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Does the Doctrine of "Separation of Church and State" Matter?: Examining the Experiences of Black Christian Families in Massachusetts Public School System

Stephanie Denise Okwudi

DOES THE DOCTRINE OF "SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE" MATTER?: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK CHRISTIAN FAMILIES IN MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

A Dissertation Presented

by

STEPHANIE DENISE OKWUDI

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ABSTRACT

DOES THE DOCTRINE OF "SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE" MATTER?: EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK CHRISTIAN FAMILIES IN MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

August 2024

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Students have full freedom under the law to practice religion in public schools. This is especially important for Black students, for whom religion has been shown to improve academic achievement and to mitigate many stressors they face. However, due to misinterpretations of the "separation of church and state" (or the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment), schools may inadvertently suppress the religious freedom of students instead of actively providing a safe space for religious practice. For this research, a single embedded intrinsic case study was conducted to determine how the separation of church and state doctrine manifested in the experiences of Black Christian students and their families in the Massachusetts public school system. Data from nine Black Christian middle or high school students and 10 parents of Black Christian middle or high school students were

collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using cultural-historical activity theory and critical race theory.

Interview responses revealed that students were able to engage with religion and implement Christian values learned at home while at school. However, not all values were important to schools, and students received mixed messages regarding Christianity. Moreover, the public school environment did not feel inclusive for the Christian students. Student participants did not mention the establishment clause directly, but they knew how the environment felt. Some of the parents did point to the separation of church and state as the reason public schools do not allow more conversation around Christianity. The study results show that schools in Massachusetts have an opportunity to be culturally responsive by affirming the Christian identity of students. Churches can also become involved with public schools to further support Black Christian students and their families.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I pray that no Christian nationalist, politician, or otherwise oppressive person/group attempts to pervert it. Jesus has and always will stand for and with the oppressed. Let us resist the urge to be like the Pharisees.

To my children Naomi and Jesse: Always remember that Jesus loves you and will help you when you need it.

To my mom, grandmother, and nana: This is a continuation of your legacy. I pray it lives on for generations to come.

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I would first like to thank my dissertation committee members for their time, effort, honesty, guidance, and support. Dr. Farinde-Wu, you gave me the firm but loving pushes that allowed me to get through the most difficult parts of writing this dissertation. Your understanding of what it was like doing this work while mothering toddlers motivated me to continue when I wanted to give up. Dr. Banwo, thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone and giving me tools to be a thorough researcher. Dr. Jett, thank you for providing me with resources, encouragement, and detailed feedback throughout this process.

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Thank you to my colleagues and students at the Henderson K–12 Inclusion School. I appreciate your kindness, grace, advice, support, trust, and openness over the years. I have been blessed to be part of such a loving and vibrant community. A special thank you to Sevan Marinilli for consistently being there for me.

I also want to thank my children Naomi and Jesse for being such wonderful kids! Being your mom is a gift. To my husband Tobe: Your commitment to your family is something I cherish. Thank you for the stability you gave and for making positive changes when you could.

Thank you to every person who poured into my life and my children's lives while I was completing this work. To my mom, dad, stepmom, and in-laws: Thank you for being the best grandparents my children could ask for! To Janice Thomas: You are a blessing from God, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. To Sonya: Thank you for being a home away from home and such a loving caretaker for the kids. To my sister Amina: Thank you for spending time in between semesters with your niece and nephew. To my sister Angie: Thank you for spending weekend after weekend being a second mom, maid, cook, and whatever else we needed. I could not have done this without you! To the Momah household: Thank you for providing a respite whenever our family needed it. Thank you to everyone who prayed for me. I could feel your prayers lifting me up in my most difficult moments. I genuinely have a super village and feel so loved and cared for.

Lastly, Lamentations 3:22–23 says, "The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is His faithfulness;His mercies begin afresh each morning" (NLT). I have lived out this verse every day of writing this dissertation, and I must acknowledge God's sustaining grace in getting it done. I truly thank Jesus for all He has given me.

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PREFACE

I had to run to my car and take a breath; I was shaken, angry, and hurt. All I did was ask a group of students to go to class. What followed that simple request was a barrage of insults where I was called derogatory names and made fun of. While in my car, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. I wanted to yell, but it didn't seem like it would help. The only thing I knew to do in that moment was open the Bible.

I went to the Bible app on my phone and clicked on whatever chapter was already cued up. It happened to be 1 Peter chapter 3. As I read, I came upon verses 8 and 9:

> Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Thank you, God! That scripture was the help and reminder that I needed. Oh, how I wished I could share what I found with others, especially students. I know they go through similar challenges and need something to help them, but I can't; I work in a public school. Even so, I wonder how many times the Christian students who go to my school remember these scriptures or look them up when they're having a challenging day. Do they know they can use their religion when at school?

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Religion[1] in public schools is a delicate subject because public schools are government institutions, and support of religious practices within their walls can seem like government interference, thus violating the First Amendment. This is especially true regarding the actions and words of teachers and administrators who hold positions of authority and act as agents of the government (Strasser, 2009). At the same time, individuals educated in public schools may deem their religion so important that they want to speak about it or engage with it while at school.

With religion being an important component in people's lives, it would make sense for school districts to ensure that teachers, administrators, and other school personnel know what they and students can and cannot do regarding the discussion and practice of religion as a means of supporting academic achievement. It would be helpful to know how students utilize their religion, or if there are barriers to students utilizing their religion, while navigating the public school system. This research study explored these areas of inquiry for a small subset of religious students—Black Christian students—to add to the knowledge base educators already have on how to support Black students. This chapter begins by defining

[1] Although this study focused on students who practice Christianity, I referenced religion in general when writing about feelings, attitudes, and laws regarding religious practice.

key terms used throughout the study, then describes the background of the topic, discusses the problem statement, significance of the study, and research purpose, and introduces the research questions. The chapter also offers a rationale for using Massachusetts as the study location and focusing of Black Christian students and their parents.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms are used frequently in this dissertation. Providing definitions ensures that readers will understand their meanings in the context of this research.

Public Schools

Public schools are defined as "free tax-supported school[s] controlled by a local governmental authority" ("Public School," n.d.). For the purposes of this research, public schools could be traditional schools, charter schools, or vocational/agricultural public schools.

Charter Schools

A charter school is a type of public school. Charter schools are "tuition-free [schools] of choice that [are] publicly funded but independently run" (Prothero, 2018).

Vocational/Agricultural Schools

To maintain confidentiality in this study, participants were not asked to indicate whether they attended a vocational or agricultural public school. Therefore, the definitions of both are given. A vocational public school teaches students "the valuable skills they need to perform a particular task or job. These schools usually provide practical training that focuses on a single field" (Tallo, n.d, para. 1). Agricultural schools give students opportunities to learn about "animal science, large and small animal care, agricultural mechanics and technology, biotechnology, food science, entrepreneurship, sustainable use and management

of natural resources, veterinary science, and the production, processing, marketing and distribution of agricultural commodities and services" (The Council, 2023, para. 3).

Achievement Gap

The term "achievement gap" is used to describe variations in learning and education attainment between socioeconomically advantaged and White and Asian students, and socioeconomically disadvantaged and minoritized students (Murphy, 2010). The literature review (Chapter 2) includes a section with information on, and critiques of, the achievement gap.

Black

According to Sullivan (2009), "racial identity is an ambiguous and socially constructed concept" (p. 164) gained through everyday encounters and self-evaluation. Being Black is not a single thing but, rather, is complex and consists of individual identification (Sullivan, 2009). Therefore, when I refer in this dissertation to Black people or students, I am referring to those who self-identify as Black.

Culture

When I reference a student's or family's "culture," I am referring to the viewpoints and routines that students and families identify with and see themselves reflected in (Crotty, 1998). When the word "culture" is used in other aspects, it refers to human behavior, a set of control mechanisms, or individuals' way of life (Crotty, 1998; Nelson et al., 1992).

Religion

In this research, "religion" is based on my conceptualization of the word. As discussed in a later section, spirituality is often separated from religion. However, when the

word “religion” is used in this research, it refers to any and all practices that foster a connection to a higher power.

Christian

Although reviewing the history of Christianity is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to acknowledge that “Christian” does not mean the same thing to everyone. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a Christian as "one who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ" (“Christian,” n.d.). However, within Christian faith communities, there is disagreement regarding the deity of Jesus, the path to salvation, and Biblical inerrancy. This study relied on a more traditional understanding of Christianity and defined a Christian as someone who believes that Jesus died on the cross to “save” them (Got Questions Ministries, 2018). However, it is recognized that there are different expressions, traditions, denominations, and sects of Christianity that were not represented in this study.

Religious Engagement

“Religious engagement” refers to prayer, reading sacred texts, listening to religious music, attending religious services, and talking to others about religion or God.

The First Amendment and the Establishment Clause

The U.S. Constitution is the written documentation of the country’s charter. It was created in 1787 and signed in 1788 (U.S. Senate, n.d.). The first change, or amendment, to the Constitution was made in 1791 and read,

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances (U.S. Senate, n.d.).

Therefore, when the "First Amendment" or "establishment clause" is used in this dissertation, the term references the aforementioned section of the U.S. Constitution.

Background

Religion has many different meanings for different people. Some say that religion is the belief in God or a Supreme Being, but there are religions, such as Taoism, Hinduism, Secular Humanism, Buddhism, and Ethical Culture, that may not necessarily teach the existence of a God (Choper, 1982) or may teach the existence of multiple gods. The conversation may become even more complex depending on which academic discipline is attempting to define religion, religiosity, or spirituality (Holdcroft, 2006). Some researchers have studied religious commitment, religious knowledge, intrinsic religion, extrinsic religion, belief in doctrines, worship, rituals, the relationship with a higher power, church attendance, and many other areas. Religious pluralism in the United States has created such variations in what "religion" or "religious belief" is that there is no way to create a "one size fits all" definition (Choper, 1982).

Regardless of how religion is defined or expressed, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects individual freedom around a variety of acts from government interference, including, but not limited to, the belief in and practice of religion. This means that the U.S. government cannot tell people to believe or not believe in any particular God or coerce or force people to practice a particular religion, nor can the government prohibit people from engaging in religious practices. These rules apply to all government organizations, including public schools.

Pretend for a moment that you are a public school teacher. One morning, you go to the cafeteria to monitor the students during breakfast and see that a large prayer circle has

formed. Some students have joined the circle and are taking turns praying out loud, while other students are watching nearby. The circle is causing a noticeable buzz in the cafeteria, and some of the other teachers are wondering if the students are allowed to pray like this. After all, it is a public school, and there should be a separation of church and state. But what exactly does "separation of church and state" mean, and how far does it go in regulating the rights of religious students? Is the academic potential of students affected when the norms and expectations of public schools interact with the students' religious lives?

Enacted in 1791, the First Amendment forbids states from forcing people to practice a certain religion and also protects individuals' freedom to choose which religion they want to practice. This part of the Constitution is often referred to as the "separation of church and state" and has guided public school involvement in religious practices. It is important that schools do not impede a student's First Amendment right to express their religion, but, at the same time, schools cannot force anyone to be religious or practice a particular religion (Graves et al., 2010). Students are allowed to pray at school, read sacred texts, and organize religious groups (Haynes, 2011). However, due to misinterpretations of the separation of church and state, schools may not recognize these rights, inadvertently suppressing the religious freedom of students instead of actively providing a safe space for religious practice (Haynes, 2011). This can be a major problem since religion has been shown to positively impact students' educational achievement (McKune & Hoffmann, 2009). The consequences of the improper implementation of the separation of church and state may be even greater for Black students, for whom religion can mitigate many stressors they face (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014). This study sought to examine, from the perspectives of Black Christian students (a small subset of religious students) and their families, how the

implementation of the separation of church and state influences their academic lives as they attend public schools.

Problem Statement

Research on ways to eliminate or reduce the achievement gap is prevalent in academia and has been conducted for decades. The achievement gap refers to "differences in academic achievement between socioeconomically advantaged and White and Asian students, and their minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged peers" (Murphy, 2010, p. 3). At one point in the 1970s and 1980s, this gap began to close but has since begun to widen (Jeynes, 2015).

Researchers have proposed numerous solutions from multiple angles. These include in-school solutions, such as school environment, curriculum, and teacher-based interventions, as well as outside solutions such as family factors and government support (Jeynes, 2015). Even with all these proposed solutions, religion still stands out as one of the most significant measures for reducing the achievement gap (Barrett, 2009; Jeynes, 2010, 2015; Phillips, 2018). The problem with religion as a means for increasing school achievement is that the use of religion-based strategies cannot be suggested by public schools. So, on the one hand, research has shown that a particular factor has the potential to positively impact student achievement, but, on the other hand, schools cannot utilize that factor. The good news is that students can express their religious beliefs and practice their religion without schools, teachers, or administrators getting involved. However, students may not be getting this message as they attend public schools; instead, they may be hearing the message that religion (specifically Christianity, in the context of this study) has no place in a public school.

The perception that religious practice is not allowed in U.S. public schools is false. The truth is that students are granted freedom of religion under the First Amendment. Schools cannot endorse religious views, practices, or a particular religion over others, but students are allowed to pray in school, read sacred texts in school, gather for fellowship with others who share their faith, and even disseminate religious literature. While I agree that the goal of a public school is not to create religious students or promote religious beliefs, I also believe that students should not feel slighted because of their religious practices or beliefs.

From my own personal experience and based on the experiences of friends and family, students of various religions rely on prayer, gathering with others who practice their faith, and reading sacred texts to guide, motivate, and support them. Findings in the literature also support religion as a factor in student academic growth (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010; Barrett, 2010b; Jeynes, 2007; McCullough & Carter, 2013; McKune & Hoffmann, 2009; Smith, 2003). However, due to teachers' and administrators' misunderstanding of the First Amendment and school personnel's fears of breaking the law, some public schools can feel like places where religion is not welcomed (Graves et al., 2010). Students may also feel forced to leave out religion, an important part of their lives, during the school day due to perceived pressure from adults in charge. As unintended consequences, school personnel fail to know the whole child, miss out on opportunities to motivate students in different ways academically (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014), and create a school climate that does not meet the needs of religious students. This can be especially true for Black students, for whom religion and spirituality may carry considerable cultural significance (Taylor & Chatters, 2010).

For example, take Milaun (pseudonym), a Black Christian girl who, when her mother told me this story, was a ninth-grade student attending a public school in Boston. Milaun's school requires students to pass an exam administered during their eighth-grade year to gain admission. She and her friends hoped they would attend the same high school and continue their close bond, so they decided to pray for their performance on the test. During their prayer, one of Milaun's teachers saw them and instructed them to stop their prayer and go to class. While recapping this story, Milaun's mother asked me, "Why wouldn't the teacher let them pray if it was important to them?" Her question was important, especially regarding her daughter's success. If Milaun drew strength from prayer and used it in her life to cope with stress, encourage herself, and help her perform better academically, why didn't the teacher, first, know this information and, second, use it to support Milaun?

This story reminded me of a similar situation that happened to me. Several years ago, students were getting ready for a science fair and, prior to the start, one asked me if he could pray. I told him it was okay, and in the middle of the auditorium, he formed a prayer circle with those who also wanted to pray. I watched them but deliberately stood on the outside of the circle, did not bow my head, and did not close my eyes. My deliberate actions were out of fear that I would get in trouble if I joined. At the same time, I felt obligated to support my student in what he deemed important.

My point in telling these stories is not to highlight the difference between myself and the other teacher, nor is it to paint Milaun's teacher in a bad light. Milaun's teacher may have thought she was doing the right thing, but for Milaun, it sent the message that her Christian practice was not important or appropriate within the context of the school day. However, prayer was an important component of Milaun's home life, and neither the school

environment, nor the action of the teacher supported it. Had Milaun's teacher known the rules regarding religious freedom, or if the school climate substantiated the religious needs of Milaun, the teacher may have suggested a different time or place within the school for the students to pray instead of telling them to stop altogether. In both examples, prayer was important for the two students as an aspect of their time at school. Unfortunately, one was discouraged from leaning on that strength, while the other was supported. The students in both stories are Black which caused me to wonder if interactions like the ones described hold even more weight for someone who already faces discrimination in society?

The actions of Milaun's teacher were most likely due to lack of knowledge rather than maliciousness. I have been a teacher for 11 years and have never been given any literature on the religious rights of students. There was little mention of religion in my teacher preparation course, no mention in my new teacher orientation, and no training regarding religion in public schools during the numerous professional development meetings I have attended. I have not heard any of my fellow educators speak about training they have received on the religious rights of students or exclusions and allowances as educators. Trainings have been offered on religious tolerance, but that is different from stating explicitly what students, teachers, and administrators can and cannot do regarding including or excluding religion in public schools generally.

Previous research mirrors my personal experience and has shown trends in other schools. A 2010 study was conducted in Texas to determine teachers' perceptions of the role of religion in K–12 public schools (Graves et al., 2010). The study found that 25 of the 26 participants surveyed were confused about laws around religion in schools and that teachers desired "clarification of school policy on how religion can or cannot be addressed at school"

(Graves et al., 2010, p. 15). Another study (Luke, 2004, as cited in Graves et al., 2010) found that only 18.5% of the 168 high school teachers surveyed stated that what they knew about the First Amendment and laws regarding religion in schools came from job training. A 2017 study concluded that teacher education programs in Massachusetts did not routinely and concretely address, or train preservice teachers on, religion-clause issues related to secondary content-area teaching, curriculum, and professional beliefs (Henry, 2017). This finding was validated in this study. Though some literature offers clear guidelines on the religious rights of students, that literature does not seem to make its way into the hands of educators.

Research has uncovered a relative silence around the practice of religion in public schools, conveying a message by teachers and administrators that religion is not important or that it is taboo. "Approaches to teaching and learning in U.S. public schools have historically avoided students' religious identities and religious literacies" (Skerrett, 2016, p. 965). Instead of risking disciplinary or legal action, school personnel have directly prohibited religious expression in schools (Haynes, 2011). Some direct examples include school personnel banning a student from saying a prayer during lunch, a teacher stopping a student from writing a report based on a Biblical story, or a school district refusing to allow church Christmas party invitations to be handed out by a student (Haynes, 2011; Loconte, 1996). I argue that school personnel's silence and ignorance regarding the practice of religion in public schools sends an indirect message that religion is not important and creates an environment that does not support the spiritual needs of religious students. This is especially troubling because research has shown that "students' religious identities are part of their social and cultural identities, repertoires of meaning-making, and come together to support their academic learning" (Skerrett, 2016, p. 969). Additionally, for minority students,

religious commitment has been shown to produce higher academic aspirations, higher test scores, and even narrow the achievement gap (Barrett, 2009; Coleman, 2023; Holland, 2014; Jeynes, 2007). There is an opportunity to expand on current research and even make new discoveries regarding the experiences of religious students who attend public schools.

This research sought to contribute to the literature on reducing the achievement gap by learning from a small subset of minorities: Black Christian students. Research has shown that the practice of religion is a staple in the lives of many students, as they oftentimes use their religion "in confronting the diverse challenges they face in their homes, schools, communities, and broader society" (Taylor & Chatters, 2010, p. 291), as well as a source of strength and motivation (Kim & Esquival, 2011). Instead of proposing new methods for addressing the achievement gap, my goal was to explore how students use what they already have—their religion—and what barriers they may face when using it. There is obviously something about religious practices that helps students in public schools, but, unfortunately, public schools can seem like a competing force because of misinterpretations of the separation of church state.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because religion and spirituality assist in stress management, promote resilience, increase motivation, curb high-risk behaviors, and may narrow the achievement gap (Barrett, 2010b; Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014). Despite these documented positive associations, schools often discount religion as a means of supporting students. There is ambiguity in schools about what the separation of church and state means in the context of religious rights, and it is important to determine if this ambiguity influences students as they navigate the

public school system. Students should be supported in the various areas they feel can help them succeed academically, and for many students, religion or spirituality is that source of support. In dismissing religion by failing to either talk about it or acknowledge students' rights to engage in religious practices, schools are disregarding lessons that families deem important (Zhang, 2015). This is especially problematic for students of color, who are already marginalized in public schools and for whom religion has had positive effects (Barrett, 2009). Such a major source of support should not be ignored, but much of the current research has failed to include students' voices in this conversation. Researching this matter can add to the discussion around supporting religious needs as a means of enhancing academic achievement.

Furthermore, culturally competent practices have been at the forefront of discussions in many U.S. school districts as a means for supporting the advancement of immigrant and minority students (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Kamm, 2018; Landa, 2017). This includes cities in Massachusetts, the state on which this research focused. For example, in September 2016, the former superintendent of Boston Public Schools (BPS), Tommy Chang, posted a letter on the BPS website asking his staff to focus on diversity. In the letter, he stated, "We need to make sure that we are sustaining and affirming the cultural, racial, and linguistic identity of our young people." As a result, many schools began embarking on professional development regarding culture after the superintendent's plea. While religion is arguably a salient aspect of culture and plays a key role in sustaining the cultures of many minority students (Dallavis, 2011), the religious and spiritual needs of students have not been on the agenda. Therefore, researching the experiences of Black Christian students supports the goals of some school districts that are aiming to be more culturally proficient.

Though I detail my researcher positionality in Chapter 3, I offer here a brief overview of why this topic is personal for me. First, I am a public school teacher who, until recently, did not know the rules regarding religion or religious expression in public schools. I knew that school employees could not "proselytize" but had no idea what could be considered as proselytizing. More importantly, I did not know if students were allowed to proselytize or to what extent they could practice their religion in public schools. I know people who faced different types of adversity during their middle and high school years and who garnered strength from and support through their religious beliefs and practices. Prayer, listening to religious messages, reading religious texts, and having relationships with friends who gave encouragement using principles from shared beliefs were just some of the practices that were vital in helping them through difficult times. As I saw students go through different hardships that affected their academic performance, I began wondering if they were religious and if their religion could also help them.

Not only am I a public school teacher, but I am also a Black Christian woman. My religion has been integral to helping me manage my life and accomplish my goals. I filter most of my experiences through the lens of Christianity. During adolescence, I experienced numerous personal and academic struggles. My Christian beliefs helped me through my personal problems but seemed removed from my academics. I spent most of my schooling unaware of how to use my Christian beliefs to help me academically. I do not know if that was because of my own personal life or because the school environment sent subtle messages that religion should not be mixed with my education. However, upon reflection, I can say that my Christian beliefs would have helped me have a more constructive schooling experience. Therefore, I now wish to find out from Black Christian students what their experiences are to

determine if there are additional ways to help Black students attending public schools succeed with the help of their religion.

Elephant in the Research

Before I continue, I must address the elephant in the research: the history of Christianity and public schools. It is not lost on me that public schools have been used as a means of Christian indoctrination throughout American history. The chronicles of education for non-White people in America are robust, and I am unable to provide a complete review here. However, one thing is clear: Schooling for Black and Indigenous individuals had much to do with converting them to Christianity.

When the colonies of the early republic were first established, religious education was commonplace, and "where schools were founded, religious conformity was taught and enforced" (Dierenfield, 1962). As America continued to grow, common schools, the precursor to modern public schools, were established. It is often claimed that Horace Mann, the founder of common schools, wanted schools to be secular, but this is incorrect (Dierenfield, 1962; Komline, 2020). As Dierenfield (1962) explained, Mann opposed schools that were sectarian and felt that "the Bible was not a sectarian book and so long as it was read without interpretation it could be legally used in the public schools" (p. 11). Therefore, using public schools to teach Christianity goes back to the inception of America and its public school system.

However commonplace, the teaching of Christianity was not the same for White and Black people. For White people, it was a normal part of education. For Black people it was an attempt to "fix" them and make them societally acceptable (Woodson, 1919). As Woodson (1919) wrote, "The first educators to take up the work of [educating] American

Negroes were clergy-men interested in the propagation of the gospel among the *heathen* [emphasis added] of the new world" (p. 18). This is true for the so-called "free North" and the South that had an economic structure that allowed for the enslavement of Black people. According to Woodson (1919), prior to the end of slavery in the North, schooling was offered to Black and Brown individuals but strictly as a means of introducing them to Christianity and allowing them to read the Bible. He went on to explain that even though churches were setting up schools, they still, for the most part, did not condemn the system of slavery in the South. At the same time, it was believed to be the duty of the masters to teach their slaves about Christianity to give them a moral foundation. As public schooling for Black people became more accessible, its use to change the perceived immoral, depraved, and ignorant nature of Black people through religious teachings remained (Woodson, 1919).

I fully acknowledge the discomfort this research may bring up due to the history of Christianity and public schools. This research in no way wishes to ignore, rewrite, or reinterpret the violent history enacted on Black and Indigenous people through religion. As uncomfortable as this history is, there are Black Christians who have a story of their own to tell—a counternarrative to the atrocities people have committed in the name of Christianity. As Gates (2022) stated, "It isn't religion that keeps beings [in bondage]; it is violence" (p. xvii). For the participants in this study, Christianity was a story of hope, liberation, and love. It is important to hear their experiences and amplify their voice.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this single embedded intrinsic case study was to explore the experiences of Black Christian students and their families as they utilized the Massachusetts public school system, which operates under the doctrine of separation of church and state.

Since religion has been shown to positively impact academic achievement by narrowing the achievement gap and serving as a path to success (Barrett, 2010b), it is important to examine the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools. Although exploring the experiences of Black students from every religious background went beyond the scope of this study, this research sought to gain insights from Black Christian students as a beginning step.

Drawing on cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this study approached the religion of students as an activity system that interacted with the public school activity system. This interaction produced outcomes for students that have implications for motivation, identity, and achievement. In addition, critical race theory (CRT) was used to uncover structures of power that make their way into the lives of Black students, even regarding their religion. This study was guided by the following central research question and sub-questions:

- Central Question: How does the doctrine of "separation of church and state" manifest in the experiences of Black Christian students and families in the public school system in Massachusetts?
    - Sub-Question 1: In what ways do religion and receiving a public school education intersect for Black Christian Students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
    - Sub-Question 2: How does the intersection of race and religion manifest in the educational experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?

- Sub-Question 3: In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?

In addressing these questions, I examined the extent to which students felt supported in an area that had significant personal meaning and could assist them academically. In addition, their responses highlighted contradictions between their religion and their schooling. Any contradictions that emerged were examined to determine if they had negative ramifications for students and their families. Learning from students and parents gives educators, church leaders, and policymakers information that can lead to the creation of environments that make it easier for students to use their religion in ways that are meaningful to their academic lives. This information also offers educators insights into how to change school environments to better serve minoritized students who are religious.

Why Black Christian Students?

Christian Privilege

Misunderstandings about religious rights affect students from all religious backgrounds. However, negative outcomes can be amplified if the student is a member of a U.S. religious minority such as Muslims or Buddhists. It is not uncommon to see stories about members of a religious minoritized group fighting for equal treatment or against oppression. In these cases, religious leaders rely heavily on the U.S. Constitution for protection (Berg, 2004). In addition, researchers have recognized that religious minorities who attend public schools face challenges that go unrecognized and unaddressed, informing academic literature that addresses the specific needs of religious minorities who attend U.S. public schools. At the same time, it is rare to find secular literature that addresses the religious needs of Christian students who attend public schools.

The lack of research focusing on this particular population is not surprising because Christians are a religious majority in the United States. This means that Christians are given "de facto protection in various ways, since religion is intertwined with culture and moral values and culture will tend to represent widely held faiths and values" (Berg, 2004, pp. 925–926). Therefore, though it may seem unnecessary to talk about the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools, I argue that being a White Christian holds the most privilege, far more than being a Christian alone.

It is true that by being members of a religious majority, *all* Christians are afforded certain privileges. These privileges include but are not limited to: having a good chance of finding a place of worship close to where they live, easily finding people who share the same religious beliefs, having their religious holidays declared official holidays, easily finding religious texts or literature based on their religion, and finding people who understand their religious views. However, these conveniences do not automatically translate into societal benefits for Black students, who continue to face systemic racism and oppression, even as Christians. Privilege is not equal across races, and although Christianity and being a Christian have afforded people opportunities throughout the centuries, Black Christians have been excluded from most of them. Therefore, I chose to research the experiences of Black Christian students, a population that may be overlooked because of their assumed privileged status in relation to Christianity. Viewing Black Christian students through the work of Sylvia Wynter on the history of racial hierarchies in Christianity provided a rationale for my choice: Being a Christian does not mitigate oppression and is not a privilege for those considered as "other," that is, Black people. Thus, Black Christian students are an important focus of research in urban education.

Racial Hierarchies in Christianity

Wynter (2003) argued that throughout history there has always been a dichotomy between being human and being the "other." At one point in history, the humans were those who were a part of the church. Being a part of the church was more than just believing in Jesus; one had to be a clergyman, a priest, or someone who held a high position in the church. Anyone outside of those roles, whether they believed in Jesus or not, was still considered less than human. This illustrates that it was not necessarily Christianity that created privilege, but a man's position within the church. An individual's personal belief did not increase their status in society.

During colonialism, the same Christian system played out again. This time, those who were considered human were Christian *and* White, with being White taking precedence over being Christian. Black people who became Christian never rose to being seen as human even though they had the same religion as White people. Slave masters forced those stolen from Africa to accept the religion of Christianity (Wynter, 2003). However, many of those slaves did indeed read some of the Bible for themselves once they learned how to read (Cornelius, 1983). Therefore, not all Christian teaching and understanding came from White slave owners. And even if they did not read for themselves, they did listen intently to the message of Christianity from Black men and women who had learned to read the scriptures for themselves. Some of these people willingly accepted Jesus as their God. This acceptance, however, did not bring them any closer to being considered human than before their conversion. Therefore, for the slaves who chose Christianity, it was not a privilege and did not become a privilege to them at any point.

I highlight the following passage to show that during slavery, even a slave who learned to read and became a preacher was still, in the end, a slave:

> Most slaves who learned to read on their own initiative did so in a religious context, demonstrating that Christian teachings and opportunities could have liberating as well as conservative results. Knowing how to read gave slaves opportunities to assume religious leadership within the slave community, where reading and preaching were closely associated. (Cornelius, 1983, pp. 171–172)

This passage also shows that Black people during slavery had, to some extent, the opportunity to learn about Christianity and Jesus through a direct source. This makes it possible that some individuals truly believed in the teachings of the Bible because they wanted to, not merely because it was forced upon them. However, in the end, they remained slaves and did not have the same privileges as White Christians. Even after slavery was abolished, being a Christian did not afford a Black person privilege equal to that of a White person. With widespread oppression and systemic marginalization of people of color, a Black man saying he was a Christian *still* did not provide any relief from racial persecution. By viewing Black Christians through the historical lens of racial hierarchies in Christianity, it is possible to see how being a Black Christian does not fall into the same category as being just a Christian.

