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Teach Us To Teach You: Experiences Of Black Males In Urban High Schools In Georgia

Judy Ward

TEACH US TO TEACH YOU: EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN URBAN HIGH

SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

by

JUDY HADWYN WARD

(Under The Direction of Robert Lake)

ABSTRACT

Why do we not ask our students what they need from us as teachers? This study is a look at my

teaching through the eyes of my former students - ten black males in two urban high schools in

Georgia. My research relies on critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006) as

a lens to analyze how institutional racism creates obstacles to black male achievement. I explore

how an "opportunity gap" provides the foundation for an achievement gap between blacks and

whites (Tate, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006a) that prevents black males from achieving academic

success. I use counter-storytelling (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and

focus group sessions to evoke true experience and voice from my students' success stories to

reveal their perceptions of what the difference was that kept them from becoming another school

to prison statistic (Smith, 2009). The findings provide insight into common high school

experiences and interventions that positively impacted the success of these students and how

their school culture, families, teacher perceptions, and community stereotypes contributed to that

impact. These students were aware of lower levels of expectations and the lack of a curriculum

that empowered them with opportunities to be successful. These students only felt valued

because of the positive relationships they developed with teachers creating a growth mindset that

allowed them to hope for a future outside the expected stereotype of black male students.

Schools are responsible for assuring teachers integrate a culturally relevant and responsive

pedagogy that supports all students in understanding their role in society and empowering them with the knowledge and strategies to fight for equality and to dare to dream of success. This inquiry and the current state of affairs in this country has awakened me to the prevalence of racism and white privilege that I refused to acknowledge could still exist despite efforts to create a fair and equitable society. More now than ever we must teach the importance of respect and acceptance of all in order to fight the devastation that will occur if racism is allowed to continue to breed.

INDEX WORDS: Black males, Stereotypes, Marginalized students, Critical Race Theory, Counterstories, Opportunity Gap, Academic Success, Audacity of Hope, Funds of Knowledge, Radical Hope

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DEDICATION

I started this journey to earn my doctorate with the $100 bill that my father gave me on my birthday. He told me that he knew I could do it. I dedicate all that I am to my parents Mr. and Mrs. Jimmie C. Hadwyn. They taught me to always appreciate education and to learn as much as I could. They taught me to work hard for what I want but most importantly to work to make the world a better place. Through their actions, they taught me to love all and with all that I have. They taught me that family is everything. Without them this would not be possible. My father may not remember the money he gave me anymore but I do. I also dedicate this to my husband Monte Ward who was patient and supportive while I spent endless nights and weekends trying to find my purpose in this endeavor. I dedicate this to my son Dr. Alexander Hadwyn Ward who recently completed his doctorate in genetics. He wants to change the world through science, and he has taught me that no matter what to never take no for an answer if something is important. During the final part of my journey, he and his wife gave birth to my beautiful granddaughters Isabelle and Evelyn at 28 weeks. As they fight for their lives, I fight for a better world for their futures. I thank Dr. Walter S. Reeves for always being there despite the difficulties inherent with working with someone like me. Without his encouragement that this is what I was meant to do, I would have given up a thousand times. Thank you to all of my family, colleagues, peers, and to God for being there for me and for helping me believe in my dream.

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE AUDACITY OF HOPE?

According to the UN General Assembly (1989) all children are guaranteed a right to an education that develops their "personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential." Although guaranteed this right, fewer than 80% of American citizens walk across the stage to receive a high school diploma at the end of twelve years of compulsory attendance in schools with the majority of those students not graduating being black males (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2012). The future success of black male students in academic achievement in America is dismal as measured by state and national assessments when compared to their peers resulting in lower graduation rates for this subgroup of students (Lewis et al., 2010; Schotts Foundation, 2015). Attempts at minimizing the achievement gap between black males and their peers from other subgroups such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have not been overwhelmingly successful. The trend continues for black males to be the least likely group to achieve academic success and to graduate with their peers. Using Critical Race Theory as their framework, education researchers discovered a commonly held belief that the success or failure of black males is largely a result of laziness, lack of motivation, family values and culture, and a general tendency towards crime. Thus, they have begun exploring alternative explanations from different viewpoints of those historically marginalized for the disparities that exist in academic achievement among the different subgroups in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner 2008). One of those alternative explanations is that the achievement gap does not exist merely because of a difference in color but because there is an "opportunity gap" that exists between white and black students and an ever-increasing "education debt" due to lack of funding and resources available to those who need it the most (Tate, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006b). By

listening to those who are directly affected by this condition, we as educators can work to eliminate that gap and find ways to eliminate the debt.

Although black males are most likely to achieve at lower levels in schools, are disciplined most often, and are most often referred to remedial or special education classes, there are those black males who achieve at very high levels of academic achievement. The temptation often is to focus on the deficit view about why black males choose to walk away from a free education instead of towards a diploma that may be their ticket into the productive world of the working class; however, we can instead focus our attention on why the others beat the odds stacked against them. The education of these young black males is important to all of us in that as children graduate from high school, they pursue different avenues to attain employment allowing them to provide for themselves. As educators, it is our duty to help students acquire the education that they need and deserve to become "knowledgeable, responsible, socially skilled, healthy, caring, and contributing citizens" (Greenberg et al., 2003). We have a responsibility to investigate what motivates students labeled as "at risk" to achieve academically so that we can better meet the needs of students statistically predetermined to not be successful at completing the requirements of a high school diploma.

Black male students do not come to class as the assumed tabula rasa that comes with the perceived notion of the racial and class stereotypes that are prevalent in school systems. Being poor does not mean that these students have no knowledge, no skills, and no resources. These students have other "funds of knowledge" available to them that come from their families and their cultures (Moll et al., 1992). To fully understand humans' complexity, we must develop an understanding of how they behave in the social environment. Effective teachers take the time to get to know their students and their students' families and cultural communities. They then use

their students' "funds of knowledge" to include and empower all students, especially those who are historically disenfranchised by the dominant white culture in the classroom. The home and community where black males live are valuable resources that allow educators to refute the "deficit model" of black male students and to acknowledge that these students know a great deal, have a tremendous amount of skills, and with their family and community support are able to accomplish high levels of achievement and success. As educators embrace who their black male students are, the outlook is more positive for these students. These educators help close the opportunity gap for these students by abandoning the tried-and-true drill and test method that is normally reserved for students who come from the poor working class. They instead design learning opportunities that engage black males in rigorous and relevant activities that utilize what these students know and have experienced in order to build and strengthen critical thinking necessary for developing feelings of empowerment and hope that blacks can compete on a level playing field with their white counterparts.

With the prevalence of violence in the U.S. from "Black Lives Matter" protests to the refusal to accept Donald Trump as president among so many, there is an awakening to the existence of the extent of the vileness of racism. Outrage at the acts of racism that are leading to tragic consequences has opened the eyes of many that racism may have only been seen through subtle maneuvers as one race strengthened its dominance over another race but now the acts of racism are bold and without fear of judgment or consequences. Those who were ignorant to assume that equality could one day exist in America have been able to see up close and personal that hatred exists for those who do not look like or act like the dominant white population.

As Americans band together and fight for equality and demand justice against the practices of racism and discrimination, black male students are learning that there is hope and

that hope comes from having a vision of what is possible. Educators must also awaken to the practices that take place in the classroom that are based on institutional racism and that contribute to the perpetuation of a curriculum that will not value black students' abilities on the same level as white students. Educators who get to know their students and their students' families are finding success in classroom practices that incorporate their students' families and culture into the classroom. Educators create change by realizing that each student has value regardless of their race or socioeconomic background. The stereotype of the black male student lacking the necessary monetary, family, and knowledge resources leads to a curriculum that will achieve failure and a feeling of hopelessness among black male students. These educators are finding ways to create hope in an educational system surrounded by racial profiling, increased police presence in lower income neighborhoods and minority neighborhoods, and practices that work against the hope of reformation during incarceration. Educators today have access to more information about who a child is and where he or she is coming from than ever before. Educators are increasingly utilizing this information to combat statistics of black males being pre-determined to a life of imprisonment based on their color, their household income status, and the educational status of their parents. These educators are working against the media's influence on the black male stereotype that defines the destiny of these students as future inhabitants of America's prisons. These educators are cashing in the funds of knowledge that these black males bring with them to the classrooms to breed hope instead of breeding a population of children who will keep the prisons in business. It is this audacity of hope that every child deserves to have so that they can dream the American dream and choose their own path to make their dream a reality. This, after all, is the Kool-Aid that we serve to all who live here and attend schools here – anything is possible. It is this audacity of hope that allowed Oprah Winfrey to not think of

herself as a poor girl from the ghetto who did not have as much as others but instead to know that she was responsible for her destiny and she could do good (Browne et. al., 1990). The audacity of hope is what empowers black males to take the fate of their success in their own hands.

As schools work towards reform to ensure equity for all students, educators are learning about their students and their students' cultures while also helping those students learn about themselves so they can understand the obstacles in their way and find ways to conquer those obstacles. In order to have a vision for the future, black male students must first understand their past. Students who create goals and see a future have hope and with hope they set goals for their successes instead of making excuses for their failures. With the help of their teachers, black males are taking responsibility for their future and they realize that education is empowering. Their teachers see a future for these students and they help these students build the self-esteem and confidence that allows them to see a future of success and to stand up and fight for that which makes their culture unique. The curriculum of these classes accentuates the positive of each culture of the students through appreciation of diversity in a positive manner. The curriculum is built not only around the individualized differences of the students but also welcomes the family and community to join in on the celebration of the culture of their children as all work to establish a positive atmosphere that assures equality and hope in educational achievement.

Obama (2008) stresses that the audacity of hope comes along with beliefs that we must all stay true to our core values and we must carefully choose who we will look up to as our role models and mentors. It is important for us all to have a strong support system as we maneuver through unfamiliar territory as we all challenge the stereotypes placed upon us. We must have hope for our students and we must help them find their own hope through the opportunities that

we provide for them to achieve excellence in education. Finding and believing in hope that there are better things to come is a collective effort of students, educators, families, and communities.

Zero tolerance policies seem to contribute to the ever-increasing and disproportionate numbers of young black males who end up being suspended or expelled from school and thus leading to increased numbers of high school drop-outs and increasing support for the school to prison pipeline for black males. However, educators are rallying for reform that leads to positive outcomes for black males (Brown, 2013). This pipeline exists because of a failure to see the potential that exists in young black males outside their perceived stereotypes. It is not only the fault of educators but of society as a whole. Educators are working to change the status quo as they work harder to know who their students are and to see that the knowledge and skills that these students possess because of their heritage and experience is an advantage that adds to the diversity of the classroom. The racial bias that exists in the school to prison pipeline reinforces a caste system based on race; however, education and acceptance of individual differences will expose and eliminate the policies that establish this system (Alexander, 2011). As educators strive to celebrate diversity and give students opportunities of expression and success, the collateral damage of economic and social disadvantage that comes from punitive, racially biased policies eventually become less of an obstacle for young black males and the cycle begins to diminish. It is time that educators look beyond the skin color and level of affluence of their students as an excuse for teaching to the test instead of teaching to the abilities of their students. Educators must look beyond the stereotypes of poor people being the problem and appreciate that our role as educators is to teach all students and appreciate their differences as being meaningful parts of our curriculum (Gorski, 2013).

The perception once was that there existed a gap in the achievement of black males when compared to their white counterparts (Tate, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006a). Contributing to the inability for black male students to achieve success in their current schools is the "education debt" that comes from the lack of funding and resources available for schools that exist in poor areas that experience a lack of jobs and a high rate of crime (Ladson-Billings, 2006a). The gap that exists between white and black achievement is not inherent in the genetic makeup of these individuals; instead, the gap exists in the opportunities afforded to individuals based on their surroundings or their appearance and the debt that exists because of their environment. As educators strive to understand their students and their students' cultures, that opportunity gap decreases as those educators find opportunities for black males to express their skills and knowledge in ways that accentuate the positive aspects of their culture and experience. Educators are encouraged to explore how they view minorities in their classrooms and acknowledge the biases and stereotypes that exist within their minds, as well as any preconceived notions about the abilities of their students, which ultimately influence the degree of opportunities that they create for their students. Educators must continue to own their misunderstandings of cultural differences as they work to create a culture of high expectations for academic success for all students that is free from bias. These educators incorporate the funds of knowledge that the poor and the disenfranchised bring into their classrooms to create a safe learning environment for all students.

It is not only the educator's issue to eradicate the opportunity gap. It is also the responsibility of the school system and the community to work together to assure that the schools in poorer neighborhoods with high numbers of black males receive equal funding and equal access to high quality teaching and resources as those schools in more affluent neighborhoods.

Students should have access to equitable opportunities, including art and music classes, where they can learn on a deeper level because the educators convey the belief that these students have the abilities to learn. Schools are beginning to focus more on the individual students and their learning needs as well as what they bring to the classroom in terms of their funds of knowledge. When teachers learn and understand how a curriculum can unintentionally create an opportunity gap that leads to some students being at a disadvantage in the learning process, they can strive to create more equitable practices and learning opportunities that empower all students especially black males. These educators adopting a curriculum that is centered around the student and that is rigorous is leading to high levels of academic achievement and creating hope for all students that there is a better future and this is providing the route of escape for these students from poverty and from being robbed of hope because of racial bias (Gorski, 2013).

West (2013) believes that teachers have the ability to help children experience freedom through education because those children who know how to think and can be independent will have the freedom to make their own choices in life. The educator has the means through a well thought out rigorous and relevant curriculum to diminish the nihilism that exists and is destroying the hope of young black male students. By designing a curriculum through a context that appreciates and celebrates individual differences and cultures, black males will not feel worthless but instead feel a valued part of society. West encourages educators to be conscious of the fact that race does matter and is forever interwoven and intertwined with our past, present, and future. Times are changing. Black male children in America have seen someone that looks like them reach the highest office in the land. Although Afro-pessimism exists and works against hope, there are pockets of those who believe in the audacity of hope and will see it as part of their jobs as educators to create that hope in all their students. Through deliberate actions that

accentuate positivity and hope, a culture of optimism will eventually replace Afro-pessimism. President Obama strategically supported policies that saw education as the solution to increasing academic achievement and economic success for black and poor Americans. These included the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit as well as the African-American Education Initiative that sought to improve the education that blacks were receiving so that they were better prepared for a prosperous future.

What do we already know about why black males are less likely to graduate high school than their white counterparts? What do we already know about why other black males stay in school and earn a high school diploma? What strategies are we currently using to keep students from leaving school? What are we missing? How do we educate teachers to work collaboratively in a common effort to build an understanding, sympathy, and goodwill among all to avoid prejudice, isolation, and hatred in an attempt to meet the needs of marginalized students? Is the problem not that black males are incapable of achieving at high levels like their white counterparts or is it that black males are afforded fewer opportunities to be successful? As an educator for the past twenty-four years, I am concerned that the graduation rate for black males in my county is less than the state and national averages. What will happen to these young men without a high school diploma? Through my research into why students are successful despite being poor, black, and male, I wanted to gain information about effective schooling practices. These practices can be implemented to increase the number of black males that remain in school long enough to complete the requirements for graduation and raise teacher awareness of why some black males stay in school while others leave. This can lead to the development of a professional learning course for teachers that will teach and strengthen the skills needed to increase completion rates for black males, and inspire teachers to improve the school

environment to support the needs of all of their students. I wanted to find out what difference the experiences and actions of teachers have on how black males feel about the worthwhileness of staying in school. My intent for the design of this study was not to be accusatory but instead to be enlightening.

A major problem affecting student achievement and student dropout rates is motivation; many students do not have it, and many teachers do not know how to help those students get it. Almost half of the number of dropouts reported that they left school because their classes were not interesting to them (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Helping students increase a sense of self-efficacy can increase their motivation and achievement (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Students develop a sense of what they can be successful at as they assess their level of knowledge and skills in relation to the tasks to be completed and the value of these activities to themselves (Bandura, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). As students build their self-confidence through mastery of learning objectives, students gain a sense of satisfaction as they become more competent: "The child's need to be competent is satisfied" and the result is that "motivation for further achievement is enhanced" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). When students do not have opportunities in which they can experience success, they become frustrated and may resort to inappropriate behavior or feelings of helplessness leading to lower levels of academic achievement. The most important factor in increasing student attendance rates is the attitude that the students have towards their school; it must be somewhere the students want to be instead of somewhere they have to be (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). Too many students are not succeeding in school and are dropping out "because they are not treated as individuals" (Stainback & Stainback, 1992).

Countless efforts are present to convince students to stay in school – reward, punishment, compulsory attendance laws, and ability to receive a driver's license. Some efforts have succeeded for some students while others have failed. In the schools in the United States today, less than one-half of black high school freshmen will graduate on time. Many of these students report the feeling of disenfranchisement from their schools as the reason they leave school before graduating. Without a high school diploma, these students are more likely to suffer economic hardships and be more at risk for criminal behavior (Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009). When students leave school without a high school diploma, there is a higher risk that they will head into a "downward spiral into greater emotional, physical, and economic problems" that may lead to increased losses to the student and to society (Beauvais, Chavez, Oetting, Deffenbacher, and Cornell, 1996). The research showing the discrepancies between white and black achievement is extensive, but it does not offer solutions. Merely stating that black males do not score as well on achievement tests as their white counterparts is only one part of the story. In order to understand why the discrepancy exists, it may be time to ask the questions in a different manner. Hooks (2004) and Ladson-Billings (2007) see a greater need to ask better questions and seek out explanations using counterstories to find out from the source about what may be leading to these disparities. Jordan and Cooper (2002) express that it is not simply enough to state the known but it is a time to acknowledge that challenges both in and out of school face black males that are unique to their situation. These include racial profiling and an overrepresentation in prisons directly linked to inequalities that span a multitude of generations and that have led to institutionalized racism.

