

Research Proposal: A Counterstorytelling Analysis of Neurodivergent BIPOC Students' Academic Experiences in a Private School in the Midwest: Narrative Inquiry or Mixed Methods Examination of MAP Growth Data and Student Experience.

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Research Proposal: A Counterstorytelling Analysis of Neurodivergent BIPOC Students' Academic and Belonging Experiences in a Private School in the Midwest: Narrative Inquiry or Mixed Methods Examination of MAP Growth Data and Student Experience.

Seventy two years after the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, racial and economic segregation within the United States remains a strong characteristic of most schools and school districts across the country (Reardon and Owens, 2014). The only time segregation of Black, White and Latinx students truly diminished was in the 1960s to the 1980s, when court ordered desegregation forced schools to have a more diverse population (Reardon and Owens, 2014, p 202). Immediately after the *Brown v. BOE* decision, school districts in the South gave Black families the “freedom of choice” to move their children to largely White schools, but this option put the pressure on Black families to integrate their children into schools where there likely would be “animosity of many White families to integration” (Coleman, Kelly, Moore, 1975 as cited in Reardon and Owens, 2014). The history of segregation in Saint Louis, Missouri has certainly followed national trends, especially in terms of the concept of white flight, a period of time in which white families left the city of Saint Louis for Saint Louis county from 1950 to 1970, perhaps in response to *Brown v. BOE* legislation. Over 230,000 residents left St. Louis City for the county during this time (Gordon, 2008; Reardon and Owens, 2014).

Saint Louis county is widely known for its multitude of private schools, many of which opened in the same years that white flight was occurring from the city of St. Louis to Saint Louis County (Reardon and Owens, 2014; St. Louis County Library, 2023). According to the Missouri Nonpublic School Directory, there are at least 80 private schools serving K-12 students in Saint Louis County (MODESE, 2026). The demographics of the private schools in Saint Louis has been largely White for almost 7 decades. Statistics show that in 1950, the white population of private schools in Saint Louis county was almost 100% white. The private school universe surveys of 2009 and 2023 shows that the majority of students in private schools are still white. In the 90s, the national population of white students in private schools was roughly 80%, while by 2021, the national average of white students in private schools was closer to 65% (NCES 2009, 2023). The midwest private school population of white students tends to be even higher at 73% in 2023. Because of the national and specifically midwestern statistics on private schools,

we can comfortably infer that the white population of the private school we will research has been overwhelmingly white for decades.

Race

Over the past decade, the student population at a small, private high school named Inverness Academy in a suburb outside of Saint Louis, Missouri has shifted from predominantly White high school students to a greater percentage of Black students with each new school year. The reasons for this shift are multitudinous. One reason for this gradual population change is that the school originated as a denominational private school for a target population of students, which was mainly White. Over the decades since the school's founding, the population decline of that particular denomination in this area of the country meant the school board and stakeholders needed to rethink the community they wanted to serve and rebrand themselves in order to stay open and thriving into the 21st century. This led to a metaphorical and practical opening of the doors to the greater community as long as new families were values aligned with the original institutional vision, which included priorities on prayer, leading with love, leaning into challenges, developing a growth mindset, buying into being part of the community through commitment to sports teams, clubs, grade level and school wide events, and committing to the rigor of daily college prep academics at the high school.

The enrollment of more students of color into private schools in the Saint Louis area follows a trend seen in larger urban areas in the Midwest. The National Center for Education Statistics shows that of the roughly 5 million private school students across the US in 2023-2024, 63% were White, 10% were Black, and 13% were Hispanic. 6% were Asian, and 6% were two or more self-identified races. The remaining percentages identified by NCES were American Indian .8% and Pacific Islander .6% (Kincel, Peterson, Willinger, & Jiang, 2026). For this research, I will focus on percentages of White, Black and Hispanic students in order to study the data for these specific demographics within this particular private school setting. Historically, the Midwest has had a slightly smaller percentage of Black (8-9%) and Hispanic (7-9%) students who attended private schools compared to national numbers, and 2023-2024 followed the same trends. However, larger urban areas like Saint Louis and Chicago tend to have higher numbers of Black students in private schools (Kincel et. al, 2026).

