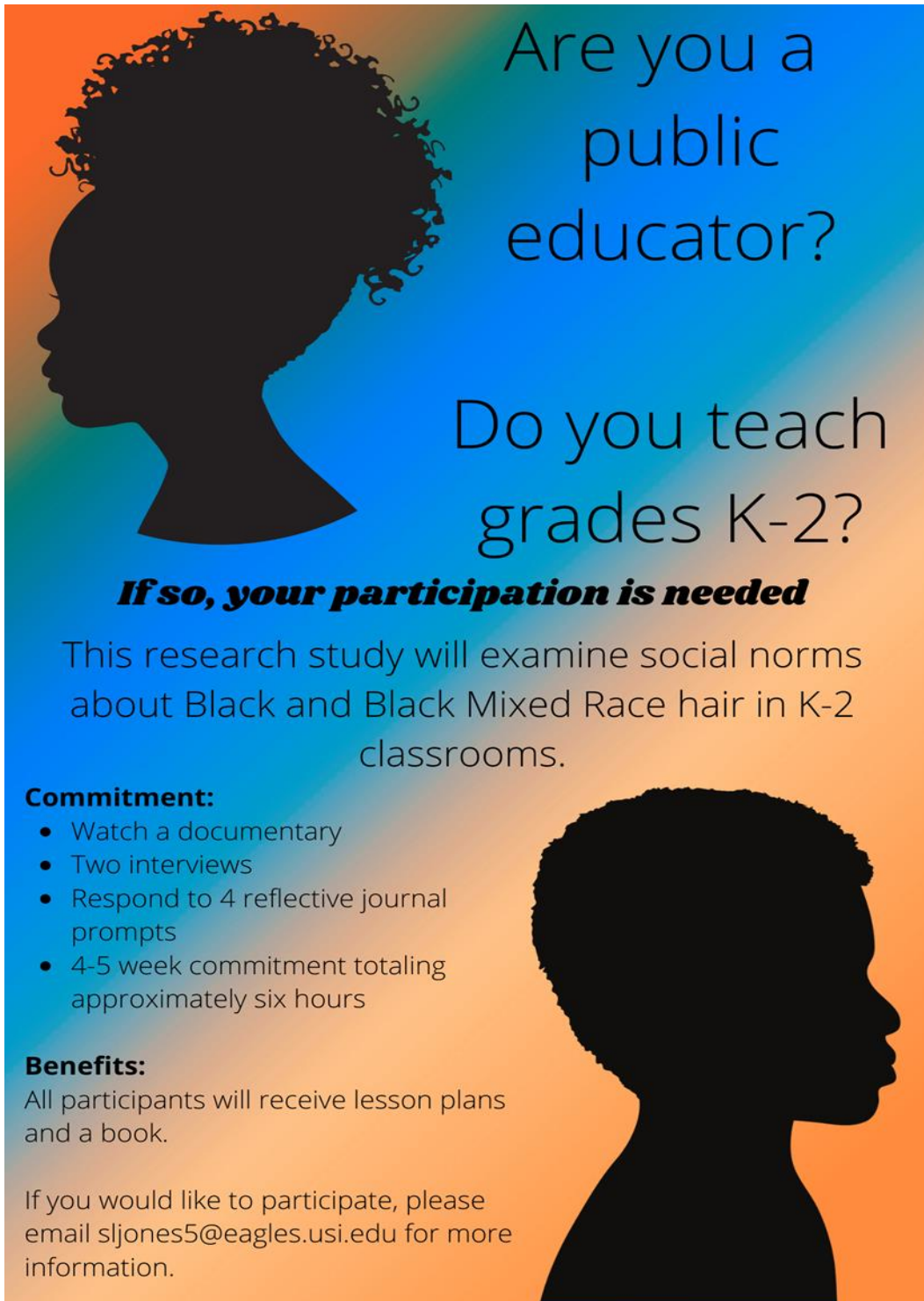Pilkey, D. (2020). *'Twas the night before thanksgiving.* Scholastic, Inc.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form One

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA

My Hair is Lit: Teachers' Perceptions on Integrating Children's Literature Focused on Black and Black

Mixed Raced Hair in K-2 Classrooms

IRBNet ID Number 1796060-1

Informed Consent Document

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to examine social norms regarding Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms. This study is being conducted by Shayla Calhoun, a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern Indiana. Shayla Calhoun can be reached at sljones5@eagles.usi.edu. For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or offer input, contact the University of Southern Indiana Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration, 8600 University Blvd., Wright Administration Rm. 104, Evansville, IN 47712-3596, 812-465-7000 or by email at rcr@usi.edu. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a part of the study.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to explore challenges faced by K-2 public educators when implementing culturally affirming literature that explicitly includes and focuses on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair in classrooms.

