



VILLAGE OF WISDOM

# A DREAMS ASSESSMENT

THE DREAMS OF BLACK PARENTS, BLACK STUDENTS, AND TEACHERS DURING COVID AND BEYOND





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is dedicated to the mothers, the Black Parent Researchers who devoted their time to co-lead this research study and to co-create this report with staff in Village of Wisdom. We acknowledge this work involved their weekends, evenings, afternoon phone calls, Google and Zoom meetings. We express a high degree of gratitude to the students, parents, and teachers who met with us over Zoom during a time in our country where so many of us were just exhausted. We dedicate this report to the mothers, fathers, caregivers, and protectors of Black Genius.



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What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?  
**Langston Hughes, 1902-1967**

# AN OVERVIEW

In 2020, the spread of the coronavirus across the U.S. and the world disrupted the dreams of many Black communities. The pandemic amplified the health inequities existing in the U.S.; accordingly, Black/African Americans died from COVID-related symptoms at a rate three times that of whites(1,2). Black communities witnessed the dreams of young Black men and women wither away from an early and unjust death at the hands of police and vigilantes who believed that Black bodies could not run through their neighborhoods ([Ahmaud Marquez Arbery](#)). Political leaders used the pandemic as a battleground for their agenda, arguing back and forth on social media platforms while ignoring the needs of Black communities. Many Black families and, more specifically, caregivers and parents balanced schooling from home during a time in the U.S. marked by political and civil unrest. State legislatures continued to underfund education at illegally low levels. And school leaders made decisions about learning and teaching without input from the very communities they served. This compounding stress had unimaginable effects on Black communities and the young people and families wherein. Yet, amid the pandemic, new opportunities would emerge and disrupt the very systems that have long since threatened the dreams of Black children, their families, and communities.

Village of Wisdom (VOW), a community-driven organization in Durham, North Carolina, dedicated to protecting the intellectual curiosity and positive racial identity (Black Genius) of Black learners, recognized the need to identify the dreams communities hold for Black children. A desire to listen deeply to the community, to listen deeply to the voices often ignored by education leaders, created an opportunity for VOW to engage Black parents as researchers in a dreams assessment. A dreams assessment is a methodology grounded in principles of racial justice, equity, and empowerment. The approach is specific to VOW and rests on the notion that those interested in Black communities frequently ask them about needs without ever asking them what the ideal would look like for their communities. Those seeking to help Black communities through notions of charity seem to never recognize the power of dreams and, especially Black communities' right to pursue and manifest those dreams. Modeling humility with a willingness to position Black parents as Parent Researchers to identify dreams and call out those systems that disrupt and defer dreams, VOW implemented a community-based (and driven) participatory research (CBPR) study. VOW recruited Black students, parents, and teachers of Black students to participate in focus groups during the Fall of 2020 and offer their perspectives and insight on their dreams and challenges during COVID, especially related to dreams that lead to culturally affirming learning experiences.

The Parent Researchers worked with VOW to make meaning of the data drawn from the three primary groups in schools, parents, students, and teachers. The meaning-making process included coding the data, generating themes from the data, and translating those themes into

recommendations. The Parent Researchers then engaged in reflective practice, drawing from their lived experience and their knowledge as advocates in educational settings to translate the recommendations into Dreamandments. This report is a reflection of the wisdom of the Parent Researchers and their ability to challenge us all to #KeepDreaming despite being in a world that would tell us otherwise.

# THE JOURNEY

The journey began by drawing upon methods that amplified and uplifted Black voices, honored Black experiences, and validated the wisdom and expertise of Black parents. We began with a decolonized approach to reclaim the idea of research, an institution of knowledge embedded in systems of colonization and power, and to transfer research back into the hands of those who have been excluded from these institutions(3). Phenomenology served as a lens to center inquiry in people's lived experiences and honor the lived experience as a valid form of evidence about phenomena(4). Lastly, community-based (and driven) participatory research (CBPR) is an inquiry approach that democratizes the research process by collaborating with community members in idea generation, data interpretation, and dissemination(5,6). VOW applied CBPR to identify and recruit Black parents as researchers, those who represented the surrounding community, and those who knew about navigating education systems.

## **Who comprised the research team?**

VOW recruited five Black women-identified mothers who were involved in previous VOW programming to serve as lead researchers in this project. These women were leaders and organizers in their communities and represented diverse realities and backgrounds. They represented individuals who had experience navigating educational spaces as mothers and advocates. The Parent Researchers underwent more than 60 hours of training. The training introduced them to ethical principles, research design, focus group facilitation, data interpretation, and dissemination. The larger research team included members of the VOW staff and a Black woman-identified researcher. The experiences of Black people in the U.S. are diverse, and the various positions held by the research team and the Parent Researchers informed data interpretation. The Parent Researchers were pivotal in translating the findings from the study, informing dissemination, and guiding recommendations for action.

## **How did we gather the voices and perspectives of parents, students, and teachers?**

VOW relied on community partners and social media platforms to recruit students, parents, and teachers to participate in the study. Flyers and posts were sent forward to local school districts and posted through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Criteria included being a middle school student who self-identified as Black, a parent of a Black student who attended a middle school, and a teacher working in middle schools where more than 25% of the student population were identified as Black/African American. Recruitment yielded about 30 participants who met the eligibility criteria, and the final group of participants included 26 people (see Tables 1 to 3 in Appendices for a complete description of participants). Participants were from Orange and Durham County; teachers also included those working in Durham Public Schools and Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools. VOW obtained consent from all adults, and the students provided their assent and parental consent for participation. There were six focus groups,

each had an average of 4 participants per group. All of the parent participants identified Black/African American as part of their identity, and all were women. Student participants self-identified as Black/African American, and the mean age was 12.1 years (range 11 to 15). All students were in middle school. Only one of the students was the child of a parent in this study. The teachers in the focus groups self-identified as women (Black and white women), and two identified as White men.