The intersectionality between—and how we frame the conversation about—race and religion undoubtedly has an impact on who has "power, voice, and representation and who does not" (Delgado et al., 2001, p. 55). This study sought to contribute to the research on narrowing the achievement gap by learning from a small subset of minorities: Black Christian students. Previous research has shown that religion practice is a staple in the lives

of many students who use their religion to "[confront] the diverse challenges they face in their homes, schools, communities, and broader society" (Taylor & Chatters, 2010, p. 291), as well as a source of strength and motivation (Kim & Esquival, 2011). Instead of proposing new methods for addressing the achievement gap, my goal was to explore how students use what they already have—their religion—and what barriers they may face when using it.

Why Massachusetts?

My primary reason for conducting research in Massachusetts was my connection to the state. I was born in Massachusetts, went to a public school in the state, and teach in the state. My parents and siblings still live in the state, and I am raising my own children in Massachusetts for the foreseeable future. I have a personal connection to the region and take pride in being a New Englander. It was important that my research be based on and have implications for the place I call home and the state I love.

My second reason for conducting research in Massachusetts was the uniqueness of its religious landscape compared with other states. Massachusetts has an intricate religious history that reaches back to the beginning of the American colonies (Roof & Johnson, 1991). The Puritans who settled in Massachusetts did so to escape religious persecution in England (Cammisa et al., 2006). However, they still believed in the importance of religious piety, which schools were established to promote. In 1647, Massachusetts passed a law requiring every town with 50 households to establish a school so that the Christian faith would be preserved (Herndon, 2004).

Over the next century, religion continued to tie directly into the politics of the state and influence the life of its inhabitants (Cammisa et al. 2006; Trickey, 2018). The majority of Christians in Massachusetts were Protestant and represented the Congregational Church,

Quakers, Baptists, Episcopalians, Universalists, and Methodists (Culver, 1929). People today may not see this diversity of denominations as significant, but in 18th- and 19th-century Massachusetts, it was a major concern. Although there was agreement among the different sects that a primary goal of schooling was to proselytize and/or solidify a student's faith, they feared that schools would be used to promote specific denominational ideologies. To prohibit this, laws were passed to ensure that no single Christian group assumed dominance in public spaces (Herndon, 2004).

This law had not yet impacted public schools in Massachusetts because towns had full control over the texts used in schools. Since the churches ran the towns, the texts often aligned with a particular Christian belief (Culver, 1929). This all changed under the leadership of Horace Mann, commonly considered the father of modern public schools. . With his appointment to Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837 came the creation of Normal Schools. Unlike schools run by towns, the Board of Education chose the texts for Normal Schools. The texts were not specific to one denomination but were supposed to teach morality and piety, which were common to all Christian sects (Culver, 1929). Although Normal Schools were not religion-free, the idea of one central government agency making the rules for what was taught in schools was implemented. Mann believed that religious teachings should be general and meet the needs of people with different beliefs, laying the groundwork for public schools to become increasingly secular (Herndon, 2004)

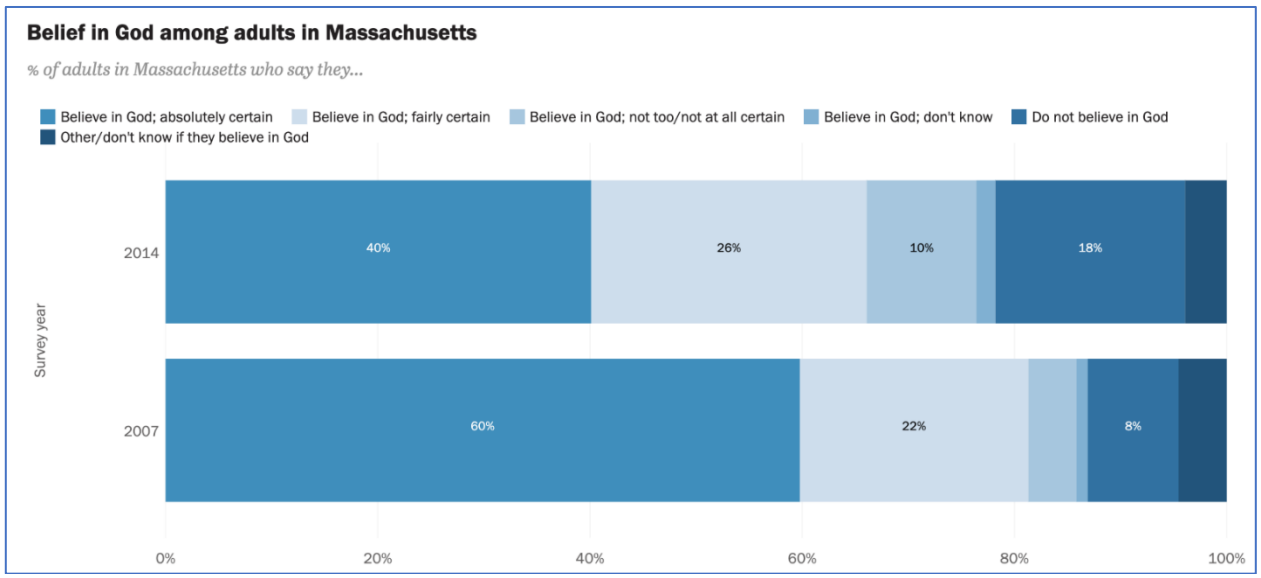
While public schooling was changing in Massachusetts, so was the broader society. In the 19th century, most of the population was Protestant, and Catholics were not a welcome group (Cammisa et al. 2006). By 1808, only three Catholic churches existed across Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, and Rhode Island (Culver,

1929). However, with the Irish potato famine came an influx of Catholics to the United States, especially to Massachusetts (Cammisa et al. 2006). This changed the political and religious landscape. The state became overwhelmingly Catholic, and the Catholic Church became a major source of power in the state.

Even with the strong establishment of religion by the Puritans and the robust involvement of the Catholic Church in the 20th century, Massachusetts has become less and less religious. The Pew Research Center surveyed over 35,000 adults to determine the religious landscape of the United States in 2007 and 2014. Over that 7-year period, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans—"describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular'—jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%" (Pew Research Center, 2015, para. 2). The changes in Massachusetts were even greater. Those who were *fairly certain* or *certain* there was a God decreased from 82% to 66%. The percentage of those who were *not too certain/not at all certain* there was a God or who did not believe in God rose from 13% to 28% (Pew Research Center, 2014). While data have shown that Christianity is still the major religion in America, "religion's importance in people's lives is on the decline across the country, but [Massachusetts] is on the trend's leading edge, [tying] New Hampshire for the official title of least religious state" (Trickey, 2018, para 6). Figure 1 shows how Massachusetts residents' belief in God changed between 2007 and 2014.

Figure 1

Belief in God Among Adults in Massachusetts, 2014 and 2017



Note. Source: Pew Research Center (2015)

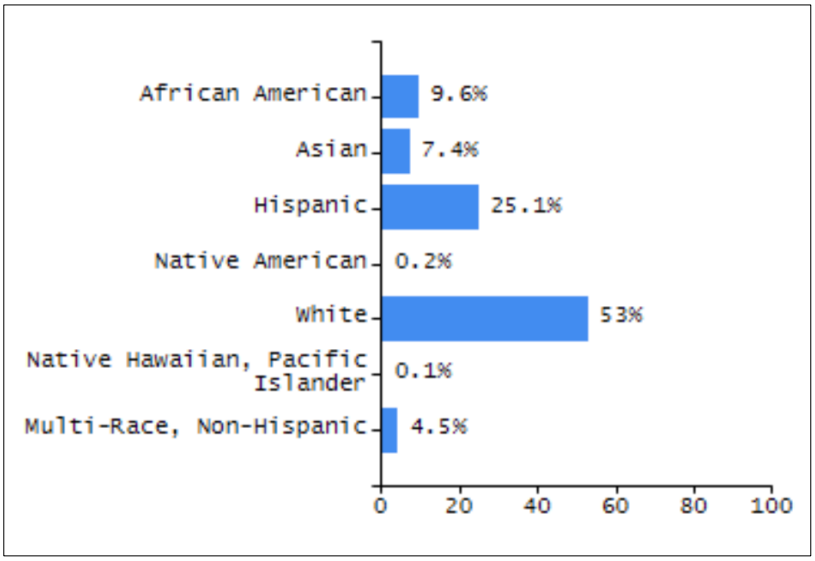
It is not clear why religiosity in Massachusetts has changed so drastically. Keener (2022) theorized that postmodernism is the cause for changes in New England's religiosity. By "postmodern," he referred to a worldview that balked against modernism, which, "among other things, respected a hierarchy of authority and viewed the world through a lens of propositions, absolutes, empiricism, and systems" (Keener, 2022, p. 12). He argued that the Puritans who first settled in Massachusetts were postmodern at heart, albeit religious. They, and other postmoderns, were suspicious of authority and put stock in conclusions they arrived at themselves rather than teachings from an authority figure. Ultimately, postmodern ideals, along with the Catholic Church's sex-abuse scandal that disgusted the world, created an environment in which the church no longer added substance to the life of New Englanders and felt more like a "ball and chain" (Keener, 2022, p. 97). Since the church had been the

main entity through which religion was expressed, the decline of its influence spelled a decline in the religiosity of Massachusetts residents (Roof & Johnson, 1991).

The data on religious trends in New England and theories about the region's postmodern ideology help give a sense of the religious landscape for Black Christian students and their families who utilize the public school system in Massachusetts. Figures 2 and 3 give a breakdown of students' and teachers' races and ethnicities, respectively, in Massachusetts schools.

Figure 2

Massachusetts Student Race and Ethnicity, 2023–2024 School Year



Note. Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) School and District Profiles.

Figure 3

Massachusetts Teacher Race and Ethnicity, 2023–2024 School Year

	State
African American	7,853.2
Asian	3,063.5
Hispanic	9,780.0
White	125,714.4
Native American	170.0
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	116.8
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	956.9

Note. Source: DESE School and District Profiles.

The preceding Figures 2 and 3 show that both Black teachers and students are underrepresented in Massachusetts schools; this is significant because, according to the same Pew data discussed earlier, religion still holds more importance for Black people in the United States. The Pew study reported that 12% of people in Massachusetts and 7% nationally identified as atheist or agnostic. The national percentage of Black people in the same category was 3%. In Massachusetts, of the people who identified as "unaffiliated," only 4% were Black. The report stated that

> researchers also asked some of the same questions of 4,574 Americans who do *not* identify as Black or African American. The findings show that Black Americans are more religious than the American public as a whole on a range of measures of religious commitment. For example, they are more likely to say they believe in God or a higher power, and to report that they attend religious services regularly. They

> also are more likely to say religion is "very important" in their lives and to be affiliated with a religion. (Pew Research Center, 2021, para. 20)

These statistics substantiate the need to study the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts. It is feasible to wonder if the importance of religion in the lives of Black families is being overlooked because they live in a geographical area where their need for religious expression is not well understood.

Conclusion

Understandably, religion and public schools are two structures that seem like they should not be combined. Public schools are government organizations created to prepare individuals to be contributing members of society, and religion is a private matter—a personal choice that individuals make for a variety of reasons. "Oftentimes issues of religion are taboo in classrooms, or spiritual conversations are relegated to religious studies courses and the like" (Jett, 2010, p. 330). Moreover, the term "religion" can have many different meanings for different people. However, religion and all its components are important to the lives of many people all over the world; and tenets of each individual's religion play an integral part in that person's evolution (Haynes, 2011). Given the centrality of religion in the lives of many families and students enrolled in U.S. public schools, research about religion in public schools would appear to follow naturally. This is especially true since religion has positive impacts on Black student achievement and other areas in adolescent lives (Dill, 2017; Holland, 2014; Taylor & Chatters, 2010; Yonker et al., 2012). Therefore, researchers, educators, and those invested in educational equality should note the positive outcomes that derive from the relationship students have with their religion. Not only should school personnel take note, but those involved in the education of adolescents should also find ways

to meet student's spiritual needs, even if those needs are religious in nature. I hope that learning from Black Christian students will further illuminate this topic.

The next chapter reviews the literature pertaining to the separation of church and state, the laws that govern religion in public schools, religion and spiritually, as well as the connection between culturally competent practices and religion. In addition, the chapter outlines the study's theoretical framework. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the case study design, and Chapter 4 presents the data findings. Chapter 5 includes a robust discussion of the findings and how they connect to the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Former President Bill Clinton stated, “Nothing in the First Amendment converts our schools into religion free zones” (Loconte, 1996, as cited in Graves et al., 2010, p. 2). It is possible, however, that lack of information for school administration and personnel has caused religious freedom to be inadvertently prohibited by those who should be supporting students. This is concerning because religion is a part of many students’ family structure, culture, and identity and has a significant impact on Black students. The literature has shown that religion has positive effects on adolescents and that understanding the importance of religion is a culturally competent practice. However, public schools operate under the “separation of church and state” and may not recognize the importance of religion in students’ lives. The interaction of school and religion may raise contradictions for religious students that have negative effects. These contradictions may be hidden for Black Christian students, who are members of a religious majority in the United States but still oppressed as Black individuals.

In my view, schools should not ignore the spiritual needs of any religious student, including Black Christian students, nor should religious practice be discouraged. To do so would deny an essential part of themselves while in school. It is imperative that student voices be heard regarding their experiences in public schools and their perceptions of their

right to practice their religion. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools and their families.

The following literature review examines several key aspects related to Black Christian students who attend public schools. The review includes an overview of the achievement gap, how religious students conceptualize spirituality, the role of religion and the church in academic achievement, theories of why religion creates positive outcomes for students, a review of Black Christianity, how culturally competent practices relate to religion, and a review of the First Amendment.

The Achievement Gap

According to Murphy (2010), the term "achievement gap" is used to describe variations in learning and education attainment between socioeconomically advantaged and White and Asian students, and socioeconomically disadvantaged and minoritized peers. It is also used when discussing strategies for changing these differences in learning. The achievement gap has been a topic of discussion throughout politics, media, academia, and personal lives for many years. As an educator, I have seen special attention paid to the achievement gap in meetings, professional development sessions, and readings.

Not surprisingly, schools are typically the central focus of discussions about the disparities in achievement between minoritized students and White students. Everyone wants to know what schools can do to close the gap, and school districts often implement initiatives that make closing the gap the number one priority. With all the focus on schools, it seems they are the primary cause of the achievement gap and the first line of defense in closing it. However, as discussed later, there are factors beyond schools that contribute to the achievement gap. A discussion of the achievement gap is necessary here because this study

centered on the achievement of Black students. I provide a brief overview of the causes of the achievement gap, proposed ways to address it, and critiques of the relevant research to paint a picture of what has been done in the past and what scholars propose should be done in the future. Both the explanation and critiques of the achievement gap highlight that there is a place for religion in the conversation as one way to help students succeed.

First, race and socioeconomic status are interrelated in creating, maintaining, and eventually closing the gap, with socioeconomic status (SES) playing a more prominent role. Economic status is a determinant in the achievement gap, and Black children who live in homes with incomes below the poverty line are more likely to have lower tests scores than students from families with more money (Murphy, 2010). This is because children from families with higher incomes have access to opportunities that children without proper means cannot access (Murphy, 2010). Included in SES is the community a child grows up in. One might not readily assume that the neighborhood in which a child lives would impact their learning; however, Murphy (2010) highlighted the importance of communities:

> Neighborhoods with an extensive array of good, accessible services, such as parks, libraries, and child-care facilities, provide more extra familial experiences, which in turn are associated with better cognitive and behavioral outcomes. Conversely, neighborhoods lacking good, accessible services restrict extra familial experience, which in turn are associated with poorer cognitive and behavioral outcomes. (p. 61)

Thus, education extends beyond schools, and students need an array of opportunities to learn. In other words, learning happens in a community just as much as it happens in a classroom.

Second, systemic racism is a factor contributing to the achievement gap. Centuries of oppression have negatively affected every aspect of African American lives, including

schooling (Murphy, 2010). This oppression manifests in the attitudes of minoritized youngsters regarding education. Murphy (2010) suggested that these attitudes include a disconnect between success in school and realization of future plans, "self-doubt engendered by a major legacy of American racism" (p. 130), internalized dependency, and, lastly, evasion of educational success because it is seen as associated with the dominant (White) culture.

Lastly, out-of-school learning experiences are important in addressing the achievement gap. The statistics regarding this issue are compelling. School readiness is extremely important because half of the achievement gap is present before a child begins kindergarten. According to Murphy (2010), Black children, on average, begin school with fewer academic skills than White children. Students from middle-class backgrounds enter school knowing more vocabulary, understanding letters and the sounds they make, and having more exposure to mathematical concepts. These gaps continue to grow during the summer months as well because "it is mainly when school is not in session that consistent losses occur for poorer students" (Entwisle & Alexander, 1992, as cited by Murphy, 2010, p. 141). Therefore, the gap widens even further during the summer as high-SES students gain knowledge and low-SES students lose it. This highlights another out-of-school factor that contributes to the achievement gap.

Although research on the achievement gap has generated information about the performance of Black students compared with their White and Asian peers, it has not painted a full picture, and critiques have arisen around where the achievement gap conversation falls short. To start, while the research has identified differences in academic attainment, these differences are typically based on test scores or grade averages, both of which are narrow

measures of success (Shukla et al., 2022) and reinforce a deficit-based narrative. The deficit view insinuates that Black families lack the tools to succeed, such as money, language, or a proper mindset, instead of addressing the real causes of the gap, which are inequities in society (Shukla et al., 2022). In addition, achievement gap conversations situate White students as the norm to which other groups are compared (Milner, 2012; Shukla et al., 2022).

Scholars have engaged in research and created terminology that addresses inequities in education instead of focusing on the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested that rather than looking at the achievement gap, which gives "a short-range picture of how students perform on a particular set of achievement measures" (p. 5), researchers and practitioners should look at its cause: the education debt. The education debt was created in the United States through historical, moral, sociopolitical, and economic systems and choices that have become interwoven with society (Ladson-Billings, 2006). To eliminate the achievement gap, the education debt must first be addressed.

Milner (2012) created a framework for examining inequitable educational practices instead of the results of said practices. These practices, termed "opportunity gaps," comprise five areas: color blindness, cultural conflicts, myth of meritocracy, low expectations and deficit mindsets, and context-neutral mindsets and practices. According to Milner (2012), "The central constructs of the framework can serve as analytic tools to explain both positive and negative aspects and realities of people, places, and policies in educational practice" (p. 699).

As a researcher, I respect, understand, and agree with some of the concerns regarding the achievement gap. However, much of the literature has portrayed Black families as problems that must be fixed. As Yosso (2005) stated, "Educators most often assume that

schools work and that students, parents, and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system" (p. 75). The truth is that schools are not equitable or effective. The achievement gap is a symptom of that problem and was used in this study to highlight existing inequities. However, unlike other studies that have focused on what students are missing, this study focused on what families already bring with them to school (i.e., their religion) and their experiences in public schools. As Ladson-Billings (2006) maintained, to address the education debt and its product—the achievement gap—education researchers must conduct studies using multiple approaches and bring their expertise to address education problems that speak to serious societal concerns. For this reason, it was important to research the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts.

Spirituality

Spirituality can be found in all areas of life regardless of a person's religious or nonreligious beliefs (Ratmakar & Nair, 2012; Weathers et al., 2016). It has been conceptualized as a sense of meaning in life, connectedness to others and the world, a means of forgiveness, the discovery of meaning in suffering, a feeling of transcendence, a perception of wonder and awe, and an origin of love (Greenstreet, 1999; Ratnakar, 2012; Speck, 2005; Weathers et al., 2016). As research on spirituality has grown, researchers have cautioned against confusing spirituality with religion. They make this plea because, for so long, the accepted form of spirituality was associated with Christianity and the spiritual beliefs of non-Christians were devalued (Boynton, 2011).

Despite best intentions, what has emerged is a dichotomy whereby spirituality is seen as individualistic, good, a means for liberation, and mature, while religion is viewed as

immature, evil, institutionalized, and limiting (Speck, 2005). Figure 4 highlights the differences between spirituality and religion.

Figure 4

Differences Between Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality	Religion
Unites/unifying	Divides/separating
Inclusive	Exclusive
Basic psychological raw material (Piedmont & Leach, 2002)	Methods of processing or channelizing that raw material
Urge coming from inside	Directives coming from outside
Highly appropriate topic for discussion in the workplace (Mitroff & Denton, 1999)	Highly inappropriate topic for discussion in the workplace
Unconditional	Conditional
Applicable to every human being	Applicable to the religion being followed
Natural	Human-created
More to do with self-discovery (Cochrane, 2000)	More to do with dogma, rituals, traditions, rules (Moss, 2002)
Manifests only in love, beauty, compassion and such positive entities...	Can manifest in anything, including murder, terrorism and genocide.
God—all that is (not one or personal God)	Some personal God, or image, or a boundary concept
Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Pure	Interpreted by man
Has more to do with the inclination, the inner force or drive	Has more to do with the path to be walked (Ottaway, 2003)
About an open-minded search for the ultimate	About perpetuating an agreed faith (Kari 2007)

Note. Source: Ratnakar, 2011, as cited by Ratnakar & Nair, 2012, p. 4.

This dichotomy has made its way into research with religious youth, failing to honor their perceptions of spirituality and, therefore, missing opportunities to understand and meet their specific needs. For example, King et al.'s (2014) study sought to determine how 30 youth, ages 12 to 21, conceptualized spirituality. Even though many participants described spirituality in the context of religious practice, the authors noted,

> Religious development specifically involves the systematic change in how one understands and uses the doctrines, practices, and rituals of a religion. Whereas spiritual development involves changes in how one experiences transcendence, commits to an ideology, and lives it out in the world. (p. 206)

In another study by James et al. (2012), the goal was to determine how youth conceptualized spirituality. Although many responses from the adolescents made specific reference to God, religion, or religious activities, the researchers separated the responses into abstract categories devoid of any connection to religion. While I understand the purpose of coding and the arduous task of analyzing data, this latter study shows researchers' propensity to separate religion, religious activities, and adherence to religious doctrine from spirituality, even if youth do not.

The separation of spirituality and religion is not without consequence, as it creates tensions that may directly impact public schools. Speck (2005) found that scholars attempted to separate religion and spirituality specifically to overcome the discomfort associated with the separation of church and state. However, "an education for the whole child requires that teachers attend to all developmental domains including the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual" (Zhang, 2015, p. 1). For many students, spiritual is synonymous with religious. Researchers must recognize and validate that.

Role of Religion and Spirituality in Academic Achievement

Protecting students' First Amendment rights is not just about religious freedom. Research has shown that religion has a variety of positive effects on student academic achievement and on closing the achievement gap. The achievement gap has persisted throughout the history of American education (Murphy, 2010), and despite several attempts throughout the years to rectify the situation, minoritized students continue to lag behind their White classmates academically (Jeynes, 2010). Different national, state, and local agencies have tried to address this issue, but their policies have failed to produce substantive change, leadings researchers to look outside government to close the achievement gap, with religion being one area of study. Jeynes's (2010) study found that religious faith had the largest effect size for reducing the achievement gap compared with the other variables of religious orientation, religious factors, religious schools, government policy, family factors, high expectations, curriculum, classroom structure, and cultural factors, with government policy being the lowest. Given these findings, it would be smart to implement policies that support families' religious faith. However, today, one can argue that public schools are discouraging religious faith. In the case of Black students, this can be a form of institutional racism (Jeynes, 2010).

National data from research conducted in three separate studies showed that young people who attended religious services regularly and believed religion was important in their lives had a higher possibility of academic achievement than their less religious peers (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010; Holland, 2016; Regnerus, 2000). Another study, conducted by Barrett (2009), showed that for 216 seniors in Buffalo, New York, religious involvement was prominent in directing the educational outcomes of Black students. These findings suggest

that religion is an important part of students' lives and should not be ignored by public schools. Amplifying student voices will allow researchers to make recommendations building on documented positive associations between religion and academic achievement.

Researchers have been unable to determine definitively why religion helps students attain greater academic success, but the fact remains that data support religion as a factor in helping narrow the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2007). Therefore, educators and social scientists can and should promote policies that accommodate faith to harness the benefits of religion for religious students, including Black Christian students. Public schools should not dismiss religion as taboo. On the contrary, they should support the whole child (Zhang, 2015), including protecting students' First Amendment rights to freedom of religion and establishing settings that foster religious expression. This protection cannot be accomplished if teachers inadvertently disseminate a message that religion is not welcome in schools.

The Role of the Church

While the literature has shown that religion, religiosity, and spirituality have positive effects on the lives of minorities in and outside school (Barrett, 2010a), some researchers have more specifically highlighted churches as the contributing force behind the positive impact of Christianity in Black communities. Churches are often the first to "step up" in communities that are disadvantaged and can act as centers for social learning (Barrett, 2009). In addition, they provide access to scarce resources and promote positivity that can be used by students to achieve in school (Barrett, 2010a). As an institutional fortress, churches, especially in Black communities, maintained a character that enables disenfranchised community members to fight against discrimination and violence (McCray et al., 2010). This was strongly felt during the civil rights era, when churches in Black communities mobilized

and participated in civil matters in unprecedented ways (Gaines, 2010). Discussing the role of the church during this time, Gaines (2010) stated,

> The social protest gospel of many churches during the period provided a biblical justification for opposing systematic oppression and empowered Blacks who sought to dismantle those oppressive systems. The independent and insular nature of the Black Church cultivated these ideals and allowed the church to function autonomously. (p. 370)

The ideals of empowerment that churches taught, along with their autonomy, assisted minorities in their struggle with Whites for economic access and educational equality (McCray et al., 2010).

The impact of churches has not been limited to fighting for measures of equality. Churches were and continue to be a socializing agent for minorities through exposure to religious texts, participation in activities that promote fellowship, and interaction with church leaders and fellow members (Barrett, 2010b). In addition, churches help Black youth obtain various forms of capital such as social, cultural, familial, resistant, linguistic, aspirational, and navigational capital (Barrett, 2010b; McCray et al., 2010). These forms of capital help students navigate schools by providing them with traditional skills that they may not obtain elsewhere (Barrett, 2009). Moreover, a church is in a unique position to have a positive impact on education by using its social and political power to speak up about educational issues that affect its members. “The church must engage the community in such a way that encourages dialogue about student achievement and fosters open, two-way communication while rejecting authoritarian unilateral power dynamics” (Gaines, 2010, p. 373). Engaging in

the community can help foster partnerships between churches and schools to help students (Green-Powell et al., 2011).

With the overwhelming evidence of the positive impact that churches have on the educational outcomes of minorities, parents and students should advocate for more partnerships. It is possible that the silence around religion in public schools is sending a message that churches have no place in school buildings. Churches can be partners in improving student learning and grades (Green-Powell et al., 2011), and dialogue should take place around how to utilize such a powerful force in minoritized communities. Families cannot engage in dialogue if they are unaware of the rights their children have while attending public schools.

Theorizing the Effects of Religion

While this research study did not focus on why religion has a positive effect on student educational achievement, studies that have addressed this question are worth mentioning. Smith (2003) theorized that religion wields prosocial impact as a result of its particular theology and moral direction, and the adherent's personal commitment. This happens due to nine different but jointly reinforcing factors: moral directives, spiritual experiences, role models, community and leadership skills, coping skills, cultural capital, social capital, network closure, and extra-community links (Smith, 2003). These factors are not mutually exclusive but are mutually beneficial and influence each other. This is not to say that religion is the only way these elements can make their way into students' lives. However, for religious students, they may be an asset as well as a key to helping navigate the school system. Other theories suggest that religion helps students with self-control

(McCullough & Carter, 2013) and with gaining various forms of capital (Barrett, 2010b; Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010)

Barrett (2010b) theorized the effects of religion on academic achievement by expanding on the work of Pierre Bourdieu as well as Smith (2003). Barrett concluded that the nine components of Smith's (2003) theory could be classified as elements of social and cultural capital that serve as key contributors to building students' habitus. Habitus is an intersection of culture and capital that manifests as a system of "learned attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors towards one's probabilities and possibilities of life trajectories" (Barrett, 2010b, p. 454). Habitus helps humans compartmentalize and then select economic, cultural, or social resources to be used in their behavior (Barrett, 2010b). Although habitus can be acquired outside religion, religious activities and practices can create habitus. Barrett's (2010b) theory suggests that students end up building habitus as a result of their religion.

Later, I explain how religion is an aspect of many students' cultures and why meeting the spiritual needs of religious students is a culturally competent practice. Barrett's (2010b) theory helps in this regard, as it explains how the educational system, though seemingly impartial, engages in social reproduction and produces a "culture" that rewards duplication of the dominant narrative. However, habitus is created through cultural norms, including religious activity, and can lead to social and cultural capital of its own. Social capital is important because it gives students access to membership in groups and, in turn, access to various opportunities through the groups' credentials (Barrett, 2010b). Cultural capital is important because it provides ways of communicating, acting, and thinking, as well as other

types of understanding or skills (Barrett, 2010b). Together, these resources can influence students in school and help them achieve academically.

The habitus that religion provides can be twofold. On the one hand, in circles outside a student's immediate family, habitus may give access to capital that can make assimilation and success easier (Barrett, 2010b). On the other hand, within a student's familial circle, habitus may provide youth with information that is cultural and unique. I believe that Christianity provides capital that can be both used and recognized within schools as a way for students to empower themselves through their own "culture."

