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## The Influence of School Policies on Black Students' Mental Health

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THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL POLICIES ON BLACK STUDENTS' MENTAL  
HEALTH

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts  
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction  
at Western Kentucky University

By

Ama O. Boateng

May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

When educators target Black students' hair through school policies, they inadvertently target their racial identity, causing harm to their mental health (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). While previous research has looked at the relationship between a school's racial climate and Black students' mental health (Mattison & Aber, 2007), this research study explored the mental health of Black adults who have experienced racial discrimination or racial microaggressions, in relation to hair and dress codes, as Black students in the K-12 school system.

A retrospective survey was used to explore the experiences that Black young adults had in the K-12 school system in relation to racial discrimination, microaggressions, dress codes, and mental wellbeing. Recommendations for schools and educators were provided about racial microaggressions and discrimination, and the steps schools can take to ensure the mental health of Black students and provide a safe, healthy environment for them.

*Keywords:* microaggressions, prejudice, discrimination, bias, stereotypes

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Kofi Kyei-Boateng and Gifty Birago, my brother Kwame Boateng, and my friends, who have always provided me with the utmost support. I also want to dedicate this work to all the Black students working hard for their futures, you will achieve so much.

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## INTRODUCTION

Black students' hair is important to their cultural and racial identity, but when educators target their hair through school policies or their attitudes toward hair, it inadvertently targets their racial identity which can be harmful to their mental health. Racism in the various systems that embody the United States of America has been heavily researched for years now (e.g., Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018), but “Black hair” in the K-12 and the college school system has recently become a more popular topic. Schools typically have a code of conduct that often includes sections related to appearance and dress. The “dress of conduct” in school policies is usually not extremely specific and does not mention how students should look or what they should wear except that they should look “decent” or “appropriate.” Then, it falls upon the schools or individual staff to decide what they consider “decent” (Martin & Brooks, 2021).

Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) investigated the significance of Black students' hair to their identity and how hair can be used as a form of social control that approves of Whiteness and disapproves of Blackness. Similar to how the police are used as a governing tool over Black people, schools can use their policies and rules as governing tools over Black children by forcing them to conform to Whiteness in hidden ways such as through their hair. Black students who do not comply with these policies and rules then have their education and school activities threatened by being written up, suspended, or expelled (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). This is a form of racial discrimination.

Racism and discrimination are shown in different forms, sometimes they can be blatant and other times more covert. Hair is one way to target Black students especially if it can be represented as a “school policy” (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). It is hard to argue with school policy. Still, it is especially hard when school policy is unclear and left up to the subjective judgments of teachers and schools whose own unconscious or conscious bias might influence who or what they consider to be breaking school policy (Martin & Brooks, 2021). Past and current research shows racism and discrimination affect Black students' mental health (Bravo et al., 2021). In a study investigating the prevalence of racially discriminatory experiences of college students and their relation to any mental health symptoms, compared to White students, racially/ethnically minoritized students reported more discrimination-related stress (Bravo et al., 2021). While all students on their college campus experienced discriminatory events, regardless of race, those from minoritized backgrounds (i.e., Asian, Black, Latinx) experienced more stress related to racial discrimination than White students. This stress was positively correlated with experiencing negative mental health symptoms in the form of depression and anxiety. So, if schools genuinely want to be a safe, healthy environment for all students, especially Black students, to flourish academically and mentally they need to address policies and attitudes that can affect them. This research study therefore explored school policies and attitudes toward Black students' hair, and other racial discrimination/microaggressions faced in the K-12 school system, affecting their mental health. Hair is culturally and racially crucial in the lives of Black students. By targeting their hair through school policies and attitudes, schools are inadvertently targeting Black students' racial identity, and this can affect their mental health. Specifically, this project addresses

the following research questions:

(1) Is historical level of racial discrimination or racial microaggressions related to current mental wellbeing?

(2) Are frequency of racial discrimination (i.e., being dress coded because of hair) or racial microaggressions associated with the type of school attended (i.e., predominantly White, or diverse/predominantly Black)?

(3) When asked to describe an experience with racial discrimination, what will participants write about?

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to the American Psychological Association (2023), racism is a form of prejudice that generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of a group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and racial discrimination against individuals; in some cases, it can lead to violence. Racial discrimination refers to the differential treatment of different racial groups at the individual level and the institutional/structural level.