There has been controversy between nature and nurture in relation to differences in intelligence, personality, behavior, and a host of other characteristics that account for

multicultural diversity. Documentation exists that disparities exist among black males on state and national assessments of academic achievement as compared to their peers (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). There is an assumption for some that these disparities exist because minority students do not achieve at academic levels as high as their white counterparts due to a genetic deficiency; however, it may not be that black students have less innate intelligence but are instead victims of their environment (Gallagher & Lippard, 2014). The view, in many cases, is that black males do not possess the intellectual capacity necessary for academic achievement (Hodges, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett III, 2008). Milner (2007) explains that just as society stereotypes black males as being academically inferior, less disciplined, more likely to commit crime, and less likely to be successful and productive citizens than others, these stereotypes can also influence the teachers of black male students leading to lower expectations. This can lead to a lesser likelihood to offer assistance to help these students be successful. The actions and biases of these teachers do not always go unnoticed by these students. If they are aware that the teacher views them in such a negative manner, they are not as likely to strive for excellence to disprove these assumptions.

Typical research indicates students are more likely to leave school if they are from single-parent households, have lower socioeconomic status, and have previous grade retentions. This is also the case if they have parents and/or siblings that have dropped out of school, have a record of poor academic achievement, have family responsibilities and obligations, have language comprehension difficulties, and have behavior and/or discipline issues (Goldschmidt and Wang, 1999). These have certainly been well researched and well documented, but they address the collective problem of dropping out of school among students. The research fails to address the human aspect of the individual students. If teachers are not aware of how each student

internalizes his or her own experience in school, how will the teacher ever be able to differentiate what they do in the classroom to meet the needs of each student? In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (1994) reported that a high percentage of high school dropouts are not those that traditionally identify as at-risk students. What students believe about themselves and their experiences can be significant predictors about whether or not they will drop out of school (House, 1999). Students who feel their teachers take an interest in them and feel like their success is important are less likely to drop out of school despite factors that identify them as at-risk students (McMillan and Reed, 1994).

Purpose Statement and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to identify common threads among the lives of ten high school students who despite being identified as at risk of dropping out instead achieved high levels of academic success. In addition, the intent of this study was to identify common threads among the perceptions of school experiences among these students, and to identify strategies that schools and teachers can implement that will support the perceived needs of these students. In order to be advocates for the equality and equity of education for black male students and to adopt Critical Race Theory as the framework, educators must design and implement strategies based on the perceived needs of black male students. The way to discover these needs is to go to the source to expose racism in schools and to find out what strategies were used that empowered black male students that allowed them to be successful in school despite negative stereotypes (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Research Questions

Conducting a study that involved collecting narratives from black males and their experiences as students in urban high schools in Georgia was used to help shed light on why

some black male students achieve at high levels of academic success. This was designed to provide helpful insight for teachers who prejudge their students as being inferior to their peer groups and incapable of academic success because of their predetermined fate. The primary research question in this study was: What are young black male students' perceptions of their experiences that led to academic success? Other relevant questions addressed in this study were: 1) How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience? 2) How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against structural racism? 3) What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used?

Significance

The long-term economic and social effects are significant for those who complete high school. The effects of obtaining a high school diploma range from a less likely chance of being incarcerated at the extreme to the likelihood of securing gainful, meaningful employment (West, 2013). Individuals who complete high school have less difficulty finding employment, earn more, and less likely incarcerated than those without high school diplomas. Dropping out of high school can begin a cycle that is difficult to overcome. Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, and Palma (2009) tell us that social and incarceration problems of young dropouts are severe among all race-ethnic groups but are more so among men and blacks. Decreased opportunities and earning problems will persist throughout their working lives. According to Sum et al. (2009) during 2008, there was less than a forty-six percent employment rate of high school dropouts. This is twenty-two percentage points below that of those who graduated from high school. Those employed high school non-completers who also earned significantly less than those who had a high school diploma. In addition, incarceration is far more likely for those who do not complete high school. This is especially true among males. Sum et al. (2009) argue that

approximately ninety percent of inmates in correctional facilities are male, and one in ten male high school dropouts end up institutionalized at some point.

One of the most critical and urgent issues in education today is that approximately one million children in U.S. public schools do not meet the necessary requirements for graduation. The incidence is higher among black and Hispanic students leading to these students being more likely to have lower incomes and fewer employment opportunities than their high school graduate counterparts (Greene & Forster, 2003). People without high school diplomas earn about $10,0000 less than those with a high school diploma, are two times more likely to be living in poverty than high school graduates, and three times more likely to not have a job than those who completed high school (U. S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In the next few years, 63% of jobs in the United States will require a minimum of a high school diploma (Carnevale, A., Smith, N, & Strohl, J., 2010). In addition, there is possibly a relation to whether someone suffers from a chronic disease or is more likely to have poor health and the level of education attained by that person (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

In 2013, a little under half of the black male students in Georgia completed high school and received their diplomas (Schotts Foundation, 2015). When a student drops out of school, it not only affects the options available to that student, but it also affects stakeholders at national, state, and local levels. The unfair treatment of students in the educational process is a matter of social justice. Students who remain in classrooms are also at risk for consequences. When a student remains a part of a classroom that has a sub-standard curriculum taught by a teacher that lacks the expertise and resources to teach the content and address the needs of all students, he will not be able to perform at acceptable levels of achievement on standardized tests. He will

therefore end up in remedial coursework where the cycle repeats itself again (Ladson-Billings, 2003). The quality of education that a black male receives while in school will directly impact that student's future success in life (Kunjufu, 2013). As part of a self-fulfilling prophecy, students often meet the expectations of their teachers whether that is to achieve at high levels of academic standards or to fail. If the student feels the teacher views him negatively, then he is more likely to not participate in class and not try to be successful. The teacher's influence can affect how the student feels about his capabilities and whether the student feels encouraged to be successful or alienated, ultimately affecting whether the student is successful in achieving the objectives of the course (Gay, 2000). Instead of alienating the student, the teacher should get to know the student – what he has accomplished, what his experiences are, and what his culture is—as well as the learning styles and needs of each student. The teacher should then design a curriculum that embraces the strengths of each student in order to have an equitable and fair curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Guild, 1994).

I chose to interview my former black male students to gain insight about their experiences in my classroom and to allow them to voice their thoughts and ideas about what factors and experiences impacted their achievement so that I could identify trends that might help me and other teachers develop pedagogical practices that empower black male students to increase their likelihood of academic success in urban schools in Georgia. The findings from this study will help teachers understand how black males feel about the perception of them by their community and their teachers and enable teachers to design instructional activities and practices that are relevant to the needs of these students and have a positive impact on their academic success. Teachers may also seek out professional learning opportunities that help them diversify

and differentiate their teaching practices in order to work around the challenges that these black

male students are facing both inside and outside of the classroom environment.

Black Stories Matter

Narrative inquiry allows for the students here to tell their stories from their world and in

context with their experiences. The South is rich in its historical background and in some cases,

many here still live in the past awaiting vindication for the Civil War. For the appreciation and

understanding of stories of these students, the students as well as the audience of these narratives

must understand and appreciate the place that these stories come from because "we cannot

identify ourselves without locating ourselves in our landscapes," nor can we become

compassionate or empathize with these students (He, 2003, p. 20).

The basis of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is on the prevalence of an endemic culture of

racism where oppression based on color is normal and mainstay (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Racism relies on fear to maintain white supremacy above all other groups leading to the societies

being perpetually handicapped with levels of biased subordination (Yosso, 2006). With Critical

Race Theory (CRT) as the framework for this study, I hoped to "expose that which is oppressive

and dominating and examine and explicate value systems and concepts of justice upon which

inquiry is based" (Schubert, 1986, p. 181). Critical race theorists help to expose the assumptions

made by the dominant culture about the underachievement of black males as being the fault of

these black males, their families, their culture, or their communities. Studies that do not include

the voices of these black male students only contribute to the persistence of stereotypes of black

males because the stories told are only assumptions made by the researchers instead of based on

analysis of real experiences of these students. The focus should be instead on who is telling the

stories, what the perspective, and what the purpose of the telling of the story is and the goal

should be to instigate social justice (Zamudio et al., 2011). By analyzing the experiences and insight about their school experiences, my intent was to develop an understanding about what leads to academic success among black male students.

The use of critical narrative inquiry and oral histories in this study allowed me to give my former black male students the opportunity to tell their stories from their viewpoints and in their own words. Their counterstories gave them a voice and allowed them to create representations of their lived experiences to provide knowledge that is different from that perceived or told by the dominant white culture, and they could provide insight into what could not have been felt otherwise. These students were able to tell their stories to provide a counter-script to mainstream reports of reality from those who throughout history have been silenced (Howard, 2008). The use of narratives to tell the stories about the lived experiences dates back to the times of Aristotle (Barthes, 1975). Narrative analysis and reflection are necessary to analyze relationships within and between student narratives. Oral histories can serve the purpose of being a way of documenting the past of those who may not leave behind their lives in a written document (Stein & Preuss, 2006). Upon completion of the narrative, it is up to the readers, the listeners, to interpret who these students are (Barthes, 1985).

The Storytellers

As a teacher in an urban school in Georgia, I became passionate about seeking out strategies that positively impact academic achievement among black males. Throughout my diversified teaching experience, I have taught in affluent schools with an almost entire population of white students boasting graduating rates above 95% but I have also taught in extremely poor schools with an almost entire population of black students with a less than 50% graduation rate for black males. I have sought out research to find out what are the contributing

factors to such a dismal outlook for black males in schools like the latter. Current research suggests that the culture of schools that black males attend along with the perspectives of their teachers contributes to their levels of success (Kunjufu, 2013). Ten of my former black male students were invited to participate in this study so that I could gather information about what these males considered to be experiences that led to their academic success. The selection of these black males relied on three criteria: 1) black male; 2) ages between 18 and 24; 3) high school graduate from an urban school in Augusta, Georgia.

Collecting the Stories

After the granting of Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, I contacted ten former students who are high school graduates from urban schools in Augusta, GA by email, and informed these students of the purpose of the study. I emailed each participant an introduction letter explaining the purpose of the study, the procedure, and the right to not participate in the study. Participants had to agree to commit to participate in an hour-long focus group discussion. I explained in the letter the methods of insuring the confidentiality protection of each participant:

1) Access to emails, manuscripts, audio files, and surveys would be password protected.

2) The use of pseudonyms will protect the real names of schools and participants.

3) All written and oral artifacts destroyed after three years.

Participants participated in a focus group session at an area library that was central to the participants' locations. Prior to the focus group session, I sent a copy of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2016) to the participants. The request was that participants read the poem in order to discuss what they read as well as their thoughts and feelings about the poem. I mailed a survey to each participant requesting feedback on their experiences in school. During the focus group discussion, participants were able to discuss experiences they had in

school and their perceptions of what contributed to their academic success. I took notes on the discussion that took place during the conversations and I asked clarifying questions when necessary.

The testimonies collected for this study consisted of both present and historical narratives. The young men in this study participated in videotaped focus group discussions and individual interviews. Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences in the classroom. Participants shared their feelings about school and teachers in general and commented on specific positive and negative experiences that they felt shaped their attitudes towards schooling. I videotaped and later transcribed all interactions to avoid researcher bias, which allowed me to triangulate the information for a more in-depth understanding of the experiences the students are depicting and not just a means of validation of their thoughts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). I analyzed the transcripts for any themes or commonalities that appeared to exist amongst the experiences of these students through use of thematic coding (Glense, 2006). Each participant wrote a letter to a teacher as a means of conveying to a specific teacher, a teacher in general, or to a body of teachers how each felt as a student in the classroom. I helped each participant with the mechanics of the letters and then when both the student and I agreed on the final product, participants read the letter aloud while being videotaped. The purpose of the videotaped recitation of the letters was to provide a non-threatening form of communication between the participant and teachers.

Listening to the Stories

After all of the testimonies had been collected from both individual and group interviews, I began reviewing all documents. I listened to and transcribed the recordings. The first review of documents was to search for themes that presented themselves as the participants revealed their

thoughts and feelings. Constant comparison involving the use of open coding to break down the information into small bits and messages from transcripts were summarized then coding used to allow the categorization of thoughts by similarities and to allow the revealing of themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Answers to the research questions came from the analysis of the themes that became evident in the participants' responses.

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

A limitation of this study is the number of participants who were willing to participate in this study. Many potential participants had moved outside of the state as they have pursued careers in the military and careers outside of the area. An additional limitation of this study is the use of participants who are no longer in school leaving me to rely on the participants' memories of educational experiences. I relied on self-reports and my interpretation of these reports which may have been influenced to some extent by the culture and experiences of myself as a white female high school teacher in an urban classroom in Georgia. The survey contained open-ended questions, which could lead the participant in many directions and not necessarily aligned with the thoughts or experiences of the other participants.

As a middle-aged white female teacher born and raised in a rural town in Georgia, I am limited in my understanding of the experiences that young black males growing up in a city in Georgia go through. Without having experienced the same experiences that a young black male has growing up in an economically challenged and predominantly black neighborhood with schools lacking sufficient resources, I must rely on the true accounts and the literal interpretations of the testimonies of the participants in this study.

The participants in this study represent the population of male black students in this urban area in Georgia. The assumption is that all responses are truthful and truly represent the

individual experiences of these students in school and their perceptions of their experiences. Because I used a small, select group of students who had graduated from high schools in one county in Georgia, the results of the study are not as generalizable as they would have been if the random selection of students in different areas across the United States occurred. The information obtained from these student observations is still useful however since the voices of these students are real and do have a right to be heard. Relying on videotaped recordings of the interviews and interactions of the students and the focus group minimized my level of bias. The use of coding provided for the reduction of bias in the analysis of the testimonies. More than one group discussion and interview allowed the researcher to develop a relationship of trust between myself and the students allowing the students to be candid and forthright in the information that they provide.

A delimitation of this study was the use of black males who had shown academic success by completing twelve years of high school and graduating with a high school diploma. I focused on these students to explore commonalities that existed that may have influenced these young black males to be academically successful. Using Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework for this study was a delimitation I chose in order to explore connections between the experiences of black males in schooling and the likelihood of academic success and to explore oppression of this group by the dominant group.

Definition of Terms

Counterstory – Story that contradicts accepted ideas generally held by the majority

Critical Race Theory – Legal movement aimed at transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power

Discrimination – Act of treating an individual differently than others based on race, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, or national origin

Hegemonic Group – Group of individuals that have dominance over other subordinate groups

Opportunity Gap – The inconsistency in availability to schools, learning activities, and resources necessary to provide all children with the possibility of high levels of academic achievement

Privilege – A right or advantage that an individual has that others do not

Racism – The act of discriminating against an individual or group based on their race or ethnic group

Stereotype – An accepted description of a specific type of individual or group of individuals

Voice – Ability of an individual or group to articulate personal experiences

During my time in the Curriculum Studies program, I have come to understand that it is important to learn who students are by asking them questions, by listening to their answers, and by observing what they do. Narrative inquiry was the method that I chose to do all three of those. It is an essential method that is used to gain insight into why students feel disenfranchised by their teachers, their schools, and their communities and how this disenfranchisement is perpetuating the expectation that some students will not be successful high school students. It is through Critical Race Theory and Narrative Inquiry, along with documentary, that I gave the participants in my study a voice potentially to initiate change in teacher behavior and expectations for black male students. Exploration of racism in these voices is important because racism does not always exist in obvious and explicit ways but is often only exposed through conversations with those marginalized individuals (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

The presentation of these participants' narratives allows teachers to hear what these black male participants are saying and to reflect on these voices as they plan educational opportunities

for black male students and as they interact with these students in the classroom. With their words, I helped them construct their narratives relying on their videotaped stories to translate their voices to words on paper.

Critical narrative inquiry guided the assimilation of all artifacts – oral, written, and visual – to allow the most accurate expression of the experiences of these students and the meaning that these experiences have for these students. The use of narrative inquiry is important because it involves the use of written, oral, and visual artifacts that contribute to the narratives of the participants with a focus on the meaning that these participants gave their experiences and gave insight into the complexity of their lives (Josselson, 2006). These stories provided knowledge from the past instead of knowledge about the past (Bochner, 2007). The focus of the analysis was on the relationship between myself and the participants and the ensuing collaboration among them. (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The use of narrative inquiry facilitates learning more about the experiences of the participants because experience is intuitively narrative, which is a way to understand the experiences through stories that have been lived and now told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In terms of narrative inquiry, the goal of the study was to not only document my thoughts but also to find a way to illustrate and bring to life what the participants had to say as an example for other teachers to learn about their own students and their stories. This will enable educators to learn the significance of learning who their students are and of listening to what they have to say.

CHAPTER 2

TEACH US TO TEACH YOU: EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALES IN URBAN HIGH

SCHOOLS IN GEORGIA

Review of literature

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that contributed to the academic success of the participants based on their perceptions as black male students in a Georgia urban school district. The review of the historical events that have impacted the education of blacks in the South served as the foundation for the current state of education for black male students in urban Georgia. Following is a review of literature related to the factors that influence academic achievement among black males and the impact that academic success has on the lives of black males. Also reviewed was literature involving biases towards black male students in schools and the limitations placed on their educational opportunities because of their stereotype as young black males. Literature about how these students feel about how they are perceived in the classroom and how they are treated compared to their peers was reviewed. Also considered was literature about possible solutions to this injustice and possibilities for improvement for black male academic success.

In order for individuals to have a chance of changing their stereotyped image and become successful and realize their individual freedom, they must have a quality education (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Even with studies that support the notion of an education being the key to success in life, all students in schools in Georgia do not always realize equal opportunities. Georgia schools currently show a graduation rate for black males as being close to only one out of every two black male students receiving a high school diploma (Schott's Foundation, 2015). The purpose of this study was to understand how perceptions and practices are instrumental in black

male academic achievement. In order to effect change in the perception and treatment of black male students in school, it is necessary to explore the history that has led to inequalities that exist in educational opportunities for black male students.

Historical Context

Racial inequality began in the South with slavery when blacks were not considered to be worthy of an education but were instead viewed as property of the white man (Takaki, 1987), and it continues today through the invisible chains that come from a lack of equal opportunities accessible to blacks.   For most blacks in the South, education was not available to them until after the Civil War. For white children of privilege, their parents paid for their private education. Communities established public schools in the South during reconstruction. The 1870's brought the legal segregation of schools, and the establishment of Jim Crow Laws made it illegal for blacks and whites to attend the same schools. In 1896, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v Ferguson* upheld this type of segregation. The racial segregation of schools in the South resulted in blacks and whites not attending the same schools. The intent was that these schools would be separate but equal. It is true that these schools were separate, but they were not equal in terms of quality, funding, or availability. Black schools had fewer educational resources, less qualified teachers paid less than white teachers, less funding, crowded classrooms, and a shorter school year; in addition, there were fewer schools for blacks than there were for whites (Wilson, 2013). Enrollment of white children in school was greater than that of black children in spite of the establishment of schools for both races.