Black Christianity

Christianity was brought to enslaved people in America by European slaveowners for the purpose of convincing them to accept their condition (Cone, 2018; Smith, 1972).[2] There is limited information on the religious conversions or beliefs of the earliest slaves, but records from the late 18th and early 19th century indicate that Black people who accepted the message of Christianity did so on their own and did not see it as synonymous with White Christianity (Simms, 2000; Smith, 1972; Vaughn, 1997). This did not happen in a linear fashion, and it is possible that some may have accepted Christianity to gain more acceptance in society or to see themselves as equal to White people (Bulthuis, 2019). However, there are multiple testimonies that show enslaved people using their faith to fight for freedom (Bulthuis, 2019; Simms, 2000; Smith, 1972).

While White Christianity preached that God cared more about the soul after death, not the body, enslaved people found hope for their current situation, love, and a higher

[2] It is important to note that Christianity did not originate in Europe. The first Biblical reference to Christians is in the book of Acts, which mentions Christians originating at Antioch, or present-day Turkey.

purpose in Christianity's message of redemption (Cone, 2018; Simms, 2000; Smith, 1972). Christianity attested to the humanness of all people, not just White people, and gave enslaved people a foundation for fighting against slavery and oppression (Bulthuis, 2020; Jabir, 2017; Simms, 2000; Smith, 1972). Jesus was the only master (Smith, 1972), and the torment and violence that enslaved people endured helped them form a connection with Christ and the gospel (Bulthuis, 2019). Black people did not calmly accept the version of Christianity that White people were trying to put forth. Instead, they questioned God and used scriptures to validate their humanness and right to freedom (Smith, 1972). Christianity was used to create counter-hegemonic ideologies by Black people enslaved in the U.S South and in the North, where Black people were "free."

Black Christian worship also broke away from the status quo created by the dominant culture (Crawley, 2017). Although forbidden by slaveowners during slavery and condemned by some White Christians after slavery, Black Christians engaged in shouting, noise making, and speaking in tongues to express a biological relationship with God (Crawley, 2017; Simms, 2000). White Christians saw the way Black Pentecostals practiced their Christianity as "excessive and discardable practices that were obstructions for achieving pure theological-philosophical thought, pure theological philosophical reflection" (Crawley, 2017, p. 37). However, for Black Christians, Pentecostalism included the spirit, which created an interaction between God and a person. This interaction evoked feelings and expression that came out in shouting, noise making, and the other conventions (Crawley, 2017). This directly challenged the dominant notion that Christianity centered on what happened *after* life.

Not all Black people found Christianity to be liberating. At the height of the civil rights movement, many became vocal about what they felt was the oppressive nature of

Christianity, which they felt taught Black people to exert forgiveness and peace while they were being assaulted and oppressed (Cone, 2018; Simms, 2000). As a result, Black theologians began to explicitly address how Jesus and Christianity related to the quest for Black empowerment. Black Theology was one such product. According to Black Theology, Jesus's mission on Earth was to free oppressed people wherever they were found (Cone, 2018). White Christians may apply their ideals universally without taking into account the suffering of others, but Jesus is alive and found in the midst of that suffering (Cone, 2018; Norris, 2020). According to Black Theology, Black power is synonymous with Christianity because Jesus wants to set the captive free (Cone, 2018). A Black Christian connects with this message, even in the midst of their oppression.

Thus far, the discussion in this section has focused on Black Christianity in the United States. Although this study took place in the U.S. state of Massachusetts, it is important to note that not every Black Christian is a descendent of enslaved people in America. Some were born in other countries or, like me, have parents who migrated from another country (my mother was born in Honduras). Does this mean that their outward representation of Christianity or how others perceive them as Christians is different? I argue that people of the African diaspora had similar experiences with (1) rejecting the European construct of Christianity and (2) making Christianity their own.

On the African continent, Christianity was present long before Europeans arrived (Fatokun, 2005). However, colonialism did introduce Christianity to sub-Saharan Africa (Fatokun, 2005; Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021), and "while Christianity was devotedly adopted by many people in Africa, there were often tensions between indigenous populations and the missionaries from the west who generally regarded Africans as being primitive in their

religious activities" (Masoga & Nicolaides, 2021, p. 24). This shows a similarity between how colonizers viewed African converts and how White people in America viewed those they forced into slavery. Along the same lines, people of the African continent established indigenous churches "in response to the needs and understanding of African people. [They] have together become an extensive movement characterized by rich creativity and astonishing diversity" (Fatokun, 2005, p. 367). This is similar to how Black Americans adapted Christianity to meet their needs as well.

In the Caribbean, the transatlantic slave trade was a means of introducing Christianity to those enslaved, much like in the United States (Schmidt, 2006). Christian sects in the Caribbean sometimes include influences from various traditions such as Vodou, Santería, and Shango; however, the Christian framework predominates (Schmidt, 2006). According to Thornton (2021), in the Caribbean,

> Christian diversity is entrenched and expansive; an undeniable facet of Caribbean cultural life, its influence ranges from historical and mainline churches across Catholic and Protestant traditions, spanning charismatic and fundamentalist configurations, to Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists, to Pentecostals, Anglicans, and Methodists, to Jamaican Revivalists, and beyond. (p. 43)

Caribbean Christians are sometimes discounted for not being true Christians. Their religion is viewed as syncretic and presumably not worthy of the same attention orthodox Christians receive (Thornton, 2021). However, Caribbean Christianity is a form of Black Christianity that grew out of the same conditions that led to the creation of other Black denominations and sects.

All forms of Black Christianity were "created under similar historical circumstances of slavery, colonization, and suppression of the religion" (Schmidt, 2006, p. 239). Whether enslaved in the Americas or the Caribbean, or colonized elsewhere, Black people from all over the world have and continue to create new practices within Christianity based on tradition and what is happening in society (Schmidt, 2006). Therefore, although there are diverse representations, "Black Christianity and spirituality are often different manifestations than White Christianity because of race, ethnicity, geography and are informed by the experiences of colonized and enslaved people" (A. Farinde-Wu, personal communication, May 29, 2024), constructing a unifying religion among Black people.

Naturally, Black Christianity in the United States has evolved over the decades, but one tenet remains: in Christianity, Jesus cares about everything (Cone, 2018), including the education of Black Christian students. It is important to understand religion as more than a set of norms that guide entrance into heaven. For the Black families in this study, their Christianity was a part of "culture" representing the ability to overcome (Dallavis, 2011), whether it originated in the United States or a different part of the world. As it pertains to student achievement, culture is a major topic of research. According to Murphy (2010), many of the differences in school performance can be attributed to a misalignment between the culture valued by schools and students' cultures (Murphy, 2010). Unfortunately, school staff often embody the culture of the school, further exacerbating the problem (Murphy, 2010). To address the mismatch and discontinuity, scholars have introduced the concept of culturally competent practices. The next section reviews culture, culturally component practices, and how they help in understanding the experiences of Black Christian students.

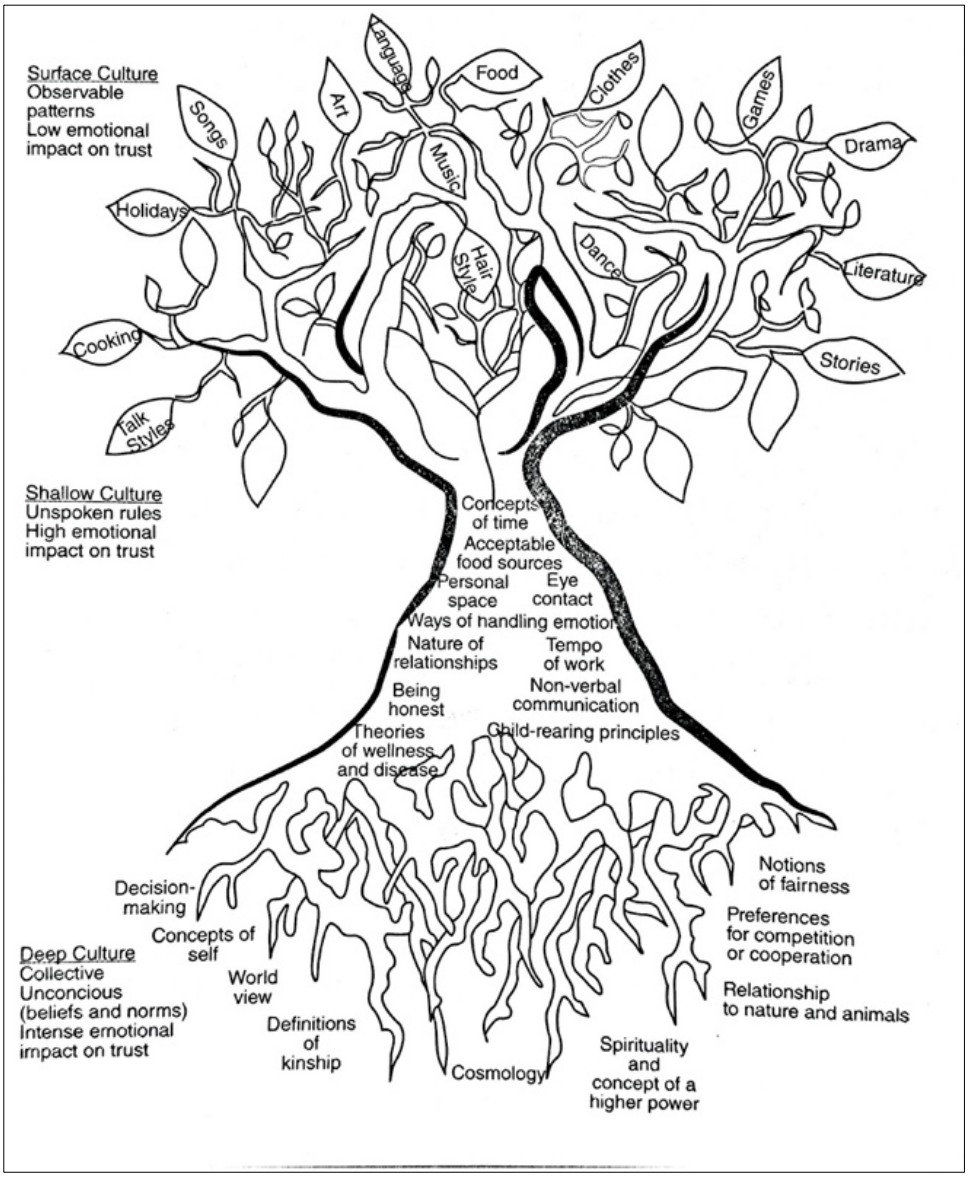
Culture

The word “culture” is perhaps one of the most complicated words in the English language (Nelson et al., 1992) because it has many connotations and definitions depending on who defining it. Some say that cultures and subcultures teach meanings in an intricate but subtle process of indoctrination (Crotty, 1998). To others, culture is the source of human behavior, a set of control mechanisms, or the very way of life (Crotty, 1998; Nelson et al., 1992). In my personal life, culture has formed the norms, practices, history, traditions, experiences, actions, ideals, and language I have connected with. It was not always explicitly taught, but when I encountered it, I knew because it felt normal as a way of life. To me, the most important aspect of culture is the connection that one makes to it. When the word “culture” is used in this study, it refers to the viewpoints and routines that students and families identify with and in which see themselves reflected (Crotty, 1998).

Figure 5 depicts the layers of culture in the form of a tree.

Figure 5

Culture Tree



Note. Source: Hammond, 2014, p. 24.

The tree in the preceding figure highlights and helps the reader understand how some layers of culture may be difficult to measure and therefore easy to classify as subjective. The bottom layer is deep culture, which comprises "cosmology that guides ethics, theories of

group harmony, how we learn new information, unconscious assumptions, and spirituality/concept of a higher power" (Hammond, 2014, p. 23). Thus, deep culture is where religion resides. This "hidden" form of culture can be easily overlooked by researchers and educators, which may lead to practices that do not support the needs of religious students.

Culturally Competent Practices

During the 1960s and 1970s, the culture of minorities was seen as a deficit to be overcome to achieve academic success in schools (Paris, 2012). Biases against non-White cultures caused researchers to position "languages and literacies that fell outside [the] norm as less-than and unworthy of a place in U.S. schools and society" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Consequently, deficit pedagogies were created that asked minoritized students to adopt languages and literacies that matched White and middle-class ways of being as a means for academic achievement (Paris & Alim, 2014). However, as time went on, the achievement gap between members of the dominant culture and minoritized students persisted, suggesting that schools could not serve all students (Dallavis, 2011). Scholars began looking for different approaches to academic success. They saw deficit pedagogies as hegemonic and sought to invalidate the idea that academic success for minoritized students could be gained by adopting negative views of their life, experiences, culture, and intellect (Gay, 2010).

In 1995, Gloria Ladson Billings introduced culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to reverse this trend (Paris, 2012). Her aim was to "challenge deficit paradigms that prevailed in the literature on African American learners" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 472). Ladson-Billings also emphasized that teachers need to appreciate what students bring to the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2014)—whether in the way they express themselves, the way they talk, the way they write, or the way they interact with others. Culturally relevant pedagogy asks

educators to establish paths that connect students' home and school cultures to cultivate cultural competence and meet the needs of diverse student populations (Dallavis, 2011). Ladson-Billings (2014) acknowledged that scholars need to develop a more comprehensive view of culture, which, for the purposes of this research, includes belief systems such as Christianity.

The Intersection of Culturally Competent Practices and Religion

Since the introduction of asset pedagogies and the subsequent literature that has grown around them, researchers have taken a deeper look at how educators can be more culturally competent. One such area that researchers have identified is religion and spirituality because these are typically present within the scope of a student's family (Weaver & Wratchford, 2017). Much of the literature on the intersection of culture and spirituality has focused more on religion than spirituality. This is not surprising given that religion is a part of deep culture, as described in an earlier section. Several researchers have explored this intersection.

Dallavis (2011) recognized religion as a crucial element of home culture because a person's thoughts about life often have a direct correlation to what they think about religion. Dallavis noted that culture can be created through relationships that are based on commonality found in religious identity as well as religious practices that are performed frequently. In addition, shared beliefs can create cultural norms and identity. Educators should be encouraged to think about how religious belief, observation, and character can revamp cultural competence in schools (Dallavis, 2011). If the religion a student adheres to is indeed part of their culture, then a culturally responsive teacher should take note of the cultural norms that students bring with them to school, even if those patterns come from the

students' religions (Dallavis, 2011). Teachers who acknowledge and appreciate students' religious lives could become even more culturally competent. Dallavis (2011) emphasized these points in interviewing a particular student who attended a Catholic school. The student, Julia, connected her religion with who she was. Julia's religious identity was connected to culturally relevant pedagogy because her view of the world was intertwined with what and how she was able to learn (Dallavis, 2011). Julia's religious identity was part of her culture—which her teachers needed to understand if they were to fully understand her.

Lingley (2016) categorized spiritually responsive pedagogy as part of culturally responsive teaching and held it as an essential part of a democratic education. Although spirituality and religion are not the same, religious young people often describe spirituality in religious terms, making Lingley's (2016) argument relevant to this research project. To Lingley (2016), spiritually responsive pedagogy is not only a teaching tool to help eliminate the achievement gap, but also emancipatory. Within public schools, there is a persistent culture that views spirituality as subjective, obscure, and not worth mentioning. However, students become "oppressed through schooling practices that do not acknowledge spirituality through a more holistic worldview, namely, one that includes spirituality" (Lingley, 2016, p. 3). Since religious spirituality is an important component of students' lives, efforts to remove spirituality are harmful to students. If a student's self-awareness involves a deep sense of spirituality, refusing to implement a spiritually responsive pedagogy asks them to disengage with parts of themselves (Lingley, 2016).

The next section reviews the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It also outlines laws pertaining to religion in public schools and discusses the rights students have when regarding the practice of religion in public schools.

The First Amendment

Specifics of the Establishment Clause

To fully understand the separation of church and state and the practice of religious censorship in public schools, one must understand key rulings based on the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The "establishment clause" of the First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (Heinrich, 2015). The clause seemingly affords freedom of religion by prohibiting the law from forcing people to choose a specific religion or to be religious. At the same time, the clause allows individuals to practice whatever religion they wish. Commonly referred to as the separation of church and state (Heinrich, 2015), the establishment clause guides rules pertaining to religion in schools.

Notably, "the establishment clause was not meant to protect society from religion, but to protect religious institutions from government interference or discrimination" (Garry, 2015, p. 8). However, over decades, as cases have been brought before the Supreme Court, the original meaning of the clause has been disputed (Munoz, 2006). The establishment clause was first applied to the states in 1947 in the landmark *Everson v. Board of Education* (Greenwalt, 2005). The court was deciding whether it was constitutional for the state to fund student transportation to religious schools. The court ruled that it was not unconstitutional for the transportation costs to be covered because the goal of the state was to provide safety for students, not to promote one religion over another (Strasser, 2009). Prior to this case, the establishment clause was used to protect states from government interference, but after the *Everson* case, the clause was interpreted as offering protection for residents against state interference.

The Supreme Court's rulings in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963) also had major impacts on religion in schools. "At issue in *Engel v. Vitale* was the daily recitation of the Regent's Prayer" (Strasser, 2009, p. 218). In its argument, the school stated that the prayer was voluntary, but the court ruled it was unconstitutional because it promoted a religious activity. Similarly, *Wallace v. Jaffree* (1985) centered on a one-minute moment of silence when students could meditate or pray each morning at school. The court ruled that the practice was unconstitutional because the school was influencing students who may not have prayed to engage in the act. Even though the prayer was optional, by simply suggesting prayer, the school was violating the separation of church and state. In *Abington Township v. Schempp*, regarding the school-sponsored reading of the Bible, the court ruled that schools requiring the reading of the Bible for non-secular purposes was unconstitutional (Heinrich, 2015). It was also clarified that studying the Bible objectively, for literacy and historical purposes as part of a secular education, was constitutional. Rulings in the previously mentioned cases did not follow the original intention of the establishment clause, but the precedents stood. This caused the doctrine separation of church and state to be interpreted as not only meaning that public institutions could not impose religious mandates on people, but they could not suggest religious practice either.

These cases made it clear that public schools, as entities of the government, could not promote religious activities or require students to engage in religious activities. In the *Wallace* case, the school thought it was providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful activities, but court saw such activities as coercing those who were not religious to engage in religious activities. Fear of litigation increased among schools following these and other court decisions, which did not provide clear guidelines. Indeed, the courts were

unreliable in tone and content regarding issues pertaining to the separation of church and state (Strasser, 2009). Schools are still affected by the ambiguity regarding the establishment clause; consequently, some schools have become "naked public schools" where all religious expression is prohibited (Haynes, 2011).

One critique of these court decisions is that they do not follow the pattern of the U.S. government. Critics have noted that government officials, from representatives to the president, offer prayers for the country and its inhabitants; God is referenced in the Pledge of Allegiance; and one of the country's mottos is "In God We Trust" (Heinrich, 2015). However, the courts have made distinctions between civil religion and promoting religion in public schools, especially regarding elementary and secondary public schools. The courts have viewed teachers as acting "in loco parentis," or "in place of the parent" (Heinrich, 2015). Authority is extended to school personnel who act as an extension of students' families. Using this authority to promote religion is unethical and illegal under the First Amendment and has been thwarted by the courts. However, I argue that the choice to ignore religion in schools also operates under "in loco parentis" by sending a message that religion is not an accepted practice. In doing so, schools are still using their power but in a way that dismisses the faith of students who are religious. Operating constitutionally under "in loco parentis" would mean supporting individual student expression of a variety of religious beliefs.

Rights Students Have Under the First Amendment

As previously discussed, the debate over the role of religion in public schools is longstanding, and a plethora of court cases have been argued regarding the First Amendment and its application in public spaces (Haynes, 2011). The 1990s saw emerging controversy

over religion in public schools (Loconte, 1996). Some questioned whether prayer should be allowed at graduations, whether mandatory assemblies regarding sex education violated religious rights, and whether Christmas and Hanukkah decorations were allowed (Lupu et al., 2007), among other discussions. In 1995, to ease tensions and provide clearer parameters, then-President Bill Clinton asked the U.S. Department of Education to create guidelines around students' religious rights (Graves et al., 2010). These rights include praying in school, using school grounds for religious meetings, reading sacred texts at school, handing out religious literature at school, wearing religious clothing at school, and responding to assignments using religious perspectives (Haynes, 2011). As long as they do not interfere with instruction, all these rights are extended to students under the U.S. Constitution (Haynes, 2011)—and could be a missing link in attempts by researchers to find ways to eliminate the achievement gap (Jeynes, 2010).

Denying a student their right to practice religion freely, whether overtly, covertly, intentionally, or unintentionally, denies them access to a part of themselves and stifles healthy behavioral patterns (Zhang, 2015). Silence from teachers and other school officials may send a message that public schools are not places where religion holds importance. Since experiences of intolerance negatively impact academic engagement, socio-emotional development, and academic achievement (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014), it is pertinent to examine whether contradictions are present that influence students. Imagine the encouragement a student might feel if they prayed openly before a big exam (Montgomery & Francis, 1996) or were able to respond to an assignment using their religious literacy, helping them earn a better grade (Skerrett, 2016). Perhaps students could handle stressful situations better by exercising one of the aforementioned rights (Curry, 2010).

Laws Regarding Religion in Public Schools

National and local statistics are surprisingly devoid of information pertaining to the religious denominations represented by students attending public schools. This lack of data could be a result of strict guidelines established under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which considers religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs of students and parents as protected information. Surveys that ask questions pertaining to religion must be consented to in writing before students can respond. Although there are no specific data regarding the percentage of public school students who are religious or claim a particular religion, national data on adults are available. A survey conducted in 2012 by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) found that 79.9% of adults surveyed had a religious affiliation. In addition, Newport (2012) wrote that 69% of people surveyed self-reported as very or moderately religious. By 2016, Newport reported that nearly eight in 10 respondents identified with a religion. Local data show that 67% of Boston residents identify with a religion (Lipka, 2015). Although data on youth in public schools are not readily available, data on adults show that religion is a factor in the lives of people living in the United States and is most likely being passed on to children.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and critical race theory (CRT) were used together to build a theoretical framework for illuminating how the doctrine of the separation of church and state manifested in the experiences of Black Christian students and families in the public school system in Massachusetts. CHAT was used to analyze what happened when the two systems, Christianity and public schools, interacted and the contradictions that arose. CRT was used to further examine the intersectionality between race, religion, and public

schools, as well contradictions, if applicable. The following sections provide an overview of the theories and how they were used to examine the experiences of Black Christian students who attended public schools and their families.

Critical Race Theory

According to Lynn and Parker (2006), "a critical race methodology in educational research can provide the necessary impetus for significant changes in the way that communities of color are studied and written about" (p. 272). Since this study examined the experiences of Black Christians and their families, it made sense to employ critical race theory (CRT) to examine the findings. Not only is CRT a useful framework on race and racism in society (Lynn & Parker, 2006), but it also is an important component in analyzing the intersectionality between race and religion. As Bracey (2022) noted, "Race and religion are so intertwined in the United States that one cannot understand the power of one without the consideration of the other" (p. 503).

CRT expands on critical theory in law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women's studies by analyzing how race, racism, and power are related (Delgado et al., 2001). It examines structures of power and privilege by reviewing history, economics, group interests, and unconscious feelings (Delgado et al., 2001). "An underappreciated aspect to CRT is its analysis of the intersection of race, law, religion, and spirituality" (Bracey, 2022, p. 504). The next sections discuss the tenets of CRT that were applied in this study.

Racism Is Commonplace

According to CRT scholars, racism is ordinary, "a normal daily fact of life in society and the ideology and assumptions of racism are ingrained in the political and legal structures as to be almost unrecognizable" (Lynn & Parker, 2006, p. 260). Even though blatantly

violent racist acts have decreased over the decades, subtle, less noticeable acts persist (Jett, 2019; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Jett (2019) described these covert forms of racism as “racial microaggressions that subordinate racialized beings in multiplicitous ways” (p. 315). He went on to say that "race has been used... to dismiss and marginalize people of African descent, and this legacy of racism has infiltrated academic spaces” (p. 315). Although Jett (2019) was referring to higher education, I posit that microaggressions occur in secondary education spaces as well.

Counternarrative

Critical race theory values the stories and experiences of the oppressed as knowledge (Lynn & Parker, 2006). This provides a counternarrative to stories told by privileged racial groups that minimize the voices and experiences of minoritized racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). In other words, “CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and [their] communities of origin in analyzing law and society” (Lynn & Parker, 2006, p. 261). This does not mean that CRT scholars assume one person’s voice speaks for the entire race (Jett, 2019), but the voices do “question, mock, and displace comforting majoritarian tales and myths” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998, p. 475).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality within CRT focuses on the challenges that arise when someone is a member of more than one disadvantaged group—for example, a Black woman. It may be easy to understand intersectionality when discussing minority religions in the United States and how that can lead to oppression on more than one front. For example, a Black Muslim student may face oppression in school because they are Black but may also face oppression because they are Muslim. It may be more difficult to recognize intersectionality for Black

Christians because Christianity is the dominant U.S. religion. Therefore, I used CRT to examine the data and determine if intersectionality was present for Black Christian students attending public schools.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory

One of the many theories of learning in academia is cultural-historical activity theory. Originally created by Vygotsky as a detour from traditional theories that described learning as a linear progression from the teacher to the student, CHAT is a sociocultural theory that centers the importance of cultural tools in learning (Engeström, 2001). Vygotsky posited that whenever a teacher asks a student to produce something, the output is mediated by tools (e.g., language or emotion) and artifacts (e.g., books) in the environment (Engeström, 2001; Igira & Gregory, 2009; Roth, 2007). These tools and artifacts are produced culturally and aid in achieving specific goals but can also change the environment (Igira & Gregory, 2009).

The interaction of people (i.e., subjects), the use of tools and artifacts, the rules that govern the environment, the environment itself (i.e., community), and the roles of the people (i.e., division of labor) make up an activity system (Engeström, 2001; Igira & Gregory, 2009; Nussbaumer, 2012). The parts of an activity system do not act in isolation, and several activity systems can exist simultaneously (Igira & Gregory, 2009). One of the main objectives of a student–teacher activity system is to change the object of attention (e.g., student) while simultaneously producing an outcome (e.g., learning).

Principles of CHAT

There are currently five agreed upon principles of CHAT. The first principle is that a collective, tools-mediated, and object-directed activity system is the main focus of analysis. Other systems can interact, but only one system is analyzed at a time. Second, activity

systems are multi-voiced and contain a multitude of traditions, interests, and opinions based on history (Engeström, 2001). This second principle leads directly into the third, which posits that an activity system cannot be truly understood unless the history of the system is understood. For example, researchers cannot fully understand the activity system of public education unless the history of schooling in America is also understood. The second and third principles of CHAT allow researchers to expose areas in activity systems where there is struggle between the oppressed and the dominant.

This research was situated within the fourth and fifth principles; thus, I explain them in greater detail here. The fourth principle relates to contradictions. A contradiction is not a synonym for trouble but signifies tensions within an activity system that arise from multiple systems interacting or from history (Engeström, 2001). These tensions manifest when something new is introduced into the system that does not agree with an element that was already part of the system. The contradiction that arises can either encourage fresh changes to the system or create conflict (Engeström, 2001). For example, a contradiction may arise if a student has a bad morning at home and subsequently refuses to do work at school. This does not agree with the "rules" of the system that say a student must produce work. The teacher could change the classroom activity system by introducing something innovative to help the student produce work, like a "cool down corner." On the other hand, conflict can develop when the teacher refuses to address the student's emotional needs.

Contradictions lead to changes in an activity system through the fifth principle, which centers on transformation (Engeström, 2001). Transformation is realized when contradictions cause the activity system to change as individuals accept new forms of being and doing within an activity system (Engeström, 2001). I believe that transformations can happen

subconsciously for subjects to maintain participation in an activity system. This may be the case for Black Christian students who attend public schools.

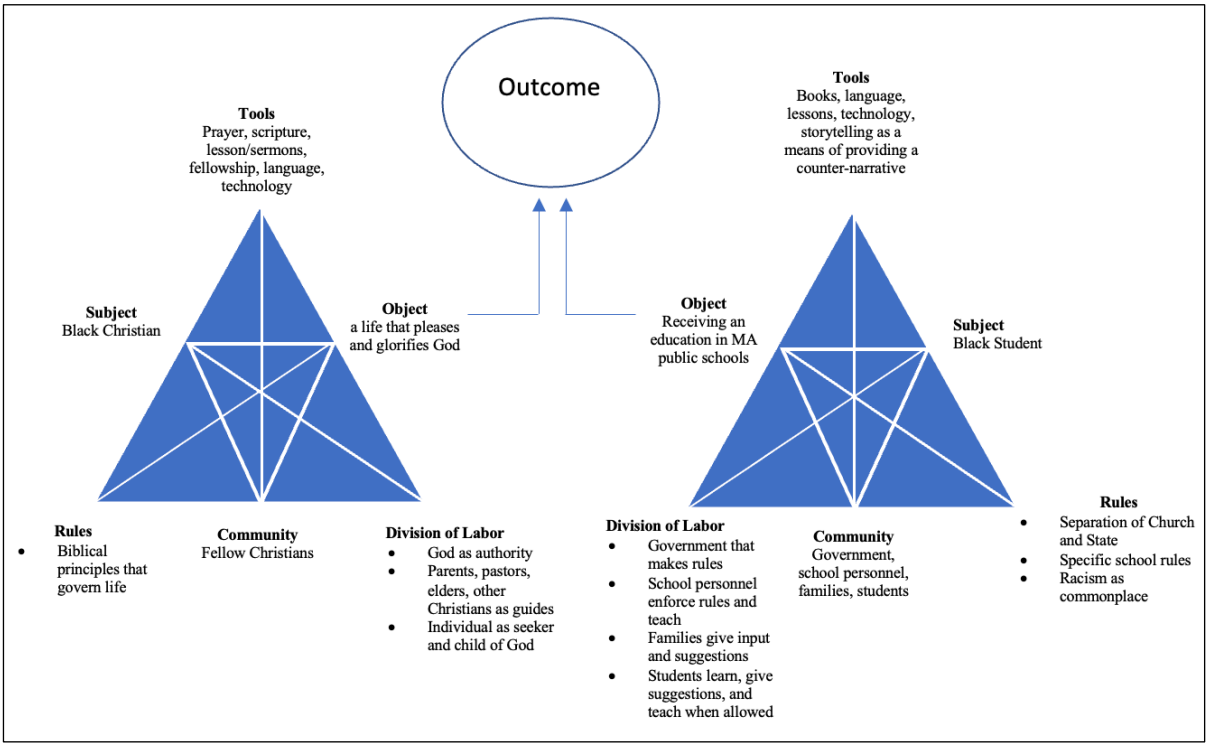
Since activity systems interact with and affect each other (Engeström, 2001), it is possible to understand how Christianity and public schools interact using CHAT. For example, the separation of church and state would affect both activity systems by its mere existence as a rule to which public schools must adhere. Igira and Gregory (2009) stated, "Within any community engaged in collective activity, there are formal as well as informal rules and regulational norms and relational values, each of which afford and constrain the internal dynamics, accomplishments and development of an activity system" (p. 438). Therefore, CHAT provided a framework for my analysis of how the First Amendment impacted both the Christian activity system and the public school activity system when they interacted.

