Afro-Textured Hair and the Policing of Black Girlhood: Race, Gender, and Resistance in a Desegregated School in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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DECLARATION

I, Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu, declare that:

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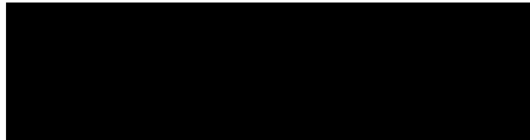

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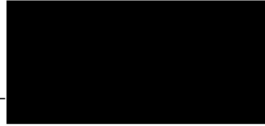

Supervisor: Professor Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi

ABSTRACT

The study presented in this dissertation examined how Black African schoolgirls experience, understand, and resist the policing of Afro-textured hair in a racially desegregated secondary school — Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School (a pseudonym) — in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Despite the legal and political shift toward educational inclusion post-1994, the study reveals that discriminatory school practices rooted in colonial and apartheid ideologies persist. Focusing on 16 purposively selected Black girls who wear their hair in styles such as Afros, braids, dreadlocks, and fade haircuts, the study explored how school-based regulation of hair becomes a mechanism for racialised, gendered, and cultural exclusion. Using African Feminist and Black Feminist theoretical frameworks and employing participatory drawings alongside focus group discussions (FGDs), the research foregrounds the girls' voices and lived experiences.

The findings unveil the covert yet pervasive ways in which hair-based discrimination manifests in desegregated schools. Verbal, undocumented rules disproportionately target Black girls, with teachers, often non-Black, employing language and punitive actions to deem natural African hairstyles as "untidy," "unacceptable," or "ugly." These practices contribute to the policing of Black girlhood, the erasure of cultural and religious identities, and the reinforcement of Eurocentric aesthetic norms. Participants also described how such scrutiny resulted in psychological harm, diminished self-worth, and, at times, exclusion from school spaces.

However, the study also reveals powerful forms of resistance. The girls challenged the informal policies through visual storytelling, group solidarity, and affirmations of cultural pride. Their refusal to conform to oppressive beauty standards signals a broader demand for transformation. The study proposes a conceptual framework that maps the intersection of institutional power, cultural identity, resistance, and policy opacity, offering a lens for addressing racialised aesthetic control in South African schools. The dissertation concludes with urgent recommendations for inclusive policy reform, teacher sensitisation, and learner protection aligned with the South African Constitution and the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996).

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late father and to my surviving mother. You both shared a vision: to see me educated and empowered through knowledge. Today, I am proud to have honoured your dreams and lived up to the expectations you held for me. I have kept the promise I made to you, and I carry your hopes with deep gratitude.

To my nieces, Lindokuhle and Andile Bhengu — this work is also for you. May it serve as a reminder that there are no limits to self-development and no endings to growth. May you always dare to spread your wings as far as you can reach.

To all the participants who generously contributed to this study—thank you. Your voices shaped this work, and without you, it would not have been possible. I remain deeply grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE

BLACK GIRLS AND THE POLICING OF AFRO-TEXTURED HAIR IN RACIALLY DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

> I grew up in a world where a woman who looks like me, with my kind of (Black) skin and my kind of (Afro-textured) hair, was never considered to be beautiful. And I think that it is time that it stops today. (Zozibini Tunzi, 19 December 2019; Miss Universe top 3 closing statement).

The study reported in this dissertation examined the policing of Afro-textured hair among Black African girls (hereafter referred to as Black [1] girls) attending a racially desegregated secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Within the context of this research, Afro-textured hair refers to hair characterised by a tightly coiled or kinky curl pattern, commonly associated with individuals of African descent (Porter et al., 2005; Khumalo et al., 2000). Afro-textured hair encompasses a broad spectrum of textures and styles, reflecting not only its natural biological diversity but also its profound cultural, historical, and political significance. Common Afro-textured hairstyles include the classic Afro, twist-outs, dreadlocks, and a variety of protective and expressive styles such as cornrows, box braids, and Bantu knots (Fabusiwa et al., 2024; Oladele et al., 2024). These styles are not merely aesthetic choices; they function as powerful symbols of identity, heritage, and resistance, particularly in environments where Eurocentric grooming standards continue to dominate.

[1] Racial categorisation in South Africa is deeply rooted in apartheid-era laws, notably the Population Registration Act of 1950, which classified citizens into rigid racial groups: Black, White, Coloured, and Indian. This classification system was used to enforce segregation and allocate socio-economic privileges predominantly to the White minority. Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid in 1994, these racial categories have been retained in post-apartheid South Africa, primarily for redress and equity policies aimed at addressing historical injustices through mechanisms like Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) and affirmative action. However, the continued use of apartheid-era racial categories remains a contentious issue, with critics arguing that it perpetuates racial divisions. At the same time, proponents assert its necessity for socio-economic redress and transformation.

The policing of Afro-textured hair among Black girls and women in South Africa is deeply embedded in colonial and apartheid histories that systematically denied Black women the right to self-representation, self-definition, and self-expression (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023; Roux & Oyedemi, 2021). These histories continue to haunt the present, reflected in the cultural fabric of post-apartheid South Africa, where Eurocentric ideals of beauty and the legacy of white supremacy remain firmly entrenched (Oyedemi, 2016; Moodley & Mthembu, 2020). The scrutiny and regulation of Afro-textured hair within schools, workplaces, and public institutions cannot be separated from broader systems of racial and gendered control that seek to render Black femininity as deviant, unruly, or non-normative.

Importantly, these practices are not unique to South Africa. Across the globe, particularly in the United States, Black women's hair and bodies continue to be sites of surveillance, judgment, and cultural anxiety (Morrison, 2018). As Rowe (2021) observes, hair becomes a proxy for deeper societal discomforts around Black embodiment, autonomy, and visibility. At the 89th Georgia Communication Association Conference, LaVette Burnette (2019, p. 45) captured this dynamic when she asked, "Can a simple hairstyle represent the complexity of the relationship of self-expression, self-definition, and political ideals?" Her response was unequivocal: yes. Burnette argues that Black women and girls use their hair not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a form of creative resistance and cultural affirmation. Hairstyles become conduits through which Blackness, self-worth, and identity are communicated in defiance of hegemonic white beauty standards. As she notes,

> For many Black women, hair is more than 'just hair'; her hairstyle represents cultural signifiers, political statements, self-esteem, and symbols of strength (Burnette, 2019, p. 43).

This intersection of hair, identity, and political visibility was powerfully affirmed by Zozibini Tunzi, the then-Miss South Africa. In her closing statement at the 2019 Miss Universe competition, Tunzi delivered a deeply political affirmation that highlighted how dominant cultural discourses continue to define beauty through a white supremacist lens, while simultaneously marginalising Black women's hair, skin, and bodies. Tunzi's words spoke to the persistent struggle of Black women

and girls to assert their significance and visibility in a world that routinely renders them invisible. Her statement, delivered on a global stage, echoed a long tradition of Black South African women who have drawn critical attention to how Black hair becomes a site of struggle, both symbolic and material, for dignity, acceptance, and self-recognition.

Indeed, the marginalisation of Afro-textured hair cannot be reduced to mere questions of style or policy. It reflects enduring ideologies of race, power, and femininity that shape how Black girls and women are perceived and treated across educational, social, and public domains (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2018). It is within this context that this study situates the experiences of Black girls whose hair continues to be regulated in the very schools meant to serve as spaces of inclusion and transformation in democratic South Africa.

The policing of Afro-textured hair among Black African girls in South Africa must be understood within the historical context of colonialism and apartheid, which systematically denied Black women and girls the right to self-representation, self-expression, and cultural autonomy (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023; Glapka & Majali, 2017). These oppressive legacies continue to shape contemporary institutional practices in subtle but enduring ways, particularly within schools. Hair remains a significant site of regulation, symbolic violence, and identity negotiation—especially for Black girls, whose bodies are often rendered suspect or unruly in educational spaces that uphold Eurocentric norms.

This was made starkly visible in August 2016, when Black girls at Pretoria High School for Girls staged a protest against the school's enforcement of grooming policies that implicitly required them to straighten their hair to appear 'neat' and 'disciplined' (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018; Ramji & Hodgson, 2016). Their protest captured national and international attention, sparking widespread public debate about the politics of Black hair in desegregated or racially mixed schools. At the heart of their resistance was a critique of how school codes of conduct were being misused to exclude natural Black hairstyles such as afros, Bantu knots, cornrows, and dreadlocks. Several girls reported being subjected to racial slurs, threats, and even the possibility of being barred from

writing exams unless they conformed to Eurocentric hair standards (Mahr, 2016). These incidents expose the enduring cultural logic that constructs Afro-textured hair as unacceptable within spaces structured by whiteness.

Such examples are not confined to the school environment. In 2020, a TRESemmé advertising campaign (featured in the Clicks retail stores) depicted the hair of Black women as ‘dry,’ ‘damaged,’ and ‘frizzy,’ in contrast to white women’s hair, which was labelled ‘normal,’ ‘fine,’ and ‘flat.’ This advertisement sparked national protests, led by political and civil society organisations, many of which called for the removal of TRESemmé products from South African shelves. As with the Pretoria school protest, the Clicks incident underscored the pervasive pathologisation of Black features in public discourse. Despite more than three decades of democracy, the ideological architecture of apartheid persists in defining beauty, acceptability, and respectability through a Eurocentric, white supremacist lens.

As Smith (2018) asserts, although hair may seem trivial to some, it holds profound symbolic weight. Hair, she argues, “is public (available for all to see), personal (biologically connected to the body), and flexible, as it can be altered or maintained to suit personal and cultural preferences” (p. 50). In the context of race, gender, and sexuality, hair becomes a politicised medium through which power, identity, and visibility are negotiated. In this regard, hair is not merely cosmetic; it is deeply political.

This politicisation was powerfully affirmed by Zozibini Tunzi, who went on to make history in 2019 by winning the Miss Universe competition. Tunzi deliberately wore her natural Afro-textured hair throughout the competition, using it as a symbol of Afro-feminism and Black feminist consciousness. In her closing statement, quoted in the opening of this chapter, she challenged prevailing standards of beauty and affirmed the legitimacy and power of Black womanhood, an act that resonated with many Black girls and women across the globe. Her win exemplified the possibility of reclaiming visibility and dignity in a world where Black bodies are routinely marginalised.

These three examples (i.e., the Pretoria High School protest, the TRESemmé/Clicks advertisement, and Tunzi's historic Miss Universe win) form part of the foundation of this study for several reasons. First, they all drew significant public attention to the political and cultural regulation of Black hair, making Afro-textured hair a site of socio-political debate. Second, they demonstrate that despite constitutional protections against racial and gender discrimination, Black features continue to be rendered as deviant or inferior. Third, the Pretoria High School case in particular illustrates how schools serve as key institutions for disciplining and regulating Black girls' bodies. Finally, these incidents reveal how race and gender intersect in South Africa in ways that demand sustained scholarly engagement. As Miller (2022, p. 1) powerfully states:

> When we focus our attention on Black girls, we see that educational settings serve as the venue for such policing against them, especially regarding their hair.

The Pretoria incident affirms Miller's argument and highlights how Black girlhood is denied the freedom and legitimacy afforded to others. In such environments, Black girls' experiences are frequently delegitimised, their voices unheard, and their perspectives marginalised. Yet, as Miller reminds us, if there is power in storytelling, then the narratives of Black girls must be foregrounded in both scholarly and public discourse.

This dissertation responds to that imperative by exploring how Black girls with Afro-textured hair experience, interpret, and resist hair policing in a racially desegregated school in KZN, South Africa. By centring their voices and experiences, the study interrogates how school cultures, despite their transformation agendas, continue to reproduce racialised and gendered hierarchies. As Teeger (2015, p. 226) observes, racially mixed schools are often idealised as "places where young people can learn to challenge racist discourses and practices." Yet, as recent scholarship and student protests reveal (Pattman & Bhana, 2021; Hunter, 2019), these institutions remain deeply implicated in the reproduction of white normativity and the gendered subordination of Black girls. The regulation of Afro-textured hair thus emerges not as a peripheral issue, but as

a crucial entry point for understanding the broader institutional dynamics that shape exclusion, resistance, and identity in post-apartheid schooling.

1.2. Rationale for the Study

Across the globe, discussions about the policing of Black bodies gained renewed momentum in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of police in the United States — an act of racially motivated violence that became emblematic of anti-Black brutality (Smyton, 2020). While global public discourse has largely focused on state-sanctioned violence against Black men, far less attention has been directed toward the institutional and symbolic policing of Black women's bodies. Even more marginalised are the experiences of Black girls, particularly in relation to how their bodies, and especially their hair, are regulated in schools and other public institutions.

This omission is especially troubling given that no other element of Black girls' corporeality is more visibly contested than their Afro-textured hair. Research conducted in urban contexts such as the United States shows that educational institutions are key sites for the surveillance, control, and disciplining of Black girls' hair, often under the guise of enforcing grooming policies (Essien & Wood, 2020; O'Brien-Richardson, 2019). Miller (2021), for example, documents how the policing of Black girls' hair results in mental distress, verbal and non-verbal forms of assault, spiritual wounding, and profound confusion about self-definition and belonging.

Other research (see, for example, Henning et al., 2022) points to the scholarly neglect of the psychological and body image dimensions of Black girls' experiences with hair-based discrimination. This gap underlines the urgent need for research that foregrounds how hair becomes a racialised and gendered site of surveillance, exclusion, and resistance. Despite limited academic attention to this issue within African contexts, and in South Africa in particular, media reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that the policing of Afro-textured hair remains a widespread phenomenon, especially in racially mixed schools.

This study, however, was not motivated by scholarship alone. It is also deeply personal. As a teacher working in a racially diverse, formerly Whites-only school, I have personally experienced hair-based microaggressions and forms of symbolic violence from colleagues. My professional journey has been punctuated by invasive questions and unsolicited comments about how I style my hair. Over the years, I have been asked, "Why did you cut your hair short?" or "Why would you choose an Afro over a Brazilian or Indian weave?" In one especially troubling instance, an Indian colleague remarked that I looked "more professional" with a straight weave than with my natural hair.

These incidents are not isolated. Okoli (2020), for example, recounts how a White student at Warwick University told her she looked more ‘professional’ when wearing a wig rather than her natural Afro-textured hair. These interactions reveal a deep-seated cultural bias, one that equates professionalism, respectability, and acceptability with Eurocentric beauty standards. They have prompted me to question not only my identity as a Black woman but also how society constructs and regulates that identity based on hair.

While I was conceptualising this study, yet another public incident affirmed its necessity. A video circulated on social media showing two White school officials at Crowthorne Christian Academy in Midrand physically confronting a Black parent and her daughter, who had been threatened with expulsion for wearing dreadlocks styled in a ponytail — a supposed violation of school policy. The footage of a White male teacher physically pushing the mother and daughter out of the principal’s office was both distressing and revealing. It exposed the raw, racialised power dynamics that continue to structure South African school spaces, particularly those that remain steeped in the traditions of apartheid-era institutions.

Such moments, combined with my personal experiences and what I observed in the schools I have taught in, where learners have been sent home for wearing African braids, Afros, cornrows, fade cuts, or natural hair left un-styled, solidified my motivation to conduct this study. I came to recognise that the Black girl learner who is disciplined for her natural hair is not merely being regulated for ‘neatness’ or ‘uniformity’ but is instead subjected to a deeper form of racialised and gendered

control. Her hair becomes a site where ideologies of whiteness, femininity, and power are inscribed, challenged, and resisted.

These experiences exist in sharp contradiction to South Africa's legal and policy frameworks, which enshrine protection against all forms of discrimination. The Bill of Rights, as part of the South African Constitution (1996), guarantees the right to dignity, equality, and freedom of expression. The South African Schools Act (1996) similarly mandates that all learners must be admitted to schools without discrimination based on race, gender, or other identity markers. In response to the 2016 Pretoria High School for Girls incident, the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) reminded schools of their legal and moral responsibility to avoid psychological harm to learners and to foster inclusive learning environments (Business Tech, 2016).

Yet, despite these progressive legal instruments, the everyday realities in many racially diverse schools suggest otherwise. Racial prejudice, particularly in relation to hair, continues to be a silent but persistent feature of school culture, reproducing the exclusions and hierarchies that once institutionalised. Within this context, the experiences of Black girls with Afro-textured hair remain largely undocumented, under-theorised, and insufficiently addressed in educational research and policy.

This dissertation, therefore, occupies a critical space that transcends academic inquiry; it is also a personal and political intervention. By centring the perspectives and voices of Black schoolgirls, this study seeks to contribute to transformative educational discourse that challenges entrenched systems of exclusion. In doing so, it aims to foster schools that are not merely racially integrated in demographic terms, but truly inclusive in their engagement with Black identity, culture, and dignity.

The findings of this study offer important insights for policymakers, educators, and school leaders, particularly in relation to developing more equitable and culturally responsive educational environments. By foregrounding the lived realities of Black girls with Afro-textured hair, this research provides a foundation for reimagining school practices that affirm rather than marginalise. At its core,

this dissertation insists that Black girlhood, and the hair that often defines it, matters, and that schools must be held accountable for honouring that truth.

1.3. Preliminary Review of the Literature

This section offers a concise overview of the key literature informing the study. It first traces the historical roots of negative attitudes toward Afro-textured hair, from indigenous African societies to postcolonial periods, and examines how these legacies have shaped contemporary understandings. The discussion then shifts to the policing of Afro-textured hair in racially desegregated schools, highlighting the intersection of cultural, social, and institutional forces that inform this practice. A more detailed and critical engagement with the literature is presented in Chapter Two.

1.3.1. The Historical Context of Negative Attitudes Toward Afro-textured Hair

Attention to hair among Black Africans dates back to the precolonial period, when hair was used as a symbol for age, religious affiliation, social ranking, marital status, and other social stratifications (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Byrd & Tharps, 2014). During the period of colonisation of Africa, and especially during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era, hair became an important site in identity politics and the oppression of Black Africans, with Robinson (2011) commenting that the hair of African people was perceived by colonial and slave masters as 'slave hair'. This concept denotes a cultural identifier in which the hair of Black Africans, alongside their bodies, was used as a site for social control and forced submission (Robinson, 2011). To demonstrate, during slavery in the Americas, African hair was shaved off by slave traders whose primary aim was to remove Black individuals' identities and their connection to the African continent (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). According to Dash (2006), to avert further humiliation, Black African slaves began to tend their natural hair in a manner compatible with European and slave trader standards. For example, the so-called 'in-house maids' were pressured into wearing their hair in a manner that imitated that of their white female housemasters. This meant that Black women were coerced into straightening (relaxing) their natural Afros (Danhoo & Smith, 2019; Asare, 2023; Dash, 2006). Given the climatic variation

in different slave sites, some of the Black slaves who worked the fields were sometimes allowed to retain their natural hair to endure variant weather conditions (Richardson, 2019). The belief by slave traders was that African hair was 'strong enough' to endure climatic changes (Richardson, 2019). Colonialism and its embedded trans-Atlantic slave trade ushered in the idea that African hair, in its many variations, was 'bad hair' (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). In Brazil, for example, from slavery until modern times, perceived 'bad hair' is associated with African lineage (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). In the USA, African skin tone and hair texture have historically been used as an arena for deep-rooted racism and discrimination against people of African origin (Ellington, 2015). Thus, slavery offset a global trend that negatively influenced modern misunderstandings and misconceptions about African hair.

In the post-slavery period, and especially in American contexts, before the advent of broadcast media, the theatre became another arena for conjuring negative stereotypes regarding African hair. For example, theatre plays became significant platforms for cultural messages. Richardson (2019) affirms how theatre plays contributed towards the advancement of discrimination meted out against African hair by using white performers with unkempt, dirty and uncombed hair to represent Black Africans. These portrayals, thus, reinforced the idea that African hair was bad and unhealthy, conjuring such words as unattractive, kinky, rough, nappy, etc. to define such hair (Richardson, 2019; Marco, 2012). On the other hand, straight, clean and well-maintained hair continued to be a symbol of sophistication with a strong connection to white beauty standards and norms (Danhoo & Smith, 2019). An effect was Black women harbouring self-resentment and not identifying as beautiful (Robison, 2011). Thus, as Tate (2007) argues, throughout the post-slavery and early post-colonial periods, particularly in the USA and the Caribbean, hair yielded the power to shape identity, including race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the quality of life for Africans.

Recent South African history is also peppered with anecdotal evidence of discrimination towards the hair of Black Africans. For example, the infamous 'pencil test' was used during the apartheid period as a tool to classify individuals according to socially established racial categories (i.e., Black, White, Coloured, or

Indian) (Carrim, 2009). In the pencil test, a typical 'fall or stuck' strategy, a pencil was pushed through a person's hair to classify them into various social strata depending on the 'test' results. For instance, if the pencil did not fall off from the hair, that indicated kinky Black stock, and that particular person was regarded as Black. Those with so-called ambiguous hair were considered Coloured (or racially mixed) (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018; Seakamela, 2016). According to Seakamela (2016), these tests were largely imprecise to the point where members of an extended family were sometimes classified into different racial groups. Therefore, being classified as Black was regarded by the racist apartheid government as inferior to whiteness (Alubafi et al., 2018). As a result, as Alubafi and colleagues argue (2018, p. 4), Black South Africans "were rendered voiceless, even in terms of the imagery of their hair." Drawing from this historical period, Pattman & Bhana (2021) argue that the conceptualisation of hair in South Africa has historically been racist, involving "progressions of 'othering' through which certain categories of people were/are viewed as different" (p. 221). This legacy persists decades into democracy, where Afro-textured hair continues to be laden with negative connotations. Thus, as Hall (1980) has long noted in his theory of cultural identity, Black hair is undeniably linked to racial and political imageries, including in South Africa's racially diverse schools.

1.3.2. The Policing of Afro-Textured Hair in Racially Desegregated Schools

While there has been a recent wave of media coverage focusing on Black learners' experiences of school-level discrimination based on their hair, very little scholarship has been published on this subject. This is surprising given that narratives of Black people's hair as problematic continue to be part of social conversations in several societies (Parker, 2019). Across different contexts, the Afro-textured hair of Black learners, for example, continues to receive scrutiny from peers, teachers and administrators alike. For example, Essein & Wood (2021) employed the narratives of 44 parents of Black children to understand the experiences of primary school Black children in the USA. A key issue revealed through the parents' narratives demonstrated how Afro-textured hair was considered "a marker of second-class citizenship and as an indicator of defilement" (p. 401). Indeed, parents communicated levels of microaggressions in

the classroom that targeted children with Afro-textured hair. Perpetrators included both teachers and other non-Black students. The authors argue that while the discrimination of Afro-textured hair was endemic to the experiences of Black girls, notions of microaggressions were nonetheless compounded by hair worn in natural styles such as Afros, twists and ponytails.

In another study based in London, Joseph-Salisibury & Connelly (2018) centred on Afro-textured hair as a site of social control by focusing on the case of 12-year-old Chikayzea Flanders. On his first day at the Fulham Boys School, Flanders was placed in isolation because the school deemed his dreadlocked hair a breach of school uniform policy. According to the authors, placing students in isolation is a disciplinary measure typically used to place disruptive students away from others. Moreover, the authors argue that Afro-textured hair is used as a gateway for schools to enforce forms of routine discipline that maintain and perpetuate white supremacy. Thus, as they continue, regulating Afro-textured hair is not something neutral, but emerges as a form of social control that “valorises whiteness and pathologises Blackness” (p. 1).

Based on a study in which she explored hair-related experiences of 37 adolescent girls of African descent in the physical education class of a low-income urban school in the USA, and how such experiences shaped their decision to participate in the class, O’Brien-Richardson (2019) reports that themes of hair harassment emerged. Hair harassment occurred socially via peers through physical touching of hair and verbal negative comments regarding Black girls’ hair during physical education classes. Noteworthy is that victims of hair-related harassment reported avoiding participating in physical education classes to avoid humiliation. The author concluded that harassment and bullying policies in schools encompass hair harassment “for its propensity to influence the self-image of Black girls and their decision to participate in school activities” (p. 523). Finally, Roger et al. (2021) examined whether, when, and how 60 Black adolescent schoolgirls in the USA referenced hair when discussing their racial and gender identities. First, their findings show that an overwhelming majority of Black girls spontaneously mentioned hair in their interviews. Second, these girls' reference to hair highlighted the realities of the discrimination they encountered at the intersection

of race and gender. These findings underscore the critical need for schools to recognise hair-based discrimination as a significant factor influencing the well-being and participation of Black girls, necessitating more inclusive policies that address its impact within educational spaces.

In South Africa, even fewer studies exist that focus on the experiences of hair discrimination, particularly in and around schools. Exceptions include Oyedemi's (2016) quantitative study, which examined the attitudes of 159 young Black women university students toward their natural hair and their perception of 'beautiful hair'. The author found that many Black women's relationship with their hair was marred by violence. This violence was not only physical but also symbolic, manifesting through societal pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards and institutional policies that often marginalise natural Afro-textured hair. Surprisingly, most of the women in Oyedemi's study showed a preference for Asian and European textured hair and styles and cited such hair as attractive. Moreover, because of socially charged Western standards of beauty, very few of the women students wore their natural Afro-textured hair. Explaining these findings, Oyedemi argues that Black women's attitudes towards their Afro-textured hair are cultivated early in their upbringing through parents and caregivers who chemically relax their daughters' hair.

Finally, in Cape Town, Hamidou (2023) explored the experiences of 10 Black women who were educated in formerly all-white schools to understand the policing of their hair. According to the author, Black women understand their experiences of hair policing as a form of institutional racism. Moreover, the author reflects on how hair policing experiences in schools are steeped in historical and social contexts that continue to subordinate Black girls and women.

Taken together, these studies highlight the significance of Afro-textured hair as a contested site of identity, power, and resistance. As Rogers et al. (2021) contend, recognising and addressing hair-based discrimination is essential to fostering inclusive educational environments. The literature reviewed thus far illustrates that Afro-textured hair continues to be politicised, surveilled, and regulated within institutional settings, necessitating deeper scholarly attention, particularly in post-

apartheid South Africa, where constitutional ideals of equality often remain unmet in everyday school practice.

1.4. Statement of the Problem

Hair is a significant cultural and political marker in the lives of Black women and girls, often shaping how they are perceived and how they navigate the social world (Essien & Wood, 2021). Afro-textured hair, in particular, has long been constructed as a site of racialised and gendered regulation, surveillance, and resistance. In post-apartheid South Africa, despite constitutional commitments to equality and non-discrimination, Black girls continue to face subtle and overt forms of marginalisation based on their natural hair textures, especially within educational settings (Glapka & Majali, 2017; Majali, Coetzee & Rau, 2017).

Recent years have seen a rise in media coverage documenting incidents of hair-based discrimination in South African schools, particularly those that are racially diverse or historically White. These incidents reveal how Afro-textured hair remains stigmatised and policed under the guise of school codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, or aesthetic norms. Yet, despite growing public awareness, South African academic scholarship has been slow to interrogate the lived realities of Black schoolgirls in relation to the policing of their hair. The issue remains under-theorised and under-researched.

Some exceptions do exist. For example, Oyedemi's (2016) quantitative study with young Black women at a Western Cape university highlighted how internalised Eurocentric beauty standards affect how women relate to their hair, often leading to preferences for straightened or chemically relaxed styles. Pattman and Bhana (2021), meanwhile, explored how Black and Indian girls attending a formerly Indian-only school in Durban made sense of hair and beauty practices as markers of identity and belonging. Both studies are valuable in foregrounding the sociocultural meanings attached to Black women's hair. However, they stop short of critically exploring how school-based institutional practices actively police Afro-textured hair, particularly in relation to younger Black girls within desegregated school spaces.

What remains absent in the literature is a focused, qualitative account of how Black schoolgirls in racially mixed secondary schools experience, articulate, and contest the policing of their natural hair. Their voices, narratives, and strategies of resistance have not been systematically captured, despite ongoing national debates about race, identity, and decolonisation in education. This study seeks to address this gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of Black African schoolgirls whose hair, by virtue of its texture and cultural meaning, renders them hyper-visible and susceptible to institutional regulation. By doing so, the study contributes to emerging conversations on the intersectionality of race, gender, and bodily autonomy in post-apartheid South African schooling.

1.5. Research Aim and Key Research Questions

The study reported in this dissertation examined how a selected group of Black girls understand, experience, and speak about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in and around the desegregated (or racially mixed) secondary school that they attend in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Moreover, within this context, the study explored how these girls negotiate, challenge and resist the policing of their hair. To pursue this broad aim, the following research questions guided data production and analysis:

- How do Black African girls understand, experience, and communicate about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in a South African desegregated (racially mixed) secondary school?
- How do these girls negotiate, challenge, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in their school?

This first question probed the nuanced narratives Black schoolgirls construct around the regulation of their natural hair, examining how historical and cultural legacies inform their perceptions and verbal or non-verbal expressions of these experiences. The second question sought to uncover the strategies employed by the girls to contest and subvert dominant aesthetic norms. Through this question, I wanted to unearth the methods of negotiation, challenge, and resistance Black girls use to assert their cultural identity and reclaim agency in the face of

oppressive beauty standards. Together, these questions provided a critical framework for exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and cultural identity in the desegregated school the girls attended.

1.6. Overview of the Study Location

The location for this study is Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, a racially mixed, former Whites-only secondary school situated in the small coal-mining town of Dundee in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Dundee, with a population of just over 35,000, is nestled in the valley of the Biggarsberg Mountains and is historically significant as the original site of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. This legacy is preserved at the Talana Museum, Heritage Park, and the Battlefield site, which house extensive archival records of the historic conflict. Founded in 1835 during the Great Voortrekker movement into the KwaZulu-Natal interior, Dundee was historically considered a predominantly White-Afrikaner enclave during apartheid. However, the town's demographic landscape has transformed in the post-apartheid era, now reflecting a Black majority occupying its core areas. Dundee forms part of the Endumeni Local Municipality and the Umzinyathi District Municipality, both of which are marked by severe infrastructural neglect, widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and escalating crime and violence (Dundee Poverty Profile, 2023). Media reports have also spotlighted pervasive racial tensions in the area, with incidents of so-called 'farm murders[2]' heightening divisions and stirring unrest (Northern Natal News, 2020). These simmering racial hostilities, rooted in historical inequalities and modern socio-economic disparities, make Dundee a compelling site for examining race and gender dynamics within educational spaces. Despite Dundee's fraught racial history and ongoing tensions, limited scholarly attention has been given to understanding how these dynamics unfold in local schools. It is precisely this gap

[2] Farm murders in South Africa refer to violent attacks, including murders, on farms and smallholdings, typically involving farm owners, workers, and their families. These incidents have been highly politicised, with some groups framing them as targeted racial violence against White farmers. However, several studies and crime statistics analyses have demonstrated that while farm attacks are indeed violent, they occur within the broader context of South Africa's exceptionally high levels of violent crime. Research by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and findings from the South African Police Service (SAPS) indicate that farm murders are not disproportionately higher than general murder rates in the country, challenging claims of targeted genocide. Instead, farm violence reflects broader socio-economic inequalities, crime rates, and land-related tensions that permeate South African society.

that motivated the selection of Dundee as the study location. I hypothesised that the racial antagonisms reported in broader community contexts, often manifesting in violent farm-related conflicts, might extend into public institutions, particularly schools, affecting interactions, policies, and everyday experiences. A more detailed exploration of the study site and its socio-political landscape is provided in Chapter Four.

1.7. Overview of the Theoretical Framework

African Feminist Theory and Black Feminist Theory provided the guiding frameworks for this study. Both approaches critically address the historical and contemporary inequalities that Black women experience, particularly in public domains such as education. African Feminism, as articulated by Tamale (2006), foregrounds the complex interplay of gender and racial identities inherent to African women, thereby exposing the enduring effects of colonial legacies. McFadden (2007) further delineates the contrasts between historically colonised African women and Western women, who are often seen as complicit in colonial structures. Within this study, African Feminism offered a robust lens for analysing how Black African girls in a desegregated secondary school understand, experience and negotiate the regulation of their Afro-textured hair. In parallel, Black Feminist Theory, championed by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), and drawing on the insights of Crenshaw (1995) and Hooks (1984), emphasises intersectionality, demonstrating how interlocking oppressions based on race and gender restrict the everyday experiences of black women and girls (Cooper, 2015; Simien & Clawson, 2004). This framework was particularly pertinent in exploring the nuanced dimensions of hair-based discrimination in educational settings. Together, these theoretical perspectives enabled a critical examination of the identities and narratives of Black girls with Afro-textured hair, thereby illuminating the broader socio-cultural dynamics that underpin their experiences. A more detailed discussion of these frameworks is provided in Chapter Three.

1.8. Overview of the Methodology

As mentioned above, the study addressed two central research questions using a qualitative approach to examine the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair in a desegregated secondary school. This methodology afforded rich descriptive insights into the lived experiences of the participants (Salvador, 2016). A case study design, as advocated by Tetnowski (2015) and McCombes (2023), was employed to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the complex, real-world issues faced by the girls who participated in the research presented in the dissertation.

The study was situated within the critical research paradigm, which interrogates the intersections of power, inequality, gender, race, class, education, culture and social change (Maree, 2016). Hair-based discrimination in desegregated schools is profoundly shaped by the interlocking dynamics of race and gender. Thus, the critical paradigm was instrumental in scrutinising the narratives and experiences of Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair, with a particular emphasis on issues of inequality, race and gender.

Purposive sampling was used to select a specific cohort of 16 Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair from a racially desegregated school in Dundee. These participants, aged between 15 and 17 and enrolled in Grades 9 to 11, engaged in face-to-face workshops incorporating participatory drawings and focus group discussions. Thus, in line with the action research orientation of the critical paradigm, a participatory visual approach was also adopted. The initial workshop established the study's rules and guidelines, while the subsequent workshops employed drawing and focus groups to address the research questions (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). Martikainen and Hakokongas (2022) note that participatory drawing effectively elicits individual perspectives, and in this study, participants followed eight structured steps during the drawing session, as detailed in Chapter Four.

To further elicit in-depth insights, focus group discussions were conducted to encourage detailed reflections on participants' experiences (Hennink, 2014). Following data production, the raw data was submitted for verification to my supervisor to ensure its authenticity before analysis, following Taherdoost (2022),

who defines data analysis as the process of translating raw data into meaningful constructs. The data were then categorised into coherent themes.

Both visual and thematic analytic techniques were applied to systematically code, sort, and define themes, thereby facilitating robust interpretations of the findings (Naeem, Ozuem & Ranfagni, 2023). This analysis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), providing a comprehensive framework to guide the research process and ensure the rigour and depth of the findings. A detailed discussion of the research design and methodology is presented in Chapter Four.

1.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in any social science research involving human participants, and addressing these challenges requires a systematic approach. To navigate these ethical complexities, I undertook several critical steps. Firstly, I secured written authorisation from relevant institutions, including the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities Research Ethics Committee (Protocol number: HSSREC/00008252/2025) and the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. Secondly, I obtained a formal permission letter from the principal of the secondary school where the study was conducted. Thirdly, I received a letter from the school's Learner Support Agent, confirming her availability throughout all research encounters. Finally, I ensured that signed consent forms were returned by each participant and their respective parents or guardians, thereby affirming their informed consent to partake in the study. The participants provided written assent for their participation in the study. Chapter Four provides a more detailed methodological approach adopted in this study.

1.10. Overview of the Dissertation

This study explored how Black girls in a desegregated school navigate the scrutiny and regulation of their Afro-textured hair, examining how they experience, make sense of, and resist hair-based discrimination within a racially diverse educational context. Chapter One has introduced the research by outlining its background, articulating the problem statement and rationale, and presenting the central

research questions. It has also offered an overview of the theoretical lenses (i.e., African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory) and the qualitative, participatory methodology guiding the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the structure of the dissertation, setting the stage for the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two critically reviews the literature on the historical and contemporary policing of Afro-textured hair, foregrounding how colonial and apartheid ideologies continue to shape the regulation of Black girls' bodies in schools. It examines how Afro-textured hair is constructed as unruly and incompatible with institutional norms, reinforcing Eurocentric beauty standards through school grooming policies and disciplinary practices. Using intersectional, Black Feminist, and Afro-feminist perspectives, the chapter highlights how race and gender intersect to produce unique forms of exclusion for Black girls. It also explores the role of media and public discourse in pathologising Black hair while noting the absence of empirical research that centres the lived experiences of South African schoolgirls. In doing so, the chapter positions hair as a politically charged site of control, identity, and resistance in desegregated educational settings.

Chapter Three outlines the study's theoretical framework, drawing on African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory to illuminate the intersectional dynamics of race, gender, and power in the policing of Afro-textured hair. Grounded in the work of Tamale (2006) and Patricia Hill Collins (1986), the chapter situates hair-based discrimination within broader histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and racialised control. These frameworks centre Black girls' lived experiences, offering critical tools for analysing how institutional practices in racially desegregated schools continue to marginalise and regulate Black femininity. By engaging these theories, the chapter provides a robust analytical lens for understanding Afro-textured hair as both a cultural symbol and a site of resistance.

Chapter Four outlines the study's research design and methodological approach, grounded in a critical qualitative paradigm. It describes how participatory visual methods — notably participatory drawing and focus group discussions — were utilised to engage 16 purposively selected Black schoolgirls at a desegregated secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. The chapter explains how the chosen

methods prioritise participants' voices and lived experiences, enabling rich, layered insights into the regulation of Afro-textured hair. It also addresses ethical considerations, data analysis procedures, and strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, illustrating a thoughtful and rigorous approach to examining hair-based discrimination through an intersectional, feminist perspective.

Chapter Five offers a thematic analysis of the data, showing how Black schoolgirls in a desegregated South African school experience the policing of their Afro-textured hair as a form of racialised and gendered exclusion. Through participatory drawings and focus group discussions, the chapter reveals how school authorities pathologise natural Black hairstyles, enforce Eurocentric beauty standards, and undermine cultural and religious expression. It also emphasises the emotional and educational impacts of hair regulation, including shame, alienation, and lowered self-esteem. Importantly, the chapter documents the girls' acts of resistance — from visual storytelling to collective solidarity — as affirmations of identity, dignity, and refusal to conform to oppressive norms.

Chapter Six reflects on the study's key findings, synthesising methodological, theoretical, and analytical insights to emphasise the importance of Afro-textured hair as a site of struggle, identity, and resistance in desegregated South African schools. It revisits the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, demonstrating how African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory enable a nuanced understanding of hair-based discrimination as intersectional oppression. The chapter also highlights the study's contributions to scholarship, policy, and practice, advocating for inclusive school cultures, anti-racist grooming policies, and the safeguarding of Black girls' rights to self-expression. It concludes by reaffirming the urgency of educational transformation rooted in justice, dignity, and cultural affirmation.

The following chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature.

CHAPTER TWO
THE POLICING OF BLACK GIRLS' AFRO-TEXTURED HAIR IN AND AROUND SCHOOL: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

> Good hair means curls and waves (no)
> Bad hair means you look like a slave (no)
> At the turn of the century
> It's time for us to redefine who we be
> You can shave it off like a South African beauty
> Or get in on lock like Bob Marley
> You can rock it straight like Oprah Winfrey
> If it's not what's on your head, it's what's underneath
> (Lyrics from 'I am not my Hair' – a song written and performed by India Arie, 2006)

I intentionally open this chapter with lyrics from India Arie's 2006 song, 'I Am Not My Hair' (Simpson, 2006), to underscore the historical and cultural embeddedness of the policing of Afro-textured hair. These lyrics serve as a crucial entry point by interrogating the cultural hierarchies imposed on Black hair, especially that of Black girls, by juxtaposing the notions of 'good hair' and 'bad hair.' This binary challenges long-standing beauty standards that have historically devalued natural Afro-textured hair, evoking painful legacies of colonialism, slavery, and apartheid. Moreover, by invoking diverse cultural signifiers — from South African traditions and Bob Marley's iconic hairstyle to Oprah Winfrey's sleek presentation — the lyrics call for a redefinition of identity. Emphasising what lies 'underneath' suggests that true worth and identity extend beyond mere aesthetics, ultimately urging a reclamation of self-worth and cultural agency in the face of persistent societal pressures.

