RECLAIMING BLACK GIRLHOOD: AN EXAMINATION OF HOOD FEMINISM AND ITS IMPACT ON GENDER-RESPONSIVE THIRDSPACE PROGRAMMING IN D.C.

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2025

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ABSTRACT

TIA C. DOLET. Reclaiming Black GirlHOOD: An Examination of Hood Feminism and its Impact on Gender-Responsive Thirdspace Programming in D.C.
(Under the direction of DR. BETTIE RAY BUTLER)

Limited research has explored the impact of non-academic extracurricular programs on Black girls, particularly in urban school settings. This study addresses that gap by examining how such programs may serve as empowering spaces that counter deficit-based narratives and resist respectability politics. Focusing on the STARS program—an in-school, gender-specific initiative in Washington, D.C.'s majority-Black wards—this study investigates how the program supports identity affirmation, leadership development, and community-building among Black girls. Drawing from the researcher's lived experience as both a former participant and program leader, the research uses an embedded single case study design to explore how STARS may operate as a transformative thirdspace. Guided by Edward Soja's Thirdspace Theory and Mikki Kendall's Hood Feminism, the study interrogates whether STARS offers a space where race, gender, and socioeconomic realities intersect to foster agency, resist systemic barriers, and reimagine belonging in schools. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analyses to assess the program's effectiveness and examine its implications for inclusive, gender-responsive learning environments. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing discourse on Black girlhood by challenging monolithic representations and emphasizing the importance of listening to Black girls' voices in educational programming. It offers a blended theoretical framework for rethinking what support for Black girls in urban schools can—and should—look like.

DEDICATION

To all the intelligent, beautiful, and infinitely powerful Black girls and young woman I have had the profound privilege of working with over the past fifteen years: This is for you. In classrooms, in conversations, in shared laughter, in hopes and dreams, we learned together. You, unknowingly, became my teachers—guiding me to see the world with fresh eyes, uncovering hidden places in myself, to an understanding of the power of community, of love, of truth.

From you, I have learned of resilience dressed in grace, of courage cloaked in joy, and of brilliance that demands to be seen. I carry your stories in my spirit. I stand with you, always, to ensure that you are free to revel in your girlhood, to live boldly, fully, and without restraint. I will continue to fight for your light to shine, uninterrupted.

And to my radiant nieces, Raelyn and Alessia— my greatest little joys. You are magic in motion, and I am endlessly honored to be your aunt. Know that I am, and always will be, in your corner—your unwavering cheerleader, your steady hand, and your advocate in every season. May you live out your wildest dreams, knowing that Auntie will always be here to help you soar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to the organization that graciously allowed me to conduct this study—a place that has poured into me with love, guidance, and steadfast support since I was just twelve years old. Your enduring belief in me has shaped who I am and empowered me to pursue this work with purpose and passion. I am forever grateful for the foundation you have provided and for being a constant source of encouragement throughout my journey.

To the extraordinary members of my dissertation committee—Dr. Bettie Ray Butler, Dr. Lisa Merriweather, Dr. Brittany Anderson, Dr. Janaka Lewis, and Dr. Michelle Meggs—thank you for your consistent support, your wisdom, and your belief in the vision of this work. It has meant the world to me to be guided by a powerhouse team of Black women scholars, whose brilliance, care, and commitment elevated this study in every way. I could not have brought this work to life as powerfully as I intended without your thoughtful guidance, your patience, and your encouragement.

To my fearless Leo mama—thank you for always believing in me, for lifting my spirits when I struggled, for reminding me of my strength even when I forgot, for celebrating my every victory as if it were your own. Thank you for your boundless love and for always reminding me who I am.

And to my amazing circle of sister-friends and mentors—you have been my anchor. Thank you for holding me, cheering for me, laughing with me, crying with me, and standing beside me with unshakable love and loyalty. This work is a testament to the power, the beauty, and the healing joy of Black sisterhood. In a world that so often seeks to diminish us, it is

within our bonds that I have found resilience, hope, and an unbreakable sense of purpose. Thank you for being my happiness, my strength, and my home.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2012, I began working for the non-profit youth organization the Girls' Collective, facilitating their in-school, gender-based STARS[1] program (Sisters Thriving and Rising Successfully). In Washington, D.C., the organization served teen girls in Wards 5, 7, and 8—communities with the city's highest teen pregnancy rates. However, since its inception, the STARs mission has expanded beyond pregnancy prevention, adopting a "whole girl" approach that emphasizes not only academic readiness and achievement but also socio-emotional wellness and overall positive development. The curriculum covered comprehensive life skills, including goal setting, developing healthy relationships, learning about reproductive health, and exploring career options. As a program leader I led groups in Ward 7, a predominantly Black community where 81% of residents identify as African American and where economic disparities are stark, with roughly one in four families with children living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Drawing from my own positive experience as a former STARS participant in Alexandria, Virginia—a diverse suburb thirty minutes outside D.C.—I embraced this new role with much enthusiasm, eager to support the next generation of young women.

I remember speaking with a friend after finding out the schools in which I would be facilitating programming. Her response was, "Girl, they about to have you in the hood!" Having worked with D.C. youth throughout college, the schools' locations never concerned me. In fact, the *where* excited me because of *who* the students would be. If there was one thing I knew and loved about Black girls in D.C., it was their unapologetic boldness—their ability to show up authentically, no matter the circumstance. Black girlhood is not monolithic. Every one of the 1,200-plus Black girls I worked with during my tenure with the Girls' Collective was unique in

[1] The program and the organization's name are pseudonyms. Other key features about the organization have also been changed to protect the identity of the organization.

their own distinct ways. We all shared an understanding of what it meant to navigate educational spaces within our shared identity. We knew that no matter what we wore, we would be labeled as Jezebels and our outfits would be oversexualized (Townsend et al., 2010). We knew that if our voices reached a certain volume, we would be told we were loud and subsequently be silenced and dismissed (Fordham, 1993). We knew that if we spoke out and advocated for ourselves, we would be labeled as aggressive and angry (Blake et al., 2012). Therefore, I wanted to create a space where Black girls could fully embrace who they were without fear of reprimand or stigma. At the time, STARS felt like the perfect platform for this work.

My students instantly reminded me of my cousins and the summers and weekends we spent at my grandparents' house in Anacostia, in Ward 8—just across the street from the historic home of Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. By most definitions, it was indeed "the hood"—a part of the city grappling with economic disparities, frequent gun violence, high unemployment rates, and under-resourced schools—all consequences of generations of systemic racism. Too often, these conditions are used to negatively label the people of these neighborhoods rather than to critique the American systems that caused those conditions. This bias also exposes a stark juxtaposition in American popular culture. Many perceive the hood as undesirable— inner-city neighborhoods no one wants to visit, let alone teach in. Yet, when we examine mainstream fashion, hairstyles, music, online trends, and vernacular, Black girls from the hood set the standards. In an article titled *Ghetto Until Proven Fashionable*, Herring and Daniels (2019) highlight ten mainstream trends that originated from Black girlhood in the hood (Herring & Daniels, 2019). From baby hairs to snapping fingers and exclaiming, "yasssss," these cultural staples all began in places like Wards 5, 7, and 8.

I begin with this recharacterization of "the hood" to set the tone for this study. As an educator who has intentionally chosen to work in the hood for most of my career, my frustrations with these school environments have never been directed at the youth. Instead, they stem from the labels and assumptions imposed on them by adults simply because of where they are growing up. More than that, I carried a deep disdain for the way these students were treated—both by some school staff members I interacted with and by the structural biases embedded within the schools themselves, biases that seemed to originate from stereotypes about Black girlhood as it existed in their neighborhoods. During my recruitment for the STARS program, upon hearing the words "pregnancy prevention program," some staff members immediately told me they would send me the "fast" girls—a harmful label that stereotypes Black girls as being more sexually precocious than their peers (Crooks et al., 2023).

The school itself felt more like a militarized zone than a place of learning. Metal detectors, bag searches, and long lines wrapping around the building each morning set the tone. My students told me when it rained, some opted to skip school rather than stand outside, waiting to get inside, soaked. Fights occurred daily, and instead of school-wide peer mediation or conflict-resolution initiatives, in-school police officers patrolled the halls and often threatened students with suspension or even arrest. Sexual harassment was also pervasive. My girls frequently reported harassment from male peers—a reality I experienced firsthand from students and even school security staff. It was difficult to see these schools as spaces where Black girls could truly thrive. How could these girls fully experience their childhood when the very institutions meant to support them seemed designed to control, punish, and surveil them instead?

The Girls' Collective had its bright moments, offering a counterbalance to overbearing school environments. The organization supported my creation of a "Know Your School Rights"

series to address illegal suspensions and funding a STEM weekend program where participants explored unique science and technology careers, from coding to the science behind cosmetology. However, the organization also revealed its own biases towards girls in D.C. at times. In organizational newsletters, participants were sometimes framed from a deficit perspective, with an emphasis on the challenges of their schools and neighborhoods rather than showcasing the triumphs of the young women. Similarly, at fundraising events, D.C. participants were frequently overshadowed by their counterparts from Alexandria, with selection favoring girls who aligned with traditional standards of femininity. In my own experience as an Alexandria participant, I was often positioned as a "success story." The difference was undeniable—while I had been uplifted, many of my D.C. students were subtly cast as subjects of pity rather than as young women full of promise.

Problem Statement

Research on extracurricular activities and in-school programs for urban youth supports their value in addressing socio-emotional development and academic disparities. While marginalized youth participate in these activities at lower rates due to barriers such as financial constraints and limited time, studies highlight that when they do have access, they experience significant benefits (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Heath et al., 2018). Youth who participate in extracurricular activities tend to have better emotional health, engage in fewer risky behaviors such as violence and substance abuse, and achieve better academic outcomes (Farb & Matjasko, 2012; Meier et al., 2018). These benefits are particularly pronounced in high-needs, low-income communities like Wards 5, 7, and 8, where systemic inequities limit opportunities for enrichment and advancement (Bloomfield & Barber, 2009).

Despite these measurable benefits, the deficit-oriented narratives surrounding marginalized youth often extend to extracurricular programming. Programs targeting Black girls in urban schools are frequently framed as interventions to "fix" behaviors and address perceived deficits rather than as empowering spaces that honor participants' identities (Baldridge, 2014; Smith & Hope, 2020). For example, Nyachae and Ohito's (2019) analysis of programs for Black girls revealed a tendency to reinforce respectability politics, shaming girls around issues such as personal hygiene, appearance, and behavior, while ignoring systemic inequities that create barriers for these students.

The term "politics of respectability" was first coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her analysis of women's groups within the Black Baptist Church during the Progressive Era (1880–1920) (Harris, 2003; Higginbotham, 1994). In this context, "respectability" referred to the emphasis African Americans placed on temperance, personal and property cleanliness, thriftiness, courteous behavior, and sexual chastity (Harris, 2003). In contemporary youth programs for Black girls, these ideologies often take the form of policing their behavior and appearance, ultimately reinforcing harmful stereotypes rather than addressing their holistic needs.

As previously mentioned, recent articles have called attention to Black women and girls—particularly those from urban communities—as the originators of popular trends in American culture. In her analysis on Black girls' influence on social media, from fashion to dance trends, Okantah (2023) stressed the role of Black neighborhoods as the "nuclei" of global culture curation. She noted that "Black teenage girls are the invisible tastemakers creating and popularizing some of the biggest trends simply by being their authentic selves. It's the everyday Black girl, without a platform or the machine of capitalism behind her, who exudes cool without

having to try" (Okantah, 2023, para. 2). Thus, in a world that looks to Black girls to determine what's hot and what's not, youth organizations should aim to uplift this creativity and aptitude for leadership as their superpower rather than seeking conformity. In my experience, STARS provided a space where Black girls could fully embrace their authentic selves, free from the constraints of respectability politics. The program demonstrated its transformative potential by offering comprehensive socio-emotional, academic, and identity-based support—critical resources often lacking in their school environments. However, the challenges I observed underscored the urgent need for a deeper exploration of how programs like STARS address the intersection of systemic inequities, institutional barriers, and the multifaceted identities of their participants. Equally important is how they communicate and frame the narratives about their programming and the girls they serve to the public.

This study seeks to explore the ways in which Girls' Collective's STARS program functions as a thirdspace for Black girls in urban schools—an empowering space where participants can resist stereotypes, redefine their identities, and access support responsive to the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and other social factors that shape their experiences. Simultaneously, it examines how the program and the organization may have inadvertently reinforced stereotypes about Black girlhood, especially as it manifests in urban city centers. Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing discourse on how schools can draw from extracurricular programs like STARS to better address the comprehensive needs of Black girls, challenge deficit-based narratives, and create more inclusive educational environments. By amplifying the voices and experiences of Black girls, this study shifts the focus from "fixing" students to fostering environments that enable them to thrive on their own terms.

Purpose of Study

This study examines how the Girls' Collective and STARS program engages with and supports the diverse expressions of Black girlhood within D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. By centering the intersectional identities of Black girls from these wards and the social, cultural, and environmental factors shaping their experiences, this research assesses how effectively the program and the organization responds to their unique needs. Specifically, it explores their successes in fostering empowerment and addressing the lived realities of Black girlhood, while also identifying areas where they fall short.

Additionally, this study investigates whether these programs challenge or perpetuate harmful social norms and stereotypes within school and community contexts, with the broader goal of informing more equitable and culturally responsive approaches to youth programming. This research extends the literature on Black girls' experiences in non-academic extracurricular programs by highlighting how initiatives like the STARS program can both meet their unique needs and celebrate the assets they bring to extracurricular spaces. Ultimately, it aims to provide actionable strategies for educators, youth practitioners, and non-profit organizations to create environments where Black girls can embrace their authentic selves, thrive within their communities, and challenge systemic inequities—not despite their identities, but because of them.

Theoretical Framework

Extracurricular programming can be a designated space for young people to undo the harms of society. Studies support that students from minoritized student populations engage in extracurricular programming to mitigate the impacts of their trauma (Hardaway et al., 2011; Kpuinen, 2021). This study approaches extracurricular programming designed explicitly for

marginalized student demographics, like STARS, as potential thirdspaces. Edward Soja's Thirdspace Theory conceptualizes space as a dynamic and transformative arena where the physical (firstspace) and the perceived (secondspace) converge to create a "thirdspace". This thirdspace serves as a site of resistance, possibility, and reimagination, enabling marginalized individuals to challenge dominant power structures and construct new, liberating realities (Soja, 1996).

In this theory, firstspace refers to the material, physical reality—socially produced, governed by laws, and shaped by mainstream social norms (e.g., schools and neighborhoods). Secondspace is the conceptualized space, influenced by the perceptions of firstspace, including how individuals interpret and navigate their environments (e.g., how Black girls are seen or stereotyped in school). At the core of this theory is Soja's concept of thirdspace—a radical, resistant space where the boundaries of firstspace and secondspace are transcended. Within thirdspace, individuals merge the real and imagined, creating possibilities beyond mainstream limitations. It serves as a site of resistance against oppressive systems, offering those with shared marginalized identities the opportunity to challenge dominant norms and expectations. Radical openness is embraced in thirdspace, making it a transformative locus for reimagining identities, futures, and societal power structures.

In the context of the STARS program, participants' firstspace is their public school environment, situated within the broader landscape of D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8 communities. Secondspace encompasses the socially constructed perceptions of Black middle and high school girls in these wards, particularly those of school staff, program staff, and the girls themselves. It also includes dominant perceptions of Black girls and Black girlhood within these environments, shaping how they experience and navigate their schools. This study views the STARS program,

along with the additional activities and supports provided by the Girls' Collective, as a space with thirdspace potential —a transformative space where Black girls can resist harmful narratives, redefine their identities, and embrace their full selves. When assessed through the framework of Thirdspace Theory, STARS holds the potential to foster safe, affirming, and empowering environments within high-needs urban schools, providing Black girls with opportunities to challenge systemic barriers and cultivate new possibilities for themselves and their futures.

Soja's exploration of the thirdspace includes an analysis of Black feminist scholar bell hook's Y*earning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990). In *Yearning*, hooks describes the disenfranchisement of Black women in U.S. society as a phenomenon that has been marked by colliding marginalized racial, gender, and socioeconomic identities. The teachings of hooks highlighted the power and influence of thirdspaces for Black women and girls. Because of these fitting parallels, this study will use Thirdspace Theory through the lens of Black feminism using the ideologies of Mikki Kendall's (2020a) *Hood Feminism*. A descendant of the Black feminist teachings of Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and others, Kendall's contemporary interpretation of Black feminism is fresh and applicable to the current school environments and neighborhoods of the STARS participants in D.C. Like its predecessors, Hood Feminism honors the intersection of race, gender, and class, centering Black women's consistent fight for equality and survival in the face of oppressive systems. Hood Feminism focuses on the experiences of marginalized Black women and girls navigating systemic barriers in low-income, predominantly Black communities often ignored by mainstream feminism. Kendall emphasizes the "hood" as more than a geographic location, but as a socio-political reality where survival, resilience, and activism intersect. Hood Feminism critiques

respectability politics, advocates for addressing basic needs as feminist issues, and challenges mainstream feminism's failure to include women at the margins. It also promotes intersectional solidarity, community-centered activism, and a shift from allyship to accompliceship, urging genuine coalitions that drive transformative change. Thus, encompassing Thirdspace Theory from a hood feminist perspective allows us to explore the possibilities of using extracurricular programs as physical thirdspaces to practice and embrace "decolonized visions, analyses, and practices" among Black girls (hooks & West, 1991, p. 61).

Research Questions

This study on the Girls' Collective and their STARS program harnesses a theoretical framework rooted in Soja's Thirdspace theory, which posits that transformative thirdspaces can have the power to bridge societal norms and imagined possibilities, fostering counterspaces to resist mainstream norms. In the context of STARS, participants navigate their schools and school communities (firstspace) and how they are treated and perceived in those spaces (secondspace). However, within the extracurricular program, they inhabit a prospective thirdspace where the envisioning new possibilities thrives. By integrating the key principles of Mikki Kendall's Hood Feminism, the study delves deeper into the power and structure of the thirdspace at the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. This approach honors the consistent struggle of Black women and girls, particularly those in the hood, for equality and survival within oppressive systems. Through this framework, the study investigates how thirdspaces can serve as physical manifestations of decolonized visions and practices, empowering Black girls to reclaim their narratives and celebrate their greatness. The study pursued the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does the Girls' Collective's STARS program operate as a thirdspace to engage with and support the diverse expressions of Black girlhood in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8?

RQ 2: In what ways does the program's approach and curriculum succeed in addressing the intersectional identities and lived experiences of Black girls and where do they fall short?

RQ3: How does the Girls' Collective and the STARS program challenge or reinforce harmful social norms and stereotypes related to Black girlhood within school and community contexts in Wards 5, 7, and 8?

Research Design

This study utilized an embedded single case study (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2018.) This research design allowed for the further investigation of the STARS program, focusing on its effectiveness for its participants—Black girls in D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Single case studies involve an intensive examination of an individual or group to draw broader conclusions (Mohajan, 2018). Robert Yin (1994) popularized this framework, recommending it for in-depth research on social phenomena. Embedded case studies allow for analysis of multiple subunits within the main case, offering a comprehensive view (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). This allowed for data to be collected and analyzed from numerous sources within this singular case.

Study Context

The study takes place in the nation's capital, Washington, D.C. A major, but condensed metropolitan city, at 68 square miles, D.C. is home to roughly 678,000 residents (Fogle, 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Despite being the nation's first majority Black city, due to rapid gentrification and high housing costs, the District's Black population is now down to 45%

(NYU, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Everyone who participated in this study either support or supported the STARS programs in D.C., as an employee of the Girls' Collective or are/were participants of the program in D.C.

Data Collection

Data were collected from four main sources: Interviews with current and former D.C. program staff; Interviews with D.C. STARS program alumnae; A focus group with current D.C. STARS participants; STARS program curriculum and other organizational documents. For the interviews, semi-structured individual interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) were conducted. Ravitch & Carl's (2016) framework for interviewing in groups was used to facilitate the focus group, allowing space for dialogue to take place between the program participants. Lastly, a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was used to analyze the program's curricula, website, and organizational reports.

Consistent with the approach of the theoretical framework, which blends Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism, collected data was analyzed using Patricia Hill Collins (2000) Afrocentric feminist epistemology. This approach, which aligns qualitative research with Black feminist thought, fosters mutual understanding between researchers and participants while promoting equity in examining their lived, intersectional experiences. Given that all interviewees and focus group participants were Black women and girls, this method provided a foundation for centering their narratives. Additionally, it allowed me to acknowledge and validate my own experiences as a Black woman and former STARS facilitator and participant. This framework was essential in amplifying the voices of Black women and girls, recognizing us as the experts of our own lived realities.

Significance of Study

Why conduct a study on the experiences of Black girls in extracurricular programming? First, there is a notable gap in literature exploring the educational and developmental experiences of Black girls in non-academic settings. In particular, few studies examine extracurricular environments as essential to Black girls' growth without framing Black girlhood from a deficit perspective—one that focuses on behavior correction rather than holistic development. This case study investigated the STARS program and the Girls' Collective, emphasizing how these programs engage with Black girls on their terms.

Second, given the significant impact of extracurricular programs on students' development and overall school experiences, insights from the STARS program can offer valuable guidance on how to better support Black girls in urban school settings. The U.S. Department of Education's 2023 Civil Rights Data Collection revealed that Black girls are the only racial group of girls who are disproportionately overrepresented in national suspension and expulsion rates (U.S. DoE, 2023). My hope is that the findings from this study will help schools cultivate safe, affirming learning environments where Black girls' talents can be nurtured—rather than responding to them with punitive measures.

Additionally, in the wake of the 2020 racial justice uprising, mainstream policy and advocacy groups have increasingly directed attention toward historically marginalized communities (Strickland, 2022). Within the Black Lives Matter movement, founding activists have consistently emphasized that the slogan does not assert that Black lives matter more but rather calls for centering the most marginalized to achieve liberation for all (Black Lives Matter, 2024; Mahdawi, 2020). Anti-racist movements stress the importance of amplifying the

voices of those most affected by social injustice, underscoring the need to listen, learn, and take action (Kratz, 2023).

Now, in 2025, under the second Trump administration, the rapid rollback of civil rights for those outside the dominant power structure—namely, anyone who is not a straight, cisgender, able-bodied, upper-middle-class Christian white man—has already begun. Efforts to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, such as the executive orders banning DEI in federal agencies, signal a dangerous shift away from recognizing and supporting marginalized identities (Mulvihill et al., 2024). The administration's proposal to eliminate the Department of Education entirely has raised alarms among scholars and advocates who warn that such a move would devastate educational equity, especially for students in underfunded, Black-majority communities (Olapido, 2025). Meanwhile, Project 2025, the policy blueprint being enacted across federal agencies, is poised to harm Black communities through deep cuts to public services and civil rights enforcement (Thurgood Marshall Institute, 2024). Additionally, the rescission of "protected areas" policies by the Department of Homeland Security has stripped immigrant and marginalized communities of critical safe spaces (Pearson, 2025).

In this context, Black girls living in economically oppressed communities will bear the brunt of these regressions—yet again positioned as one of the most vulnerable populations and one of the most ignored. History has shown that when the most marginalized are targeted, the ripple effect eventually reaches everyone. This study is not only an exploration of the STARS program—it is a declaration of what is at stake. To fail Black girls is to fail our collective future. This research is a call to action: To resist, to organize, and to ensure that no one is left behind.

Subjectivity Statement

My connection to the STARS program spans over two decades. I first became involved as a participant in 7th grade and remained engaged through my senior year of high school (2001–2007). I still remember the moment I was invited—I received a colorful card in my homeroom class, inviting me to attend a meeting. At the time, STARS was primarily marketed as a reproductive health program. After seeing who else had received invitations and making quick assumptions, I initially thought there had been a mistake. I was not sexually active. That was the furthest thing from my mind. However, even though I was an honor student; there was not a month that went by where I did not receive an in-school suspension for challenging teachers and being "insubordinate". I felt embarrassed. I felt my unruliness was finally called for an intervention—and this was it. I almost did not attend, until a friend who was invited encouraged me to go.

When the meeting began, I was guarded. But I vividly remember an icebreaker activity that made me laugh and feel included. The facilitator gave each of us a moment to speak and share something unique about ourselves. It was the first time I could talk and make a joke without being punished for it. Ms. Diana, my program leader, was warm, welcoming, and genuinely invested in getting to know us. By the end of the session, I could not wait to return. And now, more than 20 years later, I'm still here.

For us, STARS was more than just a weekly program, it was a sanctuary. It was a safe, affirming space where we could speak honestly about the challenges we faced as Black and Brown girls—tensions at home, our shifting identities, relationships, sexuality, changing bodies, and our dreams for the future. STARS shaped me profoundly. Its influence was so lasting that I remained involved long after graduation. In college, I returned as a Program Intern, and later

served as a youth member of the organization's Board of Directors. After earning my bachelor's degree, I was offered my first full-time position in 2012 as a Youth Development Program Coordinator. I facilitated five STARS groups in one D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) high school and two DCPS middle schools.

Throughout my four years as a full-time employee with the Girls' Collective, I was instrumental in updating the curricula for the participants in the 11th and 12th grades. I noticed that many of my girls in the grades mentioned wanting to go to college but needed to gain knowledge in the application and search processes. Because of the nature of the recruitment practices at that time in the high schools—social workers often referring girls who they felt were "out of control"—the majority of my participants did not have regular access to the school's college and career services that were either offered by the school or by other in-school college prep community partnerships. The culture of "cherry-picking," a term for selecting students the school labeled as their brightest stars to receive all the services and opportunities, never sat well with me. I was a product of cherry-picking and tracking in my public schools, frequently setting me apart from most of my classmates of color. As I completed coursework for my master's while working at this job, I learned that this neoliberal practice was indeed a legacy of racial segregation in schools (Francis & Darity, 2021). Although the main high school where I worked was majority Black, tracking was still in full swing.

Regarding the girls selected for college readiness resources, the school chose young women whose characteristics resembled stereotypical notions of white middle-class girlhood. In Signithia Fordham's foundational piece in Black girlhood studies, "*Those Loud Black Girls": (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender Passing in the Academy*, her research argues that for Black women and girls to be perceived as scholars with growth potential, they must conform to

standards of "good behavior" (Fordham, 1993). The girls who did not conform to white, middle-class societal standards of femininity were often sent to me and the STARS programs. Because our recruitment strategy rested heavily on the program's pregnancy prevention design, more often than not, the staff would refer girls who they thought were, or at risk of becoming, sexually active – or as we refer to it in the Black community, "fast". Although, at one of my middle schools, the social worker did an exceptional job referring a diverse group of Black girls—strong leaders and young ladies who she hoped the program would help them come out of their shell.

As a master's student, I was uniquely positioned to learn the theory behind what I was experiencing at work. This positioning impacted how I created interventions for my participants and resisted certain parts of the school's culture. I saw STARS as the perfect platform to change this narrative. I listened to what my participants said they needed and did what I could to fill that gap. We hosted career days, facilitated local campus tours, and held college and scholarship application workshops.

Additionally, when I noticed that my students received suspensions at excessively high rates—often for infractions that were not supposed to be punishable by suspension—I pitched a new pilot program to the organization to educate participants and their parents on their student rights. Reflecting, I realize my time at the organization was dedicated to making the program more equitable, advocating for Black girls within their schools and communities while teaching them how to advocate for themselves. As a Black queer woman raised in a single-parent household, my personal experiences have made me hyper-aware of gaps in equity and inclusion. My upbringing also influenced my "closed mouths don't get fed" mindset. I learned the importance of self-advocacy early on, quickly realizing how speaking up for myself directly affected my daily life. This value was central to my role as a curriculum developer, a program

facilitator, and a mentor. My new initiatives were not always welcomed with open arms by senior staff, in fear they may receive pushback from school partners or funders. The discourse while making these decisions propelled me to pursue a doctorate degree. I wanted to learn not only what we could do to make these programs more flexible for the needs of students but also what urban school districts could learn from gender-responsive extracurricular programming.

Aside from the current program participants, I have a personal connection with the staff in this study. In Chapter 3, I indicate my relationships with the staff members. Throughout the study, I used frequent bias and validity checks to ensure I accurately relayed the collected data. It is also important to note that as recently as 2023, I was a contractor with the organization, supporting rebuilding their alumnae network.

Definition of Terms

Black and African American: In this study, the terms Black, Black American, and African American are used interchangeably to describe all people of African descent living in the United States.

Black Feminist Thought: Black feminist thought embraces a body of knowledge centered on the viewpoints and lived experiences of Black women and girls. Notable Black feminist scholars are Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker.

Black Girlhood: Black girlhood is both an identity and a lived experience that reflects the unique struggles and triumphs of Black girls. It also serves as a transformative framework for advancing the liberation of Black girls and other marginalized youth (Carey, 2021).

Gender-specific programming*:* This refers to comprehensive program models designed for members of a specific gender as a space to address the unique dangers and risks the group faces because of gender (U.S. DOJ, 1998).

Gender-responsive programming: Gender-responsive programming is a more current term used to describe gender-specific programming (Bloom et al., 2006). As it relates to girls, gender-responsive programming creates an environment that "responds to the specific needs of girls, so they may feel safe and to develop meaningful relationships" (Stark & Brownlee, n.d., para. 3). Both gender-specific and gender-responsive are more commonly used to describe programs for justice system-involved women and girls. However, more practitioners in the youth development space are expanding these terms to refer to youth programming in schools and communities.

Hood: In Hood Feminism, the term "hood" refers to more than just a geographic space—it encompasses the cultural, socio-political, and economic realities of predominantly Black, working-class communities historically marginalized and stigmatized by mainstream society. The hood is marked by systemic inequities such as poverty, gun violence, underfunded institutions, and limited access to resources. Yet, it is also a site of resilience, creativity, communal care, and grassroots activism. For Kendall (2020a), who writes from her own experiences in Chicago's South Side, the hood is a lived reality that challenges dominant feminist narratives and reclaims space for knowledge-making rooted in survival and resistance.

Hood Feminism: Hood Feminism, as articulated by Mikki Kendall (2020a) in her book *Hood Feminism*, is a modern interpretation of Black feminist thought and scholarship that centers on the experiences and perspectives of working-class Black women in urban settings. It challenges mainstream feminist movements by emphasizing issues such as access to basic needs—food, shelter, and education—while critiquing their focus on respectability politics and the policing

of women of color's decorum, rather than addressing systemic injustices. Kendall emphasizes the importance of true allyship and solidarity, advocating for accomplices who actively engage in dismantling oppressive systems alongside marginalized communities, acknowledging the necessity of shared anger as a driving force for change.

Intersectional/intersectionality: A term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to describe the unique experiences of Black women and girls at the intersection of race, gender, and socio-economic status.

Respectability politics: Coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1994) in her examination of women's groups within the Black Baptist Church during the Progressive Era (1880-1920), respectability politics pertains to the promotion of values like temperance, cleanliness, politeness, and sexual chastity by Black women to achieve respectability from white people.

Thirdspace: This study uses Thirdspace Theory to emphasize the transformative power of extracurricular spaces as potential thirdspaces. This study investigates the STARS' extracurricular space as a possible thirdspace, where participants' community and school experiences coexist within an in-school program with transformative, liberatory potential.

Thirdspace Theory: Soja's (1996) Thirdspace theory hypothesizes the creation of a transformative realm, merging physical and conceptual spaces to challenge societal norms and foster resistance against oppressive systems. By combining firstspace (socially produced environments) and secondspace (conceptualized perceptions), individuals navigate within this thirdspace to envision new opportunities and disrupt existing societal power dynamics.

Urban school districts: This term is used to describe public school districts in U.S. city centers, typically with majority Black and Brown student populations.

Wards: In Washington, D.C., wards are the city's primary political and administrative subdivisions, each represented by a councilmember on the D.C. Council. The city is divided into eight wards, which serve as organizing units for governance, public services, and political representation (Council of the District of Columbia, 2024). Beyond their bureaucratic function, wards—particularly Wards 5, 7, and 8—carry deep sociohistorical significance, often reflecting longstanding racial and economic divides. These wards are predominantly home to Black residents and have historically faced systemic disinvestment, higher poverty rates, and educational disparities compared to other parts of the city (DC Action, 2025; Edwards & Jones, 2024; Forney et al., 2016; The DC Voice, 2021). As such, in research and activism, wards are not just geographic markers but also socio-political signifiers of inequality, resilience, and community identity within the District.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As detailed in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to explore how and if the Girls' Collective and STARS program creates intersectional thirdspaces for Black girls in D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Additionally, the study investigates how the organization and program addresses and/or perpetuates stereotypes of Black girlhood within the school and community contexts where they operate. Black girlhood represents a rich, complex identities shaped by intersecting systems of race, gender, and age, yet often overlooked in dominant narratives. Rooted in a history of resilience and innovation, Black girls navigate systemic barriers while asserting their agency and shaping culture in transformative ways.

Chapter 2 explores the evolution of feminist movements, contrasting mainstream approaches with the development of Black feminist frameworks that center the lived experiences of Black women and girls. By tracing the history of Black girlhood and examining its contemporary realities in urban schools and communities, the chapter highlights both the systemic inequities Black girls face and the celebratory aspects of their creativity, resistance, and leadership. The review concludes with an overview of the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Soja's Thirdspace Theory (1996) grounded in the ideologies Hood Feminism (Kendall, 2020a), emphasizing the critical considerations necessary to provide comprehensive support for Black girls in communities like D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8.

