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This dissertation uses both critical race theory and Afrocentricity to examine Black male students' understanding of what it means to be "smart." Through the use of individual interviews, focus groups and class observations, the researcher interviewed and observed a total of 14 10th-grade Black males over the course of 4 months. Five research questions guided this work: (1) How do Black males understand what it means to be smart? (2) How do Black males' views and assessment of their own intelligence affect their engagement in the classroom? (3) How do Black males understand what it means to "act white or "act Black"? (4) What impact, if any, do their understandings of "acting white" and "acting Black" have on their academic performance? (5) How do Black males understand the stereotypes associated with Black males?

The students' discussion of what it means to be smart suggests that the need exists for ongoing conversations about how whiteness and negative stereotypes about Black males impact Black male students' understanding of "smartness" and academic identity.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SMART: BLACK MALE PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

by

Travis J. Albritton

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
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Approved by

____
Committee Chair

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IN MEMORY

Nathaniel Albritton

Lucy Stokes

Edith Roulhac

Aunt Ester

Uncle Tite

You are among the great cloud of witnesses. Your lessons will never be forgotten, and your love continues to be felt. I think of each of you often.

Until we meet again . . . .

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by TRAVIS J. ALBRITTON has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Travis, you will go far and do wonderful things."

"You are really smart and you can be anything you want to be and do anything you want to do. I know I will be reading about all of your accomplishments one day."

"Just remember, a good education will carry you a long way in life. Keep your head up, work hard and have fun."

"You are special, and you will grow up to be a fine young man."

"I know you are going to make your mama proud one day."

These are just some of the many affirming messages I heard while growing up in my rural Eastern North Carolina hometown. They were messages intended to propel me into greatness and designed to help me always believe in myself. I did not realize it at the time, but as a Black[1] male growing up in the United States, the affirming messages I received about my intelligence would serve as the foundation for all of my future academic success. When I faced my own doubts and when I encountered the realities associated with living as a young Black male in this country, the many messages I received that affirmed my potential and my promise helped push my towards my goals. As a consequence, I had a decent amount of success in grade school, and my academic

[1] I have chosen to capitalize Black and use lowercase for white because like Toure (2011), I believe "'Black' constitutes a group, an ethnicity equivalent to African American, Negro, or in terms of a sense of ethnic cohesion, Irish, Polish, or Chinese. I don't believe that whiteness merits the same treatment" (p. ix).

capabilities were confirmed by not only my family and friends but also my teachers and other school personnel. It was not uncommon for me to be recognized at Awards Day ceremonies or for teachers to call my mother or send her a progress note confirming that I was one of the "good ones."

I reflect on this aspect of my public school experience because many of the Black males with whom I played basketball after school and rode bikes on the weekend did not receive the same level of teacher or parental affirmation. They were often suspended from school and placed in lower-level classes that consisted predominantly of Black students. I believe these peers were no less intelligent or smart than I was, and yet for most of them, school was a hostile and unbearable environment. In light of these experiences, I have often wondered what made me so smart. Why did my white ninth-grade English teacher refuse to allow my mother to drop me from advanced English just because I thought it was "too hard"? The teacher told my mother, "If Travis does the work, he can be successful; he just needs to not be lazy and do the work." Why was I often selected for special assignments or out-of-class advancement opportunities that other Black children were not allowed to work on or participate in? Why was I called a "genius" by my JV football coach and pushed to go to summer academic camps by my teachers and school counselors?

As I look back on my public school experience, I am grateful for all of the support and encouragement I received. As a Black male pursuing a PhD, I am aware that my academic success is not the norm for Black males. I often consider both the positive and negative influences I encountered while in public school and how those influences helped

shape my academic trajectory. Even as I appreciate all of the assistance I received along the way, I can't help but look back and wonder about all of the "brothers" out there who found school to be an oppressive place that did not allow them to shine and show just how smart they are. I do not for one minute believe that I have some special gift that my Black brothers don't have. Yet as I look back, I have to be honest and say that something or things allowed me to "successfully" do school.