After the abolition of slavery in 1865 and up through modern times, most blacks lived in the South, where they attended racially segregated schools. Black people became citizens and had to pay their taxes but not granted the rights of other citizens; one of the primary rights was

that of voting (Bell, 2004). The shackles were physically removed from blacks, but that did not remove the mental slavery that persisted as this population continued to be oppressed by whites who made them feel mentally and economically inferior (Kunjufu, 2013). Blacks in America were convinced that they were not qualified for anything other than to be a part of the laboring class because they were neither educated nor wealthy (Anderson, 1988). Critical Race Theorists believe that racism has been an integral component of America since the country's inception (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Throughout history, the use of opportunity gaps and educational debt kept blacks secure in their place and inferior to whites. Afro-pessimism persisted throughout generations of black history and has freely run through the poor and depressed neighborhoods of blacks. However, some blacks found the hope to rage against the machine of white power. These blacks eventually tired of oppression and came to the realization that their only hope to get out of their current condition was through education, which led to blacks establishing their own educational institutions (Du Bois, 1969). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People tried in the 1930's to work towards the establishment of separate but equal educational facilities for Blacks. These efforts met opposition from white stakeholders who countered these actions by blocking black schools from the resources they needed to establish schools that offered the same opportunities to black students as those offered to white students at white schools (Lowe, 2004). During segregation, white students attended schools that received more funding, and they had more access to higher education than black students were. Despite efforts to desegregate schools and to equalize the funding for all schools and the achievement gap getting smaller between whites and blacks, the opportunities afforded white students and black students are still disproportionate. Economically disadvantaged students and minority students most often attend

schools that receive less funding. Poor black students living in the South are geographically doomed to attend schools where adequate resources are not available to finance all schools equally (Taylor & Piche, 1991).

Education of Students in the United States

Pedagogy is how a teacher teaches students, including the content of the curriculum, the design of the curriculum, the strategies and techniques used to teach that curriculum, and the assessment of the attainment of that curriculum. The other part of the curriculum comes from what happens in the classroom that is outside of standardized curriculums and assessments. It is the responsibility of the teacher to determine what knowledge is important and when that knowledge has been learned (McLaren, 2003). A pedagogy that serves all students is a pedagogy no longer centered on the teacher being the active participant in the classroom but instead based on all of the learners being active critical thinkers in the classroom. These learners can evaluate their world as they develop new ways to understand and know their world instead of the teacher being the center of the curriculum (Freire, 1972).

Teachers are not just conveyors of information to the student who accepts content to store in a mental file cabinet. Instead, being a teacher means that the teacher is also the learner. Pinar (1988) sees the teacher's role in the curriculum of the classroom as being in a type of study mode where the teacher constantly reflects on who the students are and what their needs are. The teacher must be conscious of the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of the students in order to not impose his or her own values on the students. If the teacher is going to play an important role in changing the perception about black males, then the teacher must hear the voice of the black male student and give the words of this student power to question discrimination and to initiate change (Delpit, 1995).

The Struggle to Find Hope

West (2013) identified several themes and subthemes as to why students do not achieve well academically and often leave school before completion. These include 1) lack of academic stability, 2) feelings of abandonment and loss, and 3) the need to form bonds with their teachers. According to West (2013) lack of academic stability results from moving among several different schools, lacking a support system to help navigate the pitfalls of the educational process, and failing one or more grades in school. Feelings of abandonment and loss may result from growing up without one or more biological parents, experiencing loss of significant people in their lives, and no feeling of connection to formal schooling. West (2013) found that those who do not achieve in school and often drop out express a need to form bonds with their teachers. These students often feel that they have no connection to the academic process, they feel no connection to most of their teachers, teachers do not have high expectations for their learning, and the instruction that they receive is not challenging or related to the experiences of their lives. The research of Lee and Burkam (2003) supports these themes. They group risk factors for students dropping out of school into three categories: social background, academic background, and academically related behavior. According to their definitions, social background includes race, gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure. Academic background involves ability, test scores, and grade-repeating history. Academically related behaviors revolve around engagement with school, school grades, course completion, truancy, and discipline issues. Lee and Burkam (2000) found that students were less likely to drop out if they attended schools with more positive student-teacher relations, more challenging courses, and fewer remedial or non-academic courses. Similarly, Tomlinson, Gould, Schroth, and Jarvis (2006) found factors that contribute to improved academic achievement of low economic status

minority students. These include a school-wide commitment to reversing underachievement among these students; teachers who have a deep understanding of the needs of these students and take responsibility for increasing the achievement of these students; and an appropriate and challenging assessment-driven curriculum and instruction system in place.

Students who feel connected to their schools and the academic process are more likely to achieve academically and are less likely to drop out of school. According to McNeely, Nonnemeker, and Blum (2002) "the main development needs of middle and high school students include steadily increasing opportunities for autonomy, opportunities to demonstrate competence, caring, and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision, and acceptance by peers" (p. 138). They go on to say that students feel a greater attachment to school if they participate in extracurricular activities, obtain higher grades, and do not skip school. In contrast, the feeling of school connectedness is lower in schools that suspend students for relatively minor infractions as compared to schools with more flexible and lenient discipline policies (McNeely et al., 2002).

Research shows unfair treatment of underachieving students when it comes to school exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion. Students who are repeatedly suspended and expelled are more likely to perform poorly in school, to become disengaged with school, and eventually drop out of school. There is also a positive correlation between students suspended and expelled from school and the likelihood of being imprisoned (Maag, 2012).

Although there is no single portraiture of a high school dropout, Balfanz (2007) has characterized four different representative dropouts as:

1. The student who left school because of something beyond the scope of the school's control, i.e.: pregnancy, confinement, family obligations

2. The student who becomes bored with school and no longer can justify why his attendance at school is essential.

3. The student who feels pushed out of school because of the label as a problem student – too challenging, too dangerous, too far below level.

4. The student who is not successful in school and is in a school that does not provide the support he needs to be successful in school.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has grown out of a need beyond a legal need to establish equity for a person's whole identity including his race, gender, sex, and ethnic background. The basis of CRT is the realization that racism is a normal everyday practice in American society. It is a part of who we are as Americans. We have become accustomed to it as so commonplace and normal that we do not even recognize it when confronted by it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; 2001). Embedded racism is so prevalent in the daily rituals, routines, and legalities of the everyday lives of Americans that they do not even recognize that it is present until its manifestation becomes evident at the end of a process (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Throughout history, the acknowledgement of the injustices was not in a forum where all could be witnesses to the inequalities, injustices, and inhumane treatment of genetically similar organisms. CRT is critical to widen that forum to allow the voices of those, especially those of color, who have not gotten a chance to tell their stories by allowing those who have been silent to use story telling or counter-narratives to illustrate the other side of history (Tate, 1997). CRT scholars suggest that some Americans have benefitted in terms of economic, social, and political rewards because of their color and because institutional racism and discrimination have worked

in their favor. The existence of institutional racism has led to the establishment of a system that continues to reward one group over another because of their color.

Those of the dominant white culture cannot understand the feelings and experiences of discrimination or of what it is like to be a racial minority if they have never been a part of that group. They can only make assumptions about feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and anger. Together with other voices telling the same stories, the volume becomes louder and others gain a deeper understanding of how a racist society can impact generations of marginalized individuals (Delgado, 1989). It is not acceptable for the dominant white culture simply to claim color-blindness and meritocracy when explaining that all Americans have equal opportunities in this country as whites have access to economic, social, and political benefits based on their color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For many, they have been led to believe that racist America no longer exists, but for those who are in the minority, the experiences of racial subjugation are real, and their opportunities to be successful in America are limited (Cole, 2009). The image that is predominant in American culture is that of a free and equal society that rewards hard work with financial success. Those who are not prosperous citizens have their lack of work ethic to blame for their circumstances and not racial discrimination (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Delgado (1989) believes that it is important for those marginalized individuals to be able to express their reality using personal narratives and/or counter-storytelling. This allows for a different interpretation of how things really are. These narratives are not romanticized or fictionalized stories of how things should be but are stories about the lives of people of color told based on historical, socio-cultural, and political truths and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). Counter-stories allow the marginalized groups to give a real face to the issue of racism as an

alternate point of view to the stories told by the hegemonic culture. Counter-storytelling is a method of research based on the telling of stories about those people neglected throughout history as a means of commenting on the depiction of those people by the dominant culture as in stories about blacks as told by white historians (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The marginalized person can tell these stories personally or another person can tell it or it may be a composite made up of a collection of stories. The point is that the stories be told and be heard by dominant groups to make them aware of how they perpetuate a system of inequality and racism that affects fellow human beings.

Black males have experienced struggles throughout history because of their color and their culture, which has extended to the quality of education that these individuals have access to then and now. Black male students must have equal access to educational opportunities that enable them to be academically successful and be able to experience social, economic, and political freedom in the future. It is a requirement that teachers and administrators realize their responsibility as educators to know what the black male population needs in terms of educational opportunities and support.

The theoretical lens used in this study is that of Critical Race Theory. The presumption is that racism is natural in American schools and benefits the dominant white culture and the design of education was never to benefit blacks in America (Lynn & Parker, 2006). If the goal is making academic success an equal reality for all subgroups in America, it is important to tell the lived experiences of marginalized groups and the voices of these groups heard. The stories told by young black males about their experiences in schools may lead to an awareness of how the impact of teachers using the culture of students to celebrate who they are and to motivate them

may lead to improved teaching practices that challenge institutionalized racism and result in increased academic achievement among black males.

Hope Keepers: The Teacher's Role in Creating the Hope

Outside of the family home, teachers have the most direct impact as role models on students. Teachers play an important role in determining whether a student will be receptive to learning while in school. If these teachers use different instructional strategies and make the student an active participant in the classroom, students are more likely to enjoy the learning experience, have higher rates of academic achievement, and be less likely to drop out of school (Benard, 1997; Royal & Rossi, 1997). Students [are] less likely to drop out of schools where they receive support from their teachers and have teachers that challenge them (Croninger and Lee, 2001; Roderick et al., 2004). Students who have teachers who provide emotional and academic support, encouragement, care, and guidance tend to do better in school, are more sociable, and have a less risk of dropping out (Croninger & Lee, 2001). This is especially true for students in very poor, urban schools at risk for dropping out, not applying to college, and for having low self-confidence (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Students perceive teachers who treat students fairly and consistently while being less restrictive of their freedoms as caring and trustworthy leading to students not behaving delinquently or becoming defiant. Teachers and administrators who do not have a belief in the abilities of black males, who treat them with disrespect, and who are inequitable in the punishment that they place on black males contribute to the statistics of underachieving black males. Just as guilty are those who banish black males to remedial classes more often than others, who refrain from offering black males opportunities to be leaders, and who hold back on referring these black males to advanced or gifted classes (Reynolds, 2010). CRT gives black males the opportunity to tell their counterstories of educational injustice and the

effects of low teacher expectations from their perspective instead of that of the perpetrator's perspective.

Students tend to develop more self-confidence, aspire to go to college, are more social, are less likely to drop out if they feel their teacher has high expectations for their academic success, and they work harder to meet those expectations (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999; Wentzel, 2003). Children who believe in their abilities are less likely to become negative as they get older and instead develop more respect for the value of education, which results in them being less likely to drop out of school and more likely to put more effort into their schoolwork (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Public schools are not to blame for the circumstances of the child that lead to students failing academically or dropping out. However, the school can contribute to those factors and multiply the negative aspects of those circumstances if they do not provide a positive environment that has a high quality academic curriculum with programs that foster good behavior (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005).

Disparities in the Education of Black American Male Students

In the United States, about 75 percent of white high school students graduate on time, but only about 50 percent of black students graduate on time with black males in the South being the group of students least likely to receive a high school diploma. A correlation exists between students dropping out of school and attending racially and socioeconomically segregated schools (Orfield et al., 2004). The states in the South that once instituted legal segregation have some of the lowest graduation rates in the nation, especially for black students (National Governors Association and Achieve, 2005).

Inequities in education remain today despite appearances. The issue is that for so long problems have existed that propagated a view of black students as being inferior to white students. Even in schools where blacks and whites have access to the same resources and opportunities, the quality of instruction may be lower for blacks than whites as because of the conditioning of teachers to have lower expectations for black students. Black males receive punishment more than white males and are more often labeled as being behavior problems and less intelligent beginning in early grades (Hilliard, 1991). Even though some schools operate under desegregation orders, some school districts still have schools whose student population is 90 percent or more minorities. Many of these schools, referred to as "dropout factories," have fewer than 60 percent of students graduate high school in four years. These schools tend to have teachers with less than three years of experience, less certification, less experience, and lower pay (Bolich, 2000; Guyton, & Farokhi, 1987; Ingersoll, 2002). These schools often have fewer course offerings than more culturally diverse and affluent schools, allowing for fewer opportunities for black students to even the playing field for future post-secondary endeavors.

Many black males are destined to attend schools in less economically advantaged communities than their white counterparts. Schools in these areas are often dilapidated, dirty, and staffed with less experienced and effective teachers. Without the necessary skills and knowledge to compete for acceptance into good post-secondary schools and careers, these students cannot escape these communities, and unfortunately, their children will likely repeat the cycle (McNamee & Miller, 2004).

Black students tend to dislike school, and who could blame them? Black students, especially black males, experience greater retention rates, more in-school and out-of-school suspension, and more frequent placement in special education classes. The black male

population is overrepresented in remedial and special education programs, confirming the idea

that these children are not on the same level as other children from different cultural

backgrounds (Noguera, 2003). Teachers often have lower expectations for their black students

than for their white students (Simpkins, 2013; McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Combining being

black with being poor and students are more likely to attend schools with the least qualified

teachers in the most dilapidated facilities with the fewest resources available. The stories of

black male students who stayed in school and were successful in high levels of academic

achievement are rare. If we are to be advocates for the black male student and make learning

relevant to them, we have to have conversations with these students about what their needs are

and how they feel they are perceived because if we are not a black male student, we cannot

possibly understand what it is like to be a black male student.

Black males in the South are destined to a life of struggles and disappointments based on

the environment they live in, the culture they belong to, and the interactions of the people who

surround them. The environmental and cultural factors of students influence their academic

performance as well as how others, including teachers and school administrators, perceive and

treat those students based on their ethnic background and socioeconomic status (Morrow &

Torres, 1995). In order for blacks to rise up and out of mental and economic bondage, blacks

must experience academic success that can help guarantee their rights of freedom (Bell, 2004;

Ladson-Billings, 2006b). Without academic success and a chance at economic equality, black

males are more likely to be unemployed, commit crime, and become incarcerated (Western,

2006). Statistics confirm that blacks are clearly at risk with 25% of black male dropouts

incarcerated and at a rate of six times greater than whites (Wray, 2001; West, 2010). Many

young black males who did not experience academic success while in school distance themselves

from their communities because of feelings of frustration, underachievement, and failure (Lee, 1991).

Knowing what we know now about the special needs of the black male student, in our democracy we must work to enlighten black males, as well as the educational community, about the patterns to which they are subject. There is hope that they will understand more clearly what is working against them, and they will seek ways to avoid becoming statistics (Freire, 1972). Black males must have access to a high quality education and must have their unique status as a black male factored into educational opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The Teacher's Impact

Black males are at a disadvantage when it comes to having teachers who have lived their experiences and can share in their culture. In many areas, white teachers far outnumber black teachers and female teachers outnumber male teachers. Teachers must be aware of what they are teaching as part of their hidden curriculum. Being a white female teacher, I could not possibly understand what it is to be a black male student because I have not experienced what a black male has experienced nor did I have the knowledge or training to understand what it means in a school in urban Georgia to be a young black male. When I began teaching in an urban school in a depressed socioeconomic area with an almost entire population of poor black students, I was only equipped with the portrayal of the young black male in the media, and I reacted accordingly (Shuman, 2010). I was not aware of how the school culture was innately racist against this student population, and I reacted with lower expectations for these students. I convinced myself that I was colorblind and that I treated every student in my classes with equal respect and value. CRT scholars feel that this is where I may contribute to the underachievement of black males because I am subjected to the propaganda of the dominant white culture in America. My belief

was that racism and discrimination had been eliminated from the classroom and each student now has an equal opportunity to a quality education regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural upbringing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The tragedy here is in the miseducation that occurs when black males buy into the concept that they are not as good as whites, that they are lazy and unproductive, and that they are not capable of learning (Freire, 1972).

Teachers should not be complacent in accepting the assumptions that shape how and what they teach black males but instead should question their practices in terms of what is reality and what is the message they buy into from the dominant culture (Giroux, 2013). Administrators and teachers must be aware of the academic needs of their black male students and must design a curriculum that incorporates rigorous and relevant learning opportunities that empower black males to master the objectives of the course (Ferguson, 2002). Based on the improvement of achievement of black males in schools that are changing what they do based on what is already known about the circumstances that contribute to low achieving black males in the educational system, there is a chance that the destiny of these students can be changed (Edmonds, 1979). Ogbu (1987, 1990) believes that to counter the effects of culture, it is necessary to teach black males to abandon "oppositional identities" that identify education as a means of conforming to being white. Hope is not lost if black males are convinced that they can control their destiny through their own agencies by resisting and reacting against cultural forces that seek to define their social identities (Giroux, 1983).

Education through a Black Male Student's Eyes

Black males often do not trust schools to provide them the education that will guarantee they will have the skills necessary to be successful later in life. Black males have low

expectations for academic achievement and are aware that the schools they attend in their communities are dilapidated, underfunded, and not adequately prepared to meet their needs and are staffed with teachers with little or no expertise in providing learning opportunities that assure academic success (Jordan & Cooper, 2002). Black males may seek other opportunities to feel successful such as sports, dating, and grooming (Ogbu, 1990). Black male students blame their lack of preparedness as compared to their white counterparts on their teachers, counselors, and administrators for discouraging them from higher-level academic courses (The University System of Georgia, 2002). Factors identified by black male students as having a positive impact on their success in school are parent, school, and community support. These students need positive attitudes and school culture, high expectations, and challenging coursework in order to be successful (Jordan & Cooper, 2002). The progress of black males in school begins to decline throughout elementary school and into middle and high school as they begin to feel a lack of harmony between what they are doing in the classroom and the expectations of their teachers (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Teachers expect black males to show their intelligence by being obedient instead of being creative (Hooks, 2004). It is more highly regarded for black males to follow the rules than to learn (Langhout & Mitchell, 2008). The teacher perpetuates institutionalized racism through the lack of value placed on black male achievement. To educate the black male and to end institutionalized racism, CRT scholars believe that teachers must know the past and present of the black male student and what it will take to help that student rise to a higher level by seeking out possibilities that exist for him instead of giving up on him.