A member of VOW's staff contacted participants, scheduling and focus groups occurred during the Fall of 2020. The Parent Researchers conducted the focus group sessions on Zoom in pairs, with one parent serving as the lead facilitator and the other serving as a co-facilitator. Members of VOW staff served as notetakers during the sessions. The Parent Researchers provided an overview of the study and led the sessions with group agreements (i.e., Touchstones) to set the grounds for the sessions and to establish rapport. Each focus group lasted from 90-120 minutes, and participants received compensation.

The focus group protocol included similar questions for each group; however, the protocols were modified and tailored to address age differences and create a more conversational interview style. The following questions were phrased similarly across the three groups:

- What were your experiences with online learning during COVID?
  - What was challenging, were the resources needed, and how did you cope, find, and create joy during this time?
- What are your dreams and aspirations for you (as a Black student), for your child, and your students?
- How does the school build relationships with and affirm Black students and families?
- What resources or support do you need to affirm and value the learning of Black students?

### **How did we make meaning of the data?**

The meaning-making process acknowledged the role of social systems in shaping how people interpret their world. Thus, a socio-ecological lens<sup>(7)</sup> positioned the dreams, aspirations of Black students, their parents, and their teachers in a context defined by institutional structures and decisions that interrupts those dreams from occurring and turning into action. The meaning-making process began with transcribing all focus group sessions verbatim. The analysis focused on how each group described their experiences both uniquely and collectively. The lead research consultant reviewed each transcript individually and created codes from text to identify how experiences emerged within the at-home context and broader education system. The lead researcher created codes from an inductive process that involved listening to the audio recordings, reviewing the transcripts, and identifying emergent concepts<sup>(4,8)</sup>. Codes were specific in identifying how participants described their experiences with teaching and learning during the pandemic. Codes were then organized into broad themes and shared with the Parent Researchers. The Parent Researchers reviewed transcripts and themes, drawing meaning and conclusions by reflecting on their lived experiences and observations from the focus groups. A review of the research literature further confirmed the themes, a process using previous evidence to validate the themes from the data.

# OUR FINDINGS

The themes identified in the analysis fall within three broad categories, 1) the at-home learning environment, 2) the education system, and 3) dreams and aspirations. A socio-ecological lens informs the identification of two settings, the at-home learning environment and the broader system of education, to outline context shapes experiences of Black students, parents, and teachers. In this report, at-home learning environment signifies the setting where parents and teachers intersect in online learning. The education system theme will illustrate how the decisions made by school districts, practices, and policies restrict dreams and aspirations for and of Black students. The dreams and aspirations theme emerged as possibilities in the at-home learning environment and education system. Throughout, the report includes the perspectives of each group and provides quotes as evidence to support the presented themes. The themes are not exhaustive but do aim to capture the broad concepts identified in the focus groups.

# THE AT-HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The results from the analysis suggest that the at-home learning environment opened opportunities for parents, teachers, and students and presented challenges. Across the focus groups, participants expressed a high degree of appreciation for each other. Parents expressed more favorable perceptions toward the communication happening between them and teachers. Many expressed being able to keep abreast of their children's progress. The parents believed that the increase in communication between them and teachers should continue once in-person instruction resumes. Parents commented:

**"I would have to say the support with my son's school and his teachers has been amazing."—Parent 8**

**"Just having that open line of communication has been so effective and so helpful, and I appreciate it...I think that was like my biggest struggle with some of the schools that my son did attend. It's like that communication wasn't there. But just having the open lines of communication has been so helpful, you know."—Parent 7**

The parents acknowledged that the increase in communication between the parent and teachers debunked the myth that Black parents are not interested in their children's academics or that Black parents are difficult to engage. Some teachers mentioned that they were now able to see parents become involved in their students' learning. Parents and students expressed how the at-home learning environment opened opportunities to increase family time. Although students noted that time with family or the presence of family was distracting, they expressed an appreciation for being home.

On the contrary, the at-home learning environment also created further tensions between the school district, families, and teachers. For example, parents and teachers expressed that the school districts were making decisions about online learning without consulting them or getting their input and feedback. It was evident that these autocratic decisions required parents, students, and teachers to adjust and adapt quickly. In the parent focus groups, parents expressed how expectations made by the school districts did not consider their needs. Parents noted:

**"...we didn't have an opportunity as parents to tell you [the school district] what our expectations are; you know, how are you challenging my student? How does my child get to communicate with you?"—Parent 2**

**"...I feel for parents that are not working from home because when something crashes, they send me the email; not him, not her, but me. So if I wasn't home, how would I communicate that with my children? So that's one of the challenges... I don't think the school system took, put enough time and effort into deciding what they were gonna do."—Parent 4**



Teachers expressed similar sentiments as that of parents and indicated feeling unsupported and overwhelmed in the transition to at-home and online learning. They also indicated that the school districts' decisions were made without considering input from teachers. Teachers were expected to adhere to the instructions provided by their school leaders, with very little consideration given to the impact of that decision on the teachers. Teachers were expected to be proficient at using specific learning platforms with very little guidance or direct instruction. One teacher mentioned:

**“They send me three emails a day- you know, learn pop ELL, learn this, learn this- I’m like, hey, it’s hard for me to know how to assimilate any of this. You just get so far behind.”—Teacher 8**

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

**IN DECEMBER OF 2020**

**36% of NC students were learning at-home and remotely**

**Almost 15,000 of NC students were unaccounted for**

SOURCE: NC DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION. (2020). RESPONSE TO JOINT LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE: REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS

All the parents were mothers, mothers who self-identified as Black and multiethnic women. They spoke from their role as mothers of sons and mothers of children enrolled in schools. Parents had to ensure their children logged in and were present in online learning; thus, parents represented a critical voice in the at-home learning environment. If their child became agitated, frustrated, or lost, parents were responsible for supporting them and getting them assistance. Parents had to assess the issue quickly and send emails and other communication to the school and teacher.

Parents alluded to the challenges of working and schooling from home and the stress associated with balancing the two. The parents in the focus groups expressed how the school district placed these expectations on them with little input from them and limited knowledge of parent and student needs. For the parents in the focus groups, this history of making decisions without the input of parents and students, and more specifically Black families, existed before and during COVID.