Black Girlhood

Black girlhood is an intersectional identity that embodies the unique experiences of Black girls as they navigate systemic barriers while exhibiting creativity, agency, and resilience (Carey, 2021; Cox, 2015). Scholars such as Aimee Meredith Cox describe Black girlhood as a "choreography of citizenship," wherein Black girls transform restrictive spaces into

platforms for self-expression and resistance. This dynamic critiques societal norms that marginalize Black girls while celebrating their cultural innovations and leadership (Field et al., 2016). Field et al. (2016) also emphasize how Black girlhood resists erasure, redefining notions of age and gender through the lens of racialization.

Expanding on this concept, literary scholar Janaka Lewis (2018) describes Black girlhood and as an experience that is inherently "quare", a term derived from E. Patrick Johnson's representation of "queer" within Black cultural contexts. Lewis explains that Black girlhood is "'something excessive' because it extends beyond the foundations of Black cultural experiences. It is to physically inhabit one experience while of being in another" (Lewis, 2018, p.96). In her examination of Black girlhood in literature, Lewis (2018) highlights dreaming as an act of agency, using dreams to move beyond imposed identities and envision transformative justice. This idea of dreaming and excess aligns with the broader reality of Black girlhood as both a historical and contemporary construct – one shaped by intersecting systems of oppression and resistance. While historical stereotypes and systemic inequalities continue to influence their treatment in schools and communities, Black girls persistently demonstrate resilience, cultural contributions, and resistance to oppression – redefining their identities and roles in society.

Historical Foundations of Black Girlhood

The historical roots of Black girlhood in the United States are inextricably tied to the institution of chattel slavery, which denied Black children, particularly girls, the protections and innocence associated with childhood. As Pasierowska (2015) describes, enslaved Black children often experienced a "moment of realization" where they became aware of their servile status, marking the loss of innocence and the beginning of their social positioning as property rather

than people. This transition from childhood to servitude was not just a psychological transformation but also a systemic erasure of their right to experience childhood joy and security.

Black girls were subject to what Schwartz (2016) calls “dangerous childhoods”, marked by high mortality rates, neglect, and brutal working conditions. Enslaved girls, like their adult counterparts, were seen as economic assets whose value was often tied to their reproductive capacities and labor potential. For many, this meant that their existence was defined by both physical and emotional exploitation, with their health and survival deprioritized unless it served the interests of slaveholders. Thus, as might be expected, playtime was nonexistent. Enslaved Black children were subjected to the same dehumanization as Black adults and were “severely punished for exhibiting normal child-like behavior” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p.33). Dumas and Nelson argue in the retelling of the history of Black children during enslavement, “Black childhood is unimagined – and worse unimaginable (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p.35).

Enslaved Black girls were also the subjects of racialized and gendered stereotypes that served to justify their exploitation. Parker (2018) notes the emergence of the “fast-tailed girl” stereotype, which labeled Black girls as precociously sexual and inherently promiscuous, stripping them of innocence and placing them at risk of sexual violence and societal judgment. This stereotype emerged alongside the enduring figure of Jezebel, a hypersexualized archetype rooted in the belief that Black women and girls were naturally promiscuous. White (1999) explains how these stereotypes were often reinforced through practices like public punishment where enslaved girls were stripped and beaten in sexually suggestive ways, further embedding the narrative of their hypersexuality in white society’s consciousness. In contrast, the Mammy figure—a desexualized, subservient archetype—was held up as the ideal for Black women and girls who sought societal acceptance (White, 1999). This dichotomy between the Mammy

and Jezebel created impossible standards for Black girls, forcing them to navigate a world that simultaneously demanded their asexual obedience and hypersexualized their existence. Spillers (1987) refers to this as a system of naming and categorizing Black women and girls that stripped them of agency while reinforcing their subjugation.

Despite the oppressive conditions they faced, Black girls demonstrated remarkable resilience and resistance. Enslaved girls often found ways to assert their agency, whether through subtle acts of defiance or more blatant refusals to conform to their set roles. Harriet Jacobs, an abolitionist who narrated her own experiences as an enslaved person in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* highlighted how she resisted the sexual advances of her enslaver, using her intelligence and resourcefulness to protect her dignity and escape to freedom (Jacobs, 1861). As Parker (2018) explains, narratives like Jacobs' reveal how Black girls and women used storytelling and other forms of expression as tools of resistance, reclaiming their identities and challenging the structures that sought to define them. Moreover, enslaved girls played active roles in their communities, contributing to cultural preservation and innovation. Schwartz (2016) notes that despite the lack of formal medical care, enslaved women and girls often relied on community-based knowledge and practices to care for one another, creating systems of mutual support that defied the dehumanizing conditions imposed on them.

The Legacy of Stereotypes and the Adultification of Black Girls

The contemporary realities of Black girlhood are deeply rooted in historical stereotypes that have perpetuated harmful narratives about Black girls in the media, schools, and broader societal contexts. These perceptions are grounded in the history of American slavery, where Black girls and women were positioned as inherently immoral and hypersexual. Thompson (2021) argues that these stereotypes not only justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved

Black girls and women but also framed them as less innocent and therefore unworthy of legal protection. These historical narratives have evolved into what we see today as the "adultification" of Black girls. The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality amplified the concept of Black girls and adultification in their report entitled *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. This study defined adultification as a "social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children's behaviors and verbalizations" (Epstein et al., 2017, p. 4). Epstein et al. (2017) found that Black girls are often perceived as more mature and less deserving of the freedoms and protections afforded to white girls. The stereotypes that justified exploitation during slavery remain visible in modern contexts, where Black girls are still seen as "fast" or "womanish," particularly when they are involved in incidents of abuse or harassment (Epstein et al., 2017; Thompson, 2021). Dr. Monique Couvson (2016), in her book P*ushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools,* explains how this adultification reflects a form of age compression:

> The assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women. This compression [has] stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms [and] renders Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood (Couvson, 2016, p. 34).

Epstein et al. (2017) further revealed how adults often view Black girls as more knowledgeable about sex and adult matters than their white peers, perceiving them as mature beyond their years

and, consequently, less in need of protection. This perception—compounded by race- and gender-based stereotypes that label Black girls as assertive, loud, and hypersexual—informs how adults treat and respond to them in schools, courts, and communities. The adultification of Black girls reflects a denial of their innocence and normative childhood, leaving them more vulnerable to harsh discipline, less likely to be believed in incidents of abuse or harassment, and frequently denied the safety, play, and care associated with childhood freedoms (Couvson, 2016; Thompson, 2021).

Educational settings reveal some of the most immediate effects of adultification and stereotyping on Black girls. Teachers' perceptions of Black girls as loud, defiant, and disruptive often lead to harsher disciplinary practices and lower academic expectations, which in turn affect Black girls' educational experiences and outcomes. Couvson (2007) describes how teachers tend to discipline Black girls to "quiet" them, viewing their assertiveness and expressiveness as incompatible with traditional norms of femininity. This effort to reshape Black girls into "ladylike" behavior not only stifles their engagement but also minimizes their academic identities, ultimately devaluing their potential. Similarly, Fordham (1993) describes how Black girls often adopt silence as a survival strategy in school settings, suppressing their authentic identities to avoid the negative attention associated with their racial and gender identities. This form of "passing" requires Black girls to conform to dominant norms, often at the expense of their self-expression, contributing to feelings of social and academic isolation (Fordham, 1993). The educational trajectories of Black girls are further influenced by the biases of their teachers, who are more likely to perceive them as less attentive and more disruptive than their peers. Francis (2012) found that Black girls are often recommended for advanced

classes less frequently than white and Asian students, a pattern influenced by teachers' perceptions of them as exhibiting behavior that they deem too challenging.

Stereotypical perceptions of Black girls also lead to disproportionate disciplinary actions, with research indicating that they are more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement compared to their white peers (Epstein et al., 2020; Wun, 2016). The 2020 Civil Rights Data Collection reported that Black girls are 4.19 times more likely than white girls to be suspended from schools and four times as likely to be expelled from school (Epstein et al., 2020; U.S. DoE, 2022). Black girls' intersectional identities render them vulnerable to stereotypes that portray them as inherently defiant or unruly, which leads to harsher punishments for behaviors that might be deemed acceptable in their peers. Wun (2016) explored the impact of structural anti-Black racism's relationship to how Black girls are disciplined at school and the types of punishments they receive. After in-depth interviews with Black girls with disciplinary records and 12 months of in-school observations, the study's findings suggested that not only were Black girls particularly susceptible to racialized and gendered practices of discipline, but also that their punishments were inherently anti-Black and characterized by continuous neglect and humiliation (Wun, 2016). In one of her observations, Wun witnessed Black girls being characterized as "[liking] drama." One Black female student countered that narrative by stating, "Maybe the girls fight because they're vulnerable…maybe something is happening at home, somewhere, and they're angry" (Wun, 2016, p. 747). In this example, both students and teachers quickly stereotyped Black girls, dismissing what may have been going on behind the scenes, "[extending] beyond any logic of empathy or understanding" (Wun, 2016, p. 747).

Instead of receiving empathy or support, Black girls often face punitive responses that reinforce their disproportionate involvement in the school-to-prison pipeline. The presence of

school resource officers (SROs) in predominantly Black and low-income schools exacerbates these disparities, as SROs are more likely to use force against students of color, including Black girls (Kidane & Rauscher, 2023; Lefkowitz-Rao, 2024). This heightened criminalization of typical youth behavior has raised concerns among advocacy groups like the ACLU, which warns of the lasting mental health consequences of police interventions in schools (Washington & Hazelton, 2021). The trauma associated with these encounters can have profound psychological and emotional repercussions (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Furthermore, research shows that in urban school districts, the presence of SROs correlates with an increase in school-related juvenile charges, effectively entrenching Black girls in the criminal justice system for behaviors that might otherwise warrant counseling or restorative practices (Javdani, 2019). Rather than receiving the support and protection often extended to their white peers, Black girls' trauma is frequently met with disciplinary measures, further reinforcing systemic inequalities (Goodkind, 2016).

This pattern of criminalization is not an abstract issue—it manifests in violent encounters that parallel broader instances of police brutality against Black communities. A highly publicized example occurred at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, where a teenage Black girl was violently yanked from her desk and slammed to the ground by an SRO (Stelloh & Connor, 2015). Her attorney later revealed that she had recently become a ward of the state after losing both her mother and grandmother, highlighting how vulnerable students who are already coping with trauma are further harmed by the very institutions meant to protect them (Lewis, 2020). These incidents underscore a troubling reality: rather than fostering safe and supportive learning environments, schools too often become sites of criminalization and retraumatization for Black girls.

Resistance and Cultural Innovation

Despite the systemic challenges they face, Black girls have consistently resisted the constraints of stereotypes, redefining their identities and shaping culture in transformative ways. Through creativity, resilience, and agency, they have not only challenged harmful narratives but have also positioned themselves as trendsetters in American popular culture. Black girls have long been at the forefront of cultural innovation, driving trends in music, fashion, and digital media. As Lindsey (2012) argues, Black girls' contributions to popular visual culture, such as music videos and social media platforms, serve as powerful tools of resistance and self-expression, enabling them to reclaim their identities and celebrate their individuality.

The cultural movement and hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013, encapsulates this resistance and innovation. Thompson created the phrase as a way to celebrate and uplift Black women and girls (Bohn, 2022). Since its inception, #BlackGirlMagic has become a rallying cry for empowerment, encouraging Black girls to embrace their identities and highlight their brilliance. From academic accomplishments to artistic expressions, the movement amplifies the voices of Black girls while reshaping narratives that traditionally exclude or marginalize them (Lamar-Becker, 2022). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2017) observes that Black girlhood is a site of resistance, where beauty standards, systemic challenges, and erasure are countered with creativity, strength, and joy. She notes that the "magic" attributed to Black girls lies not in supernatural qualities but in their ability to persevere and succeed in a society that often disregards their humanity (Ladson-Billings, 2017).

For instance, popular sayings, dance trends, and styles originating from Black girl culture often become mainstream but are rarely credited to their creators. The "ghetto until proven fashionable" phenomenon highlights how cultural trademarks like hoop earrings, acrylic

nails, and African American vernacular expressions (AAVE) are celebrated only when adopted by non-Black individuals, erasing the contributions of Black girls while perpetuating racial and cultural appropriation (Herring & Daniels, 2019). Nevertheless, Black girls continue to assert ownership of their cultural innovations, using platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube to amplify their voices and celebrate their creativity (Lamar-Becker, 2022).

Fashion and hairstyles have also been key forms of resistance for Black girls. By embracing natural hair and bold, distinctive styles, they challenge Eurocentric beauty standards and redefine what it means to be beautiful (Turner, 2017). Movements like #BlackGirlMagic and events like BET's "Black Girls Rock" celebrate these contributions, creating online and physical spaces where Black girls are uplifted and empowered. Through these platforms, Black girls not only celebrate their individuality but also affirm their shared experiences and collective power (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Lindsey, 2012).

Educational Successes

Black girls consistently display remarkable resilience and achievement in education, often exceeding societal expectations. In educational settings, Black girls show a commitment to academic success, even in subjects where they face significant barriers. Exploring Black girls' educational experiences, Nunn (2016) found that Black girls were exceptionally good at describing their strengths. However, despite Black girls' confident articulations of their abilities, many studies have captured instances where their teachers do not share the same convictions. Lim (2008) found that even though educators in the study expressed low expectations of their Black female students' academic abilities, those same students were demonstrating high achievement. Examining the difference in math and science achievement between Black girls from low-income families and their white female counterparts, Pringle et al. (2012) studied the

relationship between educators' expectations and the girls' self-perception as math and science learners. They found that in all three schools where the study was conducted, teachers did not envision their Black female students from low-resourced schools as achievers in math and sciences, nor did they think of them as college-bound scholars. Ultimately, they concluded that these educators believed that Black girls had limited academic futures, "indicative of further promoting stereotypical beliefs about African American girls in low-resourced school environments and, as such, were consistently supporting the status quo" (Pringle et al., 2012, p. 226).

Notwithstanding these educators' beliefs of their Black female students' academic capability, the data shows that, as a collective, Black girls are proving the naysayers wrong. For example, let us consider Black girls' engagement and achievement in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, STEM fields are among the fastest-growing industries, increasing the national workforce demand for skilled STEM laborers (Hines, 2023; Krutsch & Roderick, 2022). This demand has increased attention to marginalized groups' participation in STEM education and careers, including Black girls. One 2017 study sought to deeper examine Black girls' science scores for that year's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments. NAEP scores showed that only 10% of Black students in 4th grade tested at the proficient level or above in science; however, Young et al. (2017) found that numbers did not tell the complete story for Black girls. Their case study revealed Black girls' challenges in science, but it also revealed their strengths, challenging educators to use a strength-based mindset to affirm Black girls as learners and doers (Young et al., 2017). Regardless of what narrow standardized test scores may say about Black girls' achievement in math and sciences, studies have supported that Black girls are still engaged

and interested in STEM subjects even in school environments where they have limited access to STEM content (Hanson & Palmer-Johnson, 2000; Mau et al., 1995; Nittle, 2022). A study conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA) captured Black girls' STEM dreams beyond a K-12 setting, finding that Black women were more likely than white women to state their desire to pursue a STEM undergraduate major but were less likely to earn a STEM degree (O'Brien et al., 2015). In the press release for the study, the lead researcher stated: "If Black women start out in college more interested in STEM than white women but are less likely to complete college with a STEM degree, this suggests that Black women may face unique barriers, such as race-based stereotypes" (O'Brien, 2014, para. 9).

Coinciding with the themes of the APA study, Neal-Jackson's (2018) meta-analysis showed that even though Black girls were aware of race-based stereotypes about their abilities, they still had high hopes for their futures. Black female study participants said they wanted to attend college and saw education as a way out of generational poverty (Neal-Jackson, 2018). Families also wanted the best for their Black daughters in terms of education. Evan-Winters (2011) found that Black parents taught their daughters to resist in-school efforts designed to marginalize them and to avoid getting trapped by boys. In 2018, a study conducted by Education Trust found that in the states examined, Black women outperformed their male counterparts in degree attainment—35% to 26%, respectively (Anthony et al., 2021). 2020 data from the National Center for Education Statistics found that Black women have obtained higher education degrees at consistently high rights for the past eight years, accounting for 68% of associate degrees, 66% of bachelor's degrees, 71% of master's degrees, and 65% of doctorate degrees awarded to Black students (Davis, 2020; NCES, 2023).

Black Feminism

Peal Cleage, a Black American essayist and playwright, defined feminism as the "belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic" (Cleage, 1993, p. 28). Feminism both guides and is influenced by women's movements as its guiding ideology (Fiss,1994). The term Black feminism has been used by activists and scholars to better encompass the social and political activism of Black woman for betterment of their lives. Situating Black feminism within this study allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the discourse surrounding key issues identified by scholars for Black women and girls, while addressing the elements necessary to combat institutional and interpersonal oppression. At the same time, it centers and celebrates their agency, resilience, cultural identity, and the collective power of their communities. Additionally Black feminism set the stage for how organizations like the Girls' Collective can advocate for and support the young women of color it serves.

Long before #MeToo was a hashtag slogan popularized by white women in Hollywood, the phrase had been used by author and activist Tarana Burke to raise awareness about the sexual abuse faced by Black women and girls (Garcia, 2017). With the intersectional lessons learned from the larger Third Wave feminist movement, many demanded that Burke's work be centered in the #MeToo movement, calling out how sexual harassment and gender-based violence disproportionately impact Black women and girls (Boyd & McEwan, 2022; Noveck, 20).

The hijacking of "Me Too" emphasizes the essence of Black feminist and womanist scholarship. The marginalization of Burke's original message in the broader #MeToo movement reflects the ongoing struggle to ensure that the voices and experiences of Black women are acknowledged and prioritized – the very challenges Black feminism seeks to address. Black

feminism can be summarized as the centering of political and social movements that highlight the complex and intersecting forms of oppression faced by Black women in the United States and globally. Unlike mainstream feminism, Black feminism specifically aims to address the unique injustices that impact the everyday lives of Black women, with a strong focus on intersectionality – the relationship and collective impact of various forms of discrimination, such as institutional racism, classism, and sexism (Weida, 2023).

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1996) outlined how globally, the feminist agenda has four central ideas, the first being the economic status of women. This category addresses the economic conditions of women, focusing on issues like educational opportunities, industrial development, environmental racism, and employment policies and work conditions. The next topic is political rights, advocating for women's political involvement and rights such as the rights of assembly, freedom of movement in public spaces, holding political office, and addressing human rights violations against women, such as gender-based violence and sexual assault. The third category highlighted by Collins is marital and family issues akin to laws governing marriage and divorce, child custody polices, and the women's role in domestic labor. The last theme encompasses women's health and survival, addressing issues like reproductive rights, pregnancy, sexuality, and sexual health. The term "Black feminism" enables Black women to explore how these key concepts affect us within the U.S. as part of the broader global struggle (Davis, 1990; James & Busia, 1993).

Although Black feminist scholarship and thought garnered mainstream notability in the U.S. during Second Wave feminist movements, it has roots dating back to the mid-19th century. With written accounts dating back to the 1830s, Sojourner Truth often regarded as the foremother of Black feminism. In these accounts, Truth connected the Women's Rights'

Movement to abolition, noting that for Black women, racial and gender identities are inseparable (Peterson, 2019). Additional early expressions of Black feminist thought were evident during the Women's Suffrage Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Though Black women's activism was instrumental in getting the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments passed, securing Black Americans' and women's rights to vote, they were often excluded from or segregated within women's suffrage spaces. The National American Woman Suffrage Association, for instance, barred Black women from attending their conventions, and during suffrage parades, Black women were often required to march separately from white women (Bailey, 2022). Born to former slaves in Memphis, Black suffragist Mary Church Terrell embodied what it meant to be an intersectional, Black feminist at the turn of the 20th century. At the 1889 National American Woman Suffrage Association convention, Terrell's speech urged white women to recognize the dual oppressions Black women faced during slavery, while also celebrating the resilience of freed women (Brown, 2018).

Fast forward to late 20th century, historians recognize the Combahee River Collective (CRC) Statement as a pivotal work that helped shape the modern Black feminist movement (Decherney, 2024). The Boston-based CRC was a Black, feminist, lesbian, and socialist group, active from 1974 to 1980. The group emerged in response to the racism within the Civil Rights Movement. Barabara Smith, one of the collective's founders, names the group after Harriet Tubman's 1863 Combahee River raid that freed over 750 enslaved people (Taylor, 2020). Indeed, they was on a mission to liberate. In 1977, they released the *Combahee River Collective Statement*, naming the intersecting oppressions Black women faced that the CRC was committed to fighting against—especially for queer Black women. The CRC emphasized that Black women's overlapping identities – race, gender, sexuality, and class – shape their unique political

perspectives. These interlocking oppressions also create opportunities to develop more unified and inclusive strategies for fighting against injustice:

> The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (CRC, 1977, para. 1)

Importantly, in the first section of their statement, "The Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism", the CRC recognizes how Black feminist philosophers have always been at the forefront of American political movements rather known or unknown. Highlighting the activism of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, they describe Black feminist thinkers as those who have a "shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique" (CRC, 1977, para. 3).

At the core of the CRC's beliefs, as expressed in the second part of their statement, is the conviction that Black women are "inherently valuable" (CRC, 1977, para. 9) Their liberation is seen as essential, driven by the fundamental human need for autonomy and self-determination (Taylor, 2015). Calling back to the harmful racial tropes of Black American women, the Collective emphasizes how little value was placed on Black women's lives in this country since arriving in bondage. The politics of their identities showcase Black women as who they truly are,

women rooted in “a healthy love for [themselves], [their] sisters and [their] community which allows [them] to continue [their] struggle and work” (CRC, 1977, para. 9). The CRC’s statement is also known for coining the term “identity politics”, underscoring how the most radical politics come directly from all our intersectional identities. According to Harcourt (2022), the CRC Statement formulated a critical theory emphasizing the role of identity in political consciousness and action. Harcourt noted how the CRC showcased how a person experiencing intersecting forms of oppression can create deeper political understanding, thus offering new insights for organizing and mobilizing by recognizing how these overlapping systems shape their experiences and resistance strategies (Harcourt, 2022).

Black feminism foundational scholar Patricia Hill Collins defines Black feminist thought as a critical social theory that combines both knowledge and institutional practices to address the key issues confronting Black women in the United States as a collective (Collins, 2000). Collin’s work positions Black feminist thought as being committed to social justice at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Rooted in the lived experiences of Black women, Black feminist thought aims to empower them by reflecting and responding to the societal challenges they face. Additionally, it functions as a medium for expressing and reshaping an awareness that already exists amongst Black American women, with the ultimate goal of fostering resistance and driving social change.

Collins noted how at the time, she saw Black women garner an apprehension to labeling themselves as a feminist, as they saw feminism as a concept and movement exclusively for white women. Contemporary Black feminist scholars stress the importance of Black women understanding social systems from a feminist point of view, as societal patriarchy impacts us too. In her book *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers her Superpower*, cultural theorist

Brittney Cooper (2018) emphasizes her belief that being both Black and a feminist is essential for the complete liberation of Black women. Cooper's modern take on feminism heals the misconceptions that feminist perspectives are not for Black women. In fact, she notes that within Black feminism, there is not only space for holding white women accountable the historical and current harm their actions and exclusions have caused, but also room for racial solidarity amongst women (Cooper, 2018). In an interview with the media outlet The Root, Cooper indicated that Black feminism also allows Black men to see how patriarchy harms everyone underlining what she calls and gender empathy gap. Cooper uses the #BlackLivesMatter movement as an example, centering how the Black women who started the national movement ultimately created a platform that helped the world see and humanize Black men. However, Cooper stated:

> We don't see Black men sort of zooming in in the same way and thinking really specifically about the way systems harm Black women or constrict our sense of possibility. And more so than them not only thinking about it, but having a sense of commitment to helping us change it. Aspiring to be patriarchs like what white men have, that isn't freedom. That isn't going to help anybody. It's certainly not going to help Black people commit to each other when we're thinking through, for instance, intimate partnership. What we can do is do that Black thing that we do very well, which is that we can creatively reimagine what it looks like for us to have Black love in a world that doesn't want us to have it. (The Root, 2018, 1:41)

Like Cooper, contemporary Black feminists continue to stress how the centering of Black feminist ethics can liberate everyone. In a 2020 column for The New Yorker, Princeton African American Studies professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor revisits the demands of Combahee River

Collective, recognizing the document as the origins of what we now refer to as "intersectionality" and "identity politics". She argues that there is much to be learned from the CRC, starting with the fact that people should never have to set aside their unique needs for the sake of unity within broader movements (Taylor, 2020). Instead, Taylor's (2020) piece highlights how meaningful solidarity emerges from recognizing and addressing the specific oppressions faced by different groups, ensuring that no one is left behind in the fight for justice.

Gender-Responsive Extracurricular Programming and Black Girls

This section examines the evolution of extracurricular activities in the United States, highlighting how shifting social, economic, and political forces have shaped both access and participation over time. It begins by tracing the institutionalization of extracurricular programs in the early 20th century and explores how mid-century expansions gave way to increased privatization and racial and class-based disparities in the late 20th century. The discussion then turns to the development of gender-specific programming for girls, focusing on organizations such as Girls Inc. and Girl Scouts, and the ways these programs have evolved in response to cultural shifts and feminist critiques. Special attention is given to Black girls, whose experiences at the intersection of racial and gender oppression remain underexamined in both research and practice.

For Black girls, systemic barriers are deeply embedded in educational and extracurricular contexts, requiring program designs that go beyond generalized models of gender equity. Unlike their white peers, who have historically accessed large-scale, gender-specific programming, Black girls must navigate the compounded effects of racism, sexism, and often classism. These intersecting oppressions present not only distinct challenges but also opportunities to celebrate the creativity and cultural contributions Black girls bring to extracurricular spaces. The following

explores the transformative potential of culturally affirming and equity-centered programming for Black girls. Drawing on frameworks such as Black feminist pedagogy, trauma-informed care, and community partnerships, these approaches highlight how intentionally designed gender-responsive extracurricular programs can foster belonging, leadership, and holistic development, offering Black girls the tools to thrive within and beyond educational spaces.

The Evolution of Extracurricular Activities in the U.S.

Extracurricular activities in the United States have a deep and complex history, beginning with foundational guidelines established in 1918 by a special National Education Association (NEA) committee (Cuccia, 1981). Initially, these programs were not seen as mere add-ons to education but as vital components of holistic youth development. This focus aligned with the broader progressive education movement, which sought to reform education to meet the social and psychological needs of youth during a time of industrialization and urbanization (Meier et al., 2018). By the mid-20th century, extracurricular activities had expanded significantly, particularly during the post-World War II baby boom (Angrist et al., 2005). As family sizes shrank and the competition for education and employment increased, middle-class families began to invest more heavily in structured extracurricular engagement, viewing at as essential to children's future economic security (Friedman, 2013; Meier et al., 2018). These activities included not only school-based clubs and sports but also privately funded programs outside of school, reflecting growing class-based disparities in access (Mintz, 2004).

A significant shift occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by economic recessions and the rise of neoliberal policies that restructured public services, including education. During this period, public funding for schools and youth programs was reduced, leading to the proliferation of "pay-to-play" models that favored middle- and upper-class youth, while

working-class families were increasingly dependent on the limited offerings available through publicly funded, school-based programs (Putnam, 2015; Meier et al., 2018). This transition marked the privatization of youth enrichment, as families with financial means could access a wide array of extracurricular opportunities outside of schools, while those without means faced significant barriers. Despite these growing inequalities, school-based extracurricular activities remained a critical support system for youth development, particularly in urban schools serving low-income and racially marginalized students (Dryfoos, 1999). This era also saw an increasing racial and socioeconomic stratification of participation, as access to high-quality extracurricular programs became increasingly tied to family wealth and racial privilege (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Snellman et al., 2015).

The development of extracurricular programming took another critical turn in the 1990s, shaped by zero-tolerance student conduct policies, the "war on drugs," and broader efforts to address youth crime and delinquency. With the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, urban school districts began receiving federal, state, and local funding to create extracurricular initiatives specifically aimed at "at-risk" students, a term often disproportionately applied to youth of color, particularly Black and Latino youth (Martinez & Rury, 2012). These programs were designed to divert students from perceived pathways to crime; however, Giroux (2003) critically noted that many of these initiatives were steeped in racialized assumptions, portraying Black youth as inherently deviant and requiring surveillance rather than support. This "disciplinary logic" reduced extracurricular activities to tools for social control rather than empowerment, reflecting broader societal distrust of Black childhood.

Nonetheless, contemporary research underscores the multifaceted benefits of extracurricular programming, especially for Black youth and girls from disadvantaged

communities. Participation in extracurricular activities have been linked to enhanced psychological development, including greater self-esteem and resilience; reduced engagement in risky behaviors such as substance use; increased school engagement and academic aspirations; and improved social skills and leadership development (Dotterer et al., 2007; Heath et al., 2018; Hull et al., 2008). These outcomes are particularly significant given that marginalized youth often gain more from extracurricular activities than their more privileged peers but face greater barriers to participation due to cost and accessibility (Heath et al., 2018; Meier et al., 2018).

In recent years, educators and scholars have increasingly called for equity-focused reforms to expand access to extracurricular activities and to de-normalize whiteness in these spaces, ensuring that programming reflects the cultural identities, experiences, and needs of racially and socially diverse student populations (McCready, 2004). These reforms are driven by growing recognition that historically, extracurriculars have often been structured around white, middle-class norms, inadvertently excluding or marginalizing Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those from working-class, urban communities (Johnson, 2006). This evolving equity framework involves rethinking recruitment practices, diversifying curriculum content, and creating leadership opportunities for students of color and other underrepresented groups. For example, Johnson (2006) emphasizes the need to challenge the perceived whiteness of LGBTQ youth programming, arguing that only by intentionally including diverse cultural perspectives and identities can such programs effectively support and empower marginalized youth.

Moreover, coalition-building across lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality is increasingly viewed as essential to creating truly inclusive environments where all youth can

thrive. Hansen (2022) illustrates this through participatory research in queer youth spaces, showing how centering the voices of Black and Brown students in program planning reframes norms of participation and opens space for transformative, anti-racist engagement. Additionally, Calabrese Barton and Tan (2018) provide a model for equity-focused STEM programs, emphasizing the importance of designing extracurricular programs that reflect and validate the lived experiences of youth of color, moving away from standardized, culturally narrow approaches. Together, these scholars argue that de-normalizing whiteness is not merely about representation, but about fundamentally reconfiguring the structures, goals, and values of extracurricular programs to ensure equitable access, meaningful participation, and developmental benefits for all youth—particularly those who have historically been excluded or underserved.

Gender-Specific Programming for Girls

Just as extracurricular programming in the U.S. evolved in response to shifting social norms, economic forces, and political ideologies, gender-specific youth programs for girls also developed within these broader historical currents, reflecting and challenging traditional notions of femininity and girlhood. Founded in 1864, the Girls Club of America—now Girls Inc.—is among the earliest gender-specific youth programs in the U.S. Initially, it supported young women migrating from rural areas after the Civil War by helping them find jobs and safely develop skills in the newly industrialized world (Girls, Inc., 2023; Nicholson & Maschino, 2001). In 1937, during the U.S.'s First Wave of feminism, the organization's purpose statement stated that its mission was to train young women to be wives and mothers (Kropf, 2005).This domestic focus remained through the 1950s, exemplified by collaborations like *The Handbook of Charm,* which offered etiquette advice encouraging girls to remain modest, "ladylike", and inconspicuous in public (Kropf, 2005, p.12).

Another long-standing organization, Girl Scouts of the USA, was founded in 1912 by Juliette Gordon Low, who sought to empower girls with opportunities beyond domestic life. Inspired by her experiences in Europe and her exposure to youth work through Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, Low introduced American girls to camping, first aid, sports, and even professional aspirations—all before women had the right to vote (Chatel, 2015; Proctor, 2013). Her mission challenged prevailing norms, encouraging girls to explore life beyond the home. Today, Girl Scouts serves 10 million girls in 146 countries, solidifying its role as a global leader in youth programming for girls (Girl Scouts, n.d.). Despite its longevity, Arneil (2010) emphasized how Girl Scouts experienced significant membership declines in the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with broader cultural shifts during Second Wave feminism and the countercultural movements of the era. Both Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts saw enrollment plummet by one-third to one-half, with Girl Scouts' patriotic and service-oriented mission no longer resonating with socially conscious youth (Arneil, 2010). Responding to a 33% membership drop, the organization revised its mission in the 1980s and 1990s, embracing "a commitment to girls' equality and independence and a commitment to respect for difference and cultural diversity" (Arneil, 2010, p.60).