Black male students are aware of the deficit mindset of their teachers. They are aware that teachers may have lower expectations for black males because the prevalent stereotype of

black male students is that they are lazy, lack motivation, are less intelligent, and are more likely to cause discipline problems (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Noguera, 2003). This deficit way of thinking about black males stems from society believing that there is something wrong with these children and these children become labeled as "at-risk" which has come usually inadvertently to refer to the population of black males in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1998). After all, the statistics confirm that black male children behave the worst in school, they score below grade level on assessments, they do not do their work, they fight, they skip class, they are disrespectful, they are vulgar, they are obsessed with sex, and they do not belong in the classroom (Ferguson, 2002). Because of this stereotype, teachers often hold low expectations for appropriate behavior and motivation of black males to want to learn and be successful in class (Harper, 2006). The use of CRT allows the students who are victims of unjustified stereotypes to illuminate how racism works in schools to subjugate black male students (Reynolds, 2010).

Critical Race and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Teachers have a duty to analyze the subjugation of different groups based on their race, gender, and ethnicity to understand how these three factors interact within the classroom as well as outside the classroom. Teachers who adopt a Critical Race pedagogy in the classroom understand the role that discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and gender play in whether a student will be academically successful. Their teaching practices reflect on how the hegemonic culture can place roadblocks in the attainment of academic success of some groups of students and therefore design instruction to allow free expression of the individual differences of all students to achieve academic justice and equity (Lynn, 2004). The culture of the classroom requires trust and mutual respect as well as conversations about goals and a respect for the emotional needs of the students so that all students feel valued and validated (Lynn & Jennings,

2009). These teachers design their curriculum in the classroom to teach the importance of different cultures, to encourage discussion among students, self-reflection, and self-affirmation, and most importantly, to challenge the hegemonic stereotypes and biases.

Schools that have opened their doors to role models serving as mentors have shown positive impacts on the grades, attendance, self-esteem, and behavior of students (Wyatt, 2009). Schools that have caring administrators that work with students to create goals and relate how those goals are meaningful empower students to be successful in school (Grove, 2004). Teachers and administrators that understand who their students are and appreciate the diversity of their cultural backgrounds knowledgeable about their educational aspirations, attitudes towards their school, and the careers they plan to pursue after high school. These teachers and administrators are also more likely to develop a curriculum that will meet their needs and result in academic achievement for all their students (Sullivan et al., 2008).

Historical oppression of black males in educational pursuits is a reality. It is crucial to give black males the opportunity to explore their oppression to challenge the activities in the classroom that maintain status quo and overcome oppression to become academically successful (Giroux, 2013). Progress is unlikely if the oppressed does face the obstacles that stand in his way and conquer them on his own (Freire, 1972). Education and conversation is the conduit for this. Teachers who master a Critical Pedagogy in their classrooms will be able to offer hope to black males who have been historically marginalized (Giroux, 2013). The teacher must not only seek to know and understand that culture of her students, but she must also explore her own culture as well (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The teacher must celebrate the diversity of each student's culture without subjugating other cultures. In this classroom, students can take pride in

their culture without feeling the need to abandon where they came from and who they are to become because of what the dominant culture expects as compliance.

My Story

When I first began as a student in Curriculum Studies, I wanted to learn more about how to improve myself as a teacher to help my students in physics become more successful learners. I was looking forward to learning how to conduct research in education using the scientific method much as I had always done in my career path to becoming a science teacher. After my first few classes, I learned that Curriculum Studies was a different format for learning about education and about me. I was not convinced that this was where I needed to be in order to be better at what I do. Now, at the end of this long journey, I have more of an understanding about how important it is to study culture and experiences as it relates to my students and to my career. Sometimes one learns just by listening. When I look back over my teaching career that started with an eye-opening experience of teaching at a fully integrated inner-city school and to my present position as a teacher in a health science and engineering magnet school, I realize that God had a plan for me that I was not aware of when I began this journey. My only previous experience with science was as a researcher in an all-white laboratory in Athens, Georgia. My experience as a researcher had taught me about the real world of science research but nothing about how children learn science or how to be a science teacher. My one year of teacher education courses helped me become a certified teacher, but it did not enlighten me about the different learning styles or culture of children. When I received my teaching certificate, the only thing I was prepared to do was to regurgitate science concepts and maintain a gradebook. I learned that my sole responsibility was to be a teacher who taught curriculum in a one-way conversation. Since that experience as a first year teacher, I have taught in predominantly white

schools, predominantly black schools, inner city schools, rural schools, rich schools, poor schools, small schools, large schools, and an alternative school. I have taught in schools where the graduation rate was above 90% and in others where the graduation rate was less than 50%.

My most significant learning experiences in education occurred during the years that I taught at the lowest performing school in the school district and at the district's alternative school. Both of these schools had inadequate leadership and expectations. Because both of these schools were in low socioeconomic status areas, there were no real expectations that these students would graduate from high school and/or pursue post-secondary options. I began to question why this was true. This was the first time that I had asked students if they were going to college, and they said "No" because they were not white, they were not rich, and they were not smart.

The high school, originally built as a school for black students during segregation, is located in an urban area surrounded by several low-income housing projects. The overwhelming majority of my students were black and were being raised by relatives other than their parents. Many of my students told stories of parents who had died of both natural and unnatural causes, experienced incarceration, and did not have sufficient resources to care for their children. When I accepted the position, my parents were terrified for me. I had lived in the surrounding area my whole life, but I was not as familiar with this part of town as my parents. All they knew was that this was a bad part of town with high rates of criminal activity including drug abuse, gang wars, and murder. Although a thirty-eight-year-old wife and mother at the time, my parents followed me to school on my first day there to make sure I would be safe. My father is a native of the low country of South Carolina and a career military man, and my mother is a French immigrant. I grew up in a rural area where dirt roads were plenty, and farming was very familiar. I only had a handful of "colored" friends, but it was not something that I noticed.

The dismally low graduation test scores at this school coupled with a horrific graduation rate would not have been a surprise to someone who believes that blacks are inferior and incapable of academic achievement. Despite the apparent lack of hope and optimism that black students could achieve given the same opportunities as white students, the teachers at the school banded together to go above and beyond in accepting these students as family by attending their sporting events, their concerts, and their celebrations. They came in long before school started and stayed well into dinnertime and even came on Saturdays to meet these students where they were academically and to eliminate the acceptance of a fate to remain at the bottom. Over the next five years, the scores soared and the confidence level of the students was evident in the decline of expulsion for drug use, fighting, and other disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Test scores rose on average 40-50 points on the various graduation tests, and graduation rates signaled a turn in the attitude of the teachers and the students. With a great team of teachers who wanted more for these students, we worked hard and changed the statistics for this population. We made them work. We made them study. We made them learn. What we did not do was ask them what they wanted to do. Here again, it was one-way communication. We experience accomplishment; black students, including the infamous black male students, had begun to achieve at academic levels comparable to their white counterparts in more affluent schools.

I also taught at the district's alternative school where I observed successes of black males. The situation today is slightly different. In the case of the alternative school, the overwhelming majority of the students are black males. I know there are strategies that can help restore the confidence that these students need in order to feel they can be successful. That was not always the case at the alternative school in my district. When I first accepted my position as a science teacher there, I accepted the job as a favor to a friend and administrator. I took the job knowing

that instead of having two science teachers, I would save the county money by being the only science teacher there. My classes were multi-layered and had multiple content areas taught in one fifty-minute class period. Police officers searched these students upon entering the building; they were required only to wear white shirts and black pants, and they were not able to bring any types of technology. In addition, they had to walk down the halls single-file on only one side of the hall. They were escorted by class to the bathroom, and they had to eat lunch in silence with their teachers at the head of the table. There were no social activities, and the resources were limited as teachers from the students' homeschools issued torn-apart outdated textbooks for fear these students were not capable of taking care of the brand-new ones. In my classes, I typically had students enrolled in biology, physical science, and earth science in one class period. Instead of teaching one content area to all my students in one fifty-minute class period, I had to divide the class period up into three separate instructional periods to accommodate the needs of the different contents. When I questioned administrators as to why this was different from the normal schools, they told me that this was the alternative school and it did not matter what I was teaching. "Just teach science," they told me. I could fight the system in terms of having homogeneous content class periods for the fair treatment of these students to as "normal" students.

Part of my previous job description was to work with teachers in my district to analyze student assessments in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of their students and to plan effective teaching strategies and differentiated learning activities that meet the needs of all of their students to make educational opportunities for success more equitable. As I reviewed student performance with teachers from grade 6 through grade 12, the same statistic appeared – black males perform at the lowest levels. When working with teachers on how to change the

script so that black males are not always at the bottom, teachers were not able to offer any suggestions on strategies to change this trend. However, they were quick to provide reasons for why the black males were not successful: they do not care; they do not come to class; they are disruptive; they are lazy, and have low state assessment scores in previous years. In short, it is the belief that if some students are not achieving, it is not the fault of the teacher; it is the fault of these students, and they are not as smart or capable as the other students.

The experiences that I have gained from working with these young black males to help them live up to their potential is the impetus for me to do this research to identify the commonalities among teachers who consistently rewrite history and as well the destiny of these students. I realize that ten black male students do not completely represent the more than 30,000 students in this district, but I am choosing to hear their voices and construct their narratives so that some of their voices can be heard. It is my decision to choose which voices to hear and to determine the relevancy and validity of those voices in speaking for others in similar predicaments to shed light into the understanding of why an achievement gap still exists in a country that prides itself on being democratic and just (Chase, 2005).

Since I began the Curriculum Studies Program two years ago, I have thought and struggled with a topic of study for my dissertation. Through the coursework that I have taken, I have explored many possible topics that I could study. However, I keep coming back to one that is nearest to my heart – helping students. My mother taught me to always fight for the underdog, and she always reminded me that we are all God's children and we all deserve the same. I have witnessed young black males become successful as they exceled in their high school classes despite coming from poor neighborhoods and broken families but their numbers were far outweighed by the number of black males that left school before walking across that graduation

stage. While I realize there are many factors involved, I want to know if there is more that teachers and schools can do to end this cycle. Yes, I am a white female, but I know that we all have a role in solving this problem. I have spent much of my career working with "at risk" youth of all races. I know that I have had success helping many marginalized students in obtaining a high school diploma. I just feel that there is more that we all can do to help more of our students.

My original thought was to do a study in which I identify incarcerated dropouts from my school system ages 18-25. After a life-changing class discussion on a warm Sunday afternoon in Statesboro, GA., I gave much thought about how I wanted to pursue my dissertation research. I am very passionate about what I want to do related to my interests involving telling the stories of school dropouts who become incarcerated. Originally, I wanted to focus on those who left school and eventually ended up in prison. With the advice of my mentor about trying to save those that still had a chance to graduate high school, I changed my plans and chose to focus on the positive instead of the negative as a way to prevent students from the finality of prison and instead chose to find ways to give students a second chance before it is too late. My focus was on letting the students who fought the fight against mediocrity and won to tell their stories about how they were empowered by their teachers and schools to take advantage of opportunities provided and use those opportunities to reach the highest levels of academic achievement.

I understand the concerns that I, as the researcher, am a white female. The assumption may be that the subjects will be black males and that I could not relate to their experiences or be able to accurately tell their stories through my lens and they may not be authentic. I am passionately concerned about what teachers and schools can do to help prevent the incarceration of our young people. I want all children to be able to pursue their happiness based on a solid educational background and the confidence that they can be successful. I feel that if we continue

to perpetuate educational racism then we will never make any real gains in improving the lives of all young people.

I have reflected on the discussions in class on how to approach and present my project. I want to give the young black male students in my study a venue to tell their stories so that we as teachers and professionals working in public schools can better understand and do what we can to break the cycle of school dropout and incarceration and empower black males in their educational pursuits. I wanted to understand what if anything we as educators can do to rewrite history for black males who seem predestined for academic failure. I thought much about the presentation of information about the discrepancies in student achievement in the past and I pondered the future presentation of this information in a way that might actually make a difference to educators to evoke real change in the current system that might prove more meaningful than the traditional written dissertation format. A thought that came to me was that once I selected the participants for the study I could help them tell their stories about how their teachers, their administrators, and their school environment provided opportunities that made them feel respected for who they were and what their heritage was. I wanted to help these students write letters expressing any adversities that they had to overcome and what factors enabled them to do that so that students, educators, and community members can rethink their perceptions and beliefs about the capabilities of black male students. I wanted them to tell their stories of what made the difference in how they valued school and how they were able to raise above the injustices that endemic racism creates. I wanted to turn these into a series of dramatic readings - videotaped and presented as a mini-documentary. I feel that this would enable the stories of these young people to come alive and negate concerns of bias that there may be because of my race and gender.

CHAPTER 3

LETTING THEM TEACH THROUGH THEIR VOICES

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of successful young black male high school graduates in urban Georgia about factors they felt influenced their motivation and ability to be successful in school. I selected a qualitative research method for this study to collect information about the factors that black male high school graduates perceive as contributing to their academic success. This approach is a means of studying a social phenomenon through a natural and interpretive manner that allows for various methods of inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

After reading *Canaries Reflect on the Mine: Dropouts' Stories of School* (Cameron, 2012), I realized that students are not always as teachers would like them to be. They are individuals with their own unique experiences and voices. I wanted to be a part of their success and not just a reporter of their experiences and outcomes. I wanted to listen to their stories and provide them an opportunity to say what no one was hearing. I wanted the stories of my students to reveal their feelings and emotions to other teachers so that maybe one day those stories would result in a different and more positive outcome for marginalized students.

Student commentary has been useful in conveying to teachers that students drop out of school for very diverse and complex reasons, such as mental health issues, difficulties with learning abilities, dealing with bullying, and dealing with parental neglect or parental drug addictions. The students' commentaries challenge what adults predetermine about these students and their attitudes and beliefs about education. One example of the use of student commentary is the 2012 book by Jeanne Cameron, *Canaries Reflect on the Mine: Dropouts' Stories of Schooling.* Cameron worked with students to show what leaving school looks like from their

viewpoint as a means of educating educators as to why students drop out of school. She found

from conversations with students that they wanted treatment as individuals and that they felt their

teachers favored students coming from high-income families and athletic backgrounds.

One method of incorporating the use of student voice is a method called "Inside-Outside

Fishbowl," in which the students switch places with the teachers. In this method, using a

structured discussion to discuss a school-related issue, together the students and teachers come

up with a plan of action. Another method is the "Students Studying Students' Stories," the S4

method. In this method, students videotape interviews with other students as they discuss a

school-related issue. They analyze those videos then share their analysis and ideas for

improvements with educators in forums that they host (WestEd, 2013). Berliner (2013) explains

that these tools "give disengaged students more responsibility and buy-in for school

improvement efforts," and these tools "help ensure that changes made to the school environment

actually reflect student perspectives and needs."

In a school district with a graduation rate of 71%, educators have convinced students to

come back to school after dropping out only to have those students drop out again later. This

district needed a plan B: talk to the students about why they drop out of school. The Washoe

County School District (WCSD) decided to talk to their students and to listen to what they were

saying. The result was a video documentary. A class of students at an alternative school that

included former high school dropouts produced the video, along with the interview questions, the

interviews themselves, the editing, and the storyline, and presented it to educator groups for

discussion and educational purposes. Students who had dropped out but returned to school

shared their personal stories about mental stress and bullying. They shared their "why" they quit

school and what circumstances would have changed their minds. These narratives have been

used as a means of educating district stakeholders in the "challenges, strengths, and aspirations of individual students who dropped out of high school but later returned" (WestEd, 2013). The idea of addressing school change through student voice is new but there seems to be evidence that if educators listen to what students have to say about their school experience they can gain a better understanding of the challenges these students face and can make the changes in education policies to address what the students need to be successful.

Research Questions

The overarching question for this study was: What are young black male students' perceptions of their experiences that led to academic success? Other questions that guided this research were:

1) How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience?

2) How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against structural racism?

3) What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used?

Research Design

I used Critical Race Theory in this study because it challenges meritocracy by allowing participants to tell the stories of their educational experiences, thus giving insight to teachers into the black male experience, rather than from the viewpoint of the dominant culture (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). If educators, especially white educators, are going to understand how black males feel in regards to their educational experiences, then the black males must tell their stories and educators must listen to their stories. These counterstories told by this marginalized group of students directly challenge the stories about them as told by their white counterparts and challenge educators to initiate racial reform in the classroom (Solorzano &

Yosso, 2002). The stories told by the participants in this study allowed their experiences to become public not only to benefit the audience but also as a benefit to them. They can hear their own voices and reflect on their experiences and to grow from those experiences as well as to hear the voices of similar silenced voices through focus group discussions.

Critical Narrative Inquiry in education is increasing in interest. The use of narrative inquiry allows the participants to tell their stories of human experience providing me with a rich framework for their investigation to how the participants experience the world (Bruner, 1986). Using critical narrative inquiry allowed me to identify and investigate a critical event – something not planned or that may not have a structure - that occurs in teaching that is influencing the education of students (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The combination of critical theory with narrative inquiry allowed me as the researcher to identify and address concerns that needed exposure in order to relieve the oppression of the marginalized students in my classroom and to motivate social reform (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). The use of critical narrative analysis is designed to help each student create his or her own self per the social interactions and experiences he or she tells (Forgas, 2002). Using critical analysis of the student narratives allows for the telling of the students' stories within the context of the discourse of the classroom and for the stories to then be deconstructed to determine how the students deal with issues of the real world and allow a critical meta-awareness to develop (Freire, 1972).