Christianity as an Activity System. I saw a student's adherence to Christianity as an activity system that impacts all other activity systems. While some may see Christianity as a set of tools, I saw it as encompassing all the components of an activity system: subject—student; rules—Biblical principles; community—church, other believers, and family; division of labor—pastor, elders, church members; and mediating tools—language, prayer, scriptures, spiritual truths, and, the ultimate mediating tool, the relationship with God. The object of the activity system is a life that is pleasing to God. If a researcher is to study how Christian students experience school, it is unwise to do so by looking at Christianity as a "religion" or as a set of finite rules. Its existence as an activity system means it is as complex as schooling itself.

Applying Christianity to the activity system of public school is substantiated by the premise that there are times when the object of one activity system becomes the tool of another system (Foot, 2014). This occurs when one system's actions become so automatic that they can be easily used by the subjects in other systems. Therefore, although Christianity is its own activity system, it may become a tool when applied by students in public schools. Figure 6 draws on Engeström (2001) to highlight how two activity systems can interact and what outcome(s) they might produce. Following Engeström's blueprint, I conceptualized the two activity systems of religion and public schools and used a similar visual to illustrate the different components of the systems.

Figure 6

Conceptualization of CHAT Activity Systems Viewed Through CRT



Note. Source: Adapted from Engeström (2001).

Each component of the system was created based on history, norms, and what I personally knew about the systems. I also incorporated the tenets of critical race theory that fit into the activity system of public schools, such as racism being commonplace, marginalized voices sharing their stories and experiences as counternarratives to White hegemonic thought, and intersectionality (expressed in the subject being a Black Christian and Black student, respectively). The specific principles of each system may produce contradictions for students. These may not be easily distinguishable for families or educators but still produce negative results for students. Contradictions lead to changes in an activity system, both positive and negative, and hearing from students can highlight the outcomes of the interactions of the two activity systems and how those outcomes may affect students' educational attainment.

CRT and CHAT

It was appropriate to use CHAT and CRT in this study because both offered a framework for analyzing the history, structures, and interpersonal connections between Black Christian students, their families, and public schools (Foot, 2014; Jett, 2019). Both theories also allowed for the investigation of how intersectionality played a role in the lives of participants. Findings associated with CHAT could be viewed through the lens of CRT, highlighting any power structures that may have arisen when Christian expression differed among races and how that may have affected Black Christians. If they existed, these nuances were shared by participants, and CRT helped reveal them.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed key concepts from the relevant literature. First, while academia has addressed the spiritual needs of students, it has done so by creating a dichotomy between religion and spirituality, despite youth often conceptualizing spirituality as synonymous with religion. Doing so may create research outcomes that miss the specific needs of Black Christian students. Even though there is no definitive answer as to how religion aids in academic achievement, some theories maintain that religion provides Black youth with various forms of capital. This is important because religion is an element of "deep culture" (Hammond, 2014), which is unseen but profoundly important in students' lives. Schools often want to increase cultural competence in their practices but ignore the intersection between religion and culture.

This study used CHAT and CRT to recognize potential contradictions and transformations that take place for Black Christian students and whether they have racist undertones and/or origins. These contradictions could have negative effects for students and should not be ignored. I do not recommend that educators promote religion as a means of helping students achieve academically; rather, I advocate that students be given the opportunity to use their own religion in ways that are meaningful to them. For students to be afforded these opportunities, schools must first recognize where difficulties lie and then create environments that foster and encourage the expression and outward practice of their Christianity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must take it because his conscience tells him it is right.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As outlined in the first two chapters, public schools in the United States operate under the First Amendment's doctrine of the separation of church and state. This doctrine applies to the government and its employees and also extends to students. Misapplying the separation of church and state clause (or establishment clause) most likely has an impact on all students but even more so on Black students, for whom education has proven marginalizing (Murphy, 2010). To explore if and how students experience tensions navigating their religion and schooling, I conducted a qualitative intrinsic single-embedded case study involving Black Christian families who utilized the public school system. I conducted open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants to gather data. This chapter offers a rationale for conducting a qualitative case study and provides an explanation for why I chose case study methodology as the research design. In addition, this chapter discusses participant criteria, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Research Questions

As introduced in Chapter 1, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- Central Question: How does the doctrine of "separation of church and state" manifest in the experiences of Black Christian students and families in the public school system in Massachusetts?
    - Sub-Question 1: In what ways do religion and receiving a public school education intersect for Black Christian Students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
    - Sub-Question 2: How does the intersection of race and religion manifest in the educational experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
    - Sub-Question 3: In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?

Research Design

The study was designed as a single embedded intrinsic case study. The following sections describe case study methodology and the specific case study design applied in my research.

Qualitative Study

This study comprised qualitative research, which functions within the framework of human experiences and focuses on the ways that perspective is made from those experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). Since the goal of the research was to understand the experiences of Black Christian families who utilized public schools, a qualitative study was most

appropriate. Qualitative researchers also seek to be close to those being researched, with the intent of hearing the multiple perspectives that participants bring (Creswell, 2018). These multiple perspectives, or realities, are often reported in qualitative studies using rich descriptions and/or actual quotations from particpants (Bhattachrya, 2017; Creswell, 2018). I wanted to hear directly from students and their parents, to understand how they navigated their schooling and their Christianity, and to determine if there was any friction between the two. I did not want to use my own words to describe their experiences; instead, I wanted the students and families to express themselves. Using qualitative methodology, I identified the experiences of these Christian families and helped make meaning of them.

As a researcher, I subscribe to the philosophical assumption that reality can be, and is, different depending on who is having the experiences. Qualitative research lent itself to this philosophical belief because it allowed me to report different perspectives, rely on the words of participants as evidence, interpret data through my beliefs as well as the participants', and gave me the opportunity to analyze the data repeatedly before making generalizations (Creswell, 2013). These points further strengthen the case for using a qualitative study to understand the experiences of Black Christian students and families.

Case Study Methodology

The research was designed as a case study. Case study research is commonly used in the social sciences and follows a distinct methodological path. The first characteristic of case study research is the freedom to study a person, policy, or any other phenomenon that interests the researcher (Bhattacharya, 2017). The focus can be on one or more individuals, organizations, or phenomena within their natural context, bounded by space and time (Bhattacharya, 2017; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Occasionally, however, the boundary

between the case and the context is not obvious (Yin & Campbell, 2018). For instance, when discussing Black Christian students and their families who utilize the public school system, it may be unclear whether the case is the students or the schools. When the case and the context are not easily distinguishable, case study is a preferred methodological choice because, while other methods may separate the phenomenon from its context, case study allows the researcher to account for contextual conditions. When studying Black Christian families who use public schools, context is extremely important.

Single Embedded Intrinsic Case Study

Case studies can consist of a single case or multiple cases and can be either holistic or embedded. In single case studies, the criteria are whether the case or cases are critical to the theory being used, represent an unusual case or cases that could not be studied previously, or need to be studied over a long period of time (Yin & Campbell, 2018). Black Christian families who utilize the public school system in Massachusetts represent a unique case and therefore fit the criteria for a single case study.

Whether a case study is holistic or embedded is not contingent on whether the case study is single or multiple. Holistic case studies are used when sub-units do not exist (Yin & Campbell, 2018). On the other hand, if there are sub-units that can add opportunities for deeper analysis, then an embedded case study is more suitable. For this study, the sub-units of Black Christian families who utilize the public school system in Massachusetts were Black Christian middle or high school students and parents of Black Christian middle or high school students. An intrinsic case study methodology was appropriate for the research because the focus was the case itself, generating ample information and in-depth understanding that could be used to influence policy (Bhattacharya, 2017). The purpose of an

intrinsic case study is to discern more about a particular person, party, experience, or organization instead of creating broad theories or findings for larger populations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Therefore, an intrinsic case study allows the researcher to define the case in the way that will best addrss the research questions by allowing them to describe, understand, and explain participants' experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017). This study was intrinsic because it focused specifically on Black Christian families who used the public school system in Massachusetts.

Defining the Cases

The case for the study was Black Christian families who utilized the public school system in Massachusetts. I decided to focus on two sub-cases. The first sub-case consisted of Black Christian students who attended different public middle or high schools and different churches in Massachusetts. Analyzing data from this sub-case allowed me to look for specific instances of cultural implications that are common with students but not specific to a church or a school. The second sub-case consisted of parents of Black Christian students who attended any public middle or high school and any Christian church in Massachusetts. These could have been the parents of students from Sub-Case 1, but that was not a requirement. Research Sub-Question 3 asked, "In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?" To obtain a more complete response, I wanted to hear from parents as well as students. This produced data that showed how the implementation of the First Amendment in public schools manifested in their experiences at school and outside school, which also impacts educational achievement.

Participant Selection

Each participant was a general person who provided an illustration of a large community (Creswell, 2007). I used criterion selection to identify the participants. Criterion selection is best suited for studies in which the researcher wants to learn from participants who can give substantial insight into the central issues identified in the research (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Therefore, I sought participants who could add deeply to the understanding around being a Black Christian who attended public schools. In addition, criterion selection is used when certain characteristics are required to address the research questions (Creswell, 2007). Since my research question centered on being Black and Christian, I had to find participants who had intimate knowledge associated with being both.

General Requirements

There are different Christian denominations that vary in how they interpret the Bible (Rhodes, 2015). However, for the purposes of this study, I did not select participants from a specific denomination. I did not think it was necessary to specify a denomination because, although some scriptural interpretations differ, the foundation is the same for all: Jesus. As Rhodes (2015) stated, "A Christian is one who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" (p. 8). I did not wish to find out the experiences of Christian students who just believed in Jesus; I sought participants who interacted with Jesus on a regular basis of their own free will. Therefore, the first general criterion was that participants self-identified as a committed, sincere, and connected Christian.

I defined a "committed Christian" as one who believes that Jesus died on the cross to "save" them, which is oftentimes viewed as a core belief of the Christian faith (Got Questions Ministries, 2018). In my view, being a committed Christian means that a person

has complete faith in this core tenet of Christianity. “Sincere” referred to participants who believed in the aforementioned core tenet because they wanted to, not because their family or friends told them or persuaded them to. In this study, it was important that participants chose to be Christians on their own. “Connected” meant that the participant interacted with God frequently. The correspondence could be through formal prayers, reading scriptures, informal conversations, thoughts, inward yearnings, or other types of exchanges. Having open channels of communication was important because I wanted participants who had a relationship with God, in hopes that the participants would be more perceptive—and provide more accurate data—about how public schools interacted with their religious beliefs.

Church attendance was not a general requirement because some people have a deep relationship with Jesus but do not go to church. I know several people in my own personal life who do not like religious institutions but still read the Bible, pray, and seek fellowship with other believers. Although many Christians attend church, some do not. I did not want to exclude the voices of certain public high school students just because they did not go to church.

The second general requirement was that, at the time of the interviews, the students needed to be attending a public middle or high school in Massachusetts. By the time they began middle school, students would have had time to develop spiritually (Lerner et al., 2008) and apply Christian teachings to their lives. At this point in a student’s educational career, they may have a heightened awareness of contradictions between their Christian beliefs and experiences, and their public school. These contradictions may come up readily in classes when teachers openly discuss topics that are controversial (Hull, 2003). In addition to the school environment, challenges that arise from adolescent development may encourage

students to utilize their religion in a deeper way to handle these challenges (Smith, 2003). Middle and high school students may be more attuned to instances when they are invoking their Christianity to assist with social or academic problems that arise in school and when the invocation conflicts with school. The last general requirement was that all students needed to self-identify as Black or African American.

Convenience Sampling

I relied on convenience sampling to recruit participants. According to Waterfield (2018), convenience sampling "is a method where the selection of participants is based on their ready availability. This availability is usually in terms of geographical proximity but may involve other types of accessibility, such as known contacts" (p. 402). This was not my original plan for recruitment, but the COVID-19 pandemic impacted my access to potential participants.

COVID-19

I received clearance from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin collecting data in 2021, when the state of Massachusetts was in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. That meant that face-to-face gatherings were significantly reduced, and many activities were canceled or done virtually. Originally, my plan was to inform church congregations about the study during a predetermined time of their service and then wait after church to greet and talk to interested people. However, many churches were streaming services on YouTube and holding gatherings via Zoom, eliminating that path to data collection. I also planned to talk to potential participants at youth group meetings; however, many youth groups were meeting virtually or not at all. Another plan was to distribute flyers to gatekeepers to pass out, but because of COVID-19, many gatekeepers were working from

home, and when I went to churches, the person who ordinarily would be able to disseminate the information was typically unavailable.

Impersonal Recruitments

Due to limited access to people via face-to-face interactions, information about the study was sent through email, Facebook, church websites, and community flyers left in open spaces. Potential participants could contact me using the information listed on any communication I sent out, or they could fill out a Google form on which they could express interest in the study and provide their contact information. Unfortunately, I did not receive any interested participants via these methods.

Personal Recruitment

Due to my difficulty recruiting participants, I began recruiting people I knew personally for the study. I asked them if they were interested in hearing about my research, if their children were interested, or if they knew anyone who met the criteria and who might be interested in participating. If they said yes, I gave them the information verbally, through email, or via text message and asked if they wanted to participate. If they wanted to participate, I sent consent forms electronically and set up a time to complete the interview. I also asked them to share the information with people they thought might be interested.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected via one-on-one interviews. Interviews were the most appropriate data-collection method because they allowed me to gather information on participants' behaviors, feelings, and interpretations of the world that I otherwise would not have been able to observe (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, and conducted using the interview protocol found in Appendices A and B. I

conducted one interview with each participant that lasted 25 to 45 minutes. Four interviews were completed over the phone, three were conducted in person at the participants' churches, and the rest were conducted virtually over Zoom. From the one-on-one interviews, I gathered information that was more specific to individual experiences about the ways that students and families navigated public schools in Massachusetts and religion. I conducted a total of 19 interviews.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I worked with the data inductively from the ground up. When using an inductive approach, researchers read over the data multiple times to fine-tune their codes and themes to reveal abstract findings (Saldaña, 2021). First, I considered tone, body language, and the stories participants told to paint a full picture (Creswell, 2013). When appropriate, I took notes highlighting changes in body language, tone, pauses, inflections, moments of discomfort, or anything else worth noting during the interviews. I combined these notes with the interview transcriptions to create memos, which are "short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur to the reader" (Creswell, 2013, p. 183). I created memos by reading the transcripts multiple times as well as the notes I wrote during the interviews. The memos assisted me when coding the data and in identifying the categories or themes that emerged.

Coding

I began analyzing data using prefigured codes that aligned with my research questions. I went through the data and attached the prefigured codes I had chosen to sections of data (see Appendix C). Once I organized the data using prefigured codes, I counted the occurrence of each. I removed prefigured codes that did not appear in the data. For

prefigured codes that did appear, I re-read the sections they referred to, with the goal of determining a more nuanced meaning than the codes I had predetermined. Through this process, I discovered that the prefigured codes were not capturing the essence of what participants were saying.

Descriptive, Emotion, and Value Coding. I re-read the data and selected quotes that conveyed some type of meaning, experience, value, attitude, or belief and assigned a topic name to them (instead of one- or two-word codes). This is referred to as descriptive coding, which is a way to outline the topic of a portion of data (Saldaña, 2021). However, in descriptive coding, basic nouns are used to describe what is going on but do not describe the emotions and experiences of participants (Saldaña, 2021). Therefore, I combined descriptive coding with value coding and emotion coding. According to Saldaña (2021), value coding "is the application of codes to qualitative [data] that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspective or worldview" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 167). Emotion coding is appropriate for studies that "explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions, especially in matters of identity, social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 160). I coded in this way for each interview, placing quotes with matching topics. If I did not have a topic for a quote, I created one. At the end of this coding round, I had a comprehensive list of topics and matching quotes (for a list of topics see Appendix D).

Second-Cycle Coding. During the second cycle, I analyzed the codes to synthesize the information. I used pattern coding, which groups codes into concise concepts in which specific themes can fit (Saldaña, 2021). These codes can be considered a type of "meta-code" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 322).

Theming the Data

Once I identified meta-codes, I created themes phenomenologically according to my research questions. Organizing themes phenomenologically "symbolizes data through two specific prompts: what something *is* (the manifest) and what something *means* (the latent)" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 268). Since the central research question focused on the experiences of Black Christian families, it was important that I theme the findings according to what it means, separately, to be a Black Christian and to utilize the public school system, and what it means to be a Black Christian utilizing the public school system. Regarding parents, I looked for themes around what they valued and how those values intersected with their children going to public schools.

Strategies for Validating Findings

Construct Validity

Construct validity involves identifying "correct operational measures for the concepts being studied" (Yin & Campbell, 2018, p. 42). Critics of case study methodology have accused researchers of not being specific regarding their terms and what they are studying. Although my interview protocol gave participants a chance to respond to questions using their own words and terms, I also asked specific questions based on my interpretation of the concepts incorporated into in my questions. Figure 7 depicts the measures used in the research questions.

Figure 7

Measures Used in Research Questions

Educational Experiences	Religious Expression/Religious Spirituality	Academics
Attending school, interacting with peers, interacting with teachers, interacting with other school personnel, going to classes, learning	Prayer, reading the Bible, talking about Christianity/Jesus with Christian and non-Christian peers	Completing homework, completing classwork, taking tests, participating in discussions, persevering when faced with difficulty

Credibility

Credibility is analogous to internal validity in quantitative research and refers to findings that are accurate and believable (Creswell, 2013). This case study design addressed credibility by using rich, thick descriptions and clarifying my bias as the researcher. Using rich, thick descriptions helps the findings become more realistic for the reader as they share in participant experience (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, clarifying my researcher bias was a form of self-reflection that "creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). In addition to the aforementioned strategies, I was honest about any codes or findings that countered my original prefigured codes, ensuring that I gave an accurate analysis of the research. Lastly, I engaged in member checking, which, according to Creswell (2013), involves "taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 251).

External Validity

External validity refers a study's generalizability. The goal of case study research is to make analytical, not statistical, generalizations (Yin & Campbell, 2018). The goal of this research was not to generalize the experiences of my participants to *all* Christian students who attend public schools. Rather, I sought to generalize how one system, public schools that operate under the First Amendment, interact with another system, Christianity. In other words, I wanted to highlight, using CHAT, the interaction of two seemingly different systems. The lessons learned from my study provide a basis for using CHAT to explore other interacting systems within public schools and beyond.

Reliability

Reliability involves offering enough detail about a research project to allow another researcher to replicate the same procedures and arrive at the same conclusions (Yin & Campbell, 2018). To achieve reliability, I adhered to an interview protocol. In addition, I was explicit about how the case was designed, how participants were selected, my own bias, and any other information pertinent to my research study.

Researcher Positionality

Oftentimes, positionality statements serve as a way for the researcher to justify their right to conduct research, to explain their identity, or to even to "confess" (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). However, the purpose of my researcher positionality statement goes beyond disclosing my identity or providing background information about my upbringing. Rather, it serves as an acknowledgment of what I brought about through discussion with participants based on my position in public schools, Christianity, and in relation to the research participants (Boveda & Annamma, 2023).

As stated previously, I am a Black Christian who went to a public high school in Massachusetts. My adolescent years were full of strife, and Christianity was a constant means of support, through the teachings I received, the scriptures I read, and the interactions I had with other Christians. Although I struggled socially and academically in school, I do not remember any teachers, administrators, or school personnel encouraging me through my own religion or creating ways for me to use it when I needed it. I interacted with my religion in whatever way I could and often wonder, as an adult, if I would have been more successful had my school supported me in the way Christianity helped me cope with life.

I also went to a public college, and it was much more open and inviting regarding religious practice. I excelled in college, unlike high school. It seemed like I was a completely different student. I know there are a variety of factors that make high school and college different; however, I remember being supported academically and socially *through my religion* in college. If I could, I would ask my 16-year-old self if there was any way my high school could have helped me by using my religion. I am not sure what the answer would be, but since Christianity was one of the few good aspects of my life, I am sure I would come up with several things. Through this research, I hoped to ask students questions that were never asked of me.

As a public school teacher, this topic continued to be relevant in my personal and professional life. At the time I was developing a research topic for my study, I watched *God's not Dead 2* (2016), a Christian movie about religion in public schools. In the movie, a high school student asks her teacher if there is a correlation between the teachings of Jesus and those of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The teacher's response results in litigation, as she is accused of proselytizing. In the end, she is found not guilty, but the movie concerned

me because I am a public school teacher and did not know the rules regarding religion in schools. I knew I could not proselytize but had no idea if certain things I said or did could be considered proselytizing. I also had no idea about students' religious rights or if students were aware of their own religious rights. As I investigated the matter further, I discovered that students have full rights under the First Amendment to practice and express their religion in public schools. I began wondering if teachers encouraged or discouraged this expression and whether students knew they had any form of religious freedom in schools.

Through the help of my dissertation committee, I refined this study to center the lives of Black Christian students and their families who utilize public schools in Massachusetts, not just my personal experience. However, since "both [my] and research participants' voices, perspectives, narratives, and counternarratives are represented in the interpretation and findings of [this] study" (Miller, 2007, p. 396), it is important to discuss who I am as a person and an educator in relation to my researcher role.

Researcher Bias

As a Black Christian woman who works in a public school, it could have been easy for my bias to impede the research. I could have inadvertently imposed my perspective when interacting with the participants, asking questions, analyzing data, or reporting data. To minimize these possibilities as much as possible, I adhered to the interview protocols I developed (see Appendices A and B). During interviews, however, questions can arise that are not in the protocols. In these situations, I refrained from adding a judgmental tone to my questions. For example, I asked "Do you have opportunities to pray throughout the day?" instead of "How do schools keep you from praying?" I followed this same model for any probing or follow-up questions.

As a Christian, I also have preconceived notions about religion and religious expression. While the participants and I shared the same religious background, I tried, to the best of my ability, to ensure that the conversations did not veer off into discussions about ways to express Christianity, correct doctrine, or anything that was theological in nature. If participants brought up such topics, I let them finish their thought and then asked a question pertaining to their school experiences. As the researcher, I ensured that each conversation centered on schooling and used my judgement to know when the conversation was off topic. At the same time, I let participants know when I could relate to something they were talking about. It was important to me that participants knew I understood the Biblical and Christian tenets they were speaking about. In some ways, being a Christian also helped me analyze the study data since I understood the religious or spiritual meaning and references in certain responses.

Ethics

Obtaining Permission

Before beginning my study, I sought approval from the University of Massachusetts Boston IRB. This enabled a neutral party to identify any potential ethics violations in my research. I also obtained full consent from the parents of all participants for them to take part in the research. I also obtained consent to record participants. I made efforts to hide all identities by using pseudonyms.

Working as a Public School Teacher

Working within a public school system also posed potential ethical issues. Critics of my research may feel that public schools are painted in a negative light when they are only operating under the law. I do agree that public schools must implement the First Amendment,

but, as I discussed previously, meeting the religious needs of students within the limits of the establishment clause is also important. This research was not an attempt to villainize public schools or the non-Christian families who use them but to find opportunities for meeting the needs of public school students who are religious by analyzing their own perspectives. I examined one small subset of public school students in hopes of adding to the wider conversation about how public schools can best educate students, even while operating under the separation of church and state doctrine.

Conclusion

A single intrinsic embedded case study was designed to explore how the implementation of the First Amendment in public schools manifested in the experiences of Christian families who utilized the public school system in Massachusetts. The participants consisted of Black middle or high school students and the parents of Black middle or high school students. It was important to conduct research that amplified students' and parents' voices pertaining to the experiences of Black Christians who attended public schools.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected through semi-structured interviews with 19 participants from two different sub-cases. Each participant participated in an interview in which I asked open-ended questions. Sub-Case 1 consisted of nine Black Christian middle or high school students who attended a traditional or charter public school in Massachusetts. Sub-Case 2 consisted of 10 parents or guardians of Black Christian middle or high school students who attended a traditional or charter public school in Massachusetts. Some of the participants in Sub-Case 1 were the children of the participants in Sub-Case 2, but that was not a requirement for the study.

This chapter begins with a detailed description of the participants from Sub-Case 1, followed by data findings from their one-on-one interviews. The data findings are presented via themes, which are presented using thick, rich descriptions from participants. Next, detailed descriptions of the participants from Sub-Case 2 are given, followed by a

presentation of their associated data findings, delineated thematically. Each thematic area is presented using thick, rich descriptions and participant quotations.

Sub-Case 1 Participants: Black Christian Middle or High School Students Who Attended a Traditional or Charter Public School in Massachusetts

The nine participants from Sub-Case 1 were Kanayo, Gloria, Anita, Nneka, Marilynn, Kamsi, Chioma, Judy, and Rose. (All names were pseudonymized to protect the identities of the participants.) Of the nine participants in this case, four went to a traditional public school in an urban area, three went to a traditional public school is a suburban area, one went to a public charter school, and one went to a public high school focusing on agriculture and vocational training. Table 1 summarizes the types of schools the participants attended and how their interviews were conducted.

Table 1

Sub-Case 1 Participant Information

Participant Name	Grade Level	Type of School	Data Collection Method
Kanayo	High School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over the phone
Gloria	High School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Anita	Middle School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Nneka	Middle School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Marilynn	High School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Kamsi	High School	Agricultural/Vocational	In person semi-structured interview
Chioma	Middle School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Judy	Middle School	Traditional Public	Semi-structured interview over Zoom
Rose	High School	Charter Public School	Semi-structured interview over Zoom

I began each interview by asking participants about their relationship with Christ and their church involvement, if any. I also asked a series of questions about what it was like to be a Christian at their school. I wanted to know if participants felt any shame or apprehension about their religion, so I asked if and how teachers and peers knew they were Christians. The following subsections summarize participants' responses regarding their Christian life outside of school, who knew they were Christians in school, and if they had Christian friends in school. These descriptions are important because they offer background information about each participant and ground the study in their experiences.

Kanayo

Kanayo attended a high school with over 2,000 students and a large Jewish population. He had been a Christian most of his life and was vocal about his faith among peers and teachers. All his friends knew he was a Christian because it would come up during casual conversation; however, he did not have many Christian friends in school. He did not shy away from talking about his faith in class when the opportunity arose. At the time of the study, Kanayo attended church in person, including youth ministry, and volunteered with the audio/visual ministry. Kanayo's interview was conducted over the phone.

Gloria

Gloria was a high school student at a large urban high school with over 2,000 students. She lived with a familial guardian with whom she had recently moved from California. She had one close Christian friend at school and a few non-Christian peers with whom she was close. Most of her friends and some of her teachers knew she was a Christian because she abstained from certain holidays or celebrations. She attended church virtually but did not attend youth group. Gloria's interview was conducted via Zoom.

Anita

Anita was a middle school student who attended an urban school with fewer than 1,000 students. She went to church with her family but did not attend youth group. Some of her friends knew she was a Christian as it came up in casual conversation. However, she did not have many Christian friends at school, and not many of her teachers knew she was a Christian. Anita's interview was conducted via Zoom, and her mom was present because Anita was nervous.

Nneka

Nneka was a middle school student who attended an urban school with fewer than 1,000 students. She attended church with her family, including Bible study, but did not attend youth group. She participated at church by helping to collect the offering on Sundays. Her friends knew she was a Christian because it came up in casual conversation while discussing weekend plans. That is where she found out that her friend was also a Christian. Nneka's interview was conducted via Zoom.

Marilynn

Marilynn was a high school student who attended an urban school with fewer than 1,000 students. She attended church with her family and shared that she had memorized the scriptures so she could apply them to her life. She stated that she had no friends at school, only acquaintances. However, she had very close Christian friends outside of school. Marilynn's interview was conducted via Zoom.

Kamsi

Kamsi was a high school student who attended a public agricultural/vocational high school in a suburban area. She attended church with her family but did not attend youth group because she felt like the leadership was not consistent and it was difficult to make connections with the other youth. She had friends at school, but they were not Christian. However, they did know she was a Christian because it came up in casual conversation while talking about challenges in life. Kamsi's interview was conducted in person.

Chioma

Chioma was a middle school student who went to a small suburban traditional school. She attended church with her family on a regular basis. She had Christian friends at school

who also attended church, including youth group, with her. Chioma's interview was conducted via Zoom.

Judy

Judy was a middle school student who went to a traditional school in a suburban area. She was not able to attend church regularly because she was an athlete who traveled a lot for her sport. She had friends in school, but they were not Christian, and her teachers did not know she was a Christian. Judy's interview was conducted via Zoom.

Rose

Rose was a high school student who attended a public charter school in an urban area. She attended church and youth group regularly. Not only did she have friends in her school who were Christian, but she was also close with staff members who were Christian and attended her church. She spoke about faith often with her Christian and non-Christian friends. Rose's interview was conducted via Zoom.

After gathering background information about the students, I continued the interviews with a series of open-ended questions designed to address the following research sub-questions:

- Sub-Question 1: In what ways do religion and receiving a public school education intersect for Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
- Sub-Question 2: How does the intersection between race and religion manifest in the educational experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?

- Sub-Question 3: In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?

After I conducted all the interviews, I began coding the data according to the methodological process described in Chapter 3. As discussed in Chapter 2, public schools in Massachusetts operate under the doctrine of the separation of church and state. The establishment clause of the First Amendment was designed to protect the right to religious freedom but has been misinterpreted over the years in ways that may have effects that are not fully understood. Examining Black Christian experiences in public schools can lead to discovering ways to better support students, leading to positive academic outcomes.