Girl Scout's ability to change with timely, radical movements has solidified its longevity in the gender-specific youth programming space. Throughout the organization's history, they have always encouraged girls that they could be anything they wanted to be. However, some scholars critique the direction of girls' programming during this period. Goodkind (2009) argues that many programs became vehicles for commercialized feminism, emphasizing individual empowerment, self-reliance, and personal responsibility over structural change. She notes that such programs often reframe systemic issues as personal deficits, urging girls to "transform

themselves" rather than challenge societal barriers. Goodkind writes, "What began as a problem with men, created by men, is transformed into a problem with women, who…are not confident and independent enough to use the power now available to them" (Goodkind, 2009, p.400). This neoliberal turn in feminism, while marketed as empowerment, often shifted the burden of change onto individual girls, sidelining the collective action and systemic critique central to earlier feminist movements.

Recent gender-specific programs address this tension by centering skill development, leadership, and inclusivity. Initiatives like Girls in the Game and Go Grrrls have demonstrated measurable gains in self-esteem, leadership, and health literacy for girls, especially in underserved communities (Bohnert & Ward, 2012; LeCroy et al., 2017). Moreover, STEM-focused programs for girls have proven successful in building confidence and competencies in science and technology, helping bridge gender gaps in male-dominated fields (Ruiz-Bartolomé & Greca, 2023; Stoeger et al., 2019). Scholars emphasize that for these programs to be truly empowering, they must remain attuned to girls' lived experiences and resist the pull of neoliberal individualism, instead fostering community, inclusivity, and systemic awareness (Careemdeen, 2023).

Gender-Specific Programming for Black Girls: From Deficit-Based Models to Affirming Spaces

While many contemporary gender-specific programs have evolved to empower girls broadly, a growing body of research highlights the need for intentional, culturally affirming spaces specifically designed for Black girls, who's unique experiences at the intersection of race and gender often remain unaddressed in mainstream extracurricular programming. Nyachae and Ohito (2019) conducted one of the few studies that specifically examine extracurricular

programs aimed at Black girls, finding that such programs often reflect deficit-based approaches that frame Black girlhood through the lens of respectability politics. Drawing on Higginbotham's (1994) analysis, they noted how these programs mirrored historical efforts within the Black Baptist church that sought to reform both individual behavior and societal perceptions of Black women. While respectability politics were intended as tools to combat racism and sexism, they also served as gatekeeping mechanisms, requiring adherence to narrow behavioral standards in order to gain respect and recognition as worthy citizens (Harris, 2003). Nyachae and Ohito critique these programs for often shaming and blaming individuals, limiting Black girls' self-expression, and morally policing their bodies and identities.

In mainstream extracurricular spaces, Black girls frequently experience their ways of being and knowing challenged or dismissed in environments where their identities should have been affirmed (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). However, when these spaces are intentionally designed to affirm Black girlhood, the results can be transformative. In a case study of a school-based program called Sister Circles, Carter Andrews et al. found that participants felt a sense of relief and belonging, describing how the program helped "lift the veil of disapproval and alienation" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 2537). These gender- and culturally-specific spaces provided comfort and community, helping participants realize they were not alone. Additional studies have shown that such programs can lead to improved academic performance, higher self-esteem, and reduced risky behaviors, including lower rates of sexual activity and substance use (Belgrave et al., 2000a; Belgrave et al., 2000b; Phinney & Chaura, 1992). Belgrave et al. (2004) further observed that the positive peer relationships formed in these spaces significantly decreased relational aggression, contributing to healthier social dynamics among participants.

The underrepresentation of Black girls in STEM education has garnered increased attention in recent years, prompting research into how extracurricular programming can help close this gap (King, 2022). Wade-Jaimes et al. (2019) described their experience facilitating an afterschool club that provided STEM exploration for girls, studying the benefits for the Black girls in the program. The lead researcher specifically sought participation from girls labeled as loud or disobedient, knowing that these students were more likely to be excluded from this type of programming. They found that these spaces helped Black girls reframe their self-perceptions, reporting that participants stated they now see themselves as a science person (Wade-Jaimes et al., 2019). Similarly, King and Pringle (2018) documented how such spaces allowed Black girls to reflect on their STEM experiences, share challenges and strengths, and construct new meanings about the impact of their multidimensional identities. These programs served as counterspaces, where deficit notions of people of color were actively challenged and replaced with affirming, empowering narratives (King & Pringle, 2018, p. 58).

Still, Wade-Jaimes et al. (2019) caution that while afterschool clubs provide meaningful benefits, they alone cannot fully counteract generations of systemic inequity. Nonetheless, affirming programs—from Sister Circles to STEM-focused initiatives—represent a significant shift from deficit-based approaches toward creating spaces where Black girls' identities, experiences, and knowledge are validated and celebrated. While such programs alone cannot dismantle systemic inequities, they play a crucial role in fostering self-esteem, academic success, and belonging. These culturally responsive counterspaces not only support individual growth but also empower Black girls to reimagine their identities and shared experiences, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Holistic Approaches and Black Feminist Frameworks for Gender-Responsive Programs

Building on the need for affirming, culturally responsive spaces for Black girls, scholars and practitioners have increasingly turned to holistic frameworks and Black feminist pedagogies that center healing, identity, and empowerment as foundational to youth programming. Monique Couvson's *Sing a Rhythm, Dance a Blues: Liberatory Education for Black and Brown Girls* (2019) has become influential in education and youth development for offering a transformative vision for supporting Black girls. Her work emphasizes holistic care, healing, and liberation, showing that Black girls thrive when their identities are affirmed, their traumas are acknowledged, and they are given space to lead, free from systemic bias. Central to her framework is the integration of trauma-informed, culturally relevant practices rooted in empathy, trust, and belonging.

In educational spaces, Couvson emphasizes trauma-informed practices that validate students' lived experiences. Trauma-informed practices are approaches designed to recognize and respond to the effects of trauma on individuals by creating supportive and empathetic environments. According to Ruffin and Blake (2023), these practices integrate culturally relevant interventions, critical consciousness, and identity-affirming programming, addressing the unique adversities faced by marginalized groups. Leary (2019) highlights that trauma-informed care should include culturally competent mental health frameworks that consider systemic barriers and the intersectional challenges of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. These approaches address the disproportionate exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and systemic inequities students may face outside of that space. Another study found that Black girls experience a higher prevalence of ACEs, including exposure to violence and race-based discrimination, which intersect with systemic racism and sexism (Joseph-McCatty et al.,2024).

Trauma-informed practices must integrate culturally competent frameworks that consider systemic barriers and the intersectional challenges of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Leary, 2019; Ruffin & Blake, 2023). Such approaches not only address the root causes of trauma but also foster resilience through empowerment and advocacy, as suggested by Goodkind et al. (2020), who advocate for reframing resilience as a collective, empowerment-driven process to combat societal inequities.

Couvson's research also concluded that educational spaces for Black girls should utilize inclusive curricula rooted in Black feminist narratives allow these students to see themselves in the content they learn, affirming their identities and fostering a sense of belonging. Barbara Omolade's foundational work, *A Black Feminist Pedagogy* (1987), establishes Black feminist pedagogy as a transformative framework that challenges traditional Western educational models by centering Black women's lived experiences, fostering critical consciousness, and promoting intellectual inclusion. This pedagogy emphasizes reciprocal knowledge-sharing, where students and instructors collaboratively connect personal experiences to societal structures, fostering leadership, agency, and a liberatory learning environment (Omolade, 1987). Building on Omolade's work, Ruffin and Blake (2023) advocate for integrating Black feminist narratives that promote racial identity development, resilience, and critical consciousness. When delivering educational programs to Black girls, scholars have also highlighted the curriculum's role in dismantling harmful stereotypes by amplifying marginalized voices to foster collective resistance against mainstream narratives that often leave out the lived experiences of Black women and girls (Evans, 2019; Lane 2017). Henry's 1998 study illustrates how a curriculum specifically designed for a program for African and Caribbean American girls helped them "come to voice" through the intentional exploration of their identities and racism. Scholars have also framed

Black feminist pedagogy as a tool for radical reparative justice, disrupting white-centric norms through storytelling, racial memory, and community-based activism (Kynard, 2023).

Lastly, the importance of community partnerships is also prominently featured Couvson's work. In *Sing a Rhythm, Dance a Blues*, she gives several examples of successful school-community partnerships that support the learning and healing for girls of color. She mainly focused on how these partnerships emerged from volunteerism, sometimes evolving from unlikely places. One example she provided was the National Black Women's Justice Institute collaboration with then-Boston councilor Ayanna Pressley on a project amplifying Roxbury's girls of color in equitable education discussions. Pressley's annual Jump Into Peace event featured double dutching, food, music, and a peace building activity to foster community healing from gender-based violence. At the 2016 Jump Into Peace event, Pressley explained the inspiration behind the gathering, stating, "as a young girl, double dutch represented a freedom from everyday stresses, deeply rooted friendships with other girls in my neighborhood, and peace in an otherwise chaotic inner city environment" (Strong Women Strong Girls, 2016, para. 2). Through the activities that brought her peace and joy during her childhood, Pressley was able to facilitate partnerships that reciprocated the same energy for other Black girls.

Jones (2021) found that community and business partnerships enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of outreach programs for Black girls by providing resources, mentorship, and holistic support, such as employees from local businesses leading workshops and mentoring participants. Similarly, King (2022) underscored the significance of community partnerships in STEM programs for Black girls, demonstrating how these collaborations not only address systemic barriers but also offer culturally sustaining support. The programs observed in King's study partnered with families, community mentors, and Black women professionals to

create spaces where Black girls could build confidence, challenge stereotypes, and develop STEM identities through Afrocentric curricula. King concluded that community involvement, particularly through Black women mentors, is vital for fostering a sense of healing and belonging, stating, “We must extend their village to include community matriarchs and othermothers who will assume a sense of responsibility to love and nurture Black girls as if they were their own biological children” (King, 2022, p. 59).

For extracurricular programs that serve Black girls, intentional partnerships ensure that interventions are sustainable and grounded in the realities of the communities they serve. While systemic biases often shape the programs and initiatives delivered to Black girls, especially those in urban communities, intentional, affirming, and culturally responsive approaches have the potential to transform these spaces into powerful tools for empowerment and validation. By addressing the unique challenges faced by Black girls and celebrating their identities, extracurricular gender-specific programs can foster academic success, emotional well-being, and lasting community connections.

Theoretical Framework

Black girls growing up in under-resourced urban communities often find themselves navigating spaces not built with them in mind—schools, extracurricular programs, and public systems that reflect dominant norms that rarely affirm their full personhood. Their experiences are shaped not only by physical environments but also by the social narratives and power structures embedded within them. As Mikki Kendall writes in *Hood Feminism*, “We need to shift the conversation...to one where we support the healing and healthy development of girls and young women in every community” (Kendall, 2020a, p. 52). This call for healing and affirmation is at the heart of this section’s theoretical approach.

To explore how programs like STARS can create spaces of empowerment and resistance for Black girls, this study draws on Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism. These works provide frameworks for understanding how marginalized youth carve out space for themselves, not just physically, but emotionally, culturally, and politically. Thirdspace Theory, introduced by Henri Lefebvre and further developed by Edward Soja, provides a lens to understand how youth engage with spaces that are both physical and conceptual—spaces that blend tangible realities with imaginative and symbolic meanings (Soja, 1996). In this view, Black girls in urban schools are not just moving through classrooms and hallways, they are navigating a complex web of expectations, stereotypes, and resistance, constantly negotiating who they are and who they are allowed to be. At the same time, Hood Feminism, as articulated by Kendall, insists that feminism must center the lived realities of girls from the "hood"—those dealing daily with poverty, violence, and societal marginalization. Hood Feminism as a framework values not only survival but also the resilience, creativity, and leadership that emerges from these communities, treating them as sites of knowledge, resistance, and power.

Together, Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism anchor this study's exploration of how the Girls' Collective's STARS program operates within—and against—the challenging realities of urban schooling. These frameworks allow us to ask: Does STARS serve as a thirdspace, offering Black girls a place to redefine themselves, resist systemic barriers, and reclaim joy and power? And if so, how do the physical spaces, social perceptions, and lived experiences of these girls shape the program's impact? By weaving together space, identity, and empowerment, this section sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how intentional programming can create liberatory environments for Black girls—spaces that not only affirm who they are but also who they are becoming.

Thirdspace Theory

One of the earliest formulations of thirdspace theory was developed by Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991), a French Marxist scholar and Marxist Humanist—a thinker who critiques and extends Karl Marx's ideas through the lens of human lived experience (Peters et al., 2020). In his seminal 1974 work *The Production of Space*—translated into English in 1991—Lefebvre explored the ways cities are produced, emphasizing the cyclical processes of capital investment and the social relations that emerge within urban environments. As a sociologist, Lefebvre (1992) viewed society as a complex web of social relationships and was particularly interested in how human beings generate the social dimensions of physical and constructed spaces.

To articulate this, he proposed a spatial triad: Perceived space, conceived space, and lived space. Perceived space refers to the everyday norms and interactions that occur within physical environments—norms often dictated by those with economic power and influence. Conceived space involves the ways in which these dominant ideas and norms are internalized and consumed by the broader public, even when individuals may hold personal values that challenge or resist these dominant narratives. From the tension between these two emerges lived space—a synthesis of perceived and conceived spaces. Lefebvre described this thirdspace not as a purely physical realm but as a blended, cognitive, and experiential space where individuals negotiate, resist, and reimagine the influences of the other two.

This study draws on Edward Soja's concept of the thirdspace, which builds upon and reinterprets Henri Lefebvre's metaphorical notion of spatial triads. In his work, geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja critically engages with Lefebvre's ideas through a Marxist humanist lens to further examine the production and experience of social space. Soja argues that space is not merely a backdrop for human activity but is socially constructed and experienced in ways

that are “simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical” (Soja, 1996, p. 65). Central to Soja’s Thirdspace theory—and its application in this study—is the emphasis on creating a tangible thirdspace, a physical site where two distinct spaces converge to embody the lived experiences of a particular individual or group. This convergence produces a unique and transformative environment, one that enables new forms of social interaction, identity formation, and resistance. Soja adapts Lefebvre’s spatial triad into his own framework for understanding urban environments and their inhabitants.

In Soja’s interpretation, firstspace corresponds to Lefebvre’s perceived space—spaces that are empirically measurable, materially produced, and governed by laws and dominant social norms. These are the concrete, physical environments that structure everyday life. Secondspace aligns with Lefebvre’s conceived space—the mental and ideological representations of space created by individuals or groups in response to the constraints of firstspace. Secondspace is shaped by how people conceptualize and make sense of their spatial realities.

Soja’s Thirdspace, drawing directly from Lefebvre, is both distinct from and inclusive of the first two spaces. It represents a hybrid space where the boundaries between real and imagined, material and symbolic, are blurred. As Soja notes, Thirdspace “combines the real and the imagined, things and thought on equal terms, or at least not privileging one over the other a priori” (Soja, 1996, p. 68). Crucially, Thirdspace serves as a counterspace—a terrain of resistance emerging from marginality and subordination, offering opportunities to challenge and disrupt dominant power structures. This aspect of thirdspace is particularly relevant to this study, as it emphasizes the potential for marginalized groups to construct spaces that foster empowerment and social transformation. Within the thirdspace, individuals and communities are not only able to reimagine their realities but also to actively resist systemic oppression. As

Meskell-Brocken (2020) affirms, the thirdspace offers a platform for marginalized populations to envision alternative futures while interrupting entrenched hierarchies and power dynamics.

Hood Feminism

Hood Feminism is a contemporary take on Black feminist scholarship, conceptualized by Mikki Kendall in her 2020 book *Hood Feminism*. As predecessors, scholars of Black feminist thought accentuated the experiences of Black women and girls at the intersection of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In *Hood Feminism*, Kendall (2020a) uses "hood" as a concept tied to marginalized, often predominantly Black, working-class communities that are frequently overlooked or stigmatized by mainstream society. While the text does not provide the author's explicit definition of "hood", she often refers to it as a space where systemic inequalities such as poverty, gun violence, and lack of access to resources are prevalent. Kendall is a Black feminist scholar from the South Side of Chicago—her hood. During the first Trump administration, the South Side became gun violence's poster child as its homicide rate became the highest it had been in the past two decades (Ansari & Flores, 2017).

Kendall positions the hood not only as a geographic location, but also as a cultural and socio-political reality. It represents the lived experiences of those who navigate systemic barriers daily, and a place where survival, community, and resilience intersect. Despite its challenges with the key characteristic of a hood in America, the author still shared beautiful testimonies of the South Side, showcasing the creativity and reliance of the Black community. Reclaiming the word "hood", Kendall paints the hood as sites of valuable knowledge, activism, and feminist thought that mainstream feminism often ignores. Like her predecessors, Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, Kendall's baseline for this concept is feminism at the intersection of race and class. Hood feminism is about navigating unjust systems—systems not designed for

working-class Black women and girls in urban cities to thrive—and examining how they manage to persevere and create opportunities despite these barriers, effectively making ‘a way out of no way’. Additionally, this book was used as a platform to call out mainstream feminist movements who disregarded the experiences of women at the margins.

Kendall outlines ten key principles in *Hood Feminism* that provide a framework for inclusive feminism centered on the needs of women and girls in the hood:

1. **Intersectionality**: Feminism must consider how multiple identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexuality—intersect to shape individual experiences of oppression. The struggles of marginalized women and girls are not monolithic but are influenced by overlapping forms of discrimination. Policies and activism must address unique challenges rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.
2. **Centering Marginalized Voices**: The needs and experiences of women and girls from working-class communities of color must be at the forefront of feminist efforts. Advocacy and resource allocation should prioritize the voices of those most affected by systemic oppression.
3. **Survival and Basic Needs as Feminist Issues**: Feminism must prioritize addressing food insecurity, housing instability, healthcare access, and safety from violence as core feminist issues. Feminist initiatives should advocate for access to affordable housing, living wages, and food security programs.
4. **Critique of Respectability Politics:** Feminism must reject the notion that women and girls must conform to societal norms of respectability to be deserving of rights and respect. This means supporting all women and girls, including those who defy traditional/middle-class roles.

5. **Challenging Stereotypes**: Feminism must dismantle harmful stereotypes that justify neglect and mistreatment. This calls for a reform of media representation, public discourse, and policies to reflect the complexity of Black women and girls' lives in urban communities.
6. **Community-Centered Activism**: Feminism should work collaboratively with marginalized communities, addressing their specific needs through grassroots efforts. Advocacy should be guided by community input and involve local leadership.
7. **Accountability and Allyship:** True allyship requires action, accountability, and a willingness to confront privilege and oppression. Allies must commit to listening, learning, and stepping back to allow marginalized voices to lead.
8. **Reproductive Justice:** Reproductive rights must include access to healthcare, freedom from coercion, and the ability to raise children in safe environments. Advocacy efforts should address broader social determinants of reproductive health care.
9. **Economic Justice**: Economic inequality is a core feminist issue, and policies should address the root causes of poverty and economic disenfranchisement. Advocacy should focus on living wages, job training programs, and childcare support.
10. **Intersectional Solidarity**: Feminist solidarity must recognize and address the different challenges faced by women and girls across lines of race, class, and sexuality. Build coalitions across diverse identities to address the full spectrum of issues affecting women and girls globally.

Throughout *Hood Feminism*, Kendall emphasizes these principles by grounding them in the lived experiences of marginalized women and girls, particularly Black women and girls. She highlights intersectionality through examples like the disproportionate maternal mortality rates

among Black women, showing how overlapping oppressions shape their birthing experiences. Kendall centers the voices of underrepresented women and girls, critiquing mainstream feminism for excluding those living in poverty and advocating for issues like hunger and housing to be recognized as core feminist concerns. Rejecting respectability politics, she also advocates for the inclusion of sex workers and incarcerated women in feminist movements. Her scholarship also challenges harmful stereotypes like the "strong Black woman" trope that dehumanizes Black women and girls, justifying the neglect of their mental and physical health. In the chapter "Of #FastTailedGirls and Freedom", she points out how schools and youth programs focus on the perceived promiscuous nature of Black girls rather than the historical fetishization and objectification of Black women's bodies. Kendall states:

> Girls of color in a patriarchal system have experienced more abuse, violence, adversity, and deprivation than protection. Yet programs that focus on "at-risk" girls tend to focus more on job skills and preventing pregnancy and not equipping them with better-coping mechanisms. We need to shift the conversation about systems from vague assertions that work is empowering and early pregnancy is bad to one where we support the healing and healthy development of girls and young women in every community. (Kendall, 2020a, p. 52)

Kendall emphasizes community-centered activism by promoting grassroots solutions and calling out performative allyship that fails to confront privilege. In the opening chapter, she recounts instances of feminist spaces excluding women at the margins—women from the hood— stating the book aims to show how people "have not been as good as they thought" (Kendall, 2020a, p. 4). She critiques mainstream feminism for ignoring the needs of women and girls of different races and socioeconomic statuses, noting that "no problem like racism, misogynoir, or

homophobia ever went away because everyone ignored it" (Kendall, 2020a, p. 4). Kendall stresses that Hood Feminism must be direct because the erasure of marginalized women and girls within feminist movements ensures equality remains unachievable. She advocates for intersectional solidarity, urging coalitions across race, class, and sexuality to create a truly inclusive feminism.

Furthermore, Kendall critiques common pitfalls in allyship, including the defensiveness allies often exhibit when confronted about their actions and the tendency to use their ally status as a shield against accountability. She argues that allyship frequently centers the comfort of the privileged, forcing marginalized individuals to bear the burden of emotional labor by educating those in power. Kendall urges white feminists to move beyond performative allyship and embrace the role of accomplices. In a 2020 Twitter post, she draws a clear distinction: "We don't need allies, we need accomplices. Fighting oppression isn't a spectator sport. Allies cheer you on, accomplices wade in to fight too" (Kendall, 2020b).

For Kendall, in the fight against injustice, anger is a crucial and legitimate response. While the "angry Black woman" stereotype is often weaponized to silence and discredit Black women, she contends that anger is a powerful force for catalyzing action: "No one has ever freed themselves from oppression by asking nicely" (Kendall, 2020a, p. 251). She challenges the dehumanizing expectation that marginalized groups should extend forgiveness in the face of systemic harm and instead positions anger as a unifying force between accomplices and those they stand beside. Ultimately, Kendall argues that it is this righteous anger—and the willingness to engage in real, sustained effort—that distinguishes white feminist saviorism from genuine, transformative solidarity: "Being a good accomplice is where real work gets done" (Kendall, 2020a, p. 255).

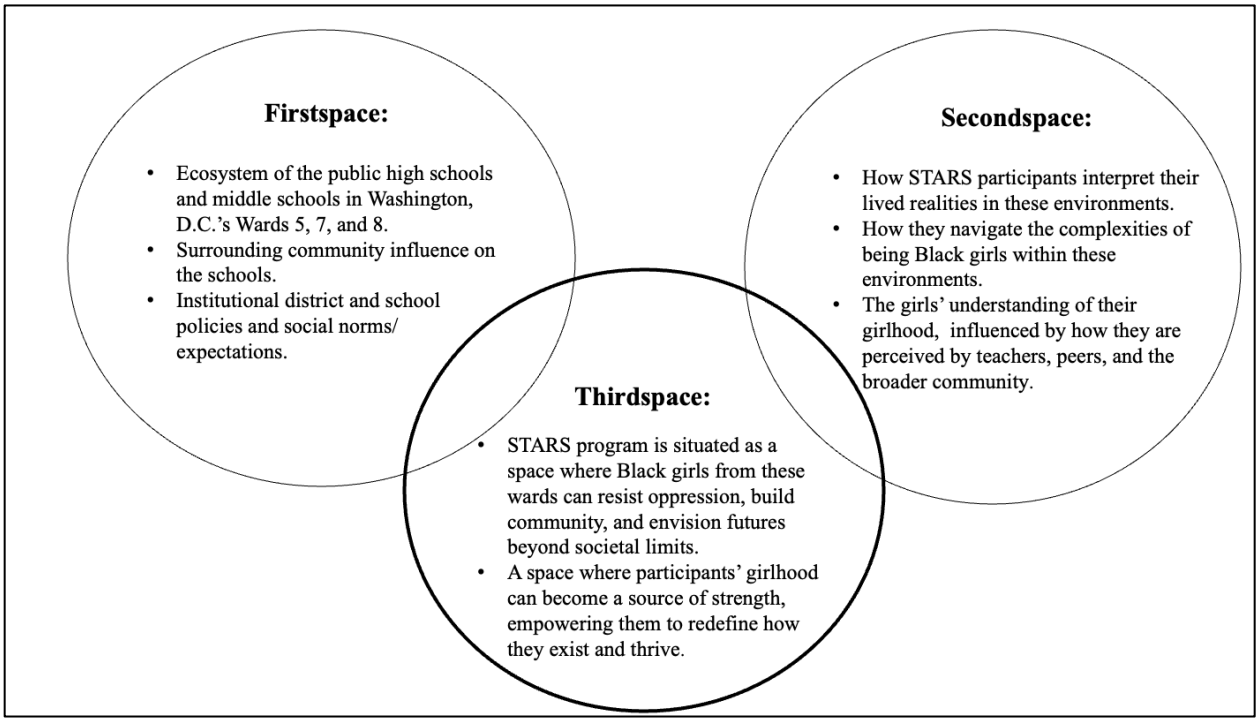
Blending Thirdspace Theory with Hood Feminism: A New Approach

Though Black feminism was created to highlight the multiple ways Black women experience and talk about their oppression, some scholars have critiqued its application to the lived experiences of Black girls. In the first chapter of *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*, "Theorizing Black Girlhood," Smith highlights that "much of the literature that explores institutional and structural violence has centered on the experiences of Black women in the political-economic sphere of society" (Smith, 2019, p. 24). She argues that failing to account for the added element of childhood risks adultifying adolescent Black girls when applying these frameworks.

As an offshoot of Black feminist thought, Hood Feminism is employed as the theoretical lens for this study, as it emphasizes the shared characteristics of the neighborhoods and schools of the minor participants in the STARS program—their firstspace—and the perceptions of Black girls and Black girlhood and how it impacts there navigation through these spaces—their secondspace. To avoid adultifying the Black girls in this study, their age was deliberately incorporated into the framework, centering their girlhood in both the study's conceptualization and research protocol. Based on vast research in the field, this is the first known attempt to blend Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism as a framework to conceptualize Black girls' experiences in extracurricular spaces. The diagram below displays how this study observes the Girls' Collective and the STARS program through Soja's Thirdspace Theory using Kendall's Hood Feminism as a lens while centering girlhood as an essential consideration:

Figure 1

Thirdspace Theory for In-School Programs at Urban Schools for Black Girls, Using a Hood Feminist Lens



To examine how the Girls' Collective and their STARS program align with or deviate from the principles of Hood Feminism in creating thirdspace programs for Black girls, it is essential to first explore the participants' firstspace and secondspace. This study defines the first tenant of Soja's thirdspace theory, firstspace, as the physical environments of the STARS participants: their high schools and middle schools located in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. According to DCPS (2024) school profiles, traditional public schools in these wards predominantly serve Black student populations, ranging from 68% to 99%. These areas face significant challenges, with most schools designated as Title I and having more than 60% of students classified as "at-risk." DCPS defines at-risk students as those whose families qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP), those identified as homeless during the school year, students under the care of the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) or in foster care, or high school students at least one year older than the expected grade level. Academic performance in these schools is overwhelmingly concentrated at the lowest proficiency levels in both Math and English Language Arts on the D.C. Comprehensive Assessment of Progress in Education (DC CAPE) city-wide standardize tests. Additionally, chronic absenteeism remains a persistent issue, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 60% of D.C. high school students now classified as chronically absent (Kim, 2024).

Wards 5, 7, and 8 are home to the city's largest Black populations, with Black residents comprising 50% of Ward 5, 88% of Ward 8, and 89% of Ward 7 (D.C. Health Matters, 2024). These neighborhoods also experience high levels of community violence—Wards 7 and 8 report the city's highest crime rates (Dil, 2023; Ford, 2023). Poverty is another pervasive issue, with rates approaching 25% in these wards (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Within this context, these firstspace markers underscore the marginalization experienced by STARS participants. Kendall highlights the critical need to understand the impact of violence, poverty, and economic insecurity in urban environments, emphasizing that girls in low-income areas often face daily threats of violence, particularly gun violence. She explains that many girls drop out of school as a survival strategy, seeking to avoid spaces where shootings are frequent (Kendall, 2020a). Recognizing the influence of participants' firstspace is vital for developing effective thirdspace programming that reflects their lived experiences.

According to Thirdspace Theory, secondspace encompasses the imagined, conceptualized, and representational aspects of space. In this study, the secondspace refers to the socially constructed perceptions of middle and high schools in these wards—how educators,

administrators, and students conceptualize these spaces. Secondspace includes staff perceptions of Black girls and Black girlhood, as these shape how Black girls navigate the firstspace of their school environments. Research indicates that teachers and administrators often perceive Black girls as loud, defiant, and disruptive, resulting in harsher disciplinary measures and reduced academic opportunities (Couvson, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017; Wun, 2016). Schools often reinforce societal norms, perpetuating stereotypes and deficit-based narratives about Black girlhood that influence how educators discipline and guide students (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Epstein et al., 2017; Nyache & Ohito, 2019). These perceptions impact how Black girls in the STARS program experience their school environments, potentially feeling unseen, over-disciplined, or excluded from opportunities. The Girls' Collective staff's understanding of these schools also shapes how they conceptualize and implement their programming. The staff selects partner schools based on their perceived ability to effectively support the STARS program, reflecting their interpretation of the schools' challenges and capacities.

The thirdspace represents a transformative counterspace. This study views the STARS program, along with the additional activities and supports provided by the Girls' Collective, as an extracurricular program with thirdspace potential. Kendall emphasizes the profound impact of volatile environments on education, noting, "When home isn't safe, and the streets aren't safe, then what kid can focus on school to the exclusion of danger?" (Kendall, 2020a, p. 20). This underscores the critical need for comprehensive, safe-space programs like STARS. Applied to this study, Hood Feminism advocates for the centering of Black girls' lived experiences in order to challenge negative narratives perpetuated by school environments. By using this framework, this study examines if and/or how the Girls' Collective incorporates these principles to empower and support young women of color attending high-needs urban schools.

Summary

This literature review emphasizes the dual necessity of understanding the intersectional challenges faced by Black girls while celebrating the richness of Black girlhood. The review highlights how systemic barriers and historical stereotypes have shaped the lived experiences of Black girls, often subjecting them to racialized gendered inequities in education, media representation, and society. At the same time, it honors the resilience, creativity, and leadership they exhibit in the face of these obstacles, asserting Black girlhood as a social force. Black girls are not merely survivors of systemic oppression—they are creators, innovators, and trailblazers who redefine narratives and claim spaces for self-expression and empowerment.

The literature reviewed reveals significant gaps in the understanding of Black girlhood, particularly regarding how extracurricular programs operate as sites of both resistance and identity formation. While there is extensive research on the systemic challenges Black girls face, less is known about how their experiences in non-academic extracurricular spaces. Additionally, mainstream feminist and educational discourse often fails to fully integrate the lived realities of Black girls, focusing instead on deficit-based narratives rather than the assets and agency they bring to social and cultural spaces.

This synthesis of challenges and celebratory factors lays a vital foundation for the broader study, which seeks to evaluate how the STARS program act as a site of empowerment for Black girls in high-needs schools. By addressing the gaps in existing literature, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of Black girlhood by integrating an intersectional framework that acknowledges both systemic oppression and the strategies Black girls use to resist and thrive. The research not only examines how Black girls experience structural inequities

but also highlights the significance of safe spaces that nurture their brilliance, agency, and the unique power of their collective identity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Chapter Three introduces the research methodology for this qualitative, embedded case study. This chapter outlines the research design, providing a detailed discussion of participant selection, methods of data collection, data analysis procedures, and the establishment of trustworthiness. The purpose of this single case study was to explore how the Girls' Collective and their STARS program align with or deviate from the principles of Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism in the creation of extracurricular spaces for Black girls in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Specifically, this study investigates the intersection of participants' lived experiences in their firstspace (the physical and social environments of their schools and neighborhoods), secondspace (the conceptualized and perceived understandings of Black girls in these environments), and the possible thirdspace created by the STARS program as a transformative, liberatory counterspace. Using Soja's Thirdspace Theory as a guiding framework and incorporating Kendall's Hood Feminism as a lens, this study aims to evaluate whether and how the STARS program addresses systemic challenges, disrupts harmful social norms, and empowers young Black women in urban high-needs schools, as well as to identify any areas where it may fall short. The chapter also highlights the rationale behind the selection of research methods and the strategies employed to ensure the dependability, credibility, and ethical integrity of the findings.

Research Questions

This case study sought out answer the following research questions:

> **RQ 1:** How does the Girls' Collective's STARS program operate as a thirdspace to engage with and support the diverse expressions of Black girlhood in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8?

RQ 2: In what ways does the program's approach and curriculum succeed in addressing the intersectional identities and lived experiences of Black girls and where do they fall short?

RQ 3: How does the Girls' Collective and the STARS program challenge or reinforce harmful social norms and stereotypes related to Black girlhood within school and community contexts in Wards 5, 7, and 8?

For RQ1, the hypothesis proposed that the Girls' Collective and its STARS program operate as a thirdspace, deliberately engaging the varied expressions of Black girlhood across D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8 to foster empowerment and liberation. For RQ2, it was predicted that the data would show that the organization addresses the intersectional identities and lived experiences of the Black girls in their programs through affirming spaces and culturally responsive curriculum. Lastly, for RQ3 it was hypothesized that there would be evidence to support that the organization deliberately pushes back against stereotypes about Black girlhood, seeking to challenge and dismantle the harmful social norms that marginalize their participants.