In *Canaries Reflect on the Mine: Dropouts' Stories of Schooling*, Jeanne Cameron interviews students who have dropped out of school. She speaks with these students about their experiences in school and the things that led to their leaving school before graduating. The results of the student narratives show that there are many reasons why students feel left out of schools and choose to leave. These students tell stories that challenge what educators and others

have traditionally thought about why students drop out of school. This book serves as a resource for educators to use as a means of understanding the feelings and actions of the students in their classrooms and hopefully incorporate what these students are saying into their own classroom that respects the human factor of each child in the classroom.

Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) interviewed high school dropouts enrolled in a General Educational Development (GED) program about their experiences in school as a means of learning more about why students leave school in order to improve the number of students who remain in school and graduate with a high school diploma. Although many reasons given for leaving school cannot be attributed to what goes on in the classroom such as pregnancy, household and family issues and responsibilities, and/or legal issues, it is important for educators to be aware of how what they do in the classroom affects the attitude that students have towards school. Some of the factors attributed to the process of schooling that warrant reflection for social reform in the classroom are dysfunctional relationship or conflict with the school or teachers in the school, not fitting in, negative peer pressure to leave, language barrier, or excessive disciplinary referrals and actions (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009). Schools can work at implementing changes that will modify push factors into pull factors to motivate students to want to remain in school such as being more flexible with school policy and being more supportive of all students and what each student brings to the classroom.

Counterstorying

The participants in this study constructed their oral histories through structured and informal interview questions and observations. With my guidance, they documented school experiences negative, positive, and neutral. The concentration of the oral history questions surrounded experiences that the participants perceived made a difference in how they viewed

classroom interactions as having a positive influence on how the participants felt about school, their teachers, and their valuing of a high school diploma.

I used surveys and focus group discussions to interview the participants and to collect demographic information. Clandinin (2000) explains narrative research as a method of study that asks the questions that get at a deeper understanding of life experiences. Through a narrative approach, the researcher can describe the details of the setting and/or context of the participant's experiences to give a more in-depth look and understanding (Creswell, 2008). This approach allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon, ask participants questions that are answered from their perspectives, analyze the testimonies for possible themes, interpret what those themes mean, and present the information to the public. Narratives are holistic representations of the life experiences of the participants and used to create a sense of community between the researcher and the participants, to engage the participants, and to engage the reader of the story into the experience (Creswell, 2008).

The use of focus groups allows an involvement in a conversation while the researcher observes the interactions of the participants including facial expressions, tone, and body language. Participants are allowed time to expand on their thoughts and to listen to other stories from participants with similar experiences in a safe environment allowing the researcher an opportunity to gain a deeper insight into what the participants' experienced and their feelings about those experiences. The intent of the questions was to discover how the participants felt about the poem *Between the World & Me* by Ta'Nehisi Coates and how they were able to relate to their perceived meaning of the poem. I chose the members of the focus group based on their similarities in culture and experiences. The focus group questions (See Appendix B) were clear,

concise, and easily comprehendible. They were colloquial in nature and open-ended to establish a connection between the participants and the focus of the discussion (Cheng, 2014).

Choosing the Storytellers

The idea for this project was to create a focus group with students who, although statistically identified as students most likely to leave school, demonstrated academic success and are high school graduates. Purposeful sampling provided for the careful selection of the participants, for their ability to offer insight about what experiences they perceived to have had positively influenced their academic achievement (Creswell, 2008). All participants were black males who had high academic achievement, attended school on a regular basis, were seldom or never written up for discipline issues, and who were motivated to participate in class and school activities. All participants were graduates of the Acme School District in an urban area in Georgia. Collection of testimonies was through student observations, student interviews, and student writings. With my help, participants constructed narratives in the form of a letter to educators expressing advice to empower black male students. The videotaping of the narratives served as a one-way conversation between the student and a teacher. Through analysis of the participant's narratives, the observer sought to discover problematic relationships that existed between what the teacher did in the classroom and how the student felt about the need to achieve academic success. Analysis of all of the narratives and synthesis into a single narrative unified a general theme that existed among the narratives. The analysis of the narratives provided insight into how the actions of teachers and the culture in the classroom impacted their academic success. Creswell (2008) explains that analysis of stories enables the voices of the participants to reflect on their silencing or may contradict stories as told by a hegemonic society.

Collecting Their Stories

The participants in this project completed a biographical questionnaire via email. They also participated in interviews as individuals and as part of a focus group and these interviews with both being videotaped. I used both individual and focus group interviews to record participant voices and feelings as they discussed and responded to interview questions (Merriam, 1998). These interviews took place during a one-hour block of time at a predetermined time and place. I later transcribed recordings into written text and used coding for analysis. The recordings and the transcripts used identification numbers to protect the anonymity of the participants. I scheduled focus group discussions at a time and location that convenient to all participants. Prior to the first focus group discussion, the participants received a copy of the poem *Between the World and Me* by Coates to read in order to discuss their feelings in the discussion.

During the individual interviews, the participants answered questions that encouraged them to talk freely about and build upon their experiences in school and to identify factors they felt influenced their motivation to be academically successful and to complete high school (Creswell, 2008). An iPad recorded the interviews and all participants commented that they were not bothered or intimidated by the videotaping. I later transcribed the video and secured the transcripts in a locked desk drawer.

After I reviewed all documentation, I reviewed the documents a second time searching for any themes that became evident. I used constant comparison to analyze the information obtained from the participants in the focus group discussions. I broke down the information into small chunks, highlighted and took notes on the documents, then coded the documents looking for commonalities among the experiences as expressed in similar words and phrases.

I critically analyzed the oral histories to search for meaning as to how what happens in a school classroom affects the attitude of students towards learning and staying in school. The testimonies also underwent analysis in terms of Critical Race Theory to discover how black male high school graduates perceive the experiences of black males in schools in urban Georgia and to take a more in-depth look at how black males feel about their own marginalization while in school (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT analysis considered the information in terms of the intersection of race with class, gender, and ethnic group and with its challenge of institutionalized ideologies and white privilege. CRT analysis seeks to allow previously silenced voices an audience and is committed to social justice. CRT analysis allows the stories of black males to be valued for the insight they offer in terms of racial subordination (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The goal was to expose common themes that would lead to an understanding or explanation of how these black males perceive their educational opportunities and which factors were influential in their success (McMillan, 2004).

The research design used in this study was instrumental in my being able to explore how black males perceive factors that contributed to their success in school and their motivation to complete high school. Using this qualitative approach, I was better able to explore the challenges that these participants overcame leading to a greater understanding of the types of education improvements needed to increase academic achievement among black males in urban Georgia. Ten black male high school graduates participated in individual interviews and in focus group discussions. I collected, coded, analyzed, and stored securely the information from these interviews.

CHAPTER 4

LEARNING FROM THEIR STORIES

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of young black males on factors that affect the academic success of black male students in urban Georgia. As a white female educator teaching in schools with predominantly poor black students, I have experienced the pain of watching young black males experience the biases that come with their stereotypes of being lazy troublemakers and lacking the ability of achieving the same academic successes of white students. I have spent countless hours, enormous amounts of energy, and a large part of my paycheck trying to save these young minds. The expectation is that black male students play a dualistic role and to code-switch in order to fit into the norms established by a predominantly white, middle class teaching staff. Schools and teachers often ask them to abandon the funds of knowledge that they bring to the classroom and adopt a new knowledge in order to meet the expectations of being "white" in the classroom. What I have not done is try to understand why the problem exists still today despite numerous studies that have identified the achievement gap that exists and the lack of opportunities that are contributing to this gap on a larger scale. The purpose of this study was not to find out what educators already know – black males have a lower graduation rate than any other academic group. The purpose of this study was to find the positive and build on that - black male students who are successful in school - black male students that do achieve at and above the academic levels of their white classmates regardless of what statistics show about their capabilities and their fates. The purpose of this study was to find out why. The purpose of this study was not only to find out why but also to use the information that comes from the mouths of these success stories to educate educators, families, and the community about what we are doing wrong in the classroom and more importantly what we are

doing right. Through this study, I have learned not to dwell on the negative but instead to believe

in that audacity of hope that these successful black males cling to that drives them towards

attaining freedom through education. I conducted this study to find out what, if anything, black

males say about teaching practices that brought out their potential. The primary research question

in this study was: What are young black male students' perceptions of their experiences that led

to academic success?

Other relevant questions addressed in this study were:

1) How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience?

2) How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against

structural racism?

3) What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used?

The Storytellers

Ten black male students who had all graduated from high schools in the Acme School

District were involved in this study. All the participants were my former students and were

chosen because of their success in my classroom. I had the opportunity to support each of these

students throughout their four years of high school through coursework and afterschool tutoring

opportunities. Five of the participants had graduated from Abacus High School, which has a

student population of 1300 students and 65 teachers. The other five participants had graduated

from Balthazar High School, which has a student population of 900 students and 46 teachers.

I sought and obtained Internal Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study with

human participants. I contacted ten previous students who were all black males between the ages

of 18 and 24 that had demonstrated excellence in school and had graduated high school in the

ACME School District by email to explain the study and to obtain approval to participate in the

study. All participants received information of the purpose of the study and all sent an introduction letter explaining the method used to obtain information from the participants, the adherence to the confidentiality of their information, and that they had a right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study. All participants received an emailed consent form to sign in order to participate in the study.

According to the biographical questionnaires, all of the participants classify themselves as having grown up in lower middle class households where both parents worked to support the family. All participants grew up in the city and attended area schools. Four of them participated as a member of the high school band. One reported participating in athletics while in school. One of the participants was a member of the school's ROTC program. Six of the participants currently have a job, two are in the military, and two are in college.

Abacus High School Graduates (pseudonym)

Jamie. Jamie is 21 years old and graduated three years ago from Abacus High School. He now works for an athletic supply store. Jamie was a quiet student in school that did not participate in any extra-curricular activities. Jamie lived in a two-parent household with the expectation that he come home every day after school and spend his evenings doing homework instead of hanging out with his friends. Jamie was obedient in school and got along with his teachers, which he credited to his parents teaching him to respect his elders. Jamie commented, "As a young black male growing up in the Acme School System, I felt distant from most of the kids that I went to school with." He explained he felt this way because his parents were strict on him and did not let him go "run the streets." He also felt he had good relationships with his teachers because he was never a "trouble maker." He was not popular in school but felt that may have been because he had "manners and respect for elders," and they did not. He felt that these

factors contributed to teachers being eager to help him when he needed help. He attributes his upbringing as being what saved him from being the black male stereotype that was incapable of learning.

John. John is a twenty-year-old high school graduate from Abacus High School. He currently works at a manufacturing plant in the same city where he graduated and has lived all of his life. John is the product of a single parent household headed by his mother. He has one younger sister. John lives in a neighborhood known for housing drug dealers and young black males that are notorious for committing acts of violence. John did not participate in any extra-curricular activities in school and once received expulsion from school because of frequent gang activity. Once John could return to school, he focused more on completing school and building relationships with his teachers, his administrators, and the school resource officer. His goal was to graduate high school, so he could repay his mother for all she had done for him. John attributes his success in school to teachers not "judging him for his past." Once he found that some of his teachers believed that he could be successful in school, he began paying more attention in class and took pride in completing his assignments and doing well on assessments. He commented that a negative experience he had while in school was that the guidance counselor, an older black man, accused him of cheating on his graduation tests because "there is no way you passed that test on your own. Your teacher must have taken the test for you." The guidance counselor did later come back and apologize for the comment when he realized that John was going to indeed graduate from high school.

Andy. Andy is a 21-year-old graduate from Abacus High School where he was a member of the Navy ROTC. Andy had a group of very close friends in school and had good relationships with his teachers, especially his ROTC instructors. Andy was also a medaled

wrestler while in high school. He attributes his success in school to his hard work and that he felt

keeping his grades up and keeping up with the physical demands of wrestling was all worth it.

His "golden moment" was seeing the facial expressions of his teammates, coaches, and teachers

when he made regionals. One of his negative experiences came from his seventh period class,

which seemed endless because his teacher seemed disinterested in the class because it was the

last period of the day. He admits that he could have made better grades in school if he had not

been so lazy. Throughout school, Andy felt the pressure of the stereotype that he was a black

male that "probably would not make it through school." He struggled with accepting his

stereotype and dropping out of school or proving that people were wrong about his capabilities.

His advice to teachers is for them to allow black males that graduated to come back and tell the

real story to the black males in their classes.

Jack. Jack is a 21-year-old graduate of Abacus High School. He is currently attending

college at a local university, and he works as a Political Director for a local political

organization. In school, he was very active in yearbook and art. Because of his wonderful

leadership skills, he often had opportunities to lead small groups in assemblies and orientations.

He was very vocal in outreach programs for minorities. Jack was an average student that made

A's and B's but felt that he was capable of better grades. He was absent for many days due to a

heart condition, so at times during the school year he fell behind. One of his most memorable

and positive experiences was being called to the office not for what he suspected to be for

discipline reasons but instead was so that the principal could share a book with him on

leadership. Jack took the book home, immediately reading the entire book and still referring to

that book today. Jack and the principal continue sharing book titles today. One of Jack's

negative experiences came from his German teacher that contributed to Jack's hatred of the three

years he spent taking German. He commented that the material was difficult to understand and on top of being extremely rude, the teacher did not offer tutoring after school to help, which led to Jack shutting down in this class. He attributes his overcoming his struggles in math during his senior year to his math teacher that took the time to help Jack learn and to help Jack work through his frustrations with math. This encouraged Jack to spend time after school and on Saturdays overcoming his perceived disability in math. The advice he would give to his teachers is for them to listen to their students and to listen with their hearts and their minds.

Randy. Randy is a 20-year-old graduate of Abacus High School, currently enlisted in the US Army still living in the local area. He did not participate in any extracurricular activities while in school and received assignment to the alternative school for one year due to excessive discipline referrals. Randy believes that the reason he was in trouble so much in high school was that he was bored in his classes. When Randy focuses on his work, he does very well at math and science. He felt that his teachers did not appreciate his humor or his creativity and he felt they did not think he was capable of doing well in his classes due to his frequent outbursts in class. Randy had a negative experience with his guidance counselor who expressed amazement that Randy had passed all of his graduation tests and was going to graduate high school. Randy commented that having two of his teachers express an interest in him and appreciating his creativity in class made the difference for him. Once he felt valued in the class, he gained the confidence to show what he knew and to help others in the class. He became a tutor to help others after school and on Saturdays. His advice to teachers is for them to get to know their students inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom and to not be so quick to judge black males. He wants teachers to know that not all black males are drug dealers and not all drug dealers are black males.

Balthazar High School Graduates

      Igor. Igor is a 24-year-old graduate of Balthazar High School and brought up in a two-parent household. His father served as a volunteer basketball coach at the school. Igor was very active in the band in high school and even became drum major. He attended school with one brother and two sisters along with numerous cousins. A visit to a state university 90 miles away during a SkillsUSA event made a lasting impression on Igor. From that moment on, he thought about having that kind of freedom and that inspired him to go to college. One of his negative experiences came from being bored in a literature class that was not challenging enough. He did not feel that the teacher was making the effort to prepare students for college. His struggle in school was trying to make good grades in school without alienating his peers. He did not want to appear to be "showing off" by making good grades. The advice he would give to teachers would be for teachers to value all of their students and believe that all students are capable of success. He wants teachers to "teach us the way you would teach any other child in any other school anywhere around the world and that just might make a difference for one child like me".

      Nate. Nate is a 23-year-old graduate of Balthazar High School where his most memorable experiences involved the band. Nate enlisted in the US Army and still lives in the community where he grew up. Nate was an average student that usually made B's in his classes. His most negative experiences in school were when teachers were out they left worksheets that were not graded and were nothing more than busy work. This would not have been so bad if it only occurred a few times but he had teachers that were out more than frequently which resulted in a lot of meaningless busy work. Nate's advice to teachers is to talk to their students, especially the black males, to find out where they are coming from and try to understand what they need. If

he were able to go back in time and change what he did while in school, Nate said he would take school more seriously and learn more.

Richard. Richard is a 23-year-old graduate of Balthazar High School. He played football while in high school and was a member of the wrestling team. He is currently an assistant manager at an athletic merchandise store. Richard grew up in a two-parent household where he learned that the only way to be successful was to work hard. Richard struggled with trying to respect what his parents expected from him while also trying to be the stereotypical black male football player. When he made good grades in high school, his teammates referred to him as a "nerd" so he would have to act out in class to fit back in with his teammates. Richard's coaches wanted him to spend all of his time working out and being ready for football games and wrestling matches and they did not seem to be concerned about his grades. Because of his athletic abilities, Richard received a great deal of freedom at school to skip class to go to the gym and often his disruptive behavior in class dismissed. Richard usually focused more after football season, which coincided with the end of the semester report cards. During Richard's senior year, he realized that he needed to spend more time with the teachers who were trying to teach him how to be ready for college rather than those who were trying to get him ready for sports. Richard attributes his success to the confidence he gained from being a part of a winning football team and wrestling team and to teachers who held him accountable for his grades. His advice to teachers is not to buy into the stereotype that black males are only to play sports and not to do well in school.

Charles. Charles is a 24-year-old graduate of Balthazar High School. Charles currently owns his own business in the area where he attended high school. Charles played in the band and became drum major at his high school. He did well in school and had great relationships

with his teachers. He lived in a two-parent household with a strict religious upbringing. Church was very important to his family, which is what Charles credits as making an impact on his attitude towards school and towards his teachers. Charles enjoyed certain liberties in school like getting out of class to help other teachers with grading papers. Charles credits the amount of self-confidence he had in high school with the support from his family and the support he got from his band director and bandmates. He commented that "being respected as a leader on the field helped him be a leader in the classroom." Charles had struggles with keeping up with the expectations that teachers had of him. He felt that many teachers asked a lot of him because he represented the non-stereotypical black male student that could be academically successful. His advice to teachers is to believe in all students, especially the black male students. He would like teachers to take the time to find something that each student can be proud of and use that as a hook for learning in the classroom. Charles feels that all black males have the potential to be successful, but it takes a teacher looking beyond the stereotype and valuing the student to motivate that student to see the benefits of learning.