The diversifying population at Inverness Academy includes Black students from local public and private schools, and international immigrant students from Kenya, Sudan, Nigeria, Guinea, France, Togo, and Uganda to name a few home countries. Many of the Hispanic students are local day students, while another portion of the international student population comes from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. It is also important to mention that the teaching faculty at Inverness Academy is overwhelmingly White, and has been since the founding of the school in 1898. Of the 42 (estimated) teaching adults in the high school who work with students on a daily basis, there are two Black male teachers, one African immigrant female nurse, and one Latinx female teacher. Therefore 81% of the teachers with whom Black students have contact with each day are White, 7 % of teaching faculty is Black, only 2% are Latinx, and 9% are other (Jordanian, Indian, Chinese, Korean) .

An additional contributor to the change in student demographics is the growth of the athletic programs at the high school. As basketball and football have developed into more competitive programs, the school has attracted and enrolled increasing numbers of talented players, many of whom identify as Black. There is a weeks-long admissions process which takes into account multiple data points for a minimum threshold of high school readiness in order to handle the rigor of this academic program. Admissions counselors also spend hours with students and families in multi-level discussions that help the school and the families determine if there are enough convergence points and alignments that will potentially enable the students to thrive at Inverness Academy. In addition, the sports program has a larger percentage of BIPOC coaches; the research and data collection for that group of student-facing teachers will be available in later months.

The changing demographics at IA have stipulated the need for increased attention to cultural sensitivity in the community. It is essential to embark on a critical self-study to answer the following questions: is the community adjusting to changing demographics, and how is race discussed, mediated, perceived as an impact on the social and academic experience of students at Inverness Academy? How are families of color perceiving the school and is there a need for greater mediation and training for the predominantly white employees as the school shifts to a more diverse population?

Neurodiversity

Another vital aspect of individual growth and belonging support within communities is the intersection of neurodivergence and race and what might be deemed abnormal ways of presenting oneself in a predominantly white school culture. Reflecting on those early teaching years prompts critical questions regarding my own pedagogical practices: How attuned was I to neurodivergent learners, and how intentionally did I differentiate instruction rather than expecting students to adapt to a predetermined curriculum? Over two decades of teaching have underscored that effective practice requires continuous, rigorous self-reflection (Johansson, 2023; Milner, 2007). As Tsangaridou and Polemitou (2015) emphasize, teaching is an inherently complex endeavor that demands adaptability to meet the multiple needs of diverse student populations. This necessity to adapt becomes even more profound when examining how systemic institutional norms construct strict definitions of ability, learning, and difference.

In *The Power of Neurodiversity*, Thomas Armstrong (2015) highlights how dominant educational frameworks have historically pathologized non-normative learning styles, prioritizing socially constructed definitions of neurotypical as “normal” over neurodivergent strengths. When neurodiversity intersects with racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity, the complexity of student experience deepens significantly. At Inverness Academy near Saint Louis, where a predominantly White faculty navigates a rapidly diversifying student body, understanding these intersecting identities is essential to ensuring that academic support structures foster true psychological safety and belonging rather than unintended marginalization. The crux of the research that I see as essential to understanding this community at a much deeper level is the intersection of race, neurodiversity and belonging. In her article written in 1993, Carol Goodenow expresses that belonging is, “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.” (Goodenow and Grady, 1993, p. 61). We will examine the school culture, achievement and sense of belonging that has evolved over the past ten years with an emphasis on the experience of African American Students, the African immigrant students, and the Latinx students.