However, for RQ3, it was also counter-hypothesized that there would be areas where the Girls' Collective and STARS program fall short. While their efforts to counter stereotypes might be evident, certain communications or programmatic strategies may inadvertently perpetuate the very stereotypes they aim to combat, particularly through unintentional reliance on respectability politics or deficit-based framing. If present, these tensions could reveal gaps in the program's ability to fully align its practices and messaging with its mission of empowering girls while affirming their diverse experiences and identities.

Research Design

To explore the STARS program's role in supporting Black girls within urban environments of concentrated disadvantage, this study employed an embedded single case study design. Grounded in the methodological framework of Yin (2018), this qualitative approach enabled an in-depth investigation of a unique case—the Girls' Collective's STARS program—by examining multiple subunits of analysis within the broader context of the program. Through triangulating data from participants, staff, and organizational documents, the study conducted a comprehensive investigation into whether the STARS program operates as thirdspace and if it supports the multifaceted experiences and identities of Black girlhood in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8.

Embedded Case Study

This study employed an embedded single case study design, a qualitative research approach that enables in-depth exploration of an individual, group, or specific entity to draw broader insights applicable to similar contexts (Mohajan, 2018). Methodologist Robert Yin introduced the single case study framework in 1984, establishing a widely adopted model for case study research and its applications. According to Yin (2018), this design is particularly suited for researchers seeking to conduct extensive, holistic investigations into social phenomena. He emphasizes that case studies allow for detailed, real-world analysis of a "case" within its context—whether examining individual life cycles, group behavior, organizational processes, neighborhood dynamics, or institutional change (Yin, 2018). Yin identifies several conditions under which a single case study is especially justified: When the case represents a critical test of existing theory, an extreme or unique situation, a typical or representative case, or when it serves a longitudinal or revelatory purpose. Supplementing this, Creswell (2007) notes

that case studies, as a qualitative methodology, utilize multiple data collection methods—including interviews, observations, documents, and reports—to construct a rich, detailed account of the case under investigation.

Within Yin's framework, the embedded single case study design allows for multiple units of analysis, known as subunits, within a single overarching case. These subunits, while distinct, are integral parts of the primary case and provide additional layers of analysis. This approach enables researchers to examine different dimensions of the case, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of its complexities (Scholz & Tietje, 2002). The use of multiple subunits also allows for triangulation—cross-verifying data from different sources—which enhances the validity and depth of the findings. Unlike purely statistical research, this qualitative design emphasizes understanding patterns and relationships in context rather than isolating variables for causal mapping (Yin, 2018).

However, working with multiple subunits can pose challenges. One key risk is focusing too heavily on subunit-specific data, such as insights from staff interviews or participant focus groups, without adequately connecting these findings back to the main case. Yin cautions against allowing the primary phenomenon of interest to wane in importance due to an overemphasis on subunit analysis. To mitigate this, he advises researchers to continually relate subunit findings to the larger case and assess how each contributes to a holistic understanding of the overall research focus.

This study's single case, the STARS program, offered a rich opportunity to explore how extracurricular programming can support Black girls in urban school districts marked by concentrated disadvantage. Guided by Yin's methodological principles, the research focused on this unique program serving predominantly Black female students within a majority Black school

district. The embedded design allowed for the analysis of data across multiple subunits, supporting robust triangulation. To maintain coherence between subunit findings and the broader case, I engaged in regular memo writing after each subunit's data collection and subsequent analysis. These memos served as a space to reflect on potential biases, uphold the study's integrity, and ensure that all findings remained aligned with the research questions and the overarching context of the Girls' Collective and the STARS program.

Study Subunits

Following the guidelines for an embedded case stud, this study looked at three subunits:

> **Subunit 1 – STARS Participants**: Current program participants and program alumnae.
>
> **Subunit 2 – Program Staff:** Current and former staff members of the Girls' Collective and the STARS program.
>
> **Subunit 3 – Organizational Documents**: Documents analyzing the program's design, strategic direction, curriculum content, evaluation reports, and publications.

The decision to explore these four subunits was integral to capturing a comprehensive understanding of the STARS program within its unique context. Each subunit offers a distinct perspective, collectively contributing to a rounded analysis of the program's impact and its alignment with Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism. STARS participants provided first-hand accounts of their experiences and the program's influence, while program staff offered critical insights into the program's evolution, management, and the operational challenges. The organizational documents revealed the program's guiding principles, curriculum structure, strategic plans, and the organizations' efforts to address systemic inequalities.

This embedded case study approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the STARS program, allowing the study to connect findings from individual subunits back to the overarching

case. By triangulating data from these diverse perspectives, this research captures a nuanced picture of how the Girls' Collective and the STARS program navigates the complexities of supporting Black girls in urban middle and high schools, striving to create transformative thirdspaces where they can thrive.

Participant Selection

This study collected data from a range of participants across two of the three subunits: Current and former STARS participants and program staff. Each subunit involving human subjects was selected to provide a specific yet interconnected perspective on the program's implementation and effectiveness in supporting Black girls in Wards 5, 7, and 8. This section outlines the participant selection criteria, recruitment process, and demographic details for each group, providing context for the range of perspectives represented in this study.

Subunit 1: STARS Participants- Focus Group Participants (Current STARS Participants)

The first subunit of this study consists of current program participants, who participated in the focus group, and program alumnae, who participated in the STARS program in D.C. For the focus group, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- Participated in STARS group at a school in Ward 5, 7, or 8.
- Participated in a STARS group for at least one school year.
- Must identify as Black/African American.

In Washington, D.C., STARS currently operates programs in Wards 5, 7, and 8, informing the location requirements. It was asked that focus group participants have been in the program for at least one school year to ensure that they had completed a full cycle of STARS programming (typically 20+ weeks during the school year). This would ensure a better recalling of what was learned/gained from their participation and the additional elements they wished to be added.

Additionally, since the study looks at the larger implications of Black girls' experiences in extracurricular programming, participants had to be of Black/African American ancestry. As an incentive, participants were allowed to vote on the lunch they wanted before the 60-minute focus group meeting. There were also offered a raffle entry ticket for a $50 gift card for their participation. I worked with the organization's leadership to identify STARS groups where the participants mostly fit this criterion. This narrowed it down to two groups—the 12th grade STARS groups at Fredrick Douglass High School in Ward 5 and Crestwood High School in Ward 8. Ultimately, one focus group was held at Crestwood High School with six current program participants.

Table 1

Focus Group Participants – Current STARS Participants

Participant*	Age	Program Location	Years in the Program
Nyla	17	Ward 8	3
Jasmine	17	Ward 8	3
Destiny	17	Ward 8	3
Eryka	17	Ward 8	3
Asia	17	Ward 8	3
Karter	18	Ward 8	3

*pseudonyms

Subunit 1: STARS Participants- Program Alumnae

To include additional participant voices, STARS program alumnae were also included in this subunit. To participate in the study, alumnae had to fit the following criterion:

- Participated in STARS group at a school in Ward 5, 7, or 8.
- Participated in a STARS group for at least one school year.
- Must identify as Black/African American.
- Must be 18 years-old or older.

Two alumnae participated in the study, providing their perspectives from participating in STARS programs in schools in Wards 5 and 7. Alumnae participants were selected using both convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method that allows researchers to select participants based on accessibility and their relevance to the study, and purposive sampling, a sampling method that allows for the selection of participants based on their characteristics, knowledge, experience, or other identified criteria (Valerio et al., 2016). These two alumnae were included based on their long-term participation and continued engagement with the organization. Michaela was selected due to our pre-existing relationship as her program facilitator during high school, while Tiara was chosen after working with her school during the organization's annual fundraiser in 2023.

Table 2

STARS Program Alumnae

Participant*	Age	Program Location	Years in the Program
Tiara	19	Ward 5	4
Michaela	25	Ward 7	3

*pseudonyms

Subunit 2: Program Staff – Current Staff

This subunit includes interviews from current and former staff members of the Girls' Collective and the STARS program. To participate in this study, the current staff members had to fit the following criteria:

- Must be currently employed by the Girls' Collective.
- Must currently or previously facilitated or supported STARS programs in D.C.'s Wards 5,7 and/or 8 for at least one full school year.

Subunit 2: Program Staff – Former Staff

To participate in this study, the former Girls' Collective staff members had to fit the following criteria:

- Must have been employed by the Girls' Collective.
- Must have previously facilitated or supported STARS programs in D.C.'s Wards 5,7 and/or 8 for at least one full school year.
- Must have departed from the organization no more than five years prior to the study.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit staff participants for this study (Valerio et al., 2016). Individuals were invited based on their roles within the organization and their eligibility according to the study's criteria. Staff members from a range of positions—including leadership and program facilitation—were selected to provide insights into both the implementation and management of the STARS program. This approach ensured the inclusion of participants with varied yet interwoven experiences, supporting the study's aim of examining the organization's and the program's overall impact and operations. Ultimately, the following current and former staff members agreed to participate:

Table 3

Current and Former Program Staff

Participant*	Role Level	Years with Organization
Ms. Cassidy	Junior Leader	5+ years
Ms. Laila	Facilitator	5+ years
Ms. Tasha	Senior Leader	1+ years
Ms. Christine	Senior Leader	10+ years

*pseudonyms

Study Context

Understanding the social and geographic context in which the STARS program operates is essential to interpreting the program's design, implementation, and impact. This section

situates the study within Washington, D.C., highlighting the city's shifting demographics, persistent racial and economic inequalities, and educational challenges—particularly in Wards 5, 7, and 8, where the STARS program is based. By examining these contextual factors, this section provides background for interpreting the STARS program's approach and its relevance to the communities it serves.

Washington, D.C.

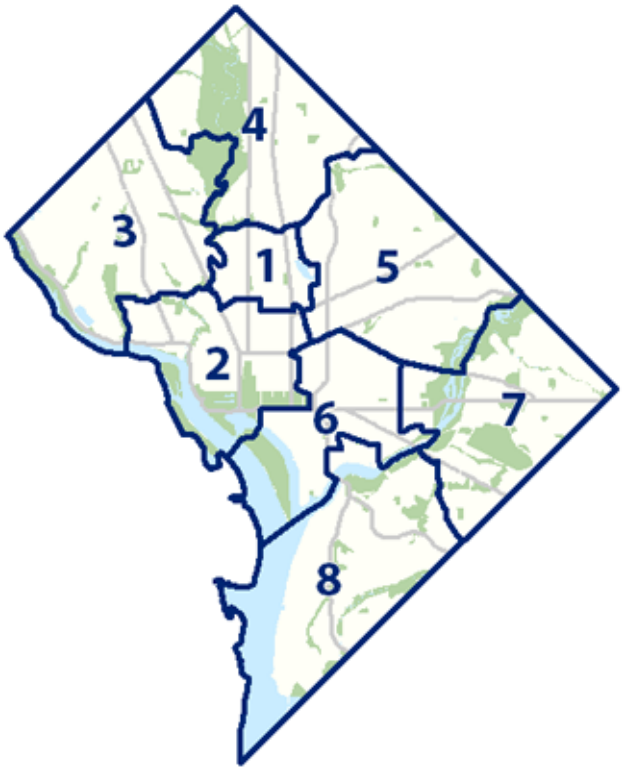
Growing up near the nation's capital, three things have always stood out to me: the city's many historical landmarks and monuments, go-go music as our constant soundtrack, and the vibrant presence of our Black communities. In 1957, D.C. became the first major U.S. city with a majority-Black population, earning the name "Chocolate City" (NYU, 2021). However, data from the U.S. Census shows that D.C.'s Black population has been on a steady decline since the 1970s, with 2017 being the first time Black people were not the city's majority racial demographic (Rusk, 2017). By the 2020 Census, demographic data indicated that D.C. was the only place in the U.S. where the white population increased (Schnell, 2021). D.C.'s Black population is now at 45% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

What does the city's demographic shift mean for its native Black residents? As a result of the city's rapid diversification, the Black population is experiencing pronounced residential segregation. Studies have determined D.C. to be the country's fifteenth most segregated area, finding that residents here live in more segregated areas than they did over thirty years ago (Menendian et al., 2021). The city also has the highest percentage of eligible gentrified neighborhoods in the U.S., in which most residents affected are Black Americans (Richardson et al., 2019). Since 2015, most of the city's remaining Black population now resides east of the Anacostia River (Rusk, 2017).

As mentioned in the introduction, STARS facilitated programs in the wards with the highest teen pregnancy rates—Wards 5, 7, and 8. Historically, these wards have been home to majority Black populations. Figure 2 shows the city's geographical layout. Ward 5 is west of the Anacostia River in the city's Northwest sector. Wards 7 and 8 are east of the Anacostia River. The river has served as a natural barrier for residential segregation, making these parts of the city slower to gentrification. Wards 7 and 8 have dealt with historical challenges of frequent violent crimes, high incarceration rates, food insecurities, and low-performing schools (Burton, 2022; DC Department of Health, 2017; DC Health Matters, 2025; Government of the District of Columbia, 2025; Rubin & Coffin, 2022; U.S. DHHS, 2021).

Figure 2

Geographical Map of Washington, D.C.'s Wards



Source: D.C. Government, Office of Planning (2025)

D. C. Public Schools (DCPS)

Though D.C.'s Black resident population has dipped below 50%, 56% of all DCPS students are African American. Latine students makes up 22% of student population, white students consist of 17%, and Asian students at 2% (DCPS, 2024). It is important to note that Because of the city's residential segregation, D.C. Public Schools are also severely racially segregated. A recent report from the D.C. Mayor's Office utilized a dissimilarity index to determine what percentage of students would need to change schools for the city's public schools' demographics to match the city's student demographics. It found that 76% of Black students would need to switch schools, indicating that school segregation was highest amongst the city's Black students (Edsight, 2023).

DCPS also classifies 47% of its students as "at-risk". As mentioned in Chapter 3, the school district defines at-risk students as those eligible for government aid programs like TANF or SNAP, experiencing homelessness, under CFSA supervision or in foster care, or high school students older than the typical age for their grade level (DCPS, 2024). DCPS is also experiencing chronic absenteeism, with reports noting that one in four DCPS students is classified as chronically absent meaning a student has missed ten or more days of school (OSSE, 2024; Wilkins et al., 2024). Friday (2023) reported that 60% of DCPS high school students were classified as chronically truant during the 2022 – 2023 school year. At eight high schools—primarily located in D.C.'s most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, including those hosting current or former STARS programs—75% to 85% of students are chronically absent (Friday, 2023). In terms of academic performance and student proficiency rates, D.C.'s statewide assessment results for 2023 showed a third of students (33.6%) met or exceeded expectations in

English Language Arts and only 21.8% of students meet or exceeded expectations in math (Executive Office of the Mayor, 2023).

STARS Program Setting

The STARS program is a flagship program of the Girls' Collective, a non-profit organization in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. In Washington, D.C., the organization implements the STARS program as an in-school initiative across 10+ middle and high schools in Wards 5, 7, and 8. These programs meet during school, typically during lunch, once a week for 20+ weeks throughout the school year (September – May). Programs are led by a youth program facilitator, also referred to as program leaders. Girls in the program usually join in 7th grade or 9th grade and remain in the program until their high school graduation. On the organization's website, the STARS program is described as a program that enables girls in grades 7 through 12 to navigate the complexities of adolescence. It provides education on fostering healthy relationships with peers, dating partners, and parents, promoting positive communication. The program also covers reproductive health, pregnancy prevention, essential life skills, and guidance on "adulting." Additionally, it equips participants with the necessary skills for college readiness and personal success.

Data Collection

This study collected data from the three embedded subunits previously described: STARS participants, program staff, and organizational documents. These subunits were examined individually to provide a holistic evaluation of the study's central focus—the Girls' Collective's STARS program. Data collection was conducted sequentially, with focused attention on each subunit before moving to the next to ensure thorough and intentional engagement. In addition, all data collection processes were guided by Patricia Hill Collins'

Afrocentric feminist epistemology, which emphasizes lived experience, dialogue, care, and accountability in research involving Black women and girls. This framework informed the study's ethical approach and shaped how participants were engaged, ensuring that their voices were centered and their contributions respected throughout.

To conduct the research ethically, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University's IRB. Following approval, student participants were recruited for the focus group. For adult participants, initial contact was made via text message or email. Once participants agreed to take part, they were sent virtual consent forms to review, sign, and return prior to their scheduled interviews. The following section discusses how the data from each subunit was collected and how elements of Afrocentric feminist epistemology were incorporated to ground the study within a framework of equity, care, and culturally responsive research practice.

Data Collection and Black Feminist Thought

The data collection process was guided by using Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) Afrocentric feminist epistemology. This epistemology is "guided by a particular understanding of the learning strategies informed by Black women's historical experiences with race, gender, and class" (Clemons, 2019, p. 1). In her research on Collins' Black feminist framework for collecting and analyzing data, Clemons (2019) notes that the convergence of qualitative research and Black feminist thought results in a methodological approach designed for a mutual understanding between researchers and participants. Choosing this epistemology allowed for the promotion of equity with the interviewees and focus group participants – all Black women and girls – and allowed for a holistic understanding of their lived intersectional experiences. The dimensions of Afrocentric epistemology are as follows:

1. Concrete experience as a criterion of understanding.
2. The use of dialogue in evaluating knowledge claims.
3. The ethic of caring.
4. The ethic of personal accountability.

Clemons highlights that "research, with a Black feminist thought and education thesis, focuses on Collins' four dimensions—articulate themes of survival as a form of resistance, critical discourses within the history of education, and pedagogical foundations rooted in Black women's activism and Black feminist pedagogy." (Clemons, 2019, p. 5). These dimensions directly informed the methodology of this study, ensuring that the data collection and analysis were rooted in an ethic of care, dialogue, and accountability.

This approach was foundational to the study due to the researcher's dual role as both an investigator and an individual with lived experience in the STARS program. Afrocentric feminist epistemology provided a methodological framework that values lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, ensuring that the study did not replicate historical silencing of Black women and girls in research. By centering dialogue and an ethic of care, this framework mitigated power imbalances in the research process, fostering trust and relational accountability between participants and the researcher. Furthermore, it reinforced a commitment to producing research that not only observes but actively affirms and uplifts the narratives of Black girls as valid and transformative sites of knowledge production. The following sections illustrate how the various data collection and analysis methods draw upon this epistemological framework, prioritizing the lived experiences of Black women and girls as sites of knowledge production, mutual dialogue, and personal accountability.

Interviews

The interviews addressed all three research questions from each participant's unique perspective, shaped by their relationship with the Girls' Collective and the STARS program. At the start of each session, participants were read an introductory script outlining the semi-structured interview process. Although interviews were scheduled for an hour, durations varied between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. Check-ins were conducted throughout, and explicit permission was sought to extend sessions when necessary.

Guided by Clemons' (2019) Black feminist thought framework, the interviews prioritized critical reflection, trust-building, and reciprocity. Participants chose the most comfortable location or platform for their interviews, reinforcing their autonomy. While several options were offered, all interviews were ultimately conducted virtually via video conferencing for convenience and accessibility.

The semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A – D), adapted from Ravitch and Carl (2016), provided a flexible framework for in-depth exploration through probing and follow-up questions. In line with dialogue as a criterion of knowledge, the interviews fostered participant-led responses, allowing themes to emerge organically. Not all probing questions were used, ensuring the process honored participants' autonomy and avoided imposing preconceived notions. This intersectional lens of the epistemology informed the structure of the questions, centering participants' overlapping identities (i.e., race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.). For example, staff interviews include inquires as to how the program addressed the participants' emotional, mental, and academic needs while recognizing the impact of systemic barriers. These questions sought to gather a holistic understanding of participants' realities, aligning with the principles of Afrocentric feminist epistemology.

To ensure personal accountability and maintain transparency, I engaged in reflexivity journaling after each interview. This practice involved capturing key observations, participant dynamics, and my emotional responses to reflect on any biases or assumptions. Having a close relationship with the organization, I wanted to ensure there was space for me to check-in with myself and challenge any predispositions. Reflexivity also helped ensure that the participants' voices remained central to the study, aligned with the epistemology.

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted to gather insights from current participants of the STARS program and address all three research questions, as well. One focus group was held at Crestwood High School involving six 12th-grade program participants. Recruitment began a week prior to the focus group with a visit where I introduced myself and my relationship with STARS as a former program leader and participant, fostering trust through shared experiences. During the visit, I explained the study's purpose, incentives, and eligibility criteria. Interested students provided their information on a sign-up sheet, which included contact details for both the participants and their parents.

For participants under 18, parental consent was obtained via signed permission slips and text confirmations. Both were required. Parents were provided with study details and invited to contact me with questions. After consent was secured, participants received text message reminders about the focus group's time and location. Additionally, students were given the opportunity to vote on their preferred lunch for the meeting, serving as an incentive and reflecting on the principle of reciprocity. This practice also acknowledged participants' contributions and emphasized care and respect for their time.

To establish a supportive environment, the focus group began with an icebreaker activity called “My Black Girl Magic”. Participants introduced themselves and completed the statement, “My Black girl magic is…,” sharing something they loved about themselves or felt proud about. This activity aligned with the ethic of care and dialogue dimensions of the epistemology, celebrating participants’ identities and fostering community.

Held in a private room secured by the program leader, the focus group provided a relaxed setting where participants could eat during the session. Following the icebreaker, the conversation transitioned to semi-structured questions (Appendix D), supplemented by probing follow-ups to encourage open discussion. Not all probes were used, allowing the discussion to flow naturally. The focus group questions also incorporated an intersectional framework. Recognizing that the participants’ experiences as Black girls are shaped by overlapping identities, the focus group protocol included prompts encouraging participants to reflect on how their identities influenced their experiences within the STARS program, their school, and their communities. This approach aligned with epistemology and reinforced the study’s commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and centering the narratives and experiences of Black girls in the research process.

Throughout the data collection process, reflexivity was central to ensuring personal accountability. Just as I engaged in reflective journaling after the interviews, I did the same after the focus group, allowing me to critically reflect on my biases and refine my approach. My multifaceted positioning as a researcher, former program participant, and former staff member required intentional efforts to balance insider knowledge with critical objectivity. For example, while I deeply value the program’s empowering impact as I’d experienced it as a participant, my notes still captured moments where I observed tensions between what I remembered about the

program versus the current experiences of participants. By journaling, I maintained a consistent focus on the participants' narratives, remaining accountable to their voices and experiences. This practice aligned with Collins' emphasis on accountability in knowledge production.

Document Collection for Subunit 3: Organizational Documents

I worked closely with senior leaders of the Girls' Collective to gather a range of organizational materials that would provide insight into the STARS program's implementation and the organization's public messaging. The following documents were collected:

Table 4

Organizational Documents

Document Type	Reason Document was Chosen
Organization's Website Content	To examine organization's mission, vision, programmatic impact, and services to public audiences and to funders; Includes key sections such as About Us, Strategic Vision, STARS Program Overview, Success Stories, Information for Parents/Guardians, and News Releases, providing insight into the organization's mission, programs, community engagement, and equity initiatives.
STARS Curriculum Summaries	To analyze the structure and content of the STARS program, with a focus on how it addresses the intersectional needs of its D.C. participants and is aligned with what the participants liked about and wanted from the program.
Most Recent Performance Evaluation (2023-2024)	To assess how the organization was being evaluated by its biggest funder for programs in D.C. and its overall outcomes based on these metrics. It was also used to assess the evaluation's alignment with its curriculum content and stated objectives.
Voices for Change Report (2019)	To gain insight on the public messaging the organization used to raise awareness about the systemic inequalities affecting Black and Brown girls in Washington, D.C.

Collectively, these materials offer a multidimensional view of the STARS program by providing insights from internal program design (curriculum summaries), external assessments (performance evaluation), public messaging (website content), and advocacy efforts (*Voices for*

Change report). Their analysis enables a critical evaluation of how/if the program operates as a thirdspace (RQ1), how well it meets the intersectional needs of Black girls (RQ2), and how it interacts with dominant social narratives about Black girlhood (RQ3). Furthermore, these documents serve as a bridge between organizational perspectives and participant experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how the organization conceptualizes and enacts empowerment for Black girls in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. This study thoroughly evaluates these texts to identify programmatic strengths, address gaps, and highlight opportunities for future development.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis using open coding followed by axial coding was used across the data collected from each subunit: STARS Participants, Program Staff, and Organizational Documents. Analyzing each subunit individually allowed for detailed insights into the unique perspectives and experiences of participants, staff, and the organization itself. This process also enabled the identification of key themes and patterns relevant to the study's research questions, ensuring that findings from each subunit contributed meaningfully to understanding how the STARS program functions and impacts those it serves.

Thematic Analysis: STARS Participants and Program Staff

Interviews and the participant focus group were audio recorded and securely stored in a password-protected digital folder on a cloud drive. Transcripts were transcribed manually. Participant names and any identifiable information were changed or redacted to protect their identities. Transcripts from the interviews and focus group were analyzed thematically using a two-step coding process using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software: Open coding followed by axial coding. Open coding served as an initial, precoding method where

preliminary codes were generated through repeated readings of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This process enabled a detailed and reflexive engagement with the transcripts, allowing themes to emerge organically without imposing preconceived notions (Clemons, 2019). As Clemons notes, “Black feminist thought and qualitative research in education positions data analysis as a process of organizing, interpreting, and producing stories that generate reflexivity” (Clemons, 2019, p. 7). Open coding is particularly essential within the Afrocentric feminist epistemological framework, allowing for participants’ full authenticity. Following open coding, axial coding was conducted to refine and organize the themes identified during the initial phase. Axial coding helped synthesize broader thematic patterns into concise categories, ensuring the consistency and depth of the analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The final categories, along with their definitions and examples, are presented in the findings write up for each subunit.

Thematic Content Analysis: Organizational Documents

A thematic content analysis was conducted manually using open coding to identify, organize, and interpret patterns and themes within the collected documents. This process followed Krippendorff’s (2018) systematic content analysis framework, which includes unitizing, sampling, recording/coding, reducing data, drawing inferences, validating findings, and ensuring replicability. The unit of analysis was thematic, with coding focused on explicit content. The process began with an initial review to understand the content and identify recurring language, concepts, and ideas relevant to the study’s theoretical frameworks.

Open coding was employed as the first step, where sections of text were carefully examined and labeled with descriptive codes that captured key concepts and ideas. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of the data without predetermined categories, ensuring that themes emerged organically. To enhance reliability, multiple rounds of intercoder reliability checks were

performed to assess consistency in coding. Following open coding, axial coding was applied to refine and organize the data by identifying relationships between codes and grouping them into broader themes. This stage involved analyzing co-occurrences and clustering related concepts.

In addition to the general thematic analysis, a targeted cross-analysis was conducted across organizational documents pertaining to both the STARS program and the Girls' Collective's mission, strategic direction, curriculum, programmatic outcomes, and community engagement. This comparative lens helped surface alignments and disconnections between the program's intended messaging and its broader organizational identity. The cross-analysis also provided a deeper understanding of how the organization articulates and performs its values—both internally and in its public portrayal of the girls it serves.

Role of Frequency in Theme Validation

While frequency counts were used in the analysis process, they did not serve as the primary determinant in the development of themes. Rather, frequency was employed as a supportive analytic tool to corroborate patterns emerging from inductive and axial coding conducted across the three subunits. Following the initial coding and categorization stages, frequency counts helped identify the relative prominence of certain ideas across the data sets and assisted in gauging which topics held wide resonance.

The use of frequency counts aligned with the principle of data triangulation in embedded case study research (Yin, 2018), offering one layer of validation when cross-referenced with qualitative meaning-making. For example, themes such as sisterhood and belonging, leadership and self-advocacy, and resisting stereotypes consistently surfaced in participant narratives, staff interviews, and organizational documentation. Frequency counts confirmed the widespread nature of these concepts, supporting their inclusion in the final thematic structure.

However, as Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize in their framework for reflexive thematic analysis, frequency alone cannot determine the richness or conceptual depth of a theme. A theme's significance is not merely a product of repetition but of its theoretical relevance, emotional weight, and interpretive resonance across units. In this study, less frequently mentioned but highly impactful concepts—such as structural barriers or mission drift—were included as key themes because of their critical importance to understanding the systemic dimensions of the program, particularly from the staff and institutional perspectives. Thus, frequency counts were used to enhance credibility and provide descriptive clarity, but theme generation was ultimately driven by interpretive analysis, cross-unit comparison, and alignment with the study's theoretical framework.

Integrated Cross-Unit Analysis: Alignment with Theoretical Framework and Epistemology

The data analysis methods were intentionally aligned with the study's guiding theoretical frameworks—Thirdspace Theory informed by Hood Feminism—and its epistemological grounding in Black feminist thought. This alignment ensured that the analysis moved beyond surface-level themes to engage critically with how power, identity, and space intersect in the lived experiences of Black girls. By centering the participants' narratives, the analysis prioritized intersectionality, emphasizing how race, gender, class, and environment shape their realities. Additionally, the analysis examined how the organization's programming supports resistance to systemic barriers, exploring both how STARS creates spaces of affirmation and where limitations may exist. Through this lens, the analysis sought to illuminate the transformative potential of thirdspace environments, where Black girls can assert agency, develop leadership, and envision possibilities beyond dominant societal constraints.

Through document content analysis, I examined whether the Girls' Collective's materials selected reflected the principles of Thirdspace Theory, specifically evaluating how/if the organization sought to create spaces where Black girls in Washington, D.C., could resist dominant societal narratives and reimagine their identities. This involved a close review of language and messaging within organizational documents to assess their alignment with the program's and organization's stated goals and mission. Findings were then evaluated through the lens of Hood Feminism, allowing for a comparative analysis of how the program both challenged and reproduced social norms. This dual approach provided insight into the program's capacity to cultivate thirdspace environments for Black girls while also identifying areas where structural inequities could be more effectively addressed.

In accordance with Yin's (2018) framework for embedded case study design, a cross-unit analysis was also conducted to synthesize findings across the study's three subunits: STARS participants, program staff, and organizational documents. This comparative analysis enabled the integration of perspectives from multiple stakeholders and data sources, enhancing the study's analytical depth and rigor. Specifically, this cross-analysis allowed for the systematic triangulation of evidence and highlighted both congruencies and tensions across the organization's stated values, its curriculum and messaging, and the lived experiences of the girls and staff. This methodological step was essential to exploring not only how the STARS program functions internally, but how the broader Girls' Collective presents itself—and its participants—to external audiences.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, the study incorporated data triangulation, reflective journaling, and member checks. Data triangulation involved collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources

(Denzin, 2009). By drawing on diverse perspectives and materials, the study provided a robust and comprehensive exploration of the Girls' Collective and the STARS program.

Member checks further bolstered credibility by allowing study participants to review and validate the accuracy of their interview transcripts. Interviewees were sent their interview transcripts to make sure their thoughts on the questions asked were fully captured in their responses. They were giving the opportunity to submit any additions or retractions via email if, necessary. By involving stakeholders in the validation process, the study ensures that the interpretations and conclusions accurately reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Clemons' (2019) and Evan-Winters' (2019) approaches to Black feminist qualitative inquiry stress the importance of fostering mutual understanding between researchers and participants. Allowing interviewees the opportunity to review their interview transcripts before submitting them as their final contributions to the study, acknowledges and respects their voices, affirming them as authorities of their own experiences.

As mentioned, engaging in reflective journaling practices, as advocated by Evans-Winters' *Black Feminist Methodology for Qualitative Inquiry* (2019), was crucial to minimizing potential bias during the data collection and analysis phases. Consistent memo writing, an essential component of qualitative studies according to Miles & Huberman (1994), further supported this effort. Reflective memos were written after each interview, focus group, and after the analysis of each document type. These journals enabled me to identify and address any biases that could impact the study, ensuring that participants' voices remained central to the findings. These reflections also helped me remain accountable to participants and ensured that the findings were grounded in their perspectives, rather than my own assumptions. Cumulative memos were

written at the conclusion of each subunit's analysis, connecting the findings to the research questions within the broader context of the case.

To conclude, while my relationship with the organization provided me with unique insight into its history and impact, I approached this study with a commitment to critical reflexivity. I remained open to identifying and critiquing both the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and the STARS program. As described in Chapter 1, my history with the organization includes fond memories of it being a supportive and liberating space, as well as moments where its outreach felt exploitative. This awareness informed my analysis and reinforced the importance of maintaining transparency and accountability throughout the study. Reflexivity journaling and memo writing were instrumental in ensuring that my personal experiences did not overshadow the voices and perspectives of participants. By critically reflecting on both the positive and challenging aspects of the organization's work, I aimed to present a balanced and honest evaluation of its practices, staying true to both the theoretical framework and the epistemology of this study.