So I readily acknowledge that this dissertation is about me. It is a study that challenges me to reflect on how I learned to navigate the tenuous terrain associated with my status as a Black male. Such reflection is situated in the larger narrative of the Black male experience, one the includes the senseless killings of Michael Brown,[2] Jordan Davis,[3] Trayvon Martin,[4] Oscar Grant,[5] and a host of other nameless brothers who died because of racial injustice. It is a narrative that includes unjust "stop and frisk" laws, police brutality, and the systematic criminalization of the Black male body. It is a narrative that calls into question the citizenship of the nation's first Black president. This narrative celebrates Black males' athleticism and simultaneously downplays their intellectual abilities. It is a narrative that tells of Black males being disproportionately placed in special education, kicked out of school for minor offenses, and disciplined at higher rates than their non-Black peers.

---

[2] Michael Brown, an unarmed 16-year-old Black male, was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., in August 2014.

[3] Jordan Davis was an unarmed 17-year-old Black male who was gunned down at a gas station by a 45-year-old white male in Jacksonville, Fla.

[4] Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 16-year-old Black male, was killed by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old mixed-race community watch leader in Sanford, Fla., in February 2012.

[5] Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Black male, was killed by a Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer on New Year's Day in 2009. Grant was unarmed and handcuffed when he was shot.

This narrative about Black males does little to promote the strengths and the accomplishments of this group. Such an overwhelmingly negative tone has lead Black scholars such as Noguera (2008) to consider *The Trouble with Black Boys* and Howard (2013b) to ask “How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?” Both Noguera’s statement and Howard’s question demand further exploration because as Ladson-Billings (2011) points out:

> We see African American males as “problems” that our society must find ways to eradicate. We regularly determine them to be the root cause of most problems in school and society. We seem to hate their dress, their language, and their effect. We hate that they challenge authority and command so much social power. . . . While the society apparently loves them in narrow niches and specific slots—music, basketball, football, track—we seem less comfortable with them in places like the National Honor Society, the debate team, or the computer club. (p. 9)

Such a narrative blames the victim and fails to take into account the numerous institutional, political, social, and economic factors that constantly work against Black males’ academic success. Moreover, this narrative fails to consider the perspectives of Black males and how those perspectives might shed light on the realties faced by the larger group. Howard and Reynolds (2013) underscore this reality when they point out that

> much of the literature has operated as though Black males are a monolithic group . . . [and] much of the previous work on Black males has fallen short in producing new knowledge because it has failed to problematize the diversity of social factors Black males face, which are often mitigated by socioeconomic conditions and normative gendered social cultural expectations . . . that can share their experiences in and out of school. (p. 233)

Howard and Reynolds's claim calls attention to the need for more nuanced research that focuses on the experiences of Black male students and that elevates their voices to positions of prominence in the research discourse.

Research Statement

While much literature exists about Black males that is deficit-based and that chronicles the educational challenges this group faces, there is a paucity of research that critically examines the K–12 successes of this population. As such, there exists a need for "[s]tudies that are focused on Black males navigating difficult terrain, and how they address the life challenges inside and outside of school" (Howard, 2013b, p. 78). I am disappointed in how the literature on Black males fails to adequately address the many social and institutional barriers that hinder this group's opportunities for educational success. Despite these barriers, there are Black males who successfully navigate the often-substantial educational and academic realties they face. I am interested in understanding how Black males with varying academic abilities navigate school. Specifically, I want to understand their perspectives on what it means to be "smart" and explore their awareness and understanding of the role that institutional racism plays in their educational experience.

This work offers Black male students an opportunity to share from the depths of their experiences. Specifically, I seek to reconsider the dominant narrative on Black male students, and I do so by placing the academic and social experiences of a group of tenth-grade Black male high school students at the center of analysis. In so doing, I seek to elevate the stories of their academic journeys to positions of prominence in the discourse

about Black male students and academic achievement. Indeed, if there is to be a shift in the current paradigms used to explore academic achievement among Black males, "new voices must be centered in the analysis, voices that are often overlooked, ignored, or outright dismissed—and that is the voices of Black males themselves" (Howard, 2013b, p. 64). So then, I approached this research endeavor with five questions:

1. How do Black males understand what it means to be smart?
2. How do Black males' views and assessment of their own intelligence affect their engagement in the classroom?
3. How do Black males understand what it means to "act white or "act Black"?
4. What impact, if any, do their understandings of "acting white" and "acting Black" have on their academic performance?
5. How do Black males understand the stereotypes associated with Black males?