    Alex. Alex is a 24-year-old graduate from Balthazar High School. He was a member of the band and the step team. Alex's mother raised him in a single parent household. Because Alex was the size of a grown adult at an early age, his mother relied on him for help with his siblings, and she put high expectations on him to be successful in life. Alex credits his mom's support as being what made the difference with how he felt about school. Alex was a good student in school and mostly made B's. Alex admits that he did not try as hard to make better grades because the expectations for him to be successful as a young black male growing up in the projects was not very high. Alex just wanted to make the best of his high school experience so he joined in on things that he was good at and music was one of them. Alex is currently a

middle school English teacher in the local area. Alex said he became a teacher because he wanted to be a role model for black males. Besides his band director and his school principal, he did not have many influential black male role models other than his English teacher. He respected his English teacher because this teacher required a great deal from his students and would not accept anything less than perfect. His teacher was not only a strong teacher that could relate to all of his students but he was also a deacon in his church. Alex's advice to teachers is to not sell black male students short even if they are from the projects. He wants teachers to find ways to meet those students where they are and give them the support and motivation to be strong black men that can support themselves.

Choosing the Research Site

Acme School District (pseudonym) is a public school district that serves the city along with the surrounding area that lies within the county. There are approximately 33,000 students enrolled in the school district's 36 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 8 high schools, 4 magnet schools, and 3 special schools. African-American students account for 74% of the population in this district, with the other major group being 19% white students. The graduation rate for the district is 61.8 %, and 96.8% of the students qualify for free lunch. At present time, 31 schools in the district are low-performing schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). The population of the city is approximately 200,000 not including surrounding unconsolidated cities with 54.7% of the population being African-American and 39.1% being white. The median household income is about $37,000.00 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011). The total number of annual violent crimes in this area is 649 and 9,181 property crimes.

The culture of a school classroom is a very important part of the curriculum of that classroom that determines the quality and amount of learning that occurs in that classroom. The

development of cognition and intellectual skills will be a product of the cultural experiences of the interactions in the classroom including the characteristics of the classroom and the sociocultural experiences of the learner (Allen and Boykin, 1992). Unfortunately, students who have cultural backgrounds that do not match the dominant culture of the school in terms of culture, race, and language are more likely not to do as well in school as their counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The black males in this study perceived that having a positive relationship with teachers, having strong family and community support, and being able to believe there was hope of success are all factors that contributed to their success in high school. These students felt they were subjected to stereotypes from parents, teachers, themselves, and their communities that could have negatively influenced their motivation to succeed. The participants in this study all lived in poor neighborhoods and attended schools that do not receive the same amount of funding as schools in nearby predominantly white and wealthy neighborhoods. The participants in this study reported that they were well aware of the stigma associated with the schools they attended and the low expectations for them to be successful in academic achievement due to their color and their socioeconomic status. Even so, these participants found success when given opportunities to participate in areas such as band, ROTC, or sports that tended to value their performance regardless of their outside appearance or their financial status. These participants credited strong support from at least one teacher, family member, and/or community member or organization as being the reason they were able to feel confidence in their abilities to be successful in school.

Having taught in more than one school in this district, I am award of the level of bias associated with schools in the poor areas of this district. Some of the participants came from a

school that had the lowest graduation rate as well as lowest performance rates on state standardized tests. The school lacked necessary technology and science lab equipment that would have provided these students with equal opportunities to be successful in math, science, and engineering. Classrooms were overcrowded, and the teachers were inexperienced in content knowledge, multicultural pedagogy, and classroom engagement strategies. Student absentee rates were very high, as well as teacher absentee rates. Support for the school came mainly in the form of funding for athletics since that produced the most community support. Teachers who had an optimistic vision for their students were able to provide the support for these students by providing them the highest level of rigor and relevance in their lessons and learning opportunities.

The participants in this study described instances of how they were victims of racism by being patronized in classes and having teachers with fewer credentials and less experience than those at the more affluent schools in the district. The participants reported that predetermined attitudes towards black male students impacted the availability and opportunities that assured these students an equal opportunity to a rigorous and relevant curriculum.

The participants in this study shared stories of how they took advantage of the limited number of opportunities offered to them, such as band, sports, and ROTC. Because they understood their circumstances, they developed strategies to combat the institutional racism in their schools. These students chose to take more upper level courses such as Advanced Placement sciences, language arts, history, and mathematics. High failure rates at the schools in this study caused overloading of classes with students and limited resources. Participants commented that teachers rarely allowed them opportunities to conduct authentic lab research or to utilize school technology to connect with real-world, relevant, and up-to-date information to

solve problems. Participants almost never attended lectures with guests from the community or field trips to places where they could see how their learning was relevant. The participants in this study found access to these resources through their participation in extracurricular activities provided to them by teachers with insight or family and community connections. Although aware of the stereotypes of black males being lazy and likely to cause problems, these students sought out opportunities to go beyond the classroom to enhance their learning. Those opportunities, whether it was bonding with a teacher for after school tutoring, joining the band, playing football, or participating in ROTC, gave these participants opportunities to gain self-confidence and gave them hope that they could change their "stars".

These participants were aware of the lower level of expectations for their subgroup, which could have adversely affected their motivation to be academically successful in school. As a teacher in these schools located in low-income predominantly black areas of town, I was aware of the stigma attached to these schools based on the stereotypes of the student population, the level of affluence, or the perceived academic abilities of poor black males. However, I naively assumed that the students were ignorant to the bias that existed within the walls of the school building. Sadly, this study revealed to me that the participants were aware of the expectations that those around them had for them. The participants expressed feelings of frustration and embarrassment when teachers refused to create authentic and challenging learning opportunities for them and praised them for exaggerated achievements. Some felt the temptation to succumb to these expectations but through their connections with teachers, administrators, leaders in the community, and their family members, they fought to create their own opportunities to enable their success and achievement.

Black male students who developed a positive relationship with a teacher in school and who felt valued by that teacher are more likely to view school as a positive experience and have a growth mindset that sees a future outside the expected stereotype of black male students. The participants in this study through the bonds they developed with role models in and out of the school, used their positive connections to motivate them to be successful in school and to seek opportunities beyond the walls of the school to experience freedom in their lives. Some of the participants are now leaders in the community, attending college, teaching in similar school situations, and working their ways up the corporate ladders of success. Once these students developed a growth mindset that helped them believe that success is achievable no matter the circumstances, there has been no limit, no stopping to what they are willing to work to achieve.

These students do not regret that their struggles in school were challenged and unnecessary. They are appreciative that they were able to conquer low expectations and structural racism in order to be successful. They do wish that they had been given the opportunity to be taught by teachers who respected who they were and where they came from. They wish that their teachers had pushed them to learn more about their culture through culturally responsive and challenging learning activities that allowed them to develop critical thinking skills that were applicable to the needs of their communities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the impact of certain variables on the academic success of black male students as told through the lived experiences of young black male high school graduates. The participants in this study openly shared their thoughts and experiences that related to the question: What are the perceptions of young black males on the factors and experiences that led to their academic success in an urban school in Georgia?

Analysis of the interview responses led to information addressed as they relate to each of the supporting questions in this study.

Supporting Question #1: How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience?

Jamie commented that teachers who get to know their students and respect them are better at motivating students to achieve especially black males who might not see the relevance of education. He commented, "One of my teachers spoke to me like I was a real person, and when I didn't do my homework, she talked to me about how important it was." Knowing that my teacher cared about me and took the time to explain why I needed to do my homework showed me she cared.

John explained that he went through a lot at an early age involving gang activity, and most of his teachers and his guidance counselor labeled him as a thug. He remembers that one of his teachers welcomed him into her class and made him feel important and not like a thug. "I didn't trust her at first because she was a white lady. Most white people don't care about black male students but this lady was not afraid of me." He admits that he would "show out" in her class, but she never gave up on him. John believes that knowing a teacher cares and is willing to accept a student as he has made the difference for him and made him want to try harder in school to make her proud.

Andy believes that teachers who engage their students in real world and interesting activities make the biggest impact on their students. As a black male, Andy did not get many opportunities to travel. Being a part of activities at school that allowed him to get out of his environment gave Andy the opportunity to see a life beyond being on welfare and not having ambition. Andy feels thankful for the teachers who saw more in him than just a potential black

male dropout and instead gave him chances to explore possibilities for a productive future. "Some of my teachers were always available before school, after school, and on Saturdays to help me be better. It's important for a black male to find good role models that are there to support kids."

Jack fell behind in school and got discouraged. He almost bought into the stereotype of black males not being successful in school. When his principal treated him like an adult and shared a book on leadership with him, Jack realized that he was more than just a statistic to this man. "My principal saw me almost like an equal. He was a great leader and he saw me as having the potential to be a great leader. He was white and I was black, but somehow it was like he saw me as being equal to him." Jack credits teachers and principals that were willing to see your future with you had an impact on his academic success.

Randy almost gave up on school when assigned to the alternative school for being a constant discipline problem. Randy is apologetic for his behavior, but in his mind, he was only trying to be a part of the class. "I wanted to show my teachers that even though I may look dumb to them, I really am smart." Randy believes that when a few of his teachers saw something more in him and gave him a chance to show how smart he was, he tried even harder and even tried to control himself a little more. Once he saw that his teachers saw something in him, he saw something in himself, too, and then he worked harder to not be the class clown that teachers expected him to be.

Igor struggled to not be the smart kid in class. He wanted to be respected by his peers and did not like being told he was "acting like a white kid" when he made good grades. When Igor was in the band, he felt the playing field was level. It was ok to be good and be a black male in the band, but when he was in the classroom, it was different. He remembered that there

were only a few white students in the class, and the teachers always seemed to spend more time asking the white students questions rather than the black students. Igor had to fight to answer questions in class, but when he did, the teachers seemed surprised that he knew the answer. Igor attended a school ranked at the bottom of all the high schools in the Acme School District. He commented that he felt the teachers there did not try as hard as teachers at more successful schools did. His advice to teachers is to treat all students with respect and expect the same from them as they would if they were at a "fancier" school.

Nate is thankful that he was able to be a part of the band. In the band, he felt treated as an individual. In his classes, Nate usually sat towards the back where the majority of the other black male students sat. He was very quiet, and the only time he participated in class was when he could work with a group of his black male friends. In band, the director seemed to value what Nate had to offer. He was only one of three students that played saxophone; therefore, he was vital to the band's success. He remembers spending a lot of time practicing because his part was important. Nate's advice to his teachers is to make each student feel like they are an important part of the class and give each student, especially black males, the opportunity to be good at something. Nate felt like he was always in competition with the "white kids" in his classes, and he felt like he could not "measure up" to how smart they were because he did not have access to the same resources that their families could give them. Nate feels that if his teachers had expected more from him as a person, he would have tried harder in class.

Richard believes that he was successful in school because he was "cocky." He knew he was good at sports and that got him respected among his peers and teachers. He made good grades in his classes, but he feels that part of that came from knowing that he did not have to have good grades because he could always fall back on his athletic abilities. He did try to

maintain good grades because his coaches encouraged him in sports and wanted him to be able to play sports in college. The support and encouragement he got from his coaches was what Richard feels impacted him most. He commented that he could have easily been the "dumb black jock" that only played sports in high school and lived off those memories, but he saw how hard his mother worked, and he wanted to make her proud and be more than what the statistics showed. One of Richard's fellow classmates and football team members was involved in a situation in which he went to jail for murdering his girlfriend. Richard explains that his friend did fall into the black male stereotype. "He was a punk. He thought football was enough and his coaches let him get away with doing stupid stuff, but it caught up with him, and now he's in jail."

Charles credits his mom for seeing something more in him. She did not want her son to become a statistic like so many others in his neighborhood. At his school, the graduation rate is close to 50% and even less for black males. The school is set in the projects where there is a high rate of violence against teens, high rates of pregnancy, and high rates of drug use. Many of the students walk home from school and spend their afternoons and evenings hanging out on the sidewalks in the projects. Charles' mother made sure that Charles was dressed for success. She believed that if he looked successful, he would be successful. Charles feels like this impressed his teachers and saved him from teachers labeling him as the "typical black thug" from the neighborhood. When in class with his peers, Charles remembers that teachers spoke in a kinder tone to him and got upset with him when he did not do his best. Other black males could sit in the back of the classroom and sleep the class away. Charles believes that his teachers passed judgements based on what the students wore and how they looked in class. If the teacher did not feel the student was worthy of the teacher's time, the teacher just ignored his presence. The

advice Charles would give to his teachers would be to look past what the students look like because sometimes students dress to meet their teacher's low expectations for fear of being hurt.

Alex was a quiet student in class and did little to attract attention to himself, but when it was time for band, he came alive. He did not feel confident in his classes because he was larger than most and did not feel as smart as the other students in the class. He remembers there was a white girl that all the teachers seemed to like. She was pretty, dressed well, and always did her homework. Many of his friends did not even try to do the homework even though they could. These friends just felt it was easier to copy from the white girl because the teachers seemed to like her better. Alex said he often wished that there were no white students at his school because they "overshadowed" what the black students could do. He did well in band because the band director was a black male, and Alex felt like he could identify with him. Alex also appreciated how hard his English teacher worked to create assignments that allowed every student to do his or her best and to be creative. His English teacher was a black male that was stern but seemed to genuinely be concerned about whether all of his students were successful. The advice Alex would give to teachers is to look beyond color to see each student for what he or she is capable of and get to know your students. Alex is now an English teacher and he wants to do for his students what his English teacher did for him – "give them a voice in his class."

Supporting Question #2: How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against structural racism?

Jamie often wanted to just be the typical black student. "It's easier when your teachers don't expect anything of you." Jamie felt that he did not fit the typical stereotype of being a black male student. He was smaller than most, quieter than most, and dressed in button downed shirts that were neatly tucked into his pressed jeans. He did not wear jewelry and he did not have

any tattoos or ear piercings. He respected his teachers and did not act out in class. His teachers

were willing to help him with his assignments, and they spoke respectfully to him. Jamie

observed that a few of his teachers were constantly yelling at his black male peers, and it would

not take long before at least one of them was put out of class. Jamie consciously made the

decision to not be a statistic of a black male dropout like so many of his peers. Jamie started out

as one of 330 students his freshman year, and by the time he graduated, that number had

dwindled down to just under 200. Jamie feels that some of his black male friends could have

been "saved" if their teachers were not "afraid" to teach them.

John bought into the black male stereotype and received expulsion from school during his

freshman year for constant gang activity. John knew inside that he was not "thug material," but

in his neighborhood, he felt that he would have no friends if he did not hang out with them and

do what they did. John did not care about his grades in school, nor did he go to his classes on a

regular basis. Sometimes he would just come in the door in the morning and would immediately

become involved in a fight and be sent home. John saw that his black male friends always had

money, girls, and fancy cars, so why did he need an education? John came to class proudly

displaying his tattoos and earrings, sagging his pants, and wearing black t-shirts. He said he

knew what teachers thought about him, so he did not even bother to try to change their opinion.

When expelled from school, John realized that he had let his mother down; it was his wake-up

call. Even though John wanted to change and be a better student, it was not as easy as that.

Luckily, John had a principal that believed every student should be in school and given a second

chance, so he allowed John to come back to school, but he could not attend classes with the other

students. John had to remain in one teacher's classroom all day and even during lunch. This

teacher gave up her planning period and her lunch to help John get caught up on his schoolwork

through online courses. She was a white woman that shared her supplies and her lunch with him. For once in his life, a white female teacher did not seem threatened by his presence and saw a future for him. As he gained confidence and began to excel in his online classes, he received permission to attend other classes with his peers. His confidence grew stronger as he worked to build relationships with his other teachers.

Andy wanted to be the typical lazy black male student that seemed to spend more time playing in class than paying attention. He chose to sit towards the back of the classroom out of the range of the teacher asking questions. His teachers tended to focus on the students who sat up front, which were usually the white students. The black male students tended to choose seats in the back of the classroom where they could get away with just being the "typical black male." There were times when it was easy, but then he had two teachers in his ROTC classes that saw more in him and demanded more. His black drill sergeant spoke from personal knowledge about the black male experience. He also conveyed what life would be like without an education. Andy respected the brutal honesty from this teacher and though he may not have respected the sergeant's high demands at the time, he later came to appreciate that as a black male he was respected and valued and that this teacher was helping him set goals that he could achieve with hard work.

Jack was a good student in school. He dressed very well, was polite to his teachers, and he did his homework. Teachers often referred to him as being a role model for the other black males in the class. At times, he resented the pressure and he resented that some teachers had made up their minds to believe the stereotype of black males not being as capable as other students are. When he did something well or "smart," his teachers, praised him as if he had "won the Super Bowl" but when white students did the same thing, they were not similarly put

on "blast." The teachers seemed to have lower expectations for the black students, and it may have been that the teachers felt showing praise would encourage the black students to believe in themselves and their abilities, but it came off condescending. The excessive praise seemed to result in Jack's becoming alienated from his peers since they did not want to compete with a "superstar."

Randy blames teachers accepting that black males are not as smart as white students and are more likely to be discipline problems as the reason he ended up in the alternative school. He believes that if teachers had treated him with the same amount of respect that they gave to his white peers, then he would have tried harder to fit in and not have acted out to get attention.

Igor felt that the teachers that were at his school were there because they were not successful teachers and placed there because the school board did not believe in the students that attended this school. He felt that the teachers here relied on sitting at their desks and simply handing out busy work so that they could get a paycheck. His school has a high incidence of fighting and expulsion due to criminal activity. He believes that good teachers are afraid to teach at his school, which is why he had teachers that did not seem to care whether the students there got a quality education. Igor fought to dispel the belief that just because he was born a black male in the poorest section of town he was going to be a high school dropout. He found teachers who had grown up like him with similar circumstances that could help him set goals and achieve them.

Nate never pushed himself in school. He accepted that he was not going to be as successful as his white classmates were and he was ok with his teachers not expecting much from a young black male who lives in the projects. The only time he felt his best was when he was in band with his black male band director with whom he could identify. This man was also

from the projects, and he made it because he was good at music. Nate was counting on the same for himself because he felt counting on his other teachers to see something beyond a "poor black guy" was not reasonable.

Richard knew in high school that the only way he was going to be successful in life was to count on the stereotype of "the black male athlete." After all, in his neighborhood there was not an overabundance of black male role models. He played along with his coaches and believed that his abilities to play sports were far more important than grades. He saw that teachers also played into that fantasy and allowed him to not do his work and gave him grades that he did not deserve. It was not until he had a teacher that had "lived that life" and knew counting on sports was a bad gamble that he began to work harder to learn what his teachers were teaching and to prove to his teachers that he was not inferior to his white peers.