In this chapter, I provide a review of the existing literature on the policing of Afro-textured hair in educational settings, with a particular focus on Black girls in South Africa's desegregated schools. I situate this discussion within a historical and socio-political framework, examining how colonial and apartheid-era racial

ideologies have shaped contemporary attitudes toward Black hair. Further, I interrogate the intersectionality of race and gender, using Black feminist and Afro-feminist theoretical perspectives to analyse the racialised and gendered dimensions of hair-based discrimination in schools. To establish a strong contextual foundation, the chapter first explores the historical roots of Afro-textured hair discrimination, tracing its evolution from indigenous African societies to its racialisation through colonialism, slavery, and apartheid policies. This historical analysis highlights the persistent impact of white beauty norms, which continue to marginalise Black aesthetics in contemporary educational institutions.

I then examine the specific ways in which Afro-textured hair is policed in schools, focusing on dress code policies, disciplinary measures, and school environments that reinforce Eurocentric beauty standards. In the discussion, I incorporate global perspectives, drawing comparative insights from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Europe to contextualise South African experiences within broader international trends of racialised hair discrimination. Further, I explore the psychological, social, and academic consequences of hair policing on Black girls. The literature indicates that restrictive hair policies undermine learners' self-esteem, cultural identity, and sense of belonging, often leading to emotional distress, social exclusion, and disengagement from academic activities.

The role of media and public discourse in shaping perceptions of Black hair is also examined. This section assesses how mainstream media and advertising reinforce Eurocentric beauty ideals, while social media activism and legislative interventions, such as the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act in the United States, have challenged discriminatory norms and promoted hair inclusivity in educational and professional spaces. Finally, I identify key gaps in research, particularly regarding the lived experiences of Black South African schoolgirls and institutional responses to protests against hair discrimination. These gaps highlight the need for further empirical research and policy advocacy to dismantle the racial hierarchies embedded in school grooming codes.

By integrating historical, educational, psychological, and media studies perspectives, in this chapter, I provide a multidimensional analysis of Afro-textured hair discrimination in schools. The chapter engages with existing scholarship while paving the way for new research and policy interventions that promote inclusive, non-discriminatory educational spaces for Black learners.

2.2. Historical and Global Perspectives on Afro-textured Hair Discrimination

Hair has long functioned as a crucial marker of identity, social status, and cultural belonging within Black African communities, predating colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). In many African societies, hairstyles were imbued with symbolic meaning, used to signify age, marital status, spiritual beliefs, and ethnic affiliation (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Thompson, 2009). Styles such as cornrows, dreadlocks, and intricate braids were not merely aesthetic choices but expressions of cultural pride, rites of passage, and spiritual traditions (Mbilishaka, 2018; Lashley, 2020). Hair was thus a living archive of African identity and continuity (Majali, Coetzee & Rau, 2017).

However, colonialism and the slave trade forcibly disrupted these cultural expressions, marking Afro-textured hair as a symbol of racial inferiority. Enslaved Africans were subjected to forced head-shaving upon arrival in the Americas—an act intended to erase cultural identity and assert the dominance of European norms (Asare, 2023). Hair thus became a tool of symbolic violence through which enslaved Africans were 'disciplined' into racialised social orders. As Richardson (2021) notes, the devaluation of Black hair was central to the colonial civilising mission, positioning Eurocentric beauty ideals, characterised by straight, flowing hair, as the universal norm.

The legacy of these racialised beauty standards has endured. In the post-slavery and post-colonial periods, Black individuals were often pressured to chemically straighten or conceal their natural hair to access employment, social respectability, and perceived upward mobility (Robinson, 2011; Dash, 2006). This conformism was frequently linked to survival within racially stratified societies, where natural hair was seen as unkempt, militant, or unprofessional. Alubafi, Ramphalile and

Rankoana (2018) argue that these attitudes persist, particularly in institutions such as schools, where grooming and appearance codes continue to reflect Eurocentric biases.

South Africa's apartheid regime institutionalised this form of discrimination through practices such as the 'pencil test', which was a pseudoscientific method of racial classification based on hair texture (Carrim, 2009). If a pencil became lodged in an individual's hair, the person was classified as 'Black,' thereby assigned a lower social and legal status. The absurdity and cruelty of such tests reveal how hair became a proxy for racial identity and social control. Although apartheid formally ended in 1994, the symbolic policing of Blackness, particularly through hair, remains evident in school regulations and disciplinary actions (Pattman & Bhana, 2021). These regulations often position natural hairstyles such as braids, locs, and Afros as inappropriate, unprofessional, or distracting, implicitly framing whiteness as the standard of normalcy.

Globally, similar trends of hair-based discrimination continue to affect Black learners. In the United States, high-profile incidents of school suspensions and exclusions based on natural hairstyles have led to legal reforms such as the CROWN Act, which prohibits race-based hair discrimination in education and employment (Davis, 2021). Despite this progress, Johnson (2022) reports that punitive measures against Black students for wearing natural styles remain widespread, underscoring the enduring legacy of white aesthetic dominance. In the United Kingdom, learners such as Chikayzea Flanders have been excluded for wearing dreadlocks, prompting legal action and public discourse about institutional racism in school policies (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). Williams (2023) adds that Black students in British schools are disproportionately penalised for dress code violations linked to natural hair, even when these styles are culturally and religiously significant.

Other settler-colonial societies, including Australia and Canada, have also reported cases of discrimination against Afro-textured and Indigenous hair. In Australia, Mooney (2020) highlights how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience hair-related microaggressions and pressure to conform to

Eurocentric grooming standards. In Canada, Nguyen and Hall (2022) found that Black students and professionals often felt compelled to alter their hair to avoid being perceived as unprofessional or unkempt. In Germany, Weber (2023) describes similar patterns, where Afro-textured hairstyles are met with suspicion and bias in both academic and corporate spaces. In France, strict grooming and uniform regulations have disproportionately targeted Black and North African students, often in the name of maintaining secularism or uniformity (Levinson, 2021).

These examples illustrate the global reach and resilience of hair-based discrimination, suggesting that what appears as a localised issue—such as a school's hairstyle policy — is part of a broader, transnational regime of racialised aesthetics. As Tate (2022) asserts, the persistence of discriminatory attitudes toward Afro-textured hair must be understood within the historical continuum of colonialism, racial capitalism, and white supremacy. Hair, in this context, becomes a site of both oppression and resistance; a terrain where Black identity is contested, negotiated, and reclaimed.

Put together, this body of scholarship affirms that hair discrimination is not merely about personal appearance but is deeply implicated in systemic power relations that shape how Black individuals, especially Black girls and women, are positioned in educational, professional, and public life. By historicising the devaluation of Afro-textured hair and tracing its contemporary manifestations in institutional settings, this section highlights the urgency of studying how Black schoolgirls experience and resist hair policing, particularly in post-apartheid South African schools where racial integration has not yet translated into substantive cultural inclusion.

2.3. Afro-textured Hair and the Role of Schools in Policing Black Identity

Educational institutions are pivotal in shaping social norms, often serving as instruments through which dominant cultural values are reproduced. In schools, codes of conduct and uniform policies are presented as mechanisms for promoting discipline and uniformity; yet, they frequently operate as tools for cultural

regulation, particularly when it comes to the appearance of Black learners. Within this context, Afro-textured hair has become a visible and politicised site of control. Scholars argue that these ostensibly neutral grooming standards disproportionately impact Black students, especially girls, by implicitly privileging Eurocentric aesthetic norms while marginalising African cultural expressions (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018).

A growing body of international research, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom, has illustrated the punitive effects of school grooming policies on Black learners who wear natural hairstyles such as Afros, dreadlocks, braids, and Bantu knots (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019; Rogers et al., 2021). These students are often subject to disciplinary measures, which include suspensions, exclusion from school activities, or verbal reprimands, signalling a tacit rejection of their cultural identity. Such policies pressure learners to conform to white normative standards by chemically straightening their hair, wearing wigs, or otherwise altering their natural appearance to avoid institutional sanction.

Similar trends have been documented in educational systems across Australia, France, Germany, and Canada (Levinson, 2021; Nguyen & Hall, 2022). In these contexts, Black and Indigenous learners continue to face institutionalised racism in the guise of appearance-based regulation. In France and Germany, for example, school authorities have excluded learners from classrooms for wearing hairstyles deemed 'unruly' or 'unprofessional', thereby equating Afro-textured hair with deviance and non-compliance (Levinson, 2021). In Canada, Black learners regularly report experiencing microaggressions related to their hair, with grooming policies selectively enforced against those with natural hairstyles (Nguyen & Hall, 2022). These practices reflect deeply ingrained societal biases that pathologise Blackness and uphold whiteness as the normative standard.

The South African context is no exception. Despite the country's progressive Constitution and legislative protections against discrimination, racially desegregated schools continue to reproduce the cultural hegemony of apartheid through their policing of Afro-textured hair. Incidents such as the 2016 Pretoria High School for Girls' protest, reported in Chapter One, exposed how school

policies are used to discipline and silence Black girls whose natural hair did not conform to Eurocentric standards (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). These protests ignited national conversations about race, beauty, and belonging, revealing the extent to which the school system remains complicit in regulating Black identity. Subsequent research (Hamidou, 2023; Pattman & Bhana, 2021) has reinforced the view that hair-based discrimination is not merely symbolic. Rather, it has tangible consequences for learners’ sense of self, psychological well-being, and academic engagement.

Hair policing contributes to an environment of cultural exclusion and emotional distress. Essein and Wood (2021) found that Black learners subjected to appearance-based scrutiny often experience low self-esteem, anxiety, and a sense of alienation from their school environment. These psychological impacts are compounded by pressure to assimilate through chemical hair treatments or concealment of natural hairstyles; practices that reinforce internalised racism and the devaluation of Blackness (Parker, 2019). In a longitudinal sense, such pressures may have far-reaching implications for identity formation, as Black girls are implicitly taught that acceptance and success require erasure of their natural selves.

Academically, these dynamics have been linked to poor educational outcomes. Anderson (2020) found that learners experiencing hair-based discrimination were more likely to disengage from school activities and experience disruptions in their learning. Rogers et al. (2021) similarly report that such learners often face higher rates of absenteeism, reduced classroom participation, and overall diminished academic performance. These findings underline how the regulation of Black hair operates as a covert mechanism of exclusion, impacting not only learners' psychological health but also their educational attainment.

Beyond schooling, the cumulative effects of hair discrimination influence how young Black women perceive themselves in broader social and professional contexts. Smith (2023) notes that persistent negative messaging around Afro-textured hair fosters internalised notions of inferiority, shaping adult decisions regarding employment, social acceptance, and self-worth. Newman (2023) adds

that these effects manifest in both overt and subtle ways, from hesitations around job interviews to daily experiences of microaggression in public spaces. Consequently, educational grooming policies that police Black girls' hair should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a continuum of institutional practices that perpetuate structural inequality.

In light of these systemic harms, legislative and policy interventions have begun to emerge. The United States has seen progress with the introduction and adoption of the CROWN Act in several states, which seeks to prohibit race-based hair discrimination in schools and workplaces (Davis, 2021). In the UK, advocacy groups have called for reforms that mandate schools to recognise and protect the cultural and historical significance of Afro-textured hairstyles (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018). These developments mark an important step toward racial justice, yet global implementation remains uneven, and South Africa has yet to adopt equivalent national legislation.

Addressing hair-based discrimination in schools requires not only policy change but also a broader cultural reckoning. As Williams (2023) argues, inclusivity must move beyond tokenistic representations and extend to institutional practices that validate the identities of all learners. There is an urgent need to challenge the unspoken hierarchies that frame Afro-textured hair as unkempt or unprofessional and to adopt grooming policies that are culturally responsive, non-discriminatory, and aligned with democratic values.

This section has demonstrated that the policing of Afro-textured hair in schools is a widespread phenomenon that transcends national borders, rooted in long-standing colonial legacies and maintained through contemporary institutional practices. In South Africa, where the promise of educational equity remains unfulfilled for many Black learners, reimagining school cultures to reflect inclusivity and dignity must begin with listening to and valuing the everyday experiences of Black girls. Their hair, as a site of identity, expression, and resistance, offers an important entry point for transforming schools into genuinely democratic spaces.

2.4. Hair-Based Discrimination as Intersectional Oppression

The concept of intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), provides a critical framework for analysing the layered forms of oppression that Black girls experience at the intersection of race and gender. Intersectionality underscores how overlapping social identities (such as race, gender, class, and cultural affiliation) compound experiences of discrimination in ways that cannot be explained by any single axis of identity (Simien & Clawson, 2004). Within this framework, the policing of Afro-textured hair functions not merely as an aesthetic concern but as a deeply embedded mechanism through which institutions regulate and control Black femininity. Hair-based discrimination emerges, therefore, as a particularly visible form of what scholars term gendered racism, targeting Black girls in ways that differ both from Black boys and from non-Black girls (Collins, 2000; Wade et al., 2022).

Globally, research illustrates how the regulation of Black girls' hair is underpinned by structural and institutionalised racism, masked as seemingly neutral school grooming policies. In the United States, Black girls attending predominantly white schools are often penalised for wearing Afro-textured hairstyles (such as Afros, locs, and braids) because these styles are unprofessional, unkempt, or non-compliant (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). In response to this persistent pattern of exclusion, several U.S. states have adopted the CROWN Act, legislation designed to protect individuals from race-based hair discrimination in schools and workplaces (Davis, 2021). However, the very existence of such legislation underscores how deeply entrenched hair discrimination is within educational and professional contexts.

In the United Kingdom, similar trends are evident. Joseph-Salisbury (2019) and Williams & Parker (2022) document the disproportionate disciplining of Black girls for wearing natural hairstyles that allegedly violate school uniform and grooming standards. In many instances, these learners are suspended or excluded from school activities, often pressured to chemically straighten their hair or cover it with wigs to align with Eurocentric beauty norms. These regulatory practices do not simply marginalise Black aesthetics; they actively delegitimise Black cultural

identity within institutional spaces, contributing to alienation and psychological distress (Crabtree & Watson, 2023).

Australian research further illustrates how Black and Indigenous girls navigate intersecting oppressions related to race, culture, and gender. Mooney (2020) reports that these girls often face explicit and implicit hair-related microaggressions in schools that reflect broader colonial legacies. Nguyen and Hall (2022) observe similar patterns in Canadian schools, where Afro-textured hair becomes a site of surveillance and discipline, reinforcing white aesthetic standards as normative. Across these contexts, Black girls report internalised racism, diminished self-esteem, and psychological distress resulting from routine exclusion and ridicule based on their natural hair.

Crucially, this intersectional analysis reveals how gender mediates the ways Black learners experience hair-based discrimination. While Black boys may also face racialised dress codes, the regulation of Black girls' hair is distinctly gendered. Studies show that Black girls are more frequently labelled as 'defiant' or 'disruptive' when resisting hair policies, reinforcing long-standing colonial stereotypes about Black femininity and respectability (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Carter Andrews et al. (2019) argue that these disciplinary responses are not just about grooming, but they reflect attempts to regulate the embodied expression of Black girlhood and its perceived transgression of racialised and gendered norms.

Moreover, the intersection of class with race and gender compounds the experience of hair discrimination. Learners from lower-income households often have limited access to alternative haircare options or the resources needed to contest unfair school policies (Anderson, 2020). For instance, while wealthier families may be able to afford salon treatments or protective hairstyles that meet institutional expectations, economically marginalised learners are left vulnerable to punishment. This intersectional inequality reflects broader systemic issues and points to how institutions perpetuate both aesthetic and structural violence against Black girls.

These forms of institutional regulation do not end with schooling. Research shows that the same biases continue into adulthood. Black women in professional settings are often subjected to the same scrutiny of their hair, with natural styles perceived as “unprofessional” or “political” (Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Tate, 2022). This lifelong policing of Black women’s bodies reinforces whiteness as the dominant norm of respectability and professionalism, while erasing or marginalising Black self-expression.

Social movements and legal reforms such as the CROWN Act in the United States and anti-discrimination campaigns in the United Kingdom are significant in disrupting these regulatory discourses (Donahoo, 2021; Brown & Lemi, 2021; Turner & Young, 2022). Yet, scholars insist that legislative measures alone are insufficient. Transformative change requires not only legal reform but also a cultural shift in how Blackness — and Black femininity in particular — is understood and valued (Newman, 2023). This includes curricular interventions, teacher training, and the implementation of inclusive school policies that celebrate, rather than suppress, Afro-textured hair and the cultural histories it represents.

The concept of intersectionality thus provides a powerful tool for examining the multifaceted dimensions of hair-based discrimination. Through this lens, it becomes clear that such discrimination is not an isolated issue of personal appearance but a structural manifestation of racialised and gendered power. As the global and South African literature suggests, challenging the policing of Black girls’ hair requires reimagining institutional cultures that currently reward conformity to whiteness while penalising expressions of Black identity. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Black girls, scholars, educators, and policymakers can begin to dismantle the systemic exclusions embedded in school policies and contribute to the creation of affirming educational environments.

2.5. Media Representation and the Politics of Black Hair

Media representations significantly influence societal perceptions of Black hair, often serving as both a site of discrimination and resistance. Historically, mainstream media has upheld Eurocentric beauty standards by presenting straight

hair as the ideal, while pathologising Afro-textured hair as unruly, unprofessional, or undesirable (LaMar & Rolle, 2022; Tate, 2022). This legacy of aesthetic marginalisation has manifested across advertising, film, television, and fashion, shaping public attitudes and contributing to the internalisation of racist beauty norms among Black women and girls (Collins & Perry, 2021). Consequently, Afro-textured hair remains not only underrepresented in media but also frequently misrepresented through negative stereotypes and roles that reify racial hierarchies (Williams & Parker, 2022).

Black women with natural hairstyles continue to experience various forms of media exclusion or stereotyping. For instance, Collins and Perry's (2021) study found that beauty campaigns overwhelmingly favour Black women who conform to Eurocentric hair ideals (e.g., through straightening or wearing wigs) over those who wear their natural textures. Similarly, in popular film and television, characters with naturally Afro-textured hair are often cast in marginal or stereotypical roles that reinforce negative associations with deviance, poverty, or lack of sophistication (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). Such portrayals directly shape how Black hair is perceived in professional, academic, and social contexts, rendering natural hair incompatible with dominant norms of success, beauty, and professionalism.

However, in recent years, counter-narratives have emerged in both traditional and digital media that challenge this hegemonic framing. In the United States, advocacy movements such as #BlackGirlMagic and legislative campaigns like the CROWN Act have foregrounded the politics of Black hair, amplifying voices that contest hair-based discrimination in schools and workplaces (Zachery & Harris, 2019). These movements have catalysed global conversations around the intersection of race, gender, and aesthetic norms, prompting some shifts in public discourse.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have proven particularly influential in this regard. Hashtags like #MyHairMyCrown and #NaturalHairMovement have provided platforms for Black girls and women to share personal stories, styling tutorials, and reflections on their cultural heritage,

thereby reclaiming their narratives from the margins (Smith & Grant, 2023). These digital spaces enable the formation of communities of affirmation and resistance, where Afro-textured hair is not merely accepted but celebrated as an expression of cultural pride and political identity (Tate, 2022; Nguyen & Hall, 2022).

Internationally, similar movements have gained traction. In the United Kingdom, initiatives such as World Afro Day and the Halo Code campaign have advocated for the protection of natural hairstyles within schools and workplaces (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). In Canada, media documentaries and news exposés have contributed to raising public awareness about hair-based discrimination in professional and academic settings (Nguyen & Hall, 2022). South African media, particularly in the aftermath of the 2016 Pretoria High School for Girls protests, has played a key role in bringing to light the discriminatory policies that regulate the appearance of Black learners in racially diverse schools (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018).

The advertising and marketing industries, long complicit in promoting Eurocentric beauty ideals, are also experiencing shifts. While historically Black consumers were neglected or misrepresented, the rise of Black-owned beauty brands such as SheaMoisture, Carol's Daughter, and The Mane Choice has helped reshape the market. These companies have positioned themselves as champions of natural Black hair, offering products specifically formulated for Afro-textured hair and featuring inclusive campaigns that celebrate Black beauty (LaMar & Rolle, 2022). This progress, however, remains uneven. As discussed in Chapter One, the TRESemmé advertisement in South Africa, which labelled Black hair as 'frizzy and dull' while praising white hair as 'normal and fine,' sparked national outrage and highlighted the persistent racial bias within mainstream marketing (Swails & Salaudeen, 2020; Anderson, 2021).

Journalism and broadcast media also reflect these tensions. Black women working in news media are often subjected to implicit grooming codes that pressure them to straighten their hair to meet 'professional' standards (Rosette & Dumas, 2007). These discriminatory expectations are not confined to North America; they are

echoed in Europe and Australia, where Black journalists and on-air personalities report similar experiences of aesthetic policing and erasure (Mooney, 2020).

At the same time, documentaries and cultural productions have been instrumental in educating the public and disrupting dominant narratives. Films such as Good Hair (Rock, 2009) and Hair Love (Cherry, 2019) offer powerful commentaries on the socio-political implications of Black hair, particularly for younger audiences. These texts centre the emotional, cultural, and historical significance of Afro-textured hair, contributing to more nuanced understandings that challenge reductive representations in popular culture.

Despite these positive developments, structural inequalities in media representation persist. Black hair continues to be evaluated against Eurocentric norms of professionalism, desirability, and appropriateness, reinforcing institutional biases in education, employment, and public life. Scholars such as Tate (2022) argue that meaningful change requires not only increased representation but also targeted media literacy programmes and public policy reforms aimed at dismantling racialised beauty hierarchies.

In summary, this section has demonstrated how media representation both reflects and reproduces societal biases against Afro-textured hair, while also serving as a powerful site of cultural resistance and empowerment. Although Afro-textured hair has gained visibility in mainstream media, this visibility does not necessarily equate to inclusion or justice. Therefore, sustained advocacy, inclusive policy design, and educational interventions remain essential in challenging the deep-seated prejudices embedded in media portrayals and public discourses. By critically engaging with the representational politics of Black hair, this study underscores the need to rethink the aesthetic regimes that continue to marginalise Black identity in media and society.

2.6. Afro-Textured Hair and the Racial Politics of School Discipline

The politics of Black hair has long been entangled in the complex intersections of race, gender, and identity. For Black girls, Afro-textured hair is not merely a matter

of aesthetic preference but a deeply embedded cultural marker with political, spiritual, and social significance. Yet, within educational institutions, particularly racially desegregated schools, Afro-textured hair is often rendered deviant, unprofessional, or unkempt, invoking school-level responses that function as mechanisms of discipline and exclusion (Tate, 2007; Oyedemi, 2016).

Rooted in colonial histories and white supremacist ideologies, the regulation of Afro-textured hair in schools continues to reproduce hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric norms. Historically, the demonisation of Black hair can be traced to slavery and colonisation, where Black individuals were subjected to grooming codes aimed at erasing their cultural identities and assimilating them into white normative standards (Robinson, 2011; Dash, 2006). These colonial legacies endure today in policies that disproportionately target natural Black hairstyles like Afros, braids, locs, and Bantu knots, portraying them as disorderly or inappropriate in educational settings (Thompson, 2009; Nasheed, 2019).

Schools, often perceived as neutral learning spaces, in fact operate as powerful sites of social reproduction that mirror and sustain dominant ideologies. In South Africa and globally, Afro-textured hair has become a key site of institutional regulation. Research shows that Black girls are frequently disciplined or excluded for wearing culturally significant hairstyles, with school policies couched in vague terms such as neat, tidy, or professional — concepts that implicitly affirm whiteness and devalue Blackness (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022; Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). The controversy at Pretoria High School for Girls in 2016 is a case in point. Here, Black learners protested against a code of conduct that implicitly required them to alter their natural hair. The school's response exemplified how institutions continue to uphold Eurocentric standards under the guise of discipline and order, and ignited national debates about race, identity, and cultural expression in South African schools.

These discriminatory practices extend beyond South Africa. In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, similar incidents of Black learners being penalised for natural hairstyles have been widely reported (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016; Mooney, 2020). In each case, Afro-textured hair is perceived as a threat to

institutional decorum, and Black girls are required to either alter their appearance or face exclusion. The emotional and psychological impact of such policing is well-documented: lowered self-esteem, feelings of alienation, and internalised racism are common outcomes for learners forced to suppress their natural identities to conform to dominant expectations (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Oyedemi, 2016). Many Black girls report experiencing anxiety about how their hair will be perceived in school spaces, and some avoid participating in school activities to escape humiliation or disciplinary action (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019).

Hair policing functions as a form of racialised and gendered social control. While framed as neutral enforcement of school discipline, these practices in fact target and suppress Black cultural expression. Black girls are often positioned as deviant not because of their behaviour, but because of the visibility of their Blackness through their hair (Robinson, 2011). The expectation that they conform to aesthetic standards rooted in whiteness reveals the deeper ideological underpinnings of school policies, which reproduce structural inequalities and cultural marginalisation (Tate, 2007; Nasheed, 2019).

Furthermore, the cumulative effect of such policies creates educational environments where Black girls are treated as outsiders, perpetually monitored, corrected, and punished. These experiences hinder academic engagement and create conditions where cultural authenticity becomes a liability. Grooming policies in schools are thus not merely about discipline; they are about power—who gets to belong, who is deemed appropriate, and whose identity is validated within institutional frameworks.

Legal initiatives such as the CROWN Act in the United States have attempted to address this injustice by prohibiting race-based hair discrimination. However, in South Africa, where post-apartheid educational transformation remains incomplete, similar legislative protections are still underdeveloped. Schools must urgently revise grooming policies to reflect the cultural realities of their learners and dismantle the covert forms of racism embedded in their codes of conduct. More than policy reform, what is needed is a decolonial reimagining of school culture; one that embraces Afro-textured hair as valid, beautiful, and meaningful.

The politics of hair in education is not a peripheral concern; it is a core issue of justice, belonging, and dignity. The struggle for Black girls to wear their hair naturally in schools is ultimately a struggle for the right to exist without compromise, to be seen without erasure, and to learn without surveillance. Afro-textured hair, then, must be acknowledged not as a disruption to educational order, but as a vital expression of identity, resistance, and cultural affirmation.

2.6.1 Respectability Politics and the Policing of Black Hair in Schools

The politics of respectability, first theorised by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), offers a powerful framework for understanding how Black hair is regulated in schools. It refers to the pressure on marginalised groups to conform to dominant social and aesthetic norms, particularly those of the white middle class, as a strategy for attaining social inclusion. Within the context of schools, this often means that Black girls are required to alter or mask their natural Afro-textured hair to comply with institutional standards that privilege Eurocentric definitions of beauty and professionalism (Dash, 2006; Thompson, 2009; Oyedemi, 2016).

Natural hairstyles such as braids, dreadlocks, afros, and Bantu knots are frequently portrayed as unruly, political, or unprofessional, while straightened or chemically altered hair is deemed acceptable and respectable (Kringen & Novich, 2018; Tate, 2007). These aesthetic hierarchies reflect deeper historical patterns rooted in colonialism and slavery, where Black hair was devalued and weaponised as a tool for social exclusion (Robinson, 2011; Alubafi, Ramphilile & Rankoana, 2018). Schools, as extensions of broader social structures, reproduce these ideologies by enforcing grooming policies that criminalise Afro-textured hair and reward assimilation.

For Black girls, such policies are not merely about uniform compliance; they are embodied forms of discipline that pathologise Blackness and perpetuate a politics of conformity. The expectation that they must straighten their hair to appear ‘neat’ or ‘professional’ sends a clear message: proximity to whiteness equates to acceptability (Robinson, 2011; Oyedemi, 2016). This creates a hostile and exclusionary school environment in which Black students must choose between

self-expression and institutional acceptance. The cost of this assimilation is not only emotional but also material, as maintaining chemically straightened hair imposes financial and health burdens on Black families (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016).

Moreover, the psychological toll of conforming to Eurocentric beauty standards is profound. Research shows that such pressures lead to lowered self-esteem, anxiety, and internalised racism, especially among adolescents navigating identity formation (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022). When students are punished or ridiculed for their natural hair, they internalise the belief that their authentic selves are unworthy of belonging or success. These school-based microaggressions—whether verbal, policy-driven, or peer-enforced—reinforce structural inequalities and undermine educational outcomes (Tate, 2007).

Despite the growing visibility of natural hair movements and legislative efforts like the CROWN Act in the United States, resistance to change within schools remains entrenched (Nasheed, 2019). Many schools continue to invoke vague notions of 'neatness,' 'discipline,' and 'professionalism' to justify discriminatory grooming policies, ignoring their racialised implications. These justifications reflect an unwillingness to confront the legacy of white supremacy embedded in definitions of appropriate appearance.

Dismantling these systems requires more than policy reform; it demands a cultural transformation. Schools must revise grooming policies to reflect an inclusive understanding of cultural identity and challenge the aesthetic norms that privilege whiteness. Educators need training in cultural competency and anti-racist pedagogies to recognise and disrupt the everyday enactment of respectability politics within classrooms and disciplinary structures (Oyedemi, 2016).

Ultimately, the politics of respectability in school settings function as a powerful mechanism of control that marginalises Black girls and their identities. Until institutions shift towards embracing the full spectrum of Black beauty, including Afro-textured hair, Black learners will remain burdened by the demand to conform. Recognising natural hair not only as acceptable but as inherently

valuable and dignified is essential for cultivating educational spaces that are truly inclusive, affirming, and just.

2.6.2. Afro-Textured Hair as Resistance: Identity, Politics and the Struggle for Belonging

For Black girls, Afro-textured hair is more than an aesthetic choice—it is a site of cultural identity, social belonging, and political resistance (Thompson, 2009; Tate, 2007). Historically and in contemporary contexts, Black hair has carried profound symbolic meaning, reflecting both oppression and empowerment (Dash, 2006). Within institutional spaces such as schools, where Eurocentric beauty norms remain dominant, Black girls face persistent pressure to conform through straightened or chemically altered hairstyles (Robinson, 2011; Oyedemi, 2016). These expectations are not neutral; they are rooted in colonial histories and maintained through structural racism and gendered oppression. In this context, the politics of hair becomes a battleground where personal identity is negotiated, contested, and asserted.

Hair-based discrimination is often enforced through school policies that cloak racialised exclusions under the guise of 'neatness' or 'professionalism' (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). These vague standards disproportionately target Afro-textured hair, reinforcing normative assumptions about whose appearance is deemed acceptable in public institutions. Yet, in response to these exclusions, Black girls have developed diverse strategies of resistance—ranging from silent defiance and cultural education to organised protest and legal action. Studies show that many engage in acts of self-affirmation by embracing natural hairstyles despite institutional pushback, while also building resilience through peer support and intergenerational dialogue (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020).

Social media has become a particularly powerful platform for contesting dominant hair narratives. YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have enabled a digital counter-publics where Black girls and women document their natural hair journeys, offer styling tutorials, and speak out against discrimination. The rise of the natural hair movement has thus generated communal spaces of affirmation that directly

challenge mainstream media portrayals and school-level regulatory practices (Tate, 2007; Oyedemi, 2016). These digital platforms are not just tools for self-expression but instruments of activism, where viral campaigns expose schools and workplaces for enforcing discriminatory grooming codes (Nasheed, 2019).

In legal and policy arenas, measures like the CROWN Act represent significant progress in recognising hair discrimination as a civil rights issue. Passed first in California in 2019 and adopted in several U.S. states since, the Act prohibits hair-based discrimination in schools and workplaces (Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). However, enforcement remains uneven, and many institutions continue to apply exclusionary standards through implicit cultural biases. This reflects the limitations of legislation that does not address the broader social attitudes and institutional cultures that shape how Black hair is perceived and regulated.

In South Africa, the 2016 student-led protest at Pretoria High School for Girls marked a critical moment in the visibility of hair-based resistance. Black schoolgirls challenged racially biased hair regulations and sparked nationwide debates about the persistence of apartheid-era cultural norms in democratic educational spaces (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022). This act of protest aligned with broader historical and contemporary struggles for Black liberation, which have long recognised hair as a political symbol of resistance, self-definition, and autonomy (Thompson, 2009).

Ultimately, the fight for hair autonomy is inseparable from broader struggles for racial justice, cultural recognition, and self-determination. Black girls continue to assert their right to wear their natural hair despite social and institutional pushback. Whether through personal choices, grassroots activism, or policy advocacy, their resistance challenges the racialised and gendered hierarchies that have long dictated norms of beauty and belonging. For schools and other institutions to become genuinely inclusive, they must move beyond superficial gestures of diversity and begin the critical work of decolonising their practices, affirming, rather than suppressing, the identities of all students. Until then, Afro-textured hair will remain a powerful and visible expression of cultural resistance in the face of enduring oppression.

2.6.3. Psychological and Educational Consequences of Hair Policing in Schools

The regulation of Black hair in schools carries significant psychological and academic consequences for Black girls (Dash, 2006; Robinson, 2011). Afro-textured hair is not merely a matter of personal styling; it is an embodied expression of cultural identity, self-perception, and heritage. When school policies pathologise this natural state, Black girls are implicitly told that their authentic selves are incompatible with institutional norms. This can result in feelings of shame, alienation, and pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty ideals (Tate, 2007; Oyedemi, 2016). The internalisation of such norms often leads to lowered self-esteem and identity confusion, particularly during adolescence, a critical period for self-definition (Thompson, 2009).

Hair-based discrimination in schools fosters psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth (Nasheed, 2019). Conforming to school grooming codes often requires Black girls to chemically straighten or alter their hair, practices that are not only emotionally taxing but financially burdensome. The ongoing cost of salon treatments and products to maintain hairstyles deemed 'acceptable' by schools imposes economic strain, particularly on working-class families, while reinforcing the notion that natural Black hair is inherently "unprofessional" or disruptive (Robinson, 2011; Oyedemi, 2016).

These pressures extend into the academic realm. Learners preoccupied with their appearance, and the risk of disciplinary action for non-conforming hairstyles may experience reduced focus and motivation in class (Dash, 2006). Research shows that students who do not feel affirmed in their school environment are more likely to disengage, both socially and academically, which ultimately affects performance and increases the risk of dropout (Tate, 2007; Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020). In contrast, a sense of belonging and validation within schools has been shown to enhance resilience and academic achievement (Thompson, 2009).

The lack of cultural competency among educators exacerbates this problem. Many school staff members are unaware of the racialised histories and implicit biases

embedded in grooming policies (Ellington, 2015; Kringen & Novich, 2018). As a result, discriminatory practices persist unchallenged, further entrenching the marginalisation of Black students. Teachers and administrators often fail to consider the significance of Afro-textured hair within Black culture and identity, perpetuating institutional racism under the guise of neutrality or discipline (Robinson, 2011). Moreover, Black girls are frequently placed in the untenable position of having to defend their appearance or educate their teachers on why their hair matters; a burden that reinforces their 'otherness' in schools that claim to be inclusive (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022). This dynamic not only undermines student well-being but also contradicts the aims of holistic, inclusive education.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic change. Schools must revise hair and grooming policies to affirm, rather than discipline, cultural diversity. Mandatory training in cultural responsiveness and anti-racist pedagogy is necessary to equip educators with the tools to dismantle implicit biases and support all learners equitably (Nasheed, 2019). In addition, integrating Afrocentric perspectives into the curriculum can help counteract the historical erasure of Black identity and affirm the cultural knowledge of Black students (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020). Until such reforms are institutionalised, the policing of Black hair will continue to undermine the psychological well-being and educational potential of Black girls. As long as Afro-textured hair remains a target of school regulation, schools will remain complicit in perpetuating structural inequality under the pretext of discipline and uniformity.

2.6.4. Towards Transformative Change: Challenging the Policing of Black Hair in Schools

Efforts to challenge the policing of Black hair in schools demand a multifaceted approach involving policy reform, educator training, curriculum transformation, and community mobilisation (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020; Nasheed, 2019).

The regulation of Afro-textured hair is not an isolated issue. It reflects entrenched structural inequalities rooted in colonial histories, white supremacist beauty ideals, and institutional racism. To address these systemic problems, intentional structural reforms must shift school cultures and institutional understandings of race, identity, and professionalism.

A crucial intervention lies in revising curricula to include Afrocentric perspectives that affirm Black identity and celebrate the cultural significance of Afro-textured hair (Thompson, 2009; Oyedemi, 2016). By embedding discussions on race, colonialism, cultural expression, and beauty norms into the school syllabus, institutions can begin to dismantle the dominance of Eurocentric standards. Curricular inclusivity not only validates the experiences of Black learners but also educates all students on the socio-political meanings attached to Black hair. In doing so, schools move beyond superficial multiculturalism to engage with deeper questions of equity and representation.

Student-led activism and parental advocacy have also been pivotal in confronting discriminatory hair policies. The 2016 protests at Pretoria High School for Girls, led by Black learners challenging racist grooming codes, serve as a compelling example of youth resistance disrupting institutional complacency (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022). Through petitions, media campaigns, and protests, students have forced schools and education departments to reckon with the implicit biases embedded in their regulations. Similarly, engaged and informed parents play a critical role in holding educators and administrators accountable, advocating for the dignity and cultural rights of their children (Robinson, 2011; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016).

At the legislative level, interventions such as the CROWN Act in the United States represent important efforts to prohibit race-based hair discrimination. However, the effectiveness of such legal protections is often undermined by inadequate enforcement and the persistence of informal biases within institutions (Nasheed, 2019; Oyedemi, 2016). Many schools and employers continue to use vague notions of ‘neatness’ and ‘professionalism’ to uphold discriminatory norms, exploiting policy loopholes to maintain hair policing under the guise of discipline

and uniformity. To counteract this, legislative action must be accompanied by robust public education and anti-racist training initiatives that confront ingrained prejudices against Afro-textured hair.

Educational institutions must also prioritise cultural competency training for teachers and administrators to ensure they understand the historical and cultural contexts of Black hair. Without this knowledge, educators risk perpetuating microaggressions and exclusionary practices that harm Black students' sense of identity and belonging (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020). Teacher preparation programmes and continuing professional development should integrate anti-racist pedagogy, with a focus on recognising and challenging the politics of respectability that continue to marginalise Black students.

Importantly, efforts to transform school environments must recognise and support the everyday resistance of Black girls. Whether through personal expression, online activism, or collective protest, Black students continually resist the erasure of their identities. Their resilience is not only a response to discrimination but also a powerful assertion of cultural pride and autonomy (Thompson, 2009; Dash, 2006). Schools must honour these acts of resistance by creating policies and practices that affirm, rather than suppress, the cultural identities of all learners.

Ultimately, educational equity cannot be achieved through policy revision alone. It requires a cultural shift that reimagines schools as spaces of inclusion, where diversity is not simply accommodated but actively embraced. This includes rejecting narrow definitions of professionalism and discipline that exclude Afro-textured hair, and cultivating environments where Black students feel valued, respected, and empowered to express themselves without fear of punishment. Until such structural and ideological shifts take place, schools will remain complicit in upholding systems of racial and cultural exclusion. Meaningful transformation lies in affirming that Black hair is not a disruption to be managed, but a powerful expression of identity, history, and resistance that belongs in every classroom.

2.7 Discussion: Towards a Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed in this chapter reveals that the policing of Afro-textured hair in educational settings is deeply embedded in historical, racial, and gendered hierarchies. Far from being neutral or aesthetic concerns, the regulation of Black girls' hair represents the continuation of colonial and apartheid-era control mechanisms that sought to devalue and suppress Black identity (Dash, 2006; Robinson, 2011). As post-apartheid South Africa struggles with educational transformation, Eurocentric standards of beauty continue to dominate school grooming policies, often pathologising natural Black hair as unruly, unprofessional, or non-compliant (Pattman & Bhana, 2021). This national reality reflects a broader global trend, as research from the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia illustrates how racialised hair discrimination disproportionately affects Black learners across socio-political contexts (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018; Davis, 2021; Mooney, 2020).