Students were specifically asked how they connected their relationship with God to academics, what it was like to be a Christian in their school, whether religion came up in classes, and if God cared about what they learned or their grades. Since the interviews were semi-structured, other questions arose as the interviews progressed. I attempted to gain a general sense of what it was like to be a Black Christian student attending a public school in Massachusetts. After analyzing the data, the intersection between religion and public education manifested in four thematic areas: (1) positive experiences, (2) negative experiences, (3) racist experiences, and (4) hypothetical experiences. Table 2 summarizes these themes. If applicable, each experience was further delineated into the following sections: environment, social, and personal. Environment referred to aspects of the school and/or classroom that were out of the participants' control. Social referred to actual, perceived, and/or "not-yet" interactions with peers or school personnel. Personal referred to interactions between individual participants and their religion and/or God.

Table 2

Sub-Case 1 Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Basic Description	Areas	Sub-Themes
Positive Experiences	Experiences where there was a void of discomfort	• Personal • Social • Environment	• Trusting God • Engaging with religion • Christian moral compass • Proselytizing • Access to curriculum
Negative Experiences	Experiences where there was the presence of discomfort	• Personal • Social • Environment	• Christianity belittled • Lack of activities • Lack of support • Self-suppression • Lack of connection
Racist Experiences	Experiences with racism		• Overt racist acts • Not acting Black • Being a Black Christian
Hypothetical Experiences	Experiences based on scenarios of overt Christian actions		• School support • Peer ridicule

Sub-Case 1 Data Findings

Positive Experiences

The data revealed that participants depended on, and interacted with, their Christian faith in various ways without discomfort. The results were positive, representing instances when Christianity helped the participants in some way. These positive experiences manifested personally, socially, and in the school environment. The following subsections describe participant responses regarding positive experiences.

The Personal

Participants relied on Christianity in personal ways that helped them navigate public schools. Trusting God, engaging with religion, and making choices via religion all represented positive personal experiences with religion for participants in their public schools.

Trusting God for Motivation and Academic Direction. Many participants expressed relying on God daily in schools. Students did this by using God for motivation and understanding that God had a plan for their lives. For example, Kanayo turned to Colossians 3:12 for inspiration, saying, “I forgot exactly what verse it is but work hard as though you’re working for the Lord and not for man. I use a lot when I don't have motivation to do a paper or something like that.” Kamsi shared similar feelings about God motivating her to do her best, regardless of the outcome. She stated,

> I just feel like He just wants you to do your best. And if you're having a hard time or anything, He just wants you to remember that it's for His glory and not the worldly glory of getting all A's, all B's. You can't fail at anything.

Marilynn stated, “I think that God is one of the reasons why I push to get good grades, and I think that He's proud to know that I'm doing my best to get the grades that I deserve.” She also stated that when she does well, she thanks God because “without God I wouldn't be able to do this.” Judy stated, “I know the things that I do good and how much effort I put; I feel like that has to do with Him.”

Students also expressed their belief that God saw school as a means for securing a better future. For example, Gloria said, “Yeah, He cares about it because you're going to need some of that stuff when you go in the world.” Anita echoed similar feelings, saying that God

thought it was important because “we need education to get places in life.” Chioma felt that God cared about academic subjects that would add to her spiritual life such as reading for the purposes of engaging with the Bible.

Participants also shared that they trusted God and knew He had a plan for their lives. Marilynn stated, “He helps [push] me towards whatever He has planned for me in the future and gives me opportunities because He knows that I'm able to handle them and I’ll be able to grow from those experiences.” Anita felt that God “guides you to the right place at the right time.” Kanayo expressed that God has a hand in everything and that doing well in class is in God’s plans. Other participants also trusted God with what they were learning; Nneka felt that God kept information in the mind to help guide them throughout the day. Kamsi trusted God to help with learning because “He gives you certain skills and a certain brain.”

Engaging with Religion. Participants expressed that they engaged with Christianity to deal with various things throughout the day. This engagement occurred through prayer, reading the Bible, listening to/seeking Christian inspiration, remembering religious advice given, or listening to gospel music.

Praying for Positive Outcomes. Many students engaged with religion through prayer. Frequently, the prayers pertained specifically to academic outcomes, and nearly every participant reported that they prayed for high grades and/or to understand lessons. Some prayers expressed general sentiments about good outcomes. For example, Anita said, “Yeah. For, like, important things, and I really want to pass, or I just want the day to go good, I'll just pray.” Chioma shared a similar sentiment: “I pray right before a test to get a good grade on it.”

Some participants prayed for positive academic outcomes because they felt stressed or had anxiety. For example, Nneka shared,

> Yeah, I often pray about it because I'm stressed, so might as well just pray about and let God put it in His hands. When I'm doing well, I still pray about it because that's, like, a blessing from God.

Gloria stated,

> I pray before quizzes and tests. I have terrible anxiety, so I'll freak out if I have a quiz, and if I still know about it, I'll freak out from that day to the next day because I know I have one, so I'll be like, "Oh Lord, please make this test go good."

Other participants prayed when they had trouble understanding the information. For example, Marilynn said,

> I pray to God because sometimes I can study and not understand what I'm being taught and still not understanding after I get help. So, at that point, it's kind of like, "Well, I need to pray about it," and once I pray about it, I have to let it go because when you let it go, you're having faith.

Judy stated, "I'll, like, come home and I'll pray, 'God, I need help with this. And I don't really understand it. And it's kind of frustrating to me.'"

Sometimes participants prayed for positive outcomes in matters that were not academic. For example, Gloria prayed before eating. She said,

> I always say Grace before I eat, doesn't matter where I am, but I will always do it. And they'll be talking. And they'll be like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "I'm saying Grace." And they're like, "What?" I'm like, "You got a problem with it, bro?"

Another time, a tragic event in the world caused Gloria to pray out loud in class for protection. Nneka would pray for motivation.

Engaging with Christianity to Deal with Negative Feelings. The data revealed that students frequently utilized their religion to deal with unpleasant feelings and find peace. This was periodically through prayer. For example, Kamsi shared that when she felt stressed, she would tell God, "I just need help with this. Can you just give me the strength for this." Chioma said, "If I'm stressed out on that day, I'll pray." Judy stated, "Well, I pray every day, and I try to pray a lot. Cause I have anxiety and a little bit of depression." Anita shared, "Yeah, because when I pray in my time, anytime I'm struggling or having a problem at school, I'll just ask God. And then when it goes better, I feel like He helped." Some students used prayer to maintain peace; for instance, Rose said, "Whenever I can find peace and quiet, I try to dedicate that to God. Especially I try to find my peace and solitude."

While most students used prayer to deal with stress at school, some read scriptures, listened to Christian music, and/or spoke to other Christians at school. Kamsi said she read the Bible when she was stressed and listened to Christian music whenever she was having a hard day. Nneka read scriptures to help her academically. She stated,

> I'm really afraid of my grade dropping below a C. So, like, the Bible verse I was talking about in the beginning, I could read those, and then I could think about it throughout the day, and that would encourage me a little bit, even when I feel discouraged.

Rose was unique in that she had Christian support within her school. Regarding that support, she stated, "When you're having a difficult time, there's always people I know I can go to you when struggling." She also found strength in sermons given at youth group meetings outside

school to deal with stress. She stated, “So I feel like when I go to youth group, I get that boost surviving off of my faith.” Marilynn learned from sermons at church to pray for an alleviation of stress at school. She stated,

> I remember one day, one Sunday I was at church, and the bishop was preaching and he was saying that if the devil sees that you're happy, he'll try to get other students or something that'll stress you out and make you feel a negative feeling. When that time comes, it's kind of like, you pray, and you think of scriptures that you learned. I would say that does help me in times of school because I have problems like that when I'm having a good day or something unexpected comes.

Christianity as a Moral Compass. Participants reported that Christianity helped them make good decisions in life, especially around peer interactions. Kanayo stated that he used his religion to make good choices regarding friends. He said that he thought about

> morals that people that I've come across have, and I'll use my faith to see, to pray about who would be a good friend to me in the way of not hurting me by what they do in their daily lives.

Gloria said she used religion to “stay away from certain things or to not go near certain situations.”

When faced with negativity, some participants used their religion to respond positively. Nneka described praying about peers:

> So, some kids that I be having some problems with, some kids because they be doing a lot for no reason. So, I feel like praying in my mind about it because if it's me that can't control them, might as well just pray up to God about it.

Marilynn stated,

> Sometimes kids are extra and it's hard to not want to make the wrong choices because they have no behavior and no reason to respect other people. But I mean, with God, sometimes it kind of helps you to remember that I have a plan and I don't need to worry about anybody else.

Participants also indicated that they used their religion to show others kindness, even if the people did not necessarily deserve it. As Marilynn said,

> Because sometimes there are kids that just kind of push you past your limit or go out of their way to make your day so horrible ‘cause simply, they don't like you. When it comes to being a Christian, you know what's right, it's hard for you to not want to retaliate to make them feel how they made you feel.

She also expressed that Christians are “staying on track” if they refrain from trying to hurt someone or be rude. Kamsi recalled when some of the boys in her welding class were rude one day and then asked for help the next day. Instead of retaliating, she “shows them the love that Jesus shows us.” Judy experienced a situation in which she noticed that a couple of girls were sitting alone at two separate tables. Although it was awkward, she offered that they sit at her table because she felt bad for them.

The Social

Participants relied on Christianity to help them navigate social interactions with peers in public schools. This came in the form of evangelizing and praying with others. Because participants described Christianity as helping them in some way, I termed the experience positive.

Proselytizing. For this study, the word “proselytizing” meant speaking about Jesus, church, or religion to give an opinion or to give someone encouragement Proselytizing in the

form of evangelism held special value for participants when they felt they were being supportive of someone or giving important advice. Most participants had some experience talking about Jesus or wanting to talk about Jesus. For example, when talking about his friends, Kanayo said,

> We've had so many conversations where religion will come up, and by religion I mean in general, they'll be talking about how they think life is or how difficult things are in the world at the moment, and I'll bring in my faith into it, and I'll tell them specifically, “Well, the Bible says this,” or “Okay, Christians think this.”

Rose tried to encourage others to go back to church:

> I try and get my friends who've had bad church experiences to [realize that] “now you're older and you can control your experience more. So, would you like to try it?” But, yeah, it is difficult. But I do try as hard as I possibly can to be like, “Hey, it's not as bad as you think.”

Kamsi conveyed that, occasionally, when talking about her day, she would end up giving advice to her friends. When they asked where she derived her wisdom, she would tell them, “It's not really exactly mine, it's given to me by God.” Chioma was unique in that some of her school peers also attended her church. She talked with them about youth group, and other non-Christian peers heard and asked about the activities. One of these peers even began attending church with them.

Social Prayer. In situations where participants knew they were among Christians who would pray with them, they engaged in audible prayer. Nneka shared that she prayed at a track meet: “So, we were at a track meeting, and I'm like, “Guys, we should pray” because I was really nervous. Rose had a unique situation because adults in her school also attended

her church, so on occasion, they prayed together and invited others to join them. She described one moment at school:

> I have my dean for my school, she goes to my church, and my other dean, she felt it's very difficult to pray. So, there was one morning where we were all just having a really difficult day. It was raining out, and it was just a dark day. And we just, in their office, we all prayed together. And, so, we were kind of showing her how to pray.

Her experience showed that when there was an adult facilitator, the connection with other Christians was more automatic. She went on to say,

> So, I found that the people who are Christian, we come to each other when we need help, or we do go to our dean if we need help. So, I feel like it would make it a lot easier if there was someone to sit there with you and pray with you when you're really struggling.

The Environment

The environment refers to aspects of a school that are in the school's control. These can be specific to classroom, the school building, or individual school personnel. These aspects can also comprise whole school policies, procedures, norms, or rules that participants referenced when discussing their or others' decisions and actions.

Access to Curriculum. Students described situations in which Christianity was brought up in class via a text or general topic. Although limited, when these situations arose, students were able to connect with the material and add to discussions in unique ways. For example, Rose stated,

> In my history class, we were talking about Christianity because we were talking about a sickness, and I think they were talking about the rapture, and I was able to relate. I knew certain things, and I was able to talk and answer questions.

Kanayo had a similar class experience:

> Recently, we were reading a book by Tony Morrison, and some of the characters had Biblical names, and they asked if anyone knew what those names meant, and I was the only one that was able to answer. And then I went into detail of where it came from and what the names meant and the stories behind them.

Other participants spoke generally about the classes in which Christianity was brought up. Anita said it came up in her social studies class when talking about early humans before God and after God. Nneka said, "In history, we learned about Hanukkah, Christmas, Buddhism, all that. Christianity, Islam, Muslim, and all that."

Negative Experiences

Participants shared that they also had negative experiences regarding Christianity in public schools. These experiences were termed negative because students either felt discomfort or excluded in some way based on their religion. The negative experiences presented themselves in the environment in the form of dismissive actions from others regarding Christianity. Personally, participants felt a need to suppress their desire to proselytize. Lastly, participants did not automatically connect with other Christians.

The Personal

Proselytizing. The personal refers to the participants' actions, thoughts, or feelings regarding religion and public schools. The only negative personal experience involved proselytizing. As reported in the previous section, participants would proselytize when they

felt it would help a peer. At the same time, some participants noted that they suppressed their desire proselytize for a variety of reasons. Rose shared that "it is more difficult to speak out comfortably when you have so much backlash on it. So, sometimes I find myself being more quiet than I should." Kamsi stated, "Sometimes I just want to be like, "You need Jesus," but I don't." Judy shared that she saw "people, my friends, a lot of 'em, they smoke and they drink and all of that, and I just want to tell them, 'This is how you're supposed to be'" but refrained because of their lackadaisical attitudes.

Chioma shared concerns about making others feel judged: "I have done it, but only the people that I know that are Christian. 'Cause I don't want to make someone feel uncomfortable if they don't believe in it." Nneka shared similar concerns, stating, "It's just like, what if they're uncomfortable? It's just not my place to do it." Kamsi expressed that she wanted to say things but felt she would be judged and that "school's hard enough." Gloria stated,

> There's been a few times I thought it, but never said anything. Only because I knew, it's not that I was sitting there trying to fit in, just I knew I would be looked at and stared at in a weird way.

Rose said,

> It's very difficult for [people] to be a Christian at school because they feel as though, "Well, I can talk about it with my people here. I can talk about it with my family, but the second I get to school, I'm a different person." And so it's easier for them to shut out their religion completely and then just participate in things that they shouldn't be participating in.

The Social

Connecting with Christians Was Not Automatic. As described in Chapter 3, the focus of CHAT is activity systems. My conceptualization of Christianity as an activity system placed "fellow Christians" within the community. However, during data collection, many participants expressed that they had very few Christian friends in school, so I asked probing questions to gather more information. Participants' responses indicated that sharing the same religion with peers in school did not make students feel connected. For example, Kanayo shared that peers sometimes felt that if their family was Christian, that made them a Christian. He disagreed with this, saying, "I've had conversations with people where I've mentioned that it's not something that can be passed down through your blood or anything like that. It's a decision that you have to make yourself at some point." Marilynn said,

> Honestly, I feel like just because someone has the same religion as me, I know you're not obligated to go out of your way to talk to them or become friends with them or just talk about God with them. But I feel like it all depends on that person's personality because I feel like when you read the Bible, it's the way … you interpret the Bible. I feel like, just because someone else is Christian like me, I don't know if they have good intentions or what their Christian life is.

The Environment

As described in the previous section, the environment refers to things in the control of the school. They can be specific to classrooms, the school building, or individual school personnel, or they can be school policies, procedures, norms, or rules.

School Atmosphere Dismissive of Christianity. Students expressed that Christianity was not frequently brought up in school. If it was, it was often in the context of a humanities,

social studies, history, or English class. Kanayo felt that that there was a disproportionate mention of Christianity. He said, “I think that when Christianity does come up, it’s ‘cause we're talking about someone in the past, they're important to the curriculum, just happen to be Christian, or something like that.” He also felt that schools should talk more about Christianity: “I think what would really be helpful in debunking stereotypes that people have about Christianity.”

Outside the classroom, participants felt that teachers and school staff tried to create an inclusive atmosphere by refraining from talking about Christianity. They did this for the sake of not making others feel unwelcome. For example, Gloria recalled when she was having a Biblical debate with another student. She said the staff eventually intervened and asked them to be quiet because they were loud and “a lot of people aren't religious.” Marilynn also commented on how school try to be inclusive:

> I feel like religion isn't a topic that is touched at our school much because they don't want to offend anybody who has different religions or who doesn't even have a religion or don't want a religion. I feel like it's not really a touched-on subject because of that fact. And they want to include everyone's feelings.

Judy said a teacher began asking if some of the students were religious but said she could not talk about it or try to influence others because people may not believe in it or may have different beliefs.

Dealing with Negativity. Sometimes participants encountered negative attitudes about Christianity. Kanayo expressed that people will “see a Christian as someone who will always think that they're better than everyone and will always judge them something.” He also noticed that, in history class, they often focused on Christians as people “conquering

other places and killing people in the name of Christ where it's like, that's not that exactly it." Rose felt that peers had a negative view of God because bad things would happen to them. She said,

> I go to a public school, so it can be difficult just because you have people with different backgrounds and people who have different struggles, so they think differently on "How can this be so great if he's letting this happen to me?"

Peers also thought she was a Christian because her life seemed absent of strife. She recalled them saying, "Well, you just believe because your life's easier and you just believe because you don't struggle because your mom's there, your dad's there."

Lack of Christian Activities. Regarding school atmosphere, participants also felt that there was a lack of Christian activities. Gloria said, "I just wish there was a lot more things that Christian kids could do." She and a friend brought the idea of starting a prayer group to staff. The staff were supportive but said there were too many things going on to start it. Judy said she wished there were a club "where people can feel like if they can't talk about it in school, they could talk about it after school and in a club." Rose stated, "I feel like it would be amazing to see more clubs that have something to do with it."

Lack of Christian Advice. Seeking wise counsel, as many Christians describe it, is an important value in the Christian faith and involves receiving advice from others who have experience and wisdom. The data revealed that there was a lack of Christian advice available in public schools for the Christian student participants. They did not want schools or school personnel to provide advice; rather, they felt that advice should be available from someone and that the advice would be helpful in some capacity. Nneka shared that Christian advice would help her when she felt discouraged or was having a bad day. Chioma felt that more

advice in school would help Christian students understand what they believed in. She stated, “Some people, they don't really know Christianity, they just think it's best. They believe in a religion, but they don't exactly know why. They just think the Bible is a book of rules.” Judy felt that having more Christian advice would help Christian students feel more comfortable talking about their faith. She stated, “They could teach how to talk to other kids about it.”

Racist Experiences

This study was designed to explore the experiences of not only Christians who attended public schools, but Black Christian students. As discussed in Chapter 2, religion has been shown to mitigate the achievement gap and have positive effects on Black students’ school experiences. I sought to determine if there was any intersection between race and religion in students’ public-school experiences. I found that some students experienced racism in school and had opportunities to react as Christians. In addition, being a Christian seemed to affect how students were viewed as Black people.

Racism in School

Students expressed that they experienced racism in school. Some racist actions were egregious enough that they had to report them to school administration. For example, Chioma endured the most extreme forms of racism, including being called the n-word. Students would make fun of her when the lights went out saying, “Where did Chioma go?” They would also say she ate a lot or made fun of her hair. She reported these events to the school and her parents, and with the help of her mom, she navigated these situations by relying on her religion. First, her mom took her to church on Sunday, and the pastor prayed over her. She also said that “she poured all the things into God because she was very upset.” In the end, she felt that God helped her because things improved at school.

Others experienced racism but handled it themselves. For example, Kanayo stated, “A lot of it is microaggressions or something that, again, people just don't realize that they're doing. There's also been times where teachers have accidentally done something that they then realize and tried to apologize for and stuff.” He also used his Christianity to handle negative racial situations, saying, “I did have the opportunity to be able to flip out, but that's not what God would want me to do or what Jesus would want me to do.”

Rose faced colorism in her school. People would say that her being light-skinned was the reason for her success, and those comments made her not want to try. When I asked how her relationship with God helped her in those situations, she stated,

> Because I am comfortable with my relationship with God, I don't let others affect me. Being in a secure relationship with God makes it easier because you know that the hate doesn't matter because you're so close to God.

Not Acting Black

Some participants were criticized for “not acting Black.” They did not necessarily say this was because they were Christian, but it was a common theme that emerged from students’ responses about experiencing racism. For example, Gloria said, “A lot of people ask me if I'm mixed because I act like I have common sense” and “‘You're a lot more different than a lot of the Black people I've met because you're one of the calm and cool ones that don't have problems.’” Kamsi said that she had been told she “‘can't wear that if you're Black.’” Rose was told that she was “whitewashed.”

Being a Black Christian

Occasionally, being Black intersected with being a Christian. Kanayo felt like both made a person out to be the “other”:

> I think this goes for both being a Christian and being a Black student. Not a lot of people know what you're going through or what it is to be you. My school has a lot of cookie cutter people where it's like everyone's almost the exact same or has the same experiences. So, it's definitely tough the way that I've had to do a lot of explaining for both Christianity and being Black.

Gloria said a peer had asked her if she was a Christian because she was Black or because she was brought up in the religion; however, she noted that the person was not trying to be racist but was just curious.

Hypothetical Experiences

In the interview protocol for Sub-Case 1, Questions 6, 7, 9, and 10 were designed to gather responses about participants' experience with overt religious activities such as praying out loud or reading the Bible openly. These questions were asked in the form of "Have you ever tried or wanted to try a particular religious activity?" (e.g., praying out loud). If participants said they wanted to but had not tried, I followed up by asking what prevented them from attempting the activity. I also asked what they thought would happen if they attempted the activity. These questions were designed to address the research question "What are the experiences of Black Christian students when they express or try to express their religion in public school settings in Massachusetts?" The data revealed that such overt religious practices seemed improbable for students. Kanayo expressed, **"**I don't think it has ever really crossed my mind, and I haven't seen anyone do that, either." Other participants reacted in the same manner, as if it were the first time they had thought about praying or reading the Bible in the open at school. Rose said, "I think other people at my school would probably be surprised. I don't know if it would be likely for that to happen."

Even though it felt improbable, students hypothesized what would happen if they tried these activities in school. First, students felt that school staff would support overt religious expression. I grouped ideas or quotes in which students expressed that school staff would give space, freedom, and/or encouragement for overt religious expression. Second, despite this support, students felt that they would be looked at as "weird" by their peers. I grouped ideas or quotes indicating that students felt like they would become a spectacle.

School Support

It was clear that students perceived they would not feel oppressed by or angst from staff regarding overt religious expression. Participants were given a hypothetical scenario in which students would gather in an open space where others were congregated and pray together. When asked how faculty or staff would react to such a scene, participants responded in a variety of ways indicating they would be supported. Anita said that she thought staff would react but in a good way. Marilynn felt that teachers would ask for clarification about what was happening but would not be negative, even if their own religion was different. Kamsi stated,

> I think, to be honest, this world has been very interesting. And I feel, like, they'd have to let us do that. I feel like they might be a little bit, maybe they'd be surprised. I feel like they'd be surprised that we'd want to do that, but I don't think they'd say no.

I also posed a scenario about reading the Bible during free time or together with others during lunch. Participants expressed similar sentiments regarding teachers' reactions. Kanayo felt that "there wouldn't be much of a reaction, then I feel like they would probably try to make a club out of it or something." Chioma did not think the teachers would say anything: "If they take, tell us to take out a silent reading book and I pull out the Bible, I

don't think they would say anything." Nneka felt that once teachers found out what they were doing, they would be positive and encourage the students to continue.

Peer Judgment

Many participants felt that peer reactions to these hypothetical situations would be negative. Anita felt that peers would react negatively to religious expression "because the way people are inside the classroom, it's like they don't have much respect for other people's opinions." Other participants felt that they would look abnormal to their peers. For example, Kanayo felt like peers would not openly discriminate but would see his actions as weird. Marilynn agreed, stating, "I feel like some kids would probably look at you weird or say something negative." Chioma expressed that since praying out loud in school is not common, peers would question it. This idea of being looked at in a weird way was reiterated by others, but they added the layer of becoming a spectacle by having their actions posted to social media. Gloria stated, "I think a lot of people would record it and think we were completely insane." Kamsi grabbed her phone to indicate that peers would record students engaged in public prayer. When Nneka was asked why she thought more people do not pray or have Bible study at school, she said,

> Maybe because they're scared of judgment from other people and that they don't think they fit this generation because this generation is wild. And then things will be put on the internet and just not say nice stuff about them.

Sub-Case 2 Participants: Parents or Guardians of Black Christian Middle or High School Students Who Attended a Traditional or Charter Public School in Massachusetts

The 10 parents or guardians for case Sub-Case 2 were Denise, Sonya, Naomi, Nia, Amina, Angie, Tina, Ife, Barbara, and Sarah. (All names were pseudonymized to protect the identities of the participants.) As stated in the previous sections, some participants from Sub-Case 2 were the parents/guardians of participants from Sub-Case 1. Table 3 indicated which student and parent participants were related.

Table 3

Relationship Between Parent/Guardian and Student Participants

Parent/Guardian Participant	Student Participant
Denise	Kanayo
Amina	Gloria
Angie	Chioma
Tina	Kamsi
Ife	Judy
Barbara	Rose
Sonya	No child in study
Naomi	No child in study
Nia	No child in study
Sarah	No child in study

The following detailed descriptions are important because they offer background information about each parent/guardian participant and ground the study in their experiences as parents of Black Christian middle or school students.

Denise

Denise was a single mom who was very active in her church. She originally enrolled Kanayo in Catholic school but decided that, for high school, he would go to a public school. She said the decision was easy because she liked the sports and theater programs and was familiar with the school.

Sonya

Sonya was the married parent of three children, the oldest of whom had just graduated from a public charter school (he was not interviewed for this study). Sonya was a public school teacher herself and stated that any trepidation she had about sending her son to a public school was due to "the possible types of dynamic that could be due to kids coming from different home environments and different types of upbringings." However, she felt there was "value in having different types of experiences" and therefore still sent her child to public school. She stated she had not physically gone to church since the COVID-19 pandemic began but attended virtually.

Naomi

Naomi was a married pastor and parent of four children, none of whom were interviewed for this study. She had many reservations about sending her children to public schools and started her oldest in a private school. Due to financial constraints, she switched to public schools and had a lot of mixed feelings. She felt that some were not supportive academically or religiously. In addition, she stated she did not want "the school system to

teach my children things about themselves to influence anything that we don't believe in here.” She had tried several schools before finding a public charter school she felt fit her current high school-aged child. She said the current school was supportive and always reached out if her child was lacking anything.

Nia

Nia was a single mother whose child went to a public charter school. Her child was interviewed for this study, but the data were not included because, as the interview progressed, it was discovered she was not "connected" as required by the study. Nia was a public school teacher and felt “that the behaviors that are acceptable in public schools go against morals and Christian beliefs.” She did not attend church regularly, which was not required to participate in this study.

Amina

Amina was the familial guardian of two children, one of whom was interviewed for this study. Amina did not disclose whether she was a single guardian. She had lived with two children in another state before moving back to Massachusetts a few years earlier. She attended church virtually every Sunday and for Bible studies. She felt very confident about sending her children to public school because “they’ve already had a great foundation since they were born and would not be easily swayed.”

Angie

Angie did not divulge if she was a single parent but did say she had more than one child, one of whom was interviewed for this study. She regularly attended a church that she really liked. Her daughter, who also participated in this study, spent 1 year at a Catholic school before her mom transferred her to a public school. When asked if she had reservations

about sending her children to public school, Angie said, “Sometimes I do think of pulling … my kids out of public school and putting them into a private school, but still that's not going to shelter them from what the world has become.”

Tina

Tina was married and had more than one child, the youngest of whom was interviewed for this study. Tina went to a church she had been attending since childhood (except the years when she lived in another state). Her youngest child went to public school from kindergarten to third grade, was homeschooled from fourth through sixth grade, went to a Christian school for 2 years, and then attended public high school. Tina had concerns about sending her child to public school, saying, “Yeah, I did. I mean, ultimately, I wasn't going to prevent it from happening, but obviously I'm concerned about the different social issues that are sometimes pushed on kids and just, in general, if she's aligning herself with people who don't necessarily have a Christian background or the same morals as Christianity.”

Ife

Ife was married and the parent of four children, the youngest of whom was interviewed for this study. Ife attended church in person or virtually when time allowed. She did not have any reservations about sending her child to public schools, saying,

> I was brought up in public school, and the other three kids went to public school. So, the public school system, for the most part, has done well by [all] of the kids. There was never really any hesitation. Every now and then, I'll hear something that goes on and I'll be like, “Oh my goodness, I need to get her out of there.”

Barbara

Barbara, who did not divulge if she was a single parent, was the parent of an only child who was also interviewed for this study. Barbara's child went to a public school for kindergarten, then was either homeschooled or attended private school before transferring to a public charter high school in Massachusetts. She decided to enroll her child in a Catholic school because she felt that being able to hear about God and Jesus on a regular basis would be a good addition to her schooling. She had reservations about placing her child in public school because she "wanted her to get a really good education and didn't want her to get distracted." She felt like "they let a lot of kids fall by the wayside in Boston Public Schools." Barbara attended her church regularly.

Sarah

Sarah did not say if she was a single parent but talked about her three children, one of whom just graduated from high school (he was not interviewed for this study). Sarah regularly attended a church in person in the community where she lived. Sarah did not have any reservations about sending her child to a public school based on academics. She explained that, unlike in Haiti, where she had come from, in the United States, there did not seem to be much difference between the quality of education received in public schools compared to private schools. Despite this belief, she did note that, based on her personal research, students who went to private schools had better tests scores than those who went to public schools. She also stated that

> if I had the possibility for them [to be] in a private school where they would see Christians being Christians like them, I think it would be better. But not having that possibility, it wasn't really a big deal. But I know that would make a difference in

their life being, like, in a private school where they get the same education they get at home.