Limitations

Overall, case studies are often criticized in the research world because their findings lack the ability to be generalized and applied to larger settings (Gomm et al., 2011). This case study has been conducted on a very specific program within a very specific setting. Ethically, its findings cannot be applied to all Black girls in urban school districts. Nonetheless, the implications of this study will offer valuable guidance to similar programs and educational settings serving student populations with comparable characteristics. Such findings aim to facilitate the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments and extracurricular spaces. This study also faced specific limitations that should be acknowledged:

1. **Limited Focus Group Representation:** The study was only able to conduct one focus group at Crestwood High School in Ward 8. Crestwood is an application-only school where students must demonstrate a high GPA and undergo a rigorous application process for admission. While the voices and experiences of the girls at Crestwood are valid and valuable, this setting may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences of Black girls in schools without selective admission criteria. I acknowledge that collecting data from girls at a school without an application process could have provided additional perspectives, particularly those from girls navigating different academic and social challenges.
2. **Missed Focus Group Opportunity at Frederick Douglass High School**: A second planned focus group at Frederick Douglass High School did not occur due to recurring scheduling issues with the program leader. This limited the range of data collected from Ward 5 and reduced the overall representation of Black girls in different school settings, particularly those outside the more academically selective environment of Crestwood.
3. **Interruptions During Focus Group**: The focus group conducted at Crestwood High School was frequently interrupted by the Girls' Collective staff as they prepared for an upcoming fundraising event that was scheduled two days later. The program staff wanted to video record statements from the senior D.C. participants, and stated the lunch time during the focus group was the only time to do so. These interruptions likely disrupted the flow of the group discussion and may have impacted the quality and depth of the responses received.
4. **IRB Amendment to Include Alumnae Interviews**: Due to the missed focus group opportunity at Douglass High School and frequent interruptions at Crestwood High

School, I submitted an amendment to the university's IRB committee to include alumnae interviews in this study. This adjustment allowed me to capture additional perspectives and experiences from former STARS participants. The alumnae reviews aimed to provide a broader understanding of the program's impact over time and address some of the limitations in participant representation.

These limitations highlight that while the findings provide valuable insights into the experiences of Black girls within the STARS program, the study's data collection was constrained by logistical challenges and the specific contexts of the participating schools. Future research might benefit from including a broader range of school environments and ensuring fewer disruptions during data collection to capture more comprehensive and uninterrupted participant responses.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the data collected and analyzed for this study. The primary aim of the research was to examine the extent to which the Girls' Collective and the STARS program address the intersectional identities of Black girls in D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Additionally, the study explored whether, and in what ways, the program empowers participants to challenge stereotypes, resist societal norms, and define their identities. It also assessed whether the program perpetuates or counters stereotypes about Black girls and Black girlhood.

The data presented was analyzed using a multi-phase coding process. As detailed in Chapter 3, each subunit of analysis was subjected to open coding, where initial codes were generated by identifying key concepts, patterns, and ideas emerging from the data. This was followed by axial coding, during which related codes were grouped and synthesized into broader categories to reveal the relationships between them. Through this process, preliminary categories were refined into themes for each data source within each subunit, providing a structured framework for understanding the data. The final themes presented in each subunit analysis represent the most robust and frequently supported themes, reflecting shared experiences, points of tension, and the overall impact of the program on participants, staff, and the overall school communities. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How does the Girls' Collective's STARS program operate as a thirdspace to engage with and support the diverse expressions of Black girlhood in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8?

RQ 2: In what ways does the program's approach and curriculum succeed in addressing the intersectional identities and lived experiences of Black girls and where do they fall short?

RQ3: How does the Girls' Collective and the STARS program challenge or reinforce harmful social norms and stereotypes related to Black girlhood within school and community contexts in Wards 5, 7, and 8?

Study Participants

Table 5

All Study Participants

Study Participant*	Relationship to STARS/Girls Collective	Years w/ STARS/Girls Collective	Race
Nyla	Current Participant	3	Black
Jasmine	Current Participant	3	Black
Destiny	Current Participant	3	Black
Eryka	Current Participant	3	Black
Asia	Current Participant	3	Black
Karter	Current Participant	3	Black
Tiara	Alumna	4	Black
Michaela	Alumna	3	Black
Ms. Cassidy	Junior Leader	5+	Black
Ms. Laila	Program Facilitator	5+	Black
Ms. Tasha	Senior Leader	1+	Black
Ms. Christine	Former Senior Leader	10+	Black

*pseudonyms

Subunit 1: STARS Participants

This section presents findings from a focus group with six current STARS participants at Crestwood High School in Ward 8 and interviews with two program alumnae. The data analysis followed a structured coding process where open codes were first identified for all three transcripts, then grouped into axial codes, and finally categorized into three overarching themes. The number of occurrences represents the frequency in which codes under each theme appeared in the interview and focus group transcripts. Findings from the STARS participant data reveal three key themes that encapsulate their experiences within the program:

Table 6

Subunit 1 Analysis: STARS Participants (Alumnae and Current Participants)

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency	Final Theme
Community and Belonging	Sense of family, sense of exclusivity, complements and positive reinforcement, celebration	14	**Sisterhood, Support, and Mentorship** ***34 occurrences***
Breaking Stereotypes and Positive Identity Building	Breaking/countering stereotypes, pride in Black/gender identity	10	
Support from Caring Adults	Support from program leaders, trusting caring adults, impact of program leaders, program flexibility and inclusivity	10	
Post-Secondary Preparation and Professional Development	College exposure, scholarship opportunities, budgeting, financial literacy, networking skills, professionalism, career development, optimism about future paths	11	**Professional and Leadership Development** ***23 occurrences***
Leadership and Self-Advocacy	Leadership opportunities, public speaking, self-advocacy, community involvement, personal growth, confidence	12	
Mental Wellness and Navigating Trauma	Self-awareness, grounding, growth mindset, self-compassion, therapy, mental health, desensitization to trauma	5	**Healing and Resilience** ***8 occurrences***
Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Awareness	Understanding unhealthy relationships, conflict resolution	3	

Each theme highlights the program's impact on participants' personal, academic, and emotional development, illustrating the ways STARS fosters empowerment.

Sisterhood, Support, and Mentorship

One of the central themes that surfaced in the data was the sense of community and connection fostered within the STARS program. Participants described how the program cultivated an environment rooted in mutual support, mentorship, and belonging, allowing them

to navigate challenges both inside and outside of school. These experiences reveal how STARS operates not just as a program, but as a space where relationships and guidance play a crucial role in shaping the participants' personal growth and self-perception.

Community and Belonging

Participants consistently described STARS as a sanctuary within their school, allowing them to express themselves freely and decompress from academic and social pressures. Nyla, a current participant, reflected on how comforting it was to be surrounded by others with similar struggles, saying, "Being able to just be around a group of girls who were having like similar problems as myself, it felt good to have that type of community and have that type of surroundings."

Jasmine, also a current STARS member, emphasized how the program helped her cope with tough days. "Sometimes I could have a bad day, but like, once I come to STARS, we like do all this fun stuff, talk it out, you know, that like distracts me from all that stress and stuff," she explained. Asia shared a moment of affirmation within the group setting that had a lasting impact:

> "We had a session where we said something positive about each other. Like saying, "Oh, I like your hair." Giving each other compliments. That made me feel good about myself."

Breaking Stereotypes and Positive Identity Building

STARS not only created a supportive space but also actively worked to challenge negative narratives about Black girls. Destiny described a pivotal session, recalling:

> "[Program leader] started to talk about how Black women are portrayed and asked how we can fix this image. Like how do we move from 'Black women are loud,

> angry, disrespectful, ghetto' to 'we are actual women—we're classy, nurturing, we care for people.' It just made me feel like appreciated, like a group actually acknowledged that we're not just this specific image that everybody portrays."

For alumna Tiara, STARS reshaped her view on professionalism and identity:

> "I think they really pushed against the stereotypes when they prepared us to network at the luncheons. They showed me like, yes, my school might treat me like I'm ghetto, but I can be professional, and I can network with professionals."

Michaela, another alumna, spoke about how the program helped her reject societal expectations, saying:

> "Because I lost my mom when I was 10, I automatically was introduced under this stereotype or like this statistic that I would either get pregnant, or I would just lead a different life. So, I feel like STARS in that way, definitely addressed those stereotypes… it just showed us that we were more than that."

Support from Caring Adults

The mentorship component of STARS deeply impacted participants' views of adults and authority figures. Michaela shared, "When I was younger, I had a lack of trust for the adults in my life because they always disappointed me in one way or another… But in STARS, I was able to let my guard down and ask for help when I needed it." She then shared how that opinion shifted when she came to STARS, stating, "When I met [program leader], and I was like, okay, so we do have adults that actually care here." Michaela highlighted how these relationships helped shape her aspirations: "The support, just being able to look up to someone and be like, 'Oh, I want to be like her.'"

These reflections demonstrate that STARS functioned as a safe, affirming space where Black girls received emotional support, peer affirmation, and mentorship. Participants described how the program challenged harmful stereotypes and empowered them to redefine their identities beyond societal expectations. Mentorship was especially impactful, fostering trust in adults and inspiring participants to envision positive futures for themselves.

Professional and Leadership Development

The second major theme that emerged from participant responses centers on how STARS supported the development of leadership, self-advocacy, and future planning skills. Participants consistently described the program as a space where they could grow personally and professionally— gaining confidence to speak up, lead within their communities, and explore post-secondary opportunities. Through structured activities, mentorship, and exposure to professional environments, STARS played a significant role in helping Black girls navigate the transition from adolescence to adulthood with a stronger sense of agency and direction.

Post-Secondary Preparation and Professional Development

Asia recalled a conversation with her program leader that prompted her to reflect on her college readiness:

> "When we had the STARS last year [our program leader] asked us like, "Are y'all really prepared? Are y'all counselors preparing y'all? Like, are y'all sure or are y'all just saying that?" And we was being honest to her, saying that our counselor really wasn't giving us no resources, like no scholarships, no events and stuff like that. So, she would check in with us every week and made sure that we were straight and ready for senior year."

Karter described attending an Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) college fair through STARS and how attending helped her explore different postsecondary options:

> "Saturday we had went on the little college thing, and I had went with STARS, and it kind of did open my eyes to what I wanted to do…It was a college fair, so like a whole bunch of HBCUs were there and we got to talk to people and learn about their school…and their tuition and all the rest of those things."

Michaela, an alumna, explained how STARS influenced her decision to pursue college for personal reasons rather than just as a means of leaving her environment:

> "STARS showed us we were able to choose the destiny that we wanted, the path that we wanted… And I think that's why I even went to college. Because I wanted to go to college to get a life to get away from D.C. But I believe like, after STARS, I wanted it for me. I didn't want it for any other reason."

As her former program leader, during her interview, we recalled our conversations about her college choices. Driven by her strong desire to leave D.C., she often expressed interest in attending schools in places like Hawaii or the Virgin Islands.

> **Researcher:** You were very much like, "I'm getting out of D.C., I don't want to be here anymore." You were over it, over it. But then I watched you figure out like, what space was right for you. And recognizing what space that you could thrive in…I noticed that transformation.
>
> **Michaela:** It's so funny, I really thought I would have ended up in California.
>
> **Researcher:** I think at one point, you were like, "I'm going to Hawaii". And I was like, "Okay, that's cool, sweetie. But like, have you looked at the plane tickets yet? You're gonna have to come back when campus is closed."

> **Michaela:** Oh my goodness, I do remember that…you just unlocked a core memory.
>
> **Researcher:** I was like, "Okay, I want to make sure you go somewhere, but I want to make sure you have a way to get back."
>
> **Michaela:** That is so funny, because I remember every time you said that, I was like, "Why does she believe that I'm not getting out of here and going far away?" But now as an adult, I'm like, okay, I get it... I was like, "Just believe in me".
>
> **Researcher**: I know…I just wanted to make sure you could finish, that's all.
>
> **STARS Alumna**: You were like, "Let's think realistically". I was like, "This is realistic". Such a teenager…But that plays into having that adult who cares and having folks that are looking out for your best interests and making sure the end goal is to get a degree.

For her, STARS provided a supportive space and a mentor who helped her explore higher education options in a way that aligned with her circumstances. Karter, a currented participant, expressed confidence that STARS did not influence their decision to attend college but acknowledged that it may have played a role in shaping the choices of others: "I was already going to go to college, but I know it kind of encourages some people to follow through with that."

Tiara, an alum, shared how she always knew she would go to college as well, but saw how the program helped a fellow program participant navigate post-secondary options. She said prior to that, she did not know there were other options for post-secondary success other than college:

> "The program didn't influence me to go to [college]. I always wanted to go to college. But not everyone had the same goals or plan as me. Like, for instance, one of my friends…she was in STARS and she didn't go to college. And I just didn't understand. I'm like, 'Well, what are you going to do if you don't go to school?' And so, the program leader was like asking her what she wanted to do and basically giving her alternate options. The next week we did this little form planning out the next two years and stuff like that. And now she got a nursing certificate, and she got a position at [a hospital]. So, I think it just made me a little more optimistic that there's other routes that you can go besides college and like there's other ways that you can be successful."

For a number of participants, their favorite memory while in STARS occurred when they had the opportunity to engage with professionals during events like the annual luncheon. To prepare for these events, they learned networking skills and professional etiquette. Responses showed that this opportunity was an empowering one, especially interacting with Black female professionals who took interest in them and wanted to hear their voices. Nyla shared, "The luncheon will always be my favorite. Just seeing so much Black excellence and for everybody to just look at you and be like, 'Hey, we want to hear what you have to say.'"

Leadership and Self-Advocacy

Many participants reflected on how STARS helped them see themselves as leaders, both within the program and in their broader communities. Through mentorship, exposure to professional environments, and leadership roles in group activities, participants became more confident in their ability to advocate for themselves and others. STARS alumna Tiara shared:

> "STARS helped me with [my] confidence in order to be able to just face anything—whether it involves public speaking, fostering relationships, or even making friendships or even just speaking up and being an advocate."

Several participants described how the program introduced them to opportunities where they could step up and take initiative, especially in spaces they previously found intimidating. Michalea shared her experience speaking with her program leader and other Girls' Collective staff at a congressional hearing on reproductive rights, and how the organization made her feel supported in showing up as her full self: "I literally went to the Capitol with my blue hair and business clothes and I was like, 'I got something to say.'"

STARS also emphasized leadership through community-building and accountability, encouraging students to use their voices to create positive change within their schools and especially within their group setting. A current participant, Karter, described how she felt she rose to the occasion during their first session this year, making sure the group was a safe space for everyone: "During the first week of this year's STARS, we put a poster on the wall saying our rules and what we wanted to do… I wrote some stuff down that I believe should be appointed to everybody in the group, so they know, like, some people feel uncomfortable with this, so don't do this."

The findings under this theme emphasize how STARS fosters critical leadership and self-advocacy skills that empower participants to engage confidently in academic, social, and professional settings. Participants valued the program's emphasis on preparation for college and careers, particularly the individualized support and exposure to diverse post-secondary pathways. These experiences not only expanded their understanding of success but also

reinforced the importance of mentorship and guidance in helping them make informed, empowered choices about their futures.

Healing and Resilience

This last central theme emerged from participants' experiences in STARS focusing on healing, mental health awareness, and emotional resilience. For many, the program provided a space where they could process trauma, navigate emotional challenges, and develop coping strategies in a supportive environment. These insights underscore STARS' role not only as an educational and leadership space, but also as a critical source of emotional support and personal growth for Black girls facing unique stressors in their schools and communities.

Mental Wellness and Navigating Trauma

One former participant Tiara shared how she experienced stress, anxiety, and trauma while in high school, particularly related to community violence. STARS provided a safe space to process these challenges:

> "I experienced a lot of anxiety. Like I would wake up every day—my school's in the headlines a lot for gun violence. I would wake up every day and I would feel sick."

Outside of their group discussions, where they stated program leaders would check in with them and give them space to process challenges they were having, the Girls' Collective also provided therapy referrals. Participants stated how they talked to them about therapy and helped break down stigma around mental health. Tiara mentioned how the organization provided her with access to a therapist after sharing the mental health challenges she faced:

> "I was in therapy. It was through STARS... It allowed me to process things and realize they wasn't nothing wrong with me… Being part of STARS helped me talk about it and process what I was feeling."

Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Awareness

STARS also helped participants develop healthier interpersonal skills, including recognizing unhealthy relationships and resolving conflicts. One current participant, Erykah, stated how the group setting helped her friends resolve conflict with a former friend in a way that was healthy: "My friends argued a lot... My program leader made us talk about it... We came to the conclusion that we can't be friends, but it's no beef."

Participants also talked about how the program gave them the tools to be able to learn about attachment styles and know how to identify unhealthy relationships. By providing tools for emotional regulation and peer conflict resolution, STARS equipped participants with essential skills for navigating romantic relationships in high school – and even now in college, as Tiara shared:

> "We talked a lot about unhealthy relationships in group... I realized was becoming emotionally codependent on how [my boyfriend] treated me…we talked 24/7. I can identify those things in my relationships now... I'd be about to get love bombed if it wasn't for STARS and my program leader."

The findings under this theme demonstrate that STARS played a significant role in fostering emotional resilience and healing among participants by normalizing mental health conversations and offering resources such as therapy referrals. The program's focus on healthy relationships, conflict resolution, and emotional awareness provided participants with practical tools they continued to use beyond high school. These experiences illustrate how trauma-informed support

within STARS contributed to participants' ability to manage stress, understand their emotional needs, and sustain healthier relationships during and after their time in the program.

Subunit 2: Program Staff

This section presents findings from interviews with four current and former staff members of the Girls' Collective who facilitated or supported the STARS program in D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Their tenures with the program ranged from a year to eleven years. Table 8 shows the condensed open codes from the initial coding process, their resulting axial codes, and the final themes for the staff subunit. The themes emerging from the analysis highlight both the strengths and challenges of the program while offering insights into operational effectiveness, sustainability, and impact on participants. The following six themes emerged:

Table 7

Subunit 2 Analysis: Program Staff

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency	Final Theme
Funding and Financial Barriers	Funding constraints, budget cuts, budget restrictions, lack of financial stability, reliance on grants, program expansion funding, staff salary	16	
Administrative Barriers in Schools	Principals blocking access, lack of administrative support, difficulty getting school buy-in	11	
Savior Complex in Leadership's Framing	Savior narratives, throw money to fix, fixing in ways not sustainable, saving vs. empowerment, victim-framing,	10	**Systemic and Structural Barriers** ***51 occurrences***
Leadership Disconnect and Community Needs	Disconnect between leadership/board and staff supporting students, disconnect between funders and participants, mission drift, unrealistic metrics	8	
Mission Drift and Evaluation Misalignment	Mission drift, losing focus, overextension of programming, misleading metrics,	6	

Table 7. *Subunit 2 Analysis: Program Staff (continued)*

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency	Final Theme
Empowering Student Advocacy and Leadership	Self-advocacy training, leadership in school, leadership in the community, networking, public speaking	16	**Leadership Development and Empowerment** ***40 occurrences***
College and Career Preparedness	College exposure, career readiness, career exploration financial literacy, digital literacy training	13	
Breaking Stereotypes and Reframing Strengths	Addressing stereotypes about Black girls, addressing community/neighborhood stereotypes, positive identity development	11	
Meeting Basic Needs and Crisis Support	Food and housing, support, emergency aid, basic needs assistance, counseling for staff	14	**Holistic Support and Addressing Student Needs** ***36 occurrences***
Mental Health Support and Trauma-Responsive Care	Mental health support, trauma-informed care, emotional support, substance abuse support, healthy self-soothing, trauma-informed care	12	
Mental Health Support and Trauma-Responsive Care	Mental health support, trauma-informed care, emotional support, substance abuse support, healthy self-soothing, trauma-informed care	12	
Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces	Safe spaces, emotional well-being, mutual respect, inclusion	10	
Cultural Representation and Responsiveness	Culturally relevant staff, representation in leadership, affirming participation, culturally responsive curriculum and activities	15	**Program Strengths: Flexibility and Cultural Relevance** ***33 occurrences***
Flexible and Adaptive Curriculum	Curriculum as a guide, flexible lessons, adjust to fit students' needs, curriculum adaptation	6	
Sisterhood and Peer Support	Sisterhood, trust-building, conflict resolution among peers	12	
Expanding Program Impact and Outreach	Expanding to new schools, outreach strategies, expanding to serve Latine community in D.C., starting earlier (elementary schools), expand inclusivity for gender expansive youth, create a multiuse space	9	**Organizational Sustainability and Future Goals** ***21 occurrences***
Strengthening Family and Community Engagement	Parent and family inclusion, community engagement events, building stronger home-school relationships	7	

Table 7. *Subunit 2 Analysis: Program Staff (continued)*

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency	Final Theme
Funding Sustainability	Diversify funding streams, more funding needed	5	**Organizational Sustainability and Future Goals *(cont'd)*** ***21 occurrences***

Structural and Institutional Challenges

The theme with the highest frequency count highlighted the structural and institutional challenges that have impacted the STARS program's implementation and long-term sustainability. Staff members reported ongoing financial constraints that limited program expansion, staff retention, and service continuity, particularly an high-need schools. Administrative barriers within schools, including limited institutional support and challenging school climates, further complicated program delivery. Additionally, some staff expressed concerns about leadership's framing of STARS, noting that past approaches sometimes reinforced deficit-based narratives rather than centering student empowerment. These concerns extended to decision-making processes, with staff identifying a disconnect between leadership and the realities of the communities they served, as well as inconsistencies in how program outcomes were measured and communicated.

Funding and Financial Barriers

One of the most frequently cited challenges amongst staff was the persistent struggle with financial instability. Funding constraints limited the program's capacity to expand into more schools, hire and retain experienced staff, and sustain long-term operations. Senior leadership staff member Ms. Christine explained:

"Main challenge I would say was funding, right? Like that's always number one.

Not just to be able to hire qualified staff and pay them what they deserved, but

> also to have multiple programs in multiple schools and be able to support whole schools of girls."

Funding limitations often resulted in missed opportunities to support more students. Another leadership staff member, Ms. Cassidy, expressed how she thought the program could expand if more money was available:

> "We need more programs…One of our school contacts shared that there's like over 1,000 students in [high school in Ward 7]. We can have two 9th grade groups if we really wanted to, right? We can service the whole school."

In contrast, discussions of funding challenges also showcased the resourcefulness of program leaders in times when financial constraints arose. Ms. Laila shared how, in previous years, she hosted a gingerbread house building activity where each participant could create their own mini gingerbread house. However, due to a tighter budget this year; she had to limit the number of kits she could purchase. Rather than seeing this as a setback, she used it as an opportunity to introduce a new group activity:

> "I bought gingerbread houses, but I couldn't get as much as maybe we would have been able to get in the past. So, just like a mama, I had two...And I divided the girls up and I said, 'Okay, you all need to work together to build this house.'"

Program leaders also did not let funding changes stop them from taking participants on regular field trips as they did in the past. Ms. Laila gather her participants interests and found free activities in the city for them to do together:

> "We were talking about free things we might be able to do over the break, maybe one thing. One of the kids said she had never gone to Kwanza, and I was like, 'Oh, maybe we can all go to a Kwanza celebration because those are free. It's

> cultural.' There's actually a play that's coming up… [at] the school that my kids used to go."

Administrative Barriers in Schools

Beyond funding, staff members encountered significant administrative challenges that impacted program implementation, including lack of support from school administrators, difficulty accessing students during the school day, and chaotic school environments that conflicted with the program's goals. Sharing her frustrations with supporting programs leaders who facilitated programs in Wards 5, 7, and 8, "It was so hard to just get into the building, just alone and getting into the classroom to serve the girls."

At times, the misalignment between the program's goals and the school climate also posed a significant challenge. While STARS aimed to provide a structured, safe space for young women, the external school environments in D.C. often undermined these efforts. When she facilitated program, Ms. Cassidy stated that, "Every time I would come in, there was either a fight while I'm walking in the building to try to get the girls, or they were fighting right when I'm coming out, during lunch."

The staff noted that when funding cuts were necessary, schools with the most challenging and chaotic environments were often the first to lose access to the program. After asking why the program was no longer in certain schools anymore, Ms. Cassidy explained:

> "Ultimately it's up to funding, right? But we had made decisions to leave those particular schools because [high school in Ward 8] was low in numbers as far as like, girls that were joining the program, but it was because they had a low number of students at that school… At [high school in Ward 7], it was mainly because of, just like support within the school and then not having enough girls

> attending programming…we left [high school in Ward 8] last year and it was mainly because of support."

Despite these obstacles, some staff members emphasized that the program must continue working in these high-need areas, even if conditions were challenging. Former senior leadership staff member Ms. Christine emphasized:

> "We're going to have to come back to that 1965 village…I don't think that they are ready to be boots on the ground, hands dirty…I am very concerned that the organization will survive…I think something will likely get done, but do I think the vast majority of girls who really need it are going to get it? Absolutely not."

Savior Complex in Leadership Framing

In addition to the barriers posed in the schools, staff also mentioned how the framing of the program and its participants also presented challenges. Ms. Christine was critical of how past leadership framed the program, suggesting that a deficit-based perspective reinforced harmful stereotypes:

> "I think in some ways it was pity, 'these poor girls,' and on the other hand, it was like, 'and we are the saviors,' right? We are going to save them, and they did not need to be saved. We could be a part of them kind of rescuing themselves. But, taking credit for saving young people who already had something innate in them, that even if it was a little bit harder, I believe they would have succeeded anyway."

Additionally, she challenged short-term solutions that emphasized aid over self-sufficiency, arguing that true empowerment required more sustainable strategies: "I think what we did not do well was if a young person had a financial crisis, the idea was just to throw money at it without

any thought behind it. That's that rescue/savior mentality." Funding pressures often shaped how the program was presented to funders, sometimes reinforcing narratives that did not fully reflect the students' strengths. She also stated that, "The organization played into the stereotypes in some ways because that's what you had to do to get the funding."

Disconnect Between Leadership and Community Needs

Beyond messaging, staff identified a misalignment between leadership's priorities and the realities of students' lived experiences. Ms. Christine reflected, "Our [former] leadership, including the board and executive director, were not from the community…They didn't understand the need for the girls to maintain autonomy." She also pointed out that decision-making was often concentrated at the leadership level, with little input from those directly working with students. She reflected:

> "Many nonprofit organizations…those who are doing the work look like the community that they're serving, and those in administration and leadership do not. I think that having a white woman with no prior direct service experience leading Black women with much direct service experience was something. And I'ma just leave it at that."

Additionally, staff emphasized the importance of securing support from funders who aligned with the organization's mission and values, ensuring that financial backing did not come at the expense of putting the girls in vulnerable situations. Recalling a time when a funder required the program to ask the girls' intrusive questions and record their responses, Ms. Christine shared:

> "I was honest and said, 'Listen, this is what they told me to ask you'. But I remember one little girl in particular, when I asked her, she looked at me and said, 'Now, Ms. [Program Leader]'. And I was like, 'I know, honey. But if we want to

> keep the funding'… Why do you think all these women in D.C. needed to be asked that question? Why? … their requirements often times was at conflict with what we were trying to do with the girls."

Mission Drift and Evaluation Misalignment

Staff mentioned how sometimes if felt like the way the organization presented metrics about the program was somewhat misleading. Though the girls in the program often completed high school at extremely high rates, there was also more to the story. Ms. Christine shared that for some, STARS very well could have been the reason they graduated high school. But for others, they had other support from their family, college readiness organizations, and their schools:

> "Boasting this 99, 97, 98% graduation rate, right? There was truth to it. There was truth to it, but it didn't tell the whole story. There were other things, other resources…So, when we talk about, you know, academics and tutoring, and college prep, of course, there were a few college tours… But they were also in schools where the schools were during similar things, so we probably should have just connected them with those resources and the people whose job it was to do those things instead of kind of making it a one-off thing."

Her statement connected to the idea of mission drift, referring to the organization's attempt to take an too many initiatives rather than focusing on its core strengths. She stated how in the past, "avoiding mission drift was definitely a problem…Ensuring that our evaluation was evaluating exactly what we were doing."

The findings illustrate persistent financial and administrative challenges that impact STARS' ability to expand and maintain services in high-need schools. Staff reflections

emphasize the complexities of navigating school partnerships, funding limitations, and leadership disconnects while ensuring students receive meaningful support. Concerns about past leadership's framing of the program and inconsistencies in evaluation highlight the importance of aligning organizational messaging with its empowerment-based mission. Despite these challenges, staff remain committed to the program's core mission, advocating for sustainable solutions that ensure STARS continues to serve students in a way that prioritizes their autonomy, strengths, and long-term success.

Leadership Development and Empowerment

The second theme highlights how the STARS program actively fosters leadership development, self-advocacy, and professional preparedness among Black girls in D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. Staff emphasized that leadership was not a fringe component but a foundational element of the program, equipping participants to engage confidently in educational, social, and professional contexts. Through leadership roles, advocacy opportunities, and discussions that challenge stereotypes, the program encouraged participants to redefine their identities and assert their agency in spaces where they are often marginalized.

Empowering Student Advocacy and Leadership

One of the defining features of the program was its emphasis on self-advocacy, ensuring that students were equipped to speak up for themselves and navigate systems of power. STARS provides students with platforms to advocate for themselves, such as speaking at budget hearings, networking events, and organizational fundraisers. The staff was very intentional about preparing girls for these opportunities, making sure they spoke for themselves and felt comfortable showing up authentically. Ms. Christine stressed:

> "There were opportunities for the girls to speak at [events]…or testify…But not just throwing them out there, but saying this is what we want to prepare them for…We were very intentional about not writing their speeches for them and allowing them to speak up and say the things that were really important to them."

Ms. Cassidy also shared:

> "We provide leadership roles all the time. Whether that's through our annual celebration event, where we have alumni come back and speak and tell their story and interview our honorees…and provide them with the opportunity to network with the individuals that are in those spaces."

However, program leader Ms. Laila highlighted the need for broader access to these high-profile leadership events for D.C. participants:

> "I do wish that they would bring more of our D.C. girls and younger girls into some of the programs…where you're standing in front of a crowd of people and proudly saying who you are and where you go to school."

Self-advocacy is also a key component of leadership development in the STARS program, encouraging students to speak up for their rights and make informed decisions. When speaking on support participants' ability to advocate for themselves, Ms. Cassidy mentioned:

> "We are big on that. We encourage the Girls' Collective girls to have a voice to advocate for themselves…We encouraged them to speak up when things are not favorable to them."

Given the program's focus on reproductive health, staff emphasized the importance of bodily autonomy and how its stressed in the program. Ms. Cassidy also shared:

> "Being able to be the place that says, it's okay to say no. It's okay to have body autonomy. You don't have to do these things because other people think that you should."

Beyond reproductive health, Ms. Christine emphasized how they stressed to participants that self-advocacy extends to all aspects of life, including education, relationships, and authority figures:

> "We were very intentional about saying your value and your worth is not just related to your body, but also that you deserve to be treated with respect holistically from your teachers, from the principal, from the police, from your mama, from the boyfriend, from your friends."

College and Career Preparedness

STARS also sought to bridge the gap between high school and professional life, exposing students to career pathways, financial literacy, and networking. Senior staff leadership Ms. Tasha emphasized, "They are encouraged to dream, and they are encouraged to understand how their unique gifts and talents can translate into something that they truly love." Though the respondents mentioned the organization had college readiness resources, they currently do not have the staff to support that initiative. Ms. Cassidy shared: "Last year we had a college and careers coach...helping our juniors and seniors with college applications and the FAFSA. We need to bring that position back."

Contrastingly, Ms. Christine reflected on whether the organization needed to expand to include these services, as it had never been a part of their original or current mission: "I think that college and career prep kinds of things, it wasn't our strong suit. And I'm not sure that it truly should have been."

Beyond higher education, Ms. Laila emphasized the importance of exposing students to entrepreneurial thinking and ownership, supporting STARS in creating business plans as group activities:

> "Our spring project is they are going to develop a company and they have to have a company name…They're gonna put together…Again planting seeds, letting them know what is possible…Giving them the techniques and tools that they need so that they can actually navigate and do this."

Leaning on their business ideas of owning salons and wellness companies, Ms. Laia also helped the girls think through their buying power as Black girls in the beauty industry and how they had the firsthand knowledge needed to create products and services their community wanted. In addition to special projects like this one, Ms. Cassidy explained how STARS integrates career readiness into its existing curriculum, ensuring participants understand how their skills translate into future opportunities: "In our curriculum, we cover careers and their future...talking about work permits, creating budgets, and how their unique gifts can translate into careers they'll love."

For students who were unable to participate in traditional job shadowing experiences, STARS provided alternative networking opportunities. Ms. Christine highlighted how the organization ensured students could still connect with professionals: "Having the annual luncheon on Take Your Child to Work Day was brilliant. Many girls couldn't go to workplaces, so we brought professional women to them."

An additional component of STARS' career preparation efforts included financial literacy education, helping students navigate budgeting and salary management. Ms. Cassidy shared how financial reality checks were built into programming: "We do budget activities where they have

to manage hypothetical salaries...They realize ‘Wait, why is half my check gone already?’ That’s when the real financial talks start.”

By incorporating financial literacy, career readiness, and networking opportunities, STARS aimed to equip students with practical knowledge and skills that could help them transition from high school to professional or post-secondary education pathways. Through these efforts, students were encouraged to see themselves as future leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals capable of shaping their own success.