A central debate in this body of literature concerns whether school appearance policies are truly neutral. Advocates argue that strict grooming rules promote discipline and uniformity (O'Brien-Richardson, 2019). Yet critical scholarship consistently shows that such policies disproportionately target Black girls by framing natural hair as disruptive or defiant (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018; Wade et al., 2022). These biases are often masked under the language of 'professionalism' or 'neatness,' effectively enforcing white aesthetic norms and racialised standards of acceptability. The infamous apartheid-era "pencil test" (Carrim, 2009) and the 2016 protests at Pretoria High School for Girls (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022) are striking examples of how hair continues to serve as a powerful symbol of racial categorisation and resistance in South African schooling.

The psychological and educational consequences of hair-based discrimination are equally significant. Numerous studies (Essein & Wood, 2021; Parker, 2019; Smith, 2023) demonstrate that Black girls subjected to grooming-related discipline experience diminished self-esteem, school disengagement, and emotional distress. These findings resonate with critical race theory and Black feminist thought,

which highlight how institutional racism operates not only through overt acts but also through the regulation of cultural and bodily expression (Crenshaw, 1995; Collins, 2000). Yet South African scholarship has yet to fully examine the long-term implications of these disciplinary practices on learners' academic achievement, identity development, and post-school trajectories.

Media and public discourse also play a powerful role in shaping perceptions of Black hair. Mainstream media frequently reproduces Eurocentric beauty norms, while natural Black hair is either invisibilised or stigmatised (Collins & Perry, 2021; Tate, 2022). Although social media has emerged as a tool for counter-narratives, highlighting natural hair movements and amplifying resistance campaigns, its impact on institutional policy reform remains under-explored, especially in South Africa. Questions remain regarding the extent to which digital activism has influenced school-level decision-making or shifted broader societal attitudes about Afro-textured hair.

A notable gap in South African literature is the limited attention to intersectionality and the concept of gendered racism. International studies, particularly from the U.S., have begun to address how Black girls experience simultaneous racial and gender-based discrimination, referred to as misogynoir (Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Williams & Parker, 2022). However, South African educational research has yet to fully explore how these intersecting oppressions manifest in desegregated schools, where Black girls are often disciplined not only for their appearance but also for challenging aesthetic norms rooted in patriarchal whiteness.

The question of legal protections is another underdeveloped area in the South African context. While the South African Schools Act (1996) and the Constitution prohibit discrimination, school codes of conduct often sidestep these legal frameworks by embedding bias within policy language (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022). Unlike the United States, where the CROWN Act has sought to explicitly outlaw race-based hair discrimination, no equivalent legislation exists in South Africa. The absence of clear, enforceable protections leaves learners vulnerable to ongoing institutional exclusion, reinforcing the need for policy innovation that explicitly affirms hair diversity as a right.

Despite the wealth of international literature, South African research remains limited in exploring the specific experiences of Black girls in desegregated schools. While comparative studies have offered important insights, they often overlook the complex ways in which South Africa's legacy of apartheid, non-racialism, and cultural assimilation continues to shape school culture (Nguyen & Hall, 2022). There is a pressing need for empirical work that centres the voices of Black South African girls, documents how they navigate hair-based discrimination, and examines how school environments either reinforce or resist Eurocentric aesthetic norms.

In sum, the reviewed literature makes it clear that Afro-textured hair is not just a matter of personal grooming; it is a deeply political issue that reveals how race, gender, and identity are regulated in postcolonial education systems. The South African schooling context provides a compelling yet under-explored terrain for such inquiry. Future research must move beyond description to evaluate the effectiveness of current legal, pedagogical, and institutional strategies in redressing this enduring form of cultural oppression. Only then can schools become spaces where all forms of Black identity, including hair, are not merely tolerated but affirmed.

2.7.1. A Conceptual Framework for Analysing the Policing of Black Girls' Afro-textured Hair in South African Schools

The policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair in desegregated schools in post-apartheid South Africa is a complex socio-cultural and institutional phenomenon shaped by intersecting historical, racial, gendered, and policy-driven forces. Drawing from the literature reviewed in this chapter, a conceptual framework emerges that provides a multi-dimensional lens for analysing how hair-based discrimination operates in schools, and how Black girls navigate, internalise, or resist these processes. institutional power, Eurocentric beauty norms, cultural identity, intersectionality, psychological impact, resistance, and policy response. These concepts serve as analytical anchors for understanding the mechanisms and effects

of Afro-textured hair regulation in South African educational contexts. Figure 2.1 (below) visually illustrates these relationships.

FIGURE 2.1: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING THE POLICING OF BLACK GIRLS' AFRO-TEXTURED HAIR IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

At the centre of the framework lies institutional power, manifested through school policies, disciplinary practices, and normative codes that regulate appearance. Although often framed as neutral or administrative, school grooming policies are frequently imbued with implicit racial bias (Carrim, 2009; Pattman & Bhana, 2021). These policies tend to privilege straightened hair as the benchmark for neatness and professionalism, while casting Afro-textured hair as unruly, inappropriate, or non-compliant (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018; Davis, 2021). Rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies, these practices reproduce historical hierarchies and marginalise Black identity in spaces ostensibly committed to equality.

Tied closely to institutional power is the pervasiveness of Eurocentric beauty norms. These norms, reinforced through school regulations, teacher expectations, and peer culture, uphold straight, fine-textured hair as the standard of beauty

(Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Tate, 2022). Media and public discourse further entrench this hierarchy by systematically privileging white aesthetic ideals while pathologising natural Black hair (Collins & Perry, 2021). Thus, schools become sites where whiteness is conflated with acceptability, and non-conformity, especially in the form of Afro-textured hairstyles, is punished.

The regulation of Black hair also implicates questions of cultural identity. As numerous scholars note, hair in African societies has long functioned as a symbol of community, spirituality, and self-expression (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Smith, 2023). Colonialism and apartheid sought to suppress this significance, framing African hair as inferior and uncivilised (Dash, 2006; Robinson, 2011). Contemporary school grooming codes that stigmatise natural Black hair continue this erasure by implicitly demanding conformity to Westernised standards in exchange for institutional acceptance.

Intersectionality is critical to understanding the specific vulnerabilities that Black girls face. As Crenshaw (1995) and subsequent scholars argue, Black girls experience both racial and gendered oppression, a duality that intensifies their marginalisation (Williams & Parker, 2022). Unlike Black boys, who may also face racial regulation but are not expected to conform to femininity norms, Black girls are pressured to manage their appearance according to both white and patriarchal expectations. This regulation operates through what scholars term misogynoir, the intersection of anti-Blackness and sexism uniquely experienced by Black women and girls (Tate, 2022).

The psychological impact of hair policing is well-documented. Repeated disciplinary action, peer discrimination, and the internalisation of white beauty standards contribute to diminished self-esteem, anxiety, and alienation (Essein & Wood, 2021; Parker, 2019). Many Black girls respond by chemically straightening their hair or avoiding natural styles altogether, often at significant emotional and financial cost (Nguyen & Hall, 2022). This internal conflict between self-acceptance and institutional conformity can persist well into adulthood, influencing career trajectories and social relationships.

Despite these oppressive dynamics, resistance emerges as a powerful counterforce. Events such as the 2016 Pretoria High School for Girls protests demonstrate how Black girls actively contest discriminatory grooming policies (Alubafi, Ramphalile & Rankoana, 2018). Broader movements, including the global natural hair movement and digital activism, provide alternative narratives that affirm Black beauty and challenge institutional racism (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019; Smith & Grant, 2023). Through social media, students and communities mobilise support, demand accountability, and contribute to a growing public consciousness around hair-based discrimination.

Finally, policy response functions as an intervening variable in the framework. In contexts like the United States, legislation such as the CROWN Act explicitly prohibits hair discrimination (Davis, 2021). South Africa, however, lacks specific legal instruments that address hair-based exclusion. While the South African Constitution and the South African Schools Act (1996) prohibit racial discrimination in schools, these legal frameworks do not explicitly cover the policing of hair. Thus, the framework recognises the need for targeted policy reform that affirms Afro-textured hair and aligns institutional practices with constitutional commitments to non-discrimination (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2022).

This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive lens for analysing the socio-political and institutional dynamics underpinning the policing of Afro-textured hair in South African schools. It situates Black girls' hair within broader struggles over identity, power, and resistance, and lays the groundwork for the theoretical framework and data analysis presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POLICING OF BLACK GIRLS' AFRO-TEXTURED HAIR IN A RACIALLY DESEGREGATED SCHOOL: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical lenses that underpinned this study. A theoretical framework serves as a critical scaffold for the research process, shaping the formulation of the research problem, the literature review, methodological design, data analysis, and the interpretation of findings (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Adom, Hussein, & Agyen, 2018). It comprises an interconnected set of concepts and assumptions drawn from relevant theories, offering a lens through which the research phenomenon is examined and understood (Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage & Young, 2020). The selection of an appropriate framework is essential for ensuring epistemological integrity and analytical depth, particularly in studies that seek to interrogate complex social issues. In this study, the theoretical framework provides the conceptual tools to examine the intersectionality of race, gender, and identity politics in relation to the policing of Afro-textured hair among Black girls in a South African school.

The analysis in this study was located within the traditions of African Feminism (also referred to as Afro-Feminism) and Black Feminist Theory. Both theoretical perspectives offer critical insights into the racialised and gendered experiences of Black girls, particularly in historically white or racially desegregated educational institutions where colonial legacies persist in hidden and overt forms (Luckett & Bhatt, 2024). While feminist theories have long provided useful lenses for examining the structural oppression of women, the intersectional realities of Black women and girls require theoretical approaches that specifically centre the interplay of race, gender, and class (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991; Simien & Clawson, 2004).

In this context, African Feminism was employed to interrogate the socio-historical and cultural conditions shaping the experiences of Black African girls, paying

particular attention to how coloniality, tradition, and heteropatriarchy influence everyday life. Complementing this, Black Feminist Theory enabled a deeper exploration of how race and gender intersect within institutional structures to shape Black girls' experiences of surveillance, regulation, and resistance. The synthesis of these two frameworks allowed for a layered and contextually grounded analysis of how Afro-textured hair becomes a site of both oppression and self-assertion. Together, these lenses enabled the study to centre Black girls' voices as epistemologically valid and politically significant, offering a critical reading of identity, power, and embodiment in the post-apartheid South African school context.

3.2. African Feminism (or Afro-Feminism)

In her book, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (2006), Tamale draws on feminist theorisation to foreground the complex identity struggles experienced by African women—struggles that emerge at the intersection of race, gender, culture, and colonial history. Tamale positions Afro-Feminism as a distinctive theoretical framework that is attentive to the historical and epistemic specificities of African women's lives, thereby rejecting its frequent misclassification as a variant of Third-Wave feminism. While the Third Wave did mark an important moment of reckoning with the intersections of race and culture within feminist thought (Oluwaseyi, 2015), Tamale critiques its ideological alignment with Western feminism and its inability to adequately capture the sociopolitical conditions of African women.

Afro-Feminists argue that the genealogies of mainstream feminism are rooted in Euro-American thought systems that often universalise women's experiences through a Western lens (Amaefula, 2021). In doing so, Western feminism has historically framed African women as *'Third World women'* — a reductive and homogenising construct that positions them as a singular, subordinate group in need of saving (Ribeiro, 2016). This framing fails to account for the heterogeneity of African women's agency, context, and resistance. As Goredema (2010, p. 38) powerfully notes, Afro-Feminism challenges such caricatures of the "real" African

woman—one imagined as content with subordination, passive in the face of abuse, and driven only by the desire for respectability.

This critique speaks to Afro-Feminism's refusal to accept frameworks that erase African women's political voice, self-definition, and resistance. Instead, it offers a decolonial and historically grounded alternative that centres African women's experiences as legitimate sources of theory, not as peripheral illustrations of global feminist narratives. In this study, Tamale's decolonial Afro-Feminist perspective provides an important theoretical anchor for interrogating how the policing of Afro-textured hair reflects deeper institutionalised logics of race, gender, and power in post-apartheid South African schools.

African feminism, in contrast to dominant Western feminist frameworks, does not treat African women as a monolithic category (Oyekan, 2014). Rather, it foregrounds the diversity of African women's experiences, shaped by distinct historical and political epochs; namely, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods (Tamale, 2006; Mikell, 1997). This historical orientation allows African feminism to move beyond the often universalist assumptions of Western feminist theory by attending to the socio-cultural, economic, and political complexities that characterise the lives of African women. As such, African feminism deploys contextually grounded analytical categories, including culture, race, gender, sexuality, class, tradition, and heteropatriarchy, to articulate a feminist politics that is sensitive to the realities of African life and thought (Bakare-Yusuf, 2003; Dosekun, 2019; Ossome, 2020).

Goredema (2010, p. 34) aptly describes African feminism as both a feminist epistemology and a rhetorical framework that validates the lived experiences of women of African descent in ways that challenge and extend the boundaries of mainstream (often Western-centric) feminist discourse. It is a tradition that insists on theorising from the South, foregrounding the epistemic agency of African women and girls, and locating their struggles within historically and culturally specific contexts. Within this study, African feminism offered a powerful lens to understand how Black African girls make sense of and resist the regulation of their

Afro-textured hair, an embodied site where race, gender, coloniality, and power converge.

Afro-Feminism, or African Feminism, offers a critical distinction between the experiences of African women, whose histories are marked by colonisation, dispossession, and racial oppression, and those of Western women, who, as McFadden (2007) notes, have often been complicit in the colonial subjugation of others. Goredema (2009) conceptualises Afro-Feminism as a lens that is attuned to the specific historical trajectories, present realities, and future aspirations of African women, recognising their unique struggles and epistemologies (p. 34). In a similar vein, Amaefula (2021, p. 290) argues that African Feminism is driven by a commitment to redressing the structural and symbolic injustices that have long undermined the dignity, autonomy, and agency of African women.

In this study, African Feminism provided a critical and culturally grounded theoretical framework for examining how Black African girls in a racially desegregated secondary school understand, experience, and articulate the policing of their Afro-textured and Afro-styled hair. The framework enabled an analysis that centres Black girls' positionalities as historically marginalised, while also acknowledging their strategies of resistance, self-expression, and identity negotiation in the face of ongoing institutional and cultural surveillance.

However, following Coetzee's (2021) theorisation, I acknowledge that the term *'African'* is conceptually broad, politically contested, and often insufficient for capturing the specific racialised and gendered experiences of Black girls in South Africa. Coetzee (2021) argues that debates around *'Africanness'* are entangled in the country's colonial and apartheid history, where racial identities were constructed and institutionalised through exclusionary state policies. In this context, the homogenising use of *'African'* obscures the distinct forms of marginalisation experienced by those historically classified as *'Black'* under apartheid. Indeed, contemporary discourses often include Coloured and Indian South Africans within the category of *'African'*, affirming their place within an African theoretical and political framework (Pillay, 2019; Nyar, 2012; Habib, 1999). Yet, as Coetzee (2021) highlights, the specific social positioning and lived

realities of *Black African* girls—whose identities are shaped by intersecting legacies of racial and gender subjugation, demand more precise analytical framing.

As such, this study adopts the term *Black African* to refer to a historically oppressed group whose experiences remain shaped by the socio-political residue of apartheid. To adequately theorise the experiences of Black African schoolgirls, particularly in relation to the regulation of their Afro-textured hair, it is necessary to draw on a framework that centres their specific histories and embodied oppressions. For this reason, I employ Black Feminist Theory, which foregrounds the interlocking systems of race and gender as central to understanding Black girls' lived realities (Simien & Clawson, 2004). The following section discusses this theoretical perspective in more detail.

3.3 Black Feminist Theory

Patricia Hill Collins (1986) is widely acknowledged as a foundational figure in the development of Black Feminist Thought, particularly through her theorisation of Black women's standpoints and epistemologies. However, this study aligns more closely with Evelyn M. Simien's (2004) conceptualisation of Black Feminist Theory, which foregrounds the lived realities of Black girls and women as central to political, social, and academic analysis. Simien (2004, p. 83) argues that "Black women and girls are status-deprived because they face discrimination based on race and gender," a dual axis of oppression that results in their systemic marginalisation within socio-political, educational, and economic institutions. This compounded disadvantage reflects the interlocking nature of race- and gender-based subordination, which Black Feminist Theory seeks to expose and contest. Simien and Clawson (2004, p. 794) outline two core themes that structure Black Feminist Theory:

1. **Intersectionality**: A central tenet advanced by scholars such as Crenshaw (1991) and hooks (1984), intersectionality recognises that Black women and girls experience multiple, overlapping forms of oppression. These are not merely additive, but mutually constitutive, shaping aspects of their daily lives and social experiences in ways that differ markedly from those of white women or Black men.

2. **Gender inequality within Black communities**: Black feminist scholars examine how patriarchal structures and gender hierarchies operate internally within Black communities. This theme explores how Black women and girls are often rendered invisible or subordinate even within anti-racist or pan-Africanist discourses, thus calling attention to the need for intra-communal gender critique.

This study engaged specifically with the first theme of intersectionality in its examination of how race and gender intersect in shaping the experiences of Black African schoolgirls within a racially desegregated secondary school in South Africa. The use of Black Feminist Theory in this context provided an essential analytical lens through which to understand the policing of Afro-textured hair as a practice rooted not only in racialised aesthetics but also in patriarchal and disciplinary power. It positions Black girls not as peripheral to broader feminist theory, but as central bodies whose narratives offer crucial insights into how institutional power is encoded and resisted in everyday life.

Other scholars have extended the reach of Black Feminist Theory, often referring to it as Black Feminist Thought (Wade et al., 2022). Patricia Hill Collins (1986), a seminal voice in this tradition, defines Black feminist thought as a body of knowledge produced by Black women that articulates their unique standpoints, lived experiences, and epistemologies. Central to this framework is the argument that Black women's insights are not merely personal or anecdotal but constitute critical knowledge systems essential to understanding the structural dimensions of their social realities. Collins foregrounds the importance of Black women's voices in analysing how intersecting systems of race, gender, and class shape their marginalisation.

As Cooper (2015) affirms, Black Feminist Thought is especially impactful in discourses surrounding race and gender, as it deliberately centres the often-overlooked experiences of Black girls and women. It acts as a counter-hegemonic force that challenges dominant narratives and resists the objectification, silencing, and stereotyping of Black female subjectivities. Collins (1986, p. S16) encapsulates this resistance through the concepts of “self-definition” and “self-evaluation”, which represent acts of reclaiming identity and affirming one’s

humanity in the face of misrepresentation. In this regard, Black feminist thought does not merely critique dominant power structures, but it also offers a transformative framework that repositions Black girls and women as knowledge producers, cultural agents, and active participants in the remaking of their realities.

Additionally, Black Feminist Thought places significant emphasis on the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression; a dynamic that remains deeply entrenched in South African society. This theoretical lens departs from traditional frameworks that isolate single axes of oppression, instead advocating for a more integrative approach that recognises these dimensions as interdependent systems of domination. As Simien (2004) argues, Black feminist scholarship must resist binary analyses that treat race and gender as separate, mutually exclusive categories, and instead acknowledge the intersecting and mutually reinforcing patterns of discrimination that shape Black women's and girls lived experiences.

In this study, I specifically engaged with the concept of "gendered racism" as articulated by Wade et al. (2022, p. 4) to analyse how the policing of Afro-textured hair in a racially desegregated school setting functions as a manifestation of both racialised and gendered control. Black girls' hair is not simply regulated through aesthetic or disciplinary norms, but through institutional logics that reflect broader socio-historical structures of racism, patriarchy, and classism. By employing Black feminist theory, this research interrogates how race- and gender-based prejudice, harassment, and exclusion are enacted through the everyday surveillance and regulation of Black African girls' natural hair textures and styles.

Moreover, Black feminist theory is not solely a diagnostic tool for identifying oppression; it also serves as a framework for recognising agency, resistance, and liberation. In this study, participants' narratives reveal how Black girls navigate, challenge, and actively resist the policing of their hair through everyday acts of defiance, redefinition, and self-affirmation. These practices demonstrate how the regulation of Black hair is not passively accepted but becomes a site of political struggle and identity assertion.

By drawing on Black feminist theory, this study centres the lived experiences and epistemologies of Black African girls in a racially desegregated South African school. It positions hair not merely as a symbol of cultural identity, but as a contested terrain through which racial and gender hierarchies are both enforced and subverted. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader decolonial feminist agenda that seeks to foreground the voices of those historically excluded from dominant academic and institutional discourses.

3.4. The Application of Afro-Feminism and Black Feminist Theory in the Study

In this study, African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory were not only conceptual frames but also operational tools that shaped the entire research process, from the formulation of the research problem to the interpretation of data. Their combined use enabled a critical, culturally grounded, and intersectional engagement with the phenomenon of hair-based discrimination experienced by Black African girls in a racially desegregated South African school.

African Feminism was applied in this study to foreground the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts shaping Black girls' experiences. Drawing on African feminist principles, as discussed in Chapter Four, the research design centred on African girls' perspectives as knowledge-producing and politically significant. During data generation, African Feminism informed the participatory visual methodology, particularly the use of drawing and narrative storytelling, as it allowed girls to express their embodied realities in ways that were not constrained by Western academic conventions. It further enabled a respectful engagement with participants' cultural identities, traditions, and language, ensuring that the research process was attuned to the social worlds of African girls.

In the analysis phase, African Feminism provided the critical lens through which to understand how colonial and apartheid legacies continue to inform school norms regarding hair, appearance, and discipline. For example, the continued expectation that learners conform to Eurocentric beauty standards (i.e., such as 'neat' or 'manageable' hairstyles) was understood not merely as a preference, but as a manifestation of historical anti-Blackness (see also Oyedemi, 2016). African

Feminism enabled an interrogation of these practices as forms of institutional violence rooted in a failure to validate Black aesthetics and African girlhood. Additionally, the theory helped interpret girls' emotional responses and strategies of survival as meaningful political acts aimed at reclaiming dignity, beauty, and agency.

Black Feminist Theory was used alongside African Feminism to engage with the intersectionality of race, gender, and institutional power. Guided by Simien's (2004) articulation of Black feminist thought, the study focused on gendered racism (for example, how discriminatory school practices reflect both anti-Blackness and patriarchal control over Black girls' bodies). During focus group discussions, Black Feminist Theory provided the conceptual structure for probing how participants experienced both racialised discipline and gendered expectations. For instance, as I show in Chapter Five, when participants spoke of being called 'untidy' or likened to boys because of their natural hairstyles or fade cuts, these narratives were analysed as manifestations of intersectional oppression that regulated not only racial identity but also expressions of gender non-conformity.

Moreover, Black Feminist Theory guided the interpretation of participants' resistance practices. From embracing natural hair despite institutional pushback to articulating pride in their identities, the girls' actions were analysed as everyday expressions of resistance, what Collins (1986) describes as self-definition and self-valuation. These were not minor acts, but rather profound counter-narratives that disrupted dominant ideas about Black femininity and respectability.

Crucially, both African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory helped ensure that the research did not treat participants as passive subjects of oppression but recognised them as active agents of change. The theories shaped the ethical stance of the study, ensuring that participants' knowledge was not extracted but honoured. Their voices were central to the research, not only methodologically, but also epistemologically, as legitimate sources of theory in their own right.

By integrating African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory, the study maintained a dual focus: while African Feminism grounded the inquiry in the specific socio-historical realities of African girls, Black Feminist Theory provided

a transnational and intersectional lens to critically engage with the institutional mechanisms of hair policing and the gendered dimensions of racial discrimination. Together, they provided a coherent, context-sensitive, and justice-oriented framework through which the policing of Afro-textured hair could be understood as a complex site of oppression, identity negotiation, and resistance.

3.4.1. Integrating Afro-Feminism and Black Feminist Theory for Analysis in the Study

As established in Chapter One, this study investigated how Black schoolgirls in a racially desegregated secondary school experience, navigate, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair. While Afro-textured hair is a powerful marker of cultural identity and pride, it remains a contested site within educational institutions that continue to valorise Eurocentric beauty standards (Richardson, 2019; Knight, 2019; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Lawrence, 2017). These normative expectations often position natural Black hair as unruly, inappropriate, or unprofessional, reproducing colonial and apartheid logics of respectability and bodily regulation.

The combined use of African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory in this study allowed for a multidimensional interrogation of how race, gender, and institutional power intersect in the regulation of Black girls' appearances. While both frameworks are grounded in the lived realities of Black women and girls, they bring distinct yet complementary emphases. African Feminism offered a contextually specific lens rooted in the socio-historical realities of African societies, focusing on the legacy of colonialism, cultural continuity, and structural gender inequality in post-apartheid South Africa (Goredema, 2021; Amaefula, 2021). Black Feminist Theory, as framed by scholars such as Simien (2004), Collins (1986), and Crenshaw (1991), contributed a robust intersectional lens for analysing how race and gender co-construct the lived experiences of Black girls, particularly in institutional settings.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the literature on Afro-textured hair has consistently shown how discriminatory school policies disproportionately target Black girls for wearing natural hairstyles such as Afros, braids, dreadlocks, and fades (Asare,

2023; Vernado, 2023; Nkimbeng et al., 2023). As the South African media reports, these styles are often labelled as untidy or unacceptable under school dress codes that remain informed by colonial aesthetics. African Feminism enabled this study to trace how such policies are not just about discipline, but are also reflective of deeper, historically rooted ideologies that delegitimise African aesthetics and impose conformity to whiteness. The theory was especially useful in unpacking how participants internalised and resisted these narratives, as well as how cultural pride and gendered embodiment are negotiated in postcolonial schooling spaces.

Simultaneously, Black Feminist Theory allowed for an exploration of the daily, lived expressions of intersectional oppression, as experienced by participants who encountered racialised and gendered scrutiny in school. This was particularly evident in how school authorities monitored and commented on hair length, style, and texture, often positioning Black girls' natural appearances as deviant or disruptive. Black Feminist Theory also guided the analysis of participants' resistance strategies, whether through verbal challenges to authority, the continued wearing of Afro-textured styles, or creative self-representation in participatory drawings and discussions. These acts were interpreted as political practices through which Black girls assert their identity in the face of institutional marginalisation (Collins, 1986).

Importantly, integrating both African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory allowed the study to move beyond identifying individual experiences of discrimination toward critiquing the systemic and structural forces that sustain such practices. It also ensured that participants were not positioned as passive victims, but as active agents who resist and reimagine what it means to be Black and a girl in a school space that continues to reflect exclusionary norms. Together, these lenses provided a rich analytical foundation for exploring how Afro-textured hair becomes both a site of oppression and a locus of resistance; a deeply political terrain where colonial residues, gendered control, and cultural affirmation collide.

3.5. Discussion: Towards a Theoretical Framework

This study engaged with the everyday experiences of Black schoolgirls in a racially desegregated secondary school to examine how they experience, navigate,

and resist the policing of Afro-textured hair, a practice that continues to function as a subtle but powerful mechanism of exclusion in South African educational spaces. At the heart of this study was the recognition that Afro-textured hair is more than a matter of grooming; it is a politically charged site where race, gender, identity, and institutional power converge. The study specifically sought to explore how Black girls interpret and articulate their experiences of hair-based discrimination and how they resist these regulatory norms within their school environments.

The analysis was guided by two intersecting theoretical lenses: African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory. These frameworks were central to unpacking the socio-historical legacies, cultural contestations, and embodied power dynamics that underpin the regulation of Black girls' hair. Both theories centre the voices and lived realities of Black women and girls, foregrounding their narratives as valid sites of knowledge production. By employing these frameworks, the study was able to move beyond descriptive accounts of discrimination to critically examine the structural forces and intersectional oppressions that shape Black girls' experiences in racially mixed schools.

The review of scholarly literature in Chapter Two revealed how Afro-textured hair has historically been framed as inferior, deviant, or unprofessional, especially within institutions that continue to uphold Eurocentric aesthetic and behavioural norms (Knight, 2019; Lambright, 2024). These deeply entrenched biases have long impacted Black women's and girls' self-image, social belonging, and educational outcomes. The integration of African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory offered a critical lens to contextualise these enduring patterns of marginalisation. Specifically, African Feminism enabled the study to trace how colonial and apartheid-era ideologies persist in contemporary school policies and disciplinary practices, while also affirming the importance of cultural pride, self- love, and African girlhood as acts of resistance and empowerment.

Simultaneously, Black Feminist Theory, with its focus on intersectionality, self-definition, and gendered racism, allowed the study to highlight how race and gender operate together to regulate Black girls' bodies. The framework was particularly useful in capturing the nuanced and often contradictory ways in which

Black girls resist institutional norms, whether through everyday acts of defiance, reappropriation of natural hairstyles, or the articulation of counter-narratives that affirm their beauty and agency. These moments of resistance, as theorised by Collins (1986) and Simien (2004), are not simply personal choices but political acts that disrupt dominant discourses and reclaim ownership over one's identity.

In combining these two theoretical lenses, the study adopted a grounded and culturally sensitive approach to understanding how Afro-textured hair is regulated and resisted in South African schools. African Feminism brought attention to the historical and cultural specificity of African girls' experiences, while Black Feminist Theory emphasised the structural and intersectional dimensions of oppression and resistance. Together, these theories provided a comprehensive framework that validated the experiences of Black schoolgirls, challenged dominant narratives that frame their hair and bodies as problematic, and amplified their voices in a research context where they are often silenced or overlooked.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework adopted in this study underscores the importance of centering Black girls' narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge. It affirms the need for decolonial, intersectional, and feminist approaches that not only critique systems of oppression but also celebrate the resilience, resistance, and humanity of Black girls in post-apartheid South Africa.

3.5.1. A Framework for Understanding and Addressing the Policing of Afro-textured Hair in Desegregated Schools

Grounded in the research questions that guided this study, two intersecting theoretical perspectives (Afro-feminism and Black Feminist Theory) were adopted to inform the analysis and interpretation of data. Together, these perspectives provided a critical lens through which to understand and disrupt the persistent regulation of Afro-textured hair among Black girls in racially desegregated South African schools. Their integration not only offered conceptual clarity but also produced a context-sensitive and politically grounded theoretical framework for addressing racialised and gendered forms of institutional control.

The first theoretical position, African Feminism, centres the lived realities and material conditions of African women and girls, taking into account the enduring legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and racism (Amaefula, 2021; Goredema, 2021). African Feminism framed the analysis of how Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair understand and articulate their experiences of hair policing within their schools. It foregrounds the argument that African girls are subjected to aesthetic and behavioural norms that are deeply rooted in colonial histories and that delegitimise African expressions of identity. In this study, African Feminism illuminated how these normative pressures impact girls' sense of belonging, self-worth, and cultural expression.

The second theoretical lens, Black Feminist Theory, offered a complementary but distinct analytical tool by attending specifically to the intersectionality of race and gender as co-constituting forces of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991; Simien, 2004). Black Feminist Theory was instrumental in analysing how participants actively negotiate, challenge, and resist institutionalised forms of hair-based discrimination. This framework allowed for the exploration of participants' agency—not as reactionary, but as rooted in a politics of self-definition and refusal of imposed norms (Collins, 1986). Thus, it enabled a shift from viewing Black girls solely as victims of discrimination to recognising them as active agents who engage in everyday forms of resistance to reclaim their identities.

Emerging from this analysis is a composite theoretical framework for understanding and addressing the policing of Afro-textured hair in desegregated schools. This framework is visually represented in Figure 3.1 below. To analyse data responding to the two research questions posed in the study, two propositions for data analysis were formulated in this dissertation.

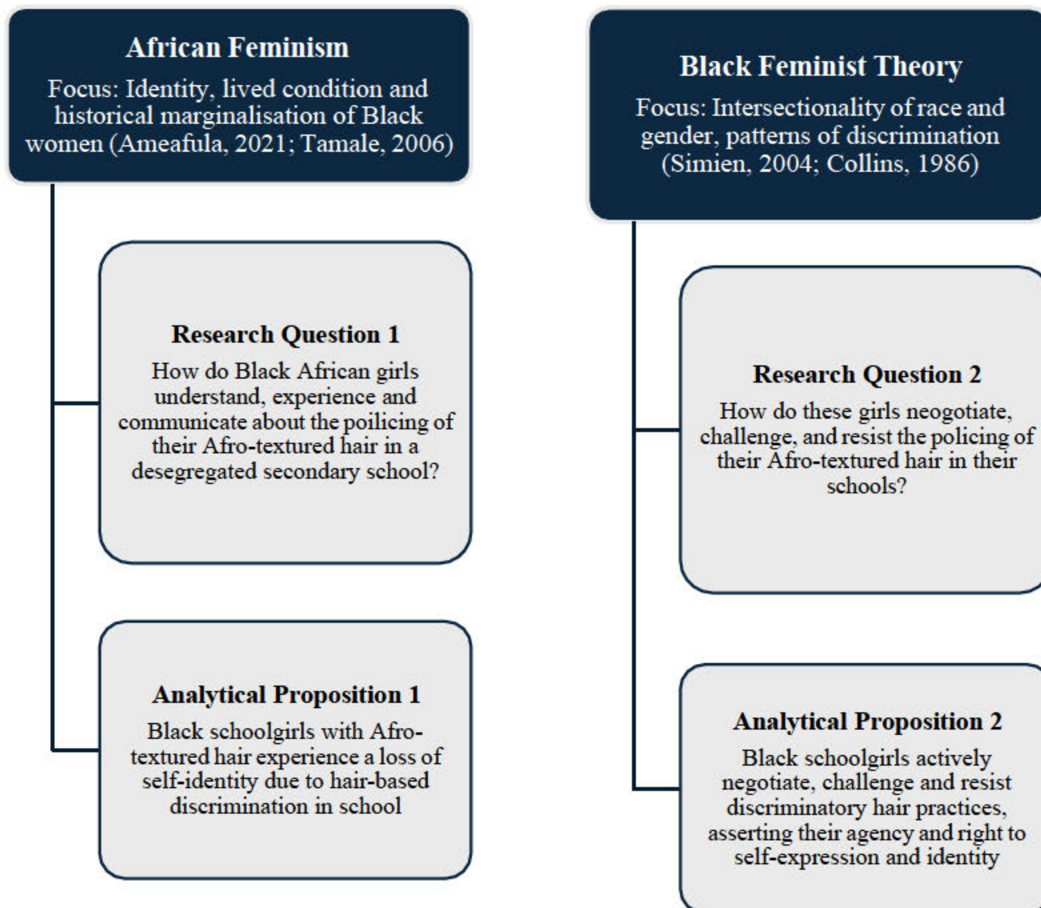

FIGURE 3.1: FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE POLICING OF AFRO-TEXTURED HAIR IN DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS

The first research question that I sought to address was: *How do Black African schoolgirls understand, experience, and communicate about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in a desegregated secondary school*? Linked to African feminism, the study's analysis was premised on the proposition that Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair experience a loss of self-identity in their desegregated schools due to hair-based discrimination. This proposition guided the analysis of participants' reflections on their everyday encounters with school codes of conduct, teacher surveillance, and peer scrutiny. As Tamale (2006) emphasises, the historical and political legacies of coloniality continue to shape African girls' social experiences. Afro-textured hair becomes a site through which institutional power operates, often delegitimising Black identity in subtle but insidious ways.

The second research question in this study was: *How do these girls negotiate, challenge, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in their schools*? Informed by Black Feminist Theory, the study's analysis was premised on the assumption that Black schoolgirls subjected to hair-based discrimination in their schools actively negotiate, challenge, and resist these discriminatory practices. Collins (1986) contends that Black feminist thought is rooted in the ideas and perspectives of Black women, underscoring their agency in challenging oppressive structures. This proposition thus provides a foundation for examining how Black schoolgirls mobilise resistance strategies against institutionalised hair policing, affirming their right to self-expression and identity.

By drawing on these theoretical propositions, the study offers a comprehensive and intersectional framework for analysing the policing of Afro-textured hair in post-apartheid educational institutions. The integration of African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory allowed for a robust engagement with both the structural and experiential dimensions of hair-based discrimination, highlighting how Black girls continue to resist, redefine, and reimagine their identities within systems not designed with them in mind.

3.6 Chapter Synthesis

This study examined how Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair are subjected to hair policing in their racially desegregated secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal and how they negotiate, challenge, and resist these policing systems. In this chapter, I have presented the theoretical framework that informed the data analysis. The chapter began with sections outlining the two theoretical lenses that informed the study's analysis, namely African Feminism Theory and Black Feminist Theory. Emerging from this chapter are two key propositions that guided data analysis. In the next chapter, I outline the study's methodology, detailing the research design, data collection processes, and analytical approaches used to engage with the experiences and perspectives of Black schoolgirls regarding hair-based discrimination.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter One, the study presented in this dissertation investigated how Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair understand, experience, and communicate the regulation of their natural hair in a desegregated secondary school in South Africa. It further explored how these learners actively challenge and resist institutionalised practices of hair policing that marginalise Afro-textured hair within schooling environments. The focus was placed on a specific desegregated secondary school where participants shared their lived experiences of hair-based discrimination. Through their narratives, the study foregrounds the everyday strategies of resistance employed by Black girls in the face of subtle and overt policing of their cultural and racial identity as expressed through their hair.

While the preceding chapter presented the theoretical framing of the study, this chapter turns to the research design and methodological considerations underpinning the study. It outlines the critical research paradigm that guided the inquiry, the qualitative approach adopted, and participatory drawing as the specific participatory method used to elicit rich, nuanced data from the participants. The chapter details the procedures followed for data production and analysis, paying close attention to the use of participatory drawing and focus group discussions. Finally, it reflects on the ethical protocols observed throughout the research process and addresses the trustworthiness and rigour of the study's findings.

In positioning the experiences of Black schoolgirls at the centre of this inquiry, this study aligns itself with feminist research traditions that privilege marginalised voices and seek to disrupt dominant narratives (see Collins, 2000; Tamale, 2006). The methodology adopted was therefore not only designed to gather empirical data but also to affirm the agency and epistemic authority of Black girls whose hair continues to be a site of surveillance, regulation, and resistance within South African schools.

4.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm refers to the overarching philosophical and theoretical framework that informs and directs the entire research process. It shapes the researcher’s worldview and guides decisions regarding the formulation of research questions, the selection of methods, and the interpretation of findings (Abbaidia, 2022; Ayton & Tsindos, 2023). Put differently, paradigms are lenses through which researchers view the social world and make sense of individual and collective experiences (Hassmén, Keegan & Piggott, 2016; Sheppard, 2019). They define what constitutes valid knowledge, determine how that knowledge can be acquired, and establish the criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of that knowledge within a given disciplinary field.

This study was grounded in the critical research paradigm, a tradition in the social sciences that interrogates the complex interplay of power, inequality, and social transformation (Maree, 2016). Central to the critical paradigm is a commitment to exposing and challenging hegemonic structures that sustain domination and marginalisation, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist legacies (Cleary, 2001; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This paradigm is particularly attuned to analysing how social phenomena, such as race, gender, class, and culture, intersect to reproduce systemic injustices (Asghar, 2013; Alhoussawi, 2023).

In the context of this study, the critical paradigm was indispensable for examining how the institutional regulation of Afro-textured hair in desegregated South African schools constitutes a form of racialised and gendered disciplinary power. Through this lens, I was able to critically analyse the narratives of Black schoolgirls, paying attention not only to their experiences of marginalisation but also to their strategies of resistance, agency, and identity reclamation. The critical paradigm, therefore, offered both a theoretical orientation and a political commitment to amplifying the voices of those whose identities are routinely marginalised within schooling institutions (Callaghan, 2016; Celikates & Jeffrey Flynn, 2023).