Some of the students who live at multiple intersections of lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989) including race, socioeconomic level, parental and familial structure, neurodivergence, second language learners, recent immigration status have been identified for extra academic and SEL support. Identification for scaffolded support is based on multiple data points including MAP scores, TOEFL diagnostic scores, previous grades, IEP or 504 plans from previous schools, parent requests, previous teacher recommendations, identified executive function skill gaps, identified cultural needs, identified educational or grade level skill gaps. This support is provided through structured study hall, which includes direct teaching content, re-teaching content and academic skills, direct teaching of executive function skills, use of an online reading program (Read Theory), and use of an online math skills program (IXL, Khan, Delta Math) to bolster students' math skills.

One stipulation of acceptance for students who are right on the line for various reasons is that they are required to take a class called Learning Engagement Center Workshop or *LEC*. I shall now refer to the Learning Engagement workshop as LEC. LEC is taught by two middle aged white learning specialists, and has been designed to provide a safe scaffolding space for students who may have difficulties adjusting to Inverness Academy expectations or who struggle with Executive Function, have learning disabilities or impairments, who have missed school and need help catching up, or who may be slightly behind grade level in reading, writing, or math. However, some students interpret being placed in LEC as punishment for being bad students or for “being dumb” in skills or content areas. The learning specialists work nonstop to dispel the rumors that the course is for “dumb students,” but students do shame each other and have to be re-directed multiple times per week. Another example of overall student interpretation of getting help from LEC teachers occurs after school. There is a required study hall for students who are missing work, or an optional study hall for students who just want extra help. The same LEC teachers conduct these after school sessions. Every day, students who choose the optional study hall time say out loud so other students can hear, “I’m not in LEC, I just need some help today with a paper.” or, “I’m not in the required study hall; I just need math help.” They clearly want to distinguish and separate themselves from any students who are required to show up for After School Study Hall. Another issue is the language used by teachers to describe students in LEC.

LEC is called “LEC,” while unsupervised study hall, which occurs at the same time and which is for students who are supposedly managing their time and academics well independently is called “regular study hall.” LEC becomes the “irregular” or “abnormal” study hall, even if not labelled that explicitly. One LEC teacher noted that it is common for students to say hi to content teachers in the hall as everyone passes from class to class, but many students who are in LEC often do not look at or acknowledge the LEC teachers in the hall in front of other students, even if they have a very positive and comfortable relationship with the LEC teachers during class time. This leads to wonderings on how students perceive the LEC teachers and their required enrollment in that particular workshop each semester. Is Inverness Academy creating a culture of belonging with the LEC program or are we unintentionally creating inequities through unconscious bias, explicit and hidden curriculum (Benson and Fiarman, 2019; Jackson, 1968)?

Belonging

Students who find themselves at the intersection of race and neurodivergence at a predominantly white and elite private school will likely experience various stages of belonging as they navigate being accepted, respected, included, and supported. Goodenow, 1993; Uwah et al., 2008) described how a student’s concept and measure of belonging affects all areas of academic experience, engagement with the community, motivation within the school setting, academic outcomes. In predominantly white schools, the concept of belonging is not evenly experienced and often students of color who are also neurodiverse feel othered, excluded, and outside of acceptable social and academic norms (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality as described by Crenshaw also helps us to understand that Black students do not experience being Black and being neurodiverse separately - there are hundreds of factors and intersections that a student lives each day. Being a student of the global majority at a mostly white school brings with it a whole set of overlapping complications that lead to feeling marginalized. Uwah et al. also described that sense of belonging may be the strongest predictor of academic success. Applying this research to our current potential research site would provide a rich backdrop for understanding in-depth the current climate at one particular school, and the needs of students who may feel excluded from mainstream norms.