Discrimination is usually the behavioral manifestation of prejudice and involves negative, hostile, and injurious treatment of members of rejected groups. Similarly, microaggression events refer to everyday derogations, slights, and invalidations that are often delivered to people of minority or marginalized backgrounds (APA, 2023).

Previous research studies on the relationship between racial discrimination/microaggressions and Black students' mental health have focused on school racial climate (Mattison & Aber, 2007), physical education (Aasland & Engelsrud, 202; Hylton, 2015), academic work (Mattison & Aber, 2007), and disciplinary actions toward Black students (Mattison & Aber, 2007). This study will focus on the effect of racial discrimination/microaggressions concerning school dress codes and policies, on young Black adults who were recently in the K-12 school system. Despite the different focus of these research studies, it is still important to include literature on these topics as they also involve racial discrimination/microaggressions in the K-12 school system.

## **Racial Discrimination/Microaggressions in Physical Education/Sports**

Racial discrimination and microaggressive behavior towards Black people in sports is quite common and almost normalized. While Black athletes are often important pieces in sports teams such as American football, basketball, and soccer abroad, they tend to be excluded from the leadership and administration of teams (Hylton, 2015). The “natural,” and “genetic” differences between White and Black athletes are often pulled out by sports enthusiasts as an excuse if a Black athlete is stronger or more athletically talented than a White athlete (Hylton, 2015). Black athletes can be verbally abused racially either by the fans of the other team if they win or by the fans of their team if they lose (Hylton, 2015). Last year Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, both talented, female collegiate Basketball players, drew media and Basketball fans' by engaging in a fierce rivalry at the final game of the season. With Angel Reese, a Black woman, and Caitlin Clark, a White woman, being such fierce competitors, fans began to make comparisons to other Black and White athletes who were competitors and non-basketball fans began to tune in to support the athlete who belongs to their racial group. The game ended with Angel Reese and her team the LSU Tigers defeating Caitlin Clark and her team the Iowa Hawkeyes for the NCAA Championship. Reese then proceeded to make the hand sign “You can’t see me,” the trademark hand sign of former WWE star and actor John Cena. This instantly drew the ire of White conservative media and White Iowa fans who proceeded to racially bash and abuse this young woman.

History repeated itself this year when the LSU Tigers and Iowa Hawkeyes once again played the final Championship game, with the Iowa Hawkeyes taking the win home this time. But before the final Championship game with the Iowa Hawkeyes, the LSU

Tigers played against the UCLA Bruins. A UCLA writer, Ben Bolch, released an article calling the LSU Tigers, a predominately Black team, “dirty debutantes” and “Louisiana hot sauce” while referring to the UCLA Bruins as “America’s sweethearts” and “milk and cookies” (Schlachter, 2024). The article was taken down and Bolch apologized after he received backlash, claiming he did not understand the racial implications he made (Schlachter, 2024). The attention the LSU Tigers have received since their Championship win has exposed them to all sorts of racial abuse and revealed just how deeply entrenched racism is in the sports world. But racism towards Black people in sports does not begin at the collegiate level, it can begin as far back as in the K-12 school system.

Younger fans of sports begin to believe this stereotype that Black athletes have a natural superiority over White athletes and even the win of a White athlete against a Black athlete is viewed as unique (Hylton, 2015). It does not end with the stereotypical beliefs imposed on young fans, as Black students can also experience racial stereotyping in physical education classes and from their physical education teachers (Aasland & Engelsrud, 2021). White people make up most PE teachers and PE teacher educators. As a result, the curriculum is developed by people who are unlikely to have encountered racism in their personal or professional lives and do not account for it when developing the curriculum (Aasland & Engelsrud, 2021). This is a common occurrence in predominately White institutions and regions as White people in these areas are generally unaware of the racial environment and situations of the Black people around them (Aasland & Engelsrud, 2021).