These questions, while not exhaustive, seek insight into how narrowly defined notions of both intelligence and achievement impact Black males' academic strengths. Additionally, they situate this study's participants as experts on their specific and unique experiences.

School Environment

The young men who participated in this study attend Stokes High School,[6] a predominantly Black school in Bluetown, a mid-sized city of 250,000 in the Southeastern United States. According to data obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), Stokes had 1,262 students during the 2012-2013 school year, the most recent for which information is available. The overwhelming majority of those students,

[6] The names of the school and the city in which it is located have been changed.

775 or 61.4%, are Black non-Hispanic. The remaining 38.6% includes American Indian/Alaska Natives (1.2%), White non-Hispanics (4.6%), Asian and Pacific Islanders (9.6%), mixed raced students (3.2%), and Hispanics (20.0%; NCES, 2014). Students who attend Stokes are from 21 countries and speak as many as 16 different languages (Rogers, 2013). As a consequence, Stokes is one of the most diverse schools in the Bluetown district.

In my discussions with faculty and staff who teach, work, and volunteer at Stokes, I learned that the school's population has not always been "majority minority," or composed of a majority of students who are racial and ethnic minorities. Founded in 1963, Stokes was a predominantly white school until the mid-1990s, when the school system was redistricted. After the redistricting, "things started to change rapidly," according to one of Stokes's former assistant principals who is now a volunteer at the school. This change led to a school with a majority-minority student population from low-income and working class communities. In 2005, Stokes had "the second lowest socioeconomic group of high school students in the district" (Rogers, 2013, p. 2).

The demographic shift at Stokes led the U.S. Department of Education to assign a Title I designation to the school during the 2010–2011 academic year. Defined as support that "provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards," Title I funds allow school faculty and administrators to think creatively about how to meet student needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, "individual public schools with poverty

rates above 40% may use Title I funds, along with other Federal, State and local funds, to operate a ‘schoolwide program’ to upgrade the instructional program for the whole school” (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Because over 80% of Stokes’s students qualify for free and reduced lunch, district and school administrators have designated Stokes a Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) school, which enables students there to receive free breakfast and lunch without completing paperwork. A review of Stokes’s School Improvement Plan reveals that additional Title I funds have been used to purchase educational materials and support outside training designed to help teachers and administrators improve students’ end-of-course (EOC) scores.

In addition to its status as a Title I school, Stokes has also been designated as a Mission Possible school by the Bluetown school district. The Mission Possible program “provides recruiting and performance incentives to help recruit and retain highly qualified teachers for schools with critical needs” (Bayonas & Baker, 2010, p. 2). Teachers in the program attend specially designed trainings to enhance their instruction and their engagement with students. These trainings include *Cooperative Learning, Undoing Racism, Differentiated Instruction,* and *Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement* (Bayonas & Baker, 2010). Coupled with both recruitment and performance incentives, Mission Possible aims to increase the number of applicants to their program so as to select the most qualified teachers to improve student performance (Bayonas & Baker, 2010). In light of the abundant and complex needs of Stokes’ student population, the school seems an appropriate site for the Mission Possible program.

While the Title I funding and Mission Possible program may be improving the school on the inside, from the outside, Stokes is sagging. One assistant principal and several teachers at Stokes commented on the fact that aesthetically, the school looks like "a mess" and that it appears that no serious upgrades have been made since the school was built. Indeed, when I arrived at Stokes for my first meeting with the principal, I noted that the building looked dingy and unkempt. In my field notes from the initial visit, I recorded my impressions of the building as follows:

> I was immediately struck by how old the school building looked. I was not sure what I thought the building should look like, but I did not think it would be so old looking. The brick appeared dingy and the chain link fence around the exterior made it difficult to figure out where I was supposed to enter the building. The fence around the school made it look more like a prison than a school, and because many of the schools I had visited prior to my visit had a more modern look and feel to them, I was not sure what to make of my new research context. There was a big green sign that hung in front of the main entrance which read [Stokes]. . . . I immediately thought, "Wow, that looks tacky." Just below the green sign, hung another sign that read [Stokes]. . . . Looking at the school, I kept thinking to myself, "How unimpressive and dank looking." (Field Notes, February 27, 2014)

What the students and the teachers shared with me confirmed my first impressions of Stokes; they viewed the school environment as depressive. During the three months I spent at Stokes, I was constantly reminded of how individuals' perception of their environment impacts how they view themselves.