Positionality

From the beginning of my teaching career over 25 years ago, the most impactful motivator for me to keep going back to work, even after the hard days, was knowing that I was making a positive difference in someone's day. As a white teacher of bilingual students in the US, I was connecting with young people who needed my help to learn English quickly and for a variety of reasons. There was urgency in my work that I enjoyed. It's a good feeling to feel needed, but as I have learned to reflect on my own teaching and what unconscious judgments I bring to my work whether I intend to or not, I often wonder about my students in the early days, and I hope I did them justice. In their book *Unconscious Bias in Schools, a Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism*, authors Tracey A. Benson and Sarah E. Fiarman share that we carry learned bias with us wherever we go. Bias is not innate. We learn bias in infancy from whoever is around us the most, and each generation tends to pass their bias on to their children implicitly and explicitly (Benson and Fiarman, 2019, p 18-19). From this standpoint, I can understand more clearly that the bias I grew up with was that "normal" was white culture, white faces on the news, white voices on the radio, white words and ways of speaking, white teachers in the classroom (Benson and Fiarman, 2015, 22-24). In fact, even if I was exposed to more classmates with a whole array of skin colors and cultural backgrounds, I still likely kept that foundational unconscious bias my whole life, and certainly through my entire teaching preparation and early career. As a child in rural Michigan, Blackness was only allowed into my family home in certain "safe" ways. A musician on the radio with a song that began and ended at 3 minutes 15 seconds. A comedian on the television who did not go too far into calling out racism and who kept it funny. A Black cast member of my favorite television show in a mostly white cast. Black basketball players whom my brothers adored watching win and lose.

My father had grown up with a single mom in poverty as the only white kid on his basketball team in Detroit. He loved talking about his teammates and he kept in touch with many of them because of his job as a CAD CAM instructor at a local community college. His world at work was diverse and he loved it and he loved his students and colleagues. Dad brought home stories, but my mother had been raised conservative and close-lipped. Dad's stories were all he could bring home from work. But as a grown up, I remember. I remember the difference in how my parents saw people with darker skin tones. My mother believed with devout

Christian conviction that God doesn't see color. Now I see that she meant God sees only shades of white. My father, on the other hand, saw every color and listened to every story his students' shared, and he believed in their potential and their worth. I like to think that I inherited some of his open minded love for all humans and his belief that we are all worthy of a good life. He was not a perfect man, but he saw his students for all the good they embodied and he appreciated their talents and helped them build their careers in such a way that many of them kept in touch with him for decades after they left school. It seems fitting now as I look back on a long teaching career that I would end up in this school at this moment - working with a mix of white students and students of the global majority from so many diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Mining and studying data to learn the story of community is a key component to research studies. In a talk given at Swarthmore College, Dr. Kevin Kumashiro (2018) stated:

Let me begin by kind of trying to name the moment. Many of you have probably read Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one of his central arguments that resonate with me, that I try to remind myself of often, is that we should not dive too quickly into trying to solve our problems, we should not dive too quickly into trying to transform society, until we first understand what's wrong with society. (Kumashiro, 2018)

The heart of this research at Inverness Academy must begin with a slow and steady quest to study the existing data and let the research questions develop as the data speaks to us. We must take our time in creating a systematic research project that will hopefully provide information to help the school and community build a greater understanding of how we can support equity, inclusion, and academic success for all students.

Literature Review

A pivotal study on the importance of student achievement related to belonging was a groundbreaking study conducted by Carol Goodenow in 1992. Goodenow was State Director of School Health Programs in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary

Education. During her tenure, Goodenow conducted a study of students in an urban middle school, and her focus was on students' perceptions of being accepted, supported, included in the school community. She discovered through her research and analysis of the data that a strong sense of belonging had a direct connection to higher academic motivation, better engagement, and more consistent academic achievement. Essentially, Goodenow's work formed the foundation of future work which focused on how schools might be able to bridge the achievement gaps between white students and students of color who were marginalized in their school communities (Goodenow, 1992. Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow, 2008).