Charles was fortunate that he did not look like a typical black male from the projects. He dressed nice, did not use foul language, and worked hard in school. His teachers seemed to like him and praised him for being a good role model. Charles appreciated that support from his teachers but at the same time he was embarrassed for how his black male friends were treated. Teachers seemed to constantly berate the black male students in his classes and promised them that "they [would] end up working in a carwash" when they did not turn in their assignments. Charles did his best while in band because he wanted to not end up as a black male dropout.

Alex seemed to fit the stereotype of black male dropouts. He came from a poor broken home in the projects, he could not afford to dress nicely, and he attended an underfunded and understaffed school. Alex's teachers did not seem to want to work hard to impress anyone. They dressed down in what appeared to be the clothes they wear when at home, they did not design interesting or engaging lessons, and they did not speak to their students with respect. It

was as if these teachers believed that since the expectations for this school were already the lowest in the district, they did not have to apply the same amount of effort as if they were at a more reputable school. Alex became very disgusted with the low expectations of his teachers and found solace in his band teacher who always seemed to push his students towards greatness. Alex's disgust at how low the expectations were made him fight harder to prove his teachers wrong, so he learned to think on his own and did not rely on his teachers to do their jobs. Supporting Question #3: What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used?

Jamie credits his parents' support and beliefs for his success in school. His parents taught him to be respectful and to care about his appearance, which later allowed him to build relationships with his teachers. His parents also did their job as parents and insisted that Jamie not go "run the streets" but instead stay home and study. His parents believed in his abilities, and when his grades fell below B's, they quickly scheduled conferences with his teachers. Teachers seemed a little annoyed at times that Jamie's parents were so involved in his grades, and Jamie thinks that "kept teachers from having low expectations" of him. He also had a very caring principal that treated all students with respect, and he often spoke with individual students in the hallway. Jamie felt that his positive relationship with his teachers and his principal made him feel "like I was somebody and they cared if I graduated no matter what I looked like."

John attributes his success in school to his mother's belief in him and his principal's willingness to give him a second chance not to become the typical statistic of the black male high school dropout. John's relationship with one of his teachers showed him that some teachers do care, and once he knew he could trust that teacher, he had the confidence to try to build relationships with other teachers. He found classes at school that he was good at, and he

concentrated on those. He used his relationships with his teachers to seek out opportunities to become successful and to change his outlook on his future.

Andy built a strong supportive network of teachers and peers through his involvement in the ROTC program. He was able to rise through the ranks and gain the respect from not only his ROTC instructors but also from his teachers as they attended awards ceremonies that recognized his achievements. "It was like teachers didn't think I could do anything, but once they saw that I did something good in ROTC, they started expecting more from me in class." Andy's ROTC instructors spent a lot of time working with students teaching them about careers in the military and ways they may be able to pay for their college. This is what influenced Andy to make good grades in school and come to school because now school was more than just a requirement – it was a commitment to a successful future.

Jack was at a point where he felt he did not want to try his best in school anymore. He had missed so many days of school due to his illness, and teachers were not sending him assignments. He went from being a good student to being a student that succumbed to a feeling of hopelessness. Jack then became healthier and regained his strength and motivation. One of his teachers had worked very hard with him to help him get all of his assignments caught up for all of his classes. His teacher's faith in him and willingness to help him before and after school gave him the support he needed to "feel capable." Jack bonded with his black male math teacher that worked with him every day and encouraged him to overcome his struggles with math. Once Jack overcame that battle, he encouraged others to conquer their own battles. His role as a mentor for afterschool and Saturday tutoring helped him build empathy skills that not only strengthened his commitment to education but also influenced others. He also was noticed by his principal who he created a bond with him and who helped develop Jack as a leader.

Randy did not have a strong family support system and because of his discipline issues in

school, he did not have strong positive relationships with his teachers. He built a bond with one

of his teachers, a white female teacher, who stayed after school with him and made sure that he

attended Saturday School to catch up on all of his credits so he could graduate on time. The

teacher also encouraged Randy to build relationships with his other teachers. Sometimes the

teacher had to escort Randy to his other classes and plead with his teachers to give him another

chance. Eventually Randy was able to fight his own battles and started doing good work. By the

time he graduated, he had gained the respect of almost all of his teachers and they were proud to

see a student who was once destined to drop out of school after alternative school walk across

the stage to accept his diploma.

Igor credits his band family for saving him from becoming a statistic. Although he

sometimes had feelings of sadness for having to attend a school with such ill-prepared teachers,

he knew he would be ok when he got to band. His band director and bandmates respected him

and saw great potential in him. They looked to him to lead them and he did. He had an

opportunity to be a leader and he took that role seriously. He used his experiences of neglect in

the classroom to show that every student mattered. His leadership in the band gained the notice

of his teachers and their expectations increased. This did not stop all of his teachers from

stereotyping him as a typical black male dropout, but it did allow him opportunities to be

creative and to attempt more rigorous learning activities that deepened Igor's want to continue

his education after high school.

Nate also counted on his band community for support and encouragement. He valued the

respect and motivation to be something better from his band director. His involvement in the

band helped him build a family bond that lasted through four years of high school. He knew

band was his safe space. The confidence that he gained from this support group encouraged Nate to work harder in his classes so that one day he might go on to college and play in a college band.

Richard relied on his athletic ability to build a community of coaches and team members that he could count on for support. Initially he relied on his coaches to provide him with opportunities to be successful, but after he had developed confidence in his abilities on the field, he began demanding that his teachers respect him by holding him accountable for his work in class. He built relationships with his teachers, especially during the offseason that allowed him to work harder to learn and to improve his grades so that he might become eligible for a football scholarship. His teachers began attending his games and his wrestling matches and Richard began to feel validated as a student and an athlete.

Charles credits his family community, his church community, and his band community with motivating him to become a successful student in high school. With their support, Charles worked hard to overcome the factors that would normally interfere with a young black male student's success in school. These communities offered him support and guidance to look beyond high school and towards a future of higher educational attainment. These communities intervened when Charles began to give in to wanting to be a part of the party culture at school along with his black male friends.

Alex is thankful that he had his mother's support as a strong black female role model and his band director as a strong black male role model. He also relied on his band community and his local band alumni community to offer Alex support and guidance to want to be a better person and to become more than what most believed would be the destiny of a young black man

growing up in the projects. He is also thankful for the school community that seemed to bond together over the years to work hard to improve the status quo of all of the students at the school.

Critical Race Analysis of the Role of Peers

As the participants expressed their perception of the factors that influenced their academic success, the involvement of their peers was a recurring theme. Peer approval and pressure had an influence on what these participants felt were acceptable behavior in the classroom. Sometimes peers could pressure the participants to not deviate from the stereotype of the young black male high school dropout as some referred to as "crabs in a bucket" meaning that if a crab tried to climb out of the bucket and avoid his destiny, the other crabs would bring him back down into reality. Some of the participants were chastised for "acting white" or being "overachievers" when they made good grades, which is common among the black male population even when among friends (Mickelson & Velasco, 2006). Black males often pressure other black males to not strive for academic success in order to preserve their "blackness" (Ogbu, 2004). This mindset suggests that being white or possessing "whiteness" is a property that brings with it a higher level of status (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Harris, 1993).

At other times, peers that shared a common interest, such as band or athletics, were a source of encouragement and camaraderie. These students were able to find a way to balance being a part of their peer group and avoiding ridicule while also achieving academic success (Allen, 2013). In this relationship, each student was supportive of each other because they all had a common goal of making the team successful thereby ensuring their own individual success. These peers offered a safe place where they were all on the same level. The bonds that they built in the band room, on the playing field, or in the ranks, carried over to the classroom setting where students knew they could trust and work with those that were like-minded. They shared

experiences, both good and bad, and they shared the journey together from year to year. The community of trust and support that they built was strong enough to withstand the temptation to seek refuge in more destructive groups. These students were also able to reach out to others because they had become empathetic to what it feels like to not be a member of such a supportive group. These students are able to use these communities as defiance towards the white hegemonic ideal as they find their own freedom through education (DuBois, 1969).

Critical Race Analysis of the Role of Parents

The participants in this study frequently referred to their parent(s) as having an influence on their academic success. Parents who supported their children by enforcing rules, communicating with teachers, and serving as role models positively impacted these students to strive for academic excellence to secure a productive future. The parents who had a positive impact on the relationships that their children were able to establish with their teachers stressed the importance of dressing appropriately, acting appropriately, and acting respectfully. When following these guidelines, these students were able to debunk the accepted stereotype of black males being aggressive, derogatory, and incapable of showing respect for their teachers.

The presumption often is that parents of black male students are unsupportive and disinterested in the academic success of their children and therefore blamed for their children's inability to be successful in school (Solorzano, 1997). One participant reported that his mother felt that her support for her son's academic progress was not wanted leading to a feeling of mistrust for the parent towards the teacher. If parents are to be valued for their support and motivation of their children to do well in school, parents have to feel that they are welcomed into the child's classroom and that the teacher values them as parents who want the best for their children.

Critical Race Analysis of the Role of Educators

All of the participants reported that at least one teacher or administrator had a positive impact on his level of confidence and motivation to be a success in school. Teachers who challenged them, provided them with rigorous and relevant learning activities, offered support, and developed relationships with them were those that contributed to their academic success. Students receive positive influence for successful academic experiences when teachers plan culturally relevant and real world learning activities that are academically challenging (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students also respond more positively towards teachers who are nurturing, empathetic, and truly invested in their fight for social justice for their black male students (Noddings, 1992; Collins, 1990).

Some of the participants were motivated to do well in spite of the teacher's lack of support. Some of these students experienced what is often the norm where teachers label the behavior of black male students as aggressive and defiant regardless of the intent of their actions (Ferguson, 2005), and these behaviors often led to unwarranted harsh disciplinary actions (Skiba, 2001). The students in these schools were not blind to the fact that whites acted in the same manner but their behaviors considered appropriate. Research shows that teachers who have low expectations for their students, question the intellectual abilities of their students, and who dumb down the curriculum can adversely affect their students' self-efficacy and motivation to learn (Milner, 2010; Steele, 2010). Although many participants reported that they felt stereotyped as being the typical black male student that would not be academically successful but would instead be disruptive and disengaged, this is not new as school based racism leading to lowered expectations and increased disciplinary action for black males in the classroom by their teachers (Allen, 2013).

Solutions

During the focus group discussions and in the individual interviews, students had an opportunity to give advice to teachers on how they can positively impact the academic success of their black male students. Most of the participants believe that if the teacher takes the time to get to know the black males as individuals rather than as stereotypes, black males will feel valued in their classes.

Jamie commented, "Teachers should not always think about what a black male looks like but should think about what that black male can be if he has a chance to be successful." He made it because his teachers saw him as a human being and not as a number in the class. John agreed and went further to explain that just because the news shows black males committing most crimes in the area does not mean that all black males are bad and "if teachers give black males a chance, they will have a future that does not involve crime."

John wants teachers to "never give up" on their students especially the black males because they are dealing with a great deal of pressure from other black males to not conform to what white teachers want them to do. He wants teachers to know that "black males make mistakes just like any other kid, but if they know you want the best and will give them a second chance, they will learn to trust you."

Andy asks teachers to hold all of their students accountable, especially the black males and when available, provide them with black male role models to show them that success is possible for them to. He would like teachers to invite him along with other black male graduates to come speak with black male students to explain that the struggles are real and that these young men can overcome these struggles to achieve academic success.

Jack stresses to teachers to provide students, especially black males, with opportunities to be leaders. As black male students grow as leaders, they later serve as role models for other black males and allow the cycle to continue.

Randy asks teachers to be aware that some black males act out in class because they are bored. Some of these students may actually be gifted but teachers have not taken the time to refer them for testing because of the perception of them as troublemakers.

Igor wants teachers to respect where they are teaching and respect the students in that school regardless of their socioeconomic status. He wants teachers to "teach us like you would teach any other student at any other school." Nate concurs and adds that teachers should "not accept male students who disengage from class." Teachers should hold all students to the highest expectations and not allow them to hide from those expectations.

Richard would like teachers not to show favoritism to white students over black students. Moreover, when black males do good work, "don't be fake and praise them like you never expected them to do anything good." Charles also would like black males to have more opportunities to be successful in the classroom by teachers calling on them more frequently in class and giving them more leadership opportunities during group work.

Alex would like teachers to build a classroom community that is as supportive as his band community is. He would like teachers to encourage the students in class to support each other and offer encouragement for each member of the class to be successful.

I gained insight into how black males perceive factors that influence their educational experiences in both positive and negative ways. In this study, the participants offered valuable information about their perceptions of the impact on black male students of their experiences at urban schools in Georgia.

I analyzed the personal narratives and identified common themes that developed from the experiences of these young black males. All of the black males in this study reported that education played a vital role in their success after high school. The factors that they identified as being the most influential towards their academic success were peer support, parental support, nurturing teachers, culturally relevant pedagogy, and a positive and respectful school culture. Factors they identified as being negative influences included stereotyping by peers and teachers, unchallenging academic environment, and lack of motivation. These participants offered solutions that involved the teacher taking the time to know the students, building relationships with these students, and helping these students set goals for their futures.

The information gathered from the participants in this study gives meaningful insight into how black males feel about their educational experiences and what they perceive to be the factors that positively influence a black male student's chance at academic success.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT THEY HAVE TAUGHT ABOUT FINDING HOPE

This chapter will provide a discussion of the findings from this study: (1) Black male students feel marginalized in the classroom, and they are aware of the lower levels of expectations and the lack of a curriculum that empowered them with opportunities to be successful. (2) Black male students feel that institutionalized racism is the reason they do not have the same resources and experiences necessary to achieve the same level of academic success as their white counterparts. (3) Black male students understand the negative influences that come from how they are stereotyped and they use their cultural knowledge to develop positive relationships with their teachers in order to feel valued in school and to aid in the development of a positive growth mindset and hope for a future beyond the expected future of their perceived stereotypes. (4) Black male students want their teachers to integrate a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy that supports them in understanding their role in society and empowering them with the knowledge and strategies to fight for equality and to dare to dream of success. This inquiry and the current state of affairs in this country has awakened me to the prevalence of racism and white privilege that I refused to acknowledge could still exist despite efforts to create a fair and equitable society. More now than ever we must teach the importance of respect and acceptance of all in order to fight the devastation that will occur if racism is allowed to continue to breed.

I based my study on my experience teaching black males in a poor-performing urban school in the most economically suppressed area in my school district in Georgia. I explored the impact of marginalized racism on the achievement of my black male students. I sought to learn more about how an achievement gap is inherent in a system that allows opportunity gaps and

educational debts to occur due to stereotypes that believe white males are innately superior and more deserving than black males. I used the lens of critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to hear the stories that challenged the assumptions made by educators about black male students. I questioned the existence still today of deficit discourse that allows black males to continue to be marginalized and kept in their place among the lowest achieving students in American schools and the lack of a critical pedagogy that is necessary to change the current demeanor of education for black males (Bell, 2004; Ogbu, 1990; Noguera, 2003). I chose to give my students a voice by allowing them to counter the stories of the hegemonic culture about why they are destined to fail through the use of counter-storytelling (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Their words are used to tell their stories about how they felt as black male students and how they conquered stereotypes.

The purpose of this study was to explore what black males perceive to be the factors that contributed to their success in school. This study also examined the challenges that these black males faced in achieving academic success. The participants also provided solutions to improve the chance for academic success for black male students. The overarching question for this study was: What are the perceptions of young black males on the factors and experiences that led to their academic success in an urban school in Georgia?

The supporting questions that guided this research were:

1) How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience?

2) How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against structural racism?

3) What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used?

This study used semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions with ten young black males who graduated from high school in urban Georgia. The participants were all my former students and were solicited by email to gain consent to participate in the study. Each individual interview consisted of five open-ended questions with follow up questions and three open-ended focus group questions and follow up questions based on the reading of the poem *Between the World and Me* by Coates. I videotaped, transcribed, and later coded all interviews according to relevance to the participants' perception of factors that contributed to the academic success of black males by me. The use of pseudonyms protects the identity of the students, the school district, and the high schools.

What are young black male students' perceptions of their experiences that led to academic success? These black male students believe that family support, community support, positive teacher relationships, and opportunities to be challenged through culturally relevant pedagogy was the key to their academic success (**Finding 1**). Teachers who create a caring and nurturing environment through the development of a critical pedagogy are better equipped to create hope for their black male students who have suffered the consequences of marginalization (Giroux, 2013). They also believe that being aware of stereotypes of black males helped them understand why their teachers expressed low expectations for their academic performance. Jamie knew that being a good and cooperative student would challenge the expectations of his teachers so he sought strategies that would contradict preconceived notions about his abilities.

How do black male students feel racism has impacted their educational experience? My students told me about how they felt marginalized in the classroom and how they were aware of the lower levels of expectations and the lack of a curriculum that empowered them with opportunities to be successful (**Finding 2**). The testimonies from this study show that the

perceptions of young black males about how the practices of their teachers impacted their academic success were similar. Teachers must understand the culture of their students in order to avoid disenfranchisement through activities that are dominated by white success stories and lead to misinterpretations of the level of success experienced by blacks throughout history (Irvine, 1990). Jamie explained that his teachers who were nurturing, did not stereotype him as a typical black male student, and who engaged him in culturally rigorous and relevant activities had the most positive impact on the academic achievement of black male students. Andy makes a plea to his teachers to let him come talk to current black male students about the stereotypes that exist and how to find strategies to avoid becoming a statistic.

How do black male students use their cultural knowledge and skills to work against structural racism? Black male students understand the negative influences that come from how they are stereotyped and they use their cultural knowledge to develop positive relationships with their teachers in order to feel valued in school and to aid in the development of a positive growth mindset and hope for a future beyond the expected future of their perceived stereotypes (**Finding 3**). These black male students felt that institutionalized racism was the reason they did not have the same resources and experiences necessary to achieve the same level of academic success as their white counterparts. Low expectations and disproportionate funding to serve the needs of marginalized students is a way of perpetuating the myth that black males are inferior to whites (Kunjufu, 2013). Igor had dreams of going to an Ivy League school where he wanted to major in music and pursue his dreams of being on stage. Because of the lack of motivation of his teachers and no real resources to support his academic and musical needs, he was not able to impress admissions counselors to give him a chance. He attended a school that was not respected by the community on the same level as schools not having the majority population being poor black

males. He now wants to teach so that he can make sure all students can achieve their dreams by being afforded the same resources that students at the nearby fine arts magnet school were privy to.