Aligned with this paradigm, the study employed participatory visual methodologies (PVM), an approach that centres the lived experiences and epistemic agency of participants (Barley & Russell, 2018; Black, 2019; Burges, 2024). As a form of decolonial praxis, PVM allows participants to express complex affective and cultural experiences through drawings, visual metaphors, and discussion (Mitchell, 2011; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Black & Chambers, 2019). Informed by Afro-feminist and Black feminist principles, the use of PVM in this study enabled Black girls to co-construct knowledge about their everyday encounters with the policing of their natural hair. These methodologies not only acknowledge the cultural significance of Afro-textured hair but also resist dominant Eurocentric research practices that often exclude or silence the voices of Black girls in knowledge production. Thus, the critical paradigm, coupled with Afro-feminist and participatory methodologies, provided the ideal framework for interrogating the racialised and gendered dynamics of hair regulation in schools and for affirming the narratives of Black girls as central to transformative educational discourse.

4.3 Research Methodology

A research methodology refers to the overarching strategy and rationale that informs how a research project is conceptualised, conducted, and interpreted (McCombes & George, 2014; Swarooprani, 2022; Bahishti, 2022). It encompasses the systematic procedures, techniques, and tools used by researchers to investigate a particular phenomenon and to make sense of the social world (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Maree, 2016). Methodology is not simply a set of mechanical procedures—it is fundamentally epistemological and philosophical, guiding the researcher in determining what kinds of knowledge are sought, what data are required, and how that data should be generated, interpreted, and represented (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Kothari, 2004).

In essence, a research methodology provides the strategic blueprint for the study, offering clarity on the research approach, data production methods, and the analytical lenses to be employed (Khan, Raman & Sambamoorthy, 2023; Kumar, 2011). It directs the researcher in making informed decisions about the selection

of participants, the tools and techniques for data generation, and the interpretive processes used to address the research questions (Bahishti, 2022; Sreekumar, 2023; Varghesi, 2025). As Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) argue, the research process broadly follows three critical stages: first, posing a question or identifying a problem for investigation; second, generating or collecting data to explore or resolve the issue; and third, analysing and presenting findings that offer answers or insights into the posed question.

In the context of this study, the methodology was not merely instrumental but politically and ethically informed. Given the focus on the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair in desegregated schools, which is a phenomenon embedded in histories of race, gender, and power, the study employed a qualitative, critical feminist methodology that centres lived experience, embodiment, and resistance. This approach was particularly well-suited to capturing the complexities of how Black girls make meaning of, and respond to, institutionalised hair discrimination in educational spaces (Daher, 2017; Wallwey & Kajfez, 2023).

Through a combination of participatory drawing and focus group discussions, the study sought to generate deep, reflective, and dialogic forms of data that could illuminate the affective and political dimensions of hair policing. As such, the research methodology served not only as a procedural guide, but also as a critical and reflexive tool through which to engage the voices and subjectivities of marginalised learners. By foregrounding the experiential knowledge of Black girls, the methodology aligned closely with the study's theoretical framework and ethical imperative to disrupt dominant educational discourses that render Black identities invisible or deviant.

4.4 Qualitative Research Approach

In this study, I adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair in desegregated South African secondary schools. Qualitative research is grounded in a holistic and interpretive inquiry that seeks to understand human experiences within their natural settings, drawing meaning from the perspectives of those directly affected (Groenland & Dana, 2020; Tenny,

Brannan & Brannan, 2022; Oranga & Matere, 2023). This approach enabled me to produce rich, nuanced, and contextually embedded data, capturing the everyday realities and complex subjectivities of Black schoolgirls as they navigate institutional spaces where their hair becomes a site of control and contestation.

The decision to use a qualitative approach was deliberate, rooted in the epistemological aim of accessing and amplifying the lived experiences of Black girls in their own voices. Qualitative research is especially useful for examining social phenomena that are multifaceted, culturally situated, and deeply affective, such as hair-based discrimination and the gendered regulation of Black bodies (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020; Ugwu & Uze, 2023; Varghesi, 2025). As Salvador (2016) notes, qualitative research privileges verbal and textual representations of meaning over numerical abstraction, making it particularly well-suited for studies concerned with embodiment, identity, and marginalisation.

Through this approach, I was able to engage with the participants' narratives in a way that foregrounded their understandings, emotions, and agentic responses to the policing of their Afro-textured hair. The study focused on gathering in-depth, first-person accounts (Burns & Grove, 2009; Haradhan, 2018; Lim, 2024) that revealed how participants experience, interpret, negotiate, and resist racialised and gendered forms of aesthetic regulation within their schools. Where necessary, probing questions were used during data collection to allow participants to elaborate on their stories and clarify meanings, in line with best practices in narrative inquiry (Maree, 2007; Belotto, 2017; Elhami, 2022; Robinson, 2023; Neuert, Kunz & Gummer, 2024).

Qualitative research follows an idiographic orientation, which focuses on the specificities of individuals' experiences rather than attempting to generalise findings across large, representative populations (Husbands, Delago, & Abdi, 2017). This individualised focus is critical when working with marginalised groups whose experiences may be obscured or misrepresented by dominant discourses and quantitative paradigms (Peck &Mummery, 2019; McLeod, 2013). As McDermott (2014) argues, qualitative methodologies are well-positioned to surface the sociocultural and political dimensions of everyday life, particularly

when those issues are expressed through the understandings and lived experiences of participants.

In sum, the qualitative approach provided a robust and ethically sensitive pathway for engaging with Black schoolgirls' perspectives on the policing of their hair. It allowed for an in-depth exploration of the meanings they attach to their hair, their encounters with institutional regulation, and the everyday practices of resistance through which they assert dignity, cultural identity, and bodily autonomy in desegregated schooling environments.

4.5 Research Design

A research design refers to the overall strategy and framework employed to address the research questions and achieve the aim of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Bhandari, 2020; Khanday & Khanam, 2023; McCombes & Bhandari, 2025). It provides both the structure and direction necessary to guide the research process, offering a coherent plan for generating and interpreting evidence (Jain, 2022). A well-constructed research design begins with philosophical assumptions about knowledge and reality, which then inform decisions about the selection of participants, data generation methods, and the strategies for data analysis and interpretation (Creswell et al., 2016; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Dawadi, 2021; Pederson, 2024).

This study employed a qualitative case study research design as its primary mode of inquiry. The case study design was appropriate given the focus on exploring a complex, context-specific phenomenon; namely, the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair within a desegregated South African secondary school. As Tetnowski (2015) explains, case studies are particularly useful in answering nuanced, real-world questions that require in-depth engagement with participants and settings (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Coombs, 2022).

Creswell and Clark (2007) note that case study research allows for the development of a rich, detailed understanding of a single case or multiple cases by incorporating various sources of data, such as interviews, observations, and

documents. In this study, the selected case comprised a single racially diverse secondary school where participants' lived experiences of hair-based discrimination were explored in depth. The school served as a bounded system within which the phenomenon of interest could be examined holistically and contextually.

According to Yin (2009), case studies are well-suited to research that investigates contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. This characteristic was crucial for this study, as the regulation of Afro-textured hair in schools is deeply embedded in broader social, cultural, and historical processes related to race, gender, and power. Stake (2005) further asserts that the strength of the case study lies in its focus on the particularity and complexity of the case itself, rather than on the replication of findings across large populations.

The case study design was therefore selected for its potential to offer thick, contextually rich insights into the lived experiences, meanings, and resistance strategies of Black girls who navigate the institutional regulation of their hair. It allowed for an intensive, situated analysis of a bounded case, aligning with the study's broader theoretical commitment to critical, feminist, and decolonial inquiry.

4.6 Research Site: Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School

The research was conducted at Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School (a pseudonym), which is a racially desegregated school situated in Dundee, a small coal-mining town in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. As reported in Chapter One, Dundee forms part of the Endumeni Local Municipality and falls under the Umzinyathi District. While the town has a rich historical profile, particularly as a key site during the Anglo-Boer War, its post-apartheid transformation reflects broader national shifts in racial demography and social composition. Once regarded as a predominantly White-Afrikaner stronghold under apartheid, Dundee has since undergone significant racial diversification. Today, the town comprises Black African, Coloured, Indian, and a small minority

of White residents. Despite these demographic changes, racial tensions, often reported through incidents such as farm-related violence, remain a visible feature of the region's socio-political landscape.

Notably, outside of media reports, very little empirical research has explored the racialised and gendered dynamics of schooling in this locale. This absence presents a critical gap, particularly in understanding how broader socio-political tensions are reproduced or contested within public schooling environments. The school selected for this study, referred to here as Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, is one of only three racially desegregated secondary schools in the area, making it an ideal case for examining the everyday experiences of Black learners within a supposedly integrated educational space.

Dundee Comprehensive is a large, no-fee public school categorised as a Quintile Two institution, which reflects the socio-economic disadvantage of its surrounding community, as designated by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN DoE). The school draws its learners from a wide catchment area that includes peri-urban and rural settlements such as Glencoe, Enkosini, and Nyanyadu, many of which are marked by poverty, unemployment, and limited access to infrastructure. A significant proportion of learners come from child-headed households and socially vulnerable families, further intensifying the socio-economic pressures they face.

At the time of data generation, Dundee Comprehensive had an enrolment of 1,265 learners and a teaching staff of 45 educators, racially composed of Black Africans, Indians, Coloureds, and a small number of Whites. Formerly designated as a whites-only institution under apartheid, the school had undergone a demographic shift, with fewer than 50 white learners and only three white educators remaining on staff. Despite this apparent transformation, the school continues to embody what Pattman and Bhana (2021, p. 204) describe as a persistent "white tone"—a normative cultural ethos rooted in whiteness and its attendant privileges. This racialised ethos is not merely historical but actively maintained through institutional practices that regulate and police Black learners' bodies. As illustrated in Chapter Five, the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair reveals

how the school continues to operationalise white-coded aesthetic norms, thereby reproducing racial hierarchies within a supposedly post-apartheid, desegregated educational space.

With an average teacher–learner ratio of 1:60, Dundee Comprehensive is severely overcrowded, far exceeding the acceptable 1:25 standard outlined in South Africa's National Policy on Post Provisioning Norms and the National Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure (2020). This structural inadequacy places immense strain on teachers and undermines the provision of quality teaching and learning. Overcrowded classrooms not only hinder effective pedagogical engagement and assessment but also exacerbate behavioural management challenges, reduce opportunities for individualised learner support, and contribute to widening educational inequalities. Within this context, the intersection of overcrowding and institutional neglect intensifies the vulnerability of marginalised learners, particularly Black girls, whose experiences of racialised surveillance and gendered regulation, as detailed in Chapter Five, unfold in a space already saturated with systemic constraint.

Despite infrastructural limitations, the school has implemented several social support programmes to mitigate the effects of poverty and inequality. These include a government-funded school nutrition scheme, a stationery provision programme, a sanitary towel distribution initiative for female learners, and a school uniform donation drive facilitated by outgoing Grade 12 learners. While these interventions are commendable, they function within a context of systemic under-resourcing and high learner vulnerability, including challenges such as substance use, teenage pregnancy, and tensions associated with ethnic grouping among learners from different rural areas, particularly between learners from Dundee and uMsinga, a nearby rural municipality. These tensions sometimes manifest as intergroup conflict within the school, echoing broader ethno-political dynamics at play in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

Importantly, the school operates within the legislative framework of the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), both of which prohibit discrimination based on race, gender,

ethnicity, or culture. Schools are also bound by the Department of Basic Education's Guidelines for the Consideration of School Governing Body Policies, which state that codes of conduct, including grooming policies, must not infringe on learners' rights to dignity, equality, and cultural expression. However, research has shown that despite these progressive policy frameworks, the everyday enforcement of school rules often reflects racialised and gendered biases, particularly in former Whites-only or racially mixed schools (Pattman & Bhana, 2021; Chisholm & Sujee, 2006; Soudien, 2007).

It is within this policy-practice gap and socio-economic-cultural context that the present study is situated. Dundee Comprehensive presents a compelling case for analysing how institutional cultures and school-level regulations interact with learners' embodied identities, such as the wearing of Afro-textured hair, to either uphold or subvert constitutional values. The school thus functions as both a research site and a microcosm through which to interrogate the ongoing contradictions of post-apartheid education and transformation.

4.6.1 Gaining Access to the School

To ensure ethical compliance, credibility, and procedural rigour in the research process, I followed several regulatory steps to gain access to the research site and to facilitate participant recruitment. Establishing institutional access was a critical first step, particularly given the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the participant group.

Initial contact was made with the principal of Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, where I formally introduced the purpose and scope of the study. Following a preliminary meeting, which also included the school's Learner Support Agent (LSA), Ms Xaba, the principal granted written permission for the study to be conducted at the school. Ms Xaba additionally provided a letter confirming her availability to assist throughout the data generation process. Her support was especially important given her close working relationship with learners and her insight into their pastoral and psychosocial realities.

In collaboration with Ms Xaba, I visited the Grade 9, 10 and 11 classrooms to facilitate purposive sampling. We specifically identified Black African girls with Afro-textured hair in Grades 9 to 11 as potential participants. The decision to focus on these three grades was informed by both ethical and practical considerations. These learners had spent sufficient time at the school to have developed contextual awareness of its institutional culture and policies, particularly in relation to appearance and discipline. In contrast, Grade 8 learners were considered too new to the school to offer the depth of insight required, while Grade 12 learners were purposively excluded to avoid any disruption to their preparation for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations.

The exclusion of Grade 12 learners from the study was a deliberate ethical decision aligned with the principle of non-maleficence, which obliges researchers to avoid causing harm or placing undue pressure on participants (Mertens, 2014). Given the academic intensity of matriculation, involving Grade 12s could have introduced unnecessary stress and compromised their educational responsibilities. Furthermore, all data generation activities, such as participatory workshops and focus group discussions, were scheduled outside regular academic hours. These sessions took place after school, on weekends, and during school holidays, in accordance with agreements made with the school principal. This approach ensured minimal disruption to the formal teaching programme while facilitating an ethical, inclusive, and voluntary research environment in which participants could engage meaningfully without compromising their schooling.

The collaboration with Ms Xaba in participant recruitment and logistical coordination played a crucial role in ensuring that the sampling process was both ethically sound and contextually responsive. Her position within the school enabled trust-building with potential participants and their caregivers, while also helping to navigate institutional protocols with sensitivity. Importantly, this collaborative approach reflects the study's commitment to feminist and decolonial research methodologies, which prioritise relational ethics, mutual respect, and community-rooted knowledge practices (Tamale, 2020). Rather than imposing an extractive model of research, the process centred on reciprocity and care — values

that are essential when working with marginalised youth in historically unequal schooling contexts.

4.7 Participant Sampling and Recruitment

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify and recruit participants who could meaningfully contribute to the exploration of how Black schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair experience, understand, and resist hair-based policing in a desegregated school environment. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; McCombes, 2023). It is widely used in qualitative research to ensure that participants possess the experiential knowledge necessary to engage critically with the phenomenon under study.

In this case, the sampling criteria were clearly defined: participants had to identify as Black African girls aged between 15 and 17 years, be enrolled in Grades 9 to 11, and wear or maintain Afro-textured hair and/or style. All the participants were learners at Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, a racially diverse public institution in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The selection of this demographic was not incidental. Rather, it reflected the study's commitment to centring the voices of those whose bodily aesthetics are often subject to surveillance and regulation in school spaces that continue to reflect vestiges of colonial and apartheid-era disciplinary cultures (Pattman & Bhana, 2021). To emphasise a point made above, Grade 12 learners were intentionally excluded to avoid interference with their final National Senior Certificate examinations, and Grade 8 learners were considered too new to the school context to provide the depth of insight required.

The recruitment process was facilitated in close collaboration with the school's LSA teacher, Ms Xaba, who not only helped identify eligible learners but also acted as an ethical gatekeeper. Following the initial selection, a meeting was arranged with the prospective participants, held in a secluded classroom allocated for the duration of the study. During this session, I introduced myself as a Master's student conducting research under the auspices of the University of KwaZulu-

Natal. I explained the aim and objectives of the study, emphasising that participation was entirely voluntary, and assured participants of confidentiality, anonymity, and the secure handling of all data. Parental and guardian consent, as well as learner assent, were obtained following institutional ethical protocols.

This meeting also served as an important opportunity to build rapport and address participants' concerns. Several learners expressed anxiety about whether the findings would be used to publicly expose the school or implicate specific teachers. I assured them that pseudonyms would be used for both the school and all individuals involved, and that the research aimed to understand systemic issues rather than assign blame. This assurance appeared to increase participants' willingness to engage openly. Another concern related to the language to be used during data production. Learners were concerned about being expected to speak exclusively in English, as they felt they would be more expressive in their local home language of isiZulu. After consulting with my supervisor, I confirmed that participants were welcome to communicate in any language they were most comfortable with, including isiZulu, which is the predominant language in the region. A further query was raised about the drawing component of the workshops, with one learner worried about whether artistic skill was required. I clarified that the drawing process was about self-expression rather than artistic proficiency, and that all forms of visual representation were welcome.

Ultimately, 16 participants were recruited— 10 from the initial sampling exercise, and six additional learners who showed interest and requested to join the study. Given that they met all the eligibility criteria, after consulting with my supervisor, I allowed this last group of participants to join the study. A summary of participants' biographical information is provided in Table 4.1, below.

Table 4.1: Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Age	Grade	Gender Identity	Hairstyle
1. Buhle	15	09	Black Girl	Short Afro
2. Alora	15	09	Black Girl	Long Braids
3. Thando	15	09	Black Girl	Short Afro
4. Hope	15	10	Black Girl	Dreadlocks
5. Angel	16	10	Black Girl	Afro-blocked
6. Zee	16	10	Black Girl	Cornrows
7. Siya	16	11	Black Girl	Open-Blown Afro
8. Amanda	17	11	Black Girl	Fade haircut
9. Mandisa	17	11	Black Girl	Cornrows
10. Thandy	16	11	Black Girl	Fade haircut
11. Moratuwa	17	11	Black Girl	Curled Braids
12. Ida	17	11	Black Girl	Short Afro-hair
13. Mimi	17	11	Black Girl	Dreadlocks
14. Caster	17	11	Black Girl	Fade haircut
15. Lebo	17	11	Black Girl	Fade haircut
16. Nosi	16	11	Black Girl	Fade haircut

In the final sample, participants comprised Black African schoolgirls with Afro-textured and Afro-styled hair, drawn from the secondary school and whose homes we located in the greater Dundee area and its surrounding communities. Aged between 15 and 17 years, and enrolled in Grades 9 to 11, these learners brought with them a rich tapestry of lived experiences shaped by their positionalities within and beyond the school environment. Their narratives constituted the empirical core of the study, offering insight into how Afro-textured hair functions not only as a marker of personal and cultural identity but also as a site of institutional regulation, surveillance, and socio-political contestation. Through their voices, the study illuminated the complex ways in which Black girls navigate, challenge, and resist dominant norms within desegregated South African schools, underscoring the broader implications of hair policing for identity, belonging, and educational justice.

4.7.1 Building Rapport and Familiarising Myself with Participants

Establishing trust and relational proximity with participants is critical to ethical and effective qualitative research, particularly when working with adolescents on sensitive and identity-laden topics such as racialised hair politics. In line with feminist and participatory research traditions, which value relational ethics and mutual respect (Letherby, 2003; Gilligan, 2011), I prioritised building rapport with the participants before formal data generation.

Following the return of signed informed consent and assent forms, completed by both the participants and their parents or legal guardians, I convened an introductory meeting in the allocated research space (classroom number 22). The purpose of this session was to establish a foundation of mutual understanding, transparency, and psychological safety. I began by reintroducing myself, not merely in my academic capacity as a Master's student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Edgewood Campus), but also as an individual whose own lived experiences had motivated the study. I briefly shared personal experiences of hair-based discrimination encountered in my professional life, including moments of being subjected to unsolicited comments and expectations regarding my natural hair. This act of vulnerability was intended to humanise the research process and model openness, thereby encouraging participants to feel comfortable in sharing their narratives.

I then provided a more detailed overview of the study, including its objectives, ethical safeguards, and the participatory methods that would be used during the workshops and focus group discussions. To ensure shared accountability and respectful engagement, I invited the participants to co-develop a set of community agreements or 'research room rules' that would govern our interactions. This included discussions around confidentiality, respectful listening, non-judgment, and the right to opt out of any activity without fear of reprisal. I also reiterated that participation was voluntary and that no form of remuneration would be offered. The participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

A large part of this session was devoted to relational engagement. I invited each participant to introduce themselves, speak briefly about their journey into Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, reflect on what they appreciated or disliked about the school, share their aspirations, and offer initial thoughts on the research topic. These conversations helped surface not only the participants' backgrounds but also their levels of comfort and curiosity regarding the study.

Participants' concerns were addressed with care. Some expressed anxiety about the language to be used during workshops, fearing they would be required to participate solely in English. With the approval of my supervisor, I assured them that they could use any language they felt most comfortable with, including isiZulu, to ensure accessibility and authentic expression. Another concern involved anonymity. Learners were initially anxious about whether their narratives might expose specific teachers or lead to reputational harm for the school. I reaffirmed that all data would be anonymised and that pseudonyms would be used for all individuals and institutions referenced in the study.

To support this, I provided participants with anonymous naming conventions for stakeholders mentioned in their narratives. For instance, the school was referred to as *Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School*, female teachers as *Teacher Y*, male teachers as *Teacher X*, and members of the school management team (departmental heads, deputy principal, and principal) collectively as *The School Manager*. Male and female security staff were designated as *Security M* or *N*, respectively, and I invited participants to refer to me as *Sthah* or *Miss*, depending on their preference.

To reinforce the study's participatory visual methodology, I concluded the session with a brief demonstration of freehand drawing using a whiteboard. I sketched a simple image of a bald girl and explained the symbolic intent behind the drawing, emphasising that aesthetic skill was not a requirement. What mattered was the meaning embedded in the visual representation and the accompanying narrative. Each participant was then asked to create a name tag using coloured paper and assign themselves a pseudonym, which would be used consistently throughout the

study. They were also advised to attach these pseudonyms to all drawings and written descriptions they produced.

This initial familiarisation session served as an important step in nurturing an environment of trust, openness, and mutual respect. It reflected a broader commitment to ethical, dialogic, and decolonial research practices that recognise participants not merely as subjects of inquiry but as co-constructors of knowledge and meaning in the research process.

4.8 Data Generation

This study employed a participatory visual methodology (PVM) as the primary approach to data generation. Rooted in critical and feminist research traditions, PVM offers an inclusive, creative, and empowering framework for engaging participants, particularly those from historically marginalised groups, by positioning them as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive subjects of research (Black & Chambers, 2019; Khau, 2021). It is an approach well aligned with the critical paradigm underpinning this study, as it foregrounds voice, agency, and lived experience in ways that challenge traditional researcher-participant hierarchies (Bergbom, Emerita & Lepp, 2021; Reichenberger et al., 2022; Lingham & Alexander, 2023).

PVM encompass a range of techniques — including drawings, photovoice, video-making, collages, etc. — that allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives visually and symbolically (Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). As Richards (2011) observes, these methodologies are particularly effective in facilitating deep participant engagement, often eliciting insights that may be difficult to articulate through words alone. Literat (2013) further argues that PVM not only generates rich, affective data but also enhances participants' sense of ownership over the research process by allowing them to represent their realities on their own terms.

In this study, I employed participatory drawing as the core method of data generation, complemented by FGDs. The decision to use drawing was based on

its potential to evoke personal and collective narratives around identity, embodiment, and resistance (Gastaldo et al., 2018; Barley & Russell, 2018), which are key themes in the study of Black girls' Afro-textured hair and its regulation in school settings. Drawing enabled participants to express complex ideas and emotions related to hair-based discrimination in ways that verbal communication alone may not have captured (Brown et al., 2020; Childs, 2020; Clark et al., 2013). This was particularly important given the age of the participants and the sensitive nature of the topic.

Each drawing session was followed by an FGD, during which participants were invited to share the meanings behind their visual representations. These discussions were guided by semi-structured prompts but remained flexible and participant-led to encourage authentic dialogue. The FGDs served a dual function: they provided context for interpreting the drawings and enabled the participants to reflect collectively on shared experiences of policing, resistance, and negotiation of their hair in the school context.

By combining visual and verbal modes of expression, this multimodal data generation strategy enriched the depth and texture of the empirical material, allowing for a more holistic understanding of how Black girls experience and respond to the regulation of their Afro-textured hair in desegregated South African schools. The methodological choice to centre participants' creativity and voice reflects the broader theoretical commitment of the study: to challenge dominant discourses that marginalise Black girls' bodies and to amplify their epistemologies as valid and necessary forms of knowledge.

4.8.1 Participatory Drawing as a Method of Data Generation

To explore the lived experiences of Black African schoolgirls in relation to the policing of their Afro-textured hair in desegregated school spaces, this study employed participatory drawing as a core data generation method. Situated within a broader participatory visual methodological framework, participatory drawing offers a powerful mode of expression that centres participants' subjectivities,

particularly in contexts where spoken language may be limiting or inaccessible (De Lange, 2010; Literat, 2013).

Participatory drawing allows individuals, whether children or adults, to visually represent their social realities through simple, freehand sketches, without the need for artistic proficiency (Martikainen & Hakokongas, 2022). As a 'low-threshold method,' drawing accommodates varying literacy levels and offers participants a non-invasive, flexible channel to reflect on, reinterpret, and communicate their embodied and emotional experiences (Tenny & Brannan, 2022). In this study, it created space for participants to construct meaning on their own terms, rather than being confined to the researcher's framing.

Participatory drawing was particularly suitable given the critical and decolonial paradigm of this research. As noted by Arruda (2015), drawings often reveal deeper layers of social meaning and symbolic representation than verbal data alone. Moreover, when accompanied by verbal or written reflections, drawings can capture complex socio-political realities, offering both insight and critique. In alignment with Guillemin (2004) and Mannay (2016), this method also promoted reflexivity and allowed participants to pause, reflect, and represent aspects of their schooling experiences that are often silenced or ignored.

4.8.2 Workshop Structure and Implementation

Three participatory drawing workshops were conducted at the research site, Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, in a dedicated space (Classroom 22) provided by the school management. The workshops were held on non-instructional days (a Thursday afternoon when the school's academic programme ended early, a public holiday, and a Saturday) to ensure minimal disruption to the learners' academic activities.

The first workshop, while focused on generating initial data, also served both an introductory and rapport-building function. I reintroduced the research objectives, clarified ethical commitments, and reaffirmed participants' rights, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any stage. Participants were

reminded that the focus of the research was not on artistic skill, but on the meanings conveyed through their drawings. This message was reinforced through a practical demonstration, where I again created a basic free-hand drawing of a Black woman with Afro-textured hair, captioned ‘Black Women,’ and used it to model how symbolic content, rather than artistic quality, would be the basis of engagement. This served to ease participants' anxieties about drawing, especially given their concerns about not being good at art.

Each workshop was guided by the eight-step participatory drawing process outlined by Rivard and Gervais (2009), and adapted for this study as follows:

1. **Identifying the Topic**: I introduced each session with a clearly defined research question and thematic prompt aligned with the study’s objectives. For instance, the first prompt asked participants to draw *“how it feels to be a Black girl in a racially mixed school*,” which enabled participants to surface experiences related to school culture, identity, and belonging.
2. **Creating Enabling Conditions**: The physical space was arranged to allow each participant privacy and comfort during the drawing process. Each learner was provided with an individual desk, ensuring a quiet and respectful environment for creative reflection.
3. **Providing a Prompt**: At the start of each session, I offered a visual and thematic prompt to direct the drawing process. Prompts were intentionally open-ended to allow for diverse interpretations and personal reflection. For example, one prompt asked participants to "*draw how you experience the policing of your Afro-textured hair in school*."
4. **Normalising Non-Skill-Based Drawing**: Throughout, I reminded participants that drawing quality was not being assessed. Emphasis was placed on expression, meaning, and the message behind the drawing, not technical accuracy.
5. **Distributing Materials**: Each participant received drawing materials including A4 plain paper, crayons, khoki pens, coloured pens, pencils, and erasers. Ample time (45–60 minutes) was allocated for each drawing session to accommodate varying paces.

6. **Writing Descriptions**: Participants were asked to add brief textual descriptions of their drawings. These could take the form of captions, speech bubbles, or short paragraphs and were essential for clarifying the meaning and intent behind the visual artefact.
7. **Displaying the Drawings**: Upon completion, participants were invited to display their drawings on a whiteboard using Bostik adhesive. This gallery-style sharing encouraged mutual engagement and allowed participants to view and reflect on one another's work, generating a sense of collective experience and validation.
8. **FGD**: Each workshop concluded with an FGD that used the displayed drawings as conversation starters. This format facilitated deeper probing into the drawings' meanings, enabling participants to explain their visual representations in their own words and to respond to one another's reflections. This phase was instrumental in producing rich, dialogic data and reducing hierarchical researcher-participant power dynamics, in keeping with the participatory ethos of the study (Leavy, 2018; Literat, 2013). I reflect on this final step in a section below.

Each workshop was structured around a specific research question:

- **Workshop 1** centred on school governance, the code of conduct, and broader learner experiences within a desegregated school context. As an initial entry point, participants were asked to respond to the prompt: "*How does it feel to be a Black girl in a racially mixed school?*" While this prompt did not constitute a formal research question, it served as a generative entry probe, allowing participants to surface affective and embodied responses to their everyday schooling realities. It offered valuable insight into the racialised dynamics of school culture and institutional regulation, while also foregrounding the emotional landscape within which Black girls navigate their identities. This approach is consistent with participatory and feminist methodologies that seek to honour the experiential authority of participants and allow research themes to emerge inductively from their lived realities.

- **Workshop 2** was explicitly designed to address the study's first research question: "*How do Black African girls understand, experience, and communicate about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in racially mixed secondary schools?*" Through a series of guided participatory activities and focused prompts, the workshop created space for girls to reflect on how their hair is treated within the school context and, crucially, how such treatment affects their sense of self, belonging, and dignity. Follow-up questions encouraged participants to narrate personal encounters with school authorities, peers, and broader institutional practices. This process not only surfaced layered accounts of racialised and gendered surveillance but also enabled participants to articulate emotional and embodied responses to everyday experiences of regulation. In doing so, the workshop affirmed the value of participatory feminist research in foregrounding the epistemic authority of marginalised youth in contexts shaped by enduring inequalities.
- **Workshop 3** engaged directly with the study's second research question: "*How do these girls negotiate, challenge, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in their schools?*" This session invited participants to reflect on their everyday acts of resistance, whether subtle, embodied, relational, or overt, and to consider how such acts disrupt dominant narratives of passivity or compliance. Through facilitated discussion and participatory visual methods, the girls articulated how they assert agency in the face of institutional regulation, racialised expectations, and gendered surveillance. The visual artefacts produced during this workshop served as powerful testimonies of defiance and self-affirmation, challenging the Eurocentric norms embedded in school culture. This process aligns with African feminist and Black feminist traditions that recognise resistance not only in grand political gestures but also in the quiet, everyday practices of reclaiming dignity and cultural identity.

Each session was designed to be facilitative, not prescriptive. An overview of the data collection sessions is presented in Table 4.2, below:

Table 4.2: Outline of Drawing and Focus Group Discussion Sessions

Session	Research Focus	Duration
Session 1	How does it feel to be a Black girl in a racially mixed school?	One hour and 30 minutes
Session 2	How do Black girls communicate and experience the policing of their Afro-textured hair in racially mixed schools?	One hour and 30 minutes
Session 3	How do Black African girls challenge or resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in and around the school?	One hour and 30 minutes

As the researcher, I assumed the role of workshop facilitator, ensuring that participants led the conversations and that their agency and voice were prioritised throughout. The integration of drawing, storytelling, and collective reflection allowed participants to move beyond surface-level engagement and to explore the deeper social, cultural, and political meanings embedded in their everyday experiences. Through participatory drawing, the study created a dialogic space for Black girls to visually and verbally narrate their schooling experiences and to assert counter-narratives to the dominant ideologies that continue to police their bodies and identities within desegregated educational settings.

4.9 Focus Group Discussions

In alignment with the participatory visual methodology of this study, FGDs were used as a complementary method of data generation. FGDs are widely regarded in qualitative research as a valuable tool for exploring collective experiences, shared meanings, and socially negotiated understandings of a phenomenon (Hennink, 2014). By facilitating interactive group dialogue, FGDs allow participants to elaborate on and reflect upon one another's contributions, often surfacing insights that may not emerge in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011).

In this study, FGDs were held after each participatory drawing session to probe the meanings behind the visual representations, elicit deeper narratives, and engage participants in collaborative reflection. This multimodal process strengthened the credibility and richness of the data, as participants were given

space to explain their drawings in their own words, respond to peer interpretations, and elaborate on their lived realities of schooling, appearance regulation, and identity negotiation.

Each focus group discussion included all eleven participants and was conducted in isiZulu, the participants' preferred language. This linguistic flexibility was critical to ensuring authenticity, emotional resonance, and inclusivity— particularly given the sensitive and personal nature of the study. The use of home language enabled participants to speak freely, without the burden of translation or linguistic self-censorship (see Ngidi & Moletsane, 2023). With approval from my university supervisor, all discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Supervisor oversight was also instrumental in ensuring fidelity during translation and maintaining alignment with participants' original meanings.

Each FGD lasted approximately two hours and was held in the same private venue allocated for the workshops (Classroom 22). Before the commencement of each discussion, I reiterated ethical protocols, including confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of pseudonyms, and the right to withdraw at any time. Participants were reminded of our signed non-disclosure agreement and were encouraged to continue using their anonymous name tags. To maintain consistency, names of school staff and the institution were also anonymised on a whiteboard for reference throughout the discussions (e.g., *Teacher X*, *Teacher Y*, *The School Manager*).

The format of the FGDs followed a structured yet flexible approach. Each participant was invited to present their drawing to the group, explain its meaning, and respond to questions from peers and myself. These conversations often extended beyond the drawings themselves and opened up broader discussions about school policies, peer relationships, and bodily autonomy. In several instances, peer responses prompted participants to reflect further on their own experiences, generating layered and multi-dimensional data.

4.10 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a crucial stage in qualitative research, where raw empirical material is systematically examined to generate meaning, identify patterns, and offer theoretically informed insights into the research problem (Ngulube, 2015; Taherdoost, 2022). This process involves moving beyond mere data description toward interpretation, categorisation, and theme construction. As Bhatia (2017) argues, data analysis enables the researcher to derive conclusions from raw material by transforming it into coherent and insightful accounts. This interpretive stage is particularly significant in critical and participatory research, where the aim is not only to understand experience but also to challenge structures of power and oppression embedded in those experiences (Haarmans et al., 2021; Haarmans et al., 2022; Guerrero & Dobson, 2024).

This study generated data through two primary methods: participatory drawings and FGDs. The data corpus, therefore, consisted of 39 drawings and multiple FGD transcripts. Given the diverse forms of data—visual, verbal, and textual—I employed a combination of visual analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the dataset. This triangulated approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences while preserving the richness of their expressive modalities.

4.10.1 Visual Data Analysis

Participatory drawing was employed as a tool to access participants’ subjective experiences and offer a non-verbal mode of expression through which sensitive or marginalised perspectives could be represented (Brown, Spencer & Howard, 2020). Drawings offered a visual medium through which participants documented their encounters with hair-based discrimination and reflected on their racialised and gendered identities in school contexts. However, as Literat (2013) cautions, visual data must be contextualised and interpreted with care, as their meaning is deeply tied to the participants' backgrounds and intentions. For this reason, drawings were not analysed in isolation but were accompanied by participants' verbal and written descriptions, as well as focus group commentary. To analyse

the drawing data, I followed the three-step process proposed by Campbell, Skovdal and Mupambireyi (2010):

- **Step 1: Initial Engagement** – I immersed myself in the visual data, observing each drawing in its entirety without preconceptions, taking note of visual elements, symbols, and composition in relation to the topic.
- **Step 2: Textualisation** – I examined the accompanying descriptions, captions, and oral explanations provided by the participants during the FGDs. This step ensured that the interpretation of each drawing remained grounded in the participants' meaning-making, rather than being imposed by the researcher.
- **Step 3: Coding and Thematic Analysis** – I then identified recurring visual motifs, metaphors, and narratives across the dataset and coded them in relation to the research questions. The resulting codes contributed to the broader thematic analysis and helped to uncover the social and political meanings embedded in the drawings.

This approach allowed for a nuanced reading of the visual data and ensured that both content and context were considered during interpretation, maintaining ethical fidelity to the participants' voices.

4.10.2 Thematic Data Analysis

To analyse the verbal and textual data, I employed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a foundational method in qualitative inquiry that facilitates the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within data (Dawadi, 2020; Rosairo, 2023). It is particularly well-suited to studies that seek to centre participant meaning-making while also interrogating broader social structures. In this study, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis was followed systematically as outlined below.

- **Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data**

I began by immersing myself in the entire dataset—repeatedly listening to audio recordings, reading transcripts, and viewing drawings. This process enabled me to identify emerging ideas, emotional tones, and keywords across the different data forms. At this stage, I took initial notes and made observations on how participants communicated their experiences of hair-based regulation and resistance.

- **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

Using a manual coding process, I systematically worked through the data, assigning descriptive and interpretive codes to segments of text and imagery that related to the research questions. Codes were developed inductively from the data and ranged from explicit terms (e.g., "not neat", "too wild", "discipline") to interpretive codes that reflected social meanings (e.g., "gender non-conformity", "racialised shame", "embodied resistance").

- **Phase 3: Searching for Themes**

Once all data had been coded, I began clustering codes into broader themes that captured patterns of meaning. Visual and textual data were analysed concurrently to trace the relationship between what participants drew and what they said or wrote. Themes were constructed to respond specifically to the research questions—how Black girls experience hair policing, and how they resist or challenge these forms of regulation in desegregated schools.

- **Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

Themes were reviewed, refined, and reorganised to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and distinctiveness. I revisited the entire dataset to ensure that themes accurately captured the essence of participants' narratives. Particular attention was paid to areas of overlap and contradiction, as well as to silences and hesitations within the data.

- **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

At this stage, each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its central organising concept. Where appropriate, sub-themes were developed to capture nuances within larger themes. This process was iterative and interpretive,

requiring close engagement with the data and reflection on how themes aligned with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study.

- **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The final stage involved weaving together the analytic narrative with verbatim excerpts from the data and linking the findings to relevant literature and theory. The thematic analysis was not simply descriptive but critically interpretive, examining how participants' experiences reflect and resist dominant norms around femininity, race, and discipline in post-apartheid school settings. The findings are presented in detail in Chapter Five of this dissertation.

Through the combination of visual and thematic analysis, this study constructed a layered and intersectional understanding of Black girls' experiences of hair-based discrimination and resistance in a South African desegregated school. Importantly, the analytic process was not only methodological but politically centred on affirming the voices, epistemologies, and embodied experiences of Black schoolgirls whose identities continue to be marginalised in educational institutions.

4.11. Ensuring Trustworthiness in the Study

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research is a fundamental requirement for validating the credibility, authenticity, and methodological integrity of a study (Nowell, Norris & Moules, 2017). Rooted in a critical paradigm and guided by participatory and feminist research principles, this study employed two qualitative methods, namely, participatory visual drawing and FGD, with data analysed using both visual and thematic strategies. Trustworthiness was carefully considered throughout the research process, from design to data production, analysis, and interpretation.

Qualitative research does not rely on statistical measures of validity and reliability as found in quantitative paradigms. Instead, it turns to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as articulated by Lincoln and Guba (1981), to assess methodological and interpretive rigour. These criteria were

used in this study to ensure that the findings were contextually sound, ethically derived, and meaningfully connected to participants' lived experiences. In the sub-sections that follow, I discuss how each of these criteria was applied in the study.

- **Credibility**

Credibility is concerned with the extent to which research findings are trustworthy, accurate, and reflective of the participants' realities (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). It addresses the internal validity of the study, ensuring that the data meaningfully correspond to the research questions and theoretical framework (Creswell, 2016). To enhance credibility, in this study, I employed two data sources and triangulation, including visual artefacts (drawings) and verbal narratives (transcribed focus group discussions). The triangulated data enriched the analysis and supported the depth and authenticity of participants' perspectives.