## **School Racial Climate's Effect on the Academic Work and Discipline Outcomes of Black Students**

Mattison and Aber (2007) conducted a research study investigating the relationship between school racial climate and students' self-reports of academic and discipline outcomes (Mattison & Aber, 2007). They found that students who reported having a more positive perception of their school's racial climate also had higher grades and fewer detentions and suspensions (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Unfortunately, Black students reported having a more negative perception of their school's racial climate and as a result, compared to their White peers, had lower grades and more detentions and suspensions (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Black students who perceive any unfair treatment based on racism, from their teachers and/or their school can find it difficult to not only focus on their academic work, but can also rebel against the rules being enforced on them, which can lead to more suspensions and expulsions, and further the belief that the teacher and/or school is racist (Mattison & Aber, 2007). This does not just apply to Black students but even White students who perceive any unfair treatment in their school's racial climate can lose respect and trust for their teacher and their school, which can lead to misconduct and poor academic work (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

While a negative school racial climate is primarily detrimental to the academic work and behavior of Black students, it can also affect their non-Black peers. After all, a school environment where every student is prioritized, respected, and treated fairly has been proven to be much more instrumental in the academic growth and positive behavior of students (Mattison & Aber, 2007). There can be many reasons why a Black student is not performing well academically or is getting into fights and receiving suspensions, but

a negative school racial climate should not be one. Black students deserve to have a school environment where they are not being targeted for their skin color but are receiving the proper instruction and support to be able to perform well academically.

### **Mental Health of Black Students and Racial Discrimination/Microaggressions in the K-12 School System**

Racially discriminatory experiences can have a negative impact on the mental health of Black children and can lead to the development of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem symptoms (Walker et al., 2022). Current research studies have explored the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and mental health outcomes such as depressive and anxiety symptoms in Black children (Walker et al., 2022). While the results indicated that there was no link between Black children developing depressive symptoms after a racially discriminatory experience, they did develop anxiety symptoms (Walker et al., 2022). The development of anxiety symptoms in Black children after a racially discriminatory experience can be a result of them struggling to process and move on from the experience with no help from a parent or a professional mental health practitioner (Walker et al., 2022).

Black students who also experience racial discrimination in the K-12 school system have higher feelings of hopelessness and lower self-concept, than their non-Black peers, with some even exerting aggression and behavior problems (Cook et al., 2014). After a racially discriminatory event, the last thing a Black child should do is push past it without properly processing it and receiving professional mental health care. It is not only



the responsibility of the child's parents but also the responsibility of the school, especially if the child was exposed to racial discrimination on school premises.

### **Targeting Black Students' Hair Through School Dress Codes**

For most Black people, hair is one of the most common ways to not only fit in with the Black community, but to be able to express individuality and creativity, as well as connect to other parts of the Black diaspora. For Black children, a new haircut or a new hairstyle can either make them the recipient of praise from their peers or the recipient of ridicule. Hair is significantly important in how Black people express themselves and connect with one another. Black hair can be manipulated into many, different hairstyles, such as box braids, twists, cornrows, locs, afros, etc. and for most Black people all over the world, this is the norm. Unfortunately, Black natural hair and hairstyles are not as favorably viewed by those outside of the Black community.

Despite the United States commonly referring to itself as a melting pot, Whiteness or proximity to Whiteness is the commonly accepted societal standard. As such, Black natural hair and hairstyles which differ extremely from White hair can be viewed as dirty, messy, distracting, and unprofessional (Rogers, 2022). Black hairstyles and dress can even be associated with gangs and violence (Rogers, 2022). Because these are quite common stereotypes, it is not particularly shocking to find teachers and schools having these prejudiced beliefs and thoughts as well.

As they follow their prejudiced beliefs, schools, and teachers covertly enact and enforce school policies and attitudes that punish Blackness and uplift Whiteness, "These racializing beliefs by some White teachers and administrators that connect urban wear

and hairstyles to gang activity, or label Black styles as distracting, stem from media portrayals of Black bodies and the inability to disconnect Blackness from deviant behavior and culturally prescribed class performances” (Rogers, 2022). Black students can be punished with detention, suspension, and even expulsion if their hairstyles do not fit the White standards of beauty and professionalism such as DeAndre Arnold who was suspended from his Texas high school, in 2020, due to the length of his locs (Rogers, 2022). Recently, in February of 2024, a Texas judge ruled in his case against the school district “Arnold v. Barbers Hill Independent School District,” that the school district was not discriminating against him for the length of his locs. Mr. Arnold is not the only the Black student to face the punitive actions from their school because of their Black hairstyle. Marian Scott, only eight years old, was not allowed to take her school pictures because of her red braids (Rogers, 2022).

There are many more stories not only limited to the United States K-12 school system but in the military and professional workspaces as well. Black adults are often criticized, mocked, and forced to conform to White hairstyles and standards, to be viewed as beautiful and professional by their coworkers and superiors. Even though some of these methods of conformity, such as Black women and girls straightening their hair using perms, hot combs, etc. can be extremely painful as they cause chemical burns, cuts, and wounds. The dress codes and policies in the K-12 school system are used to force Black adults to conform to White standards at a young, impressionable age.