Stokes is situated along a busy four-lane thoroughfare and is in walking distance from several fast food restaurants and gas stations. It was not uncommon to see students hanging out in the parking lot of or walking from the McDonalds next to the school

before the school day started or during lunch. Similarly, before and after school, I saw individual students and groups of students who appeared to be walking to and from home, as there were at least two apartment complexes and several small single-family homes immediately surrounding Stokes. The neighborhood in which Stokes is located consisted of several small brick homes which, based on their architecture, appeared to have been built in the early to mid-1970s. Similar to the homes in the surrounding community, Stokes was also a brick building and its architecture resembled that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The two-story, red brick school building was organized around four primary halls that were divided by numbers. The 100 and 300 halls were located on the same side of the building and the 200 and 400 halls were located on the opposite side of the building. Both the 100 and 200 halls were on the first floor and the 300 and 400 halls were on the second floor. While teachers from the same discipline were sometimes grouped together, it was not uncommon for teachers who taught the same courses to be spread across the four different instructional halls. Each of the four halls was lined with old brown lockers with built-in locks that, according to teachers and students, were rarely used.

Stokes's administrative offices were not centrally located but instead spread out throughout the entire school. Only the principal and one of the four assistant principals had an office in the "main" office, which was located at the front of the school. The remaining three assistant principals as well as the curriculum specialists for subjects such as English and math had offices located in suites that were situated throughout the four main halls. Next to the main office was the library, which I found to be a space that was

poorly equipped for student success. There were several loud heaters located along the back of the library wall that, when running, made it difficult for students and teachers to hear what was being said during instructional time. The area outside of the library was often noisy and tended to serve as a congregating point for both students and faculty.

Many of the school's classrooms did not have the most up-to-date equipment. None of the classes I observed were equipped with the latest technology and as a result, teachers often had to push their equipment around on carts. There was a ceiling leak in Ms. Ferguson's class that required her to place a trash can in one of the aisles to collect water. Ms. Diggins's classroom, while dry, was one of the nosiest classrooms in the school because all that separated it from the classroom next door was a thin insert wall that was used to divide a larger room into two smaller classrooms. As a consequence, if students in the classroom next door were watching a movie or engaging in some other activity, the noise from the class often spilled over into Ms. Diggins's class.

Much like the interior of the building, the school's exterior was poorly maintained and in need of landscaping. With the exception of a spacious courtyard that included a few picnic tables, the rest of the school grounds were poorly maintained. The outdoor athletic facilities were dated and appeared to be in need of repair, and the rusty chain link fence around the building was old and detracted from the school's overall appearance.

Understanding Stokes

According to data from the 2012–2013 North Carolina School Report Card (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 2014), barely a quarter (26.7%) of students at Stokes who took the English II end-of-course-test (EOC) scored at or above grade level. Scores

were even lower in other subjects: on the Math I EOC, just 7.3% of students scored at or above grade level, while 24.6% of students scored at or above grade level on their Biology EOC. These numbers are well below the school district and state average. Specifically, the percentage of students in the Bluetown district who scored at or above grade level on their English II EOC was 51.6%; in Math I, it was 38%; and in Biology, 48.2% scored at or above grade level. Statewide, 51.2% of students scored at or above grade level on their English II EOC; in Math I, it was 36.3%; and in Biology, 45.6% scored at or above grade level. See Table 1.

Table 1

Percentage of Students Scoring At or Above Grade Level on State End-of-Course Tests

	English II	Math I	Biology
Stokes High	26.7%	7.3%	24.6%
Bluetown District	51.6%	38.0%	48.2%
State	51.2%	36.3%	45.6%

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2014).