**"And the first time the teacher talked to my son in a, what I thought was a disrespectful way...and when he came home and told me, I went up to the school, and I said 'I wanna tell ya'll this just one time: this is mine. I brought him in this world, and I will take anybody out who harms him. You're not gonna talk to him any kind of way.'"—Parent 2**

Many parents in the focus groups could recall stories like the quote above and did not feel their children would be safe and treated fairly in schools. Thus, the move to at-home learning enabled parents to feel they could protect their children more versus when their children were away at school.

Parents offered a balanced view of their experiences with at-home learning, honoring the places in which teachers were helpful and naming the pervasive and chronic issues of exclusion in schools before COVID. Overall, the sentiment in the focus groups revealed parents were happy that their children were learning at home during the pandemic. Many parents noted that their children could concentrate more and were not distracted by peers and other happenings in the regular classroom environment. The parents stated that they found ways to give their children more free time to enjoy family activities such as game nights and how they used different activities to create and maintain joy in their homes. They all expressed that they did not look to the school districts or schools to ensure their well-being. They only looked to the school districts to deliver instruction, give them access to free Wi-Fi, technical support, and learning platforms (e.g., virtual tutoring).



# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS

All of the students were young people who expressed independent ideas and thoughts. These students were required to adapt and adjust to the at-home learning environment. For some, this adjustment meant that they would not physically see their peers, interact with their friends, and participate in the extracurriculars provided by schools. The students in the focus groups discussed the challenges they experienced in the at-home and online learning environment. Many noted that access to academic resources and the inability to move around was challenging for them. The students expressed an increase in the volume of work they had to complete, difficulties in managing expectations and the lack of structure and learning support in the at-home learning environment. One student commented:

**"So like I have a lot of classes, so I got a lot of work. And some of my difficulties turn[ing] in all my work because sometimes I don't get to all my work."—Student 4**

The students in the focus group identified some challenges associated with at-home learning and new possibilities. For example, contrary to what parents' noted, some of the students indicated that the at-home learning environment was distracting and found the structure in school and the face-to-face learning environment was missing at home. They revealed how slow Wi-Fi and glitches in the learning platforms became challenging for them, sometimes feeling like such barriers increased being overwhelmed by the workload. The students in the focus groups were also able to identify how their caregivers and parents found ways to keep them active. While they discussed missing classes like physical education, they noted how their families would find ways for them to be active during the day. When asked about what were some things that were bringing them joy during at-home and online learning, one student happily commented:

**"Play board games with my mom and ride my bike."—Student 5**



# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS

The teachers in the focus groups self-identified as women, men, and those who had more experience teaching and in the workforce. Their diverse identities and experiences converged as they discussed the challenges of at-home and online learning. The teachers discussed how the school district did not prepare teachers to teach online. The teachers discussed feeling a lack of support and overwhelmed with the transition to online learning. Similar to parents, teachers did not feel the school districts considered their input nor were aware of their needs. The teachers indicated that they were provided with instructions and expectations but did not have much preparation or support. The teachers in the focus groups, like the parents, alluded to the challenge of managing working and schooling from home. Many of the teachers commented that at-home and online learning did not work for them or their students and expressed concerns about the success of their students.

The teachers in the focus groups indicated that they felt disconnected from their students and noted how one of the reasons they decided to become teachers was their interest in connecting with students. The at-home and online learning environment made it difficult for them to build rapport with students and build rapport between students in their classrooms. While they mentioned some creativity used, such as letting students create a playlist they would play at breaks and scheduling small group discussions during free time, they still noted difficulties. Some discussed difficulties with adhering to some of the school districts' policies. One teacher commented on a school district's decision to require all students to place their cameras on during Zoom and their disagreement:

**...I have found that one of the impacts I'm really having to deal a lot with is, um, higher-up administration basically requiring of the students that they have to have their videos on during Zoom- which I'm not a fan of. And I don't enforce it in my class. And just the constant feel that I am having to buck the system...the students who are living in the rural parts of the district, they only have access to one internet company, and that internet company is not terribly reliable, and their bandwidth is not reliable. So these particular students are struggling with being able to stay on.—Teacher 3**

The teachers in the focus groups also mentioned how they felt a decline in their morale during COVID and during at-home learning. Not only did the teachers feel disconnected from their students, they also indicated feeling a decline in their mental health and witnessing a decline in the mental health of their students. One teacher (Teacher 7) commented that "[we] are all depressed, and no one wants to name it." Other teachers in the second focus group agreed with the sentiment of this teacher. Some teachers who were also parents discussed the challenge of being present as teachers and monitoring their own children's at-home learning environment. One teacher commented on the challenges of:

**"... balancing being there for my students... doing all my IEP's, working with my teachers, all of that has been a real stressor. And then balancing my own child, who needs a lot of support at home." —Teacher 4**

The teachers in the focus groups were less likely to perceive the at-home learning environment as an opportunity for new possibilities; however, some teachers did express they were able to see parents and their students differently. The teachers acknowledged that at-home and online learning created new opportunities for them to learn how to appreciate parents and interact with Black families differently. In this quote, one teacher commented on seeing more of a student's family online:

**...teaching Black students during this time on Zoom. I have never seen so many cute babies in my entire life. There are truly extended families that we're teaching or that we're reaching. Ok? And it is not uncommon for one of my girls to have her little cousin in her lap and she is babysitting this child. Ok? So I've had to learn, you know I usually take a couple of seconds to say 'hey cutie, what's your name?' and they come back to me and then the student is very good about trying to keep the child off to the side. But you know I have to be very aware that home life looks different. I mean we are in their homes. —**

**Teacher 1**

Another teacher commented on how online learning has enabled them to slow down and deliver more intentional content.