Data generation and interpretation were conducted with prolonged engagement and persistent observation. I remained in consistent communication with the participants across multiple sessions, allowing trust to develop and creating space for nuanced and detailed storytelling. Furthermore, regular supervisory debriefing sessions were held throughout the data analysis phase to ensure reflexivity, minimise researcher bias, and validate interpretive claims. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis was rigorously applied to support analytic transparency and consistency.

- **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of this study may be applicable or useful in other, similar contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In qualitative research, the goal is not generalisability in a statistical sense, but rather the generation of rich, contextualised insights that may resonate with or inform similar settings (Smith, 2018). Transferability in this study was supported by providing thick descriptions of the research context, including the school setting, socio-political environment, and participant demographics. The detailed account

of the methodological process — including sampling criteria, participant recruitment, workshop facilitation, and analytic procedures — offers future researchers a clear framework for replicating or adapting the study. By focusing on the narratives of Black girls in a racially desegregated school in KwaZulu-Natal, the study contributes context-specific insights while also highlighting broader structural issues relevant to schooling, race, gender, and identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

- **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process over time (Kyngas & Kaariainen, 2020; Kakar, 2023; Ahmed, 2024). It asks whether the study's findings could be repeated with similar results if conducted in the same context using the same methods (Koch, 2006; Polit & Beck, 2012; Cope, 2014). To ensure dependability, detailed documentation was maintained throughout the research process, including field notes, audio recordings, transcripts, and procedural records of data generation and analysis. The transparency of the research design, including clear descriptions of data generation methods, coding procedures, and thematic construction, provides an audit trail for future researchers. All materials were securely stored and can be made available for academic scrutiny or replication, thus enabling external review of the analytic decisions and ensuring methodological consistency.

- **Confirmability**

Confirmability addresses the neutrality and objectivity of the research findings, ensuring that the results are shaped by participants' experiences rather than the biases or preferences of the researcher (Creswell, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In this study, confirmability was supported using verbatim transcriptions, visual artefacts, and direct quotations from participants. Emphasis was placed on letting participants lead discussions, particularly during focus group interactions, thus minimising researcher imposition. All narratives, visual outputs, and transcripts were treated as participant-authored texts, and their meanings were interpreted

within the frameworks provided by the participants themselves. Where translation from isiZulu to English was required, the process was guided and reviewed in consultation with my academic supervisor to maintain semantic integrity. Participants' use of anonymous names, as well as the anonymisation of all school stakeholders and settings, further reinforced the ethical commitment to impartiality. To deepen confirmability, participants' drawings and statements were consistently referenced as central evidence in the thematic construction of the findings, rather than being selectively or reductively interpreted. As a researcher situated within the broader discourse of critical and decolonial scholarship, I maintained a reflexive stance throughout, recognising my own positionality while allowing the participants' stories to remain at the centre of the research.

Therefore, the trustworthiness of this study was upheld through transparent methodological processes, ethical engagement with participants, and a commitment to representing the complex realities of Black schoolgirls navigating hair-based discrimination in South African desegregated schools. The criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were systematically addressed to ensure that the study not only met academic standards but also honoured the voices and agency of the participants at its core.

4.12 Ethical Consideration

Ethical integrity is a fundamental aspect of any research endeavour, particularly when the study involves vulnerable populations such as minors (Feinstein & O'Kane, 2008; Crane & Broome, 2017; Ott et al., 2018). This research, which explored the lived experiences of Black schoolgirls aged 15–17 in a racially desegregated South African secondary school, necessitated a rigorous ethical framework to ensure the protection, dignity, and agency of all participants. The ethical foundations of the study were guided by the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, minimisation of harm, and psychological safety (Cacciattolo, 2015; Arifin, 2018). As qualitative research is relational, participatory, and deeply affective, adhering to these principles was

essential to ensure both the credibility of the research and the well-being of those who participated in it (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

Before data generation, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00008252/2025). This approval provided the legal and ethical mandate to proceed with the study. Thereafter, gatekeeper permissions were obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN DoE), and the principal, acting on behalf of the school's management team, granted access to the school site and learner population and provided permission to conduct the study at the school.

Given that the participants were minors, parental or guardian informed consent was obtained through detailed information sheets and signed consent forms. In addition, the learners themselves signed assent forms, thereby affirming their own understanding of the study and their willingness to participate. At all stages, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that there would be no financial incentives or penalties, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without having to provide a reason.

As stated above, to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants and school stakeholders, all identifying information was removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Learners used anonymous name tags, and references to teachers, school management, and security personnel were anonymised using agreed-upon codes (e.g., *Teacher X*, *The School Manager*). The school itself was referred to by a pseudonym (*Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School*) throughout the study. Participants were repeatedly reminded that what they shared in the form of drawings, narratives, or written texts would remain confidential and could not be used outside the research without their permission. Importantly, they were also informed that their creative outputs remained their intellectual property and that any use of their work would be subject to their continued consent.

Given the sensitive and potentially emotional nature of the research topic (i.e., racialised and gendered hair-based discrimination in schools), psychosocial

support mechanisms were built into the research design. The school's Learner Support Agent (LSA) was present at the school (but not inside the research venue) and maintained ongoing contact with the participants to monitor their emotional well-being. The LSA also held private check-ins with learners to ensure that their mental health was not adversely impacted by their participation in the study. While no emotional distress was reported, I made myself available for any follow-up concerns and facilitated transport support for two participants who faced logistical barriers in attending the sessions. Moreover, a local social worker was listed and ready to provide psychosocial support to any learners who might have experienced distress.

Furthermore, ethical reflection continued beyond procedural compliance. Throughout the study, I remained reflexively engaged with the power dynamics inherent in research involving minors and committed to creating a space where participants felt respected, heard, and free to express themselves without fear of judgment or reprisal. This included frequent reminders that participation was voluntary and that they retained agency over their narratives and representations. In line with best practices in qualitative research ethics (see, for example, Creswell, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018), this study consistently sought to uphold the rights and dignity of all the participants. Ethical principles were not treated as a checklist, but as ongoing commitments embedded within the research design, implementation, and dissemination. As such, this study modelled an approach to ethical research that was context-sensitive, relational, and grounded in the values of care, respect, and justice.

4.13 Chapter Synthesis

This chapter outlined the methodological architecture of the study, detailing the philosophical positioning, research design, data generation methods, and analytic strategies employed to explore the policing of Afro-textured hair among Black schoolgirls in a racially desegregated South African secondary school. Situated within a critical research paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative, participatory visual methodology to amplify the voices of girls whose embodied experiences are often marginalised in dominant educational discourses. The chapter provided

a comprehensive account of the research site and sampling strategy, explaining how purposive sampling was used to select participants whose identities and experiences were central to the study's aims.

The data generation process, which combined participatory drawing and focus group discussions, was designed not only to elicit rich, multi-layered narratives but also to disrupt hierarchical researcher-participant dynamics. Participants were positioned as co-constructors of meaning, and their drawings and accounts served as powerful artefacts of resistance, self-expression, and critique. Data analysis was conducted using visual analysis and thematic analysis, guided by the work of Campbell et al. (2010) and Braun and Clarke (2006), respectively. These approaches enabled a nuanced interpretation of the data, preserving the integrity of participants' voices while critically interrogating the social and institutional practices that regulate their hair and bodies.

In the chapter, attention was also paid to the trustworthiness of the research, addressed through the lenses of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were also discussed in depth, particularly given the involvement of minors and the sensitive nature of the research topic. These ethical commitments were not merely procedural but relational and ongoing, ensuring that the research upheld the dignity, agency, and emotional well-being of all participants.

In conclusion, the methodological choices made in this study were deeply informed by the political, ethical, and epistemological commitment to centering Black girls' lived realities within a South African schooling space. The next chapter presents the findings of the study, thematically organised and critically analysed to reveal how Afro-textured hair is policed, negotiated, and resisted in desegregated educational environments.

CHAPTER FIVE

BLACK GIRLS' NARRATIVES OF HAIR-BASED DISCRIMINATION, IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN A RACIALLY DESEGREGATED SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in previous chapters, this study examined how Black African schoolgirls experience, interpret, negotiate, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair within a racially desegregated South African school. This chapter presents a thematic analysis of data generated through participatory drawings and focus group discussions with learners at Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School in KwaZulu-Natal. Framed by African Feminism (Afro-feminism) and Black Feminist Theory, the chapter explores how intersecting structures of race, gender, and institutional power manifest in everyday hair-based discrimination, while also illuminating how the girls assert agency through acts of resistance. The analysis is structured around four interrelated themes: (1) Racialised Discrimination and the Policing of Black Girls' Afro-textured Hair; (2) Black Girls' Cultural and Religious Exclusion through Hair Regulation; (3) Gendered and Sexualised Dimensions of Black Girls' Hair Discrimination; and (4) Black Girls' Everyday Acts of Resistance, Defiance, and the Reclaiming of Identity. Each theme is grounded in the participants' visual artefacts and narrative accounts, interpreted through the study's conceptual and theoretical lenses. The first three themes address the study's first research question: *How do Black African girls understand, experience, and communicate about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in a desegregated secondary school*? The final theme responds to the second research question: *How do these girls negotiate, challenge, and resist this policing*? Selected participant drawings are presented throughout to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. The chapter opens with Theme One, which examines how Black girls at Dundee Comprehensive encounter racialised aesthetic regulation, revealing how informal discipline and normative hair codes reproduce systemic inequality in ostensibly integrated school spaces.

5.2 Racialised Discrimination and the Policing of Black Girls' Afro-textured Hair

South Africa is widely recognised as one of the most unequal countries globally (Makgela, 2020), with the legacies of racial segregation and structural injustice persisting across many sectors, particularly education. Historically, Black South Africans have been positioned as inferior and consistently marginalised through state mechanisms, with apartheid education policies explicitly designed to entrench racial hierarchy by limiting opportunities for Black learners (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Msila (2007) argues that under apartheid, education functioned as a political tool of social division, shaping the identities and futures of pupils along racial lines.

While the post-apartheid era promised educational equity, Jansen and Taylor (2003) contend that transformation efforts were intended to foster a democratic citizenry committed to constitutional values. Reforms such as curriculum restructuring (Gumede & Biyase, 2020) and the South African Schools Act of 1996, which mandates non-discriminatory access to education, reflected a broader commitment to social justice. However, the reality on the ground tells a different story. Evidence from this study reveals that racially mixed schools such as Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School continue to reproduce systemic racism through informal, racialised disciplinary practices, especially around appearance and grooming policies.

Despite the legal framework prohibiting unfair discrimination, Black learners, and particularly Black girls, experience everyday forms of exclusion and subjugation rooted in the symbolic policing of their bodies and identities. The use of school authority to enforce unwritten, racially biased grooming norms points to how white tone and its aesthetic values are subtly privileged within educational spaces. At Dundee Comprehensive, this manifests through the consistent policing of Afro-textured hair, revealing the persistence of power asymmetries wherein race operates as a key axis of discrimination, intersecting with gender and cultural identity (McConnachie, 2014). In this context, hair becomes more than a style. It is a site of contestation, belonging, and resistance. The historical degradation of

Black hair as 'unkempt' or 'inappropriate' continues to shape how Black girls are perceived and disciplined in schools today (Trusty, Ward, Ward & He, 2022). One participant, Angel, poignantly illustrated this continuity between past and present:

> **Angel:** It is destroying me greatly because our grannies had told us how they were discriminated against as Black people back in the olden days of apartheid, and now I think what is happening here at school is a similar thing, where a Black person is seen as an object of discrimination. I feel like the life that was lived then is still being perpetuated in our schools.

Below, I present the narratives of Ida and Moratuwa, which further expose the deeply racialised and gendered mechanisms through which school-based discrimination is enacted and normalised in so-called desegregated educational spaces. Although the South African Schools Act (1996) explicitly prohibits unfair discrimination and affirms learners' rights to dignity, equality, and non-discriminatory education, the lived experiences of these Black girls suggest otherwise. Their testimonies, supported by Ida's drawing in Figure 5.1, reveal how school authorities, particularly Indian teachers in this context, become complicit in maintaining a racialised aesthetic order that devalues Afro-textured hair and delegitimises Black cultural expression. Ida's drawing captures the racialised double standard in school hair regulations, where an Indian girl is exempt while a Black girl is threatened with punishment. The teacher's aggressive stance of holding scissors and uttering coercive threats symbolises institutionalised violence and disregard for Black girls' dignity. The Black learner's protest, grounded in logic and fairness, highlights the injustice and her critical awareness of racial bias.

Figure 5.1: A teacher threatens to cut a Black girl's braids, revealing racialised hair discrimination

Ida's account, below, is especially harrowing – forcibly removed from class, ridiculed, and subjected to the physical violation of having her braids cut in a public and humiliating manner.

> **Ida**: This drawing shares my experience that took place in the year 2021, where I had a long curly braided hairstyle and an Indian [Teacher Y] who really does not like Black girls called me and reported me to the school manager. At the office, I was asked why I had done that hairstyle and where I had seen it. I told them that I saw it from other Indian girls here at school who happen to share the same religion as the Indian teacher who had reported me. Thereafter, the teacher was so furious towards me, and I was made to remain at the principal's office after I was asked by [Teacher Y] to undo my braids and had refused because I had paid so much money for my braids. [Teacher Y] started cutting my braids, and this incident took place during breaktime while all the other learners were outside. I was laughed at and called bad names, such as 'ugly', after my hair was cut. I was deeply hurt, humiliated and embarrassed.

This act was not only a breach of personal dignity but also a violent assertion of institutional power over Black female bodies, with the teacher's action reinforcing whose bodies, styles, and aesthetics are seen as acceptable within the school space. Her refusal to comply, grounded in the financial investment and cultural

significance of her hairstyle reflects an assertion of agency in the face of dehumanisation, which is a critical resistance that aligns with Black feminist theorising on hair as a site of identity, resistance, and politics (Banks, 2000; Hooks, 1992). The public nature of her humiliation further compounds the trauma, echoing what Crenshaw (1991) identifies as the intersectional vulnerabilities of being Black, female, and young in a hostile institution.

Just as well, Moratuwa's experience, though less physically violent, underscores a similar double standard.

> **Moratuwa**: I am sharing an incident that once happened to me, where the other day my Indian friend and I were sitting and having our lunch, then came an Indian teacher to reprimand me because of my hair. Mind you, my friend and I had done a similar hairstyle, which was braids, and the only difference was that she used her hair, and I used extensions. I was then summoned to the staffroom and interrogated as to why I had those long braids at school, because I know they are not allowed, and I was asked to undo my hairstyle while my Indian friend was left alone. At first, I refused and asked my teacher why I was the only one who was supposed to cut my hair and not my friend as well, and she replied by saying that that is her natural hair and I cannot compare myself to her. I was then left hurt and with no choice but to remove my braids.

Despite wearing a hairstyle identical in form to her Indian peer, she alone is reprimanded and disciplined, on the basis that her use of extensions disqualifies her from claiming naturalness. This distinction, wielded by her teacher to uphold a racial aesthetic hierarchy, constructs Indian hair as 'natural' and therefore legitimate, while Black hair (and by extension, Black beauty practices) is marked as artificial, excessive, or deviant (Radhakrishnan, 2005; Wing & De Carvalho, 1995). Her questioning of this discrepancy reflects not only her awareness of racial injustice but also her refusal to internalise the inferiority ascribed to her appearance. This critical questioning, even when it results in forced compliance, signals a moment of resistance; what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) terms a 'subjugated knowledge' that challenges dominant hegemonic scripts.

Both incidents highlight the ongoing presence of what Pattman and Bhana (2021) term a ‘white tone’ in historically white or Indian-dominated schools: a set of implicit norms, aesthetics, and disciplinary regimes that centre whiteness and Indian middle-class respectability while marginalising Black ways of being. The aesthetic policing of Black girls’ hair becomes a proxy for broader struggles over space, legitimacy, and belonging. Moreover, the enforcement of hair rules, often undocumented and communicated verbally, creates a shifting terrain where Black girls are vulnerable to arbitrary punishment and humiliation. Through the lens of African feminism, these acts of aesthetic regulation can be read as ongoing colonial and patriarchal violences that deny Black girls full citizenship within the schooling space (Goredema, 2010; Amaefula, 2021). In this sense, the school is not simply a site of learning, but also a site of surveillance, regulation, and racial governance.

The contradictions between the legislative promises of post-apartheid education and the embodied experiences of these girls demand critical attention. The data suggest that desegregated schools remain sites of covert racial exclusion where the Black female body is rendered hyper-visible and persistently out of place. What emerges, therefore, is a powerful call for institutional accountability, culturally responsive school policies, and the centering of Black girls' experiences in educational transformation debates. Through their accounts, Ida and Moratuwa not only reveal the structural violence embedded in hair discrimination but also demonstrate the urgency of recognising Black girlhood as a site of political and pedagogical struggle.

Guided by African Feminist theory, this analysis foregrounds how racial and gender oppression intersect in the daily experiences of Black schoolgirls. African Feminism is attentive to the specific historical burdens and contemporary injustices faced by African women and girls. It insists on listening to their lived realities and advocates for structural change aimed at dismantling persistent forms of exclusion (Goredema, 2010; Amaefula, 2021). As Le Cordeur (2024) observes, even after thirty years of democracy, South African schools remain racially segregated, sometimes structurally, often culturally. In Dundee Comprehensive, racialised inequality is not only present but also embedded in the informal

regulation of school uniforms and hairstyles. This was powerfully demonstrated in Workshops One and Two, where participants reflected on the racialised double standards they face. Siya's drawing in Figure 5.2 illustrates one such reflection: a drawing of a Coloured girl with long hair, a short skirt, and painted nails juxtaposed against a Black girl with a shaved head.

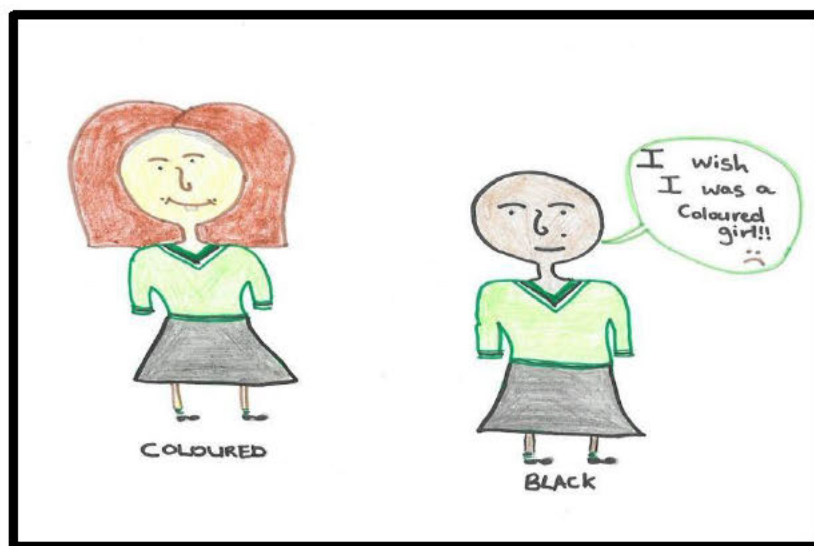

Figure 5.2: Racial Inequality and Scrutiny by Peers

Siya, the participant-artist, explained:

> I drew a Coloured girl who has long hair with edges, she's wearing a short skirt, and has her nails painted. Then there is a Black girl with a shaved head who now wishes she were a Coloured girl so she would also wear her short skirt and do whatever hairstyle she wanted without being disciplined or scrutinised by the schoolteachers.

Prompted to reflect further, the following exchange ensued between me and Siya:

> **Sthandiwe**: As a black girl too, how does this make you feel?
>
> **Siya**: It makes me feel bad. It hurts.
>
> **Sthandiwe**: Does this incident also make you wish you were a colored or an Indian girl, just because you are treated differently as a Black schoolgirl?
>
> **Siya**: Yes, it does, big time.

Sthandiwe: Do you think you would have felt appreciated if you were a Coloured girl?

Siya: Yes. Because I would be treated the same as the other learners.

This testimony exemplifies how Black schoolgirls internalise the unequal treatment they receive, often aspiring to assimilate into identities perceived as less scrutinised. As Siya highlights, Black girls are questioned and policed for their appearance while Coloured learners enjoy relative freedom, even when breaking the same school rules. Such unequal treatment is not merely anecdotal; it reveals a deeper structural bias embedded in the culture of the school. Through both verbal regulation and silence in official codes, school authorities at Dundee Comprehensive effectively endorse a racialised aesthetics regime in which Blackness is deemed deviant and subject to correction.

The narratives of Mimi and Alora further expose how Black girls' hair is not only policed but also systematically vilified by teachers at Dundee Comprehensive, especially by Indian teachers. These acts of scrutiny are not applied universally but are racially selective, disproportionately targeting Black schoolgirls while excusing similar or more extravagant hairstyles worn by Indian or Coloured learners. For example, Mimi's drawing illustrated this double standard. She depicted an Indian Teacher publicly scolding a Black learner for wearing a fringe hairstyle. The learner defended her hairstyle by pointing out that several Indian girls wore the same style without repercussion. Only then did the teacher realise the learner was referring to Indian schoolgirls. Discussing her drawing during a focus group discussion, Mimi had the following to say:

Mimi: I drew an Indian [Teacher Y] scolding and questioning a black schoolgirl who had a fringe hairstyle, and when questioned, she stated that she didn't think it was going to be a problem since there were other girls with a similar hairstyle and no one ever said anything to them. The teacher then realised that the learner was referring to Indian schoolgirls who normally do a similar hairstyle with their natural hair. Also, the teacher is labelled as one of those who hate Black learners and do not want to teach them, so instead, she discriminates against them through hating on their hair but not Indians.

This moment of recognition revealed how racialised bias operates not only through silence or policy but through deliberate and targeted enforcement. When I probed further, Mimi went on to reflect on how this incident shaped her own thinking:

> **Sthandiwe**: If this incident had happened to you, how would it have made you feel?
>
> **Mimi**: I would have felt confused as to why the teachers have a problem with us and our hair only, but not Indian or Colored girls' hair and I would have ended up questioning if we are the problem.

Mimi's words demonstrate the psychological impact of such discrimination: Black girls internalise the negative attention they receive and begin to doubt their self-worth and legitimacy within the school space.

Alora's drawing also depicted a similarly stark contrast between how two girls (i.e., one Black and one Coloured) were treated for wearing similar hairstyles. A Black girl, who had an Afro and wore a pink bandana, was reprimanded and told to either undo the hairstyle or cut her hair off. The Coloured girl, who had dyed her hair blonde and wore an identical bandana, was left unchallenged. Alora explained:

> **Alora:** I drew a Black and a Coloured girl, where a Black girl has an Afro hairstyle with a pink bandana, and the Coloured girl has with dyed blonde hairstyle and a pink bandana. [Teacher Y] scolded the Black girl only and stated that her hairstyle is not allowed at school, and she must undo it or cut her hair off. Therefore, as a Black girl, I feel discriminated against because our hairstyles are judged by teachers while Indians/coloureds are not judged, and they are left alone with any hairstyle.

Together, Mimi and Alora's experiences illustrate a clear racial asymmetry in disciplinary enforcement. Teachers, particularly Indian and Coloured female educators, emerged in the data as key agents in upholding Eurocentric standards of neatness and beauty. These educators, whether consciously or not, replicate the logic of apartheid-era schooling, where Blackness was rendered deviant, dirty, or disruptive, while whiteness and its associated aesthetics were privileged. Caluza (2025) provides historical continuity to these findings, recalling how educators in

her school days discouraged Black girls from growing their hair long, labelling it 'unclean' and insisting it be cut short. This history reverberates in the present. One participant, Hope, recalled a similar experience:

> **Hope:** I can relate to what Thando is saying. An Indian teacher said my afro is too big, and I needed to straighten it or cut it off. I refused.

The refusal, while courageous, highlights the impossible choice faced by Black girls: conform to an aesthetic regime that erases their cultural identity or risk marginalisation and punishment. Indeed, the data reveal that learners at Dundee Comprehensive exist in what might be called 'two schools within one.' While all learners physically share the same classrooms and school grounds, their experiences are bifurcated along racial lines. For Black girls, the school becomes a site of surveillance, emotional harm, and identity suppression. For Coloured and Indian learners, school appears to be a more permissive and accepting space. This racial bifurcation is powerfully captured in a metaphoric image, Figure 5.3, drawn by Hope.

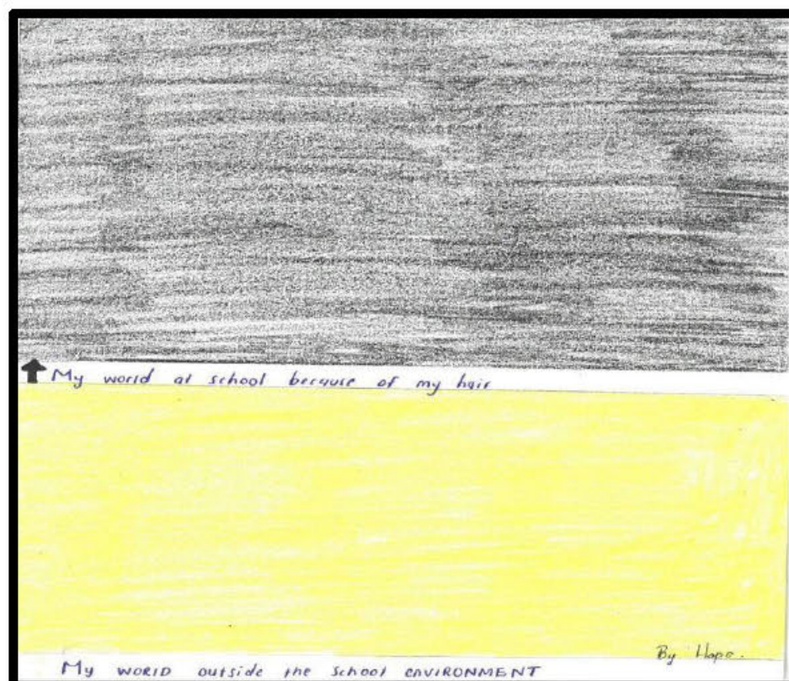

Figure 5.3: A Black Schoolgirl's Two Worlds

In her drawing, Hope depicted two contrasting environments: a dark, hostile world representing her school, and a bright, welcoming one representing life outside school. She explained:

> **Hope:** I drew two worlds apart. The dark world represents my life at school. That is where I feel judged, sad, frustrated, unwelcome, unacceptable, and less confident about myself and my unique hair. The other world, full of light, represents my life outside the school. That is where I feel loved, understood, not judged, but accepted.

Hope's illustration is not merely symbolic; it reflects the lived reality of many Black girls who feel emotionally excluded and culturally devalued within racially desegregated schools that continue to operate through the logic of white supremacy and racial hierarchy. What these girls encounter is not just bias; it is a structural reproduction of historical violence through the soft, everyday mechanisms of schooling: scoldings, remarks, exclusions, and unspoken rules about what is and is not acceptable. The racialised policing of Black hair, then, must be understood as a continuation of colonial and apartheid projects that sought to discipline and diminish Black identity. Within the supposedly inclusive space of the post-apartheid school, the Black girl's hair becomes the site upon which this unfinished struggle over dignity, identity, and belonging is fought.

The exclusion of Black schoolgirls at Dundee Comprehensive is not only symbolic but also physical. Some participants recounted instances where girls were removed from the school premises for wearing their natural hair. In one striking example, Zee recalled:

> **Zee:** A Black girl was chased out by the school's security personnel after she came to school with her huge Afro.

This literal expulsion from a public educational space speaks to the extent to which hair-based discrimination functions as a form of racialised gatekeeping. Such practices are not unique to Dundee. Madlingozi, Booi and Tumbo (2024) document similar incidents at Pinelands High, Jeppe High School for Girls, and other schools in the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces, pointing to a broader, systemic problem in South Africa's supposedly post-racial educational landscape.

The narratives from participants in this study reinforce how racialised aesthetic norms, particularly those favouring Eurocentric hair textures, continue to dominate school cultures. Robinson (2011) explains that dominant white culture has long defined beauty standards in ways that elevate European features and demean African ones. This influence is visible in how Indian and Coloured schoolgirls at Dundee are allowed expressive hairstyles, while Black girls face scrutiny, discipline, and humiliation. During one focus group, I asked if the participants thought girls of other racial groups were treated fairly compared to Black girls. Participants affirmed this notion, with Ida and Angel highlighting the discrimination of Black girls.

> **Ida:** Yes. I have been in this school since 2020, and I have never seen nor heard of an Indian or Coloured girl being asked to undo her hairstyle, but they are always made good examples for us Black schoolgirls to learn from.
>
> **Angel**: Black girls' hair is looked down upon, and it is mostly labelled as 'smelling', but good compliments are only given to Indian or coloured schoolgirls' hair.

Such comparisons illuminate how racialised privilege is maintained and naturalised within desegregated school spaces. These girls are not imagining the disparity, but they are living it daily. Their testimonies align with Hunter's (2007) research on the historical privileging of lighter skin and straighter hair among enslaved and colonised Black populations, which continues to structure social hierarchies in contemporary institutions. Figure 5.4, drawn by Hope, offers further evidence of how Black girls are subjected to mockery and ridicule by peers, particularly Indian and Coloured learners, for hairstyles that reflect cultural and familial practices.

Figure 5.4: Racism and Ridicule by School Peers

Speaking about her drawing, Hope shared:

> **Hope:** A Black schoolgirl had her head shaved because of her cultural belief that if a family member has passed on, they should shave their heads. The girl was asked by the principal why she had her head like that and was labelled as 'ugly'. She was then laughed at by Indian schoolgirls.

Siya added her view:

> **Siya:** A Black girl who had shaved her head yearned to become a Coloured girl so she could have any hairstyle preference without being disciplined or scrutinised by the teachers.

These narratives demonstrate how Black cultural expressions, whether spiritual, traditional or aesthetic, are rendered deviant within the schooling space, while other racial groups are granted leniency and affirmation. The dehumanisation of Black hair continues through harsh verbal assaults and degrading disciplinary actions, as described in Mandisa's drawing in Figure 5.5, below.

Figure 5.5: Black Afro-textured hair juxtaposed with Eurocentric hair and beauty standards

Based on the image presented above, in one focus group, participants discussed symbolic violence targeted toward Black girls and their Afro-textured hair.

> **Mandisa:** There are comments I receive from other teachers and learners, such as 'ewww! your hair is stinky, disgusting, untidy, dirty and unacceptable.
>
> **Zee:** I ended up cutting my hair because I was receiving bad remarks about my hair. They would say it was 'ugly' and 'smelly'.
>
> **Buhle:** An Indian learner insulted me and said I had ugly hair.
>
> **Ida:** They (teachers) cut our hair or chase us out of the school premises.
>
> **Hope:** Sometimes, teachers come together and discipline you harshly until you cry.
>
> **Angel:** They don't address us nicely; they just start pointing at your hair and ask, 'What is this?'

These encounters point to an entrenched structure of symbolic violence that disciplines Black girls into silence, shame, and self-surveillance. The repeated, often public, shaming of Afro-textured hair and culturally significant hairstyles deeply affects the psychological well-being of these girls. Trusty, Ward, Ward, and

He (2022) argue that hair-based discrimination profoundly influences the psychological identity development of Black youth. This was made clear when participants were asked about how these experiences had affected their mental health:

> **Sthandiwe**: How have these experiences affected your mental health?
>
> **Hope:** You end up questioning yourself as to why you were a Black girl in the first place. Sometimes you end up wanting to change yourself into becoming someone that you are not by wearing weaves and bleaching your skin colour so you can be like them.
>
> **Angel:** I feel like I am not human enough, and I don't belong anywhere.
>
> **Ida:** You end up questioning your whole being and why you were born to be a Black girl.
>
> **Buhle:** You end up looking down upon yourself and asking, why am I Black? Why do I have such hair?
>
> **Moratuwa:** You end up wanting to change your Afro hair to straightened hair so you can fit in like the other Coloured or Indian girls.

These reflections highlight the corrosive effects of persistent aesthetic devaluation. African Feminist scholars remind us that this form of exclusion is not incidental but deeply embedded in the colonial matrix of power. According to London (2021), the construction of Afro hair as unprofessional or undesirable is rooted in historical systems of white supremacy. This devaluation continues to push Black women and girls to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards, often at great psychological and even physical cost. The desire to 'fit in' leads some girls to alter their natural hair through wigs, weaves, or chemical straightening practices, which can result in scalp burns, hair loss, and chronic follicular damage (Arogundade, 2000; Houston, 2016; Winfield-Thomas & Whaley, 2019). The harm is not only physical but deeply symbolic: in altering their hair, these girls are often attempting to erase aspects of their Black identity to gain conditional acceptance in racially hostile spaces.

In her work, Rogers (2020) affirms that hair is not merely aesthetic for Black schoolgirls. Rather, it is a deeply political and cultural artefact through which they

express identity, narrate exclusion, and enact resistance. The findings from this study reinforce that reality. At Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, Afro-textured hair remains a contested site of power, discipline, and erasure. Despite the promise of educational equity enshrined in post-apartheid legislation, hair-based discrimination persists, reconstituting old racial hierarchies under new institutional guises.

This study employed African Feminism as the guiding analytical framework, precisely because it centres Black girls lived realities, amplifies their voices, and confronts the colonial and patriarchal systems that continue to oppress them (Goredema, 2010; Amaefula, 2021). African Feminism insists that the present cannot be understood outside the historical conditions of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid that shaped what constitutes respectable femininity and beauty. Within this framework, the continued policing of Black girls' hair in schools is not an isolated disciplinary matter but part of a broader cultural and institutional legacy of racialised exclusion.

Hair bias, as Trusty, Ward, Ward, and He (2022) argue, remains one of the more covert forms of institutional discrimination — subtle, everyday, yet deeply insidious. While South Africa's 1994 democratic transition officially ended legal segregation (Graham, 2020), the findings reveal that racially desegregated schools like Dundee Comprehensive continue to function as covert domains of racism and exclusion, especially towards Black learners. As Madlingozi, Booi, and Tumbo (2024) note, it is deeply troubling that even three decades into democracy, forms of racial discrimination remain entrenched in South African educational institutions.

The study allowed Black girls to speak from their own positionalities, documenting the emotional and structural violence they endure through hair-based regulation. Three critical findings emerge in this theme: First, racial inequality is prevalent and institutionalised. Black girls are subjected to stricter surveillance than their Indian and Coloured peers inside the school. While the latter are allowed to dye their hair, wear colourful accessories, and style their hair freely, Black girls face restrictions, punitive measures, and outright humiliation for similar choices.

This reflects not only unequal application of school norms, but the deeper ideological devaluation of Afro-textured hair as 'unruly' or 'unacceptable.'

Second, the problem extends beyond texture to include the cultural and spiritual significance of Black hairstyles. Participants reported being punished for wearing dreadlocks, fades, or beaded styles that hold religious and ancestral significance (issues I discuss in detail in the following sections). As Mercer (1987) suggests, Black hairstyles embody identity and adaptation. They are cultural texts shaped through history, struggle, and creativity. Dundee Comprehensive fails to recognise or respect these meanings, thereby invalidating the spiritual and cultural selves of its Black learners.

Third, participants recounted acts of verbal violence and physical punishment for wearing natural or culturally significant hair. As shown in their drawings, Black girls are subjected to insults, called 'dirty' or 'smelly,' forced to cut their hair, or sent home from school — all without any formal, written school policy to justify such disciplinary action. These practices breach multiple constitutional rights, including the rights to dignity, freedom and security of the person, and access to education, as protected by the South African Bill of Rights (1996).

This failure of policy transparency is critical. Participants revealed that they had never received or seen an official school policy document outlining acceptable hairstyles. Instead, they were guided by an ambiguous caution board placed at the school gate, which was vague, unendorsed, and selectively enforced. According to Le Cordeur (2024), language and skin colour often become proxies for systemic exclusion when school policies are either ambiguous or absent. The case at Dundee illustrates how this vacuum allows for informal, racially targeted policing practices that disproportionately harm Black learners.

In this context, the policing of Afro-textured hair is not simply about 'neatness' or 'school discipline.' It is a racialised project of aesthetic domination, a covert mechanism through which Blackness is marginalised, and 'whiteness' remains the unstated norm. The desire to 'fit in' expressed by many participants, through straightening their hair, wearing wigs, or even considering skin bleaching, must be

understood as survival strategies in an institution that devalues their natural identities.

Ultimately, this study exposes how racialised beauty standards remain embedded within South African schooling, despite the country's formal commitment to equity and redress. The hair-based discrimination experienced by Black girls at Dundee Comprehensive is not an exception but a symptom of broader structural failures. Schools, rather than serving as spaces of liberation and affirmation, continue to reproduce colonial logics of control over Black female bodies. Without urgent policy reform, intersectional anti-racist teacher training, and deliberate recognition of Black cultural identities, desegregated schools will remain apartheid by another name.

While these racialised practices of hair policing reveal deep-seated aesthetic and disciplinary biases, they also intersect powerfully with cultural and religious exclusion. The next section explores how Black girls' spiritual and ancestral identities, embodied in hairstyles like beaded dreadlocks, are subjected to equally violent forms of regulation, revealing the school's failure to honour the cultural pluralism enshrined in South Africa's democratic vision.

5.3 Black Girls' Cultural and Religious Exclusion through Hair Regulation

This section explores the intersection of religious expression, cultural identity, and systemic exclusion through hair-based discrimination. While the previous theme addressed broader racialised policing of Afro-textured hair, here the focus is more pointed: on how hairstyles such as beaded dreadlocks, often linked to spiritual callings and cultural customs, are subject to punitive measures in racially desegregated schools, thereby violating Black schoolgirls' constitutional rights. As Msila (2007) cautions, South Africa's democratic promise has faltered in fully achieving access, equity, and meaningful school participation. This failure is pronounced in the lived experiences of Black girls at Dundee Comprehensive, who are disciplined not only for their Blackness but for cultural and spiritual expressions embodied in their hair. In African spiritual and cultural traditions, hair is more than a surface marker. It is sacred, expressive, and symbolically rich (Brogan, 2023; Lashley, 2020).

Figure 5.6, below, produced by Hope, depicts these harms: hair cutting, threats of suspension, and denial of religious expression in school spaces. The drawing is a visual testimony that encapsulates the emotional, spiritual, and cultural violence enacted through hair-based discrimination in desegregated schools. The image depicts a tearful Black girl adorned with long, beaded dreadlocks facing a visibly angry teacher (labelled as Teacher X) who holds a pair of scissors and shouts: *"Those beads are not allowed in this school! You will have to cut even your hair, you look messy* (sic)*."* This image provides a visceral representation of what African Feminist and Afrocentric theoretical lenses reveal – the deep structural and symbolic violence that targets Black girlhood, Black hair, and Black spirituality. Hope recounted:

> **Hope:** My drawing depicts a Black girl who came to school with beaded dreadlocks, and [Teacher X] asked her why she had those beads on since it was not part of the school uniform. The teacher took out a pair of scissors and asked the girl to cut off her hair because it was ugly and looked messy, then the girl started crying. This incident took place at my school. The girl, however, refused to cut her hair because it was part of her spiritual calling, and then she was threatened with being suspended or kicked out of the school for good, and to go look for another school elsewhere. My question then is, are these Black learners with spiritual calling that requires them to have beaded dreadlocks denied their right to education since they are chased away from school just because of their spiritual gifts?

From a Black Feminist perspective, this image demonstrates the intersectional nature of oppression faced by Black schoolgirls, where race, gender, culture, and spirituality are entangled in the denial of dignity. The girl's tears convey the internalised emotional pain of institutional rejection. Her beads are not merely decorative but represent spiritual significance and ancestral continuity, making the teacher's demand to remove them a direct attack on her being. African Feminism, as articulated by scholars like Goredema (2010) and Amaefula (2021), demands recognition of such lived realities and asserts the right of Black girls to exist as spiritual and cultural beings within public institutions. The image confronts us with the question: whose body, whose hair, whose identity is considered legitimate in democratic schooling spaces? The use of scissors in the teacher's hand

symbolises a disciplinary tool not only to cut hair but to sever heritage, spiritual autonomy, and girlhood agency.