Dispelling Stereotypes and Reframing Strengths

In addition to providing leadership opportunities and consistently emphasizing the importance of self-advocacy, the organization also strived to empower their Black girl participants by actively challenging harmful narratives about Black girls in D.C.’s Wards 5, 7, and 8. They shared how they often did this through the reframing of perceived “negative traits” as leadership strengths. Ms. Cassidy articulated, “From the first day, we tell them all those labels are irrelevant. You can choose to attach yourself to them or not, but here, we don’t.” Rather than focusing on perceived deficits, staff work to recognize and celebrate students’ strengths, especially when they hear negative remarks about program participants from the school staff. Sometimes, the girls even hold negative stereotypes about themselves and why they may have been chosen for the program at school that did not offer an open invite. Ms. Cassidy continued:

> “That girl that they say, ‘All she does is cuss. She’s loud and she’s this and she’s that.’ We ultimately say, ‘Oh my God, what leadership skills she has!’ We change the narrative.

Recalling her time with the organization when she facilitated STARS groups, and what she observed from the program leaders she supervised, Ms. Christine shared how staff worked to shifted what the girls thought about themselves:

> "The girls came in and they looked around like, "Oh, this may be the group for the bad girls.' They already had those stereotypes of themselves. Program leaders do a very good job of cutting out those biases and stereotypes and getting the girls to see their strengths and see themselves in a different light."

Staff responses also provided insight on how they helped Black girls rethink the harmful stereotypes about their neighborhoods, reframing negative perceptions through candid discussions about systemic inequities. Ms. Christine emphasized the importance of this and how she reframed these perceptions using tangible examples participants could connect to:

> "I told them that their community may have challenges, but every community does. But their community also has strengths. When we think about social justice… getting them to understand that in fact, your community is not treated the way the rest of the District is…You have to go all the way down Chinatown to get to Chipotle, right? And so, understanding when the schools in Northwest got a new library, or the community in Northwest got a new rec center. Showing those differences in a way that was empowering so that they understood that they had options, that they had opportunities and they could speak out and say we need and deserve the same thing that everybody else is getting."

Ms. Laila shared how she used real-world examples to challenge negative narratives, such as pointing out a nearby house valued at over $1 million to highlight the high value of their community. Similarly, Ms. Tasha reinforced this perspective by recognizing the positive

attributes of the D.C. participants' neighborhoods and the youth who lived there. These efforts reflect the program's commitment to reframing perceptions and fostering a sense of pride and empowerment among participants:

> "The girls in these deeper cities might even be more prepared [for life] ….not because they have the same equipment or tools, but because they make it anyway. There is a pride. These are traits and characteristics that you can't buy. And you can never underestimate it. The strength that comes from these communities is mind-blowing."

The findings illustrate that STARS provided participants with platforms to develop and exercise leadership, advocate for their needs, and explore college and career pathways. Staff reinforced the importance of bodily autonomy, self-worth, and challenging limiting narratives, while also acknowledging organizational limitations in areas such as college readiness support. Efforts to reframe perceived deficits as strengths and to affirm the value of participants' communities further supported the program's goal of empowering Black girls to recognize their potential and navigate barriers with confidence.

Holistic Support and Addressing Student Needs

This theme explores the ways in which STARS staff supported participants beyond their regular programming by addressing immediate needs such as food insecurity, housing instability, and access to hygiene products. Staff often provided direct assistance when external resources were lacking, ensuring students could continue engaging with the program. Additionally, the findings highlight how mental health support and trauma-responsive care are central to the Girls' Collective's approach, particularly in response to grief, violence, and substance use among participants.

Meeting Basic Needs and Crisis Support

Many participants in STARS faced barriers such as food insecurity, lack of hygiene products, and housing challenges, which could prevent them from fully engaging in school and STARS programming. Staff frequently stepped in to provide direct assistance when resources were unavailable, often using their own money. Ms. Laila shared:

> "Just recently we had to purchase a bed for a family because their springs had broken... My latest request, just as late as Friday, was, 'We need toilet paper. We don't have any toilet paper, and I'm not going to get my next check until next month.'"

She also shared another story of how she stepped in—using her own time and resources—to support a former program participant:

> "I had a family, and a girl was missing class…She had gotten kicked out, so they were living at a hotel. When I called mom, what she said that she needed was underwear and school pants…I actually went and bought the pants and underwear to make sure she had those things."

Regardless of whether the girl was still in the program or not, Ms. Laila stressed the lasting impact of the STARS community, especially during times of need. Beyond direct financial support, STARS staff worked to eliminate barriers to participation by ensuring students had access to necessary resources. Ms. Christine highlighted how making field trips free and covering transportation costs reduced obstacles for participants: "Just making sure that they had that. I think making sure the field trips and things [were] free, and that we pay for transportation, [eliminating] those barriers."

Financial limitations also posed challenges for students attending professional events. To ensure participants felt prepared and confident, STARS staff organized clothing drives, making sure students had professional attire for the annual luncheon on Take Your Child to Work Day. Ms. Christine recalled:

> "I think when there was the luncheon, there was this idea of doing a clothing drive, or a blazer drive, so the girls could have that particular thing and they didn't have to go out and spend money, especially if they were used to wearing a [school] uniform."

In addition to clothing and transportation, STARS took a holistic approach to addressing students' hygiene needs. A notable example was the feminine hygiene drive, which went beyond simply distributing supplies. Ms. Christine described the intentionality behind the initiative:

> "I think when you think about the feminine hygiene drive, that it was really more than a drive. And that was in response to the girls feeling embarrassed about having their period or having to go to the bathroom, and so giving them something that was cute, but had everything in there that they needed. And then on top of that, providing the hygiene [lesson] along with that, I think, was really looking at it holistically instead of just saying, 'Here's a pad,' right? So, looking at that holistically, and so I think when we think about those kinds of basic needs, I think those things we did well."

These efforts demonstrate how STARS staff not only met students' immediate material needs but also took a broader, more thoughtful approach to ensuring their well-being. By eliminating financial and logistical barriers, providing essential supplies, and fostering open conversations

around topics like hygiene and self-care, STARS created an environment where students felt supported in every aspect of their lives.

Mental Health Support and Trauma-Responsive Care

STARS staff incorporate trauma-responsive practices to support students navigating grief and exposure to violence. Ms. Cassidy explained, "Specifically after the pandemic, it has been such a priority for us to focus on mental health…We always have mental health first aid training every single year." Ms. Laila also addressed how the program responds to loss within the community, particularly given the frequency of such events in the city. She stated:

> "I talked to you about the grief, that's happening in D.C. everywhere. That our students, unfortunately, are being either killed or are in accidents. We try to be mindful of that and speak to grief counseling, bringing people in to speak with our students."

Additionally, staff has observed a rise in substance use as a form of self-medication among participants. The program actively addresses these behaviors by fostering open conversations, promoting healthier coping mechanisms, and making referrals to mental health professionals when needed. Ms. Cassidy shared how her program staff is taking on the issue:

> "What we're seeing within the last couple of years, is an increase in the use of marijuana and alcohol where our girls are coping through smoking or drinking. Some of them are coming high to school, some of them are drinking…We don't shy away from having those conversations."

Supporting students in high-needs communities can also result in an emotional toll for program staff. Recognizing that, senior leader Ms. Tasha shared how the organization offers counseling services to the program team: "We also offer them mental health support. That's a part of what

we do. I mean, when you are absorbing as much as you absorb when you're working with youth, you need the outlet." While trauma support is a core focus, some program staff recognize the need for more structured mental health initiatives, including mindfulness and emotional regulation techniques. Ms. Laila recommended, "I think the Girls' Collective is going to have to really think about how to address mental health…maybe more mindfulness woven throughout the curriculum."

Findings under this theme reveled that STARS staff frequently addressed both material needs and emotional well-being, providing essential support in areas such as crisis intervention, grief counseling, and mental health referrals. Staff observed a rise in trauma-related behaviors, including substance use, and responded through open dialogue and resource connection. The emotional demands of this work were also noted, with leadership acknowledging the need for mental health support for staff, alongside a growing interest in expanding structured wellness practices within the program.

Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces

A defining feature of the STARS program was its ability to foster an environment where participants felt safe, supported, and encouraged to express themselves authentically. Staff emphasized that their role extended beyond instruction—they were trusted adults providing guidance, mentorship, and emotional support. For many participants, STARS provided a rare safe space where they could openly discuss personal challenges, ask difficult questions, and receive support without judgment. Ms. Christine highlighted the importance of this emotional safety:

> "I think in terms of the emotional needs, because it was a safe space, they were able to share intimate details and get answers to hard questions or things that they

> were embarrassed about. They had an adult who they could trust, and so if they needed help or something was happening, they felt safe in speaking to that person."

Unlike traditional school settings, STARS facilitators built trust by centering relationships and affirming students' lived experiences. Ms. Cassidy emphasized the significance of these connections:

> "We are not just worried about you coming into a program and learning our content. We're not teachers. We're trusted adults that are walking through life with you."

By creating a clear distinction between STARS spaces and the school environment, staff reinforced a culture of emotional safety. Ms. Cassidy explained: "[We remind] the girls that this space is not the same space outside. When you go in them hallways, it's different when you come into this space."

The impact of this nurturing environment was evident in participants' personal growth. Many who initially hesitated to share their thoughts gained confidence throughout the year. Ms. Cassidy described how even the quietest students found their voices:

> "You can see that with girls that are quiet, because we don't always have the girls that are loud…We got girls that are quiet, like, won't say anything. And you'll see by the end of the year, they're raising their hand and they're talking and they're coming in and they're sharing what's happening."

Over time, STARS also evolved to become more inclusive of diverse identities and experiences, ensuring that every participant felt respected and valued. Ms. Christine reflected on the program's shift towards inclusive language and practices:

> "I think initially it was like, girls, girls, girls, right? This is a girls' program. We serve only girls. And that was our language, that was our written language and our verbal language. I think that eventually we kind of got to the point where we understood that not everybody identified as a girl, but also that there may have been two female couples or same-sex couples…ensuring that our language said things like 'partner' instead of 'boyfriend'".

Beyond language, STARS encouraged participants to use their voices to advocate for issues that mattered to them. Ms. Cassidy emphasized how advocacy was woven into the program's foundation:

> "We welcome them to advocate on behalf of the things that they feel are most important to them. And so, like I said, it's ingrained in what we do. And then it's expected that the girls utilize their voices to speak against things or speak for things that matter to them."

The program also incorporated intentional practices to promote active listening, participation, and mutual respect. Ms. Laila described how the concept of "taking space and making space" became a core principle within her STARS groups:

> "One of the community agreements that we had was to take space and make space. So, I said, 'Well, what does that mean to take space and to make space?' So, throughout the year, I'm constantly saying, 'Hey, we're gonna take up some space and we gone make some space.'"

Through these approaches, STARS cultivated an environment where students not only felt seen and heard but also empowered to take ownership of their experiences. By centering emotional

well-being, fostering inclusive language, and promoting advocacy, STARS provided a transformative space where participants could grow, connect, and lead with confidence.

Program Strengths: Flexibility and Cultural Relevance

Findings under this theme highlight the STARS program's flexibility, cultural relevance, and commitment to fostering peer support and sisterhood. Staff and participants consistently emphasized how the program's adaptable curriculum and focus on creating a supportive group environment contributed to participants feeling seen, valued, and connected. These strengths supported both participant engagement and emotional well-being by allowing facilitators to tailor sessions to the specific needs and interests of the girls they served.

Cultural Representation and Responsiveness

The STARS program's commitment to cultural representation and responsiveness emerged as a central theme in staff reflections, emphasizing the importance of staff diversity, leadership representation, and mentorship. Staff members highlighted how intentional hiring practices ensured that participants had trusted adults who understood their experiences. They also emphasized how culturally relevant leadership and programming helped create a safe and affirming space where students could navigate personal, social, and structural challenges.

Ensuring that STARS participants were supported by facilitators who reflected their identities and experiences was a key priority for program leadership. Staff members explained how representation was essential in fostering trust, relatability, and a sense of belonging among the students. Having role models who shared similar cultural backgrounds allowed facilitators to serve as both mentors and advocates. Ms. Laila underscored the significance of hiring culturally responsive staff, noting:

> "Making sure that we have program leaders who look like them and who understood them was extremely important... Although we understand that just because you are the same race, that you will have differences. But we were able to make sure that we had staff who understood their role in terms of being a role model and being a support and a resource and being non-judgmental."

Ms. Cassidy emphasized the importance of having women of color in leadership roles to ensure that students had trusted adults who could support them beyond just program activities:

> "It is important that we have the right women—women of color—that are working with our youth because we are saying we are trusted adults that are walking with you through life... That sometimes we're holding your hand because no one else is holding your hand."

Ms. Laila also made it a point to surround her STARS program participants with positive Black women role models, calling on her own friends and professional networks:

> "I call it Ms. Laila's Friends. The girls do an info sheet... I find it really helpful to bring people in that are doing those things and allow them to ask questions... I ask my female professional friends that have the time to come in and share so they're constantly seeing excellence and brilliance. I am hoping that they will see themselves."

Program staff also spoke about the importance of maintaining an all-women facilitation team to create a supportive and affirming environment for participants. Ms. Christine reflected:

> "Having Black women, like women in general, not bringing men in to facilitate programs unless it was something special... They were able to just be themselves. We could be a part of them kind of rescuing themselves."

Beyond representation, staff saw their role as helping participants challenge and reject negative stereotypes. Ms. Christine described how representation shaped students' perceptions of their potential:

> "Having program leaders who look like them was important in showing them that they could overcome stereotypes and biases. Knowing that you don't have to accept the labels, you don't have to fall into the stereotypes."

In addition to representation within program staff, organizational leadership played a crucial role in aligning STARS with the needs of the communities it served. Leadership representation ensured that decision-making was informed by firsthand understanding of the challenges faced by participants. Ms. Tasha, a Black woman in a senior leadership role, described how being in a position to enact change at a systemic level was deeply meaningful to her: "I am a fighter. Let me go in here and fight this battle for our babies... making sure they are never left behind and are always at the table when discussions are being had."

Flexible and Adaptive Curriculum

Unlike rigid learning structures found in traditional classrooms, STARS was praised by its staff for its culturally responsive and adaptable curriculum, which allowed facilitators to tailor sessions based on students' needs. Staff were encouraged to integrate their own creativity, ensuring the program remained engaging, relevant, and responsive to the lived realities of participants.

STARS facilitators emphasized that the curriculum serves as a flexible framework rather than a rigid structure, allowing them to customize lessons while maintaining alignment with the program's goals. Ms. Laila described how she personalizes her approach to curriculum delivery:

> "I use the curriculum as a baseline, and I use it to sort of help keep me guided on what the Girls' Collective would like the girls to understand. But then, I kind of add my own icing and my own decoration instead. But I let that be my guiding post."

Similarly, Ms. Cassidy reinforced this perspective, stating: "Our curriculum is more of a guide... We train our staff to utilize it as a guide and to be creative with their girls as far as their sessions are concerned." Facilitators valued the ability to pivot their lessons based on student needs and real-world challenges. This adaptability allowed them to incorporate interactive and engaging activities when necessary. Ms. Cassidy highlighted how facilitators are empowered to shift discussions to align with students' immediate concerns: "A lot of the times we might have a session that's, I would say, just not really what the girls are ready to talk about or need to talk about right now. And so, we have that ability to just pivot." STARS facilitators remained mindful of the evolving challenges their participants faced, incorporating discussions that addressed relevant social, emotional, and personal development topics. Ms. Laila described how she expands on certain subjects when she sees a need for deeper engagement: "Sometimes I will do extensions, in terms of self-esteem, if I notice that that's something that we need to maybe penetrate a little bit more." Ms. Cassidy explained how program discussions are shaped by students' lived experiences:

> "We are mindful about the topics that we discuss with our girls in our curriculum... If we're noticing that [drug use] is happening frequently with

> individuals, we'll speak with those individuals, and we try to get them the support that they need."

Ms. Christine further emphasized the importance of flexibility in adapting to the specific needs of each group: "The curriculum left time and openness for flexibility, and you could adapt things based on your individual group and what they needed." Beyond flexibility, STARS facilitators were also intentional in expanding curriculum topics to ensure they resonated with students' lived realities. Ms. Cassidy described how discussions were adjusted when students presented with urgent needs:

> "We tweak our curriculum to meet [the girls'] needs... Like, if a student comes into programming drunk or high, we pivot to talk about coping mechanisms. We don't shy away from these conversations because it's their reality."

Ms. Laila shared how she integrates real-world issues into programming to facilitate deeper discussions:

> "One of the activities that we're planning for the spring, I thought it would be fun, I'm going to have them debate Roe vs. Wade. So that we can kind of talk about that a little bit because I think—and this is a little more than the curriculum, right? But it's a base that gives us a launching pad."

Through this flexible, culturally responsive curriculum, STARS provided students with a safe space to explore personal challenges, receive tailored support, and engage in meaningful discussions. The ability to adapt programming—whether modifying discussions, incorporating inclusive language, or responding to students' immediate concerns—allowed the program to remain a vital source of guidance and affirmation for participants.

Sisterhood and Peer Support

One of the program's most defining features was the sense of sisterhood that it cultivated among participants. STARS was intentionally designed to foster a supportive environment where students could build trust, navigate conflicts, and develop strong peer connections. Facilitators worked to ensure that sisterhood was more than just a concept—it was something that was lived and reinforced in every session. Ms. Laila emphasized how she embedded this principle into her programming: "The girls all know my favorite African proverb is, 'I want for my sister what I want for myself.' I say it, but what I want us to do is to live it." Participants were encouraged to embrace the idea that their personal success was intertwined with the success of those around them. Ms. Cassidy reinforced this, stating: "We let them know that it's a sisterhood. In here, we are respectful to each other."

This emphasis on collective care and mutual respect helped to create an environment where students felt seen and valued. Ms. Christine noted how the presence of Black women as mentors and facilitators reinforced a positive model of sisterhood, free from negative stereotypes about female relationships:

> **"**And because the topics were so sensitive, it was important that they had the representation of Black women supporting them so they could see what they could be, but also that it was an environment of sisterhood and they could also have time together outside of the stereotypical, you know, cat fighting or girls don't get along or, you know, that kind of thing."

In the spirit of sisterhood, the STARS program intentionally fostered an inclusive atmosphere where all participants felt they belonged. Ms. Cassidy reflected on how students found emotional support within the group: "Just seeing that they had that support that they would not have

had other places—that sisterhood, a caring adult who they could go to and get facts in a non-judgmental space." Ms. Christine expanded on this, explaining that the structured group environment provided the social-emotional reinforcement many students needed:

> "I think the group environment provided the social support that they needed. They were not excluded. They were part of this special group. They were able to identify as a STARS girl… the program leaders did a really good job of creating that safe space and connecting and that sisterhood for the girls."

For many participants, being part of STARS gave them a sense of identity and belonging. It became more than just a program—it was a space where they felt safe, heard, and empowered to support one another. Navigating peer relationships was another essential component of STARS. Facilitators actively worked to help students build communication skills and resolve conflicts in constructive ways. Ms. Christine described how participants developed a sense of ownership over their space, which encouraged them to hold each other accountable:

> "Even learning a difference between assertive and aggressive, and allowing them to be assertive and be advocates for themselves and communicate and seeing them practice communication skills and check each other in group, right? Like this is our space—and take ownership—like this is my group. This is our space."

Sometimes, tensions between students escalated, requiring facilitators to shift programming to address the moment. Ms. Laila recalled how she improvised a peer-led conflict resolution activity when students at a middle school were experiencing ongoing disputes:

> "Like last year, they were having fights over at [middle school], and it was like back and forth... Finally, I was like, 'You know what? We're gonna have Sister

> Court… We're gonna have a judge. I got to have some jury members.' And they got so excited."

The STARS program's emphasis on flexibility, cultural responsiveness, and sisterhood has played a crucial role in fostering an inclusive, supportive, and engaging environment for participants. By ensuring representation among facilitators, adapting curriculum to meet students' evolving needs, and promoting peer support, STARS has created a space where Black girls feel seen, valued, and empowered. The program's ability to pivot discussions, challenge stereotypes, and reinforce a sense of community has strengthened both participant engagement and emotional well-being. These strengths underscore STARS' impact in helping young women develop confidence, navigate challenges, and build lasting, supportive relationships.

Organizational Sustainability and Future Goals

This set of findings reveal the Girls' Collective's aspirations for their programmatic future growth, sustainability, and community impact. Staff members emphasized the importance of expanding the program's reach to more schools, enhancing inclusivity for gender-expansive youth, and strengthening engagement with families. Additionally, staff highlighted the need for financial diversification and increased public visibility to ensure long-term sustainability and alignment between funding sources and the organization's core values.

Expanding Program Reach

Several staff members expressed a desire for STARS to expand its programming to more schools, particularly those it previously had to leave. Leadership staff all mentioned a desire to see the program expanded in more schools in D.C. across all grade levels. Ms. Cassidy wished the program could be "in every single school in Ward 5, 7, and 8, even starting in the in the elementary schools." Staff members also noted D.C.'s growing Latine population, with an

increasing number of Latina participants in schools that were once predominantly Black. Ms. Laila recommended that the organization should "focus on getting more funding to not only be in more schools in Ward 5, 7, and 8—but even go into the Latin community."

Learning from their participants, the organization has realized the need to further expand how they think about gender and how, as a historically gender-responsive program for girls, to increase their inclusivity of gender-expansive youth who exist beyond the gender binary. Reflecting on her time with the organization, Ms. Christine commented on the on-going transition, stating, "I think that that's something that the Girls' Collective is really thinking about now, because I think that our students are way ahead of us. They are very aware around gender." Ms. Laila also acknowledged progress in this area, while noting the continued need for growth: "I think that we at some point started to do a better job embracing the fluidity of gender, but of course, there is definitely room for improvement."

Strengthening Family and Community Engagement

Some staff members emphasized the need to deepen relationships with families, in hopes that the program's values will be reinforced outside of STARS spaces. Ms. Laila shared how she thought a multigenerational approach would be beneficial:

> Finding ways, if we can, to incorporate parents. I mean because, everything can be just undone. You do all these wonderful things, and because the person that they trust most and love the most are their family. However dysfunctional, however, whatever you think—These are my people, and this is who I'm gonna ride or die with. You are here for a season. They are here for a life. And even maybe giving parents some tools that they can reinforce at home would be nice.

Leadership staff acknowledged that expanding engagement with parents could have a significant impact on the girls, as misalignment between program values and home values sometimes created tension. Ms. Cassidy recognized that increased parent interaction would provide an opportunity for families to better understand the organization and gain insight into the lessons and topics their children explore in the STARS group:

> I would love to see us be more involved with our parents…We have connections with our parents, but a lot of the things that we were teaching the girls conflict with what they're being taught at home… We have a lot of girls that are in these programs that the parents really don't necessarily know that the impact they're seeing in their child is really through this program.

Long-Term Sustainability and Financial Stability

As seen throughout this section, the staff frequently acknowledged that for STARS to remain effective and expand, it needed more funding. Ms. Tasha emphasized the need to diversify funding sources and move away from dependence on a single revenue stream: "We've got to diversify our funding streams. Having so much in one pot has been a very, very serious concern that we have dealt with." Senior staff recognized that diversifying funding sources and reducing reliance on the requirements of a few funders would require increasing the organization's visibility in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. 4:

> "Our policy platform, where we're really advocating for teen girls in a major way …Where our teen girls are today, what their needs are at this time, how we need to stand in the gap for them, really utilizing the data in a way that helps inform decision making."

This theme underlines that while the STARS program is poised for expansion, sustained growth requires addressing current limitations in funding, inclusivity, and family engagement. Staff underscored the need to diversify financial streams and increase organizational visibility to reduce reliance on funders whose requirements may not align with the program's mission. Based on responses about the Girls' Collective's current transformation, the organization appears to be intentional about shaping public perceptions of Black girls, other girls of color, and gender-expansive youth. Their future goals are strategically aligned to both enhance the lives of the young people they serve and further refine their broader organizational vision.

Subunit 3: Organizational Documents

This section presents a cross-document analysis of the organizational documents relating to STARS and the Girls' Collective's mission statement, strategic direction, curriculum content, programmatic impact, and community presence. This analysis not only take a deeper look at the content of the STARS program and its documented impact, but it also looks at how the organization brands itself and presents itself – and the teen girls' it serves –to the public. Appendices F – H outline the thematic and open codes for each of the four document types analyzed. Table 8 summarizes the purpose of each document for the organization and their primary focus areas, along with each document type's strengths and limitations:

Table 8

Subunit 3 Document Analysis Summary

Document	Purpose of Document/s	Primary Focus Areas	Strengths
Organizational Website Content	Communicates the organization's mission, vision, programmatic impact, and services to public audiences and funders.	Empowerment, social justice, holistic support, and program impact narratives.	Strong branding and public messaging; Aligns with program ethos.

Table 8. *Subunit 3 Document Analysis Summary (continued)*

Document	Purpose of Document/s	Primary Focus Areas	Strengths
STARS Curriculum Summaries	Guides implementation of STARS programming across grades 6–12 through structured lessons.	Self-efficacy, reproductive health, leadership, mental wellness, and college/career readiness.	Comprehensive and developmentally aligned; Directly serves implementation.
Most Recent Performance Evaluation (2023-2024)	Evaluates program's outcomes including academic, behavioral, and health-related metrics across multiple sites and cohorts.	Graduation rates, self-efficacy gains, health knowledge, and risk prevention.	Provides quantifiable data to support program's credibility and impact on participants.
***Voices for Change* Report (2019)**	Report created by the organization to document the lived experiences and needs of Black girls in D.C., informed by youth participatory action research.	Structural inequities, push-out, systemic neglect, and policy advocacy.	Grounded in participants' voices; Surfaces community and school issues impacting program participants.

To further contextualize the findings from Subunit 3, a comparative summary of the four primary documents was conducted (see Table 9). These documents offer distinct yet overlapping perspectives on the mission, implementation, and perceived impact of the STARS program. Each document holds unique strengths, however; they also present limitations. Through this comparative lens, several common themes emerged—most notably in areas related to empowerment, mental health, reproductive health education, academic readiness, and systemic inequities. These shared themes, as well as the areas where documents diverged in emphasis or framing, laid the foundation for a cross-document interrogation. This analytical process not only examined individual content but also generated cross-document insights, revealing how organizational values are communicated, categorized, and enacted across varied formats.

This synthesis is important because it surfaces the underlying rationality of the Girls' Collective's programming while also exposing tensions between internal practice and external

presentation. By interrogating the alignment and dissonance across documents, the analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of how the organization articulates its priorities, navigates funder expectations, and addresses the complex realities of Black girls' lives in Washington, D.C. The following section details this cross-document interrogation and its implications for practice, evaluation, and program consistency.

Table 9

Subunit 3 Cross-Document Analysis

Theme	Website Content	Curriculum Summaries	Performance Evaluation	*Voices for Change* Report	Cross-Document Insight
Empowerment and Advocacy	Central branding message; Holistic, whole-girl model	Recurrent themes of self-efficacy, sisterhood, and leadership	Reflected in self-efficacy increases, though older girls show lower gains	Girls seek voice in policy; experience silencing in schools	Organization delivers on empowerment but older students' efficacy needs deeper work**.**
Academic Success	High school graduation and college readiness emphasized	Most frequent theme; Vertically scaffolded skills across grades	100% graduation and promotion rates reported	Describes low expectations in D.C. schools; Graduation without skills	Internal program outcomes are strong, but external school systems undermine preparedness.
Reproductive Health and Pregnancy Prevention	Highlights trauma-informed, gender-responsive	Covered extensively; STI, consent, LGBTQ+ topics	100% pregnancy prevention; 72% knowledge gain	Lack of safe sex dialogue in schools	Curriculum fills systemic education gap in reproductive health.
Mental Health and Emotional Support	Framed under holistic support, social emotional learning focus	Mindfulness, conflict resolution, self-care sessions	Not evaluated quantitatively	Identified as a major barrier; Lack of mental health access, stigma	Girls' Collective responds well to mental health needs unmet by schools.
Relationship Skills and Safety	Covered in leadership, healthy relationships, safety narratives	Sessions on consent, friendship, and social dynamics	Lower relationship self-efficacy for older students	Participants reported sexual harassment and lack of adult intervention	Curriculum covers topic more effectively for younger students.

Table 9. *Subunit 3 Cross-Document Analysis (continued)*

Theme	Website Content	Curriculum Summaries	Performance Evaluation	*Voices for Change* Report	Cross-Document Insight
Systemic Inequities and Social Justice	Social justice language used in branding; Public advocacy efforts	N/A	Addressed via self-efficacy and decision-making	Systemic barriers named and challenged (suspensions, race/gender bias)	Advocacy is a cornerstone**,** but direct curriculum on structural analysis/social justice is limited.
Career Readiness / Adulting	Some content on workplace readiness	Focused in Grades 11–12; Resume writing, professionalism	Weakest evaluation area (only 48% showed gains)	Students feel underprepared for adult life after school	Critical skill gap exists in transition to adulthood preparation.
Youth Voice and Agency	Highlighted in mission but less evident structurally	Group agreements and team-building are common	Not explicitly measured	Girls strongly express desire for policy input and shared governance	Youth agency recognized but not formally structured within curriculum.

The following is a further explanation of the themes emerged during the cross-document analysis, as displayed in the chart above.

Empowerment and Advocacy

Empowerment emerged as a central theme across all four documents. The website presents it as a holistic and integral part of the organization's mission, while the curriculum reinforces self-efficacy, sisterhood, and leadership across grade levels. Performance evaluations show increased self-efficacy for younger participants, but less impact on older girls. The *Voices for Change* report underscores that Black girls desire voice in policy conversations but often feel silenced in school contexts. Taken together, these sources confirm that the organization successfully fosters empowerment, but the approach requires more depth and tailoring to older youth.

Academic Success

The emphasis on academic success is strong across all documents. The website markets college readiness and graduation as primary outcomes, and the curriculum scaffolds academic skills through each grade level. The evaluation confirms 100% graduation and promotion rates among program participants. However, the *Voices for Change* report exposes a troubling disconnect—many girls graduate without meaningful academic support or skills. The documents showed that while STARS supports strong internal outcomes, DCPS may be failing to uphold their part.

Reproductive Health and Pregnancy Prevention

The program's approach to reproductive health is one of the clearest examples of curriculum filling a systemic gap. The website emphasizes trauma-informed, gender-responsive care. Curriculum includes lessons on STIs, consent, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and emotional safety. Evaluations document 100% pregnancy prevention and a 72% knowledge gain around these topics. Meanwhile, the Voices for Change report reveals that D.C. schools rarely engage students in open discussions about sexual health. Together, these findings validate STARS as a leading source of reproductive health education for participants.

Mental Health and Emotional Support

Mental health is framed as a component of holistic wellness on the website and is reflected in the curriculum through mindfulness, conflict resolution, and self-care practices. However, the funder evaluation does not systematically assess emotional outcomes, leaving a data gap. The *Voices for Change* report names mental health access as a major challenge, particularly due to stigma and institutional neglect. Overall, the data showed that the Girls'

Collective appears to meet critical mental health needs informally, highlighting a need to formalize its emphasis in the curriculum and evaluating its implementation.

Relationship Skills and Safety

While the organization discusses healthy relationships and overall safety on its website, this theme is more deeply embedded in the curriculum, with sessions on consent, friendships, and navigating social dynamics. However, evaluation data show reduced relationship self-efficacy among older students. *Voices for Change* revealed alarming gaps in school responsiveness to harassment and violence. This suggests that STARS is more effective at teaching these topics to younger girls and may need to redesign content for upper grades to match developmental realities.

Systemic Inequities and Social Justice

Though the website and public materials use social justice language, the curriculum largely avoids direct systemic critique. Evaluation data include decision-making skills but fall short of capturing civic understanding. In contrast, the *Voices for Change* report boldly confronts suspensions, race and gender bias, and inequities in public education. The documents collectively reflect a commitment to advocacy but highlight a missed opportunity to embed systemic education more thoroughly within the core program.

Career Readiness / Adulting

The website and curriculum touch on professional skills and workplace readiness, especially in later grades. However, the evaluation revealed there was only a 48% increase among participants demonstrating they met the learning objective (target: 60%) —the lowest among all measured domains. The *Voices for Change* report supports this by highlighting girls' feelings of unpreparedness for life after school. This signals a need to rethink or strengthen

the STARS program's career readiness and adulting components to better serve older youth facing life transitions.

Youth Voice and Agency

The organization's mission celebrates youth agency, yet its structure lacks formal avenues for participant governance. The *Voices for Change* report showcases girls explicitly calling for shared decision-making and policy input, however; the website and curriculum did not specify how or if participants' voices were used in organizational decision making. This reveals that while youth agency is culturally affirmed, it may not be structurally realized.

Cross-Unit Analysis of Study's Overall Case: The Girls' Collective's STARS Program

This section presents a comprehensive cross-unit analysis of the three embedded subunits within the case study: STARS participants (current and alumnae), STARS program staff (current and former), and organizational documents from the Girls' Collective, including curriculum supports, program evaluations, and public-facing communications. The following eight themes emerged from that analysis:

Table 10

Cross-Unit Analysis of the Girls' Collective's STARS Program

Theme	Subunit 1: Participants	Subunit 2: Staff	Subunit 3: Organizational Documents	Cross-Unit Insights
Safe Space and Sisterhood	Described STARS as a safe space, promoting trust, connection, and a relief from school stress.	Emphasized intentional relationship-building, affirming peer dynamics, emotional safety.	Documents stress "creating trauma-informed, identity-affirming environments" and "inclusive belonging."	**Strong alignment:** The program's design and implementation are strongly consistent across levels.