C.J. Uwah and research partners used elements of the Goodenow study and adjusted it to work with marginalized students in an urban high school. Uwah and fellow researchers interviewed 40 Black male high school students in grades 9 and 10. The study used a quantitative correlational design, and students were asked questions related to the sense of belonging, their academic achievements and independence, as well as their aspirations for the future. (Uwah et al., 2008). Findings from Uwah et al. demonstrated that not only was belonging an essential component to academic success, but also the strongest predictor of academic success in this particular study was strong relationships with adults in the school. Uwah et al. cited Goodenow in their research by sharing that, "Psychological sense of school belonging is defined as the extent to which students perceive themselves to be welcomed, valued, and respected members of the school community." (Goodenow, 1992 as cited in Uwah et al. 2008). Another aspect of the study that stood out was that the students valued what they perceived as "authentic relationships" over being liked. This study brings to the forefront how essential it is to cultivate a strong sense of belonging for all students, but especially students who may feel marginalized, or who may feel they do not share the same cultural background or shared intersection points with their teachers if most of the teachers are White.

A more recent study comes from Derrick Brooms. Dr. Brooms is a professor of sociology and Africana studies at the University of Cincinnati, and he conducted a qualitative research study in which he interviewed 20 Black male graduates from an urban charter school about their experiences that connected being Black with multiple intersection points (Brooms, 2019,

Crenshaw, 1989). Brooms asked the students questions surrounding preparedness, sense of belonging, academic experience, relationship with teachers, aspirations and success, and their overall reflections on their school experience. The intersectionality of their cultural, socioeconomic, familial, and educational background with the school community factors was intentional and helped to focus the study on the intersection of Blackness, educational belonging, opportunity, and the development of each student's perceived identity (Crenshaw, 1989).

Brooms used a phenomenological approach - focusing on the students' own interpretation of their lived experience versus Brooms' interpretation of their experience at the school. Brooms found through his research that school culture and connections with teachers and feeling a sense of belonging fundamentally shaped the students' academic success trajectories, including post high school experiences. Brooms wrote that a supportive school environment and meaningful relationships with trusted adults made a tremendous positive difference in the lives of this particular set of students. Narrative inquiry and phenomenological approach could be an excellent method for conducting research and gathering qualitative narrative data from students at Inverness Academy in order to learn about how the school is doing in its support systems for Black and Hispanic students. The emphasis on studying strength of relationships for students at Inverness with their teachers, peers, coaches seems fitting as one measure of belonging and academic success.

Together, Goodenow (1992), Uwah et al. (2008), and Brooms (2018) help to build a narrative in which belonging plays an essential role in academic settings because it is both psychological and a racialized experience. Goodenow shows that belonging is necessary for academic motivation. Uwah et al. show that for Black students, academic self-efficacy is directly tied to strong relationships with adults in the building. Brooms goes further to show that Black students live and experience intersectionality every day on multiple levels as they navigate their lived experience in high school. For the diverse student population at Inverness Academy, where students might experience "cultural othering," (Kumashiro 2000) uneven MAP growth, or inconsistent adult mentor support due to cultural differences, these studies show that culturally responsive relationships are key to psychological safety (Clark and Soutter, 2022), which in turn supports risk taking and academic success.

Clark and Soutter's year-long study at a high school in the northeast of the US focused on researching the concepts of growth mindset and intellectual risk taking (IRT). Their work helped clarify that students are more willing to take intellectual risks if the classroom (or school) culture affirms their individual identities, supports vulnerability, and provides psychological and relational safety. In addition, students need to feel internal positive beliefs about their own capabilities in order to take risks in the classroom (Clark and Soutter, 2022). This study ties directly to the research goals at Inverness Academy as classroom teachers are mostly White, the Black student population has increased relatively quickly, and most students are involved in a competitive sport with coaches, some of whom are also teachers at the high school. The need to understand how students perceive their psychological safety and their self perceived measure of risk taking while experiencing multiple points of intersectionality is a necessity.