Figure 5.6: A Black schoolgirl being forced to cut her dreadlocks

From an Afro-feminist theoretical standpoint, Hope's drawing reflects the ontological clash between Eurocentric school norms and African cosmologies. For example, Afrocentricity insists that African knowledge systems, such as those embedded in hairstyles like dreadlocks, are valid, holistic, and spiritually grounded (Asante, 2003). The teacher's framing of the girl's hairstyle as "*messy*" signals how colonial logics of order and neatness remain embedded in post- apartheid school governance, where 'neatness' becomes a racialised, aesthetic code to erase Africanity. The demand that she cut her hair is not neutral. Instead, it is a symbolic cleansing of Blackness (Oyedemi, 2016; Zulu, 2024). Afro-feminist thought urges us to reframe such moments not as disobedience or disorder, but as epistemic resistance. That is, the girl, even in tears, embodies dignity by refusing to abandon her cultural expression. The erasure depicted in Hope's drawing contradicts the South African Schools Act of 1996, which explicitly requires that school codes of conduct be inclusive, transparent, and developed in consultation with parents and learners.

However, as in the previous theme, the study found no formal, shared policy document, only arbitrary verbal policing and exclusionary enforcement practices.

In yet another drawing (Figure 5.7), Buhle captures the raw pain and public humiliation experienced by a Black girl following the forced cutting of her Afro-textured hair. Her tears and silence evoke a deep sense of violation, powerlessness, and racialised shaming in a space meant to nurture her. The drawing poignantly captures the anguish of a Black girl whose culturally significant hairstyle is forcefully removed by a teacher. The tear-streaked face, paired with her words, "*Do I really have to choose between school and my ancestral rituals and practices*?", reveals the deep conflict between institutional schooling and spiritual identity. Her pain embodies the trauma of cultural erasure and the violence of aesthetic regulation in racially desegregated educational spaces.

Both Figure 5.6 and Figure 5.7 demonstrate how spiritual hairstyles like beaded dreadlocks are rendered unacceptable through a process of despiritualisation, where African religious symbols are framed as threats to institutional decorum. The teachers, representing school authority, use shame and coercion to enforce Eurocentric norms, while the learners are depicted as both wounded and defiant. This dynamic reflects the lived tensions many Black girls navigate: to exist spiritually intact in spaces that deny them the right to do so.

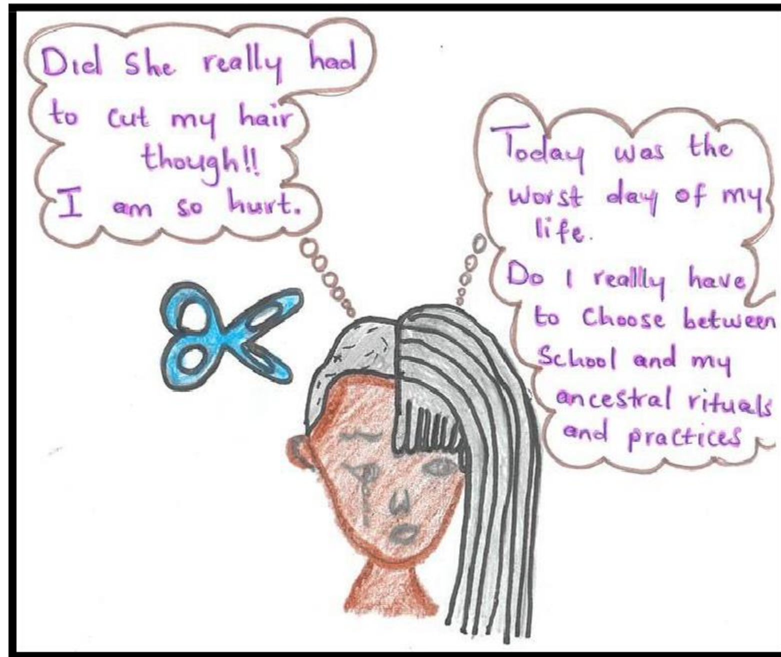

Figure 5.7: A Black schoolgirl's emotional thoughts after her hair was cut

Moreover, both drawings stand not only as illustrations of discrimination, but as political artefacts. They communicate visually what African Feminism and Afrocentricity articulate theoretically, that the regulation of Black girls' hair is not merely about grooming—it is about power, erasure, resistance, and the struggle for epistemic justice in South African schools.

These were not isolated cases in the study. Thando shared a striking juxtaposition in her drawing showing two teachers wearing their own religious markers yet ridiculing a Black girl's dreadlocks. Discussing her drawing during a focus group discussion, Thando said the following:

> **Thando:** I drew a Black schoolgirl who has beaded dreadlocks that represent her spiritual calling. Next to her are her teachers, who are also wearing something that represents their beliefs. The Muslim teacher has her headwrap on, and the Indian teacher has a red dot on her forehead; however, the Indian teacher claims that the black schoolgirl's hair smells and that she is faking her spiritual calling, therefore, she must remove her beaded dreadlocks. Whilst the other teacher suggests that she must leave school and go be with her kind of spiritual people at home. Seemingly, the

only cultural behaviour and practices that are deemed relevant and important in this school are those of Indians and Muslims.

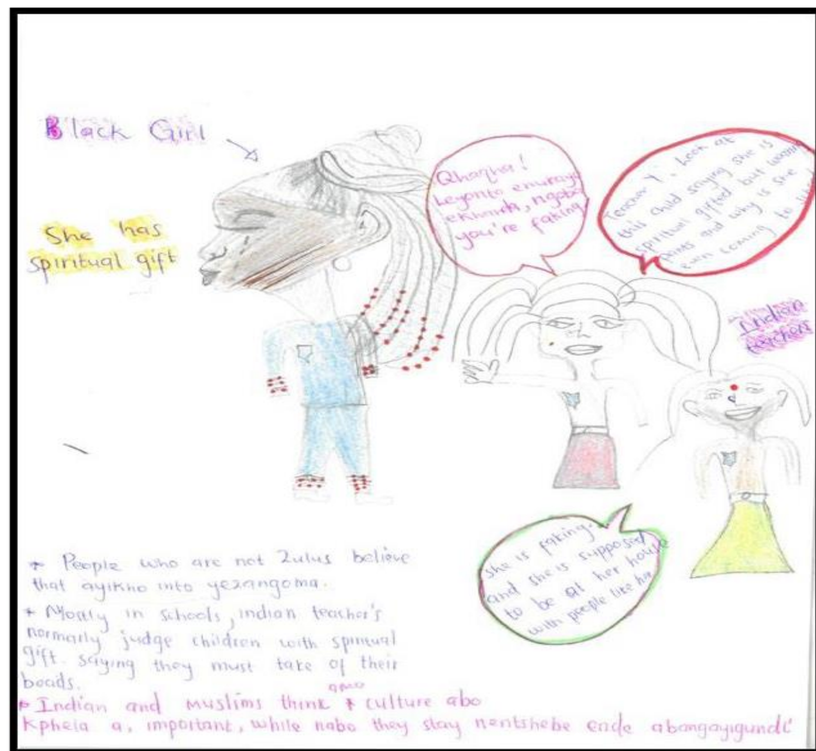

Figure 5.8: Teachers mocking a Black girl's beaded dreadlocks

Thando's drawing and her description offer an important visual critique of the selective enforcement of cultural and religious norms in racially desegregated schooling contexts. At the centre of the image is a Black girl with beaded dreadlocks, visibly distressed as she stands before two non-Black female teachers—one wearing a Muslim headscarf, the other marked by a red bindi, a signifier of Indian Hindu identity. Both are depicted ridiculing the Black girl's hair and spiritual calling, with one saying, *"Leyonto ekhanda yakho, uyayiqamba (It is all in your head (the spiritual calling), you are making this up, you're faking!"* and the other dismissing her presence at school altogether: *"She must go stay at home with people like her."*

In the lower part of the drawing, Thando adds a critical meta-commentary in isiZulu and English, such as:

> **Thando:** Indians and Muslims think culture ama culture abo kuphela abalulekile (it's only their cultures that are important), while they stay nentshebe ende abangayigundi (their long unshaved beards)!

This statement exposes the hypocrisy that non-African spiritual markers are afforded respect, while African ones are met with suspicion, mockery, and violence.

Thando's image highlights the erasure of African girls' spiritual subjectivities within institutional spaces. Afro-feminism affirms the epistemological and ontological value of African ways of knowing, being, and believing. The Black girl's beaded dreadlocks symbolise more than style—they are sacred emblems tied to ancestral lineage, spiritual vocation, and cultural honour. Yet within the school space, her hair and religious/spiritual affiliation are rendered "*messy*," "*fake*," and grounds for exclusion. This reflects what Afro-feminist scholars like Goredema (2010) and Amaefula (2021) describe as the colonial residue within post-apartheid institutions that continue to criminalise African spiritual aesthetics, particularly when embodied by women and girls. Thando's depiction of the teachers' tolerance for their own religious symbols, but not the Black girl's, is a visual indictment of how desegregated schools continue to uphold non-African norms as legitimate, while African cosmologies are treated as illegitimate, irrational, or dangerous. Afro-feminism resists such hierarchies by affirming that African girlhood is both spiritually legitimate and worthy of full institutional recognition.

Black Feminist Theory strengthens the analysis by insisting that Black girls' embodied experiences of race, gender, and spirituality are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression. Thando's drawing is not simply about hair; it also addresses institutionalised anti-Blackness, the marginalisation of Black female spirituality, and the de-legitimisation of Black cultural expression in a supposedly inclusive school. The image portrays how disciplinary power is exercised through humiliation, with teachers using authority to regulate not only appearance but belief. Moreover, Black Feminist Theory highlights how epistemic violence operates through both verbal ridicule and aesthetic norms. The speech bubbles in the image, particularly "*She is faking it*", echo the historical pattern where Black

women's spiritual lives are dismissed as illegitimate or 'lesser.' This aligns with the theory's core concern: how Black women and girls are rendered hyper-visible in surveillance but invisible in recognition. Importantly, Thando's use of bilingual expression (e.g., isiZulu and English) mirrors the hybrid, transgressive identity of Black girls who straddle multiple worlds yet are denied legitimacy in either. Her drawing serves as a form of counter-storytelling, a concept central to Black Feminist praxis, where oppressed groups narrate their own truths against dominant discourses.

Thando's drawing also encapsulates the core argument of this theme. That is, schools like Dundee Comprehensive selectively legitimise religious expressions, protecting Indian and Muslim cultural markers while targeting African spiritual practices for ridicule and sanction. This selective inclusion is not incidental but structured by broader histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and anti-Black epistemologies. Thando's representation is not merely observational; it is politically charged, exposing how Black girls with spiritual callings are denied educational belonging. Through her drawing, she asserts a radical Afro-feminist and Black feminist critique: that Black girls do not need to apologise for their spiritual ancestry, and that schools must be held accountable for trying to erase it.

As Osman (2018) asserts, meaningful transformation in schools demands the active inclusion of diverse cultural and spiritual beliefs. Yet at Dundee Comprehensive, this inclusion is selective and exclusionary. Black girls who wear beaded dreadlocks (a hairstyle intimately tied to spiritual calling and ancestral identity) are routinely punished, humiliated, and excluded, even as other religious identities are accommodated without question. Mimi recounted:

> **Mimi:** At an assembly, [Teacher Y] called out my friend to the front as she wanted to refer to her hair as an example of an unacceptable hairstyle. She criticised her hairstyle by saying beaded dreadlocks are not acceptable at school, regardless of her spiritual calling. She said her hair looks scary, smelly and dirty, and other learners are no longer comfortable with her around because they feel like she is practising witchcraft at school. My friend was suspended for a week and told that upon her return, she should

be without that hairstyle, and should bring a parent along. She was so devastated and hurt that day.

This public shaming reveals the profound disrespect and pathologisation of African spirituality within the schooling space. Buhle offered a similar narrative of violence and exclusion, describing insults from both teachers and peers, disciplinary measures without due process, and the refusal of school management to recognise the cultural significance of hairstyles rooted in African cosmologies. Buhle added:

> **Buhle:** These are the challenges we face in our school as Black girls; I drew a girl who has beaded dreadlocks as part of her spiritual journey. Then [Teacher Y] is seen insulting the girl by stating that her hair is ugly, smelling, and she looks like a hobo and that her hair is not acceptable at school. She further alluded that she must return home and come back without the dreadlocks. During that incident, she was also insulted by her peers, saying she had ugly hair. One of the school managers also questioned why she had such dreadlocks at school while she tried to explain herself that she has a spiritual gift, the manager did not care less and suspended her to return the following Friday without her dreadlocks, and if not, she should return with her parent.

Such treatment, while framed as school discipline, amounts to epistemic violence. It not only humiliates learners but also materially disrupts their right to education, as Mimi further explained how teachers "*Violate our right to education, while we are at home, we are not learning*." These incidents represent clear violations of multiple constitutional rights. First, the right to freedom of expression and religion is violated when learners are forced to remove hairstyles that represent spiritual callings. Thando emphasised this when she asserted:

> **Thando:** Black girls also have a right to express their religion without being judged or told to remove their beads, as that would be going against their basic human right to religion and freedom of expression.

Second, the right to education is undermined by unjust suspensions and exclusions. Mimi captured this reality:

Mimi: They violate our human right to education when they have us suspended for a week, because while we are at home, we are not learning.

Third, the right to dignity and security of the person is jeopardised when learners are subjected to forced hair cutting or physically coercive disciplinary practices.

Another example of such extreme violations comes from another drawing (Figure 5.9) by Hope. The image depicts a visibly distressed Black schoolgirl having her beaded dreadlocks cut by a teacher identified as Teacher X. The teacher's accusatory words, "*You don't listen hhe*!!", convey disciplinary disdain rather than pedagogical care. The cutting of the girl's hair, drawn mid-action, symbolises the violent erasure of cultural and spiritual identity under the guise of school regulation. Hope's drawing foregrounds the traumatic impact of such racialised and gendered punishments, exposing how Black girls are forcibly disciplined for nonconformity while their dignity and personhood are undermined.

Figure 5.9: The Punitive Policing of Black Girls' Spiritual Hair

Referring to this drawing, Hope added:

> **Hope:** They are violating our right to safety as they are exposing us to harm when they are cutting off our hair using scissors of which is wrong, and we also have a right to say 'No' when they want to cut our hair.

Hope's statement highlights the physical and psychological violence that underpins hair-based disciplinary practices in desegregated South African schools. By asserting, "*we also have a right to say 'No'*," she invokes the constitutional right to bodily autonomy and safety, directly challenging the school's authoritarian culture that polices Black girls' hair without consent. Her reference to scissors as instruments of harm reframes what may seem like a mundane act (e.g., cutting hair) as a violation of personal dignity, cultural identity, and human rights. In doing so, Hope exposes the deep entanglement between institutionalised racism, gendered power, and everyday violence in school spaces.

According to the South African Schools Act (1996), only a duly constituted School Governing Body (SGB) may suspend a learner, and only after a fair hearing. However, the participants in this study described being sent home without due process, parental notification, or a clear code of conduct. Responding to a question I posed during the focus group, Alora pointedly challenged this disregard for procedural justice:

> **Sthandiwe**: If you were to become a leader of your school's Black girl movement, what action would you suggest be taken against the unfair treatment of Black girls with Afro-textured hair?
>
> **Alora**: I would suggest we involve our parents and call the school governing body (SGB) to account as to why we are being discriminated against as Black girls in our school, and if they cannot resolve those issues, we are going to fight as black girls.

This call to action underlines the learners' own understanding of democratic participation and the accountability role of the SGB; an accountability that, in this case, appears absent. The inaction of the SGB not only reflects systemic neglect but renders them complicit in the marginalisation of Black girlhood. These exclusions are not isolated. The 2023 case at Crowthorne Christian Academy, mentioned in Chapter One, where a learner was expelled for wearing dreadlocks,

sparked national outrage and a renewed examination of school policies and their legal and ethical inconsistencies (Caluza, 2025). Similar dynamics are clearly playing out at Dundee Comprehensive. Despite the government's stated commitment to promoting religious tolerance and diversity education (Msila, 2007), the evidence here suggests that African spirituality is not seen as worthy of inclusion. Participants observed that Indian and Muslim teachers are permitted to wear religious markers such as bindis or hijabs, yet Black girls are vilified for expressing their spiritual identity through beaded dreadlocks. This double standard entrenches the idea that African belief systems are illegitimate, fabricated, or even dangerous. As Taylor (2003) and Osman (2018) remind us, hair is deeply linked to dignity, self-recognition, and spiritual autonomy. When Black girls are forced to sever this link, it is not just a case of school regulation, but it is also a denial of their full humanity. The policing of Black hair in this context is not simply aesthetic—it is political, spiritual, and deeply gendered.

Guided by Afro-feminist and Black feminist theory, this analysis recognises that the intersection of race, gender, culture, and spirituality shapes the school experience of Black girls in profoundly unjust ways. The refusal to accept beaded dreadlocks is not neutral. It is a violent attempt to silence African spiritual identities and enforce Eurocentric norms under the guise of policy. The approach taken by Dundee Comprehensive is therefore not only constitutionally indefensible but also morally bankrupt. A genuinely transformative and inclusive education system must affirm, not erase, the cultural and spiritual identities of Black learners. It must recognise that Black girlhood is not a problem to be managed, but a subjectivity to be affirmed, protected, and celebrated.

In addition to cultural and spiritual regulation, the data also exposed how hair functions as a gendered and sexualised marker, particularly for Black girls who defy conventional femininity. The following section unpacks how hairstyles like the fade haircut become sites of gendered surveillance and queerphobic discipline, challenging any notion that hair discrimination is ever neutral.

5.4 Gendered and Sexualised Dimensions of Black Girls' Hair Discrimination

This section examines how Black schoolgirls at Dundee Comprehensive experience gendered and sexualised surveillance and exclusion through their choice of haircut, specifically the fade haircut – a style traditionally associated with boys. While Afro-textured hair in general has been policed for its perceived unruliness and non-conformity to Eurocentric beauty standards, the fade haircut represents a particular flashpoint for discrimination, as it intersects with societal anxieties around gender non-conformity and queer identity. In this theme, the focus is on how hair becomes a site for the regulation of sexuality, the disciplining of gender performance, and the racialised policing of identity, particularly for girls who either identify as part of the LGBTQI community or are perceived to be queer.

According to Christine (2025), hair plays a vital role in lesbian style cultures—it can signify queerness, challenge femininity, and affirm identity. Medhurst (2022) notes that queer women often choose to cut or shave their hair as a way of visually aligning with their sexual identity and resisting normative gender expectations. Historically, the fade haircut has been coded as masculine and, when worn by women, has attracted labels such as 'dyke', which is a term originally used pejoratively but now increasingly reclaimed by queer women with pride (Nolasco, 2022; Belcher, 2018; Wilkinson, 2018).

At Dundee Comprehensive, Black schoolgirls who wear fade cuts are subjected to suspicion, ridicule, and regulation. Some are accused of being lesbian or referred to as "*tomboys*" by teachers, particularly Indian educators, while others are asked to change their hairstyle altogether. Importantly, as Thando's drawing in Figure 5.10 reveals, some girls simply prefer the aesthetic of the fade without any connection to sexual identity, yet they are still labelled and policed:

> **Thando:** My drawing depicts a female friend of mine who usually cuts her hair in a fade haircut, and she is always questioned about why she is behaving like a boy by cutting her hair in a fade, or she would be asked if she is a girl or a boy. She is mostly asked about her sexuality by Indian teachers, as they always see a need to refer to her as a tomboy since she does not do girly hairstyles.

Figure 5.10: A teacher questioning a fade cut.

When probed further, the following discussion took place:

> **Sthandiwe**: How does your friend feel when she is referred to as a tomboy?
>
> **Thando**: She does not like being referred to as a tomboy because she is a straight girl who just likes short hairstyles. She normally feels discriminated against and undermined.

This illustrates how femininity is rigidly defined in the school space and deviations from normative gender presentation are automatically pathologised. Black Feminist Theory critiques precisely this system of control, where Black girls' bodies and choices are not granted complexity or legitimacy. The assumption that a non-feminine hairstyle equals queerness reveals the school's broader discomfort with non-normative gender expression.

Thando's drawing powerfully illustrates the gendered, aesthetic, and psychological violence that Black girls with short or fade haircuts often experience in desegregated school environments. The image captures a moment of ridicule: a girl with a fade hairstyle is visibly upset as another person, presumably a peer or teacher, accuses her of looking "*ugly*" for cutting her hair. The speech bubble stating, *"Why did you cut your hair? You look ugly!"* is emotionally charged. It reveals how normative expectations around femininity are used to shame, devalue, and police Black girls' bodies. The insult "*you look ugly*" is not merely personal; it is structurally rooted in colonial and patriarchal definitions of beauty that equate femininity with long, soft, Eurocentric hair. By choosing a short, fade-style haircut

(an aesthetic more common among boys or masculine-presenting individuals), the girl challenges the dominant ideals of what a 'proper' girl should look like. Her resistance is met with rejection, not just of her hair, but of her worth as a Black girl. Afro-feminism insists that Black girls' choices, especially those grounded in cultural, political, or queer expression, must be understood as acts of agency and identity reclamation, not deviance. This drawing starkly reflects how Black girls are denied this agency in schools where hairstyle becomes a proxy for disciplining gender and race.

From a Black Feminist Theory lens, the interaction depicted is an instance of intersectional harm, where Black girls face overlapping scrutiny based on their race, gender expression, and perceived non-conformity. The phrase *"You look ugly"* is not just an aesthetic judgment; it is a weaponised form of social exclusion, designed to invalidate her identity and push her back into conformity. The image highlights how Black girls' bodies are hyper-visible and policed, while their pain is minimised or silenced. The girl's silence and downcast eyes represent what Black feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and bell hooks (1989) have long pointed out: that Black girls must endure constant judgment from peers, educators, and systems that expect submission, not self-definition.

Indeed, for some girls in the study, the fade haircut is an act of queer self-identification and resistance. These learners use their hair as a visible marker of their sexuality and community membership.

> **Amanda**: A fade-haircut makes me feel okay, and I feel like I am human enough because the cut makes it easy or rather, represents my sexuality to people easily. When people see me with a fade haircut, they clearly and quickly understand my sexuality. In a nutshell, I would say it helps me stand out and identify as an LGBTIQI individual.
>
> **Caster**: I am a girl, but I like being a boy. I love a fade haircut, and when I have a fade haircut, I feel like a complete boy(*umjita*), and I even feel more confident when I am approaching a girl because I know she would be seeing a guy in me. Imagine if I had approached her with any feminine hairstyle? A fade haircut makes me feel that Yes! I am a man, I feel myself.

> **Lebo**: When I have a fade haircut, I see myself as a boy, and many people get confused and end up asking each other if I am a boy or a girl, and then I would explain that I am a girl, but I like the life of being a boy.

These three narratives (by Amanda, Caster, and Lebo) offer insights into how Black schoolgirls construct and express their gendered and sexual identities through the fade haircut. Their voices are vital in illuminating the intersectional politics of hair, gender, and sexuality in the context of desegregated South African schooling. These accounts disrupt normative constructions of Black girlhood and reveal how hair becomes both a liberatory tool and a site of regulation. For example, Amanda's reflection that "*I feel human enough*" is a profound declaration of self-worth in a context that constantly undermines her. Her fade haircut is not just about aesthetics, but it is a means of reclaiming personhood in a school that refuses to acknowledge Black queer subjectivity. Afro-feminism demands that African girls be seen and validated in all their multiplicities, including those who challenge traditional gender roles or present outside normative femininity. Amanda's haircut becomes a radical act of self-naming, asserting presence where absence is expected.

For Caster and Lebo, the fade haircut affirms a masculinised gender identity — not in opposition to being African girls, but as part of the diverse expressions of African girlhood. Caster's use of "*umjita*" (a local slang for 'guy') points to how language and style intersect in constructing gendered personhood. These Afro-feminist articulations resist colonial binaries of male/female and push for an understanding of African identities as fluid, localised, and self-determined.

Black Feminist Theory foregrounds the interlocking systems of gender, race, sexuality, and schooling that shape the lives of these girls. All three participants describe how their fade cuts draw attention, provoke questioning, or cause confusion; yet none of them apologises for their presentation. Their narratives demonstrate how visibility can be both empowering and dangerous. Amanda notes that her haircut "*represents my sexuality... clearly and quickly*." This speaks to the double-edged nature of visibility: it can enable self-affirmation, but also expose one to surveillance, ridicule, and violence. Caster's and Lebo's experiences further highlight how schools enforce heteronormative femininity. Their narratives

challenge the assumption that girls must look or behave a certain way to be recognised as valid. When Lebo says, *"I am a girl, but I like the life of being a boy,"* she expresses a complex identity that refuses to be confined by binary categories. Black Feminist Theory compels us to see this not as a contradiction but as resistance to systems that demand legibility through conformity.

Together, Amanda, Caster, and Lebo demonstrate that hair is not just hair. It is an embodied archive of identity, resistance, and possibility. For these girls, the fade cut becomes a visual declaration: *'I exist on my own terms.'* It is both a shield and a sword; a way to carve out space in an institution that seeks to collapse its complexity into silence. In schooling contexts where Black girls are expected to present as respectable, heterosexual, and compliant, these fade-wearing learners represent a queer counterpublic. Their haircuts signal that Black girlhood is not a singular experience, and that queerness and African identity are not mutually exclusive. These narratives call for a reimagined schooling environment. One that does not merely tolerate difference but nurtures it, where hair is recognised as a medium of self-definition and gender and sexuality are not policed but protected.

Yet, as the narratives show, their choices are not always met with affirmation. Instead, they are punished, scrutinised, or selectively silenced. Caster and Amanda recalled:

> **Caster:** It happens that other teacher treats you well, and others treat you badly. I was once told by [Teacher X] to come back the next day, having cut off my fade hairstyle, and I did not understand what was wrong or right, but I was told to remove it even though I liked my fade cut. Some teachers would ask me to cut it off, and others would compliment me. Another teacher here at school doesn't like to have fade haircuts, so from time to time he would tell us to cut them off, especially if you are a Black schoolgirl, but he doesn't ask the Coloureds to cut it off; instead, he would say they are okay. So, as Blacks, we don't understand why we are asked to remove our curls while Indians are allowed.
>
> **Amanda**: It differs. Some do not care about what is happening, and others like to put pressure on me to a point where I would feel uncomfortable attending school. I became uncomfortable and scared to even enter the

school gate because I get questioned as to why I cut my hair like this, whilst I can see how other girls cut their hair at school. However, I cannot change my fade haircut because it is what I believe in, and when I believe in something, I strongly believe in it.

Read from an Afro-feminist perspective, Caster's and Amanda's experiences expose how Black girls are routinely denied the right to aesthetic autonomy, particularly when they diverge from Euro-normative or heteronormative gender presentation. Caster's observation that Coloured girls with the same hairstyle are not asked to change it, while Black girls are told to cut theirs, speaks to how schools subtly replicate racialised hierarchies of acceptability. Afro-feminism urges us to understand this not as an isolated disciplinary issue, but as part of a broader pattern of inherited colonial power structures, where Blackness is equated with excess, deviance, or disorder, and must be managed into invisibility. The fade haircut, when worn by Black girls, becomes a contested site of resistance, not simply because it departs from femininity, but because it refuses assimilation. Afro-feminism defends this refusal as valid, powerful, and necessary. As Caster explains, she is left confused: *"I did not understand what was wrong or right."* This confusion is political. It reflects a schooling system that fails to articulate clear, fair, and inclusive policies, instead relying on arbitrary, racially coded enforcement.

On the other hand, Black Feminist Theory foregrounds the emotional and psychological impact of such disciplinary encounters. Amanda's admission that *"I become uncomfortable and scared to even enter the school gate"* speaks to the internalisation of surveillance and fear, common among Black girls who do not conform to dominant norms. The school environment becomes a space of anxiety, where one's presence is constantly up for interrogation. Her assertion that *"I cannot change my haircut because it is what I believe in"* is a radical declaration of Black queer self-determination. Black Feminist Theory recognises the political significance of this. It suggests that Black queer girls are not simply victims of discrimination, but agents of resistance, carving out space in systems that deny their humanity. Amanda's belief in her haircut is not shallow or performative. Rather, it is deeply tied to her identity, values, and sense of belonging within the

LGBTQI community. Black Feminist Theory also helps us see how emotional labour and resilience are embedded in these young women's everyday lives. Amanda and Caster are forced to constantly navigate contradictory school responses where some teachers compliment, while others humiliate. This inconsistency fosters instability and reinforces the idea that Black gender non-conforming youth must constantly negotiate their worthiness, while their non-Black peers are granted easy acceptance.

When I asked the girls whether this treatment made them feel racially othered, Amanda responded:

> **Amanda:** Yes, I do feel like that. It takes me back to the idea that we do not get along as blacks versus Indians/coloureds, and it makes me realise that maybe we should not interact as a collective, and we should distance ourselves from them. Blacks should interact with other Blacks, and Indians/Coloured people interact on their own, since they are judging us based on our hair.

This response reveals how racialised hair discrimination fractures the ideal of post-apartheid social cohesion. Amanda's suggestion that "*Blacks should keep to themselves*" reflects a painful reckoning with the failure of desegregated schooling to deliver equitable inclusion. Drawing on Afro-feminism, this sentiment illustrates how everyday exclusion pushes Black girls to question the very logic of integration, while Black Feminist Theory helps illuminate the emotional toll of persistent judgment. Hair, in this context, becomes a symbolic fault line, reinscribing racial divisions under the guise of inclusion. Amanda further shared that she draws inspiration from queer South African public figures:

> **Amanda:** I have a role model named Leon Mabhena who has the same sexuality as I. She is part of the LGBTQI group, and I am also part of the group. She is the one I look up to. There was a live show she once did, and on that show, she was explaining her fade cut, and I could relate to her, and I felt relieved and believed that I could also have a fade cut and express my sexuality through it and do that freely and for people to see and know my sexuality.

Her reflection highlights the powerful role of representation and visibility in shaping Black queer girls' sense of self. By identifying with public figure Leon Mabhena, Amanda finds affirmation, connection, and permission to exist authentically. Her ability to relate to Mabhena's explanation of the fade haircut illustrates how Black LGBTQI youth use cultural symbols, like hair, to articulate identity and belonging. Her testimony reveals how Black queer girls draw strength from within their own communities to counter institutional silencing and marginalisation. It further underlines that Amanda's recognition of herself in another is not incidental but deeply political; it resists erasure and fosters self-determination in a context that routinely undermines queer Black girlhood. Amanda's narrative affirms that hair, far from being a superficial feature, is a critical tool of identity-making, resistance, and survival.

The narratives presented in this section illuminate how Black schoolgirls who wear fade haircuts navigate schooling spaces that are deeply structured by racialised, gendered, and heteronormative norms. Far from being a neutral aesthetic choice, the fade haircut functions as a contested signifier of gender identity, sexual orientation, and cultural resistance, and is thus heavily policed in the desegregated school context. As Christine (2025) and Medhurst (2022) argue, short hair and shaved styles have long served as expressive tools within lesbian and queer communities, allowing women to mark visibility, claim space, and challenge normative femininity. Yet within institutions like Dundee Comprehensive, these expressions are criminalised, particularly when embodied by Black girls.

Afro-feminism offers a powerful critique of how African girlhood is continuously constrained by colonial remnants that define beauty, femininity, and respectability through Eurocentric and patriarchal standards (Goredema, 2010; Amaefula, 2021). Black girls who choose fade haircuts, whether to align with queer identity or simply for personal comfort, are framed as 'problems,' often ridiculed, misgendered, or made invisible. This is echoed in Amanda's testimony, where she describes the fade as helping her "*feel human enough*," exposing the extent to which Black queer girls must struggle for basic recognition and dignity in school spaces. Black Feminist Theory further deepens this analysis by exposing the

intersections of race, gender, and sexuality that render Black queer girls especially vulnerable to institutional violence (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). In Amanda, Caster, and Lebo's accounts, we see how fade cuts become both a form of queer self-making and a trigger for state-sanctioned discipline within the school. They are told to "*cut it off*," excluded from school spaces, or made to feel alien in integrated settings that reproduce older racial and gendered hierarchies under the guise of policy and professionalism.

Notably, these discriminatory acts are not evenly distributed. As the girls emphasised, Coloured and Indian learners who wear similar cuts are often left unchallenged, pointing to the racialised double standards that continue to shape racially desegregated schooling (Le Cordeur, 2024). This reinforces the assertion by Ratele (2019) and hooks (1992) that Black bodies, especially when non-conforming, are read through a lens of hypervisibility and deviance, requiring management and correction. Yet, what also emerges is a powerful thread of resistance and identity assertion. Amanda's reference to Leon Mabhena, a visible queer figure, affirms the importance of representation as survival; a critical insight echoed by scholars like Caraballo (2023), who argue that visibility and belonging are crucial for queer youth of colour. The fade haircut thus becomes a site of refusal and affirmation, a way for Black queer girls to assert their right to exist and to be seen on their own terms.

In sum, the regulation of fade haircuts in Dundee Comprehensive is not about grooming. It is about disciplining non-normative Black girlhoods. It reflects the broader structural failure of desegregated schools to create truly inclusive, liberatory spaces where all forms of Black femininity, masculinity, queerness, and ambiguity are respected. The voices of these girls compel us to recognise that hair is not merely symbolic, but also political, embodied, and deeply consequential. A transformative education system must not only protect the rights of queer Black girls to self-expression but also affirm their right to thrive, to be visible, and to be free.

Despite the oppressive systems Black girls must navigate, their narratives are not solely ones of suffering and subjugation. The final theme foregrounds their acts of

defiance and self-definition, illuminating how Black girls actively resist

institutional policing and reclaim their identities through powerful, everyday acts of resistance.

5.5 Black Girls' Everyday Acts of Resistance, Defiance, and Reclaiming of Identity

Education is widely celebrated as the key to liberation, citizenship, and social mobility (Alexander, 2013; Spiel et al., 2018; Serneels, 2019), yet the schooling experiences of Black girls in desegregated South African contexts often reflect a contradiction to this democratic promise (Lambais, 2022; Morton, 2022; Ringstaff, 2023). As the data provided above has shown, instead of being empowered to exercise their rights and shape their identities, Black girls are subjected to persistent racialised and gendered surveillance, particularly around their natural Afro-textured hair. The historical vilification of Black hair continues into the present, where Afro-textured styles are labelled 'unprofessional,' 'untidy,' or 'unacceptable' within school codes of conduct (Osman & Wilke,2018; Anderson, 2020; Olatunji, 2020; Rimes, 2025). Despite this, Black schoolgirls are not passive recipients of this discrimination. As seen in national cases like the Pretoria Girls High protest (The Guardian, 2016; SA News, 2024) – discussed in Chapter One – and echoed powerfully in this study, Black girls engage in everyday acts of resistance to reclaim their dignity, identity, and cultural pride.

Figure 5.11, like several other similar drawings produced by the participants in this study, depicts the resistance enacted by Black schoolgirls, challenging hair discrimination in desegregated schools.

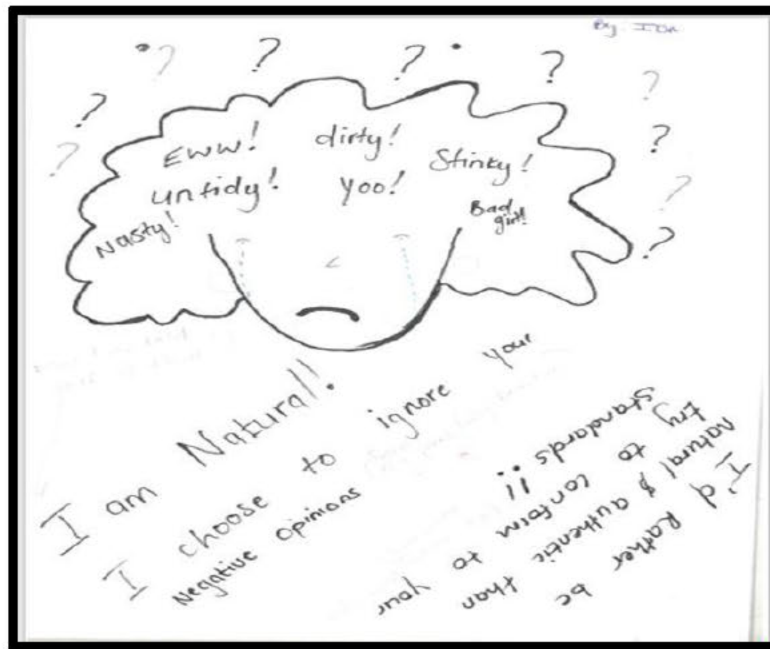

Figure 5.11: Ida's illustration of resisting Afro-textured hair policing

Ida's drawing illustrates the emotional violence enacted through racist and gendered commentary on Black girls' natural hair. The phrases— *"eww!" "dirty!" "stinky!" "untidy!" "bad girl!"*— are not isolated insults, but manifestations of what Afro-feminism terms the enduring legacies of colonial dehumanisation and cultural alienation (Salami, 2017). These utterances, situated in the visual of a crying face surrounded by question marks, demonstrate how schools function as sites where Black girls are made to question their own worth. From a Black Feminist theoretical lens, the drawing becomes a political act of testimony and resistance (hooks, 1992; Simien, 2004). Ida's insistence that *"I am Natural!"*, *"I choose to ignore your negative opinions"*, and *"I'd rather be natural and authentic than conform to your standards"*, is a reclaiming of voice and agency. These affirmations align with Patricia Hill Collins' notion of 'resistant knowledge' produced by Black women and girls in hostile environments. Ida's drawing is not simply expressive. It is political pedagogy, educating viewers on how Black girls resist hegemonic beauty norms, white respectability, and institutionalised anti-Blackness. In the focus group, participants illustrated this defiance:

> **Ida:** This is a black girl (herself) with afro hair, and these are negative comments she usually receives from her peers and teachers which including ewww! dirty, stinky, you are a bad girl, etc. However, I have told

myself that 'I am natural', and I choose to ignore their negative opinions, and 'I would rather be natural and authentic than to try to conform to their standards'." *(Ida)*

Mandisa: [...] and there were comments I had received from other teachers and learners, such as ewww! Your hair is stinky, disgusting, untidy, dirty and unacceptable. However, I chose to ignore the negative comments because 'I love my hair', and 'I am a natural black girl'.

These affirmations are not just acts of self-love but constitute what Afro-feminist theorists (Salami, 2017) would describe as everyday resistance against cultural erasure. Afro-feminism insists that African girls' bodies and cultural expressions must be treated with dignity, not regulated through whiteness-centred norms of professionalism. Ida and Mandisa assert the political value of being natural and resisting assimilation into white-coded standards of beauty. Just as well, Black Feminist Theory (Simien, 2004; Hooks, 1992) further allows us to read these acts as both personal and collective resistance to overlapping structures of race, gender, and respectability politics.