PROCEDURES: If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things*:* watch a documentary, complete two virtual interview sessions, complete four weekly journal prompts, and check in weekly via email during a four week period.

TIME COMMITMENT: Your participation in this study will require four to five weeks of your time, totaling approximately six hours throughout the overall study.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks of taking part in this study are minimal but may occur. These risks include lack of comfort when giving responses, loss of time, lack of interest, possible loss of confidentiality. Measures will be taken to minimize the risks/discomforts listed above. Participants can choose not to answer certain questions. Participants can reschedule or stop the interview at any time. There also may be other risks/discomforts that cannot be predicted. The benefits of taking part in this study are: participants will have the satisfaction of knowing that they have contributed to understanding the experiences of others and how they fit into the equation.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential.   Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.   All data collected will be securely stored electronically. Your identity will be held in confidence in the event that the study may be published. The researcher will have access to the data and will not share it with outside sources who do not meet IRB guidelines. All data and recordings will be stored for at least seven years after the research study is completed.

COMPENSATION: All participants will receive lesson plans and a book for their commitment.

VOLUNTEERING FOR THE STUDY: Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the investigator(s). You may opt-out at any time by emailing the researcher.

ALTERNATIVES TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY: The alternative is not participating in the study.

PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT: I have read the information provided to me. I have had all of my questions answered. Based on the statements listed above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I am of 18 years of age or older and agree to take part in this study.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature:_____Date:_____

Researcher's Name: _____

Researcher's Signature:_____Date:_____

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form Two

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN INDIANA

My Hair is Lit: Teachers' Perceptions on Integrating Children's Literature Focused on Black and Black Mixed Raced Hair in K-2 Classrooms

IRBNet ID Number 1796060-1
Informed Consent Document

Audio/Video/Photographic Recording of Human Subjects

You previously agreed to participate in a research study entitled: My Hair is Lit: Teachers' Perceptions on

Integrating Children's Literature Focused on Black and Black Mixed Raced Hair in K-2 Classrooms

conducted by Shayla Calhoun. We are asking your permission to allow an audio recording to be included

in the study. You do not have to agree to be recorded to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the researcher and for educational purposes.

The recording(s) will be used for data collection and analysis. Specific quotes, which will remain

anonymous may be used to help provide context or meaning in the research study. The video recordings

will remain confidential. All participants' names will be changed and given a pseudonym for confidentiality

purposes throughout and after the study. Any information that would compromise the identity of

participants will not be shared with anyone other than the researcher.

The researcher will collect and store data from the interviews and journal reflections. All interviews will

be transcribed and coded. All files and any recordings will be stored electronically and on an external hard

drive and then stored in a locked secure location. These data files will be kept for at least seven years after the study is completed.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or offer input, contact the University of Southern Indiana Office of Sponsored Projects and Research Administration, 8600 University Blvd., Wright Administration Rm. 104, Evansville, IN 47712-3596, 812-465-7000 or by email at rcr@usi.edu. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be a part of the study.

Your signature on this form gives permission to record and use the recording for the study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Participant's Signature: _____Date:_____

Researcher's Signature:_____Date:_____

Appendix D

Pre and Post Interview Questions

1. Describe your educational experiences as a child?

2. Describe your educational experiences (education)?

3. How many years have you been teaching?

4. Describe your teaching experience (grade levels taught)?

5. What content areas/subjects do you currently teach? Are there any content areas/subjects that you could see yourself teaching in the future?

6. Have you taught other grade levels and subject areas? If so, please explain.

7. Describe the demographic composition of your school.

   a. Race/Ethnicity of students and staff

     i. Approximate number or percentage of students and staff

8. Do you use culturally relevant books in your classroom? If so, explain.

9. Have you ever used books related specifically to Black and Black Mixed Race natural hair? If so please, please explain.

10. How do you feel about teaching using books that explicitly focus on Black and Black Mixed-Race hair? Please share your thoughts and feelings.

11. Are there any barriers or challenges that you face when considering implementing books about Black and Black Mixed Race natural hair?

12. Do you feel that race/ethnicity will have an impact on the presentation of such books about Black and Black Mixed Race natural hair?

Appendix E

Weekly Reflective Journal Prompts

Week One Prompt One

Currently, in your classroom, do you have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.

Week Two Prompt Two

Take a visit to your school library. Does your school library have any books that focus explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed-Race natural hair? Are there any books that have Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair? Record and share your findings.

Week Three Prompt Three

Read a book to your class that focuses explicitly on Black and/or Black Mixed Race natural hair or a book that has Black and/or Black Mixed-Race characters who have natural hair. Record and share your experiences.

Week Four Prompt Four

Write and share a reflection about your overall experience as a participant in this study.