The North Carolina School Report Card also provided data grouped by gender, race, and ethnicity. As can be seen in Table 2, scores for male students were lower than for females, and scores for Black students were lower than for most other racial categories. In general, the gender differences in EOC scores were more pronounced at Stokes than at the district and state levels, while the differences across racial and ethnic groups were less pronounced. See Table 2.

Table 2

Percentage of Passing Scores on State End-of-Course Tests Grouped by Gender, Race, and Ethnicity

	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian	Two or More Races
Stokes High	18.3%	24.2%	36.4%	18.0%	23.0%	14.3%	23.2%	35.1%
# of Tests Taken	502	418	44	555	200	14	69	37
Bluetown District	43.8%	48.8%	66.1%	28.2%	37.0%	34.3%	51.8%	48.2%
State	42.5%	45.7%	55.8%	24.5%	33.5%	26.8%	63.6%	45.0%

Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2014).

The Teachers

The teachers at Stokes played a critical part in my integration into the school environment, and their support proved instrumental in my ability to recruit participants for the study. The three teachers whose classes I observed, and with whom I had countless conversations, demonstrated a keen interest in my research and a strong grasp of the multitude of issues facing their Black male students. Talking with these teachers sparked a desire in me to consider a study focusing on what teachers need to know and understand when they teach Black males. While such research goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, I find it impossible to think about and analyze my data without deep reflection on the role each teacher played in shaping the educational experience of the 14 young men I interviewed and observed during my three months at Stokes. I offer a detailed description of each teacher because their individual approach to teaching, as well

as their commitment to the success of their Black male students, created dynamic classroom environments that informed much of my thinking about this study.

The Civil Rights Sista. Ms. Selma,[7] who I refer to as the Civil Rights Sista, has over 19 years of teaching experience. Born and raised in rural Mississippi, Ms. Selma reported that she and her sister were the only two Black students to integrate her all-white elementary school. She was also the only Black person in the English department when she attended Mississippi State University. Her father, who was educated at Morehouse College, taught English at a junior college and her family lived on the college campus. Ms. Selma's parents stressed the importance of education and demanded that their children work hard to achieve academic excellence. In a class discussion about race and the Civil Rights Movement, Ms. Selma shared that she participated in sit-ins and was arrested for acts of nonviolent disobedience. She said that her parents supported civic engagement and encouraged all of their children to become involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

During an intense class discussion about voting rights, President Obama, and the Civil Rights Movement, one in which several students questioned the significance of their vote, Ms. Selma stated, "My dad told us that we could not act stupid. We had to represent the race. He said he would support us and back us up but we had to do our best" (Field Notes, April 2, 2014). She then encouraged the students to do their best and to recognize that they could not stand on the sidelines and not care about justice and civil rights at such a critical time in the nation's history. Ms. Selma went on to challenge the

[7] All teachers' names have been changed.

students to think about how they could make a difference in their communities and how they could become more civically involved.

Ms. Selma's experiences with her two adult sons, both of whom were in gangs, played a central role in her recognition of the need to demand excellence from the Black males in her class. One of her sons is incarcerated for drug trafficking and probation violations, and the other spent time in prison for drug trafficking. On numerous occasions, Ms. Selma shared that she is particularly hard on her Black male students because she does not want them to find out what it is like to "have a foot on their neck," adding that she has watched the difficulty her sons face because of their criminal records. While she acknowledged the need for her sons to take responsibility for their actions, she did so with the recognition that the current U.S. American context is structured in ways that do not promote Black males' success. As a consequence, Ms. Selma told me:

> I understand where the boys are coming from, but my dad told me to prove [white people] wrong. I try to use my experiences to help my African American boys see that you prove [white people] wrong. I always have a "come to Jesus" moment with my learners and tell them to stay positive in the struggle. (Field Notes, June 2, 2014)

Ms. Selma challenged her Black male students to persevere in the face of the injustices they experience on a daily basis. She desperately wanted them to stay out of trouble, graduate from high school, and move on to successful careers. She commented on numerous occasions that she understood the difficult realities faced by her Black male students, yet even as she recognized these challenges, she knew how much more difficult it would be for them if they did not have a solid educational foundation.