Because Inverness Academy enrolls a fairly large population of international students from Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, Guinea, and Togo, studies in the experiences of African students in American private schools can provide some important perspectives on the differences and similarities that Black American students and Black international students might experience within the same school based on cultural assumptions of the dominant group, cultural expectations of the students based on previous schooling and experiences with American schools, and racialized biases based on skin color. (Crenshaw, 1989, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2002).

Boateng conducted a qualitative interview study in 2018 to explore how African immigrant high schoolers experience the intersections of racial identity, cultural identity and Blackness at US schools. All of the 20 students in the study identified as African immigrants, and they identified as Black in their high school setting. Boateng used interviews and analysis of those interviews to study common themes from the students' perspectives. The study found that the students experienced racialization in two distinct ways; they were categorized as Black by the norms that dominate our culture while they were also categorized and stereotyped because of bias and stereotypes against African immigrants. Students reported feeling that teachers had lower expectations of them and did not necessarily know their unique stories as individuals and immigrants with rich backgrounds and additive potential.(Boateng 2018)

Another study that helped bring the perspective of African immigrants to light was conducted by Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara in 2019. They used a qualitative case study design to conduct interviews with 15 African immigrant middle and high school students from Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Somalia. Some of the results of this study centered around the fact that the students were identified as Black in their schools, but the students did not necessarily identify themselves with Black American cultural norms. The mismatch between how they were perceived by others and how they perceived themselves was a key finding in the study. The study also showed that culturally responsive teachers helped the students feel more connected, confident, and have a greater sense of belonging (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara, 2019).

The previous studies which focused on the experience of African immigrant students in US schools (Boateng, 2018; Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara, 2019) connect closely and help build a case for future research into the lived experiences of the African immigrant students at Inverness Academy. The African immigrant student experience can be seen through a cultural lens of intersectionality which is distinctly different and varied from the experience of Black Americans. This literature directly supports why it is essential to understand the diverse perspectives of all students of the global majority at Inverness Academy, and not to make racialized assumptions about their experiences.

One more impactful early study that is directly connected to potential research direction is a study conducted by Thomas Dee in 2004. Dee studied student/teacher racial matching in over 20,000 students during STAR testing in the state of Tennessee. Dee studied whether students who are randomly assigned a teacher who identifies as the same race as the student perform better on standardized tests with that teacher. The results of the study were that Black student assigned to Black teachers made significant gains in reading and math, while White students assigned to White teacher made moderate gains. Dee's conclusions through this study were that students performed better because of higher expectations, reduced stereotype threats, improved communication, and better cultural understanding (Dee 2004). This study relates directly to Inverness Academy as most teachers at the high school are White, and it's important to consider the ramifications and consequences of this fact within the sphere of student achievement and student improvement during the academic year. Would Black students make

better progress if more of their teachers were Black at Inverness Academy? These are questions that deserve time and attention in order to serve the community currently enrolled and future students at Inverness Academy.

Another critical connector that can help us to further understand how to serve our diverse communities comes from a comprehensive study on teacher racial bias conducted by Starck, Riddle, Sinclair, and Warikoo on whether teachers hold less implicit bias than the rest of the general population (Starck et al. 2020). The study focused on roughly 69,000 PreK-12th grade teachers in the United States, who were among the 1.6 million respondents in this study. Essentially, Starck et al. found that teachers in the US hold pro-White implicit bias and explicit bias at almost the same rate as non-teachers in the US. The study holds that 77% of teachers hold a pro-White bias. The resulting interpretation of the study posits that this implicit and explicit bias influences teacher behavior, student expectations, discipline decisions, teacher connection with students, and therefore student feelings of belonging, safety, and overall achievement (Starck et al. 2020; Kumashiro, 2020). If most teachers at Inverness Academy are White, the population is becoming more diverse, and teachers are not aware of implicit bias, we have strong motivation to learn more about the undercurrent of cultural realities that carry the school from day to day.