After gathering background information about the parents/guardians and their feelings about sending their children to public schools, each interview continued with a series of open-ended questions designed to address Research Sub-Question 3: "In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?" After conducting the interviews, I coded the data. The following sections describe how the data addressed my central research question and what was revealed about the lived experiences of Black Christian families who utilized the public school system in Massachusetts.

Sub-Case 2 Data Findings

Morals

In examining the participants' Christian values, I specifically asked parents/guardians from Sub-Case 2 to describe their values. Through data analysis, additional values that participants held but did not state explicitly were also discovered. Unlike with participants in Sub-Case 1, these values were not based solely on scripture but rather on what participants held as important. Two main themes associated with values emerged after analyzing the data: personal morals and social morals. I arrived at morals because parents/guardians expressed a desire for their children to do what was right and avoid what was wrong based on the Bible or Jesus's example. For instance, Denise stated, "I would say that biblical values kind of shape who we are" and also said, "We try to navigate together as far as how we treat people and how we respond to certain scenarios." Nia expressed that environments cannot always be changed, but parents can "guide the child in the right direction and influence our child within

that environment." Sarah stated that she wanted to "make sure that they know the Bible, what are the rules, regulations, what's right, what's not right." This was important to her even if her children do not get it right every day.

Many parents echoed these same sentiments in their responses. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "moral" as "of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior" and "expressing or teaching a conception of right behavior"; therefore, I categorized parents'/guardians' responses regarding right and wrong as morals. Table 4 summarizes the themes and sub-themes related to personal morals, socials morals, and support. Personal morals involved internal directives that parents hoped their children carried with them and used to make good decisions. Social morals involved how parents expected students to interact with others. Personal morals included: being a Christ-like role model, being disciplined, having integrity, having faith and sexuality morality. Social morals included: having respect, showing love and kindness, evangelizing, getting a quality education, and being with other Christian believers. In addition to Christian values the data revealed that parents valued support but felt like it was lacking.

Table 4

Sub-Case 2 Themes and Sub-Themes Related to Personal Morals, Socials Morals, and Support

Theme	Basic Description	Sub-Themes
Personal Morals	Internal directives that parents wanted their children to live by	• Being a Christ-like role model • Being disciplined • Having integrity • Having faith • Sexual morality
Social Morals	Outward actions directed toward others that parents wanted their children to exhibit or have	• Showing love and kindness • Evangelizing • Having respect • Getting a quality education
Support	What is missing in schools and the ways it can be addressed	• Lack of community • School support • Church support

The following sections provides details on each sub-theme and how the values they represent intersect with receiving an education in public schools.

Personal Morals

Being a Christ-Like Role Model. Parents/guardians expressed that it was important that their children be role models in school by carrying themselves as if they were representatives of Christ. As Amina shared,

> Who you representing? You can't say you're representing someone, but you're doing the opposite characteristics of who they are. Okay, nobody's perfect, and we already know that already, but the part of where you're striving to be Christlike, because that's what we're supposed to do, is what we have to do, and what we should be doing. When you show other people, when people say, “Man, you, you're different,” you're striving to be like Christ was.

Tina stated she wanted her daughter “to be a representative of Christ.” Ife stated, “Treat others the way Jesus would treat people. Try to be as Christlike as possible.” Barbara referred to Jesus telling His followers that they were the light of the world and to let their light shine before others (Matthew 5:16, NIV), saying to her daughter, “Make sure your light spreads. Make sure that when you go out into the world, you're showing people goodness and kindness and grace, and forgiveness, because those are things people remember.”

Being Disciplined. Parents/guardians conveyed the importance of their children being disciplined in school. When talking about going to school and doing work, Naomi said, “One of the things that Jesus always talks about, and the Bible talks about, is discipline.” Amina stated,

> As far as their grades go, you should be striving to be the best. Not like the best but do your best. I use the work environment with them a lot. If you go to work and you tell your boss, "I don't want to do it today,” be prepared to go home with your stuff in a box.

Sarah said she felt that students who attended Christian schools had a greater sense of discipline.

Having Integrity. When asked about important values, some participants named honesty and integrity. For example, Denise related integrity to “who you are in public and who you are in private [matching] up.” Nia tied in honesty and school by saying that academic integrity was important. Angie said, “Just be honest, tell the truth, be an honest person so that it speaks about your character.”

Having Faith. Whenever parents/guardians spoke about believing what the Bible said or believing who God is, I coded the response as “faith.” The result of these beliefs

could be internal thoughts/feelings or external actions. For example, Naomi said she wanted her children to "be confident in the God that they serve," which signals internalizing faith. She also said, "We like the kids to really be comfortable, and free, and themselves in their beliefs in Christ." This denoted that she wanted her children to act out their faith without constraint. Other instances of internalizing faith included Amina saying she wanted her child to "believe what the Bible says" and Tina saying she wanted her daughter to "follow after God. [Believe] that His ways are best." Nia said that she wanted her daughter to "rely on and trust the Lord and His promises to [her] as a Christian and a faithful believer in Him, that He will always provide."

Contradictory Messages. Parents/guardians expressed that their children were receiving two different messages from school and home, which could impact their faith. Sonya said,

> A lot of times, that confusion is my parents and my church are saying one thing and the Bible is saying one thing. And then these people who I really respect academically and these people that I view as being smart are saying something different. And I think it makes kids think, "Well, someone clearly doesn't know what they're talking about." I just think it's really hard for kids to navigate being stuck in the middle of that.

Naomi said that her children were embarrassed to say they were Christians. She said it was one thing when kids don't understand, "but when it comes from an adult, it's just like, 'Wow, maybe we are doing something wrong.'" Angie said that, because of the messages school disseminated, "Mommy's going to look like she's the devil or mommy's not accepting change." Sarah said,

> When they're raised in it at home and they're not exposed to it at school, that makes a big difference. You are teaching something at home and then you are going to have two different personalities in that same student because you are trying to raise somebody at home with some beliefs and values. Then the school is teaching them something else where "I don't want you to talk about Jesus. I don't want you to talk about this, I don't want you to talk about that." They don't even have a Bible now at school.

Denise felt that "there's very little things that match up exactly with what the Bible says that are popular and accessible." She said she had constant conversations with her son about "what the Bible says versus what the school says versus what the school enforces and doesn't enforce." Angie felt that "the school only delivers what they want to deliver to you. I feel like [students] don't have a right to believe at all." Naomi's daughter was told. "'You can't bring religious stuff to school'" and that "she couldn't read [the Bible] in school during her reading time." In addition, parents shared instances when schools taught something that went against what Christians believe. Sonya stated, "When they talk about evolution and about creationism and how the world began and stuff, a lot of times there are a lot of things presented as proven fact that are really just theory." Ife stated, "So evolution, they learned that in science, they're teaching that humans evolved from monkeys, and that's not true. And so, she knows that."

Sexual Morality. Many parents named sexual morality as an area where they wanted their children to do the right thing and avoid the wrong thing. Naomi summed up the sentiment: "So, the value is, like, 'Hey, my body is the temple of God.'" Every

parent/guardian participant echoed that same belief. When speaking about it from the perspective of challenges that young Christians face, Denise said,

> Being a Christian child isn't easy. I think you're bombarded with all these images and ideologies. You can't pick up your phone without being exposed to filth, and that can be from any source. There are friends from outside of school, there's just the general Instagram, what body images are supposed to be like, or what language is supposed to be used, how you respond to the opposite sex, how you respond to the same sex.

Ife included sex among the problems, saying, “Drugs, alcohol, sex, you name it. All of those things are a challenge to kids in general. The temptations are real, and they're there. I think that they're more hidden now due to social media.” She also felt that she did not have enough time to get in front of her daughter learning about sex in public school. She said,

> So, if you're a Christian and it's a topic that you didn't want to discuss with your kid because you felt that they were too young or too immature or it just wasn't time. They're getting introduced to this stuff really, really early on, and that's a challenge in and of itself, right? Yeah, because if as a parent you weren't proactive because you didn't think that you were going to run into these types of things so early on and your kid gets exposed to it, but yet they're too embarrassed to come back and tell you about it. I feel like if you were in a Christian environment, there would be a lot more control over that type of stuff. I would think, I don't know if that's true or not, but I just think that it might be.

In addition to parents/guardians speaking about sexual morality generally, parents were also specific about what was right and wrong regarding sexual acts, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Sexual Acts. Some parents felt that pre-teens and teens performing sexual acts was a big topic promoted in society and public schools. Naomi felt like "sex is a big thing in high school or middle school." Denise felt that schools had the mentality of "'Well, everybody's having sex, so if you're going to, use protection.'" Tina echoed the same sentiments, saying, "In health classes they might stand on, 'As long as you have safe sex, then that's fine.'"

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. In this dissertation, "sexual orientation" refers to whether a person is heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual. "Gender identity" refers to someone identifying as male, female, or non-binary. Almost every parent remarked on public schools teaching beliefs that were contrary to Christian beliefs regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Nia said, "As a Christian myself, I have no disrespect to the LGBTQ community. I think as a Christian, what we believe goes against what they believe and how they live their lives." Sonya felt that "when we're talking about gender and sexuality, that is where a lot of things are contradictory to things that the Bible says." She also felt that "pluralism of the different genders is taught as a fact as opposed to [a theory]." Denise felt that "sexuality [is] almost promoted in school to experiment [with]." Angie felt similarly, stating, "And they're telling them, 'Oh, you should explore, should go kiss a man.' So, if you, like, wait, what? I wasn't even thinking about that. But you planted that seed." When asked if she believed public schools teach anything that contradicts Christianity, Tina said, "That you can choose your own gender, that's big right now [and] what are your pronouns? That's huge." Naomi felt that the information the public school gave her child about sex went against her Christian ideals as well. She stated, "I had to read their thing. It talks about same-sex attraction. It talks about sex period. It talks about not just that same-sex attraction, but they teach you how to have sex." Amina opted her children out of sex

education because the school was going to teach about the different sexual orientations people had, and her children “don't do that and we don't, we're not going to learn that. We know about the different orientations that people have.” Sonya shared that her child received backlash for his opinion that homosexuality was wrong. She said,

> If you have a problem with homosexuality or if you believe that it is sinful, basically you need to keep your mouth shut. That is, that's generally the perspective that is taken in schools across the board from what I can see.

Sometimes participants follow-up their comments about sexual orientation and gender identity with comments that espoused loving people. Those data are presented in the next section, which details what participants said about social morals.

Social Morals

Showing Love and Kindness. As mentioned, participants were adamant that Christians are supposed to “love regardless of whomever the person is” (Denise) and be “loving and kind and caring” (Nia). Angie stated that one of her values was to “treat everybody like you like to be treated.” Tina said one of her values was “to be kind, considerate, and giving whether they're Christian or they're not Christian.” Naomi said, “They don't have to be Bible thumpers or beat people over the head, but just show the love of Christ in school.” Ife said,

> Try to love people even through the hard times. Have empathy for others. Try to be a community [that] serves, who can help those who are in need. But mainly I think just love. I feel like if there's just more love the way Jesus loves people, that the world would be different. And so that's what I try to focus a lot on. Less hate, less competition, more love. Yep. Doesn't always work that way, but we try.

Some participants were specific about showing love to members of the LGBTQ community. After stating that LGBTQ community's beliefs contradict what she as a Christian believes, Nia stated,

> A bunch of my friends who are gay ask me about it, 'cause I'm going to be real with you. I love you. And because I love you, that's what matters. How you choose to live your life, I may not [agree] with it, but that doesn't mean [I'm] against you. It's just like being an alcoholic. As a Christian, we believe those things to be sinful.

Denise said, "If God commands us to love, then we love, period—doesn't matter what color, gender, sexuality, orientation that you are, that's the bottom line." Amina said, "Christ was a person that didn't dislike people, He disliked their behavior. So that's what we have to do."

Public Schools' Support of Love and Kindness. When I asked if public schools taught anything matching Christian ideals, some parents/guardians commented that the schools promoted love and acceptance. Denise felt that schools indirectly taught Christian values: "I mean, acceptance and love, that's Jesus all over it. But I think they don't like to associate that with Him because there's a whole belief that Christians are intolerant and that we don't accept others." Sonya felt that "schools generally have been leaning toward loving and respecting all people, which I feel is a Biblical truth." In addition, she said, "The idea of doing to others as you have them do unto you and then the Bible saying, 'So love your neighbor as yourself.' Those things kind of align". Tina felt that public schools "try to encourage their students to be considerate and kind to their fellow peers and to be responsible human beings," which matched Christian ideals. Ife said that the school is "just trying to be good people and be a good community within the school itself." She said public schools want students to "love each other and all that other stuff."

Evangelism. Evangelism involves telling others about Jesus and the Christian faith. Analyzing the data revealed that some Christian parents/guardians held evangelism as a value. Denise said, "I encourage him to be a friend to everyone and that if he has opportunities where people want to hear about his faith, take those opportunities." Naomi wanted her children to feel comfortable talking about Christ and to "not be embarrassed to say that [they're] a Christian." Barbara directly tied her daughter's education and to spreading God's message, saying, "I think that she can use that education to be a light in the future. So, God's using her in a way. Everything that she learns can be used towards something that He can use."

Challenges to Evangelism. Parents/guardians expressed what they felt were challenges related to talking about Jesus or Christianity. Some parents/guardians felt that people had the wrong idea of what it means to be Christian and therefore did not want to hear what youth had to say. For example, Denise said,

> I think that one of the most effective things the devil has done, as far as his tactics, is to make Christianity look crazy or discredited or still give license to the people who are nutty in the name of Christ.

Barbara stated, "The idea of what a Christian is [is] so skewed in society right now. Or they're getting the idea of what Christians are from people who maybe don't align with the things that we align with."

Others felt that the school did not create an environment conducive to proselytizing. Ife did not have any personal evidence that schools did not support Christian students. At the same time, she stated, "I also don't hear that they're talking about Christianity or religion in class, either. They're not allowed to, and Judy says they're not allowed to, so that's probably

the reason why." While wondering if it was acceptable for a teacher to answer students' religious questions, Amina said, "I feel as the law, we put teachers on a position to make it feel like it's taboo to talk about it and we shouldn't." Although this comment was about teachers, it speaks to an environment that may not be open to religious conversation. Naomi also felt that schools created "pressure from the adult that says, 'Hey, you know, can't talk about God here. This is not a place to talk about God.'"

Respect. It was important to parents/guardians that their children were respectful in school and life. When expressing what was crucial in their family, Sonya said, "Valuing family, valuing relationships with others, respect for his teachers, and colleagues." Nia conveyed the necessity of respect for others: "I had actually two parents say to me, "I teach my child to stand up for themselves. Somebody hit them, you hit 'em back." As a Christian, I don't believe in that." Denise highlighted the importance of respect for others and self ,saying,

> What I've spoken to him directly about is treating other people the same. And that the way that he carries himself matters, not just as a reflection of who he is, but as a reflection of what it's like to be a Black man.

Respect in School. There were instances when parents/guardians spoke about respect in relation to their child's schooling. Amina felt that respect for authority in the school was important as a Christian:

> Do you obey those that have authority and rule over you, which would be your teachers in school, which would be the principal, your guidance counselor? So, if you don't obey them, then what are you saying you're for Christ for?

Nia equated getting good grades with having self-respect but felt that her daughter had difficulty with the lack of respect from others in her public school. She said,

> Once she got to middle school, it was a different type of schooling. It was a different school, and the environment was different. And I remember her having a really hard time assimilating, assimilating to the structure of the school and the students. And she's like, "These kids are out of control. They're just all over the place. They're rude, they're disrespectful." And that's not the way I taught her. And that's not what she was exposed to.

Sonya felt that public schools matched Christian ideals when it came to "respect for creation and nature, that kind of stuff."

Getting a Quality Education. Data revealed that getting a quality education was one of the values parents/guardians held in high importance. I coded this under "morality" because it was something that parents wanted to "get right" in relation to the school they chose for their child. For example, when I asked Tina why she chose to homeschool early in her child's education, she stated,

> I had been homeschooling my other children, and I felt like it was just a better education, more focused education on what the child's bent was, and I felt like the public school was just not that rigorous of an education.

Sonya stated, "In terms of the educational side of it, I had done a lot of research about this particular school and its reputation, and it seemed like it was a place that would be a good fit for him." Denise felt she was making a good choice with her son's school, saying, "I'm familiar with the school, and it's a pretty decent school based on the state testing and I guess breaking, I feel comfortable with him there." Although Barbara felt that her daughter had

dealt with “some of the drama and stuff that goes along with being at a public school,” she kept her daughter in the school because “they are really on top of the kids and trying to make sure they do well.” Naomi also felt that she made the right decision in the school her daughter attended: “Love the school. I think it's open, it's inviting. I love the school. They're very helpful. Anything that I need or if my daughter is lacking in anything, they make sure to reach out to me.” Sarah also valued her child getting a good education and felt like public schools were able to do that. She said,

> I was technically raised in Haiti in private school, but when I came here in America, I realized that there was no big difference, private and public school. Not in the sense of the education that you get, but in the knowledge, there's no big difference. But back home, there's a big gap between public and private school. So, to me, it's not a big deal sending them to public school because I know they will get the same education as if they were going to private schools.

Nia wanted her daughter to have a good education that was supported by God. She said,

> [God] will always provide all of our needs, knowing the need is education, getting an excellent education and making sure the finances are there for her education. That's a need. And I have nothing but absolute confidence that God is going to take care of her. I know for a fact.

The Benefit of a Strong Personality. Some parents/guardians said that having a strong personality helped deal with social challenges. Ife said,

> I mean, I think it all depends on the student, right? Judy has a pretty strong personality in terms of, she's not afraid to tell people that she believes in God, or she

> might go to church because she's not intimidated by any backlash or any type of backlash that she might get from students.

Barbara echoed similar sentiments about the benefits of having a strong personality:

> She does have a pretty strong personality and sense of self, so she's able to kind of navigate those situations pretty well. She's really good at telling her friends, “No, I don't do that.” And luckily for me, she's made friends that respect that.

Ife said,

> I could see another student who doesn't have a strong personality or isn’t as confident, or maybe a student who may get picked on typically in school, might feel like they're going to get labeled as a Jesus freak or something. And so therefore may not want to let other students know that he goes or she goes to church.

Support

Parent responses indicated that their children lacked a Christian community in public schools. They also expressed that having support would be helpful, not only for themselves, but for their children, and the school community. They reported that there were ways in which schools could provide support and ways in which churches could provide support. Support could be given through programming, but also by changing the way Christianity is spoken about.

Lack of Christian Community. “Christian community” refers to participants and their children being in close contact or surrounded by others who have similar interests and characteristics. Several parents/guardians expressed that their children lacked Christian community and acceptance from non-Christians. Talking about her son in school, Denise said,

> As of right now, he doesn't really have any Christian friends at all. It's a rough age anyway, but to not have a Christian support system or any Christian friends to speak to at all, I think has [been] even harder for him.

To Amina, having a Christian community was important because "the peers or the people they hang with, or their friends could steer them in the wrong direction, could try to, and I say try to, change their minds or could change their minds about certain things." Denise felt the lack of Christian community was a challenge that could lead to stigma because

> people see you as you're believing in something that doesn't exist. To some people, they feel like you shouldn't be talking about it. This is your belief. We don't want to hear it. That's your opinion. And sometimes they look at them differently. They bully them at school if they know they're Christians. And because whatever you teach those kids, you will see the difference. A Christian student and a non-Christian student, if you see them together, you can see the difference. So sometimes they get bullied at school.

Denise felt that Christians in her son's school lacked support:

> If I were to say, "I'm upset about this because I'm a Christian," I would probably have more backlash than support. I think they like to say on paper, like, "Oh, we're accepting. We accept all beliefs and colors and creeds" and all that, but let somebody disagree, and then it's a whole other ball game, and they come out.

Sonya felt that, in the Northeast, it was "harder in a public school to identify as Christian." She felt that public schools lacked Christian community and were places where Christians received backlash. She said,

> Generally, any talk of God or mention of God is sort of frowned upon among the student body. That culture of, "Oh, we respect everyone and everyone's views and who everyone is," that doesn't always extend to the people that take Christ seriously.

She continued,

> If you are vocal about your stance on any particular thing, I mean generally other kids will see them as judgmental, whether or not they are. They're not necessarily saying that other kids need to be a certain way, or that they're looking down on anyone, but just generally holding certain viewpoints—there is an intolerance for that. It creates a lot of issues for kids who are in public school and don't want to be vocal about the fact that they're a Christian because they realize that it kind of makes them a target in some ways.

She went on to say that even though some Christian students felt like targets, they could not say anything because, in the mind of others, "you are the majority, you're privileged." When explaining how being in a public school affected her daughter, Nia said, "Trying to find her voice was hard. And I think that she really, she was always a scholar, but I think she really just dug into her work because having her voice in that environment was a conflict."

How the Schools Can Provide Support. I asked parents/guardians if there were ways the church or the schools themselves could support them. Some parents/guardians highlighted how schools could support them and their children as Christians. Sonya had several ideas. She wanted schools to make sure "that students that identify as Christian are as protected as everybody else." She thought it would be a good idea if schools allowed a "space for students to pray together, even before testing, quizzes, that kind of stuff when the anxiety is high." She also said,

> I'm not expecting that school is going to teach things through a Christian worldview, but I would expect that if you're going to talk about things that are potentially controversial or things where the Bible has clear stamps on that, schools could at least notify parents that certain things are in the curriculum or that certain discussions are going to take place. Maybe even letting parents know if the school has certain religious clubs or so forth to, so that parents know that that's an option. Then can you possibly encourage their kids to get involved? That would be helpful, too.

Naomi said she wished she knew the rules regarding religious freedom. Angie wanted religious activities to be included when addressing mental health. She said, “They talk about mental health. They don't talk about religion or how praying can help relieve some of your mental health.” She also wanted a partnership for the sake of the child:

> It has to be all of us to be able to help them because anywhere they can be influenced. When say not just the school, it is with us. It's our church. It's the school, too. So, it's all three of us. Because those are the three triangles that are impacting the kids. They're actually in the middle of it.

Tina thought it would be ideal if schools could read scriptures with students who were struggling but said “I don't think scriptures are probably allowed in school.” She spoke about other support for students, saying, “If they had a church support, if they had some, a support person. Like the hospitals have, what do they call those? Where they'll ask somebody, ‘Do you want to speak to a chaplain?’” Sarah said she wished there were more course offerings for Christians: “That way they don’t feel left out, and they will feel more fit in the school system. That way they don’t have to juggle finding there where they fit in as a Christian.” She also said,

> I know they don't allow Bibles or, even now, you're seeing some states, they are cutting off some courses and stuff like that. I don't think it's fair because everybody has their own religion the same way when they get to high school, you make them pick between French and Spanish and Mandarin and other languages. It can be an open subject. If they want to go for a Bible study, put it as a subject.

Barbara's child had Christian support at her school because one of the deans was a Christian. She recalled a time when Rose's grandfather died and she went to school very sad. Her dean and another teacher prayed with her. She said,

> We just happen to have a really good experience, I think, because it's not like [Christianity's] something that's talked about in school. Obviously, it's not something that's discussed or anything like that, but in the times when she's needed it, [Rose] has been able to find the support that she needs.

How the Church Can Support. Parents/guardians commented on ways the church can support their children. Angie said, "I think they should tell them it's okay if they are religious to be able to have that open conversation." Denise said, "We could do a better job of supporting our kids by having a more consistent youth ministry and having something for the older kids." She also said,

> They fear Christians are crazy, hateful, crazy, judgmental, all of that. The church could do a better job of representing and reflecting Christ for this next generation so that it's not just a tradition or not just people assuming if you believe in Christ that you must hate everybody else.

Tina also spoke about youth groups: “If they have their own local youth group that equips them to be stronger in their faith and be able to take the stance that God would want them to take.” Sonya said the church could

> kind of relate to where kids are trying to stay up to date on what kids are being exposed to and what's happening on social media, all that stuff. If you're aware of the things that kids are dealing with in school and that they're dealing with socially, it gives them a chance to talk about these things while and before and after they're encountering issues that come about at school. Sometimes I think that group support and that just knowing that other kids are going through the same things or that other kids are concerned about the same types of issues or have been confronted in the same ways by peers or by teachers, can help them to not feel alone when they're in those situations.

Ife also spoke about making connections. She said the church could

> put on some more community events where they're advertising that they're having some fun things out there to get kids to come along. Maybe have more volunteers that are more aware of things that are going on when they do have these youth nights. And recognize the signs that some of these kids are feeling uncomfortable. Because if you want them to stay, you're going to have to [do0some damage control.

Sarah wanted something in school that students could rely on. She said,

> Maybe have something where you can talk about Jesus, about God, bring some Bibles, give them to the kids. But that would be in accordance to the school, they have to be agreeable to it. I think that could be an idea. The same way they allow

other services or people to come to the school and open up about their business, about whatever they do in the community, I think the church can be part of it as well.

Some participants focused on afterschool programs. Naomi said,

> I really want an afterschool program. I want an, after I've been praying to God about this afterschool program, I really feel like we put it on my heart. And especially for kids of color, Black kids, an afterschool program that consists of tutoring, music, music lessons, and mentorship.

Nia also talked about afterschool programming:

> I think the churches actually need to open up the doors and have some afterschool programs. I don't understand why we have all these churches and you're not participating with afterschool programs. I think that if the afterschool program came from a Christian standpoint, it will then teach students these things that they need to be successful students. It will teach them to be successful people.

Amina spoke about the need for more clubs, similarly to schools on the West Coast:

> I think as far as the education, as a Christian community, there should be things. They have that thing, separation of church and state. Nobody really goes by that from what I'm looking at cause in the high schools, they have, I know in California they had, Christian fellowship. They had a lot of Christian groups, clubs. I call 'em clubs. Clubs in the schools. I don't know if they have them here. I haven't seen any or looked for it either, but I haven't seen any. Normally they have, when they have their announcements or when they do their little newsletters or something, they have those. But I haven't seen those organizations. The North is definitely not the same as the West.

Conclusion

This chapter gave an overview of the finding from the study focusing on Black Christian families and public schools. Findings showed that participants from Sub-Case 1—Black Christian middle or high school students who attended a public school—engaged with and expressed their religion in different ways. They also used their religion to interact with people and deal with situations. Participants from Sub-Case 2—parents/guardians of Black Christian middle or high school students—expressed several values and discussed how those values intersected with receiving a public school education. In conversation with existing literature, the next chapter discusses the findings and how they connects to my theoretical framework informed by CHAT and CRT.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

—1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

For the Black Christian students and their parents/guardians who took part in this study, religion involved a relationship with God that was personal, actionable, and life changing. It was more than a set of rules but a relationship in which the things of God provided a lens for viewing the world. For the participants, a relationship with God was of great importance, even as they navigated public schools operating under the doctrine of separation of church and state. For this reason and others, it was important to learn about their experiences and how religion interacted with receiving a public school education. Using the frameworks of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and critical race theory (CRT), this final chapter discusses the findings associated with the research question "How does the doctrine of 'separation of church and state' manifest in the experiences of Black Christian students and their families in Massachusetts' public school system?" To ground the chapter, I first offer an overview of the previous chapters. I then unpack the findings related to the research sub-questions, as a final exploration of the central question. Lastly, this chapter

concludes with (1) a discussion of the study's implications for Black Christian students, their families, and public schools, (2) a personal reflection, (3) an acknowledgement of the study's limitations, and (4) a consideration of future research.

Review of Previous Chapters

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 provided a rationale for why this examination was important. First, the achievement gap and how to close it has been a topic of study in education for decades. The achievement gap is a term used to describe differences in academic attainment between White, Asian, and socioeconomically advantaged students, and their minoritized and socioeconomically disadvantaged peers (Symonds, 2004). One element that has been shown to positively affect student achievement is religion (Barrett, 2009; Coleman, 2023; Holland, 2014; Jeynes, 2007). Several scholars have theorized why this happens (Barrett, 2010b; Smith, 2003), with some arguing that religion gives students access to different forms of capital. However, public schools operate under the First Amendment, hindering students' opportunities to engage with their religion in schools. Any prohibition of religious engagement would be especially detrimental to Black students, for whom the research has shown religion to be beneficial (Kim & Esquival, 2011; Skerrett, 2016; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). In addition to an overview of the aforementioned topics, the chapter presented anecdotal situations from my own life as a teacher to solidify the notion that religion in schools is a relevant topic that affects students and their families.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 comprised a literature review summarizing important topics pertaining to this research study. It included an overview of how religion has been shown to improve

academic outcomes for Black students, an overview of the doctrine of separation of church and state and how its misinterpretation may inadvertently lead to a lack of support for Black Christian students, why this study focused on Christian students, and why attending to the religious needs of Black Christian students is a culturally competent practice. The chapter also offered an overview of CHAT and CRT. Both theories were used as theoretical frameworks to guide this study.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 outlined the design and implementation of this qualitative single embedded intrinsic case study. There were two sub-cases: (1) Black Christian middle or high school students who attended a public traditional or charter school and (2) the parents/guardians of Black Christian middle or high school students who attended a public traditional or charter school. To satisfy the criteria for participation, students needed to (1) self-identify as Black, (2) believe in Jesus of their own volition, and (3) communicate with God daily in some way. The data were collected via semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presented the findings gathered from qualitative interviews with participants from the two sub-cases. The data revealed that there were positive, negative, racist, and hypothetical experiences that showcased the intersection between Christianity and public schools. These experiences were manifested in the following areas: the environment, the social, and the personal. In addition, social and personal morals were held up as important for families.

Review of Findings from Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presented the findings from the data. As mentioned, participants from Sub-Case 1, Black Christian middle or high school students who attended public traditional or charter schools, had positive, negative, and racist experiences in their schools. They also expressed what they thought would happen by discussing hypothetical experiences. Their positive and negative experiences were felt through the environment, personally, and socially. Positive experiences included trusting God, engaging with religion, having a moral compass, proselytizing, and having access to curriculum through religion. Negative experiences included Christianity being belittled, a lack of activities, lack of support, lack of connection, and having to suppress their desire to talk about Jesus. Students also expressed being victims of overt racist acts, being told they did not "act Black," and having to navigate being a Black Christian. Lastly, hypothetical experiences emerged when the participants responded to questions about overt religious expression such as praying in a group during unstructured school time or visibly reading a paper Bible. These actions were unrealistic to students, but they shared what they thought would happen in those situations. It was clear that students anticipated they would have school support but would become a spectacle for their peers to mock.