What type of curriculum do black males wish their teachers had used? Black male students want their teachers to integrate a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy that supports them in understanding their role in society and empowering them with the knowledge and strategies to fight for equality and to dare to dream of success (**Finding 4**). John had no interest in going to school other than to be a part of a gang. His classes had no relevance to where he came from or what he planned to do with his life. Destiny intervened and John was put in a class where his teacher showed compassion for his predicament as the sole supporter of his mother and sister. Her curriculum was interesting and challenging. He was allowed to be himself and he was encouraged to have dreams of graduating high school and getting a good job. He was successful because the teacher made the class about the students and not about herself (Freire, 1972).

Research shows that teachers who encourage positive experiences in the classroom, who motivate students through goal setting, who form nurturing relationships with their students, and who respect and value the culture of the students are more likely to have a positive impact on the academic achievement of black male students (Sergiovanni, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Wiggan, 2007). Teachers who have stereotyped black males and teach them with a deficit mindset have lower expectations for their black male students and tend to view them as being intellectually inferior to their white counterparts and more likely to be discipline problems in the classroom. Negative stereotypes of black male students portray these students as lazy, incompetent, and aggressive and have a negative impact on black male students' attitudes

towards academic performance (Bell, 2004; Ogbu, 2004). The participants' responses confirm the need for teachers to understand and accept that black males have different needs than other students and require that teachers develop strategies that counter stereotypical views and expectations that stifle the academic progress of black male students (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006). The participants voiced their needs for teachers to find ways to motivate and encourage black males to achieve academically since there were so many external factors that were working against the progress of black males. These include such things as peer pressure not to "act white," to buy into the black male dropout stereotype, and to meet the low expectations of ill-prepared teachers who perpetuate institutionalized racism (Gordon et al., 2009).

The participants in this study indicated the lack of black male role models to serve as beacons of success. Studies support the need for black male students to have appropriate role models that confirm the value of their race and their culture and serve as a source of pride and achievement for black students resulting in positive attitudes of these students towards school (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sullivan et al., 2008). In addition to the presence of black role models, black male students need their teachers to create a sense of trust while they challenge them through instructional activities that value their culture and that meet their individual needs while also allowing for encouragement and praise (Ferguson, 2002; Stewart, 2008). It is imperative that black male students recognize all forms of racism that influence their motivation to succeed and fight against it.

What impact do black male stereotypes have on the motivation for academic success among black male students? Throughout history, blacks experienced disenfranchisement by the dominant white culture and the educational system in America is only one more avenue by

which this occurs (Jenkins, 2006). Continually stereotyping black males is a means of perpetuating the ideals of white superiority (Rome, 2004). The stereotype of black males leads educators to ignore that they have needs instead of creating an environment that values their culture and establishes high expectations for this group of students (Hopkins, 1997). Some assume that the stereotype is not an assumption but a factor of genetic inheritance that prevents blacks from achieving the same level of academic achievement as whites (Welsing, 1974). If the stereotype of academic ineptitude continues to infiltrate the academic institutions, blacks will forever believe that they are helpless and will not have the necessary motivation to persevere (Hwang, 2012).

It may not be a deliberate action of a teacher to have low expectations for black males but it may be a result of unconscious biases and prejudices; however, a biased expectation of a black male student stifles the teacher's motivation to encourage the student to reach higher levels of learning (Fashola, 2005). Teachers who are not experienced or knowledgeable about the black male culture and struggles may misinterpret and denigrate the behavior, language, and cognitive approaches of the black male students (Irvine, 1990). The participants in this study felt the presence of the black male stereotype in the classroom as their teachers seemed to place more importance on the academic achievements of white students versus those of black students. As a result, some of the participants chose to meet those expectations and do the minimum work while others chose to use the injustice of the ungrounded stereotyping as a catalyst to perform above what was expected. It was fortunate for these participants who had a strong network of support either from their association with a school group, their family, or their community. Others without that support, however, may shrink into the oblivion of the foreground of the classroom and be content to maintain the status quo of the black male stereotype.

What strategies or relationships within a school or community contribute to the success of black male students in school? John Dewey (1958) observed many years ago that a school shown to be effective often depends on whether or not students form meaningful groups. Effective schools foster the building of support for their students by establishing a climate of care and high expectations for all students with welcomed support from parents; they have clear rules and consequences while encouraging school engagement, motivation, and a bond with the school (Leffert, Benson and Roehlkepartain, 1997). These demonstrate support for all students and when all students feel valued they are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards themselves and towards schools, and this connectedness with their schools and their teachers makes them less likely to become involved in destructive behaviors (Resnick et al, 1997). Black males have unique experiences that lead to unique needs. If supportive relationships with their teachers meet their basic needs, these students are more likely to become engaged in classroom activities and are more likely to put in the needed effort to become academically successful in the class (Watson, 2003).

The participants in this study credit their membership in a strong family, community, or school group with their ability to be successful in school. Whether they were a member of the band, an athletic team, or military group, they felt there was a safe space where they felt valued as a member because their role in the group was an integral part of that group's success. Opportunities to be leaders fostered the self-confidence that they were able to apply in the classroom. The trust they developed by having the support of their peers, their family, or their community members served as their motivation to make them proud and to meet their expectations for success.

The conversations with the participants in this study provide insight into how black males perceive what influenced their academic achievement and how factors such as classroom environment, teacher expectations, and group support contribute to their success. The findings in this study confirm that black males are more successful in a classroom environment that promotes high expectations for their academic success and foster positive relationships between them and their teachers (Heck, 2000; Sullivan et al., 2008). Despite the myriad of barriers that have historically prevented black males from achieving an equivalent level of academic achievement to white males, these participants found pockets of support that served as sources of motivation that helped prepare them and provide them opportunities to be successful (Yosso, 2006). Their counter-stories and academic success prove that black males are capable of what before was assumed an impossibility. These counter-stories challenge the traditional hegemonic belief about the inferiority of black males and help pave the road to more equitable educational practices that level the playing field for all students of color and extinguish practices that cater to a deficit mindset for these students (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The insight from the findings in this study may prove helpful in improving teaching practices that incorporate the factors that these black males self-identified as positively impacting their own academic achievement. It is not an accurate assumption to believe that teachers come to the classroom knowing how to be culturally responsive (Milner, 2007). There is hope that professional learning for teachers will focus on how to meet the needs of the black male students previously excluded from conversations about which strategies are most effective in achieving high levels of academic success. To these participants, the advice to teachers is simple – "know your students," These participants challenge teachers to take the time to get to know their students, especially their black male students who may have already withdrawn from the

educational process as a means of self-preservation. As teachers get to know their students and show value for whom they are and where they came from, pedagogy can become a source of freedom for the students who will begin to take pride in their heritage and become motivated to be a part of the class. The research supports that culturally responsive teaching is beneficial to students who are not a part of the dominant culture (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study helped to illuminate the feelings of how black male students feel in the classroom because of the stories told by them from their experiences.

The findings from this study confirm that in order for black males to feel empowered to achieve in schools, schools must meet their needs. It is essential that they feel that they are cared about and understood. They must feel their teachers support them and their teachers offer encouragement. They need their parents and community to be involved and they must have their culture understood and respected. Meeting the needs of black male students is only but one way to change the negative educational trend for these students.

Implications

I believe that high levels of academic achievement are attainable by black males if educators make progress in changing the deficit mindset that many teachers bring to the classroom. Each educator must embrace the mindset that every student can be academically successful if provided adequate resources, appropriate instruction, and high levels of expectation. Black males must feel they are valued as much as their white counterparts and teachers take an active interest in their lives. Teachers must work with black male students to set achievable goals and must provide encouragement to meet those goals. The battle is neither easy nor brief, but there must be a struggle in order to have progress in closing the achievement gap that exists between blacks and whites (Graves, 2000).

The academic struggles that black males experience while in school are often a product of a lack of understanding on the teacher's part about their cultural identity leading to the teacher being ill-prepared to meet the needs of the diverse cultural needs of the students. These inadequacies in meeting the needs of black males can lead to these students feeling disconnected from the rest of the class, which can perpetuate the negative stereotype of black males as disinterested and disengaged from making academic progress. A lack of encouragement from the teacher, parents, and the community along with the absence of positive black male role models contributes to feelings of disenfranchisement of black males enticing them to seek the respect and value they desire in less positive and sociably acceptable manners. It is imperative to use the findings from this study as well as similar studies to prepare educators for their roles in helping black males reach their true potential and serving as protests to institutionalized racism. It is imperative to conduct an in-depth analysis and assessment of what black males are reporting in their counter-stories and develop and implement effective strategies aimed at promoting factors that positively impact black male achievement in classrooms. After all, as Ronald Edmonds (1979) explains, children do know how to learn but they learn in their own special ways. We as educators have to find out what those ways are and learn how to teach them in those ways.

No matter the makeup of the students in a classroom, effective instruction means the teaching practices are engaging, relevant, multicultural, and differentiated to meet the needs of all the students in that classroom. Effective teachers use inclusive not exclusive instructional activities that involve interdisciplinary collaboration dealing with real world and culturally relevant circumstances that empower students in the classroom. As these participants revealed, they are aware of how teachers look at how their black male students act through their own

cultural lens and without understanding or knowing about the culture of these students they express their racism both consciously and unconsciously through having lower expectations, harsher disciplinary actions, and lack of engagement with their black male students. These students do not want to abandon their families and their heritage in order to become a hybrid of what the white culture wants them to be (Au & Kawakami, 1994). The teacher cannot just state a belief that all students no matter their race, gender, or socioeconomic status are capable of meeting the highest expectations of academic excellence. The teacher must truly believe and invest in that belief by designing lessons which provide all students equal and fair opportunities to be successful.

These participants were aware that some of their teachers believed the deficit stereotypes of black males, but these students chose to rebel against the self-fulfilling prophecies and instead found ways to achieve success by locating resources that would positively impact their learning experiences and provide the support and encouragement they were not getting in the classroom. A teacher who accepts the deficit thinking about black males will sympathize with black males when they perform poorly instead of demanding more effort from the student and this teacher will overly praise black males for simple tasks. These participants expressed disdain for over praising of a task that a white student would not receive similar praise for because it was a normal expectation for a white student but a contradiction to the expectation of a black student.

The struggles of the black male student in education are real, and they demand immediate attention from teachers, administrators, families, and the community. The participants in this study plead to educators to hear the voices of the black male students asking for their words of encouragement and support. They plead for administrators to help provide these students with strong black male role models so that they can see how their efforts in the classroom are essential

to their success later in life. Let these role models serve to dispel the myths that the dominant white culture does not want them to see so they can maintain their role of superiority. They ask educators to understand that the path the black male student takes to success is not always a straight and narrow path but will often be a path that makes wide turns and travels up steep hills and down suddenly to deep ravines but with being able to see the destination the trip will continue until the end. There will be times when black males will cave to the pressure by peers to be "black" and there will be times when the temptation to be the "black thug" will seem easier than the fight to have the teacher see more than a statistic. There will then also be periods of hope that shine through when the black male student receives rewards from meeting challenges and periods when doing an assignment well is not met with unwarranted praise but is considered an expectation of success for this student.

The perceptions of these black males as to what contributed to their success is presented, and there is meaning in what they have said, but there is also room for more information to be gathered about how to make their voices heard by educators so that teaching practices are changed to improve the statistic of male achievement in school. Questions and the resulting answers about the differences between white expectations for success and black expectations for success are critical as well as what practices specifically empower black students to celebrate their heritage so that they maintain their "blackness" and acceptance by family and friends.

A contradictory study to this one might be to explore how black males who were not successful in school attribute their failure. It would be interesting to explore their voices and their perceptions about which factors they feel would have made the difference in their ability to be academically successful. Research into the strategies implemented in order to intercept teacher stereotyping may be helpful to find out effective interventions when teachers are not

prepared to utilize a critical race pedagogy that will support the learning of their black male students instead of alienating them into silence. It may also help to explore the attitudes of black males towards education and its perceived relationship to their academic success.

Research that explores the perceptions about how culturally responsive a teacher's practices are and how well they meet the needs of black male students as told by teachers themselves may also provide valuable information about how well the needs of black male students are being met and the impact it has on the academic success of those students. A study related to this might explore the availability of culturally relevant resources for black males and the impact on student achievement. Educators should provide black males with opportunities that encourage them to be critical thinkers and problem solvers dealing with socially relevant and meaningful tasks instead of sitting in classrooms absorbing vocabulary without meaning.

In light of recent events with the prevalence of hate crimes and the emergence of white supremacy groups, there is an urgent need to demand that social justice occur in the classroom in order to teach children to respect each other's culture and abilities. It is clear that allowing institutionalized racism to continue in the American classroom has contributed to adults believing that whites are superior to blacks and exerting their power over blacks to continue the subjugation of blacks. The only hope is for teachers to listen to the voices from studies like this that speak to the teacher to be the change that will give black males a fair chance at the pursuit of happiness and to attain the economic, social, and political freedom that comes with academic achievement and attainment. It is important to hear the voices in this study so that teachers will be aware of the hopes and dreams that these black males had that may not have survived to fruition without the support and motivation of those who understood their condition. They did

their part to debunk the myth of the underachieving, incapable, rebellious black male who is destined to lead a life of crime and servitude in ignorance.

There is a need for more research on the perceptions of black males towards academic achievement. Educators need this valuable insight in order to make informed decisions about how and what they teach in a classroom with black males. It is imperative that school systems implement a reform plan that will reverse the trend towards underachieving black males so that black males will reach their academic potential in order to serve as future role models for the black males that will follow in their paths. The effects of a part of our population that is traditionally unsuccessful at life's achievements affects all in that population. In order to work towards peace and harmony, the vocal acknowledgement of racism both overt and subtle is imperative and efforts enacted to stop its existence. Education is the foundation for what we are capable of achieving in life and as a society.

As I complete this chapter of my life I look forward to the next chapter of my life where I plan to implement what I learned in this study. The counterstories told by these participants have greatly affected me and their words will survive with me long after the completion of this document. My plans are to create professional learning opportunities that enlighten teachers to the impact that their curriculum has on the possibility of success for their students. As my former students have shared their experiences, they have told me what I need to tell others in order to assure that opportunity and achievement gaps become memories of the robbing of the success of black males because of institutional racism. My work now is to help others hear these voices so that my colleagues and those educators that come after me will respect each student's culture and find ways to create equal opportunities for academic achievement.

As I try to end my thoughts at the conclusion of this research, I feel triumphant in that I have given black males an opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences and to tell their sides of the stories about what led to their academic success. My joy quickly turns to frustration as I prepare to work with a group of 8th grade black male students in the Science Olympiad only to find out that they cannot participate in practice due to after school detention because they misbehaved in class and their teachers wrote them up. They will spend an hour after school in an auditorium learning how to be quiet instead of working with me on building a hovercraft from scratch. One of the 8th grade teachers (an older white female) came to see me to warn me about the behavior of two of the boys explaining that they are bad and did not do their work in class. She suggested that I find other students to work with that might be more likely to experience success. I feel confident that telling these stories may influence at least one person to listen and to approach teaching with equity in mind for all students and to believe that all students can and will be successful when the playing field is leveled, each child's culture is respected, and learning opportunities are rigorous and relevant for all students. However, I still struggle with understanding why black male students are continually stereotyped, punished, and cheated in the educational process. I find hope when I find out that one of the lowest performing schools will next year offer college level courses to students from the poorest area in the city. I find hope when another of the lower performing schools has begun a cooperative learning program with the technical college with which it shares a campus. I find hope when STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) integration is being implemented in the lower performing schools as a means of giving students previously left out of the academic loop a chance to shine as they use critical thinking and problem solving skills to solve real-world problems. I find hope when an industrial school system partner creates a product and a program

to help these young black males become apprentices as they start their young careers while completing high school. I find hope when teachers openly discuss designing lessons that positively highlight the contributions and needs of all cultures.

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Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions

School Experience Survey

1)   Think back to any time when you were at school and had a positive experience. Tell me a story about that time and what you think made that a positive experience for you.

2)   Think back again to another time at school but this time try to remember a time when you felt bored. Tell me a story about that time and why you felt that way.

3)   While you were in school, think about your academic achievement and the struggles you needed to overcome to make good grades and to learn well. Tell me about those struggles and how you were able to successfully overcome those struggles in order to reach a level of academic achievement higher than most of your peers?

4)   If you could go back and visit all of your teachers, what advice would you give them that would help black males be successful in school the way that you were?

5)   Think back to your first day of school and all the time that you spent in school up until you walked across the stage and received your diplomas. If you could go back and have a second chance to change something, what would it be and why is that important to you?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

1) As you were reading Between the World and Me, how did reading about the author's experiences make you feel? Were you able to relate your experiences in school to his experiences?

2) Why do you think Ta-Nehisi Coates chose to tell his story? What do you think he was trying to accomplish?

3) After reading about this black man's experiences, how do you feel about how you were treated in Richmond County Schools based on your status as a young black male?

Appendix C

<u>Demographic Profile (Please Print)</u>

First Name	**MI**	**Last Name**

Age	**High School**	**Graduation Year**

E-Mail Address (If available): _____

While in high school, were you involved in any extra-curricular activities such as sports, clubs, competitions, etc.? Yes ( ) No ( )

If so, please list: _____

_____

Identify the type of family household during your time in school:

( ) Single Parent   ( ) Two Parent   ( ) Other

How would you describe your family's household income status?

( ) Poor   ( ) Lower Middle Income   ( ) Upper Middle Income   ( ) Wealthy

Choose which best describes your ethnicity:

( ) American Indian or Alaska Native   ( ) Black or African American

( ) Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander   ( ) Hispanic or Latino

( ) Asian or Asian American   ( ) Non-Hispanic White   ( ) Other

What is your current employment status?

Not employed and not going to school ( )

Not employed but attending college/technical school ( )

Employed ( ) If employed, what is the nature of your employment? _____

Thank you for your responses