**...this virtual learning, [what it] has caused me to do is to slow everything down. Just slow down. The content is there, but the way I teach it now is so much more intentional. I am 'do you understand this? Is there anyone who needs extra help? Please put it in the chat. Are you ok?' I do the check-ins every day because I need to know where you are and how you're feeling.—**

**Teacher 7**

# THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The findings from the focus groups revealed that the education system and the school districts appeared to operate under the same pre-COVID system. That is, school district leaders made the decisions and required all other stakeholders to adjust and adapt to these decisions. Although school districts provided students and teachers with laptops, access to Wi-Fi, and even support with meals, the school districts made decisions with little input from students, parents, and teachers. Similarly, all the participants in the focus groups expressed how the education system and the school districts, did very little to respond to Black students' needs and did very little to respond to the expectations of Black families. Parents and teachers described a school culture that did minimal to embrace and value Blackness and a school culture that excluded the diversity of Black expression and Black identity before and during COVID.

## DID YOU KNOW?

IN JANUARY OF 2021

**More than 50% of Black parents reported a more favorable view of homeschooling during the pandemic**

SOURCE: BEST COLLEGES. (2021). IMPACT OF COVID-19 HOMESCHOOLING ON STUDENTS, SCHOOLS.  
[HTTPS://WWW.BESTCOLLEGES.COM/BLOG/HOMESCHOOLING-DURING-COVID-19-AND-STUDENT-OUTCOMES/](https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/homeschooling-during-covid-19-and-student-outcomes/)

# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS

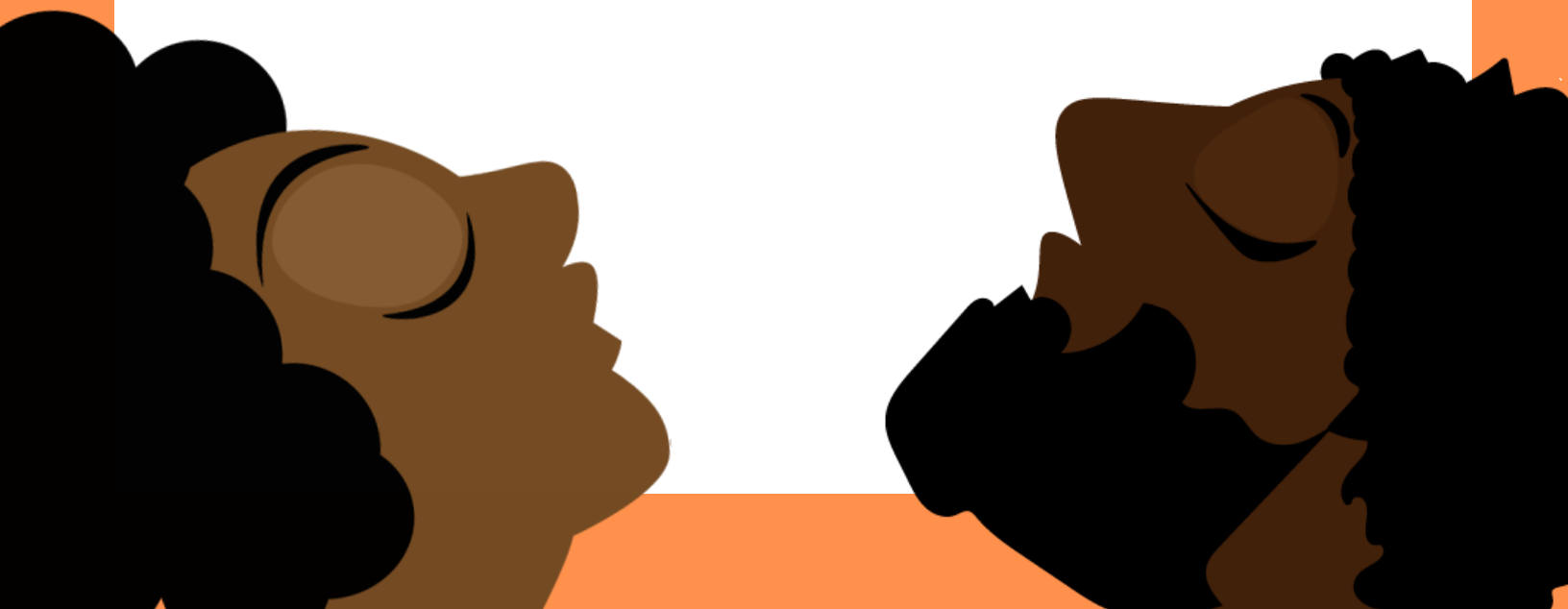
Parents expressed having a history of feeling excluded from the school districts' decision-making process before and during COVID. In the focus groups, parents began to tell how their thoughts and ideas are rarely considered, yet they are expected to adhere to the school system's rules, regulations, and expectations. The parents in the focus groups discussed stories about how before COVID, they would have to show up early in the school year to let teachers and administrators know that they cared about their children and how they would advocate for their children. Some expressed that if they did not go to the schools, their child would experience exclusion and mistreatment. Some noted that exclusion is most apparent in the lack of racial diversity in the teacher workforce, specifically Black male teachers.

**"...maybe not so much this year but before, it's um, not enough teachers that look like us. And for the young men, it's not enough male teachers- whether they are, look like us or not."—Parent 9**

Parents in the focus groups noted the curriculum used in schools omitted Blackness in the learning environment. They reiterated that during Black history month, their children learned about Blackness in restricted and simple Black history facts. A parent proceeded to explain how this lack of Blackness plays out in schools:

**And we don't have a lot of true content for what we go through as a group of people. And our history isn't accurately reflected and our um, struggles aren't taken into consideration.—Parent 9**

The parents in the focus groups expressed an eagerness and interest in working with school districts and teachers to improve learning environments for their children. However, they did not see how the school districts created these opportunities before and during COVID.