Participants from Sub-Case 2, parents/guardians of Black Christian middle or high school students who attended public traditional or charter schools, reported information that offered insights into their values and how they intersected with utilizing the public school system. They highlighted personal morals that they wanted their children to exercise internally and social morals that they wanted their children to exercise openly. The personal morals included: (1) being a Christ-like role model, (2) being disciplined, (3) having

integrity, (4) having faith, and (5) staying sexually pure. The social morals included: (1) showing love and kindness, (2) evangelizing, (3) having respect, (4) getting a quality education, and (5) having a Christian community. A discussion of the findings and how they addressed the research questions follows.

Discussion of Findings

The central research question of this study was, "How does the doctrine of 'separation of church and state' manifest in the experiences of Black Christian students and their families in Massachusetts' public school system?" To address this central question, I developed three sub-questions:

- Sub-Question 1: In what ways do religion and receiving a public school education intersect for Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
- Sub-Question 2: How does the intersection between race and religion manifest in the educational experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?
- Sub-Question 3: In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?

First, a review of the theories cultural-historical activity theory and critical race theory are necessary to provide a foundation for the discussion.

Review of Theoretical Framework

CRT

Critical race theory comprises six tenets, three of which were used for this study. The first was CRT's assertion that racism is a normal part of society but may at times be difficult

to detect. Extremely overt racism may not be as frequent, but everyday subtle racist acts still remain. This includes racial microaggressions, which are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Second, CRT allows for the examination of intersectionality, whereby individuals experience discrimination within two separate and distinct categories. Lastly, CRT honors the voices of the oppressed and uses those voices as a counternarrative against false or incomplete stories from the dominant culture.

CHAT

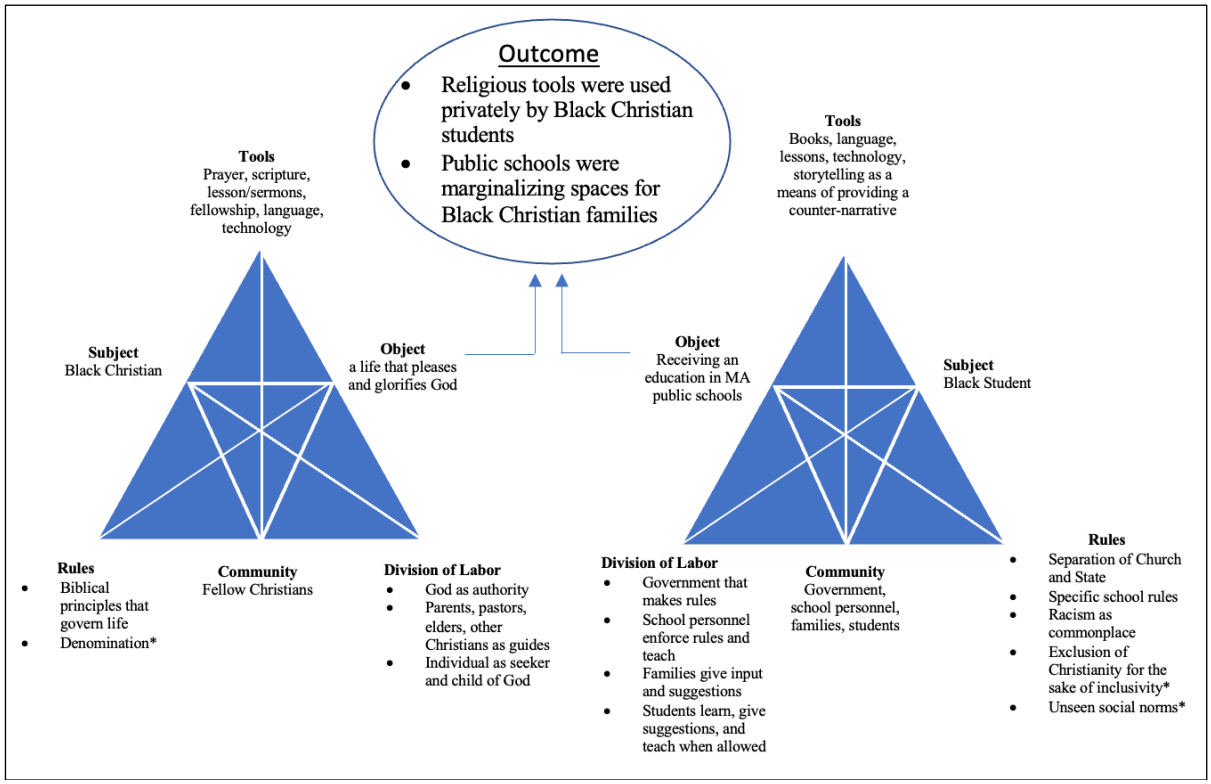
Cultural-historical activity theory is systemic way to look at the multiple dimensions of routine or strategic human behavior that does not ignore psychology, tools, power, culture, and history (Foot, 2014). The focus of analysis in CHAT is an activity system, in which the subject engages with an object for some specific outcome. The term “activity” refers to what is being done together and is influenced by both the cultural and the historical context (Foot, 2014). The system includes subject, object, tools/mediating artifacts, rules, division of labor, and community. Although the unit of analysis is typically one system, sometimes more than one activity system is at work. Their interaction produces contradictions that lead to outcomes for the subject of the system (Engeström, 2001).

It is important for researchers to examine both the system as a whole and the system from the subject’s point of view (Foot, 2014). In this case study, the interaction of the activity systems "Christianity" and "public schools" was explored through the perceptions and interpretations of Black Christian middle and high school students who attended public schools and their parents/guardians. In chapter 2, I discussed my conceptualization of the two

activity systems of "Christianity" and "public schools." Figure 8 provides an updated version of the conceptual framework based on the study findings (components with asterisks relate specifically to findings).

Figure 8

Revised Conceptual Framework



Foot (2014) noted that,

> although the essential task of CHAT analysis is to grasp the systemic whole of an activity, not just its separate components, the triangular activity system model with its six nodes makes possible the analysis of multiple relationships within an activity system at a particular point in time and over time. (p. 27)

The following discussion addresses the research questions by analyzing the relationships within and between the activity systems. This is done by highlighting which parts of the activity system "Christianity" interacted with the system "public schooling for Black middle and high school students," as well as if and when contradictions arose.

In What Ways Do Religion and Receiving a Public School Education Intersect for Black Christian Students Who Attend Public Schools in Massachusetts?

The participants in Sub-Case 1, Black Christian students who attended a public middle or high school, had much to say about the ways that Christianity intersected with receiving an education in their schools. First, participants made clear that the covert tools they used as Christians were brought with them to school as students. They navigated their environments through the sustained use of Christian tools, which they utilized to deal with stress, make decisions, and motivate themselves.

Sustained Use of Tools/Mediating Artifacts from Christianity

There is a consensus among CHAT scholars that a tool can be anything that aids in the process of change and that the use of specific cultural tools constructs the way people think and act (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). According to Foot (2014), tools are available at different levels: primary tools, secondary tools, and tertiary tools. Primary tools do not require much thought for a subject to use them—for example, a white board for illustrating the solution to a problem. Secondary tools can represent concrete tools or "discursive constructs [such] as expectations, hypotheses, and explanatory models" (Foot, 2014, p. 15). Tertiary tools can be epistemologies, ideological ideals, and socio-political visions (Foot, 2014, p. 15). The study data showed that mediating artifacts or tools associated

with Christianity remained salient and usable for Black Christian students while attending public schools.

For the students, reading the Bible, praying, remembering Godly advice, listening to Christian music, and telling others about God were not arbitrary actions that only applied when in church; they were part of the individuals themselves. Igira and Gregory (2009) maintained that tools are produced culturally and can be used as a means for reaching goals and/or influencing the environment. Since religion is part of a student's culture, as described in Chapter 2, it makes sense that these tools would stay with them as they navigate the public school system. In addition, the students who took part in this study self-identified as connected, meaning they interacted with God frequently. The interaction could be through formal prayer, reading scriptures, informal conversations, thoughts, inward yearnings, or other types of exchanges. These actions developed in the Christianity activity system. However, "with practice and internalization, activities collapse into actions and eventually into operations, as they become more automatic, requiring less conscious effort" (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p. 63). Therefore, the activities of the Christianity activity system became automatic tools that were used in the public schooling activity system, and students did not feel like they had to depart from that part of themselves.

The use of Christian mediating artifacts and/or tools typically occurred privately, when others did not know that participants were engaging in the activities. This is because the tools were used when students faced personal challenges. Participants prayed, remembered Biblical teachings, and listened to gospel music when dealing with stress, hoping for positive academic outcomes, or looking for direction and motivation. This finding substantiates results from previous literature indicating that religion and spirituality assist

with stress management, promote resilience, increase motivation, curb high-risk behaviors, and narrow the achievement gap (Barrett, 2010b; Butler-Barnes et al., 2012; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014).

Using Tools with the Community. There were times when students utilized religious tools openly. This display occurred when students felt that they were with people who shared the same religious culture. By "religious culture," I refer to members of the same church or denomination. I did not anticipate finding this grouping. When designing the study, I did not specify what denomination participants had to belong to and conceptualized Christianity as an activity system in which the community was "other Christians." However, participants made it clear that affiliation mattered, and someone saying they were Christian did not automatically make them part of a participant's Christian community. For example, the four student participants who mentioned praying with others or having Christian friends at school shared a church with those people or a denomination. The one participant who was given space in school to engage with prayer went to church with the staff member who gave her access. For the other participants, gathering to pray or reading the Bible was not feasible because there was no one with whom to engage in those activities.

Proselytizing as a Rule and Tool. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he told His followers to

> go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

Other Biblical verses implore Christians to be "ambassadors of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20) and to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:5). The scriptures tell Christians to not only talk about Jesus in general, but also to talk about why they believe (1 Peter 3:15). These scriptures are a few of many "rules" that guide Christians toward a life that is pleasing to God. Saris et al. (2023) explained that

> the subject is potentially influenced or constrained by *rules* or [cultural] norms which derive from tacit or explicit social situations governing the activity. Intertwined with *rules* are the *community* within and for which the activity occurs, and the *division of labor* in which actions and activities are distinguished and have been discussed.

This excerpt helps to see how "cultural" norms of Christianity and social norms of schools influenced proselytizing.

In Christianity, the cultural norm is to respectfully evangelize if the opportunity presents itself, and this evangelism becomes a mediating artifact/tool toward a life that pleases God. It is important to not confuse the scriptures with the act of evangelizing. In scripture, *to evangelize* is the "command," and the *act of evangelizing* is the tool or action. All goes toward achieving a life that is pleasing to God. Students expressed that they refrained from the action of proselytizing in the name of being inclusive, even if they wanted to talk about Jesus.

The need to censor themselves was something they felt internally and that they perceived in their environment. However, they would evangelize in school when it was deemed appropriate in specific social situations. That is, if peers wanted advice or needed encouragement from the participant, then talking about God or Biblical principles was appropriate. Foot (2014) stated that artifacts or mediating tools can become rules when they

are thought of by the subject as a demand designed by those with power to meet the need of someone or multiple members of a community. At the same time, Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999) stated that rules can serve as guides for actions that are acceptable by the community. Therefore, when students felt that they needed to talk about Jesus because scriptures directed them to, the tool of evangelizing became a rule mediated by social situations in public schools. It is important to note that it is not considered a tool in public schools because it is not helping students work toward the object, which is receiving a good education. In this case, it is just a rule that drives interaction between community members.

Contradictions. CHAT helps reveal contradictions that arise when the public school activity system and the Christianity activity system try to merge. Kuuti (1996) described this notion of contradiction:

> Because activities are not isolated units but are more like nodes in crossing hierarchies and networks, they are influenced by other activities and other changes in their environment. External influences change some elements of activities, causing imbalances between them. Activity theory uses the term contradiction to indicate a misfit within elements, between them, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. Contradictions manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, breakdowns, and clashes. (p. 34)

However, contradictions do not have to be negative. They highlight opportunities for growth and the restructuring of a system (Foot, 2014). The implications and recommendations sections that follow offer a comprehensive explanation of opportunities for restructuring.

Contradictions with Respect to "Tools". Students' perception that they would not be able to engage in overt religious actions without ridicule highlights a contradiction regarding

outward prayer, reading the Bible, and using other tools. The contradiction is most likely due to the change in "community" (explained previously) and "rules" of the system. In churches, the community is aware of the norms around open prayer and reading scriptures. Outward religious expression happens regularly during services. Although these same actions can be carried out at public schools, the space does not have a recent history of these activities happening, and the current community is not used to these actions taking place. Therefore, a contradiction arises. If students engage in these behaviors, they would be seen as different and be put on display in a negative way. When the activity system of public schools is examined using CHAT, one sees how the contradiction regarding the use of overt Christian tools happened over time; as the rules established by the First Amendment were interpreted by different actors, social norms regarding religious expression changed.

Contradiction with Respect to "Rules". Another example of a contradiction occurred when students talked about Jesus when they felt commanded by scripture. Although students perceived, thought, or were told that talking about Christianity did not foster an inclusive environment, they did it when they felt led by God. In other words, the division of labor element of the public school activity system said, "Make everyone feel welcome," but the tool of evangelism from Christianity translated into a rule in public schools when the need of a friend or peer overrode the need for inclusivity.

The Environment Could Feel Exclusive When It Came to Christianity

Participants expressed that the school environment framed Christianity negatively and that the staff controlling the environment were uninterested in their needs as Christians. Specifically, participants expressed that Christianity was typically not mentioned, and when

it was, it was in a negative light. In addition, there were not many Christian activities available on campus, and participants lacked people who could provide religious support.

Religious Activities. Foot (2014) reminded readers that

> the division of labor references the fact that who does what in relation to the object, (i.e. which members of the community engage in which types of actions using which tools), is typically mediated by sociohistorical power structures and patterns of relations, both within the community and between a community and the larger culture/society of which it is part. (p. 8)

Within the public school community, principals, teachers, or other school personnel typically approve the creation of clubs. They must decide what adult is going to be responsible for the students during club activities and where and when the activities will take place, and they have to make sure the correct procedures and policies are being followed. None of the participants had experiences in which school personnel had given the green light for Christian clubs or activities to be created, even when some participants expressed that they wanted one.

Mention of Christianity. Participants also expressed a desire for Christianity to be talked about more, either in the form of advice for themselves or general information for the community because it would help them when they needed it and help the community understand what Christianity really is. When staff did talk about Christianity, it was in a historical sense, or it came up organically in the curriculum. However, the views disseminated about Christianity were negative, and participants felt they were unfair portrayals of their faith. For participants, this resulted in peers continuing to rely on inaccurate information about Christianity that was not corrected by adults.

Regarding advice, it would be unpractical for public school staff to give religious support to Christian students without directives and training from their district, and it is safe to say that this will not happen because of the First Amendment. Hence, students received little support from staff (except for one participant, who attended the same church as a staff member) and no support from qualified individuals partnering with the school.

Contradictions in "Division of Labor". So far, contradictions have been highlighted within the community, rules, and tools when the activity of public schools intersects with the activity system of Christianity. The following sections describe contradictions that arise from division of labor.

Religious Activities. Chapter 2 highlighted that students have a right to practice religion in public schools, so we can surmise that students have a legal right to create clubs or engage in activities that satisfy their needs. However, as Foot (2014) explained,

> When the object from another activity system is introduced by one of the actors within the activity system, this sets in motion a very different dynamic in which power relations become central (Groleau et al., 2012; Groleau & Mayère, 2009). More specifically, power relations (as manifested in the division of labor) within the activity system determine whether the alternative object catalyzing a contradiction results in a change in the central activity system. (p. 23)

In the case of Christianity, having a life that pleased God was the object introduced by participants. For participants, maintaining this goal in any way was important, including having access to Christian activities at school. As the preceding quote infers, introducing an object from an alternative activity system automatically results in a contradiction. The quote also suggests that whoever has the power within the division of labor decides how the system

changes once the new object is introduced. Put plainly, although students *could* create clubs or engage in religious activities, do they have the power to do so?

When it comes to religious activities, the role of school administrators as decision makers takes the power out of the hands of students. Gloria's response highlighted that, sometimes, power dynamics can arise when students introduce Christianity into public schools. When I asked her about praying visibly with peers at school she stated,

> We came up with that idea and we brought it up, and I think they actually are going to, they're going to start a club for it next year. But because there's so many things going on now, they haven't actually started it yet.

Gloria did not take the initiative and start the club, although she could have. She followed the division of labor and went to the staff members who had the "power" to start a club. Gloria and her peers had to wait, however, because other things at the school took precedence.

Mention of Christianity. Participants expressed having to deal with a negative perception of Christianity. Occasionally, they chose to address the misconceptions. No participants reported school personnel framing Christianity as being used negatively by actors in history; instead, Christianity was talked about as being inherently bad or evil. In this sense, the division of labor gave teachers and staff the ability to talk about Christianity in whatever way they saw fit, within the perceived parameters of the First Amendment. Conversely, these parameters did not give students access to personal support and, in their view, did not give the community a chance to really learn what Christianity is.

Contradictions with Respect to "Community". The interaction between Christianity and schooling resulted in a change within the community component of the Christianity system. Within activity systems, the interplay between the subject and those who

engage with a shared object can be thought of as "community" (Foot, 2014). Several participants expressed that just because someone was Christian did not mean they had a shared object. In other words, for the study participants, a life that pleases God was not the same for all Christians. This could be because "relations between the subject and the community are mediated by the rules that regulate the subject's actions toward an object, and relations with other participants in the activity" (Foot, 2014, p. 6). If the rules are different based on a student's denomination, then that could impact who they consider a part of their Christian community.

This is further substantiated by participants feeling like they would become a spectacle if they engaged in prayer or Bible reading as a group. When the two activity systems interact, individuals who do not share a religious culture are introduced into the system—not just Christians of a different denomination, but individuals who do not share any aspect of the Christian culture because they adhere to a different religion or be unreligious. Participants sensed this change in community and felt that not sharing a Christian culture would subject them to ridicule.

How Does the Intersection Between Race and Religion Manifest in the Educational Experiences of Black Christian Students Who Attend Public Schools in Massachusetts?

The previous answers to Sub-Question 1 can be analyzed using critical race theory to provide a more nuanced view of the contradictions that arise within the school through the lens of racism. As explained previously, students felt excluded from the community and limited in their connectedness with other Christian students. I posit that this further marginalized students. Kanayo explained,

> Being a Black student that goes to a most White school—it is, it's tough. I think this goes for both being a Christian and being a Black student. Not a lot of people know what you're going through or what it is to be you. Whereas a lot of people are able to know what it's like to be each other because everyone else, my school has a lot of cookie cutter people where it's like everyone's almost the exact same or has the same experiences. So, it's definitely a tough way that I've had to do a lot of explaining for both Christianity and being Black. Just explaining [to] people what it is.

For Kanayo, being both Black and Christian pushed him further to the margins, where he was still seen as "other." I suggest that this marginalization did not happen by accident but rather through a series of microaggressions aimed toward Black Christian students in public schools.

Public Schools Are Marginalizing Spaces for Black Christians

Participants shared that in their public schools, they felt marginalized as Black people and as Christians. Most people would not think that a Christian could be marginalized given Christianity's privileged position in the United States. However, the intersectionality tenet of CRT helps clarify how this is possible. As described in Chapter 1, New England is less religious than other parts of the country, especially among White people. Black and brown people continue to be the most religious groups in the country (Pew, 2014). This is a trend, and new data have emerged indicating that religiosity continues to decline nationally (Derose, 2023). So, what does this say about the intersection of race, religion, and public schools? It affects these students' place in the community and marginalizes them as Christians and as Black students. Language from texts about school climate can help frame

the conversation regarding students' place in the community and how public schools feel for Black Christian students.

The Intersection Between Race, Religion, and Public Schools. Critical race theory can be used to understand how intersectionality and microaggressions create conditions in which Black Christian students lack connection in public schools. As discussed previously, CRT holds that covert racism is still commonplace. I once again merge CHAT and CRT to suggest that for Black Christian students, microaggressions exclude and relegate them to "other" in their public schools. These microaggressions are based in part on the history and culture of religion in the United States and show up as microinvalidations and microinsults. As this discussion continues, the reader should keep in mind the intersectionality component of CRT. That is, I am not talking about microaggressions toward Christians, nor am I talking about microaggressions toward Black students. The study participants were both Black and Christian at the same time and received specific treatment because of this.

Microinsults. Students experienced microaggression in the form of microinsults. According to Sue et al. (2007),

> a microinsult is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color. (p. 274)

When a teacher or staff member spoke negatively about Christianity, the student participants experienced a microinsult. The history of people *using* Christianity to commit atrocities has been addressed in previous sections and cannot be denied. However, to blame Christianity feels like Jesus is being blamed for the wrongs. Teachers do not talk about people using

Christianity violently; they talk about Christianity being violent, and this serves as a microinsult because it demeans students' Christian heritage. As Paradise (2014) explained,

> Christianity often operates at the same time in history in different moral directions depending on who is acting in its name, it is very difficult, indeed impossible, to support the broad conclusion that Christianity's net effects "cannot credibly be said to represent egalitarian respect for difference. (pp. 174–175)

Given that Christianity has been a source of hope and liberation for Black people in the United States, it is important that the positive and negative usage of Christianity is lifted up.

Microassaults. The second type of microaggressions that students faced were microassaults, which, I posit, they experienced when their Blackness was called into question. According to Sue et al. (2007), "a microassault is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (p. 274)—for example, when Rose was called "whitewashed" or when Gloria was told she did not "act Black." Some may push back on this idea because the people who delivered the microassaults were Black. Some believe that Black people cannot exhibit racism. However, as Ibram (2019) explained, every time a Black person generalizes something negative about Black people, they are being racist. In the case of this research, anyone who perpetuated the idea that Black Christians are not Black enough were perpetuating a negative ideal about Blackness.

The idea that Black Christians are "whitewashed" is not new. Although Christians were the backbone of the civil rights movement led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., some Black people during that time felt that Christian adherence aided the White people

oppressing so many all over the world (Paradise, 2014). To Black Power activists, "Christianity was the religion of their enslavers and packaged to render Blacks docile and resigned to their inferior, subjugated position" (Paradise, 2014, p. 159). In their minds, it was not possible to be both fully Christian and Black (Paradise, 2014). These ideas remain. Personally, I cannot count the number of times I have been told Christianity was only created to oppress people. As Paradise (2014) said, "Indeed, even decades after the era of Black power, the image of Christianity as a White man's religion that offers no solutions to the harsh realities that shape their everyday lives" continues among some urban youth (p. 167). When associations like these are made, Black Christians receive the message that they are "Uncle Toms" who are giving up some of their Blackness to fit in with "the White man."

In What Ways Does Receiving an Education in Public Schools Intersect with Christian Values for the Parents of Black Christian Students Who Go to Public Schools?

Parents/guardians identified several values that were important to them and their children. Table 5 summarizes the values parents/guardians reported.

Table 5

Values Reported by Parents/Guardians

Theme	Basic Description	Sub-Themes
Personal Morals	Internal directives that parents wanted their children to live by	• Being a Christ-like role model • Being disciplined • Having integrity • Having faith • Sexual morality
Social Morals	Outward actions directed toward others that parents wanted their children to exhibit or have	• Showing love and kindness • Evangelizing • Having respect • Getting a quality education
Support	What is missing in schools and the ways it can be addressed	• Lack of community • School support • Church support

The following discussion addresses Sub-Question 3 based on the theoretical framework.

Use of Christian Tools

For parents/guardians, the rules of Christianity became tools for students to use while at school. The values of being Christ-like, having discipline, having integrity, having faith, being sexually pure, telling others about Jesus, and having respect are all found in the Bible as admonishments to Christians. Parents described these rules as being important for their children to remember, adhere to, or implement throughout their school day because public schools were places where children could apply these rules as a testimony to the faith they learned while at home. In other words, public schools intersected with parent' values by simply being a place where those values could be applied as tools.

According to CHAT, activity systems are influenced by culture. That is, the subject (in this case students) work toward an object (in this case receiving a quality education). The actions involved are influenced by a student's culture. In this study, the word "culture" described the viewpoints and routines that students and their families identified with, and saw themselves reflected in, and religion was a part of deep culture. Therefore, it can be concluded that parents wanted their children to take their religious culture with them and apply it at school.

The Value System of Public Schools vs. Parents

Parents reported that sometimes the schools' value system differed from the family's value system. The messages the schools sent regarding what was right and wrong clashed with what parents were trying to teach. To parents, if the schools did not agree with or see the worth of family values, then the value was dismissed or even altered. This was not done blatantly but, according to participants, could be subliminal and ideological. This created confusion for children and required parents to constantly reteach or unteach things they felt the public schools have gotten wrong.

Accepted Values. There were some values that schools accepted and even promoted. These included being Christ-like, being disciplined, having integrity, having respect, and getting a quality education. These are characteristics that public schools already promote, so there was no need for backlash from them. I researched the schools represented in this study, and many included some form of encouragement about being respectful, inclusive, determined, and responsible. Therefore, it made sense that there was no pushback regarding these qualities. Being Christ-like was the one value that parents were explicit about schools

promoting without giving credit to Jesus or the Bible and therefore requires further discussion.

Being Christ-Like. For parents, being Christ-like involved their children showing they were followers of Jesus through their attitudes and behaviors. They wanted their children to live out 1 Timothy 4:12, which reads, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.” As evident in the data, parents were clear that even if their children had a different viewpoint from someone else, they were to be respectful and show the person love.

Love is the most important aspect of the Christian faith. When asked what the most important commandment was, Jesus said, “‘The most important one … love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these’” (Mark 12:30–31). Unfortunately, when people think of Christians, they do not see people who have been taught to love. Christians, especially evangelical Christians, have become associated with right-wing politics that often feels racist, homophobic, and controlling (Blake, 2024; Miller et al., 2022). As written about many times in this research, the voices of Black Christians get lost in the narrative that Christianity is White and oppressive.

Parents expressed this when talking about their children being Christ-like. They believed that being loving and kind was a quality of Jesus that the schools promoted. However, they never connected that value to His name. For example, Denise said, “I mean, acceptance and love, that's Jesus all over it. But I think they don't like to associate that with

Him because there's a whole belief that Christians are intolerant and that we don't accept others."

For parents/guardians, public schools espoused inclusivity while allowing the premise that Christianity is exclusive to permeate the building. Parents/guardians were frustrated by this because, according to their understanding of Christ, He loved everyone and treated them accordingly. They wanted their children to do the same. To parents/guardians, if schools were able to reinforce that Christ stood for love and acceptance, it would help paint a better picture of Christianity.

Dismissed Values and Contradictions in "Division of Labor". Parents expressed that having faith, sexual morality, and evangelism were values that did not receive support in public schools, indicating a contradiction in the area of "division of labor." As discussed previously, division of labor refers to who does what in the activity system. Regarding students getting an education, the public school activity system puts the responsibility for teaching on educators. By contrast, the Christianity activity system puts the responsible for teaching on scripture, parents, and religious leaders. This is the source of the contradiction: Who is responsible for teaching morals? According to parents/guardians, they are, but schools act as if they are, with teachers acting "in loco parentis," as discussed in Chapter 1. However, teachers acting in place of parents is an assumed right of educators that essentially gives them the prerogative to teach morality in the way they see fit. According to CHAT, this will be constrained by "rules," which in this case are laws that govern public schools, and culture, which in this case comprises societal norms.

***Having Faith and Evangelism*.** Parents expressed that public schools caused their children to question their faith. This was a direct result of "in loco parentis," whereby

teachers and schools gave the impression that public schools were not a place for God. Not only that, but some of the public schools' messages made it seem that the tenets of Christianity were not correct. When students encountered these messages from educators they respected, it made them question if what they were being taught at home was correct. Feeling like schools were not a place for God also caused students to be shy about saying they were Christian or talk about their faith with others.

***Sexual Education*.** Parents/guardians expressed that sexual education in schools happened before they were ready and differed from what they believed was appropriate based on Biblical principles. This indicates a change in the "division of labor" component of the activity systems. In the Christianity activity system, parents, families, and religious leaders are responsible for teaching sexual morality based on the rules of Christianity and the authority of the Bible. However, when the activity system merged with public schools, the responsibility shifted to the school. This created a contradiction whereby parents felt their right to choose was being taken away and they were being made to look bad or ignorant regarding sex. As a result of the contradiction, (1) parents had additional conversations at home about their Christian beliefs compared with what the school taught and (2) parents decided to keep their children in public school because it prepared them for the world.

Several quotes from participants highlighted these outcomes. Denise said, "We've had a lot of conversations about how to respond to what the Bible says versus what [the school] says." Angie said, "Sometimes I do think of pulling my kids out of public school and putting them into a private school, but still that's not going to shelter them from what the world has become." After speaking about challenges in public school, Ife said, "But at the same time,

these are real life things, and you don't want them to live in a bubble because their bubble's going to be burst when they get out into the world."

Even though parents/guardians felt that public schools introduced topics of sex too early and not in a way that aligned with Christianity, they still kept their children in public school. This was partly because they felt that they had given their children a strong foundation for navigating public schools. In other words, parents/guardians felt like the contradictions could be handled through conversation at home and were necessary to prepare their children for the world they lived in.

Dismissed Values and Contradiction in "Community". Having support was a value for parents. However, just like students, a contradiction in the "community" aspect of the activity system showed up. Parents/guardians felt that public schools did not foster an inclusive environment for Black Christian students. Some reported that their children did not have other Christian friends or Christian activities in their school. Overall, they felt like it was difficult for their children to be Christians in their public schools.

Implications

This study's findings have three main implications. First, tools of Christianity are a part of Black Christian students' culture that they take with them to navigate the Massachusetts public school system. This study substantiates previous findings that religion (in this case Christianity) increases student achievement by relieving stress, increasing motivation, and helping students make decisions for their life (Kim & Esquival, 2011; Skerrett, 2016; Taylor & Chatters, 2010). However, it is not just being Christian that produces these results; it is the act of implementing the tools of religion while students attend public schools.