The Gender Bender. When I first met Ms. Ferguson, she readily acknowledged, "People don't know what to do with me. Look at me! I look like one of the students, and my style of dress throws people off." Indeed, when the principal took me to meet Ms. Ferguson, I thought she looked like a student. Dressed in Air Force Ones, khaki pants, and a long-sleeved knit shirt and sporting a close "boy cut," Ms. Ferguson is an admitted "gender bender" who does not want to be placed in a box. When I met her, Ms. Ferguson was finishing up her second year of teaching. She had started the year by coming out to her students on the first day of class. "I wanted them to know upfront who I am. Last year I didn't tell my students I am gay and I think they knew but resented me for not being honest. This year I wanted things to be different, so I told them on the first day."

Ms. Ferguson ran a highly structured, task-oriented class but allowed flexibility for students to engage in meaningful conversations about current events. She often started class with a journal assignment, giving students a choice of five or six topics to write about. During one class, students could choose from such questions as:

1. What are traditional male/female roles?
2. How have traditional male/female roles changed?
3. Is a college degree enough to be successful?
4. Are you more concerned with politics, art, sports, academics, entertainment, religion, etc.?
5. How long should you get to know someone before starting your commitment? (Field Notes, May 19, 2014)

Typically, the journal assignments were meant to help students practice their writing skills. Often, however, students' thoughts about the topics erupted into intense class conversations that Ms. Ferguson facilitated. She seemed to welcome these conversations

and mentioned several times that she recognized the need to cultivate a safe space that offered students the opportunity to openly discuss their opinions.

Ms. Ferguson said her friends and family often refer to her as an “old soul” because she speaks and acts beyond her years. She shared that being a 24-year-old Black woman in a school like Stokes means that she must work hard to earn the respect of her students and peers. I noted early in my observations that she commanded respect from students and gave them the same level of respect in return. She once told me, “The students know the truth; they know that some teachers don’t expect them to make it out” (Field Notes, April 7, 2014). As a consequence, “It’s easier [for the students] to be the negative. It’s easier to be what the media portrays rather than be different” (Field Notes, April 7, 2014).

Ms. Ferguson made these comments during a larger conversation about the need for teachers who are not afraid to address the educational inequalities faced by many of the Black males that attend Stokes. Specifically, she discussed how Black males are often viewed as “thugs” who are uneducable and must be policed. Adamant in her belief that such categorizations of Black males are uncritically perpetrated by the media, Ms. Ferguson shared that when she teaches Black male students, she does not see thugs; rather she sees young boys that she can help grow and develop into strong Black men. Ms. Ferguson views her interactions with her Black male students as a “rewarding approach,” one that allows her to create a safe place for them to be authentic about who they are, their fears, their concerns, and their struggles. She pointed out that her approach “creates a two-way avenue, because when I offer something, they want to offer

something back" (Field Notes, April 7, 2014). Based on my observations of Ms. Ferguson and her Black male students, the level of trust shared among them helped maintain dialogue that created a space for the students to operate beyond narrowly defined stereotypes about who Black males should be and how they should act.

The White Sista. The majority of my time at Stokes was spent in the classroom of Ms. Diggins, a 35-year-old white female who has taught high school for 12 years. Well-liked by her students, Ms. Diggins has a fiery personality that grabs students' attention, communicates respect, and reflects her sincere concern and care for all students. When we first met, it was obvious that Ms. Diggins was sizing me up to determine if I was a worthy candidate to observe her classes and to make sure that I would do no harm to her students. After I explained the focus of my research, Ms. Diggins looked me up and down and in a matter-of-fact manner stated, "You are not going to dress like that when you come back, are you? The building gets hot and the students might not be as open to talking with you if you are dressed like that" (Field Notes, February 27, 2014). Although initially taken aback, I later learned that Ms. Diggins was not trying to be rude; she simply did not think that the dress pants, business shirt, tie, and pullover sweater I wore during our meeting would go over well with students, especially if worn on a daily basis. She did not think I needed to dress like the students, but she felt strongly that my initial presentation was too "stuffy" and would not help the students relax around me. I assured Ms. Diggins that I would not wear a tie every time I came to the school, and this seemed to alleviate her concern.