## **The Mental Health of Black Adults After Experiencing Racial Discrimination/ Microaggressions in the K-12 School System**

Black adults who attended predominately White middle/high schools, can have poor mental health, physical health, and behavioral outcomes (Dudovitz et al., 2021). Dudovitz et al. (2021) used participants from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health and retrieved their data from when they were 18-26 years old and when they were 26-32 years old.

They found that, unlike White students who report lower stress and depressive symptoms, as a result of benefitting from better education opportunities without the detrimental effect of being a racially minoritized student in a predominately White school, Black students despite receiving better education opportunities suffer from negative mental and behavioral outcomes, as a result of being a racially minoritized student in a predominately White school, which increases the risk of racial discrimination and microaggressions (Dudovitz et al., 2021). In adulthood, Black students who attended predominately White middle/high schools with less racial cohorting can have long term depressive symptoms, stress, substance issues(smoking), and poorer mental and physical health (Dudovitz et al., 2021). The racial discrimination and microaggressions Black students face in the K-12 school system can have detrimental effects on them as adults, not limited to just their physical health but to their mental health as well.

This research study explored Black students' experience with their hair, and other racial discrimination/ microaggressions faced in the K-12 school system, affecting their mental health. Hair is culturally and racially crucial in the lives of Black students. By targeting their hair through school policies and attitudes, schools are inadvertently

targeting Black students' racial identity, and this can affect their mental health.

Specifically, this project addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Is historical level of racial discrimination or racial microaggressions related to current mental wellbeing?

Hypothesis 1: Participants with greater or more frequent experiences of racial discrimination or racial microaggressions will have poorer mental health as adults.

Research Question 2: Are frequency of racial discrimination (i.e., being dress coded because of hair) or racial microaggressions associated with the type of school attended (i.e., predominantly White, or diverse/predominantly Black)?

Hypothesis 2: Black students who attended predominantly White schools will experience more racial discrimination or racial microaggressions than Black students who attended predominantly Black and racially/ethnically diverse schools.

Research Question: When asked to describe an experience with racial discrimination, what will participants write about?

Hypothesis 3: No hypothesis is generated for this research question since it is purely exploratory.

## METHODS

Based on previous research in this area and my topic of interest, a retrospective survey was created that explores the experiences that Black students might have had in the K-12 school system related to their race and their hair, as well as their current mental wellbeing. This study is descriptive.

### **Sample**

Participants were recruited from the online subject pool, Prolific Academic. To participate in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) identify as Black, (b) be a resident of the United States, (c) be 18 to 30 years of age, (d) able to speak/read English, and (e) have attended a U.S. school during K-12. Data collection was completed in a week.

Participants ( $n = 304$ ) ages ranged from 18 to 30 years of age. Participants who identified as Black/African American (65.9%) and biracial/multiracial (33.8%) made up majority of the participants. In response to gender identity, participants identified as mostly female (56.91%) and male (36.84%), the rest of the participants (6.25%) identified as non-binary/non-conforming, transgender, and questioning. Approximately, 56.25% of participants were from a suburban area, 31.58% of participants were from an urban area, and 12.17% of participants were from a rural area. Most ( $n = 146$ ) participants attended a racially/ethnically diverse high school, 109 participants attended a predominantly White high school, 48 participants attended a predominantly Black high school, and one participant did not respond. Compared to the 35.86% of participants who

attended a predominantly White high school, only 15.79% of participants attended a predominantly Black high school. Most participants though (48.03%) attended a racially/ethnically diverse high school.

## **Procedure**

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board at Western Kentucky University (Appendix A), a Qualtrics survey was posted on Prolific Academic. Funds were provided through an Honors Development Grant to pay participants to complete the survey. Prolific Academic can provide access to over 130,000 participants worldwide and compensates participants monetarily (\$8.00 per hour minimum). Prolific Academic has been found to provide higher quality data, like Mechanical Turk, and a more diverse sample than both Mechanical Turk and CrowdFlower (Peer et al., 2017).