Table 10. *Cross-Unit Analysis of the Girls' Collective's STARS Program (continued)*

Theme	Subunit 1: Participants	Subunit 2: Staff	Subunit 3: Organizational Documents	Cross-Unit Insights
Identity Empowerment and Stereotype Disruption	Reported transformation in rejecting tropes about Black girlhood (i.e., "loud," "ghetto").	Staff actively reframe perceived deficits (i.e., "cussing, loudness") into leadership traits.	Organizational mission emphasizes the program's goal of empowering its participants; Empowerment is also a reoccurring theme in the curriculum	**Strong alignment:** Practice matches theory. This is a core strength across all levels.
Leadership and Advocacy	Testified at Capitol, led group initiatives, developed advocacy skills.	Designed and scaffolded those experiences; emphasized bodily autonomy and speaking truth to power.	Strategic plans cite leadership and "youth-led social change" as outcomes.	**Strong alignment:** Fully integrated across practice, staffing, and policy. However, access to public events could be more equitable (staff concern).
College and Career Readiness	Described guidance on scholarships, HBCU fairs, alternate career paths, and networking.	Mixed views—some value it; others believe it distracts from the core mission. Limited staff capacity.	Org documents promote "post-secondary exploration" but not as a core pillar.	**Tension:** Participants value it highly. Staff are under-resourced to deliver. Org docs treat it as optional. Misalignment here.
Healing and Mental Health	Reflections on therapy access, trauma support, emotional awareness, and grief navigation.	Identified trauma-informed care as critical. Called for more structured wellness supports.	Organizational docs reference "healing-centered engagement" and "mental health partnerships."	**Strong alignment**: Implementation challenges exist but the commitment is embedded across units.
Structural Barriers and Sustainability	Largely unaware of operational challenges or school access issues.	Exposed deep financial instability, school admin resistance, and leadership disconnect.	Documents are optimistic, sometimes sanitized; Underreport funding gaps or school system resistance.	**Gap:** Participants mostly focused on their experience—sustainability is invisible unless services are removed; Documents could do more to candidly reflect systemic risks.

Table 10. *Cross-Unit Analysis of the Girls' Collective's STARS Program (continued)*

Theme	Subunit 1: Participants	Subunit 2: Staff	Subunit 3: Organizational Documents	Cross-Unit Insights
Curriculum Flexibility and Cultural Relevance	Did not comment much—but benefited from relevant topics like relationships, social justice, and wellness.	Valued flexible curriculum that could adapt to real-time needs and crises.	Curriculum guides emphasize adaptability and "student-responsive content."	**Partial alignment**: Flexibility is working as intended; Could also benefit in more structured lessons on social justice and mental health (tend to occur at the digression of the facilitators)
Representation and Relational Trust	Positive reflections on seeing Black women in leadership and mentorship roles.	Prioritized hiring culturally relevant staff. Built identity mirrors for students.	Leadership diversity stated as a goal, but some historical disconnect noted.	**Partial alignment:** Past misalignment in leadership noted by staff; Current docs are catching up with values in practice.

This comparative analysis enabled deeper insight into how the STARS program is experienced, implemented, and institutionally represented, revealing both areas of alignment and critical tensions. The following further explains the derived themes.

Safe Space and Sisterhood

Participants described STARS as a sanctuary that provided a reprieve from academic and personal stress. This sentiment was echoed by staff, who emphasized building safe, affirming peer dynamics and centering emotional safety. Organizational documents further reinforce this alignment, stressing the importance of trauma-informed, identity-affirming environments. This theme demonstrates strong alignment across all subunits, suggesting that the program's intention to create a healing-centered space is successfully operationalized in practice.

Identity Empowerment and Stereotype Disruption

Participants frequently described how STARS helped them reject negative tropes surrounding Black girlhood. Staff worked intentionally to reframe behaviors often pathologized in school—such as assertiveness and emotional expressiveness—as signs of leadership.

Organizational documents emphasize empowerment and identity work as core components of the program's mission and curriculum. There is strong theoretical and practical alignment in this theme, marking it as one of the program's most coherently implemented strengths.

Leadership and Advocacy

Students reported engaging in advocacy efforts, including testifying at public hearings and leading events/group sessions. These experiences were scaffolded by staff, who intentionally design programming around bodily autonomy, activism, and self-efficacy. Organizational strategies cite youth-led social change as a desired outcome. This theme shows full integration across practice, staffing, and organizational policy, though some staff noted concerns about equitable access to leadership opportunities, particularly for students with fewer external supports.

College and Career Readiness

Participants valued exposure to college fairs, scholarships, and alternative career paths through the STARS program. In contrast, staff held mixed views. Some saw this as vital, while others worried it detracted from the organization's core goals. Limited staffing was noted as a barrier. Organizational documents promote college exploration but do not position it as central. This theme reflects misalignment. While students find value, organizational and staffing resources do not fully support this area as a program priority.

Healing and Mental Health

Students discussed the benefits of trauma support, emotional awareness, and access to therapy. Staff affirmed the importance of trauma-informed care and expressed a desire for more structured wellness programming. Organizational documents cite healing-centered engagement

and mental health partnerships. Despite some implementation challenges, this theme reveals strong alignment in intent and growing execution capacity across subunits.

Structural Barriers and Sustainability

Participants were largely unaware of the program's operational challenges unless services were withdrawn. Staff, however, detailed financial variability, school resistance, and leadership instability. Organizational documents portrayed a more optimistic image, underreporting these systemic vulnerabilities. This reveals a gap in transparency and communication—critical systemic challenges may be obscured in public narratives, risking trust and long-term sustainability.

Curriculum Flexibility and Cultural Relevance

While participants did not explicitly reference curriculum flexibility, they engaged deeply with its culturally relevant content. Staff praised the ability to adapt lessons in real-time to student needs and community events. Curriculum guides affirm this approach, describing content as student-responsive. There is partial alignment here. Flexibility works in practice, but more structured attention to themes like social justice and mental health may improve consistency across sites.

Representation and Relational Trust

Participants spoke positively about seeing Black women in positions of leadership—rather that was their program facilitators or the women they got to meet at the organization's annual events. Staff emphasized hiring practices that promote cultural relevance and mentorship. Organizational documents articulate leadership diversity as a value, though some staff noted past disconnects in executive representation. This theme reflects partial alignment. For participants, relational trust is strong in delivery. It is also evident that the staff is intentional about the women

they select to serve the organization, both as staff and as volunteers/invited guests. While in the past, funder messaging misrepresented participants from a savior narrative, current documents are beginning to reflect what has already been embedded in practice – showing the assets of the program participants bring to the STARS space and describing the challenges they face as long-standing systemic issues.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2015, while working at the Girls' Collective, I my supervisor sent me as her proxy to a policy forum on restorative justice interventions for Black girls in D.C. Dr. Monique Couvson (formally Morris), who published *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, was a featured speaker. In her speech, she said something that would forever change my perspective, propelling this study nearly a decade later. She posed a question to the audience, asking, ""Why are the same characteristics that make Black women successful in the workforce being punished in schools?" I thought about the hundreds of Black girls I had worked with over the years, and my own experiences as a Black girl child who was not afraid to advocate for herself, and she was absolutely right. In that moment, it was clear to me why spaces like STARS and organizations like the Girls' Collective were needed. Gender-specific thirdspace programs not only have the power to provide girls of color with spaces to have their voices heard and their experiences validated, but the organization as a whole is positioned to be community advocates for the girls they serve.

The purpose of this study was to explore just how the Girls' Collective's STARS program functions as a thirdspace to engage with and support the diverse expressions of Black girlhood in Washington D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8. By blending Edward Soja's Thidspace Theory with Mikki Kendall's Hood Feminism, the study examined if and how the STARS program and the Girls' Collective provided empowering counterspaces for Black girls to resist harmful stereotypes, develop leadership skills, and address their intersectional identities within school and community contexts. Three research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ 1: How does the Girls' Collective's STARS program operate as a thirdspace to engage with and support the diverse expressions of Black girlhood in Washington, D.C.'s Wards 5, 7, and 8?

RQ 2: In what ways does the program's approach and curriculum succeed in addressing the intersectional identities and lived experiences of Black girls and where do they fall short?

RQ3: How does the Girls' Collective and the STARS program challenge or reinforce harmful social norms and stereotypes related to Black girlhood within school and community contexts in Wards 5, 7, and 8?

This chapter presents the key findings of the study and discusses their significance to the research questions, theoretical framework, and existing literature. Additionally, the chapter provides the practical implications for practitioners that emerged from this work, along with overall study application limitations. Finally, it concludes with recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the three guiding research questions, grounded in the theoretical framework and existing literature that informed the study's design.

RQ1: STARS as a Thirdspace

Findings from this study affirm that the STARS program operates as a thirdspace—a liberatory site where Black girls resist harmful narratives and systemic barriers embedded in urban school settings. Edward Soja's (1996) concept of thirdspace theorizes space as

simultaneously physical, mental, and imagined—a hybrid zone where marginalized people generate new possibilities beyond their material and representational constraints.

Within the context of STARS, this framing is evident in the cross-unit theme *Safe Space and Sisterhood,* which highlights how participants consistently described the program as a safe space. Amid the hyper-surveilled and punitive structures of their school environments, STARS offered a “radically open space” where girls could express vulnerability, form peer relationships, and explore their evolving identities (hooks, 1990). In these settings, participants were defined not by disciplinary histories or academic assessments, but by their creativity, leadership, and agency. This affirming of self and sisterhood resonates with the Combahee River Collective’s foundational assertion that Black women are "rooted in a healthy love for [themselves], [their] sisters and [their] community which allows [them] to continue [their] struggle and work” (CRC, 1977, para. 9). STARS created space for this radical self-love to emerge, allowing participants to show up authentically and be celebrated holistically.

This contrast with traditional educational environments is significant. Literature shows Black girls are disproportionately disciplined and subjected to adultification bias—perceived as older, less innocent, and more aggressive than their peers (Blake et al., 2011; Epstein et al., 2017). The STARS program directly countered this trend by allowing Black girls to show up fully in all their complexity, supporting research that emphasizes the value of culturally sustaining, out-of-school spaces (Baldridge, 2014; Grant, 2012).

However, while STARS functioned as a thirdspace in practice, this liberatory environment was not institutionalized within the program’s design. Facilitators’ personal commitments to radical care and cultural responsiveness shaped many of the liberatory conditions. Without formal frameworks, curriculum integration, or evaluation tools, these

outcomes are vulnerable to staff turnover. Findings indicate a clear opportunity to strengthen STARS' liberatory potential by codifying thirdspace principles into curricula, training, and programmatic assessments.

RQ2: Addressing Intersectionality

The STARS program demonstrated deep engagement with the intersectional identities of its participants through themes such as *Identity Empowerment*, *Stereotype Disruption*, and *Curriculum Flexibility and Cultural Relevance*. Participants shared how the program helped them challenge internalized stereotypes—such as being labeled "loud," "ghetto," or "too much"—by reframing those traits as expressions of confidence, cultural resilience, and leadership. This shift mirrors Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping systems of oppression—race, gender, class—compound the experiences of those at the margins.

Participants consistently noted that their cultural expressions, including language, aesthetics, and humor, were not only acknowledged but celebrated. In doing so, STARS actively disrupted the dominance of respectability politics in youth programming (Higginbotham, 1994). As Kendall (2020a) observes, such politics often pathologize behaviors rooted in survival. STARS, instead, created a space where girls could fully inhabit their identities without apology or assimilation.

A key strength of the program was its flexible curriculum design, which allowed facilitators to adapt content to the specific needs of each group. Participants engaged in workshops on reproductive justice, financial literacy, college access, and civic advocacy—all rooted in culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, the program's engagement with intersectionality was not institutionalized; it often depended on individual

facilitator initiative. As mentioned in the previous findings' discussion for RQ1, STARS' group discussions around structural issues such as systemic racism, Roe v. Wade, and gentrification were inconsistently integrated. Without embedding intersectionality into formal curricula and training, there's a risk these vital conversations may be lost through staff turnover or program transitions.

To truly embrace intersectionality, STARS must move from a responsive to a co-constructed model of programming—one that elevates participant voice in ongoing curricular and organizational development. Participants should be consistently consulted not only about session topics but about how programming is designed, facilitated, and evaluated. Regular youth-led focus groups or advisory councils could provide a formalized feedback structure that recognizes Black girls as co-creators, not passive recipients.

In addition to internal reforms, expanding the program's presence and partnerships within the community is essential. A stronger, reciprocal relationship with local schools, families, and neighborhood organizations would allow the Girls' Collective to better understand and reflect the diverse, intersectional needs of Black girls across Wards 5, 7, and 8. Community engagement is not just outreach—it's insight. By being embedded in the everyday lives and spaces of participants, staff gain a more nuanced understanding of the cultural, economic, and political factors that shape the girls' realities.

Collaboration with other community-based organizations—especially those focused on housing justice, healthcare access, anti-violence work, and mental health—can also ensure STARS does not operate in a silo. A holistic intersectional approach recognizes that identity is deeply shaped by material conditions. For example, Black girls who are queer, neurodivergent, parenting, or undocumented require tailored approaches to advocacy, healing, and leadership

development. Through coalition work and shared programming, STARS can support these needs with care and specificity.

Ultimately, intersectionality in programming is not just about naming identities—it's about structuring programs to center the lived realities of girls who sit at the crossroads of multiple oppressions. It demands a shift from top-down delivery to collaborative, justice-centered co-creation. STARS has laid a foundation for this, now it must commit to the long-term, community-rooted practices that intersectionality calls us into.

RQ3: Challenging Harmful Norms and Stereotypes

The STARS program worked intentionally to challenge harmful norms and stereotypes surrounding Black girlhood. Through the themes *Leadership and Advocacy* and *Representation and Relational Trust*, the program reframed participants not as problems to fix but as powerful leaders, capable of influencing change within their schools and communities. Girls described participating in advocacy efforts, including testifying at city council meetings and leading community workshops. These leadership opportunities reinforced their political identities and validated their capacity as civic actors—an enactment of Lorde's (1984) assertion that "the personal is political." Facilitators encouraged girls to move from self-advocacy to collective action, integrating empowerment into the everyday fabric of program life.

The theme *Healing and Mental Health* further illustrates how STARS resisted punitive school norms through trauma-informed care. Participants used the space to process grief, community violence, and personal struggles. Facilitators implemented mindfulness, peer dialogue, and restorative practices to support collective healing. This approach reflects Ginwright's (2018) framework of healing-centered engagement, which moves beyond trauma management to focus on joy, agency, and cultural meaning-making.

However, the theme *Structural Barriers and Sustainability* illuminated not only organizational challenges such as inconsistent funding and administrative resistance, but also a deeper contradiction between mission and practice. These barriers reflect broader neoliberal constraints placed on youth-serving programs in marginalized communities (Baldridge, 2014). Yet, when programs like STARS retreat from schools labeled as the most "difficult," they risk reinforcing the very stereotypes they seek to dismantle—namely, that Black girls in the hood are too hard to reach, too much to manage, or unworthy of sustained investment. This sends a dangerous message: That proximity to systemic inequity makes one expendable.

Avoiding high-need schools does not protect programming—it perpetuates the devaluation of those most affected by structural violence. If the goal is to serve the most vulnerable, then the presence of challenge should not be a deterrent—it should be a call to deepen commitment. As Ms. Christine, a former senior staff member, powerfully noted, "I think what we had a decade ago was staff who were willing to be inconvenienced for an hour because they knew the girls were inconvenienced for 24 hours a week." This disconnect became particularly visible during the Crestwood High School focus group, where the session was repeatedly interrupted by program staff preparing for the organization's annual fundraising event. It was the week of the event and I was told they had just realized they needed more representation of the D.C. girls, so they were taking them out my focus group to record short, rushed video snippets to show at the gala. The D.C. girls—already contending with systemic underinvestment—were pushed to the margins once again, their participation squeezed into last-minute scheduling. These moments reveal how systemic neglect can manifest even in liberatory spaces, not through intent but through omission. It is a reminder that equity is not only about bold visions—it is about who is prioritized in practice.

Lastly, STARS appears to have benefited from leadership that shares aspects of identity with the Black girls it serves—particularly race and gender—which has likely contributed to the development of trust and cultural responsiveness across program sites. Participants emphasized the importance of having Black women facilitators who could relate to their experiences and affirm their identities. Research supports that such same-race mentorship fosters academic engagement and emotional safety (Dee, 2005; Irvine, 2003). However, shared identity alone does not guarantee alignment with the full spectrum of experiences faced by Black girls in urban, marginalized communities. As Bettina Love (2019) asserts, what is needed are not just allies, but accomplices—leaders who actively work to dismantle inequities rather than simply support equity in theory. To live into its mission, the Girls' Collective must ensure its board and leadership team reflect this deeper level of commitment. Accompliceship demands an understanding of the systemic barriers Black girls face and a willingness to engage in community-informed leadership. It calls on those in power to collaborate with the young women they serve, not to define them by deficit or stereotype, but to recognize their rich, diverse assets and co-create liberatory possibilities from within.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of thirdspace programs like STARS, however; they also reveal systemic challenges that impact the program's sustainability and reach. This section explores the broader implications of these findings for educators and non-profit organizations. It offers recommendations for schools seeking to create more inclusive learning environments, non-profit leaders striving to sustain and expand Black girl-centered programs, and researchers looking to further examine the long-term impact of

extracurricular thirdspaces. By addressing these areas, this study aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to create affirming, equitable spaces where Black girls can thrive.

For Schools and Educators in Urban School Districts

Implement Extracurricular Thirdspace Programs

Urban schools should actively collaborate with non-profit youth development organizations to establish identity-affirming, culturally responsive thirdspace programs, such as STARS, to support Black girls in developing leadership skills, challenging stereotypes, and expressing themselves freely. These thirdspace programs can also benefit other marginalized student groups, particularly when they incorporate frameworks focused on social-emotional learning, leadership development, self-advocacy, and community engagement. Organizations like the Girls' Collective, along with many long-established youth non-profits, have years of measurable data demonstrating the effectiveness of their programs.

Schools should recognize the positive impact these partnerships have not only on students' academic achievement but also on their social-emotional development. Educators cannot do this work alone: Leveraging community networks strengthens support for students. Additionally, because non-profits like the Girls' Collective receive funding from outside sources, their services are typically provided at no cost for the school. For Black teens in particular, research highlights the importance of thirdspaces in fostering a sense of community, identity, and social justice engagement, providing a safe environment where they can explore their identities and build confidence (Nwoko, 2025).

Adopt Asset-Based Approaches

Urban schools should prioritize shifting from deficit-based narratives—where Black girls are viewed through a lens of deficiency or risk—to asset-based frameworks that celebrate their

strengths. The study highlights how STARS disrupts harmful stereotypes and societal assumptions, advocating for Black girlhood as a space of resilience and empowerment rather than criminalization. Too often, Black girls are disproportionately disciplined in school settings for behaviors that are perceived as defiant but are, in reality, expressions of self-advocacy and agency. By shifting toward asset-based approaches, educators can foster an environment where Black girls' voices are valued rather than silenced.

In practice, this means recognizing the unique cultural knowledge, leadership qualities, and creative problem-solving skills that Black girls bring into learning spaces. Schools must actively reject the criminalization of Black girlhood and instead implement curricula, policies, and pedagogical strategies that affirm their lived experiences. Programs like STARS serve as a model for how schools can amplify the strengths of Black girls by fostering mentorship, leadership training, and community-based learning initiatives. In many ways, the students and the staff expressed how the STARS space served as a direct counter to students' classrooms. That should not be the case. Extracurriculars should be an extension of the care, love, and support Black girls receive in their schools—not a place where they escape it.

The Trauma-informed Equity-minded Asset-based Model (TEAM) provides strategies for educators to approach teaching from an anti-racist lens, recognizing and valuing the cultural assets that students bring to the learning environment (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021). By integrating TEAM strategies, educators can challenge implicit biases, create more inclusive classroom spaces, and actively work to dismantle systemic barriers that disproportionately impact Black girls. These shifts not only improve academic outcomes but also contribute to a greater sense of belonging and empowerment among students.

Culturally Competent Mental Health Support

Urban school districts must also integrate trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches within mental health services, acknowledging the racialized and gendered traumas experienced by Black girls. Traditional school-based mental health services often fail to consider the unique socio-cultural stressors that Black girls face, including racial microaggressions, gendered stereotypes, and adultification (Anderson, 2024; Erving et al., 2022; Quiles et al., 2024). Without culturally responsive interventions, Black girls are at risk of experiencing misdiagnoses, punitive disciplinary responses, and inadequate support for their emotional well-being (Ma & Mumphrey, 2024; Scott & Collins, 2025; U.S. GAO, 2024).

School-based mental health programs must incorporate a holistic understanding of trauma that includes the lived experiences of Black girls, especially those in communities that experience high rates of gun violence, ensuring that interventions address both the immediate and long-term psychological effects. Black youth in urban communities with high crime rates face additional challenges that impact their mental health, including exposure to community violence, economic instability, and generational poverty. Research has shown that children living in high-crime areas are at significantly greater risk of developing PTSD, depression, and anxiety, yet many school-based mental health programs lack the necessary frameworks to address these realities (Christoffersen et al., 2024; Foell et al., 2021; Park, 2020; Weisburd et al., 2018). In this study, several STARS participants and program facilitators noted the immense weight of grief and anxiety caused by community violence. Educators and program staff must be equipped with training to recognize culturally specific expressions of trauma and stress. STARS participants discussed how their community experiences shaped their academic performance, confirming that compounded trauma—particularly from exposure to violence—requires access to mental health professionals who understand these contexts. By acknowledging the intersectionality of race,

gender, socioeconomic status, and mental health, schools can move toward a model of care that empowers Black girls and helps them heal.

Promote Self-Advocacy and Leadership Opportunities

Rather than suppressing self-advocacy, schools should provide intentional leadership opportunities for Black girls. The study's findings greatly supported how the leadership opportunities provided through the Girls' Collective and the STARS program gave participants confidence in their leadership abilities. Several participants reflected on how the most impactful sessions involved "adulting" preparation—covering financial planning, resume building, and navigating life after high school. This feedback, echoed in the *Voices for Change* report, signals a demand for deeper investment in transitional life skills that public schools, especially DCPS, have failed to consistently provide. These activities also equipped participants with the tools to navigate systemic challenges, preparing them for both academic and professional settings. In fact, in urban school settings, all students can benefit from engaging in leadership development.

Engagement in leadership roles, such as student councils, advocacy groups, and peer mentoring programs, has been shown to enhance students' self-confidence, communication skills, and problem-solving abilities. These programs empower students to take active roles in their education and school environment. For instance, San Diego State University's National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) research found that effective student leadership in urban schools involves influencing a critical mass of the school community, which includes empowering students to participate in decision-making processes (NCUST, n.d.). Providing structured leadership opportunities allows students to take ownership of their educational experiences and contribute meaningfully to their school communities.

Urban schools should foster an environment where students are encouraged to advocate not only for themselves but also for their peers and communities. Encouraging student advocacy leads to numerous benefits, including increased self-confidence, improved communication skills, and enhanced problem-solving abilities (Cormier, 2017; Karagianni & Montgomery, 2017; Wong et al., 2012). When students are given platforms to address school policies, social justice issues, and community concerns, they develop critical leadership skills that prepare them for future academic and professional success. STARS shows us that fostering a culture of advocacy helps students build resilience and strengthens their sense of agency, which is particularly important for young people who often face systemic barriers in educational settings. By embedding leadership and self-advocacy into the fabric of the school experience, urban schools can ensure that all students—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—are empowered to become changemakers within their communities. Creating spaces where students are heard, valued, and encouraged to lead ultimately contributes to a more equitable and inclusive school environment.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Sexism Training for Educators

Implicit bias training should be mandatory for teachers and administrators to reduce discrimination and microaggressions against Black girls. The study underscores the necessity of acknowledging intersectionality—how biases uniquely impact Black girls from economically disadvantaged communities due to race, class, and socioeconomic status. Addressing these compounded biases is crucial in ensuring equitable treatment in educational spaces.

In urban schools, where the majority of students come from historically marginalized backgrounds, it is particularly critical to implement comprehensive anti-racism and anti-sexism training. Schools that primarily serve students of color must recognize the deeply embedded

racial and gender biases that often shape disciplinary policies, academic expectations, and teacher-student relationships (Chin et al., 2020; NASSP, 2021). By mandating implicit bias training, educators can gain awareness of how these biases manifest in classroom interactions and learn strategies to counteract them.

Furthermore, anti-racism and anti-sexism training should not be a one-time professional development session but an ongoing process embedded into the school culture. Schools should incorporate restorative justice practices, encourage culturally responsive teaching methods, and ensure that teachers receive the necessary tools to create inclusive, affirming spaces for Black girls and other marginalized student populations. Research has consistently shown that when students feel seen and valued in their learning environments, they are more likely to succeed academically and socially. Regional Educational Library Midwest emphasizes that when students perceive their school environment as inclusive and supportive, they exhibit increased engagement and motivation, leading to better academic outcomes (Regional Educational Library Midwest, 2022).

For schools that serve predominantly Black and Brown students, dismantling racist and sexist structures within education is not just beneficial—it is essential for achieving true educational equity. Anti-bias training allows educators to reflect on their own prejudices, recognize systemic inequalities, and implement practices that promote fairness and justice (O'Donnell et al., 2024). This is especially important in schools where punitive discipline disproportionately affects Black girls, pushing them out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline (Crenshaw, 2015). Schools must shift from a punitive framework to one that uplifts, supports, and empowers students, ensuring that Black girls are not criminalized for their identities but celebrated for their brilliance and resilience. Ensuring that educators are equipped

with the knowledge and skills to address these issues will lead to stronger student-teacher relationships, improved student outcomes, and a school culture that actively works against systemic oppression. Educators must reflect on what it truly means to be allies—or better yet, accomplices—to Black girls.

For Non-Profit Youth Organizations

Center Black Girls' Voices and Agency

Non-profits that support Black girls must prioritize their agency in shaping program content and leadership opportunities. This study emphasized how STARS and other youth non-profits serving girls of color should move beyond traditional empowerment models, ensuring that their participants have real decision-making power within their organizations. It is essential that Black girls not only participate in these programs but also lead them, influencing policies and organizational structures to better serve their needs and aspirations.

Respectability politics should not dictate behavior expectations—Black girls must be allowed to express themselves freely, without being forced to conform to white middle-class standards of femininity or professionalism. Many traditional extracurricular programs that serve Black girls impose narrow behavioral expectations that suppress their individuality and cultural expressions (Nyache & Ohito, 20219). Instead, non-profits should create environments where they can be their authentic selves, affirming their voices, identities, and lived experiences.

Additionally, leadership opportunities for Black girls in the thirdspace must extend beyond symbolic roles. Organizations should integrate pathways for Black girls to engage in policy advocacy, program development, and community organizing. When it came to advocacy, the Girls' Collective did this well. They provided participants with the opportunity to speak out about issues impacting their schools and communities. STARS participants and alumnae in this

study were eager to share not only how these opportunities helped them develop leadership skills, but also how their participation in these activities gave them confidence that people wanted to hear from them—that their voices mattered. Centering Black girls' voices in the non-profit youth space fosters long-term leadership skills that empower them to take charge of their futures and become active changemakers in their communities.

Non-profits must also ensure that Black girls' voices are central in research, program evaluation, and decision-making processes. Engaging Black girls in these areas fosters a greater sense of ownership over the programs designed for them and ensures that initiatives remain responsive to their evolving needs. Organizations should adopt participatory action research (PAR) methods to involve Black girls in identifying challenges, crafting solutions, and leading efforts that directly impact their lives. By prioritizing Black girls' voices and agency, non-profits can disrupt historical patterns of exclusion and tokenization, replacing them with meaningful engagement and leadership opportunities. These shifts not only benefit Black girls individually but also contribute to the broader movement for racial and gender equity by cultivating a generation of empowered, self-determined leaders.

Shift from Deficit-Based to Asset-Based Language and Advocacy

Historically, many non-profits have relied on deficit narratives—framing Black girls as "at-risk", for example—to secure funding. While this approach has successfully drawn attention to the systemic barriers Black girls face, it has often reduced their identities to a collection of hardships rather than recognizing their strengths, resilience, and leadership potential. This framing has reinforced stereotypes that depict Black girls as inherently in need of saving rather than as powerful change agents in their own right.

Instead, organizations must celebrate the complexity of Black girlhood and focus on their strengths. An asset-based approach highlights Black girls' agency, creativity, leadership, and community-building efforts rather than defining them by adversity alone. This shift requires organizations to be intentional in how they communicate their mission and impact, ensuring that their advocacy uplifts rather than diminishes the narratives surrounding Black girls. Asset-based advocacy focuses on highlighting the resilience, creativity, and leadership of Black girls. For instance, the Black Girl Freedom Fund, launched in 2020, aims to mobilize a $1 billion investment by 2030 to support initiatives that uplift and empower Black girls and gender-expansive youth. This fund emphasizes the importance of investing in the "braintrust, innovation, health, safety, education, artistic visions, research, and joy" of Black girls, moving away from deficit-focused frameworks (Grantmakers for Girls of Color, n.d.).

STARS has successfully shifted toward asset-based advocacy, challenging respectability politics and advocating for holistic, positive narratives in grant writing and reporting. By prioritizing storytelling that centers Black girls' successes, aspirations, and contributions. This includes featuring Black girls as experts in their own experiences, amplifying their voices in decision-making spaces, and ensuring that funding proposals reflect a commitment to empowerment rather than victimhood. Programs must also affirm that being from the hood is not a limitation. Black girls from these communities are not inherently broken; they are imaginative, talented, and resilient. STARS and other programs must continue to lean into this truth—not just avoiding respectability politics but actively dismantling them through affirming language and advocacy.

Furthermore, shifting toward asset-based advocacy and language involves educating funders, stakeholders, and policymakers on the importance of reframing how Black girls are

represented in program narratives. Non-profits must push for structural changes that recognize and support Black girls' full humanity, advocating for investment in their futures rather than simply addressing immediate challenges. Ultimately, asset-based advocacy is not just about rebranding narratives—it is about fundamentally transforming how society values and supports Black girls. By rejecting deficit-based frameworks and embracing a vision of Black girlhood that is dynamic, brilliant, and full of possibility, non-profits can contribute to a future where Black girls are recognized as leaders, innovators, and visionaries in their own right.

Prioritize Healing-Centered and Trauma-Informed Practices

The study confirms that Black girls frequently experience racialized and gendered traumas that traditional systems fail to address. These traumas may stem from school-based discrimination, over-policing, adultification, and systemic barriers—or a combination of these stressors—that negatively impact their emotional and mental well-being. Without intentional interventions, Black girls are left navigating these challenges without adequate support, increasing their risk for long-term mental health concerns.

Organizations must implement trauma-informed and healing-centered frameworks that prioritize Black girls' mental and emotional well-being. A trauma-informed approach acknowledges how experiences of racial and gendered trauma affect a young person's development, while a healing-centered approach moves beyond simply addressing trauma to fostering joy, resilience, and self-empowerment. Both are essential for creating environments where Black girls can thrive holistically. A useful resource to reference is National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI) CARES Mental Health Assessment Tool. NBWJI created this tool to "help schools cultivate intersectional, trauma-informed practices and spaces in

schools to care for the mental health and emotional wellbeing of Black girls and gender-expansive youth" (NBWJI, para. 3, n.d.).

For Black girls living in urban environments with economic challenges and high rates of violent crime, healing-centered practices are even more critical. Exposure to community violence, economic instability, and systemic oppression can compound existing trauma, making it essential for non-profits and schools to offer structured support systems. Research has shown that chronic exposure to violence and poverty can lead to toxic stress, negatively impacting cognitive development, emotional regulation, and overall well-being (Foell et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2018). By implementing trauma-informed care, schools and organizations can help mitigate these effects, ensuring that Black girls have access to safe, affirming spaces where they can heal and grow.

To prioritize healing-centered and trauma-informed care, organizations should also ensure that mental health professionals working with Black girls are trained in culturally responsive care. Many Black girls report experiencing dismissal or misunderstanding from mainstream counseling services that fail to consider the intersections of their race, gender, and social environment (Nasheed, 2019; NBWJI, n.d.). Investing in building connections with Black therapists, community wellness practitioners, and restorative justice facilitators to support youth organizations can bridge this gap and create more affirming support networks.

Resist the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

In this study, Girls' Collective staff frequently echoed the challenges presented by funding constraints and pressures to conform to funders' expectations. The increasing reliance on grant-based funding often forces organizations to align their programming with the priorities of foundations, donors, and local governments rather than the needs of the girls they serve. This

pressure can lead to the dilution of radical and transformative work in favor of initiatives that are deemed more palatable to funders, leaving the most urgent and necessary advocacy efforts underfunded or ignored.

Organizations must actively work to protect their radical missions by resisting the pressure to weaken their goals in favor of appeasing funders. This requires a shift away from dependency on large foundations and philanthropic or government entities that impose restrictive guidelines and toward financial models that prioritize the autonomy and sustainability of Black girl-centered initiatives. Ensuring that organizations remain true to their missions means rejecting conditional funding that seeks to control programming and instead developing self-sufficient funding mechanisms that are accountable to the communities they serve rather than external funders.