Figure 5.12, a depiction by Mimi, presents a further layer of spiritual resistance:

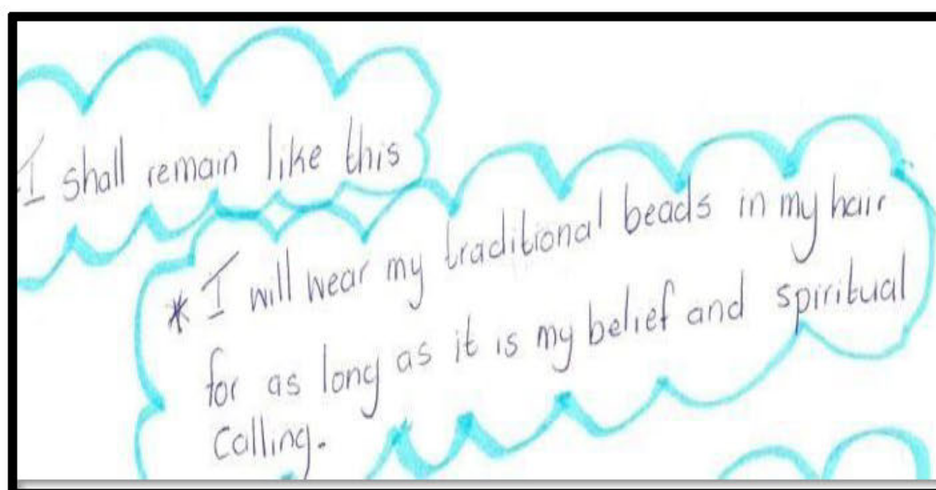

Figure 5.12: Mimi's affirmation of spiritual resistance

Mimi's drawing and subsequent narrative (below) underscore the heart of Afro-feminist and Black feminist resistance. That is, the unapologetic assertion of self in the face of erasure. The declarative statements, *"I shall remain like this"* and *"I*

will wear my traditional beads in my hair for as long as it is my belief and spiritual calling," are not merely personal affirmations. They are political refusals to be assimilated into whiteness or secular schooling norms that delegitimise African cultural practices. Mimi's language expresses her right to define her being in connection with indigenous belief systems and spiritual beliefs. Her decision to wear her traditional beads is not performative but rooted in a spiritual calling that the school fails to recognise. Her utterance, visually framed within cloud-shaped borders, symbolises clarity and transcendence over the 'storm' of disciplinary violence. The theoretical lens adopted in this study sharpens this moment as a site of embodied self-definition, where Mimi uses her hair and spiritual beads to reclaim visibility in a space that otherwise seeks to erase her (Collins, 2000; Simien, 2004). Her emphasis on endurance (e.g., *"I shall remain"*) is not just resistance but survival. It reflects the deeply interwoven struggles Black women and girls face navigating institutions that simultaneously police, devalue, and fear their cultural presence. Referring to her drawing during the focus group discussion, Mimi added:

> **Mimi:** I told myself that I shall remain like this and continue wearing my traditional beads in my hair as long as it is my belief and spiritual calling, and the school must also accommodate me and my religion. I also stated that the school management must hire a social worker so that whoever is a victim of hair discrimination can go and talk to them in order to prevent things like committing suicide. In my case, though, I stand on what I believe in, and no one is going to change me

Mimi's declaration here provides a deeply layered insight into the embodied resistance practised by Black girls when their religious and spiritual identities are invalidated. Mimi's insistence on wearing her traditional beads as a form of spiritual expression underlines the centrality of indigenous knowledge systems and cosmologies in defining African girlhoods. Afro-feminism, which privileges culturally grounded forms of spirituality, understands Mimi's act not as rebellion, but as the reassertion of African epistemologies in a schooling context that continues to treat whiteness as normative and neutrality as secular (Ratele & Laubscher, 2010; Urson & Kessi, 2018; Resane, 2021). Simultaneously, her experience captures both individual agency and the systemic neglect of emotional

well-being in schools. Her suggestion that schools should "*hire a social worker so that whosoever is a victim of hair discrimination can go and talk to them in order to prevent things like committing suicide*" brings attention to the psychological toll of everyday racism and the institutional absence of support structures. Mimi's suggestion is both a critique of structural neglect and a strategy for institutional transformation. This is consistent with Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) assertion that Black girls and women engage in self-definition and collective care as tools of resistance and survival. The phrase "*no one is going to change me*" echoes Black feminist commitments to autonomy and unassimilated subjecthood.

Her resistance must also be seen through the lens of spiritual trauma and moral policing (Peters, 2022; Nkimbeng et al., 2023). By asserting her right to wear spiritual beads, Mimi defies not only secularist interpretations of school policy but also the racialised assumption that African spiritual expression is primitive or illegitimate. Her claim for visibility within the school space amounts to what Yaba Blay (2011) terms the politics of appearance, which is the insistence that hair, style, and body aesthetics among Black women and girls are intimately tied to power, community, and survivance. This singular narrative, therefore, activates the multiple registers of Afro-feminist and Black feminist political thought, such as self-ownership, spiritual and cultural sovereignty, institutional critique, and community-rooted healing. Mimi's resistance is not just defiance; it is a claim to being and knowing otherwise in an anti-Black world.

Similarly, Moratuwa's account further affirms this:

> **Moratuwa:** [Teacher Y] wanted to chase me out of the school because I had an Afro hairstyle. She stated that I should change my Afro hair to straight hair or cut my hair, since my Afro hair is not allowed at school. She was so rude and shouted after I had ignored what she ordered me to do. She threatened to suspend me. However, I chose to ignore her and refused to change my hairstyle because it is part of my culture too. Upon my refusal, I was sent home and was asked to bring a parent.

Moratuwa's experience further deepens the theoretical resonance of this theme by demonstrating how Black girls' defiance is an assertion of cultural belonging and epistemic legitimacy. Her refusal to comply with the teacher's demand to

straighten or cutting her Afro-textured hair is both a spiritual and political act. In line with Afro-feminist critique, her resistance pushes back against schooling practices that reproduce colonial hierarchies of appearance, where European aesthetics are treated as the norm and African traits as deviant. Within Black Feminist Theory, Moratuwa's agency illustrates what bell hooks calls the refusal to internalise domination, which is a powerful mode of resistance that affirms self-worth in the face of institutional racism and gendered control. That Moratuwa was sent home and forced to bring a parent shows how discipline becomes a tool for re-inscribing power and maintaining white-coded norms of order. Moratuwa's assertion that her hairstyle is "*part of [her] culture too*" is a clear articulation of how the personal is political — she demands recognition not only of her hair, but of the legitimacy of her being and the cultural world it represents.

Figure 5.13, below, further captures how girls like Angel resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in school.

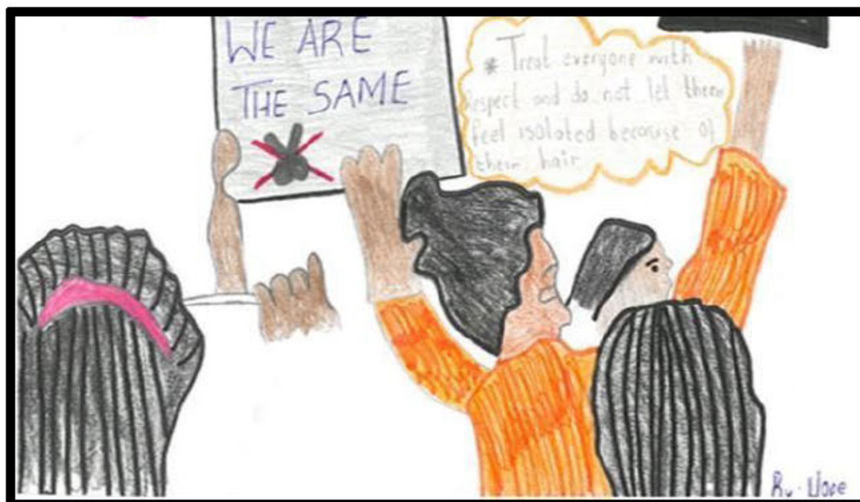

Figure 5.13: Angel's illustration of collective resistance by Black girls in the school

Angel's illustration, above, offers a vivid, symbolic representation of collective resistance and the demand for equal treatment in relation to Black girls' experiences of hair-based discrimination. The visual foregrounds unity and protest, with placards bearing messages such as "*We are the same*" and "*Treat everyone with respect and do not let them feel isolated because of their hair.*"

These calls for equity and dignity reflect not only shared grievances but also a strong political and emotional solidarity among Black schoolgirls. The drawing captures the spirit of community-based resistance and self-definition that centres African girlhood. The raised fists, braided hairstyles, and collaborative stance communicate what Salami (2017) terms collective emancipation through cultural affirmation. These learners are not simply reacting to exclusion, but they are actively demanding their right to be seen and respected on their own terms, rooted in African aesthetic traditions. Black Feminist scholars (see, for example, Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1992) similarly recognise this imagery as a mode of collective consciousness-raising. The placards function as textual affirmations of group identity and social justice claims. This moment channels what Collins (2006) calls 'the outsider within' position. Here, Black girls navigate schools that nominally include them but subtly enforce Eurocentric norms. Their act of visually elevating their message above their heads symbolises the raising of Black consciousness and the centring of Black girls' lived experiences.

Referring to how she envisions addressing hair policing, Angel added:

> **Angel:** I would want to write a letter to our school management requesting them to address this issue because, among the school management personnel, there are Black people who clearly understand our Black culture.

Angel's reflection introduces a critical lens on institutional complicity and internalised power. Her desire to write to the school management demonstrates political awareness and faith in institutional reform, while simultaneously expressing frustration at the dissonance between Black representation and Black advocacy. This reveals how even Black staff within the system may become silent or complicit in structures that continue to marginalise Black girls. Her appeal is not just for recognition, but for culturally conscious leadership that reflects the lived realities of Black learners. Afro-feminist critique furthers this point by insisting that true transformation demands not only diversity in school leadership but deep cultural responsiveness. Angel's strategy of writing a letter invokes Black feminist traditions of mobilising literacy and communication as tools for justice-seeking (Almeida, 2015; Gallaway & Turner, 2020; Tamale, 2024). Her belief that

Black management should understand and intervene to reflect the hope that representation should translate into solidarity—a hope often deferred in racially stratified institutions.

Likewise, Alora's vision of collective mobilisation provides a striking image of political agency among Black girls in desegregated schools. Her drawing, Figure 5.14, and narration depict two girls approaching the head girl, initiating a dialogue with the school principal and parents, thereby modelling a participatory approach to challenging discriminatory practices.

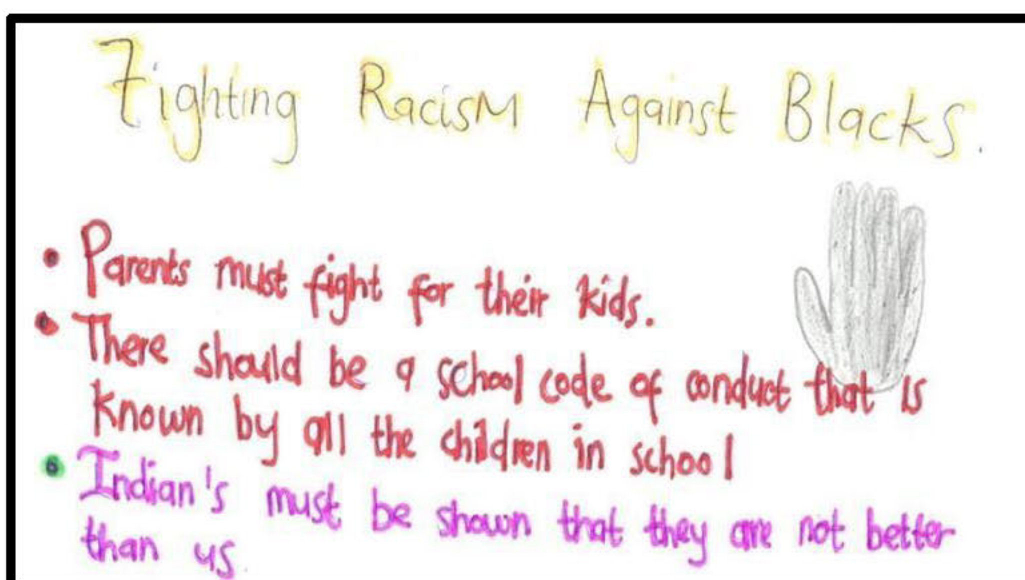

Figure 5.14: Alora's vision of advocacy for an inclusive school code of conduct

Alora's drawing, titled *"Fighting Racism Against Blacks"*, presents a bold and impassioned call to action that reflects the emotional intensity and political urgency many Black schoolgirls experience in racially unequal school environments. Her messages— "Parents must fight for their kids," "There should be a school code of conduct that is known by all the children in school," and "Indians must be shown that they are not better than us"—collectively signal both a critique of institutional neglect and an assertion of Black collective agency.

In explaining her drawing during the focus group, this is what she said:

> **Alora:** I drew two black girls who went to the school's head girl to ask her to organise a meeting with the school principal and the parents to address

> this issue. As we now can see the school's head girl speaking in a meeting regarding the problem at hand, as I quote " we are here to discuss the issue of discrimination in our school, specifically we have been noticing that black students are being targeted for their natural hair while Indian and Coloured students are not being targeted with their hairstyle, they are allowed to do an hairstyle at school.

Alora's account is not merely descriptive; it is equally transformative. It positions Black girls not as passive recipients of injustice but as political actors capable of initiating structural dialogue. Alora's vision models a participatory and democratic approach to justice, one in which learners, school leaders, and parents co-create inclusive solutions. Her articulation of unequal treatment, where Black girls are policed for their natural hair while Indian and Coloured peers are granted leniency, underscores the racially coded nature of school discipline and policy enforcement. This act of storytelling and visual narration centres the lived experience of Black girls as a valid and necessary form of knowledge production (Glaw et al., 2017; Gomez, 2019; Sepalveda & Ruiz, 2022). Her critique of racist double standards within the school aligns with Black feminist calls for the decolonisation of education spaces and the amplification of Black girls' voices in policy discourse.

Equally, her emphasis on parental involvement, as shown in the bullet point *"Parents must fight for their kids"*, echoes Afro-feminist values of intergenerational resistance and community mobilisation (Goredema, 2010; Salami, 2017). The call for a codified and transparent policy (e.g., *"There should be a school code of conduct that is known by all the children in school"*) exposes the failure of institutional clarity, which disproportionately disadvantages Black learners whose cultural expressions fall outside of Eurocentric or white-adjacent norms. Her final point (*"Indians must be shown that they are not better than us"*), though direct, emerges from a place of profound racialised pain and exclusion. It reveals the psychic toll of internalised school hierarchies, where Blackness is repeatedly marked as inferior or deviant. While this language calls for careful contextualisation and cross-racial dialogue, it also reflects Afro-feminism's insistence on naming power dynamics without sanitising the truth. The accompanying image of a raised hand can be read as a symbol of protest, refusal,

and unity. That is, a gesture historically associated with Black consciousness and liberation movements. In this context, it visually amplifies the political stance Alora takes in both her speech and drawing. Thus, Alora's account exemplifies what Afro-feminism and Black Feminist Theory seek to affirm: that resistance is rooted in voice, that transformation begins with recognition, and that Black girls are already theorising, organising, and imagining just futures. Her drawing is both testimony and praxis—a refusal to be erased and a demand to be heard.

Similarly, in the same focus group discussion, Mimi, Thando, Zee, and Moratuwa directly challenged the absence of a clear school code of conduct:

> **Mimi:** The school does not have a school code of conduct, and we do not like the fact that if they feel like they do not like our hairstyle, they choose to cut it off.
>
> **Thando:** There should be a school code of conduct that is known by all children.
>
> **Zee:** The school should have a parents' meeting aiming at addressing the hair policy and stating what is acceptable and not acceptable.
>
> **Moratuwa:** They should let us be who we are, and they should let us do the prescribed hairstyles by the school code of conduct when it is issued out and have copies, as it will outline what is acceptable and not acceptable.

The girls' narratives here offer a critique of institutional arbitrariness and an urgent demand for procedural justice within their desegregated school. Mimi's observation that teachers simply "*cut off*" hairstyles they disapprove of highlights the school's informal and authoritarian disciplinary approach, one that leaves Black girls vulnerable to spontaneous, often violent, policing of their identities. This lack of transparency and due process reflects the racialised power dynamics in the school, where cultural and aesthetic expressions linked to Black identity are disproportionately targeted. The absence of a clear school code of conduct thus enables racial discrimination to masquerade as discipline, while simultaneously silencing Black pupils' rights to self-expression.

Likewise, Thando and Zee call for the codification and democratic communication of school policies. Their insistence that there *"should be a school code of conduct that is known by all children"* and that parents must be involved in meetings about hairstyle regulations signals a collective demand for accountability and inclusion. Their critiques emphasise the need for structural transformation in institutions that claim neutrality but act in ways that entrench historical injustices. By invoking the need for a policy known and negotiated with all stakeholders (such as learners, parents, and teachers), they challenge top-down rule-making practices that often erase the voices of those most affected.

Finally, Moratuwa's statement builds on this by asserting that learners should be allowed to "*be who we are*" and follow "*prescribed hairstyles*" as outlined in a proper policy document. This insistence is more than a procedural recommendation; it is a reclaiming of the right to cultural authenticity within a space that has long privileged Eurocentric norms. Her desire for a written policy calls for justice that affirms African identity, dignity, and belonging. In the absence of such a policy, the girls are subjected to unequal treatment and unpredictable regulation, reinforcing a climate of fear and exclusion. Thus, their statements together present a vision for an inclusive, culturally sensitive educational environment grounded in equity, recognition, and legal clarity.

Thando furthers this by insisting on consequences for racism.

> **Thando:** If there is a child who is being discriminated against, there should be involvement of the Department of [Basic] Education because some learners take it personally and end up refusing to go to school. So, whoever is a perpetrator of any kind of discrimination should be punished.

Thando's assertion highlights a demand for institutional accountability and state intervention in addressing school-based discrimination. Her call for the involvement of the Department of Basic Education reveals a recognition that discriminatory practices, particularly those targeting Black girls for their hair, are not isolated incidents but systemic injustices requiring formal redress. By linking discrimination to learner disengagement and school refusal, Thando draws attention to the psychological and educational harms that result from unaddressed racism in schools. Her insistence that perpetrators be punished reflects a desire

towards justice for marginalised identities and the urgent need for schools to become spaces of protection rather than harm. This perspective also resonates with feminist commitments to institutional reform that centres the lived realities and dignity of Black learners (Ahikire, 2019; Dobson, 2023; Somdyala, 2025).

Figures 5.15 and 5.16, below, accompany direct affirmations from Angel and Ida, respectively, on their refusal to assimilate into Eurocentric beauty norms. Their drawings serve as visual assertions of Black girls' calls for dignity, equity, and justice within the context of racially desegregated schools. Angel's illustration, featuring a bold "*STOP RACISM AT SCHOOL*" and the phrase "*We All Have Equal Rights!!*", foregrounds her demand for systemic transformation and affirms constitutional guarantees that are often denied to Black learners. This act of visual resistance is rooted in Afro-feminist ideologies that recognise Black girls as political agents who challenge their exclusion not only through speech, but through artistic expression that names, visualises, and protests injustice.

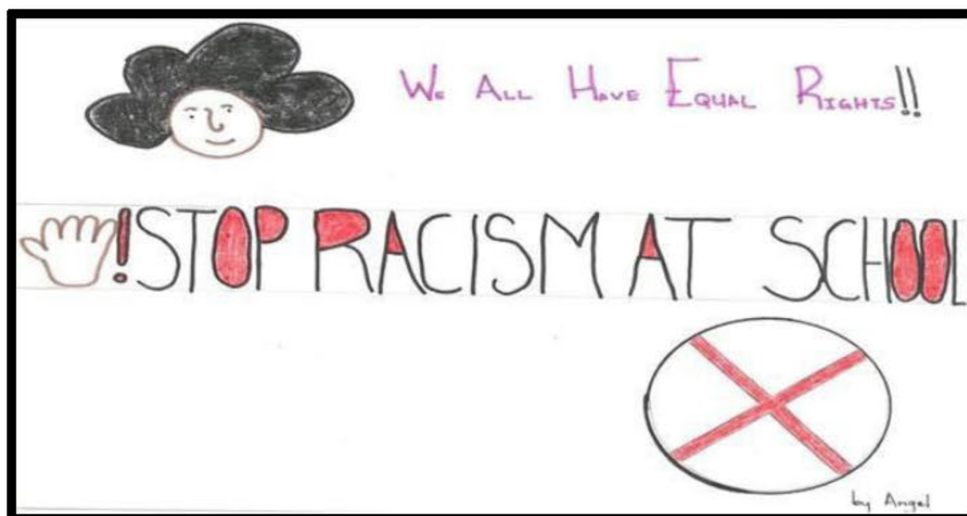

Figure 5.15: Angel's call to stop racism at school

Just as well, in Ida's drawing (Figure 5.14), the statement "*Treat others with respect and dignity, regardless of their background, culture or identity*" is emblematic of an Afro-feminist ethos grounded in respect for difference and the right to belong without assimilation.

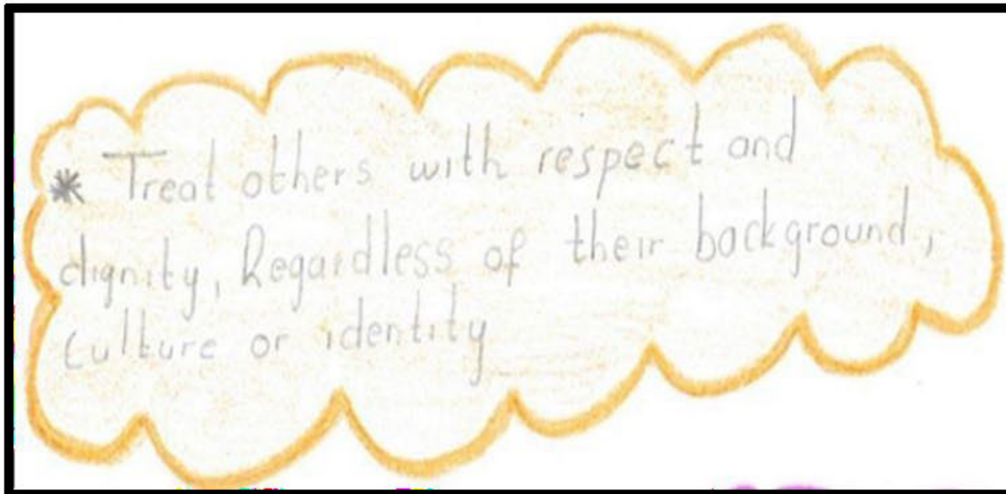

Figure 5.16: Ida's call to treat others with respect and dignity

Ida's insistence on dignity aligns with African conceptions of ubuntu (Lefa, 2015; Mligo, 2021; Samuel, 2022), which centres mutual recognition and humanity as the basis of ethical relationality. In resisting hair-based exclusion, both girls are not merely advocating for surface-level inclusion, but for a deeper, culturally affirming justice that challenges Eurocentric norms embedded in school policy and practice. Their drawings thus function as pedagogical and political texts, demanding that schools reimagine themselves as inclusive, anti-racist, and culturally responsive spaces.

Finally, as an end to the focus group discussions, participants were invited to share their final reflections on the policing of Black girls' Afro-textured hair in their school. The following statements were made:

> **Angel:** There should be an end to black discrimination and racism because we are all equal, and we do not like it when we are wearing our big Afros and we are being asked to straighten our hair and make it look like theirs.
>
> **Alora:** Yes, because straightening your hair using chemicals damages one's hair and skull, so we prefer our natural afro hair, and it is unfair that we are made to cut our hairstyle that we paid for with our expensive money.
>
> **Ida:** The school should accommodate us with our spiritual calling. Teachers and other learners must stop discriminating against our Black Afro hair and hairstyles because I have never heard that an Indian girl was discriminated against for their natural hair.

> **Siya:** I am a black girl, and there is nothing that is going to change that, so please accept the way I am.
>
> **Mandisa:** I am a Black girl (said loudly and with emphasis), and they must accept who I am, my culture and religion.

These closing reflections from the participants function as a collective declaration of Black girlhood, bodily autonomy, and resistance against racist schooling practices. Angel's statement articulates a clear rejection of assimilationist pressure, highlighting how the demand to conform to Eurocentric hair standards undermines both equality and dignity. Her critique challenges the embedded nature of white normativity within school cultures, which remain unreformed despite South Africa's democratic promises. Alora's contribution furthers this argument by underscoring the physical and financial costs of enforced assimilation. The requirement to chemically straighten hair is not only an aesthetic imposition but also a form of violence enacted on Black girls' bodies, reinforcing colonial hierarchies of beauty and acceptability.

Ida, Siya, and Mandisa assert the legitimacy of Black cultural and spiritual identities in the face of institutional erasure. Ida's insistence that the school should accommodate learners' spiritual callings points to a broader demand for cultural and religious inclusivity; an essential tenet of Afro-feminism, which foregrounds spirituality as integral to identity. Meanwhile, Siya and Mandisa's emphatic affirmations, "*I am a black girl… accept the way I am*", mark a reclaiming of voice, visibility, and cultural authenticity. These declarations embody the spirit of Black Feminist Theory (Peterson, 2019; Boone, 2020; Tamale, 2024), which centres Black girls' lived experiences and frames their resistance not as peripheral but as revolutionary. Collectively, these closing words demand not only the end of hair discrimination but the remaking of school spaces into environments that honour, protect, and uplift the full humanity of Black girls.

Taken together, these findings reflect a powerful genealogy of resistance among Black girls in South Africa, one that resonates with the legacies of anti-apartheid activism, the Black Consciousness Movement, and Pan-African feminist mobilisation. In this study, hair becomes a site of struggle, spirituality, memory,

and collective reclamation. Afro-feminist and Black feminist theories enable me to hear not just the pain of exclusion but the power of resistance that pulses through every drawing, utterance, and refusal.

5.6 Discussion

The findings of this study affirm and extend the critical arguments advanced by Afro-feminist and Black feminist theorists regarding the structural, cultural, and spiritual regulation of Black girlhood. The persistent and punitive policing of Afro-textured hair, whether in the form of Afros, beaded dreadlocks, or fade haircuts, reveals not simply a concern with school discipline or uniformity, but a deeply racialised, gendered, and spiritual contestation over the legitimacy of Blackness in educational spaces. This echoes longstanding critiques by theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), who assert that Black girls and women exist at the intersection of multiple oppressions and are thus disproportionately targeted for symbolic and physical regulation. As this study shows, the regulation of hair functions as a proxy for disciplining Black female bodies into silence, invisibility, and docility.

Afro-feminist theory, particularly as articulated by Amaefula (2021) and Goredema (2010), helps illuminate how these practices are rooted in a colonial matrix of power that continues to shape post-apartheid schooling. The refusal to accommodate dreadlocks as spiritual expression, or to legitimise short fade haircuts as valid aesthetic and identity choices, reflects the enduring dominance of Eurocentric norms that are coded as neutral, professional, or neat. Afro-feminism critiques precisely this erasure, foregrounding African spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic knowledges as valid, sovereign, and deserving of protection. Participants' drawings and testimonies, particularly Mimi's insistence on retaining her beaded hairstyle for spiritual reasons, or Amanda's articulation of queer identity through the fade, demonstrate what Afro-feminist scholars call epistemic and embodied resistance.

Black Feminist Theory further deepens this understanding by centering the lived experiences, interior lives, and emotional labour of Black girls navigating spaces of everyday racialised surveillance. Bell Hooks (1992) and Crenshaw's (1991)

intersectionality framework are particularly instructive here. They help explain why Black girls face uniquely intensified forms of disciplinary violence — gendered, racialised, classed, and often sexualised in ways that exceed what other learners experience. When Mandisa declares, "*I am a Black girl, and they must accept who I am*," she performs a radical act of self-definition against an institutional regime that seeks to reshape her into something more palatable. This aligns with Hill Collins' (2000) concept of resistant knowledge, where Black women and girls generate counter-narratives that challenge dominant norms and reclaim their subjectivities.

Importantly, this study also disrupts the idea that discrimination operates solely through explicit policy or formal codes. Instead, it uncovers what Trusty, Ward, Ward, and He (2022) describe as covert institutional violence, where aesthetic norms and unspoken expectations are wielded as tools of exclusion. At Dundee Comprehensive, the lack of a written hairstyle policy becomes an instrument of discretionary bias, enabling teachers, especially Indian and Coloured female educators, to enforce white and Indian aesthetic preferences while punishing Black cultural expressions. The affective and material consequences of this are profound, as participants described feelings of alienation, shame, suicidal ideation, and fractured identities.

This evidence resonates with both local and global literature on the politics of Black hair. In the South African context, scholars such as Le Cordeur (2024) and Caluza (2025) document the persistence of racialised beauty hierarchies that punish Black girls for wearing natural or spiritual hairstyles. Internationally, research by Arogundade (2000), Hunter (2007), and Winfield-Thomas and Whaley (2019) similarly shows how Afro-textured hair is treated as a site of deviance in schools, workplaces, and media, reinforcing Eurocentric standards of beauty and respectability.

What distinguishes the current study is its commitment to participatory visual methodologies (i.e., drawings and focus group discussions) that place Black schoolgirls at the centre of the research process as agentic individuals rather than passive subjects. This approach challenges conventional top-down research paradigms that often render marginalised youth voiceless or visible only through

the interpretive lens of adult researchers. By enabling participants to produce drawings and then reflect on them in group settings, the study aligns with what Mitchell (2011) describes as participatory visual epistemologies; that is, methods that not only elicit rich, embodied narratives but also democratise the production of knowledge. Through their illustrations and dialogue, these girls do not merely narrate their experiences; they theorise them by linking pain, injustice, and exclusion to broader systems of race, gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Their acts of storytelling, drawing, naming, and resisting become political interventions that critique schooling as a site of everyday violence and aesthetic domination.

This framing resonates with Black Feminist methodologies, which insist on the centrality of lived experience, voice, and reflexivity in the process of theorising oppression (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017; Mitchell & Moletsane, 2018). As Patricia Hill Collins argues, Black women and girls produce what she terms subjugated knowledge from their social location, and this knowledge is no less rigorous or valid than academic theorisation. It is, in fact, often more attuned to the complex intersectional realities of oppression. In this study, Black girls' drawings emerge as sites of theory, where they visualise the affective and structural dimensions of hair-based discrimination, its links to racial injustice, and their collective acts of defiance.

Similarly, Afro-feminist theory (c.f., Amaefula, 2021) insists on reclaiming African spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural forms of knowing as legitimate and central to feminist critique. The girls' drawings — many of which include symbolic references to ancestral spiritual callings, cultural hairstyles, and communal solidarity — should be understood as expressions of Afro-feminist theorising. Their work resists Eurocentric modes of objectivity and reclaims African girlhood as a site of moral, spiritual, and political clarity. As Yaba Blay (2011) and Salami (2017) remind us, Black girls and women use their hair, adornment, and aesthetic choices not only to survive but to theorise and resist, what Salami calls a politics of appearance.

By drawing on participatory visual tools, this study also advances the decolonial imperative in educational research to unsettle Western hierarchies of knowledge. Le Grange (2016) and Chilisa (2012) argue that ethical and transformative

research in African contexts must engage local epistemologies and methodologies that reflect participants' own ways of knowing. In this sense, the girls in this study do more than share their stories. They map alternative futures. Their visual and verbal narratives operate as counter-knowledge of schooling, redrawing the boundaries of belonging, discipline, and identity from their own vantage points.

Ultimately, the participatory visual methodology employed here positions Black girls as co-authors of knowledge and not simply respondents (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2019, 2023; Ngidi, 2023). This reorientation affirms their agency as cultural critics, theorists of their own lives, and visionaries of more just educational worlds. As hooks (1990) urges, we must learn from the margins, not just about them. In this study, the margins speak (and draw) back (Ngidi, 2022).

The findings presented in this chapter affirm that hair-based discrimination in schools is not merely about grooming or appearance; it is a manifestation of structural racism, gender oppression, and cultural invalidation. Afro-feminism and Black Feminist Theory offer powerful lenses to interpret these dynamics, not only in their oppressive forms but also in their radical potential for resistance. Through drawings, testimonies, and everyday defiance, the girls in this study assert their right to be, to belong, and to flourish on their own terms. Their resistance is not incidental. It is the curriculum they are writing into existence, against all odds.

The following chapter reflects on the study's methodology, theoretical framework, and key findings, while outlining its scholarly contributions, practical implications, and concluding insights.

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the threads of this dissertation, which examined how Black African schoolgirls experience, narrate, challenge, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair within a racially desegregated secondary school — Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School — in KwaZulu-Natal. Although the school is multiracial, comprising Indian, Coloured, a few White, and Black learners, the focus of the study was specifically on African Black schoolgirls who wear Afro-textured hair in styles such as cornrows, braids, dreadlocks, natural short hair, and fade haircuts. The study aimed to explore how these girls make sense of their lived experiences of hair-based discrimination in a school context still shaped by racialised power dynamics. It further sought to understand how they negotiate and resist these discriminatory practices, which, though informal and often unwritten, are deeply embedded in the institution's culture. To address this aim, the following research questions were posed:

- How do Black African girls understand, experience, and communicate about the policing of their Afro-textured hair in a South African desegregated (racially mixed) secondary school?
- How do these girls negotiate, challenge, and resist the policing of their Afro-textured hair in their school?

This was a qualitative study situated within the critical research paradigm, which interrogates systems of oppression, marginalisation, and inequality, especially those stemming from colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist legacies (Asghar, 2013; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Maree, 2016). The paradigm aligned with the study's commitment to exposing how the policing of Afro-textured hair constitutes a form of racialised and gendered disciplinary power. In keeping with the principle of non-maleficence (Mertens, 2014), the research process was designed to be non-intrusive, collaborative, and respectful of learners' rights and dignity. To

foreground the voices of the participants and assessing the affective dimensions of their experiences, the study employed participatory drawing and focus group discussions (FGDs). These methods are especially well-suited to research with young people, as they allow for the expression of complex emotions and ideas beyond the limits of verbal articulation (Literat, 2013; Barley & Russell, 2018; Butschi & Hedderich, 2021). The participatory drawings allowed the girls to represent their own realities, while brief descriptions and FGDs provided additional narrative depth. The inclusion of FGDs was especially valuable in capturing shared experiences, perceptions, and acts of resistance among a group that shared racial, cultural, and religious affinities rooted in Blackness.

A total of 16 Black African girls with Afro-textured hair were purposively sampled from Dundee Comprehensive. They represent a broader cohort of learners who continue to be subjected to covert and overt forms of racialised aesthetic control in desegregated South African schools. The participatory drawings, combined with FGD data, produced rich insights into how school-based practices around hair regulation are experienced and contested by those most affected. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step model, alongside Campbell, Skovdal and Mupambireyi's (2010) approach to visual data analysis. The findings revealed that hair-based discrimination persists in the desegregated school under study, despite constitutional guarantees of dignity, equality, and cultural freedom. Participants described being routinely targeted for their natural hair, including Afros, braids, cornrows, and dreadlocks, even in the absence of a formal, written school policy. Instead, disciplinary action was justified through spoken rules, unevenly applied to Black girls in particular.

This chapter reaffirms the urgent need for desegregated schools to reimagine their institutional cultures in line with the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996), which mandates non-discrimination and equality for all learners. The findings call for inclusive, racially just, and gender-aware school policies that affirm, rather than regulate, Black girls' right to embody and express their cultural and aesthetic identities.

6.2 Methodological Reflections

This study was grounded in the recognition that racialised and gendered exclusions remain deeply embedded in the institutional cultures of many desegregated South African schools. Despite the end of formal apartheid, traces of Black marginalisation continue to manifest through discriminatory practices such as the policing of Afro-textured hair. These forms of exclusion, often normalised and rendered invisible through unofficial codes of conduct, highlight the persistent failure of the post-1994 education system to redress the deep-rooted inequalities of the past (Arendse, 2019). While the democratic government made notable efforts to address historical injustices across sectors, including education, the mere extension of access does not equate to substantive equality. As Moja (2016) argues, when education is provided within a discriminatory or substandard framework, learners' constitutional rights are fundamentally undermined.

To interrogate these continued injustices, this study adopted a qualitative approach situated within a critical research paradigm. The critical tradition in social sciences seeks to expose and challenge intersecting systems of domination, particularly those shaped by colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Maree, 2016). In this study, a critical lens enabled a deep examination of how Afro-textured hair policing constitutes a form of disciplinary power that racialises and regulates Black femininity within desegregated school spaces. Central to this paradigm is the imperative not only to understand oppression but to transform the conditions that produce it (Elshafie, 2013).

In line with this transformative aim, the study employed two participatory, child-centred methods of data generation: participatory drawings and FGDs. These methods provided a dialogic and affirming space for participants to share their lived experiences in ways that transcended traditional or written limitations. Participatory drawing has been widely recognised as a powerful tool for accessing the inner worlds of children and youth, particularly when exploring sensitive or embodied topics (Literat, 2013; Barley & Russell, 2018; Brown, 2020; Li & Gong, 2025). Within this study, drawings served as windows into the girls' everyday encounters with hair discrimination and their acts of resistance, offering both

visual and symbolic representations of their embodied realities. These visuals were accompanied by brief written descriptions, enabling richer interpretation.

To probe further into the emotional, cultural, and political dimensions of the participants' narratives, FGDs were conducted with the same group. The FGDs allowed participants to collectively reflect, elaborate on, and validate the themes emerging from their drawings. As Nyumba et al. (2017) and Eeuwijk and Angehrn (2017) observe, focus group discussions are particularly effective in exploring collective perceptions, producing layered understandings of a social issue. In this study, the FGDs created space for solidarity and affirmation among the girls, whose shared experiences of being Black in a desegregated school context often went unrecognised by institutional structures.

Sixteen Black African schoolgirls with Afro-textured hair participated in this study. While this sample size was modest, it was purposively selected to represent a broader population of Black girls in similar school contexts. The participants attended Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, located in a small coal-mining town in KwaZulu-Natal — a province noted for its concentration of former White and Indian schools (Chisholm & Sujee, 2006). These participants shared not only racial and cultural identities but also the daily experience of attending a school that polices Blackness through aesthetic regulation. The participants' accounts of being punished for braids, cornrows, dreadlocks, or fade cuts demonstrated how school-based hair policing functions as a form of institutionalised anti-Blackness.

It is important to acknowledge that while the study generated rich, in-depth data, its findings are not intended to be generalised to all Black girls in South African schools. Rather, the aim was to foreground the specific, situated experiences of a marginalised group whose voices are often excluded from education policy discourses. As with many qualitative studies, the goal was depth over breadth: to provide a thick description of participants' lived realities and to highlight how broader structures of race, gender, and power are reproduced in micro-school interactions.

Methodologically, the study encountered only minor challenges. All data generation sessions were conducted after school hours and during weekends to ensure non-disruption to teaching and learning. However, on weekends, some participants who lived far from school faced transportation barriers, which at times delayed the start of sessions. In such instances, I provided transport to ensure their safe participation. Despite these logistical delays, all scheduled activities were completed, and the quality of engagement remained high throughout.

In sum, the methodological choices underpinning this study were deliberate and critically informed. By centring Black girls' voices through visual and dialogic methods, the study generated authentic, nuanced, and emotionally textured data on how Afro-textured hair policing is experienced and resisted. The insights yielded from this process offer a compelling basis for rethinking school policy, inclusion, and the everyday violence of aesthetic regulation in post-apartheid educational spaces. The next section turns to the key contributions and implications of these findings.

6.3 Theoretical Reflections

The theoretical framework that underpinned this study was shaped by African Feminism (Afro Feminism) and Black Feminist Theory, both of which offered essential tools for understanding the racialised and gendered regulation of Black girls' Afro-textured hair within desegregated South African schools. These frameworks were chosen not only for their explanatory power but also for their political commitment to centering the lived experiences, voices, and resistances of Black women and girls; voices that are often excluded from dominant discourses on schooling, discipline, and respectability.

African Feminism provided a culturally rooted lens through which to examine the historical and contemporary struggles of African Black girls in educational contexts still haunted by colonial legacies. As Nnaemeka (2004) and Amina Mama (1995) argue, African Feminism is concerned with lived realities specific to African contexts, including the intersection of race, gender, culture, spirituality, and class. In the context of this study, African Feminism enabled a deep

interrogation of how schools continue to regulate the Black female body through everyday practices that target hair as a site of control and subjugation. The school's unspoken but widely enforced norms around 'neatness' and 'presentability' reflect what Lewis (2009) refers to as aesthetic conformity rooted in colonial and missionary values, where whiteness becomes the normative ideal and Blackness the deviation.