Prolific allows for the prescreening of participants. For this study, participant age was restricted to 18 to 30 to maximize the likelihood that participants would accurately recall their high school experiences. Median completion time was just over seven minutes. Upon accessing the survey, participants were first asked to read the informed consent document. Next, they answered questions about the level of racial microaggression/discrimination experienced in the K-12 school system. Then they moved on to questions about dress codes and school policies. The last section was about the level of mental distress they experienced in the past and currently. Participants then answered demographic questions and the survey was complete. They received their monetary compensation shortly after. Data were collected through Qualtrics software, exported to Excel, and analyzed using SPSS software.

## **Measures and Materials**

The survey included questions about the participant's hairstyles, school policies and attitudes, any perceived discriminatory and microaggressive remarks, self-report, and a measure of mental health. Responses were primarily given based on a Likert scale. The mental wellbeing measure was the *World Health Organization Well-Being Index* (WHO-5). It has acceptable validity (.81 - .86) used as both a measure of depression and general outcome measure in clinical trials across disciplines (Topp et al., 2015). The survey used items from WHO-5 such as, I have felt cheerful and in good spirits, I have felt calm and relaxed, I have felt active and vigorous, I woke up feeling fresh and rested, and my daily life has been filled with things that interest me. Item scores range from 0-5, with 0 being not at all present and five being almost always present. Raw score totals can range from 0-25 but is then multiplied by 4 for a final score of 0-100. Demographic questions include age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, level of education, location of school, and school racial diversity.

## **Data Analysis**

To answer the first research question (racial discrimination or racial microaggressions related to mental wellbeing), Spearman's correlation was conducted due to the ordinal data. For research question two, to look at the type of school attended, diverse ( $n = 146$ ) and predominantly Black ( $n = 48$ ) were combined into one category, and predominantly White ( $n = 109$ ) was left as a second category. Chi-square was used to answer this research question. Finally, research question three was exploratory and

responses were reviewed for any themes or patterns, and this question served as an opportunity to describe participants' experiences.



## RESULTS

About half of the participants ( $n = 304$ ) attended a K-12 school with a mix of many racial backgrounds represented, some went to predominantly Black schools (15.7%), and some predominantly White (35.6%). Most participants felt they were dress-coded due to the style of their hair at least sometimes (37.6%), and some often (13.0%). Students who attended a diverse school or a predominantly White school seem to experience more instances of racial discrimination compared to those who attended a predominantly Black school. Of those who attended a diverse school, 92.9% indicated some experience with being dress-coded due to the style of their hair. Ninety-six percent of those who attended a predominantly White school experienced being dress-coded due to hair. Compared to 71.4% who attended a predominantly Black school.

The first research question examined the relationship between mental wellbeing and racial discrimination or microaggressions. Overall, participants had generally moderate to high levels of well-being with an average WHO score of 68.04 (range of 49-100 on a scale of 0-100). Due to the ordinal nature of the data, a Spearman's correlation was run in SPSS. Results indicated there was no significant relationship between Black students' current mental health and the level of racial discrimination experienced in the K-12 school system,  $r(247) = -.02, p = .795$ .

To evaluate whether the type of school attended was associated with frequency of microaggressions, a chi-square test was run. A chi-square test showed that the frequency of being dress-coded due to hairstyle was not associated with the type of school attended ( $\chi^2(5) = 1.22, p = .943$ ), but frequency of microaggressions was significantly associated

with type of school attended ( $\chi(5) = 20.21, p < .01$ ). Specifically, participants who attended a diverse or predominantly Black school experienced a greater frequency of microaggressions.

Finally, qualitative responses were reviewed to explore the kinds of events that participants recalled and described. Common microaggressive behaviors present in qualitative responses were related to dress and appearance. For example - comments from teachers and students about straightening their “nappy” hair, being written up or threatened with suspension for natural hairstyles, insults of facial features and skin color. Some participants even recall being accused and suspected of wrongdoing by both teachers and school staff with no authentic basis and even facing their disbelief when they did deny the wrongdoing. Other participants remember being forced into playing stereotypical roles by their friends and being rejected from their friend group for being too “dark.” Teachers would even comment on the outfits some participants wore by calling it too “provocative” or “short” despite other students wearing similar outfits, participants believed they were being singled out for their body type.

A sizable number of participants mentioned experiencing public humiliation by teachers and classmates in reference to their skin color being too “dark” or their hair too “messy.” Even though they were known as excellent students, both behaviorally and academically, some participants still received accusations of smoking weed by teachers with no basis. Even worse a few participants recalled the unnecessary usage of the n-slur by non-Black classmates, teachers, and friends, sometimes in reference to them or to other Black people, with no consequences.