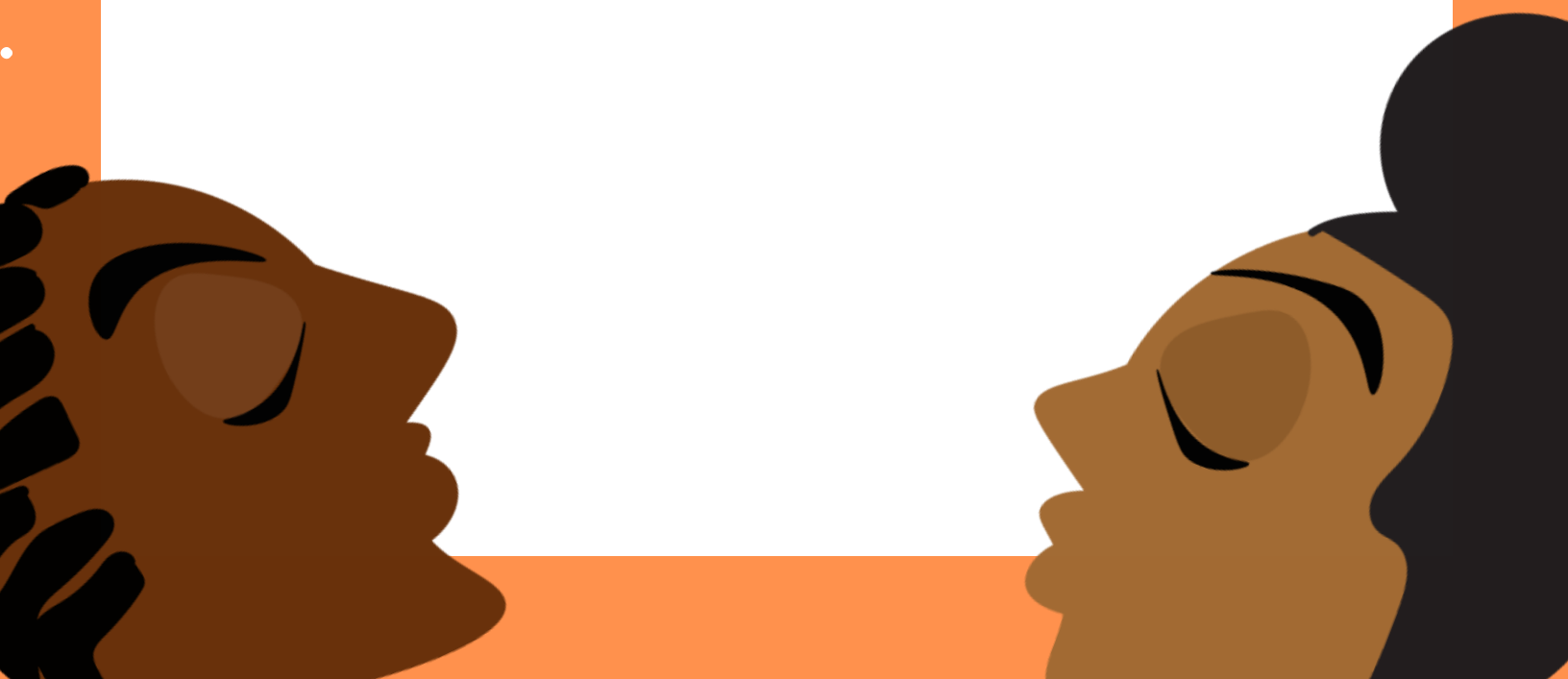
# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS

The students in the focus groups seemed to describe some of their experiences depending on the type of school they attended and the population of students. These different perspectives were primarily due to attending schools that had different racial compositions, either predominantly Black or predominantly white. For example, those students who went to predominantly Black schools stated they did feel more affirmed in their learning environments versus those who went to predominantly white schools. Those students in the focus groups who went to predominantly white schools expressed unfair treatment and felt like teachers did not respect them. Some of the students offered examples of how they were overlooked in class when they raised their hand and overlooked when they wanted to contribute to class discussion:

**"I want them to make like, to respect us like...like how people, how some white people is um, I just want them to like interact with us; you know talk with us more like they do white."—Student 3**

**"I feel like they should treat everyone the same way that they treat everyone else; that everybody should be treated in the same way, judged the same way, or even help the same way."—Student 7**

The students in the focus groups discussed feeling like their Blackness was excluded from the curriculum and mentioned how they wanted to see Blackness and Black history in what they learn "not just during Black History Month." One participant (Student 6) discussed a deep need to "learn more about our culture and want[s] to hear about the positive things that our people have accomplished. We are always portrayed negatively." The analysis revealed a similar sentiment between students, both those attending predominantly Black and predominantly white schools, and parents' responses. All groups indicated an absence of Blackness in the learning environment.





# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS

The teachers in the focus groups indicated observing the mistreatment of Black students and families by school districts. Many expressed that a system of racism operates inside of schools and its negative impact on Black students. Teachers were aware that this system of racism operated before and during the pandemic. Many expressed witnessing different racist acts and observing how policies in school exclude Black students. They were able to identify that the perceptions many people held about Black students are often inaccurate and how individuals use a deficit mindset to evaluate students' behavior. Teachers commented on observing these systems of racism manifest in how Black children are diagnosed with different learning needs, a lack of responsiveness to students' individual education plans (IEPs), and increased referrals for discipline. One teacher discussed how this deficit mindset could limit schools from identifying strengths in Black students:

**"...been looking at the data, and black students are way disproportionately identified as having a learning disability than their white peers. And like that doesn't make sense. So just in looking at like the students on my caseload and trying to like, with that understanding in mind or with that knowledge, really trying to dig down into ok...And what, you know because I can't take away their IEP unless they don't need it anymore- which in some cases we find that students have closed the gaps and that's great-but like trying to dig, drill down into what is really going on with the student, what are their needs but then what are their strengths and how can we like build on those more instead of coming at the student from a deficit model. Deficit mindset I guess."—**

**Teacher 6**

Some of the teachers in the focus groups discussed how the school districts and school leaders do not provide support for teachers who report incidences of racism and discrimination. It appeared as if the teachers could not identify any clear policies or procedures that prevented any retaliation or recourse from other teachers and administrators. Some of the teachers in the focus groups discussed how the school districts and school leaders do not provide support for teachers who report incidences of racism and discrimination. It appeared as if the teachers could not identify any clear policies or procedures that prevented any retaliation or recourse from other teachers and administrators. Many of the teachers expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding their ability to help and protect Black students when they see them mistreated due to the fear of losing their job.