An additional cultural feature that exists throughout the educational systems in the US is what researchers call the “hidden curriculum.” Coined in 1968 by Phillip W. Jackson, a professor and educational psychologist at the University of Chicago, this hidden curriculum described all of the unspoken rules and underlying expectations that students had to learn in schools in order to navigate the culture of a particular school (Jackson, 1968). More recent research has highlighted racialized hidden curriculum in elite high schools. One example of a qualitative interview design studying hidden curriculum was through a study by Allen and White-Smith (2022)

An additional enlightening professional summary of a study published by Prober and Freeman (2023) in the *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* of 2023 highlighted the experiences of Black and Hispanic students in private high schools in the United States. The study focused on mental health challenges related to implicit and explicit racial discrimination and how it influences a sense of belonging, academic motivation and overall

mental health. The result of the study was that the experience of Black and Hispanic students in a mostly pro-White environment can have a negative effect on their relationship with their schools. Elite, private schools with mostly White enrollment inevitable contain a hidden curriculum that centers White culture as “normal” and as the summit of the cultural hierarchy. The study noted that students often felt isolated and othered, even when trying to cultivate a sense of belonging. The study also pointed out that students felt that private school administration did not do enough to mitigate actions that were perceived as discriminatory, such as the ruining of a student’s prayer rug by another student (Proberbs and Freeman, 2023). The parallels with this study to the potential experiences of the nonWhite students at Inverness Academy could be a rich resource and foundation for learning more about the community and how to better serve the students of the global majority within the majority White community in a majority White suburb.

Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson brought the disproportionate focus of discipline on Black students into focus in their study published in 2002. A school cannot ignore the systems and cultures put in place to handle discipline issues of adolescents with diverse backgrounds and familial norms. The Skiba et al. study found that Black male students are sent to the office for discipline infractions much more often than White male students, and this is well-documented in multiple studies across the decades in the United States (Skiba et al. 2002). White students were sent to the office for behaviors like skipping school, smoking, obscene language, and loitering, whereas Black students were sent to the office for being disrespectful, excessive noise, threat, or loitering. While the study does not put forward absolute proof of racial discrimination in punishment, it does bring up questions of the hidden curriculum of behavior expectations thrust upon Black students versus White students.

Another notable study by Dieppe. Hamilton, Goldsmith and Darity (2021) examined the relationship between school demographic population and the educational and SES outcomes of Black students. The results of the study were that Black students perform better in either predominantly Black schools or in predominantly White schools, whereas Black students do not make significantly better progress in schools that are more racially balanced. The authors uses the lens of stratification economics to posit that Black students may experience more discriminatory behavior in more racially balanced schools, which may undermine their academic

success. (Dieppe et al., 2021) This study brings to light the arguments of W.E.B. Dubois in 1935, who argued that Black students need quality education over any demographic mix. He stated, “The Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education.” (Du Bois, 1935, p. 355). Understanding the factors and forces that exist within Inverness Academy that implicitly and explicitly shape students’ experiences is of tantamount importance if we are to learn how to be better at supporting the needs of all students.

In her article ‘She Ugly,’ Black Girls, Women in Hip Hop and Activism - Hip Hop Feminist Literacies Perspectives, Dr. Elaine Richardson describes the experiences of Black girls in American society in a multitude of intersections and lived expressions (Crenshaw, 1989). Richardson writes:

...Black women and girls are entangled in patriarchal systems with our brothers, sons, and loved ones. We are expected to be sources of love, loyalty, and labor, even when being the source may be harmful. This expectation is manifested in general society in which Black people and Hip Hop are entangled (Richardson, 2006).

Add to this the intersectionality of being Black female students at a majority White high school with hidden curriculum carrying unconscious racial bias, and the need for honest, self-reflective research becomes clear. Richardson goes on to explain, “I understand that performance is survival (Richardson, 2009, p 13).” Consequently, Black female students may feel compelled to engage in performative behaviors or adopt the speech patterns of the dominant power structure—a practice of “code-switching” framing Baker-Bell’s discussion of responses to linguistic racism and pressures to conform (Haugen, 1950; Baker-Bell, 2020).