## DISCUSSION

Half of the experiences Black students have, are related to their school environment, whether it is with teachers, friends, academics, or extracurricular activities. It is supposed to be a safe and healthy environment for these students to learn and grow. Unfortunately, this is not the case for all students, especially Black students. Black students can be subjected to racially discriminatory and microaggressive behaviors in the K-12 school system, this can affect their mental health, physical health, behaviors, and more. This study looked at the usage of school policies, specifically, dress codes, to target Black students' hair and appearance, and the effect that has on their current mental health. Based on current literature I hypothesized that the current mental health of Black students who experienced racial discrimination or racial microaggressions will be low. I also hypothesized that in comparison Black students who attended predominantly White schools would experience more racial discrimination or racial microaggressions than Black students who attended predominantly Black and racially/ethnically diverse schools. While a self-report was included in the survey for participants to describe their experiences with racial discrimination, it was mainly exploratory.

The results of this study indicated that Black students who attended a diverse school or a predominantly White school experienced more instances of racial discrimination compared to Black students who attended a predominantly Black school. Participants who attended a racially diverse school and participants who attended a predominantly White school experienced being dress-coded due to the style of their hair, more than the participants who attended a predominantly Black school. Both findings

agree with those of Rogers (2022), Aasland & Engelsrud (2021), and Dudovitz et al., (2021) who found that Black students are subjected to more racially discriminatory and microaggressive behaviors in predominately White school environments. While some of their white peers and teachers might not realize the racial climate of their environment this is not the case for most Black students who are often the ones being subjected to these racially charged behaviors and comments (Aasland & Engelsrud 2021). Participants who attended a racially diverse or predominantly Black school experienced a greater frequency of microaggressions than their Black peers who attended a predominately White school. This result is not consistent with those found by Cook et al. (2014) which indicated that Black students experience more racially discriminatory behaviors than their White peers which can lead to both negative externalizing and internalizing behaviors. The inconsistency between these two findings might be because of not this study not including questions about the teachers or administration in the survey, because while the students might be racially diverse or predominantly Black, the teachers or administration might not be. Another reason for the inconsistency between these two results is that being in a racially diverse/predominately Black environment does not necessarily mean other students or teachers will be more aware of the racial differences and language to use with other Black students. An example from the self-report, a Black Hijabi student was asked by another Black student if she had “good” or “bad” hair underneath her hijab. In the Black community, “good hair” is longer, looser, more manageable hair while “bad hair” is shorter, tighter, less manageable hair. Despite the benefits of “bad hair” such as serving as a roadmap for enslaved peoples and warding of lice, the proximity of “good hair” to

White standards of beauty and acceptability can make it more desirable to some Black people. This could be why the Black Hijabi participant felt that the other Black student was being microaggressive towards her and could also explain the results, if other Black participants had similar experiences in racially diverse/predominately Black schools.

For Black students' current mental health and the level of racial discrimination experienced in the K-12 school system, there was no significant relationship and participants had generally moderate to high levels of well-being. This result is not consistent with that of Dudovitz et al. (2021), which found that Black adults who experienced racial discrimination/microaggressions suffered from negative mental and physical health outcomes such as depressive symptoms, stress, and smoking. The difference in these results could be because of the extremely large sample size and younger age of the participants of the study conducted by Dudovitz et al. (2021), compared to this current study in which the sample size was smaller, and the participants ages were older making it harder for them to remember. Another reason that a significant relationship may not exist is that current well-being scores were all relatively adequate, making it harder to establish a significant relationship statistically.

Even though there was no significant relationship between Black students' current well-being and the level of racial bias or discrimination experienced in the K-12 school system, 247 out of 304 participants reported they had experienced racial microaggressions in the K-12 school system and could recall those instances they had experienced racial discrimination and microaggressions consistently. Although the degree

of microaggressive/discriminatory behaviors varied, they all had a significant impact on participants for them to be able to recall them, some incredibly detailed, years later as adults. Participants responses were categorized as either racially microaggressive behaviors or racially discriminatory experiences, although some can be both. Some racially microaggressive behaviors participants described was being told their “nappy” hair looked better straightened, their skin was too dark, their clothing and appearance looked “ghetto” and “hood,” etc. Some racially discriminatory experiences participants described were exclusion from friendships because they were too “dark,” accusations and suspicions of wrongdoing despite exemplary grades and behavior, singled out for their hairstyles and outfits by teachers in the presence of their classmates, disregarded complaints of teachers and students using racial slurs by school administration, etc.