Black Feminist Theory, particularly as articulated by scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Bell Hooks (1994), and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), further enriched the analysis by foregrounding intersectionality, which is the recognition that race, gender, and class interact to produce unique forms of oppression. The girls' narratives clearly showed that their experiences of hair discrimination were not merely about grooming standards but were deeply entangled with institutional racism, sexism, and classism. These theories also enabled a reframing of Black girls not as passive victims, but as agents who resist and subvert dominant discourses. Their subtle refusals, whether through braided hairstyles, cornrows, or fade cuts, were interpreted through Black feminist lenses as acts of political self-definition and cultural assertion in the face of institutional denial.

Importantly, both African and Black Feminist perspectives reject the universalism of white, Western feminism and instead centre the specificity of Black girlhood and womanhood in contexts marked by both global anti-Blackness and local patriarchal formations. In this study, these frameworks made it possible to treat the participants not as research subjects but as co-constructors of knowledge. Their drawings and group discussions were analysed not as data to be interpreted from a distance but as expressions of embodied knowledge shaped by centuries of colonial violence, postcolonial struggle, and everyday survival.

Through these theoretical lenses, the policing of Afro-textured hair was understood not as an isolated disciplinary issue but as a structural expression of what Crenshaw (1991) calls interlocking systems of oppression. These theoretical lenses helped uncover how institutional discourses of professionalism and respectability are often wielded against Black girls to silence their cultural expression and invalidate their bodily autonomy. The school, in this case, emerges

not as a neutral site of learning but as a contested terrain where coloniality is reproduced through routine interactions and policies that privilege whiteness and marginalise Black aesthetics.

Furthermore, African and Black Feminist Theories made it possible to interpret the participants' resistance as more than individual defiance. Whether it was a girl refusing to cut her braids, another questioning why her hairstyle was punished while an Indian classmate's was not, or yet another drawing a scene of humiliation and reclaiming her dignity through narration, these acts become forms of embodied feminist praxis. They reflect what Bell Hooks (1994) calls theory as liberatory practice, where knowledge production emerges directly from the margins and is used to challenge dominant systems of meaning and control.

Therefore, the theoretical framework not only guided the research design and data analysis but also anchored the study in a critical, decolonial, and intersectional ethos. It allowed for a rigorous yet empathetic engagement with Black girls' lived experiences of hair discrimination, while also highlighting their resilience, creativity, and resistance. In doing so, the study affirms the continued relevance and power of African and Black feminist thought in contemporary South African educational research, particularly in the ongoing struggle for justice, dignity, and affirmation of Black girlhood.

6.4 Reflecting on the Findings

The major findings emerging from this study reveal that Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, despite being a desegregated public institution, operates through covert, racialised disciplinary practices that disproportionately target African Black schoolgirls. The school is alleged to have no recognisable or accessible written school policy regarding hair, which leaves room for verbal, informal, and inconsistent enforcement mechanisms that marginalise Black girls with Afro-textured hair and culturally rooted hairstyles. According to the participants, disciplinary decisions are not based on transparent or equitable regulations, but rather on teachers' subjective perceptions of acceptability, which are often racialised, gendered, and classed. The data show that Black schoolgirls

are routinely labelled by non-Black teachers and peers as “untidy,” “ugly,” or “disruptive” when their hair in natural styles, including afros, braids, cornrows, dreadlocks, and fade cuts. In multiple instances, participants described being forced to undo or cut off their hairstyles, either under threat of school punishment or in humiliating, coercive public settings. These findings suggest a systemic pattern in which desegregated schools, rather than embodying post- apartheid ideals of inclusion and equality, reproduce the very logics of exclusion and racial discipline they claim to transcend.

This analysis offers a powerful critique of how desegregated schooling in South Africa continues to enact structural violence on Black bodies, particularly Black girls’ bodies, through aesthetic regulation. While formal apartheid has ended, the findings support the view that many South African schools, especially former White and Indian institutions, still embed racialised ideologies within their disciplinary cultures (Mataboge & Mahlangu, 2024). These schools often uphold informal practices that disproportionately penalise Black learners for their appearance, especially when that appearance resists Eurocentric beauty norms. By targeting Afro-textured hair and its associated cultural meanings, such schools participate in what African Feminist theorists understand as the regulation of Black femininity, reinforcing systems of anti-Blackness under the guise of uniformity and discipline. One participant reflected that the current treatment of Black girls’ hair in her school echoed stories her grandmother told her about apartheid schooling, underscoring how historical legacies continue to structure everyday educational practices. These findings affirm African Feminist claims that present-day oppressions are inseparable from the historical legacies of slavery, colonisation, and apartheid.

Hair-based discrimination was not only described in terms of punitive enforcement but also in terms of symbolic violence. Girls were mocked, dehumanised, and equated with witches, vagrants, or people lacking dignity simply for embracing natural or cultural hair practices. Such microaggressions, seemingly small, but cumulatively damaging, exposed participants to daily shaming, exclusion, and threats to their self-worth. Black girls who wore culturally significant hairstyles, such as beaded dreadlocks linked to ancestral callings, were dismissed as “fake”

and forced to choose between honouring their cultural identities and complying with school expectations. The findings further revealed that learners who identified as LGBTQI+ and wore fade cuts were targeted and ridiculed, called “tomboys,” and subjected to invasive questioning about their gender. This policing of appearance functioned as a broader attack on Black cultural expression, gender non-conformity, and bodily autonomy. Through this lens, the findings affirm the argument that desegregated schools remain key sites where institutional racism and heteronormative gender ideologies intersect and materialise on the Black female body.

Significantly, the study exposed the school’s racialised double standards. While Black girls were harshly disciplined for their hairstyles, Indian and Coloured girls, some of whom wore similar styles, were exempt from reprimand. This inconsistent application of unwritten rules signals not only a bias in enforcement but a fundamental inequity in whose cultural expressions are deemed acceptable. These practices do not merely reinforce exclusion; they cultivate internalised oppression; wherein Black girls may begin to devalue their natural hair or alter their identities in pursuit of acceptance. As many participants noted, the psychological toll of such regulation includes shame, lowered self-esteem, and anxiety about school attendance. Physically, the pressure to conform can lead to harmful hair practices, including chemical straightening and scalp damage, all in service of meeting whiteness-inflected standards of respectability. These harmful effects align with the critiques of African Feminist scholars who argue that African girls continue to be denied dignity in spaces where whiteness remains the unspoken norm.

- **Black Girls’ and Hair-Based Discrimination in a Desegregated School**

The experiences narrated by Black schoolgirls at Dundee Comprehensive reveal a sobering portrait of how hair-based discrimination functions as a proxy for deeper systemic exclusions. What emerged from their accounts was not simply individualised incidents of unfair treatment but a patterned, racialised school culture in which Afro-textured hair is positioned as deviant, unruly, and incompatible with institutional norms. The findings suggest that far from being

neutral or benign, hair policing is part of a broader regime of control that disciplines Black girls into silence, conformity, and self-surveillance.

Crucially, African Feminist Theory allowed for an interrogation of how postcolonial schooling spaces continue to enact what McKinney (2022) terms the afterlives of apartheid, where the aesthetic, bodily, and cultural expressions of Black people, particularly girls, remain subjected to whiteness as an unspoken standard. The participants' accounts illustrate how teachers, largely from Indian and Coloured backgrounds, deployed hair regulation not through a shared, transparent school policy, but through spoken rules and discretionary judgments. These verbalised policies functioned as fluid instruments of power: flexible enough to target Black girls for a range of infractions, yet vague enough to avoid formal accountability. The policy vacuum enabled a racialised logic of discipline, where identical hairstyles worn by non-Black learners were tolerated or ignored, while Black learners faced surveillance, scolding, or forced removal.

These experiences expose how racialised aesthetic standards are enforced through mechanisms that are both overt and insidious. Some girls were subjected to physical violence when teachers cut their braids or dreadlocks without consent, an act that not only stripped them of their autonomy but also actively humiliated them in public view. Others described emotional degradation, including being labelled "*ugly*," "*untidy*," or "*a hobo*," reinforcing the historical criminalisation and dehumanisation of Black bodies. Importantly, these actions were not one-off incidents but were embedded in the school's day-to-day operation, suggesting a routine normalisation of anti-Black violence in spaces purported to be post-racial.

Beyond race, the findings point to how the school also suppressed cultural and religious identities under the guise of professionalism or discipline. Participants who wore beaded dreadlocks in observance of ancestral callings were ridiculed and accused of witchcraft. These responses reflect a deep ignorance, or rejection, of African spiritualities, revealing how the secularism of post-apartheid schooling can itself be culturally exclusionary. Girls who identified with LGBTQI+ communities and wore fade cuts were similarly policed and subjected to gendered mockery. Their bodies became sites of contested legibility, constantly scrutinised for how they deviated from heteronormative expectations of femininity. Through

this lens, hair regulation intersects with what Lewis and Forman (2020) describe as heteropatriarchal disciplining, where non-conforming Black girls are punished not just for their hair, but for who they are allowed to be.

Institutional racism in this context is not only about what is said or done, but about the broader climate that enables Black girlhood to be constantly regulated, doubted, and denied. African Feminist Theory reminds us that the educational institution, like the home or the church, has historically been weaponised to control African women's bodies, voices, and modes of expression (Nnaemeka, 2004). What this study reveals is that even in a democratic South Africa, school remains a key site where such disciplining occurs, quietly, informally, and often violently, under the logic of maintaining order, uniformity, and academic focus. For Black schoolgirls, this order is achieved not through support or inclusion but through suppression and erasure.

- **Black Girls Resisting and Challenging Hair-Based Discrimination in School**

In stark contrast to the oppressive school environment described above, the participants also narrated compelling stories of resistance, agency, and collective consciousness. These forms of resistance were not always spectacular or overt. Instead, they were often subtle, quiet acts of defiance, what Scott (1990) might call infra-politics, through which Black girls reclaimed dignity and contested the terms of their exclusion. These acts included continuing to wear their natural hair despite threats, refusing to cut off culturally significant dreadlocks, ignoring insults, and asserting their rights to cultural and spiritual expression.

This refusal to conform was underpinned by a strong sense of identity and pride. Drawing on Black Feminist Theory, these actions reflect what Hooks (1994) terms the oppositional gaze. That is, a refusal to internalise dominant narratives and a deliberate turning away from the standards that seek to regulate Black femininity. Participants rejected the notion that their hair was unkempt or inappropriate, instead affirming it as a symbol of cultural authenticity, spiritual significance, and personal empowerment. In doing so, they challenged the Eurocentric beauty norms

embedded within the school's disciplinary culture and made visible the decolonial desire to exist otherwise.

The study also revealed moments of collective resistance that deepen the theoretical insights offered by scholars like Salami (2017), who emphasises collective emancipation as a feminist strategy for confronting structural violence. Participants described how they supported one another during disciplinary encounters, encouraged each other to retain their cultural hairstyles, and even questioned teachers together. These were not simply acts of solidarity; they were modes of strategic disruption aimed at undermining the school's moral and institutional authority. In many ways, their collective efforts model what Black Feminist scholars call fugitive pedagogies, or practices of learning, resistance, and community-building that occur outside the dominant curriculum and against the institution's grain (Givens, 2021).

What is also notable in the girls' resistance was their articulation of what justice might look like. Participants did not merely oppose the current verbal policies, but they also demanded a formal, written code of conduct that would affirm, rather than police, their identities. They called for policies that are co-developed with learners, parents, and communities; policies that recognise the legitimacy of African spiritualities, gender expressions, and aesthetic traditions. This vision of justice exceeds reform. It reflects a radical reimagining of what a decolonised and inclusive schooling system could be; one that not only includes Black girls but is transformed by their presence and politics.

Indeed, Afro-feminism and Black Feminist Theory enabled this study to read participants' drawings, narratives, and silences not as passive reflections of harm, but as active modes of refusal. Their embodied practices, such as wearing dreadlocks, cutting fades, and adorning braids, function as pedagogies of resistance, challenging the very idea that discipline must look like compliance. The girls' insistence on their right to beauty, spirituality, and queer expression affirms the political significance of everyday practices and reclaims school space as a terrain of cultural struggle and transformation.

Indeed, the resistance strategies employed by Black girls in this study illuminate how marginalised learners not only survive systemic exclusion but also generate alternative ways of knowing, being, and relating. Their stories remind us that resistance is not the absence of oppression but the presence of political imagination. These Black girls did not merely endure the violence of the school; they responded with voice, vision, and solidarity. And in doing so, they opened up possibilities for a more liberatory and inclusive education that honours their full humanity.

6.5 Study Contributions

This study makes significant methodological, theoretical, and empirical contributions to the field of inclusive education, African girlhood studies, critical race studies, and feminist schooling research in South Africa. It illuminates how Afro-textured hair policing in desegregated schools functions as a mechanism of racialised exclusion, gendered discipline, and cultural erasure. Using participatory drawings and FGDs, the research examined the affective and embodied experiences of African Black schoolgirls, foregrounding their narratives of pain, humiliation, agency, and resistance. In doing so, the study provides not only a documentation of harm but a critical account of how Black girlhood is policed, resisted, and reimagined in the everyday life of post-apartheid schooling.

Methodologically, the use of participatory drawings in conjunction with FGDs proved to be a particularly effective tool for eliciting deep, authentic, and nuanced data. The visual method allowed participants to express aspects of their lived experience that are often difficult to verbalise — emotions, memories, and power relations embedded in everyday encounters with school-based discrimination. Their drawings, enhanced by written annotations, thought bubbles, and speech captions, served not only as data but as visual critiques of institutional violence. The follow-up FGDs offered a reflective space where participants made meaning of their drawings in relation to shared realities and broader socio-cultural contexts. Collectively, this participatory methodology created a dialogical, ethical, and empowering space for Black girls to be positioned not as subjects of research but as knowledge co-producers and agents of transformation.

Scholarly, the study builds upon and extends African and Black Feminist theoretical frameworks to provide new insights into how postcolonial institutions maintain racialised and gendered hierarchies. While prior literature has explored racism in former White or Model C schools (Roets, 2016; Christie & McKinney, 2017; Mataboge & Mahlangu, 2024), few studies have investigated how hair, the very embodiment of identity, becomes a site of regulation, humiliation, and resistance. This study demonstrates that Afro-textured hair is not merely a cultural marker but a contested terrain where Black girls' citizenship, belonging, and autonomy are negotiated. By situating this struggle within the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, the study makes visible how institutional racism continues to operate through seemingly mundane practices such as 'grooming' or 'discipline,' often in the absence of formal policy.

The findings indicate that desegregated schools in South Africa, far from being inclusive spaces, often replicate racial and cultural hierarchies through covert and verbalised rules that target Black girl learners. Teachers, operating with institutional authority, rely on unwritten and inconsistently enforced standards to discipline Black girls for wearing their hair in ways that reflect their identity, spirituality, and community belonging. Participants recounted being verbally ridiculed, physically punished, or threatened with exclusion for wearing afros, braids, beaded dreadlocks, or fade haircuts; hairstyles which do not align with Eurocentric ideals of neatness or femininity. Such experiences constitute a direct violation of learners' rights to dignity, culture, religion, and freedom of expression as enshrined in the South African Bill of Rights and the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996). In this context, hair policing becomes a powerful metaphor for how the post-apartheid schooling system continues to regulate Blackness as something pathological or in need of reform.

The participants' responses, however, also reveal a radical possibility. Despite the exclusion, shame, and violence enacted upon them, Black girls at Dundee Comprehensive actively resisted these regulations, refusing to internalise dominant ideologies and instead asserting their right to exist on their own terms. Through strategies such as collective refusal, appeals to cultural rights, and sustained demands for policy transparency, they transformed the school space into

a contested site of resistance. Their actions align with what Salami (2017) and Hooks (1994) describe as collective emancipation — a form of counter-hegemonic agency that emerges from shared identity, collective struggle, and a refusal to be silenced.

Building on these findings, the study proposes a conceptual framework that can guide future research, teacher training, and policy reform in addressing the policing of Afro-textured hair in racially diverse schools. The framework is grounded in five interwoven dimensions that emerged from participants' narratives and drawings: racialised aesthetic surveillance, cultural and spiritual erasure, gendered policing and heteronormativity, collective resistance, and policy gaps that betray constitutional protections. Figure 6.1 illustrates this conceptual framework.

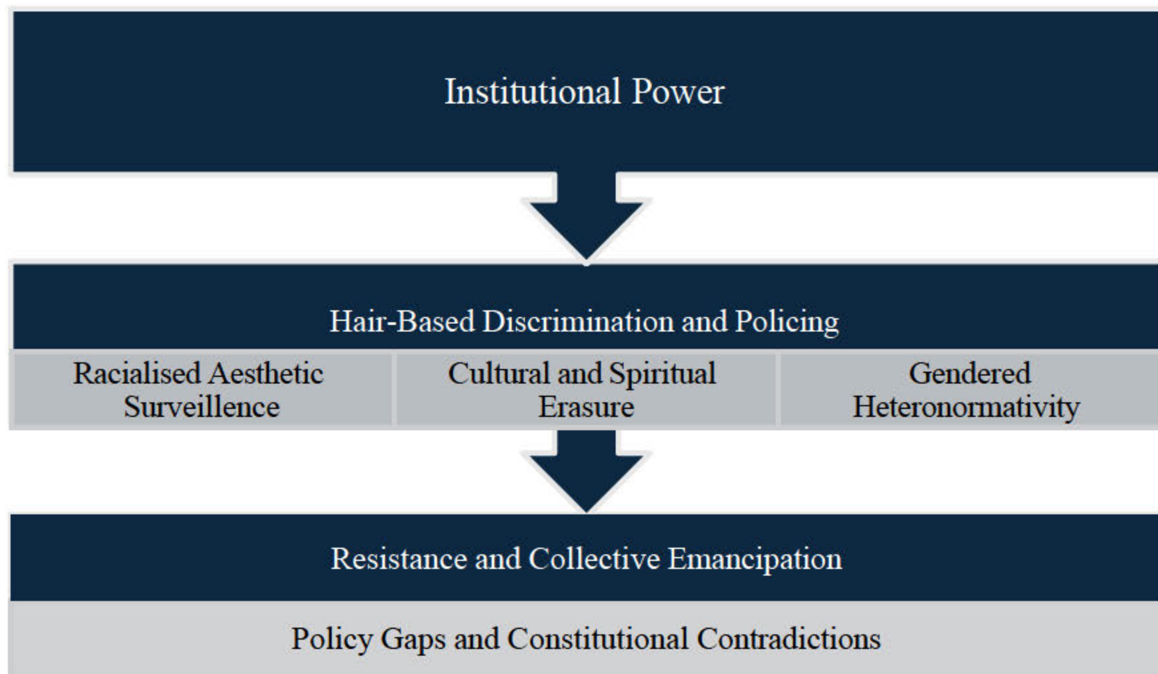

FIGURE 6.1: A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING HAIR-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN RACIALLY DIVERSE SCHOOLS

At the heart of the framework is the idea that institutional power is exercised through informal policies and symbolic control. Verbal rules, unwritten yet rigidly enforced, allow school authorities to regulate the visibility of Blackness in ways that reproduce colonial hierarchies under the guise of discipline and order. This

racialised aesthetic surveillance is not applied universally; instead, it targets hairstyles associated with Black identity while allowing Indian and Coloured learners more freedom. As a result, the Black girl becomes the site where school culture negotiates and asserts its unspoken allegiance to whiteness.

Linked to this is the cultural and spiritual erasure enacted by policies that disregard or criminalise hairstyles with religious or ancestral meaning. Girls who wear beaded dreadlocks as part of their spiritual calling are punished or mocked; their beliefs dismissed as illegitimate. The policing of hair thus becomes a tool for epistemic violence, which undermines African worldviews and asserting the superiority of Euro-Western cultural logics.

The third dimension of the framework highlights how aesthetic regulation enforces heteronormative femininity. Girls with short hair or gender non-conforming appearances are pathologised, misgendered, and asked to alter their appearance to conform to dominant ideas of 'girlhood.' This demonstrates how school culture imposes a narrow, patriarchal script on Black girl bodies, denying them the freedom to express gender and sexuality on their own terms.

Despite these exclusions, the study foregrounds the importance of resistance as a mode of reclaiming dignity and agency. Black girls in this study challenged the verbal policies not only by refusing to conform, but also by demanding structural reform. Their resistance, whether expressed through drawings, peer conversations, or acts of defiance, exemplifies a powerful pedagogy of refusal. It challenges the narrative that schools are neutral spaces and repositions learners as political actors.

Finally, the framework calls attention to the urgent need for written, transparent, and inclusive school policies that comply with the South African Schools Act and the Bill of Rights. As the study shows, the lack of formal policy documentation creates room for discrimination, erodes trust, and violates learners' rights to dignity and equality. A truly transformative policy response must affirm Afro-textured hair as a valid form of cultural expression, not as a problem to be managed.

This framework thus offers an original contribution by conceptualising hair-based discrimination not as an isolated disciplinary issue, but as a complex, intersectional problem rooted in institutional power and historical trauma. It encourages educators, policymakers, and researchers to shift from a deficit gaze toward one that affirms the cultural agency, resistance, and humanity of Black girls in educational spaces. Through the voices and visions of its participants, this study reclaims Afro-textured hair as not only a marker of identity, but a terrain of struggle—and a catalyst for systemic transformation in post-apartheid education.

6.6 Study Implications

The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational policy, school governance, teacher training, learner support, and broader frameworks of social justice in South African schooling. At their core, these implications reveal the persistent afterlives of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid in shaping how institutions regulate the bodies, identities, and cultural expressions of Black girls, especially through the policing of Afro-textured hair. Through the lens of African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory, it becomes evident that school spaces remain sites of structural violence where Black girls are not only disciplined but actively excluded under the guise of maintaining 'order,' 'uniformity,' and 'neatness.'

A critical policy implication is the urgent need for the Department of Basic Education to reassess the powers granted to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in designing school policies—especially in former White and Indian schools. Currently, these policies are often developed without adequate consideration of race, gender, religion, culture, or sexuality, resulting in frameworks that are exclusionary by design. The absence of written policies, as shown in this study, creates room for covert, verbal regulations that disproportionately target Black girls. These verbal rules are inconsistently applied and justified by dominant school authorities, often masking institutionalised racism behind vague standards of "professionalism" or "discipline." The Department must ensure that all school policies are explicitly aligned with the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) and the Bill of Rights in the Constitution. In doing so, schools would be

compelled to affirm the rights to dignity, cultural expression, and equality for all learners—not only in rhetoric, but in everyday practice.

Second, the study reveals that the covert regulation of Afro-textured hair represents a serious infringement of Black girls' basic human rights—including the rights to freedom of expression, religion, cultural identity, education, bodily autonomy, and gender recognition. By denying learners the ability to wear their natural or spiritually significant hairstyles, schools compromise both the psychological well-being and self-worth of these learners. Girls reported feeling humiliated, dehumanised, and alienated within school spaces, leading to loss of self-confidence, identity confusion, and in some cases, emotional distress. This kind of discrimination does not only violate national policy but contradicts South Africa's international commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990).

A third implication pertains to teacher professional development and accountability. The findings suggest that teachers, especially non-Black teachers in desegregated schools, require urgent training on anti-racism, cultural sensitivity, gender diversity, and inclusive pedagogies. Teachers must be reminded that their authority does not entitle them to impose racialised aesthetic standards or to engage in verbal abuse, humiliation, or public punishment of learners based on appearance. The South African Council for Educators (SACE), in collaboration with provincial departments of education, should strengthen ethics training and ensure that teacher conduct is monitored in alignment with national legislation and human rights principles. Regular workshops and professional development sessions should centre real cases of racialised exclusion and equip educators with tools to affirm rather than pathologise difference.

Fourth, while some schools have Learner Support Agents (LSAs), this study shows that these support systems are often insufficient for addressing the psychosocial trauma experienced by Black girls exposed to racialised discrimination. Schools must establish trauma-informed programmes that provide psychological, emotional, and spiritual support to learners who have been targeted for their

identity. These services should be informed by culturally relevant mental health practices, include partnerships with local clinics and social workers, and ensure confidentiality, safety, and non-judgement. Furthermore, schools should create platforms —such as student-led forums or anti-racism clubs — where Black girls can voice their concerns, share strategies of resistance, and contribute to building inclusive school cultures.

Both African Feminist Theory and Black Feminist Theory offer critical insight into how past historical injustices continue to shape present realities for Black women and girls. African Feminism draws attention to how slavery, colonialism, and apartheid constructed Black bodies, especially hair, as sites of regulation, control, and exclusion. The findings of this study show that these legacies persist through the mundane policing of Afro-textured hair, where Black girls are labelled as "untidy," "ugly," or "smelly" and forced to remove dreadlocks worn for ancestral or religious reasons. These forms of symbolic violence mirror historical discourses that positioned Black hair as deviant and unclean, rendering Black girls as perpetually out of place in educational spaces designed around white norms.

At the same time, Black Feminist Theory was central to understanding how these girls enact resistance and reclaim agency. Participants in this study refused to internalise the deficit discourses imposed upon them. Many affirmed their Black identity through their hairstyles, resisted school rules that pathologised their bodies, and demanded written, inclusive codes of conduct. Their acts of defiance, whether individual or collective, constitute what Black Feminists call counter-hegemonic practices: they challenge the authority of schools to determine what is acceptable and offer an alternative politics of presence, dignity, and cultural pride. The theory underscores that resistance is not simply reactive but generative; it produces new possibilities for self-definition and collective emancipation.

Ultimately, the implications of this study point to the need for a radically reimagined education system — one that does not merely integrate Black children into formerly white spaces, but one that actively decolonises its structures, values, and assumptions. The regulation of Afro-textured hair may appear trivial, but it is symptomatic of a broader crisis of institutional power and epistemic violence.

Addressing it requires not only policy reform, but a cultural shift in how schools conceptualise discipline, aesthetics, and inclusion. At stake is not simply hairstyle compliance, but the affirmation of Black life, culture, and personhood within the very institutions meant to support human development.

6.7 Conclusion

This study is rooted in personal experience — an experience that, like those of many Black women teachers and learners, exposed the subtle and overt forms of discrimination embedded in South Africa's desegregated schooling system. When I began teaching at a racially mixed school in 2018, I was unaware that something as personal and culturally meaningful as my hair would be subject to critique and ridicule. Compliments flowed when I wore Brazilian weaves, while my natural Afro was dismissed as ugly and unprofessional. Over time, I observed a similar pattern of racialised aesthetic policing targeting learners, particularly Black schoolgirls. At the school gates, Afro-textured hair was scrutinised, regulated, and punished, while Eurocentric hairstyles passed unquestioned. Despite the absence of a clear written school policy, enforcement was routine, often degrading, and deeply unequal. These daily acts of exclusion were not isolated; they mirrored a broader national and global crisis in how Black hair, and by extension, Black identity, is treated in educational spaces.

This deeply personal awakening led me to ask: how do African Black schoolgirls understand, experience, and navigate hair-based discrimination in desegregated schools? What are the emotional, cultural, and psychological costs of these policing practices? And how do these young girls resist, reimagine, and reclaim their dignity in the face of such institutional injustice?

Through participatory drawings and FGDs with sixteen Black schoolgirls at Dundee Comprehensive Secondary School, this study uncovered painful yet profound insights. The girls' voices, drawings, and narratives revealed a shared sense of hurt, humiliation, and dehumanisation. The policing of their Afro-textured hair was not simply about neatness or discipline; it was a symbolic regulation of identity, dignity, and cultural presence. The school's verbal policy

functioned as an invisible but powerful tool of racial control, that disproportionately targets Black girls, erasing their cultural and spiritual practices, and violating their constitutional rights to education, freedom of expression, dignity, and equality.

The study illuminated several interconnected findings that expose the structural persistence of racial and gendered inequality in South Africa's desegregated schools. First, historical continuity remains stark: despite claims of transformation, schools like Dundee Comprehensive continue to reproduce apartheid-era ideologies, with covert racism enacted through verbal regulations that disproportionately target and police Black bodies. This is compounded by policy opacity, as the school's code of conduct remains undocumented and inaccessible to learners and parents, enabling arbitrary and selective enforcement, particularly concerning Afro-textured hair. These informal practices reflect a deeper layer of aesthetic racism, whereby Eurocentric beauty norms are normalised, and African hairstyles are marked as unkempt, deviant, or inappropriate for educational spaces. The consequences are severe: participants recounted instances of disciplinary violence, including exclusion from school, public humiliation, and the threat or use of forced haircuts as punitive measures for breaching unwritten appearance standards. Moreover, this scrutiny extended to learners' identities, amounting to cultural and religious erasure, as girls wearing dreadlocks for spiritual reasons or adopting non-normative gender expressions through fade haircuts were subjected to ridicule, dehumanisation, and threats of exclusion. Yet, amidst these deeply troubling experiences, the study also revealed powerful moments of resistance and solidarity. The girls refused to internalise the deficit discourses imposed upon them, instead voicing their resistance through drawings, dialogue, and collective action. In doing so, they demanded anti-racist, inclusive school policies that respect their dignity, cultural identity, and right to self-expression, signalling a refusal to remain silent in the face of institutional injustice.

These findings speak to an urgent need for institutional reform. South African desegregated schools must recognise that racial integration alone does not equate to transformation. Inclusion requires deliberate, sustained attention to the lived realities of Black learners, particularly girls, whose bodies and identities remain

subject to colonial and patriarchal scrutiny. Schools must begin by aligning their policies with the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 and the Bill of Rights, ensuring that all learners' cultural, religious, gender, and sexual identities are affirmed and protected. Furthermore, this study calls on the Department of Basic Education to oversee and regulate the policy-making powers of School Governing Bodies in former White and Indian schools. It is unacceptable for covert, verbal, and racially biased regulations to persist unchecked in public institutions. Teacher training programmes must also be strengthened to address systemic racism, unconscious bias, and cultural insensitivity, particularly among educators working in racially diverse environments.

Finally, the stories shared by the girls in this study represent more than individual pain—they embody collective memory, resistance, and transformation. Their refusal to internalise racist and sexist messages about their hair and bodies reflects a broader movement for Black girl liberation. Through the lenses of African Feminism and Black Feminist Theory, this study affirms their agency, their beauty, and their right to take up space — unapologetically — in educational institutions that have long attempted to make them invisible.

In conclusion, the policing of Black girls' afro-textured hair is not a trivial issue. It is a deeply political act that reflects the ongoing struggle over whose bodies are seen as acceptable, whose cultural practices are deemed valid, and whose voices are allowed to shape the future of education in South Africa. This study offers not only a critique, but a call to action to listen to Black girls, to believe them, and to build schools that honour, rather than erase, their identities.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

19 March 2025

Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu (214520947)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear SM Bhengu,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008252/2025
Project title: Afro-textured hair under a magnifying glass: The perspectives of Black African girls in a desegregated secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 13 February 2025 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 19 March 2026.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

Doctor Shamila Naidoo (Senior Deputy Chair)

/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 **Email:** hssrec@ukzn.ac.za **Website:** http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE OF CONSENT FORMS AND LETTER OF INFORMATION

Letter of Information

Research title: Afro-Textured Hair under a Magnifying Glass: The Perspectives of Black African Girls in Desegregated Secondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

Researchers' details:

Names: Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu

Email: 214520947@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Contact: [redacted]

Institution: UKZN, School of Education

Qualification: Master of Education

Research supervisor:

Name: Dr N.Ngidi

Email: NgidiN10@ukzn.ac.za

Contact: [redacted]

Address: University of KwaZulu Natal

Durban

4041

This letter aims at assisting you in making an informed decision regarding your participation in this research study. This letter will elaborate on what is the study about, the possible outcomes that you can benefit from as a participant and to be assured of your rights and obligations to this study.

In any case of confusion and seeking clarity regarding all the processes of this research study, are allowed to contact the researcher to enquire before giving your consent to participate in the study. If you consider to participate, you will be then required to sign a consent form.

This study aims at exploring and learning about the vile and unfair treatment black girls with afro-textured hair received in their mixed-race schools located in Dundee. The expected number of participants is a total of 20 learners from both schools.

This study will use two participatory drawing workshops which will take about 2hours each. It will also include a Focus Group discussion with the selected 10 participants from each school. Notably, the workshops and the Focus Group discussion will be done collectively for both sessions.

This study does not foresee any unpreventable risks and has no guaranteed benefits for the participants. However, I wish this study reaches its highest potential and receive the attention and momentum it deserves in order for the voices of these young girls can be heard, valued and prioritised by the DoE.

Importantly, Participants should be aware that their participation in this research is voluntary and as a participant you may decide to withdraw from the participation at any given point of the study and without any repercussions or penalties, however a participant may be replaced if they show no interest or not providing relevant information that can benefit the study.

The participants should note that there will be no tangible benefits or remuneration provided to them for this study. Hopefully, your participation will be benefitting the study and lead to appropriate findings.

During the workshops and Focus Group discussions, Pictures, audio recordings, videos will be taken and kept safe in my digital gadget as evidence that data was collected and use accordingly without fabricating any information.

Importantly, during the curse of the study code names (anonymous names) will be assigned to participants and the schools to keep their identities anonymous. Confidentiality will be assured at all cost even during data analysis and data findings, no individual will be exposed or put at stake for the information disclosed. Information provided by the participants will be solely used to respond the main research question mentioned above.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Greetings: Learner.

My name is Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu, a Master of Education candidate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education.
Email: 214520947
Contact: [redacted]

You are cordially invited to voluntarily participate in a study that is concerning the ill-treatment and scrutiny against black Afro-textured hair in desegregated secondary schools. This study is aiming at exploring and learning the extent scrutiny against that black girls with afro-textured hair encounter in their desegregated (formerly white only) secondary schools in Umzinyathi District. The study is expected to have 20 learners (10 for each school) from two separate secondary schools in Dundee. The study will conduct two physical drawing workshop sessions which will take about two hours per session. The study will also involve a focus group discussion after each drawing workshop session.
This is a crucial study that might expect few potential risks and also positive outcomes for the participants as they would be voicing out their encounters. However, I also wish that this study reaches the entire of KwaZulu Natal and encourages more researchers to embark on a similar study. During a focus group discussion, the participants are allowed to ask and discuss anything related to the topic with the asurrance of their safety and confidentiality.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSRECZ/00005500/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns you may contact the researcher at [redacted], alternatively via email at 214520947@stu.ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation is voluntary in this research study and participants will be allowed to withdraw from the workshops and the focus group discussions at any point during the research study. The withdrawal will be accepted by the researcher without any repercussions or penalties towards the participant. Participants may be replaced if they show less interest and/or not providing relevant information for the study and this will come with no repercussions for the replaced participant.

In this study there will be no payments made to the participants as it is done voluntarily. Hopefully, the participation and narratives provided can assist to reach the expected research aims of this study.

During the recorded focus group discussions I will ensure that the real names of the schools and of the participants will be kept anonymous with an aim of protecting their image and confidentiality. To ensure trustworthiness in my study, I will keep the original drawings from each workshop, the notes,the transcripts and the recordings for each focus group discussion in a safe space and on my laptop or usb.
The raw data collected from the participants will be interpreted and concluded correctly into response to the main research questions for this study.

Indicate with an [X]

Do you understand this research study and willing to take part in it? [YES] [NO]

Has the researcher answered all your questions? [YES] [NO]

Do you understand that you can withdraw from being in this research at any time? [YES] [NO]

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio and video-record of my drawing / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Image capture of my drawing / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Use of my photographs for research purposes	YES / NO

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature ______________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature _____________________________ Date __________

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Greetings: Teacher/Parent or Guardian.

My name is Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu, a Master of Education candidate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education.
Email: 214520947
Contact: [redacted]

Your child is being selected and invited to participate in a research study that is concerning the ill-treatment and scrutiny encountered by black girls with afro-textured hair in their desegregated secondary school in South Africa, KwaZulu Natal. This research aims at exploring and studying the experiences and narratives from the learners enrolled in these desegregated secondary schools which purposely design their school code of conduct or policy with an aim of discriminating and scrutinizing against black girls with their natural afro-textured hair. This research will be located in Umzinyathi District schools. The study will have a total number of 16 participants from one desegregated secondary schools in Dundee. The research will be conducted through participatory drawing workshops which will be followed by a focus group discussion that would involve all 16 participants. The drawing workshop and the focus group discussion will take about three hours per session. The two sessions will be held on different days.

This is a crucial study that might expect few potential risks and also positive outcomes for the participants as they would be voicing out their encounters at their school. However, I also wish that this study reaches the entire of KwaZulu Natal and encourages more researchers to embark on a similar study. During a focus group discussion, the participants are allowed to ask and discuss anything related to the topic with the asurrance of the safety and confidentiality.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSRECZ/00005500/2023).

In the event of any problems or concerns you may contact the researcher at [redacted] alternatively via email at 214520947@stu.ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation is voluntary in this research study and participants will be allowed to withdraw from the workshops and the focus group discussions at any point during the research study. The withdrawal will be accepted by the researcher without any repercussions or penalties towards the participant. Participants may be replaced if they show less interest and/or not providing relevant information for the study and this will come with no repercussions for the replaced participant.

In this study there will be no payments made to the participants as it is done voluntarily. Hopefully, the participation and narratives provided can assist to reach the expected research aims of this study.

During the recorded focus group discussions I will ensure that the real names of the schools and of the participants will be kept anonymous with an aim of protecting their image and confidentiality. To ensure trustworthiness in my study, I will keep the original drawings from each workshop, the notes,the transcripts and the recordings for each focus group discussion in a safe space and on my laptop or usb.
The raw data collected from the participants will be interpreted and concluded correctly into response to the main research questions for this study.

CONSENT

I ____(Parent /Guardian Name)
have been informed about the study entitled, Afro-Textured Hair under a Magnifying Glass: The Perspectives of Black African Girls in Desegregated Secondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal by Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at (provide details).

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-video record of my drawing / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Image capture of my drawing / focus group discussion	YES / NO
Use of my photographs for research purposes	YES / NO

____________________ ____________________

Signature of Parent/Guardian **Date**

____________________ ____________________

Signature of Witness **Date**
(Where applicable)

____________________ ____________________

Signature of Translator **Date**
(Where applicable)

APPENDIX C

GATEKEEPER PERMISSION FROM THE SCHOOL

Dundee 3000

E – Mail :

To whom it may concern

I the principal of hereby grants Miss S.M Bhengu, student number: 214520947 a master's candidate at the University of KwaZulu Natal a permission to conduct her research study which is titled: Afro-Textured Hair under a Magnifying Glass: The Perspectives of Black African Girls in Desegregated Secondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

I was fully informed about this research study and I also understand that the research will take two sessions consisting of workshops that would be accompanied by a Focus Group Discussion.

Yours Sincerely

Dundee 3000

E – Mail :

I, School's Learner Support Assistant (LSA) declare my availability to offer any assistance that might be require by Miss S.M Bhengu for her participants during their drawing workshops and group discussions that would be carried out for her master's research study, titled: Afro-Textured Hair under a Magnifying Glass: The Perspectives of Black African Girls in DesegregatedSecondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal. Miss Bhengu has mentioned that her study might trigger some emotions and therefore, it might need an LSA's assistance. The workshops and discussions will take place inside the school premises which is under my jurisdiction.

Regards

APPENDIX D

GATEKEEPER APPROVAL LETTER FROM THE KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X 9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Email: buyi.ntuli@kzndoe.gov.za **Tel:** 033 392 1051

Ref No.: 2/4/8/235
Enquiries: Mrs B. T. Ntuli

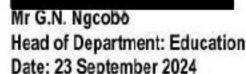
Ms Sithandiwe Marlene Bhengu
518 Mbasa 12th Street
Sibongile Township
DUNDEE
3000

Dear Ms Bhengu

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"AFRO -TEXTURED HAIR UNDER A MAGNIFYING GLASS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF BLACK AFRICAN GIRLS IN DESEGREGATED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL :"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **23 September 2024 to 31 December 2027**.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.



Mr G.N. Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 23 September 2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX E

TURNITIN REPORT

Sithandiwe Dissertation

Match Overview

1%

Match 1 of 68

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EN View English Sources

Matches

1 researchspace.ukzn.a... Internet Source 1%

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