Another teacher in a focus group described a specific situation they observed in school regarding a referral for punishment:

**"...we have a high population of Black and Brown students, and I've seen discrepancies in discipline. An example that I will highlight that I kinda' had to intervene for...And so basically, the teacher in question said that the student was aggressive and was fighting another student and was yelling and belligerent. We pulled the camera, and if you're um if you're familiar with like how black men will kinda' dap each other up or give each other you know a bear hug- like 'what's up? How ya doin?' That was really the extent of it. He hugged his friend, did a little rock, and then went into the classroom and sat down. No different from you know other students saying 'hey, what's up?'...And if there wasn't anybody checking behind and intervening, that child could've been in a situation to where he's turned off from school."—Teacher 2**

Some teachers commented on a lack of intent by school districts to align policies and practices with an equity lens while some discussed how teachers should also be responsible for personal development and competence around diverse learners, cultural experiences, and identities. One teacher (Teacher 1) commented on the importance of professional development plans, "I'd almost put...personal development plan- a PDP- that way you have to own it. You have to own it." The teachers in the focus groups recognized the need for professional development and the need for school districts to support how teachers increased their cultural competence and responsiveness in schools. Some of the teachers expressed that there needs to be a system of accountability that ties professional development to teacher evaluations.

# DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS

The findings from the dreams assessment reveal that parents, students and teachers still dream. Though teachers may have experienced a sense of powerlessness, and Black students and parents felt excluded and marginalized, there remained evidence of these groups holding onto dreams for Black students. When asked to discuss their dreams and aspirations for Black students, participants expressed a desire for Black students to realize and actualize their brilliance, unique gifts, and talents and a need for Black students to see their Blackness represented in schools positively and in affirming ways. All participants expressed how dreams and aspirations are essential for Black students during COVID and into the future. While parents more easily articulated dreams for their children, both parents' and teachers' responses expressed words like "full potential" and "pride," and "anything is possible". The parents in the focus groups were quite concerned that their children would internalize racism and how its internalization would hinder their children from aiming toward doing and being their best selves. The parents in the focus groups expressed wanting their children, explicitly saying "[my] son," to live up to their full potential.

**"I want my son to be able to figure out his full potential and know his soul strength and know what he can do and see himself like I do"—Parent 1**

Another parent mentioned:

**..I want my son to be successful as well and to be able to um, recognize that just because he is [black], that he has the same opportunities as everybody else. And don't let that be a hindrance to what you wanna do. So even though you may do stuff differently and may learn at a different pace, that doesn't mean that's who you are; that's just another stepping stone you just got to get over, and there's gonna be plenty more. But I want him to understand that you know you can do anything you wanna do..."—Parent 9**

The Black students' responses in the focus groups tied their dreams and aspirations to taking care of their mothers, their friends, and those in need (e.g., those experiencing homelessness) by accumulating wealth or "getting money".

**"If I could get anything it would be money. And what I would do with the money, I would um, give to the homeless and help people who need help. And I would get me stuff and I'd give money to like some people who you know need help and stuff."—Student 1**



Black students, similar to the parents in the focus groups, expressed the dream of learning in classrooms that embraced Black brilliance, pride, and their full potential. Collectively, the theme of seeing Blackness amplified, valued, and represented emerged across all focus groups. Some of the teachers also talked about the importance of Black students knowing they are valued. One teacher (Teacher 5) commented how she wanted "her Black students to know that they are valued and welcome no matter where they are but exactly as they are." All groups expressed the need to hold such dreams for Black students but the teachers in the focus groups were more likely to express dreams that had a specific focus on how to change policies and practices in schools. The teachers commented:

**...I would need administrative support to really come down on um, come down sounds too strong of a word, to really support the trainings around things like anti-racism and going beyond just like the culture of your classroom and the culture of your building...Um, you know we need higher-up individuals- whether it's superintendents of the state or the districts- to encourage principals to allow their staff members to engage with learning from where they're at. So if they want to engage in anti-racism training, that should be acceptable, and that should be ok, and that should be funded. That should not be something that is coming out of the pocket or cost of the teacher to fund those things.—Teacher 3**

**They need to see teachers, professionals that look like them. And I don't care if they're not in the school but if the teachers are another race, then bring in professionals; take them to see black people that look like them. Because they're not gonna' realize you can say all you want that you can have your dreams and aspirations for them but if I don't see anything that looks like me I'm not gonna jump at it because I'm thinking it's still for somebody else.—  
Teacher 7**

# OUR TAKEAWAYS

The findings in this study provide the dreams amid COVID and beyond held by Black students, their parents, and teachers of Black students and the challenges they encounter in schools. The findings suggest that Black students, their parents, and teachers aspire to dream, and these dreams center on seeing Blackness valued and affirmed in schools and at home. Seeing Blackness valued and affirmed in schools can begin with school districts creating pathways to hire and retain Black educators, especially Black male teachers. Moreover, all teachers need professional development plans that center on culturally affirming learning strategies. Such learning will require an interrogation of racism and anti-Blackness. Districts, school leaders and teachers will need to commit themselves to understanding how these systems shape beliefs and education practices. Districts should be willing to evaluate teachers and school leaders through an equity lens, one evidenced by the well-being of their teachers and staff and the extent to which the school's culture and practices affirm Black learners. Village of Wisdom is willing to partner with schools and districts to administer assessments that support these efforts, and one such tool is the [Culturally Affirming Climate Survey \(CACs\)](#).

Valuing and affirming Blackness in schools will require school leaders to display a moral fortitude that demands they see Black students, their families, and communities as collaborators and partners in decision-making. The parents in this study indicated that parents did not see the school districts reach out to them for their input nor exemplify a model that consults Black parents and families on decisions. The perspectives provided by parents in this study corroborated previous studies that suggest Black parents overwhelmingly experience hostility and invalidation from schools, which often leads to less favorable perceptions of schools (9-12). Involving Black students and families in decision-making in the design of curriculum and instruction and as collaborative partners will disrupt imbalanced power structures. School districts and schools should practice a more democratic and inclusive decision-making model. School districts can facilitate town hall meetings with students, teachers, and parents and facilitate these sessions in the communities they serve. Opening communication pathways to solicit ideas and input around curricula adoption, standards, and policies from parents and students, and communicating the implementation of these ideas back to these stakeholders are essential practices that build strong school-family relationships. Mutually collaborative relationships between schools, parents, and students can begin to repair the damage of excluding families from decisions that directly impact them.