Based on the participants responses from the self-report, the K-12 school system needs to work harder and account for some of these school policies and staff/classroom attitudes that can be detrimental to the learning and mental health of Black students. Some ways the K-12 school system can better accommodate Black students are including mental health and racial discussions in school policy and curriculum, providing resources and support for Black students, training staff/faculty in racial and cultural awareness/differences, acknowledging and standing behind Black students, enforcing explicit, non-discriminatory school policies/dress codes, and consistently and properly enforcing consequences for instances of racial discrimination or microaggression.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

It was unexpected that students of color would experience more racial microaggressions within a diverse or predominantly Black school. One limitation of this finding is that the survey failed to account for the composition of teachers when asking this question. That is, while participants might have attended a diverse school, they may not have had a similarly diverse staff. While having a more diverse set of classmates is important, teachers are one of the biggest aspects of a school environment and that showed in the self-report responses, so including questions on the composition of the teachers would have been beneficial in the results. Another limitation is that, while some items were used from previously established scales, this measure was created for this study and lacked any reliability or validity evidence.

A future study can be more detailed by conducting a longitudinal study and following middle school or high school Black students into college or the workforce to evaluate the long-term effect of racial discrimination and racial microaggressions on the mental health of the now Black adults or comparing the racial climate of the middle/high school to the racial climate of the college and the impact that might have on the mental health of the Black adults.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE: February 12, 2024

TO: Ama Boateng  
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [2160803-1] The Influence of School Policies and Attitudes On Black Students' Mental Health

REFERENCE #: IRB# 24-198

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: February 12, 2024

REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Exempt Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by an *implied* consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Robin Pyles at (270) 745-3360 or Robin.Pyles@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Project Title:** The Influence of School Policies and Attitudes On Black Students' Mental Health  
**Investigator:** Ama Boateng, Psychology Department, [ama.boateng772@topper.wku.edu](mailto:ama.boateng772@topper.wku.edu) (Faculty)  
**Sponsor:** Sarah Bonis, Ph.D. [sarah.bonis@wku.edu](mailto:sarah.bonis@wku.edu)



You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you consent to participate in this project.

**You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.**

In this document, I will explain in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may email any questions you have to help you understand the project.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please click the button below to give your consent and continue to the survey. Please print this page if you would like to keep a copy of this form.

- 1. Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this study is to explore how school policies and educator attitudes towards Black hair affect Black students and their mental health and how schools can better address these policies (or lack thereof). Results for this survey could help guide future research in this area and help schools provide a safe, healthy environment for Black students, by expanding and working on school policies and attitudes.
- 2. Explanation of Procedures:** The first portion of this survey will ask you about your experiences with racism, microaggressions, hair, and dress codes, in the K-12 school system. After this, you will be asked about the impact these experiences had on your mental health and self-esteem. You will then answer questions about the level of support and protection you received inside and outside the K-12 school system. In the final portion of the survey, you will be asked for basic demographic information. This survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.
- 3. Discomfort and Risks:** Given the nature of the content (discussion of racism, discrimination), you may feel uncomfortable or unpleasant while completing the survey. If you or someone you know have experienced a situation similar to the content of the survey, you may experience anxiety or other stress responses when reading the survey.
- 4. Benefits:** A monetary amount will be provided to you for your participation in this study (\$8/hour). The results of this study can also help guide future research and support schools or educators in matters related to covert racism.
- 5. Confidentiality:** Names are not collected in any portion of the survey. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. and advising faculty for a minimum of three years following the study.
- 6. Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

*You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.*

***Your continued cooperation with the following research implies your consent.***

Please enter your PROIRIC ID. Note: You will not receive credit unless we have your PROIRIC ID.

Thank you for participating in this study. This survey will ask you questions about your experience in K-12 school, specifically potential instances of discrimination.

According to the American Psychological Association, **racism** is a form of prejudice that generally includes negative emotional reactions to members of a group, acceptance of negative stereotypes, and **racial discrimination** against individuals; in some cases it can lead to violence. **Racial discrimination refers to the differential treatment of different racial groups at the individual level and the institutional/structural level.** Discrimination is usually the behavioral manifestation of prejudice and involves negative, hostile, and injurious treatment of members of rejected groups.