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) seems the most appropriate critical lens through which we are positioned to study the interconnected dimensions of multiple forms of oppression that Black students and Hispanic students experience within their high school culture at Inverness Academy. Griffin, Harris, and Proctor (2024) argue in their article on intersectionality and school racial climate that schools that talk about belonging, but do not tackle racism or gendered stereotypes directly, harm Black students because no school can actually be race neutral (Griffin et al., 2024). Griffin et al. go on to state that school climate

research that focuses on belonging through safety, relationships and instruction, but which approaches the issue of racism with a “color-evasive lens” fails to protect, support, or shed light on the lived experiences of Black students. The authors also shared that even in a well-resourced school, school climate is not experienced equally across racial groups (Griffin et al., 2024, p.3).

Reasoning, Purpose, Research Gaps

The purpose of this two-part mixed method study (data collection and narrative inquiry) is to examine multiple aspects of school support and culture at a predominantly White high school in the Midwest. No research of this kind has been conducted at this particular school and with this unique community. The school has diversified rapidly, but academic and belonging (SEL) support for Black and Hispanic students, especially students who may also be neurodiverse, may not be equitably effective. We will examine how effectively we scaffold and support the learning, skill development, and sense of belonging of Black, Hispanic, and White students who are performing below grade level, who have been identified as needing extra support for a multitude of reasons, or who have been placed in LEC and Read/Write support classes. We will pay particular attention to MAP growth over time, academic intervention systems, student sense of belonging, and post high school feelings about the school after graduation. We will use aspects of belonging theory as posited by Baumeister and Leary in 1995. Baumeister et al. theorized that student academic success is directly connected to how accepted, valued, and supported they feel within their school environment.(Baumeister et al., 1995) Drawing on this framework as a common denominator, we can study how interventions, teacher expectations, hidden curriculum, and school culture influence students’ sense of belonging and academic achievement at Inverness Academy. Walten and Cohen also used belonging theory to study race, social fit, and academic achievement (Walten and Cohen, 2007). Their work fits into student self-perception of social belonging, which can help to elucidate student sense of belonging or points of dissonance for students of color at Inverness Academy.

There are multiple research gaps that would benefit from this type of focused study in a private school in St. Louis. First and foremost, the in-depth data research on the changing population in this particular predominantly white and elite school has never been completed or

studied. There have been significant demographic changes in this elite school, and it is essential to self-reflect and think critically on how the demographic changes have made an impact on school culture for all stakeholders. It would be incredibly helpful for the school to undergo a thoughtful and deep reflection on how culturally responsive teaching has been implemented, how culturally responsive teacher training has been implemented, and to examine the impact on the community over the past 10 years. Our contribution would be to understand more deeply how racial demographics intersect with academic support systems, and the achievement results of students who meet these criteria. Because we have a diverse population of African immigrants and African American students within the same school culture, we have a rich opportunity to understand more deeply expectations, sense of belonging, and response to intervention systems for Black American students and Black African students, who are often grouped into the same category, but who can have extremely varied experiences within school settings based on racial bias, cultural expectations and cultural upbringing. National data on private schools does not seem to distinguish between the experiences of African immigrant students and Black American students. (Kincel et al., 2026) This is a crucial research gap, and when partnered with narrative inquiry (Milner, 2007) could build a rich story of student belonging and achievement outcomes within this particular environment. Another crucial aspect of this research is the lack of data on neurodiverse students who also identify as Black. The potential for learning more how to serve our students whose needs intersect in diverse ways (Crenshaw, 1989) is essential to growing in our capacity to support all students who enroll.

Sections to Continue as I work towards the research proposal and dissertation:

MAP Growth Longitudinal Analysis and Systems of Intervention

Narrative inquiry section will help to understand the experiences of current students and recent graduates of Inverness Academy.

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