Valuing Blackness will require a will to change schools from a place where Black children survive to a place where Black children are thriving (26). There was evidence in the focus groups that traditional U.S. school environments presented some challenges and threats to the dreams and aspirations of the participants. Many of the challenges and threats identified during COVID existed before COVID in the schools. Schools systematically exclude Black students from education opportunities, including the curriculum, instructional resources, and support (9-15). The cultural realities, expressions, and genius of Black students remain undervalued, minimized, and diminished in U.S. schools (13,16-17). Valuing and affirming Blackness in schools will require schools to change policies and implement restorative practices that acknowledge the harm caused to Black students and their families.

The teachers in this study confirmed how they bore witness to overt and covert racist acts

against Black students and how they felt a sense of powerlessness to protect students due to fear of reprisal or retaliation. Brooks and colleagues (19) noted in a previous study that teachers' sense of powerlessness often happens in schools when school leaders and administrators make decisions without input from teachers. The authors further suggest that teachers often struggle with the belief that all children can learn while teaching in a sociopolitical context that states otherwise.

The teachers in the focus groups did have dreams and aspirations for their Black students, but their responses suggest they did not feel they could always translate these dreams into action. The teachers' observations also provided examples of how the abuse of power often shows up through the systemic racism present in schools. The teachers expressed how racial discrimination and harm occurs between teachers and Black students, between Black students and their peers. They discussed discretionary policies that included Black students being referred for unfairly harsh or completely unjustified punishment under the guise of discipline as well as questionable and discriminatory ability grouping and service recommendations. The teachers were able to articulate symbolic and cultural erasure through curriculum and the lack of Blackness in schools. Similar to Black families, teachers are an important partner in the decision-making process in schools. If teachers are committed to honoring and valuing Black communities, they too become essential collaborators in the decision-making process in schools and in their classrooms.

Dreams can fester like a sore when Black students exist in learning environments that do not protect them and when they are enrolled in schools that do minimal to protect those who speak up and advocate on their behalf. There needs to be a policy and a protocol for racist and abusive behaviors committed against students and staff. The policy should state zero tolerance for any form of emotional, psychological, and physical harm against Black students and teachers. At the same time, a protocol will put actions around how to hold those accountable for violations. Protocols and policies should protect those who report such incidences from retaliation. The teachers in the focus groups discussed the lack of responsiveness by their schools to hold who caused harm to Black students accountable. They provided examples of teachers who told stories about Black students not on a premise of truth but on inaccurate perceptions of their behavior, inaccurate perceptions that resulted in a student being punished. These false perceptions by teachers can often result in harsh punishment, and a school police officer called on a student (13).

The dreams and aspirations of Black students and their parents can crust over if learning environments do not allow Black students to connect learning to solutions that will enable them to protect their families and communities. The students in this study discussed their dreams as involving wealth accumulation, and this accumulation of wealth is closely associated with their success in education. Their success in education depends on how learning experiences nurture their interests and how learning nurtures their racial identities positively (20). The parents in the focus groups shared messages they give to their children; these messages document the ways parents use positive racial socialization to build strong racial identities in Black children (21-23). Like teachers, the parents expressed a high degree of concern for their Black children in schools and with racism, especially the racism their sons will experience in the world.

# LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations in the conclusions made in this report. First, the parents and some of the students appreciated the at-home learning environment. We acknowledge that families who have less access to resources may experience more family disruption, housing insecurities, and may have perspectives that contradict these findings. Understanding the experiences of Black families from different socioeconomic backgrounds, experiences, and geographic areas could enhance the robustness of our findings. Second, the parents in the focus groups were women and mothers and often expressed responses that centered on the experiences of their Black sons. While the mothers may have had Black daughters, they overwhelmingly mentioned their sons. Perhaps, this signaled concerns about their sons' educational experiences that they did not have for their daughters or that somehow their sons' learning experiences were uniquely different from their daughters. Black parents socialize their Black children to navigate the world in very different ways. Previous research has shown that Black sons are more likely to receive messages specific to racism and the barriers they will face as budding Black men, rather than cultural pride messages which emphasize strengths, pride in being Black (20,21,23).

In this report, the Black and white terminology used to describe participants may not align with how participants defined themselves. When the participants were asked to indicate how they self-identify, many used other terms associated with the concept of nationality and ethnicity. We used the terms Black and white to illustrate the stark inequities between socially constructed definitions of race and illustrate how the capitalization of the term Black is associated with empowerment and the inclusiveness of many people of African descent. It is important to note that the teachers in the focus groups appeared to be older and appeared to have spent more time in the teaching workforce. Future studies should include teachers with less teaching experience. Broadening the sample to such teachers would be important given that many Black children in public schools have less experienced teachers. Lastly, this report honored the methodologies of lived experience and those co-constructed by participants who are in proximity to the phenomena of interest. The findings do not make any generalizations or draw any conclusions about groups not represented in the data.



# TURN DREAMS INTO ACTION

When COVID hit the nation, it blurred the boundaries between at-home and school-based learning environments. The blurring of these boundaries provided teachers with a glimpse into the home life of their students while providing parents with insight into teaching and instruction. And, particularly for participants in this study, the blurring of these lines in the online environment created a common disrupter to their dreams—school policies and practices that did not include their input, their wisdom nor understand their needs. Quite broadly, the responses from participants in this study were saying the same thing and named the challenges school districts create for Black students, their families, and the teachers who serve them. This study began with VOW's commitment to protect the intellectual curiosity and positive racial identity (Black Genius) of Black learners and VOW continued this commitment through a study that focused on how communities still dream for Black children. We relied on the wisdom of Black Parent Researchers to listen deeply, to interpret, and then make recommendations from the voices of Black students, parents, and teachers of Black students. We challenge us all to explore what dreams should be and what they can become when we create a path for dreams to explode into action.