Have you experienced racial discrimination in the past six months?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

How often have you experienced racial discrimination in the past six months?

- Always (at least weekly)
- Often (every 2-3 weeks)
- Sometimes (more than twice)
- Rarely (only one instance)
- Never

Did you ever experienced racial discrimination in the K-12 school system?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

How often did you experience racial discrimination in the K-12 school system?

- Always (at least weekly)
- Often (every 2-3 weeks)
- Sometimes (more than twice)
- Rarely (only one instance)
- Never

Dress-coded is when you receive a consequence for being in violation of a dress expectation at school. This might be a verbal warning, a disciplinary referral, or something else. Being in violation of a dress code might include anything related to your clothes or overall appearance like hair, skin, piercings, etc. Have you ever been dress-coded in the K-12 school system?

- Yes (Indicate which level: HS, MS, ES)

- Unsure
- No

How often were you dress-coded in the K-12 school system?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Were you ever dress-coded in the K-12 school system due to racial discrimination?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

How often were you dress-coded in the K-12 school system due to racial discrimination?

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
- Every time

Have you ever been dress-coded because of your hair or the style of your hair?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

How often were you dress-coded because of your hair or the style of your hair?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

At my school, there is always a purple elephant running around. What color is the elephant?

- green
- purple
- blue

According to the American Psychological Association, Microaggression events refer to everyday derogations, slights, and invalidations that are often delivered to people of minority or marginalized backgrounds. Have you ever experienced racial microaggressions in the K-12 school system?

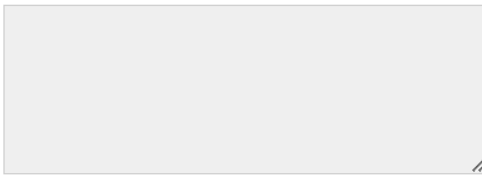
- Yes (If yes, indicate which level: HS, MS, ES)

- Unsure
- No

How often did you experience racial microaggressions in the K-12 school system?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Think of the most memorable time that you experienced racial discrimination in K-12 school as it related to your hair, dress, or appearance more generally. To the extent that you are comfortable, please describe that experience in as much detail as possible.



Did you feel any mental distress after the discriminatory encounter?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

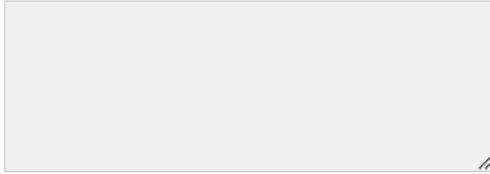
Level of mental distress after the discriminatory encounter?

- Very high
- High
- Medium
- Low
- Very low

Was your mental state affected after the discriminatory encounter?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

If yes, how was your mental state affected after the discriminatory encounter?



Have you experienced low self-esteem because of the discriminatory encounter?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Please select Unsure as your response to this question.

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Do you think the K-12 school system did anything to protect you from facing racial discrimination?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No



Did the K-12 school system show support for you after you faced racial discrimination?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Did you find support anywhere else apart from the K-12 school system?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

If so, where?

Did you receive any mental health care after facing racial discrimination?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

Do you think the K-12 school system provides adequate support to Black students after they face racial microaggressions/discrimination?

- Yes
- Unsure
- No

If so, how? And if not, how do you think they can?

Please indicate for each of the five statements which is closest to how you have been feeling over the past two weeks.

	All of the time	Most of the time	More than half of the time	Less than half of the time	Some of the time	At no time
I have felt cheerful and in good spirits.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have felt calm and relaxed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have felt active and vigorous.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I woke up feeling fresh and rested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What year were you born?

Gender Identity (select all that apply):

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary / non-conforming
- Transgender
- Other

- Prefer not to respond

Sexual Orientation

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Heterosexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Other

- Prefer not to Respond

Race

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Biracial/Multiracial
- Other

**Ethnicity**

- Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- Prefer not to Respond

Which of the following best describes the location of the high school you attended?

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

How would you describe the school where you completed most of your K-12 education.

- Predominantly white
- Predominantly black
- Diverse (a mix of many ethnic backgrounds represented)

What is your highest level of education?

- Less than high school diploma
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college, no degree
- Currently enrolled in college
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other
- 
- Prefer not to Respond

Thank you for your time participating in this survey. Should you require additional support, please consider one of the following resources:

<https://blackmentalhealth.com/connect-with-a-therapist/>

<https://www.freeblacktherapy.org/>