To achieve financial independence and sustainability, organizations should explore alternative funding models, such as community-based fundraising, partnerships with Black-owned businesses, and collective grant-making initiatives. Community-based fundraising efforts—including crowdfunding, small-donor campaigns, and cooperative economics—allow organizations to maintain their autonomy while building financial support directly from those who benefit from their work (Bouton et al., 2018; Community Centric Fundraising, n.d.; Quinn, 2024). Partnerships with Black-owned businesses and Black professional organizations not only provide financial backing but also strengthen community ties and foster shared investment in Black girls' futures. Additionally, collective grant-making, in which grassroots organizations come together to apply for and distribute funding collaboratively, ensures that resources are equitably allocated while minimizing funder-driven restrictions (Bartczak, 2014).

With the changing political landscape, alternative funding models—especially for programs that teach comprehensive sexual education rather than abstinence-only curricula—are crucial. Many Black girl-centered programs that focus on reproductive justice, gender-inclusive health education, and bodily autonomy are increasingly vulnerable to political attacks and funding cuts (Ford et al., 2021). Ensuring that these programs remain financially viable requires proactive strategies that shield them from the influence of shifting political ideologies while continuing to provide critical services and education to Black girls. Resisting the non-profit industrial complex is not just about financial sustainability—it is about reclaiming power, ensuring that Black girls' needs remain at the forefront of programming and advocacy efforts, fostering long-term infrastructure for community-led change.

Strengthening Alliances for Collective Impact

Collaboration among organizations, activists, and policymakers is essential for systemic change. No single organization can meet all the needs of Black girls on its own; instead, effective support requires a coordinated effort among various stakeholders who bring different expertise, resources, and access to opportunities. By developing strong coalition networks, non-profit youth organizations can create a more comprehensive and sustainable support system that amplifies the impact of their work. Rather than duplicating services, non-profits should specialize in their strengths and partner with other entities to address the broader needs of Black girls. STARS participants shared that their college readiness support largely came from other programs or initiatives in their schools—highlighting the importance of collaboration rather than attempting to provide all services internally. This example demonstrates that organizations best serve Black girls when they focus on what they do best and lean on trusted partners for supplementary support.

Strengthening community partnerships with businesses, health organizations, and universities will expand access to mentorship, scholarships, and professional resources. For example, Black-owned businesses and professional networks can serve as financial sponsors, career mentors, and internship providers, while universities can offer research-based support and pipeline initiatives that prepare Black girls for higher education. Additionally, health organizations can provide trauma-informed counseling, reproductive health resources, and wellness programs tailored to the unique needs of Black girls.

Policy advocacy is also a key component of coalition-building, as systemic change requires not only direct services but also shifts in institutional structures that perpetuate inequities. By forming alliances with lawmakers and policy influencers, organizations can push for legal protections against discrimination, equitable funding for Black girl-serving programs, and the implementation of school policies that prioritize restorative justice over punitive discipline. At the Girls' Collective, they assembled a research team from their network to develop the *Voices for Change* report. They presented their findings at multiple open forums, engaging key stakeholders who are influential policy decision-makers in the communities their participants belong to. Through these efforts, they aimed to drive meaningful policy changes that directly address the needs and priorities of girls in D.C.. In sum, building coalitions within the community a strategic necessity for ensuring that Black girls receive holistic, long-term support. By collaborating across sectors and advocating for systemic change, organizations can create a lasting impact that extends far beyond individual programs and initiatives.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study highlights the transformative role of STARS as a thirdspace for Black girls in Washington, D.C., it also uncovers critical areas for further exploration. The following

research ideas build upon the study's findings and implications, offering pathways for deeper inquiry and continued advocacy.

Long-Term Impact of Thirdspace Programs on Black Girls' Leadership and Advocacy

The findings of this study affirm that STARS plays a crucial role in fostering self-advocacy, leadership development, and confidence among its participants. However, future research should examine the long-term effects of such programs beyond high school. A longitudinal study tracking STARS alumnae—or alumnae of other programs similar to STARS— over several years could provide insights into how thirdspace participation influences their college and career trajectories, civic engagement, and leadership roles in adulthood. This research would be particularly valuable in understanding whether the foundational skills and support systems cultivated in these programs have lasting impacts on Black girls' ability to navigate systemic barriers and advocate for themselves in professional and academic settings.

The Role of Gender-Responsive Thirdspaces in Addressing Mental Health and Trauma in Black Girls

A key finding of this study was the critical role STARS plays in fostering emotional resilience and healing for Black girls, a number of whom may experience compound traumatic stress in their schools and communities. Given the limited availability of culturally competent mental health resources in traditional school settings, future research should explore how gender-responsive thirdspaces contribute to trauma recovery and mental well-being. A comparative study between students who participate in such programs and those who do not could shed light on the extent to which these interventions mitigate mental health disparities, reduce stress-related academic disengagement, and enhance overall emotional well-being. Understanding these

dynamics is essential for advocating for broader implementation of thirdspace models in urban school districts.

Navigating Institutional Barriers: The Sustainability of Black Girl-Centered Nonprofits

While STARS has demonstrated a significant impact, the program, like many community-based initiatives, faces persistent structural challenges, including financial instability and institutional barriers that limit its reach. This study highlighted the tension between securing funding and resisting deficit-based narratives that often define grantmaking and donor expectations. Future research should investigate how Black girl-centered nonprofits navigate these challenges while maintaining their mission. A policy-oriented study examining how philanthropic models, government funding structures, and educational partnerships influence the sustainability of thirdspaces could offer insights into best practices for ensuring the longevity of transformative programming for Black girls.

Expanding Gender Inclusivity in Black Girl-Centered Thirdspaces

As discussions around gender identity continue to evolve, this study revealed that STARS participants are increasingly recognizing and advocating for the inclusion of gender-expansive youth in their spaces. While STARS has historically been a gender-responsive program focused on girls, its participants and staff acknowledge a need to explore how to adapt its framework to better serve non-binary and gender-expansive youth of color without compromising its core mission. Future research should examine how gender-responsive programs can balance maintaining their foundational focus while expanding inclusivity. Ethnographic studies that explore the experiences of gender-expansive youth in Black girl-centered thirdspaces could inform best practices for creating affirming environments that honor both gender diversity and the unique experiences of Black girlhood.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Black Girlhood

This study began as an act of love and resistance for the Black girls who are too often overlooked, misunderstood, or reduced to narrow stereotypes—especially those living in communities labeled as "the hood." Through an intentional blend of Hood Feminism and Thirdspace Theory, this research not only explored how Black girls experience extracurricular spaces like STARS but also imagined what those spaces could become when we truly listen to and trust them.

One of the most important takeaways from this work is that Black girlhood is not monolithic. It cannot—and should not—be flattened into a single narrative. Participants in this study showed up in complex, often contradictory ways. Some were bold and outspoken; others introspective and observant. Some attended under-resourced neighborhood schools, while others were enrolled in selective magnet programs. Some were preparing for college, others dreamed of trade school or entrepreneurship. Despite geographic proximity, their lives were wildly diverse reminding us that the hood is not a fixed identity but a deeply layered space of survival, culture, love, and imagination.

In *Between Good and Ghetto*, Nikki Jones (2009) critically examines this binary framing of Black girlhood in inner-city neighborhoods, particularly the pressure to perform either as a "good girl" or a "ghetto girl." She challenges this dichotomy by documenting how Black girls in Philadelphia constantly negotiate between these roles as acts of survival and identity-making in the face of gendered violence and societal expectations. This study builds on Jones' work to argue that Black girlhood in the hood is more than a tension between two roles. It is a thirdspace: A creative, embodied site where girls can define their lives on their own terms.

Yes, Black girls' realities are shaped by their communities, but they are not confined by them. Their lives are not simply negotiations of acceptance or rejection within first (institutional) or second (social) space logics. Their existence as Black girls in liberatory thirdspaces like STARS offers a new way forward—one in which they are equipped with the tools, language, and support systems to decide for themselves who they are and who they wish to become.

Often mischaracterized, the hood is in fact a space of strength, where Black girls develop critical assets that support their resilience and brilliance. These include relational and identity assets like community pride and racial socialization (Burnett et al., 2022; Evans-Winters, 2011) and cultural and civic capital such as street smarts and organizing skills (Hunter & Robinson, 2016; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Through a Black feminist lens, traits like assertiveness and emotional resilience are seen as strategic tools for navigating marginalization (Jones, 2009). Additionally, Black girls cultivate emotional and creative agency through storytelling, humor, and art (Leadbeater & Way, 1996), and thrive in culturally affirming spaces that honor Afrocentric values and identity development (Belgrave, 2009). These assets prove that Black girls are not limited by where they are from—*they are powerful because of it*.

Organizations like the Girls' Collective must avoid the trap of assuming who these girls are or what they are capable of. The curriculum must be shaped with them, not just for them. The STARS program, while not perfect, provided a glimpse into what is possible. It showed that when Black girls are centered—not managed, not saved—they thrive. They lead. They teach us. And they remind us that in every corner of the city, especially in the places that have been most dismissed, brilliance is blooming.

This research offers more than a call for reform. It is a call to reimagine youth programming through a blended framework of Thirdspace Theory and Hood Feminism. The

former gives us the vocabulary to describe the spatial, cultural, and psychological transformations taking place; the latter grounds us in the material conditions Black girls navigate and affirms their right to joy, agency, and liberation. To reclaim Black girlhood is to bravely reclaim possibility. It is to say: You are seen. You are sacred. You are not a problem to fix—you are a future to believe in.

A Love Letter to Black Girls in D.C.

There was a time—right in between finishing Chapters 1 through 3 of this dissertation and starting data collection—when hope was tangible. For many of us, it took the shape of what could have been our county's first Black female president. For a moment, we allowed ourselves to believe that this country might see, truly see, the brilliance, tenacity, and power of Black womanhood elevated to the highest office of our nation.

When Former Vice President Kamala Harris lost her bid for the presidency, it stung. Not because we didn't understand politics or electoral strategy, but because we felt it. Her loss was personal—not just hers, but *ours*. It reminded us of the countless times we, as Black girls and women, have come so close only to be met with barriers that others never have to face. That loss was not just political—it was ancestral. It echoed with the voices of foremothers who fought for seats they were never allowed to claim.

But we know something the world often forgets: when Black girls are given the opportunity to lead, we do so with grace, with power, and with vision. We lead from the heart, with a deep understanding of community, of survival, of what it means to lift others as we climb. The STARS program reminded me of that every day—of your potential when nurtured, your brilliance when allowed to shine. In our thirdspaces, we created room for leadership that was not about conforming, but about becoming.

And yet, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the shifting ground beneath our feet—the changing landscape of our city. D.C. is not the same. Schools are closing, neighborhoods are gentrifying, and the justice system continues to refuse to see you as children, to offer you the grace and protection you deserve. It feels like the city is slipping away, brick by brick, block by block.

But hear me, and hear me well: the Chocolate City is still here—because you are still here. You are what makes D.C. the place to be. The flavor, the culture, the energy—it all begins and ends with you. No amount of new developments or displaced history can erase the impact of Black girls in this city. You are the heartbeat of D.C., the storytellers, the trendsetters, the movement makers. You are home.

Historically, we have been here before. This is not new. Our foremothers laid the groundwork in times when their voices were silenced, their labor exploited, their lives undervalued. And yet, they led. They dreamed beyond the bounds of their oppression, and in doing so, gave us a roadmap for resistance, for resilience, for reclamation.

So to you, Black girls: know that you are the continuation of that legacy. In a world that often tries to define you by limitations, you have the right to dream expansively, to speak boldly, to exist unapologetically. You are not the sum of stereotypes or the product of your environment—you are a force, a curator of culture, a leader in waiting.

This study was about you, for you, because of you. It is proof of what happens when Black girls are given space—real, affirming, liberating space—to lead, to thrive, and to imagine futures not yet written. You are not a problem to be solved; you are the solution many have yet to realize.

With love,

Ms. Tia

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONS FOR CURRENT STAFF INTERVIEWS

Questions	Possible Probing Questions
1. Please share your current role with the Girls' Collective and your history with the organization.	a. What initially brought you to work with youth, particularly in this program? b. Was there a specific experience or interest that led you to this line of work? c. Did you have prior experience working with young people or similar programs?
2. How does the organization address or respond to the different aspects of participants' identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, through its programs?	a. How do staff trainings or additional services support this? b. Are there specific ways the programs meet participants' emotional and social needs? c. Does the organization address basic needs like food security or housing?
3. How does the STARS program, and/or the Girls' Collective as a whole, assist participants with their academic and career goals?	a. Can you share any resources, activities, or success stories related to academic and/or career support? b. What are the different post-secondary pathways shared with participants?
4. Does the program and/or the organization, provide opportunities for participants to take on leadership roles or engage in advocacy?	a. Can you share examples of advocacy efforts or community engagement fostered by the program or organization? b. How have participants reacted to any leadership opportunities? c. In what ways, if any, do you think the programs support participants in advocating for themselves or addressing social justice issues? d. From your perspective, do the programs encourage participants to engage with their communities? If so, in what ways?
5. Do you think the STARS programs and/or the organization as a whole addresses or challenges stereotypes that Black girls might face in schools or communities– particularly in Wards 5, 7, and 8?	a. How, if at all, does the program and/or organization help participants manage or challenge these stereotypes? b. Do you think there are any ways the organization or its programs intentionally or unintentionally perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black girls or Black girlhood? c. Do you think the program/organization had an impact on participants' sense of self as Black girls?
6. How does the program incorporate the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of Black girls from communities like Wards 5, 7, and 8?	a. Are participants involved in shaping the curriculum or activities? b. How is their feedback used to enhance inclusivity? c. Do you feel like the programs/organization and/or the opportunities it created for participants are inclusive of participants from different backgrounds (e.g., varying socioeconomic or academic experiences)?
7. How would you describe the current organizational culture at the Girls' Collective?	a. What aspects of the culture help you effectively support participants?

	b. Have there been any impactful staff training or development opportunities? c. Can you discuss any staff feedback regarding the effectiveness or relevance of the training opportunities? d. Is there any type of training or additional support you wish you had?
8. From your perspective, what impact do you believe the STARS program is having on its participants?	a. Can you share any moments of participant growth or transformation you've witnessed?
9. Where do you think the organization and its programs could improve to better support participants, particularly its participants in D.C.?	a. Are there specific challenges or gaps you've observed in meeting participants' needs?
10. What is your vision for the future growth of the Girls Collective and the STARS programs?	a. How would you like to see the programs evolve to better serve participants? b. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't discussed?

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONS FOR FORMER STAFF INTERVIEWS

Questions	Possible Probing Questions
1. Please share your former role with the Girls' Collective and your history with the organization.	a. What initially attracted you to the organization? b. Were there specific aspects of the mission or programs that resonated with you? c. Reflecting on your tenure, what were some of the most rewarding aspects of working at the Girls' Collective? d. Were there any challenges you faced while working there? How did you or the organization address these challenges? e. Why did you leave?
2. From your perspective, how did the organization address or respond to the different aspects of participants' identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, through its programs?	a. How did staff trainings or additional services support this? b. Are there specific ways the programs meet participants' emotional and social needs? c. Did the organization address basic needs like food security or housing?
3. How did the STARS program, and/or the Girls' Collective as a whole, assist participants with their academic and career goals?	a. Can you share any resources, activities, or success stories related to academic and/or career support you remember? b. What are the different post-secondary pathways shared with participants?
4. During your time with the Girls' Collective, did the STARS program and/or the organization, provide opportunities for participants to take on leadership roles or engage in advocacy?	a. Can you share examples of advocacy efforts or community engagement fostered by the program or organization? b. How did participants react to any leadership opportunities? c. In what ways, if any, do you think the programs supported participants in advocating for themselves or addressing social justice issues? d. Is there something the organization did that it no longer does to provide leadership opportunities?
5. During your time at the Girls' Collective, do you think the programs and/or the organization as a whole addressed or challenges stereotypes that Black girls might face in schools or communities– particularly in Wards 5, 7, and 8?	a. How, if at all, did the program and/or organization help participants manage or challenge these stereotypes? b. Do you think there are any ways the organization or its programs intentionally or unintentionally perpetuates negative stereotypes of Black girls or Black girlhood? c. Do you think the program/organization had an impact on participants' sense of self as Black girls?
6. During your time at the Girls' Collective, how did you observe the program/organization incorporate the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of Black girls from communities like Wards 5, 7, and 8?	a. Were participants involved in shaping the curriculum or activities? b. How is their feedback used to enhance inclusivity? c. Did you feel like the programs/organization and/or the opportunities it created for participants were inclusive of participants from different backgrounds

	(e.g., varying socioeconomic or academic experiences)?
7. How would you describe the organizational culture during your time at the Girls' Collective?	a. What aspects of the culture helped you effectively support participants? b. Were there any impactful staff training or development opportunities? c. Can you discuss any staff feedback you recall regarding the effectiveness or relevance of the training opportunities? d. Is there any type of training or additional support you wish you had?
8. From your perspective, what impact do you believe the STARS program had on its participants?	a. Can you share any moments of participant growth or transformation you witnessed?
9. Where do you think the organization and its programs could have done to better support participants, particularly its participants in D.C.?	a. Are there specific challenges or gaps you observed in meeting participants' needs? b. From your perspective, how has the organization evolved since your time there? c. Are there aspects of its current programs or mission that you find particularly encouraging or concerning?
10. If you could envision the future of Crittenton's programs, what would you hope to see?	c. Looking back, are there areas where you think the organization could have improved to better support staff? d. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed?

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR STARS PROGRAM ALUMNAE INTERVIEWS

Questions	Possible Probing Questions
1. Can you share your name, where you went to school, and how long you were part of the STARS program?	a. N/A
2. What did you like most about the STARS program?	a. Why would you say you liked this the most? b. What specific aspects of the program left the biggest impression on you?
3. Did the program influence your goals for school or your future?	a. If so, how? b. Were there specific program activities or discussions that inspired you?
4. Did you take on any leadership roles as part of STARS?	a. What were those experiences like? b. What did you learn from those experiences? c. Even if you haven't held any leadership roles in the program, has what you learned in STARS encouraged you to take action in your community or speak up about important issues? Why or why not?
5. Do you recall any challenging or stressful times you faced in your school or community while you were in the program?	a. How did STARS help you navigate or overcome these challenges? b. Are there ways that STARS could have better helped you navigate or overcome these challenges?
6. A stereotype is an unfair belief that all people in a certain group are the same, without considering their individual differences. In your opinion, what are some stereotypes about Black girls?	a. For example, all Black girls in D.C. are "loud" and "ghetto". b. Have you heard these stereotypes before? c. How did they make you feel growing up, if you were aware of them?
7. Do you feel the program addressed stereotypes about Black girls, especially those in D.C.?	a. If so, how did that make you feel? b. If not, do you wish it had? c. Do you think they can do a better job of this in the future?
8. Did the program help you feel proud of your identity as a young Black woman?	a. Were there specific activities or conversations that empowered you in this way? b. What activities of conversations do you wish you could have had that may have helped?
9. How well did the program reflects your culture and experiences? For example, did the activities and topics you discussed in the lessons provide information that was useful to you?	a. What topics do you remember the most? b. How did these discussions/activities help you as teen? c. How do they help you now as a young adult? d. What topics would you have liked to add or discussed further?
10. If you could make one change to the program, what would it be?	e. Are there any activities or topics you think the program should include in the future? f. What about field trips? g. Is there anything else you would like to share about your time in STARS?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR CURRENTB STARS PARTICIPANTS

Questions	Possible Probing Questions
1. Let's go around and have everyone share their name and how long you have been a part of STARS program?	a. N/A
2. What do you like most about the STARS program?	a. Why would you say you like this the most? b. What have you learned or done in the program would you say has left the biggest impression on you? Why?
3. Has the program influenced your goals for school or your future?	a. If so, how? b. Are there specific program activities or discussions that inspired you?
4. Have you taken on any leadership roles as part of STARS?	d. What were those experiences like? e. What did you learn from those experiences? f. Even if you haven't held any leadership roles in the program, has what you learned in STARS encouraged you to take action in your community or speak up about important issues? Why or why not?
5. What challenges do you face in your school or community?	a. How has STARS help you navigate or overcome these challenges? b. Are there ways that STARS could better helped you navigate or overcome these challenges?
6. A stereotype is an unfair belief that all people in a certain group are the same, without considering their individual differences. In your opinion, what are some stereotypes about Black girls?	d. For example, all Black girls in D.C. are "loud" and "ghetto". e. Have you heard these stereotypes before? f. How do they make you feel?
7. Do you feel the program addresses stereotypes about Black girls, especially those in D.C.?	a. If so, how does that make you feel? b. If not, do you wish it did? c. Do you think STARS can improve in this area?
8. How do you feel about yourself as a Black girl? What do you love about yourself?	a. How does the program and/or your program leader help you feel proud of yourself? b. Were there specific activities or conversations that empowered you in this way? c. What activities of conversations you wish you could have that may help?
9. How well did the program reflects your culture and experiences? For example, did the activities and topics you discussed in the lessons provide information that was useful to you?	a. Do the activities and discussions provide information that is useful to you? b. What topics or lessons have been most memorable? c. How have these discussions or activities helped you as a teen? d. How do they help you now? e. What additional topics would you like to explore in STARS?
10. If you could make one change to the program, what would it be?	a. Are there any activities or topics you think should be included in the future? b. Is there anything else you would like to share about your time in STARS?

APPENDIX E: SUBUNIT 3 ANALYSIS: DOCUMENT TYPE 1 – GIRLS' COLLECTIVE WEBSITE CONTENT

	Theme	Initial Codes	Frequency	Examples
1.	Empowerment and Advocacy	Empowerment, leadership, confidence, resilience, self-efficacy, mentorship, sisterhood, advocacy, holistic approach, whole-girl	37	• Equipping girls with tools to overcome obstacles, make positive choices, and achieve their dreams • Programs designed to empower teen girls • Provides support to help girls succeed in school, relationships, and careers • Leadership development for young women
2.	Education and Academic Support	Graduation rates, college readiness, academic support, STEM careers, goal setting, social and emotional learning (SEL)	35	• High graduation rate • Programs focusing on college readiness and social-emotional learning • Offer a program that promotes academic and personal growth • Offers academic resources and mentorship
3.	Financial and Resource Allocation	Funding, donations, grants, emergency support, scholarships, community resources	23	• Funding sources including government grants, corporate and individual contributions • Emergency support through the organization's food pantry • Investing in youth and family support services • Ensuring financial transparency
4.	Youth Programs and Curriculum	Trauma-informed care, reproductive health, healthy relationships, life skills, [names of programs offered]	21	• A program helping girls navigate adolescence • A program supporting young mothers • Programs foster social-emotional learning and resilience • Teach participants life skills such as financial literacy, career readiness, and reproductive health
5.	Equity and Social Justice	Equity, racial justice, gender equity, poverty, systemic barriers, advocacy	17	• Supporting Black and Brown teen girls in underserved areas • Addressing systemic barriers like poverty, racism, and lack of access to healthcare • Providing trauma-informed care and mental health support • Advocating for policies that support young women
6.	Community Involvement and Support	Community involvement, partnerships, community events, fundraisers, family support, mentorship, peer support, trauma-informed care	16	• Mentorship programs connecting girls with female leaders • Community events introducing girls to career pathways • Building a network of support for young women • Engagement with community allies and funders

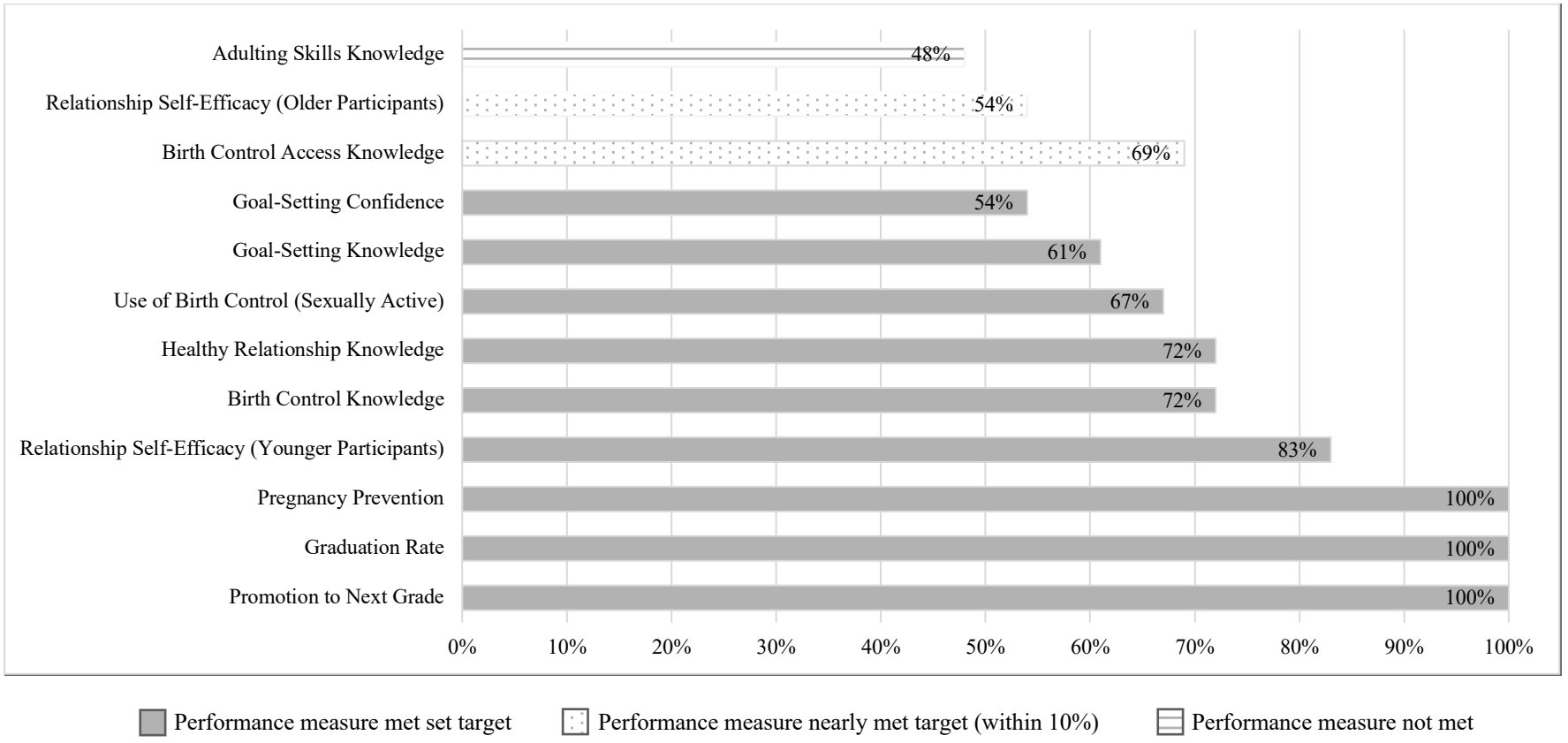
7.	Strategic Growth and Sustainability	Strategic plan, organizational growth, funding diversification, increasing visibility, increasing impact	12	• Plan to exponentially increase its impact over three years • Expanding programs and diversifying funding sources • Strengthening brand recognition and data-backed policy advocacy • Investing in long-term sustainability and operational growth

APPENDIX F: SUBUNIT 3 ANALYSIS: DOCUMENT TYPE 2 – STARS CURRICULUM SUMMARIES (GRADES 7 – 12)

Theme	Codes	Frequency	Grade Level Code Frequencies	Example Sessions and Lesson Topics
1. Group Dynamics and Team Building	Group building, group agreements, group bonding, leadership, allyship	27	Grade 7: 6 Grade 8: 5 Grade 9: 4 Grade 10: 4 Grade 11: 4 Grade 12: 4	• Grade 7: Strengthening Our Sisterhood • Grades 7-12: Group Building
2. Emotional and Mental Health	Stress management, mindfulness, conflict resolution, self-care, overcoming challenges	25	Grade 7: 6 Grade 8: 6 Grade 9: 3 Grade 10: 4 Grade 11: 3 Grade 12: 3	• Grade 7: Controlling My Emotions • Grade 10: Stress Management • Grade 12: Taking Care of Me – Self-Care
3. Academic Support and Goal Setting	Academic planning, goal setting, college readiness, financial literacy, life planning	41	Grade 7: 11 Grade 8: 9 Grade 9: 3 Grade 10: 4 Grade 11: 7 Grade 12: 7	• Grade 7: Mid-Year Check-In • Grade 9: Introduction to High School • Grade 11: Life After High School
4. Relationships and Social Skills	Healthy relationships, unhealthy relationships, consent, friendship support	24	Grade 7: 5 Grade 8: 4 Grade 9: 4 Grade 10: 4 Grade 11: 3 Grade 12: 4	• Grade 8: Healthy Relationships: • Grade 10: Identifying Abuse • Grade 12: Friends Forever - Maintaining Relationships After High School
5. Reproductive Health and Sexual Education	Reproductive health, pregnancy, STIs, abstinence, sexual consent, sexting, LGBTQ identities	29	Grade 7: 4 Grade 8: 6 Grade 9: 7 Grade 10: 8 Grade 11: 2 Grade 12: 2	• Grade 7: Understanding My Body • Grade 8: I am ME (exploring sexual and gender identity/expressions) • Grade 9: Teen Pregnancy
6. Problem-Solving and Decision Making	Risk avoidance, negotiation skills, prioritization,	15	Grade 7: 3 Grade 8: 3	• Grade 7: Compromising and Negotiation • Grade 10: Prioritizing

		overcoming challenges, financial decision-making		Grade 9: 3 Grade 10: 2 Grade 11: 2 Grade 12: 2	• Grade 12: Creating a Budget
7.	Career Exploration and Professional Development	Career exploration, professionalism, resume and personal statement development, workplace skills	5	Grade 7: 0 Grade 8: 0 Grade 9: 0 Grade 10: 0 Grade 11: 3 Grade 12: 2	• Grade 11: My Future Career • Grade 12: Workplace Professionalism
8.	Program Evaluation and Reflection	Pretests and posttests, end-of-year recap, celebration, reflections on skills learned	24	Grade 7: 4 Grade 8: 4 Grade 9: 4 Grade 10: 4 Grade 11: 4 Grade 12: 4	• All Grades: Pretest • All Grades: Posttest • All Grades: End-of-Year Celebration and Recap

APPENDIX G: SUBUNIT 3 ANALYSIS: DOCUMENT TYPE 3 – MOST RECENT PERFORMANCE EVALUATION METRICS (2023 – 2024)



APPENDIX H: SUBUNIT 3 ANALYSIS: DOCUMENT TYPE 4 – *VOICES FOR CHANGE* REPORT

Theme	Initial Codes	Frequency	Examples from Report
1. External and Emotional Barriers to Success	High stress, high anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, mental health support, exposure to violence, poverty, economic hardship, single-parent household, neighborhood violence, lack of transportation, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	37	• Many girls take on caregiving roles and household tasks, while financial hardship limits school attendance due to lack of transportation or clean clothing. • Exposure to violence, chronic stress, and stigmatized mental health issues affect students' well-being, with limited school support. • First-generation college students balance academic pressures with family expectations, while teachers often misinterpret stress as defiance, leading to unfair discipline.
2. Barriers to Academic Success	Poor school climate, lack of supportive teachers, absenteeism rates, lack of social-emotional learning, disruptive behavior, cyberbullying, physical fights, low teacher expectations, high graduation rates + low academic performance, low standardized test scores, lack of academic support, achievement gaps	29	• Frequent conflicts, disrespect in classrooms, and cyberbullying contribute to a chaotic atmosphere where students feel unheard and disconnected from learning. • Many students advance grades despite struggling with basic skills, leading to a “culture of passing” that leaves them unprepared for college or future opportunities. • Stark achievement gaps between wealthier and underprivileged wards, coupled with discouraging grading practices, reinforce educational disparities and student disengagement.
3. “Push Out” and School Suspension	Excessive suspension, suspension for minor offenses, implicit bias in discipline policies, targeted dress code policies, school-to-prison pipeline	21	• Girls are frequently suspended for minor infractions such as dress code violations or being late to class, while boys receive more lenient consequences. • School discipline policies often target Black girls disproportionately, with teachers interpreting their behavior as more defiant or disruptive. • Many students mention being informally “sent home” without an official suspension, meaning they miss out on education without it being recorded in school data. • Some schools implement strict discipline measures without considering the underlying trauma or challenges that lead to behavioral issues.

4.	Gender-Based Discrimination and Inequality	Sexual harassment, lack of adult intervention, gender-based discrimination, negative stereotypes, gender inequality	14	• Girls experience harassment from both peers and adults, often feeling their complaints are ignored or that they are punished for defending themselves. • Negative assumptions about Black girls being aggressive or disrespectful lead to harsher disciplinary actions compared to their peers. • Boys receive better access to extracurricular programs and athletic resources, while girls' interests and experiences, including harassment on their way to school, are often overlooked.
5.	Lack of Youth Voice in Decision-Making	Girls feel unheard, lack of inclusion in policy discussions, need for student-led solutions	12	• Girls feel excluded from decisions about school policies, discipline, and curriculum, despite being directly affected by them. • Efforts to improve education rarely include the perspectives of the girls most impacted, reinforcing cycles of neglect. • Students advocate for leadership programs and student councils to amplify their voices and help create safer, more inclusive schools.

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