Second, while Black Christian students can use certain tools of Christianity throughout their education, public schools in Massachusetts continue to disparage Christianity. This fosters a community that does not feel inclusive for Black Christian students and their families, even as many public schools claim to value inclusivity for all. Moreover, Black Christian students experience racism in the form of microaggressions from a public school culture that devalues their faith.

Third, Black Christian students who attend Massachusetts public middle or high school lack social connections in school regarding their Christianity. They do not have a Christian community to rely on in public schools to further help them reach their academic and personal goals. This leads to poor connectedness in terms of school activities, the home-to-school connection, and receiving religion-based help throughout the day. Ultimately, this lack of connection can impact students' mental health.

Implications for Research

Researchers have studied the experiences of Black students in Christian schools, the effect of White Christian nationalism on Black students and on public schools, and the religiosity of Black Christians. However, very little, if any, research has focused on the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in the U.S. context and beyond. To my knowledge, there is no research of this nature centering on Massachusetts public schools. Therefore, my study addressed a gap in the literature. It is known that public schools operate under the doctrine of separation of church and state, but understanding the implications of this for Black Christian students who attend those schools is important. This is especially true since researchers are still trying to understand the achievement gap and ways to eliminate it.

Limitations of CHAT

One implication of this study for research relates to the limitations of CHAT in painting a complete picture of the experiences of Black Christian families in the Massachusetts public school system. In their interviews, participants repeatedly described how the environment made them feel as Christians. The CHAT framework helps analyze actions and activity mediated by tools, within a community regulated by rules and division of labor; all of these are components a subject uses in working toward an object. However, CHAT does not necessarily give a definition of the feel of an environment, a school's atmosphere, or a framework for assessing how an environment feels within an activity system. CHAT hints at the environment by calling into account the history of a system, the rules of a system, and who does what in a system. In addition, contradictions can arise when things do not “fit." CHAT does not provide a way to analyze how contradictions make people feel.

In this study, CHAT helped identify what changed in the public schools or in Christianity, and even why that change occurred, but did not speak to the emotional implications for the students or parents involved in the activity system. Analyzing how the contradictions affected people's place and/or emotions in an activity system would necessitate that another theoretical framework be used alongside CHAT.

Implications for School Practice

This study’s findings showed that schools can be hostile toward Christianity. Considering how Christianity has historically been used to marginalize groups of people, it is understandable why people in Massachusetts public schools talk negatively about Christianity. However, this hurts Black Christian students and causes them to face racism

that is most likely unintended. Through this research, schools have an opportunity to begin honoring the voices of Black Christian people and the liberating place that Christianity has had in their lives. The truth should be told: The practice of Christianity has been both oppressive and uplifting at the same time. There is nothing unconstitutional or illegal about the truth, and the separation of church and state does not prohibit individuals from providing a complete history of Christianity in the United States.

Culturally Competent Practices

Not only should schools teach both sides of history when it comes to Christianity, but they should also be more intentional about including religion in their efforts to be culturally competent. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA-DESE) already encourages educators to incorporate culturally sustaining practices in their work. MA-DESE (2023) states on its website,

> In order to be highly effective, educators must develop an authentic understanding of the students and adults in their school communities, ensure that their students' experiences in school are affirming of who they are and what they bring to the school community, and unpack how their own culture impacts their worldview and approach. (para. 3)

This study suggests that this is not happening for Black Christian families regarding religion, and some public schools ignore, downplay, or show hostility toward Christianity. For Black Christian families, this is a form of cultural incompetence. As discussed in Chapter 2, religion is an aspect of culture, and the cultural wealth that students bring with them via their religion should be recognized by schools. Doing so would help educators move from deficit-

based thinking regarding Black students and support them in ways that increase student achievement.

As Yosso (2005) noted, communities of color foster and possess various forms of capital, and schools can utilize what students of color know from their homes and communities and transfer it into the classroom. Understanding these forms of capital would help school personnel to think about and incorporate practices "shaped by an understanding of their students' interests, experiences, and ways in which their students interact with family and community members outside of school" (Carey et al., 2018, p. 297). For example, Milner et al. (2015) found that one characteristic of parents raising high-performing students was that they placed importance on religious involvement as an extracurricular activity. Schools that understand how involvement in religious activities contributes to student achievement can help teachers and other school personnel connect with their students in culturally appropriate ways. This is just one example; there are other ways that being aware of, respecting, and even incorporating religious aspects of students into public education would bring about increased cultural competence.

Implications for Policy

First and foremost, there is a need for school-based training regarding religion and public schools. However, before training can be implemented, the state must set policies and procedures around religious rights in public schools. As stated previously, I have never received training on the religious rights of my students or what can and cannot be done in public schools regarding religious practice—and I have worked for the same district for 12 years. School districts must make understanding the religious rights of students a priority within training on diversity and inclusion. Henry (2017) conducted a study of Massachusetts

teacher education programs and concluded that they did not "address, instruct, and train preservice teachers on religion clause issues as they apply to grade 6–12 content area pedagogy, curriculum, and professional ethos" (p. 173). If public schools in Massachusetts are serious about educating all students, then teachers must be trained accordingly.

School Climate

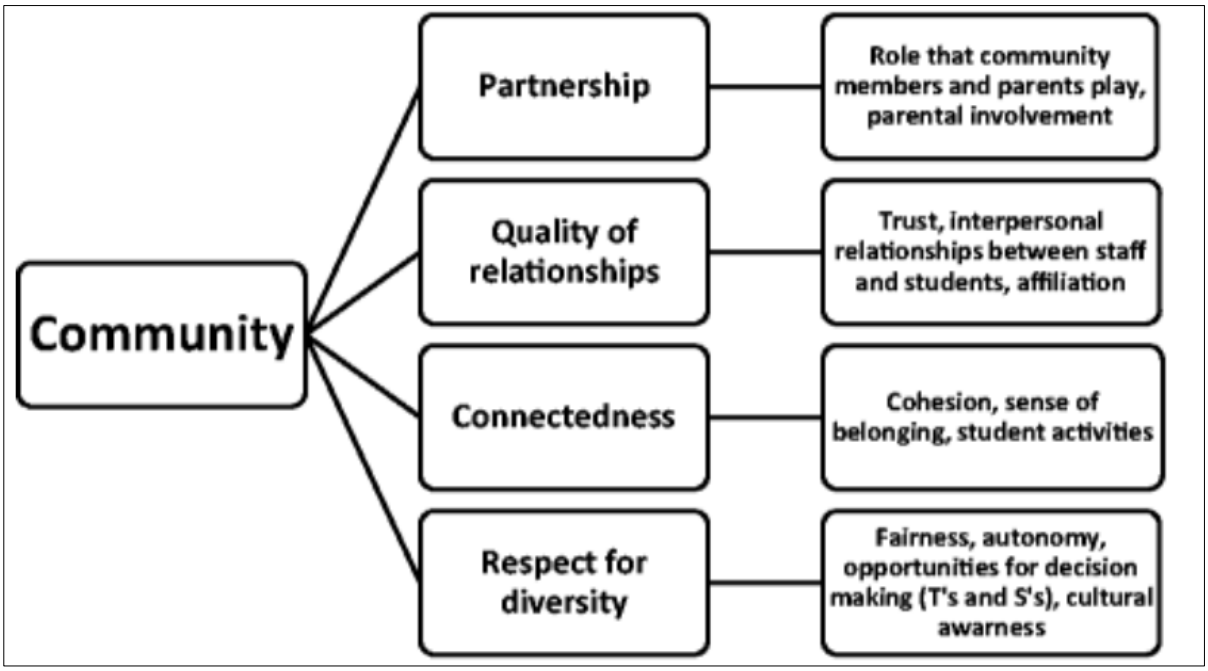
Another implication is that policies addressing the needs of Black Christian families need to be created around school climate. School climate was not initially part of my theoretical framework because I was not attempting to determine what the school climate was like for Black Christian students who attend public schools; this study focused more on how, when, where, and why Christianity showed up in public schools according to Black Christian students and their families. However, participants stated that the school climate aspect of community/connectedness was lacking as it related to students' Christian identity. They indicated that in their public schools, Christianity could be portrayed negatively and/or spoken about in ways that made it feel irrelevant. Students attested that they had little access to activities, there was not much awareness or positive talk about Christianity, and they did not have Christian comradery in the school.

According to the National School Climate Council (2007), "School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, and organizational structures" (p. 4). Although agreement on the exact parameters have not been reached, there is a consensus that school climate includes academics, safety, institutional environment, and the community (Wang & Degol, 2016). The community aspect of school climate was most relevant to this study. Wang and Degol (2016) maintained that the community stresses "the quality of

interpersonal relationships within the school" (p. 317), as well as partnerships, feeling connected, and feeling that respect for diversity is present. Figure 9 displays a detailed description of the community component of school climate.

Figure 9

Community Aspect of School Climate



Note. Source: Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 318.

Within the community aspect of school climate, students must feel that "adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 367). Moreover, positive school climate has been highlighted as an avenue for promoting student achievement (Thapa et al., 2013).

Policymakers look for what has worked in promoting positive school climate and focus on prosocial education and the support of students, parents, and educators. In addition,

some reform efforts have attempted to strengthen school–home–community partnerships (Thapa et al., 2013). An implication of this study is that meeting the religious needs of families could enhance positive school climate. I am in no way suggesting that public schools begin proselytizing to improve school climate, as that would be illegal. Rather, as Jett (2010) said, “Recommendations are intended to suggest that religion and spirituality might be viable topics, for students and teachers alike, as well as researchers and policymakers, when exploring and drawing connections to academic achievement” (p. 330), especially for Black students.

Districts and schools must find legal ways to increase connectedness and community engagement for Black Christian students and their families. Black Christian students should not feel marginalized because they are Christian. As Ibram (2019) held, to be antiracist, schools must first acknowledge their racism and then engage in activities to undo harm and promote equity. Farinde-Wu et al. (2024) found that antiracist work cannot be done without including the experiences and voices of minoritized families. In addition, "for family-school partnerships to be antiracist, families must be given power to make not just recommendations, but decisions" (p. 104). Schools must hear the voices of Black Christian families, validate that they may not feel as connected in schools as they would like, and with them create change that will increase their connection to the community.

Understanding what the school climate is like for Black religious students of any faith is one way to begin narrowing the achievement gap and adding to literature regarding public schools in Massachusetts. Acknowledging the needs of Black Christian students will help create a robust model for school climate and inform educational stakeholders on how to increase student achievement (Kwong & Davis, 2015).

Implications for the Community

This study highlights the continued importance of the Black church in the community. There is an opportunity for churches to make a difference in the lives of Black Christian students by simply showing up and being present in public schools. Paradise (2014) wrote that in the wake of the Black power movement, church leaders began reflecting on the "Black church's failure to maintain and practice the Black church's historic commitment to Black liberation" (p. 162). It appears that Black churches have the same opportunity in today's context. The same struggles remain for Black people, yet mobilization within the Black church seems weak. This study highlights not only the Black church's importance, but also opportunities to get involved.

This does not only apply to Black churches. All churches can be champions for the liberation of any and all oppressed groups. Predominantly White churches, predominantly Asian churches, predominantly Latinx churches, and multicultural congregations can all help improve the educational achievement of youth in public schools. They can enact programs that are not religious in nature but instead have the goal of helping people who are poor, disenfranchised, or marginalized. Such is a religious pursuit and one that Jesus would want His followers to take on.

Personal Reflection

As a Black Christian educator who works in a Massachusetts public school, this research was very personal. As a qualitative researcher, I brought my own understanding of Christianity and filtered participants' responses through what I shared with them regarding religious culture. I found myself sympathizing when they felt marginalized and optimistic when their religious identities were honored.

Every section of this dissertation that I wrote on the marginalization of Black Christians was substantiated by my own experiences as a Black Christian. In preparing for this research, a professor told me that no one would care about my research, and a classmate openly asked a professor in class what should be done if they felt research would do harm to participants (they later admitted they were talking about my research). This was after explaining how much my relationship with God has meant to me; how much benefit I derive from Biblical principles, prayer, and fellowship; and how I have persevered through difficult situations because of my faith. In addition to people in academic spaces, strangers have looked at me in disbelief when I tell them about my research and ask, "Why would you do anything like that?!" In each encounter, I immediately felt invalidated and questioned not only my intelligence but also my faith.

At the same time, people have encouraged me. Even those who are not religious have listened intently and earnestly as I have explained what I was researching and why. Many educators have taken our conversations about religion in public schools and engaged in further research so they can become knowledgeable for their students. These instances, along with my faith in Christ, have encouraged me to keep pressing forward.

As I conducted this research, I saw parallels between my own experience and those of the participants. As I listened to parents/guardians, it was as if I could hear my own mother talking. I feel blessed to have been able to name these feelings for the Black Christian students who took part in my study and their families. Their stories give substance to the feelings that Black Christians have all over the world. It is my hope that their experiences can make a difference for future students who go through the public school system in Massachusetts.

Limitations

One limitation of this study related to my methodology. As discussed in Chapter 3, I received clearance to begin research in 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant recruitment began at the end of 2020 and continued through 2021. However, recruitment was severely limited as people focused on staying safe and healthy. Absent the pandemic, my research would have included data from school personnel and church leaders. These data would have provided a more comprehensive picture of the intersection between religion and public schools from the viewpoint of those working in public schools and those disseminating Christian messages. In addition, I would have held focus groups with Black Christian participants who went to the same church, under the rationale that students who attend the same church would hear the same messages, which may have influenced how the students connected with their religion while attending school. Lastly, I would have included a quantitative component to the study that surveyed participants about their general knowledge of public school students' religious rights.

The definitions I used to design this study were also limited. I designed the study through the lens of a traditional view of Christianity, requiring that participants self-identify as being "committed." That meant they believed that Jesus died on the cross to "save" them. However, not all Christians believe this. Some identify as Christian but do not believe Jesus is God and therefore do not believe He has the power to redeem people. Not only did participants have to be committed, but I also required that they have daily communication with God in some form. These criteria for participation left out the voices of Black Christian students who identified as Christian but lived out their faith differently.

Future Research

There are opportunities for researchers to expand on this study. First, the definition of Christianity could be more inclusive so that families who practice nontraditional forms of Christianity would qualify, providing a comprehensive view of the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools. In addition, the study could be designed to focus on those who go to the same church, the same schools, or live in the same community. Studying strategic groups such as these could help determine if similar social situations influence experiences in public schools. Another option would be to conduct longitudinal research in which participants are followed over long periods to capture their experiences in real-time.

Additionally, future research could be expanded into other New England states to determine if trends are consistent throughout the Northeast. Research could also be conducted in states, mainly in the U.S. South, where Christianity has a more prominent place in society through politics. This would help determine if the experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools differ by region. In addition, future research could examine school climate for Black Christian families.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was guided by the central research question "How does the doctrine of 'separation of church and state' manifest in the experiences of Black Christian students and their families in Massachusetts' public school system?" Students in this study were able to pray, read scriptures, listen to Christian music, and remember sermons or religious advice while they were in school to help them. Nevertheless, there was very little in the school to support their Christian practice. Students hypothesized that schools would support outward

religious actions, but the reality of their current school experiences showed that neither students nor parents/guardians felt connected in public schools. The school climate did not feel inclusive when it came to community and connectedness for both students and parents. For students, the loss of connection was exacerbated through microaggressions in the form of microinsults and microassaults that labeled Black Christians as "other" as a Black person and as a Christian.

In addition, when Christianity was mentioned in schools, it was infrequent, and sometimes students had to sit through hearing negativity about their religion. Students would put themselves out there and talk about Jesus if they thought it would help a friend or person in need. They also knew to treat people the way Jesus wanted them to. This was because they took the values they learned at home, from their family, to school with them. However, not all Christian values were important to schools, and according to parents/guardians, students received mixed messages regarding the validity of the Christian faith, sexual morals, and evangelizing.

This research study revealed that public school environments did not always feel friendly to Black Christian families. Student participants did not mention the establishment clause directly, but they knew how the environment felt. Some of the parents/guardians in this study did point to the separation of church and state as the cause for public schools not allowing more conversation around Christianity. I argue that, over time, the way the courts have interpreted the First Amendment and communicated their rulings regarding religion in public schools have given school personnel and the public the idea that religion is not allowed in public schools. For example, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) is often cited as the Supreme Court case that took prayer out of public schools. However, that is an incorrect interpretation.

The case prohibited *school-mandated* prayer in public schools, but as discussed in previous sections, students can still pray openly if they wish. The government could help school communities understand the establishment clause of the First Amendment by producing easy-to-understand information (as opposed to judicial opinions or rulings) that spells out what is and is not allowed in terms of religion in public schools. The government being open and honest would create a more inclusive environment and clear up misconceptions that school personnel have.

Another way for schools to create a more inclusive environment is to change the way they speak about Christianity in schools. Schools should celebrate a child's religious identity the same way they would other identities and encourage more conversation about religion as a component of cultural understanding. This simple change would interrupt the disconnection that Black Christian students feel whenever they hear their religion spoken about negatively or whenever they feel like religion is not welcome in their schools. A sense of belonging and connection is a component of school climate and culture, and having a positive school climate and culture impacts academic achievement (Damme et al., 2016). Therefore, it behooves public school districts to improve climate and culture in unprecedented ways.

This is especially important because this study focused not solely on Christians but on Black Christians. Black students already face a plethora of challenges in schools that have negative consequences for their achievement. Educators should avoid assuming that Christians are privileged and, therefore, their religious needs do not need to be attended to because this type of thinking has a negative impact on Black Christian students and families. Black Christians are still marginalized and need the things they rely on for strength to be respected and used as a means of support. For example, Chioma was called the n-word but

used Christianity to heal from the incident. Understanding the lives of Black Christian students and how religion affects them positively can lead to increased student achievement and may also open the door for more inclusive practices for Black families of other religious groups.

Another way for schools to create a more inclusive environment not only for Black Christian students but for all Black religious students is by implementing programs that address their specific needs. Many participants wanted more opportunities tailored to them as Christians. The First Amendment, however, makes it difficult for schools to implement policies or programs that support religious students. As discussed previously, schools are not allowed to promote religion or proselytize in any way. Confusion as to when a school is or is not promoting religion poses a barrier to supporting religious students. However, the Supreme Court established a precedent that schools can follow to ensure they comply with the law. In previous cases, the courts used the following criteria to determine if a program or policy was constitutional: (1) it must have a secular purpose; (2) it must have a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion; and (3) it does not result in an excessive entanglement between state and religion (Paradise, 2014, p. 137).

Once again, religion is an aspect of deep culture, and adhering to the religious needs of students is a way to be culturally competent. Schools can use these parameters to create programs with the goal of improving academic outcomes, thereby allowing school leaders and educators to use religion as a culturally responsive tool and/or teaching practice. Engaging and supporting Black religious students in ways that honor their religion has the secular purpose of improving academic performance and reducing the achievement gap. If done strategically, these initiatives will not promote religion or entangle the church and the

state. Schools must be innovative and intentional with initiatives that meet the criteria already set forth by the courts to create a more inclusive environment and provide the support needed for students to reach or maintain high academic standards.

Parents/guardians in this study also offered recommendations for how schools and churches could help support them and their children. These recommendations were detailed in Chapter 4; Table 6 provides an overview.

Table 6

Parent/Guardian Participant Recommendations

Recommendations for Schools	Recommendations for Churches
• Interfaith chaplain	• Partnership with schools
• Space for students to engage with religion	• Community events
• Increased communication with parents	• Educating the community on what Christ stands for
• Inclusion of religion to address mental health concerns	• Having knowledge of social trends and issues

All the preceding recommendations have validity, but the focus on mental health is particularly important. Several student participants shared that they engaged with Christianity to deal with stress, anxiety, and depression. When spiritual engagement through religion is supported, there is a greater chance of mental well-being, which helps child flourish, build meaningful relationships, and be outwardly effective in the world (Chapman et al., 2021). For Black students this is yet another tool for creating a positive experience in school. In

addition, many students already receive mental health counseling in school, and as the parents/guardians suggested, religion can be one area professionals focus on in supporting students. School districts should explore ways to employ interfaith chaplains as a means of providing mental health services without violating the separation of church and state. Lastly, educators can use the Biblical principles of compassion, empathy, joy, patience, healing, and forgiveness to support and restore students who have been historically dismissed, hurt, or pushed out of public schools (Butler et al., 2024).

This study looked at the experiences of Black Christian families in Massachusetts public schools and discovered that there are opportunities for public schools to improve the education the families are receiving. The students and parents/guardians who participated in this study are part of the public school community and should be treated as partners whose experiences are valid and important. By implementing the previous recommendations and others, public schools can be communities that not only attend to the needs of Black Christian students, but also promote positivity, connection, and achievement for all students.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SUB-CASE 1: STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED ANY PUBLIC SCHOOL AND/OR CHURCH IN MASSACHUSETTS

Warm Up Questions. Start with telling me about yourself. What is your church like? What types of things do you learn at church? What types of things do you do to strengthen your relationship with God (pray, read the Bible, talk to others about Christ?) Do you talk about your faith at home? What is your school like?

What are the experiences of Black Christian students when they express or try to express their religion in public school settings in Massachusetts?	
Question #	**Question:**
1.	What is it like being a Christian at your school?
2.	Do teachers know you're a Christian? • ***Yes-*** *How many? How did they find out? How has them knowing you are a Christian changed your experiences in school?* • ***No-*** *Has the topic ever come up? Have you ever wanted to tell them?*
3.	Do your friends at school know you are a Christian? • ***Yes-*** *Are they friends who have religions different from your own, or just Christian friends? How did they find out you are a Christian?* • ***No-*** *What do you think would happen if people found out that you are a Christian? Do you ever want to tell them you are Christian?*
4.	How would you say you express or use your religion at school?
5.	Have you ever felt the urge to pray while at school? • ***Yes-****what happened when you had the urge?* • ***No-****Why do you think that is?*

6.	I know you can pray without anyone hearing you, but what do you think would happen if you decided to pray out loud with other Christians at your school, like in a group?
7.	Would you ever try to pray out loud at school?? • ***Yes-*** *Under what circumstances?* • ***No-*** *Why do you think that is?*
8.	Have you ever had the urge to read a scripture or any other religious text while at school? • ***Yes-*** *What happened when you had the urge?* • ***No-*** *Why do you think that is?*
9.	What do you think would happen if you took out your Bible and started reading during a time when you didn't have any work to do (i.e. breakfast, lunch, study hall?)
10.	What do you think would happen if a group of Christian students decided to meet during breakfast, lunch, or study hall to have a Bible study? • *Would you join them?* • *Probe: Why or why not?*
11.	Have you ever wanted to bring up Jesus, the Bible or anything else pertaining to Christianity while at school? • ***Yes-*** *What happened when you brought it up?* • ***No-*** *I will give an example "For instance, when I was younger and was having a hard time with something, I would talk to my other Christian friends and we would encourage each other by using something spiritual or religious. Does that ever happen to you or do you ever want it to happen?"* • ***Yes-*** *What happened when it did?* • ***If still No-*** *Why do you think that is?*

In what ways do religion and receiving a public school education intersect for Black Christian Students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?	
Question #	**Question:**
1.	Do you talk about school in youth group or at church? • ***Yes-*** *What types of things? How do they help you in school?* • ***No*** *– Do you want to talk about school at youth group or church? What types of things would you like to talk about?*

2.	Do you think God has anything to do with learning in school? • ***Yes*** *– How so?* • ***No-*** *Why Not?*
3.	When you are doing well in a class do you think it has anything to do with being a Christian? • ***Yes-*** *Tell me more. Why do you connect good grades with your religion?* • ***No-*** Why not?
4.	When you are struggling in a class do you ever use something Christian to help you? • ***Yes-*** *What type of things? What helps you want to use them?* • ***No-*** *Why not?*
5.	In any of your classes does religion of any kind come up? • *Yes- What happened? How did it make you feel?* • *No- If religion came up would it feel weird? If yes, how come?*
6.	Do you ever learn things that you think go against Christianity? • *Yes- When and what happened?* • *No- Have you ever learned something that goes against a different religion? If yes, when and what happened?*
7.	Do you ever learn things that support Christianity? • *Yes- When and what happened?* • *No- Why do you think that is?*
8.	Are there Christian teachers at your school? Do they every talk to you about Christian things? • ***Yes-*** *How do you know they are Christian? What do they talk about?* • ***Not sure-*** *Why do you think that you don't know?* • ***No-*** No probing questions
9.	Has anyone ever told you to pray, read the Bible, listen to a sermon, or anything else Christian as a way to support you at school? • ***Yes*** *– What happened?* • ***No-*** *Why do you think that is? Do you think people at school should give you Christian advice?*
10.	Could you describe any other time when school and Christianity were connected?

11.	Would you like to see more Christian things or be given Christian advice at school? • ***Yes-*** *What kinds of things or advice? What would they do for you as a student?* • ***No-*** *Why not?*

In what ways does the intersection between race and religion manifest in the educational experiences of Black Christian students who attend public schools in Massachusetts?	
Question #	**Question:**
1.	Have you witnessed or experienced racism at your school? • ***Yes-*** *What happened?* *Follow-up question:* 1. *Do you think being a Christian makes any difference in the treatment of Black students?* • ***Yes*** *– In what ways* • ***No*** *– Why not?* 2. *When you witnessed or experienced racism did you engage with your Christianity i.e. pray about it, read any scriptures, talk to other Christian people about it, talk about it in youth group, or anything else?* • ***Yes*** *– What did you do and why?* • ***No-*** *Why not?* • ***No –*** *No probing questions*
2.	_____(insert name), you previously spoke about _____ (insert event). Do you think that had anything to do with your being Black?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SUB-CASE 2: PARENTS OF BLACK CHRISTIAN STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Warm Up Questions. Start with telling me about yourself. How many children do you have? Do all your children go to the same school? Can you tell me a little bit about the school(s)? Can you tell me a little about your church?

Sub-Question 4: In what ways does receiving an education in public schools intersect with the values of Black Christian families?	
Question #	**Question:**
1.	As a Christian what are your family values in general?
2.	What do you think about sending your child to a public school?
3.	Do you think children face challenges specific to them being a Christian outside of school? • **Yes –** What are the challenges? • **No-** Why not?
4.	Do you think children face challenges specific to them being a Christian inside of school? • **Yes –** What are the challenges? • **No-** Why not?
5.	Do you think schools support you as a Christian parent? • ***Yes-*** *In what ways?* • ***No –*** *Why not? What can be done differently?*
6.	Do you think schools support children as Christian students? • ***Yes-*** *In what ways?* • ***No –*** *Why not? What can be done differently?*
7.	What specific Christian lessons do you teach your children that you want them to apply to school?
8.	In classes do you feel children are taught lessons that contradict Christian ideals? • ***Yes*** *– What are the messages and how do they contradict?* • ***No*** *– No probing questions*

9.	In classes do you feel children are taught lessons that support Christian ideals? • ***Yes*** *– What are the messages and how do they support?* • ***No*** *– Why do you think this is?*
10.	Do you think there are specific ways the church can assist your child in their educational experiences? • ***Yes*** *– Give examples* • ***No*** *– Why not?*

APPENDIX C

PRE-FIGURED CODES FOR SUB-QUESTIONS

Code	Sub-Question 1	Sub-Question 2	Sub-Question 3	Sub-Question 4
1. Religion forbidden/Not allowed				
2. Embarrassment/fear of peer judgment				
3. Fear of teacher judgment				
4. Not sure how to begin				
5. Need support from peers				
6. Need support from school/teachers				
7. Has freedom in school to express religion				
8. Expresses freely				
9. Has support from friends				
10. Has support from school/teachers				
11. Connects Christianity and schooling				
12. Does not connect Christianity and schooling				

Code	Sub-Question 1	Sub-Question 2	Sub-Question 3	Sub-Question 4
13. Never thought about the connection between prayer and school				
14. Never thought about the connection between reading the Bible and school				
15. Never thought about the connection between talking to other Christians and school				
16. Never thought about being a Christian while going to school				
17. School is important at church				
18. School is not important at church				
19. God cares about what is learned at school				
20. God does not care about what is learned at school				
21. My relationship with God should be connected to learning/achievement				
22. My relationship with God should not be connected to learning/achievement				
23. No religions are allowed in schools				
24. Some religions are allowed in school but not Christianity				
25. Christianity is the only religion allowed at school				
26. Schools contradict Christian values				

Code	Sub-Question 1	Sub-Question 2	Sub-Question 3	Sub-Question 4
27. Schools support Christian values				
28. Race is a factor				
29. Being a Christian caused conflict in school				
30. Christianity helped me combat racism in school.				
31. Praying is important for academic success				
32. Reading the Bible is important for academic success				
33. Talking to other Christians is important for academic success				
34. Using Biblical principles is important for academic success				
35. Being a Christian creates social challenges in school				
36. Being a Christian creates relational challenges in school				
37. Being a Christian creates academic challenges in school				
38. Being a Christian creates personal challenges in school				
39. The church assists in public school education				
40. The church does not assist in public school				

APPENDIX D

DESCRIPTIVE/VALUE/EMOTION CODING TOPICS

Descriptive/Value/Emotion Coding Topics—Students
Christianity Comes up in Class Faith impacts how situations are interpreted Faith comes up in conversation with friends Uses religion to make good choices Staff support for religious expression Peer opposition to religious expression Defending Christianity Viewing academic lessons with a Christian lens positive academic outcomes through Christianity Concerns with LGBTQ disproportional mention of Christianity How Christian advice would help Negative attitude about Christianity Racism in school Reacting to racism as a Christian Being a Black Christian Connecting with other Christians not automatic Religious censorship from staff Religious censorship for self God caring about what is learned Not acting Black Lack of activities for Christians Using faith to deal with negative peer interactions Christian support from other Christians in school Religion specifically comes up in Humanities Church lessons about attitudes and behaviors not academics Using religion to help with stress

Descriptive/Value/Emotion Coding Topics—Parents
School academically sound Fears about sending child to public school How religion impacts lives Christian values Christian friends Lessons that contradict Christianity

Descriptive/Value/Emotion Coding Topics—Parents
Things that match Christian values Perception about Christianity vs Christian truth Challenges Christians face in school Challenges Christians face in society What the church could do What schools could do to support Christian families How contradictory messages affect students Christian representation in school Students' strong personality

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