**What happens when dreams are no longer deferred?**

**Do they spring like the blossoms,  
And reach for the sun?**

**Or do they shine,  
brighter than anyone?**

**Do they ignite gifts, talents?  
Or inspire the gallant?**

**Do dreams urge children to soar,  
move crowds to roar?**

**Maybe they let the lie of “you can’t” erode,  
And they explode?**

**Dawn X. Henderson, Director of Research  
Village of Wisdom, 2021**

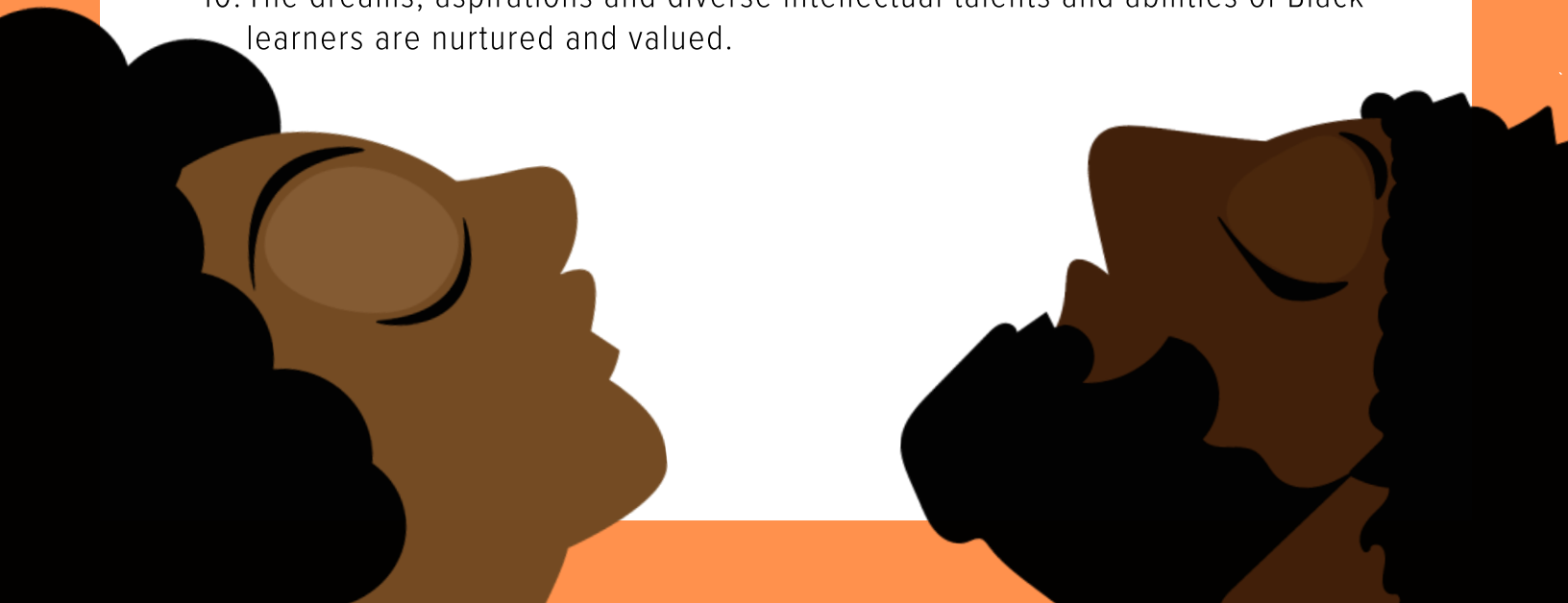




# DREAMANDMENTS

The Dreamandments are conditions required to be in place to receive Black learners. They were developed from the findings of this report and guided by the expertise, wisdom of the Black Parent Researchers.

1. Black students and their families collaboratively inform and co-create strategic goals, action plans with schools to meet their learning needs (e.g., hiring decisions, reopening plans, curricula, etc.).
2. Black students lead and guide teachers and schools on culturally affirming practices to ensure their autonomy, cultural expressions and realities are affirmed.
3. Teachers reflect and share the racial and cultural experiences of our Black students.
4. Schools create spaces, opportunities, and provide resources to support the hiring and retention of Black teachers.
5. Schools create spaces, opportunities, and provide resources that allow Black students to thrive in learning environments.
6. Teachers use the Black Genius Framework to establish trust with Black learners, to nurture their interests and their pursuit of social justice in the learning environment.
7. Incorporate Blackness, Black learning traditions (e.g., tactile, kinesthetic, communal/familial) into the learning environment.
8. Black sources of information such as literary materials, art, and other mediums reflect “Ourhistory” and is a priority in schools.
9. Instruction in the learning environment is personalized and not constrained by local or state curriculum standards.
10. The dreams, aspirations and diverse intellectual talents and abilities of Black learners are nurtured and valued.



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# APPENDIX A

Table I. Parents

	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Parent 1	Black	Woman	38
Parent 2	Black	Woman	50
Parent 3	Black	Woman	31
Parent 4	Black/African	Woman	38
Parent 5	Black	Woman	n/a
Parent 6	Multicultural	Woman	35
Parent 7	Black	Woman	45
Parent 8	Native American, Black, Other	Woman	34
Parent 9	Black	Woman	39

# APPENDIX B

Table II. Students

	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Student 1	Black	Male	11
Student 2	Black	Male	15
Student 3	Black	Male	12
Student 4	Black	Female	12
Student 5	Black	Male	11
Student 6	Black	Male	12
Student 7	Black	Male	12
Student 8	Black	Male	n/a
Student 9	Black	Male	n/a

# APPENDIX C

Table III. Teachers

	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Teacher 1	Black, Dutch, British, African	Woman	62
Teacher 2	Black	Woman	n/a
Teacher 3	White	Man	45
Teacher 4	Black	Woman	37
Teacher 5	n/a	Woman	n/a
Teacher 6	White	Woman	31
Teacher 7	n/a	Woman	62
Teacher 8	White, Irish	Man	46