I share my initial exchange with Ms. Diggins because I think it captures the direct manner in which she spoke to both her colleagues and her students. She was not diplomatic in her communication, yet she was always honest and straight-forward. My observations of Ms. Diggins's classes confirmed that the students welcomed her direct communication style and appreciated that she spoke to them in a "real" way. She did not mince words, and as a result, students never had to wonder what was on her mind.

Ms. Diggins's popularity at Stokes was evident as students changed classes through the day. Like most teachers, Ms. Diggins stood outside her door during class changes. During these five-minute breaks, it was not uncommon to see a throng of students gather outside Ms. Diggins's door to talk with her about whatever was on their mind. Even when she tried to move the students along, several would linger at her door and talk until just before the bell.

Ms. Diggins's popularity carried over into the classroom, where she exhibited the qualities and characteristics associated with teachers known as "warm demanders" (Kleinfeld, 1975). Defined as teachers who "expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment," warm demanders take charge of their classrooms in ways that communicate high expectations and the need for students to do their best (Delpit, 2012, p. 77). When Ms. Diggins discussed with me the needs of her students and her Black male students in particular, elements of warm demander pedagogy were evident in her comments. For example, she stated:

> I think it is important to establish a presence in the classroom. [Students] are allowed to run other rooms. It is an intentional act for me to take control. I have chosen to invest in them. I do get emotional. Everyone will not receive them in the way I do. (Field Notes, May 5, 2014)

She went on to state that the inequalities Black male students face start with the youngest students. Specifically, she argued, “We expect them to sit in a desk and [we] do not allow them to explore their interest as people. We don’t meet them where they are” (Field Notes, May 5, 2014). As a consequence, Ms. Diggins argued that as “[Black male students] get older, they are disproportionately placed in exceptional children’s programs and suspended at higher rates than any other demographic” (Field Notes, May 5, 2014).

Ms. Diggins’s comments about the need to pay attention to the concerns of Black male students are particularly poignant because she is the mother of two Black sons. We talked often about how her personal experiences as a parent allow her to see just how difficult it is for Black male students to thrive in public school settings. Although both of her sons are biracial, Ms. Diggins told me that she tells people that her sons are Black because when members of the larger society look at her children, they don’t see biracial children; instead they see Black children, specifically Black males. Accordingly, Ms. Diggins has chosen to parent her sons in ways that teach them to be keenly aware of how racism and racial injustice impacts their daily lives. In so doing, she talked about how the racism her sons experience, coupled with the struggles of the Black male students in her classes, helps her to better understand how schools are structured to marginalize Black males.

Personal Reflection: Teaching With Passion. After observing all of the teachers and talking with them individually, I made the following comments in my field notes:

> It is obvious to me that all of the teachers care deeply about their students and want to see them be successful and do well in school. They do not speak negatively about or ill of their students. Even those students who might be discipline problems, I can tell that the teachers care deeply for them and want to see them be successful. All of the teachers spoke personally about their concern for the students' well-being. I was struck by the fact that all of the teachers wanted the very best for their students and were determined to push them towards success as much as possible. (Field Notes, April 7, 2014)

I include this note to indicate how deeply invested each teacher was in her students. All three teachers exhibited a palpable sense of concern for their students, and I witnessed many times how each went the extra mile to ensure their students had every opportunity to succeed. Even when their commitment was not reciprocated by students, the teachers continued to extend themselves in ways that went well beyond their responsibilities.

The Students

The interviews, focus groups, and personal interactions conducted with the young men in my study pushed me to think more deeply about my work with Black males and to ask questions that I had not previously considered. Each student interaction offered insight into the difficulty and tension young Black males experience as they seek to navigate both school and society. Their discussion of their daily realities as well as the struggles they face as Black males offered me new perspective about the role both race and gender play in the educational experiences of Black males. In the chapters that follow, I hope to paint a clear picture of the views and perspectives of the 14 students I

interviewed, as each of them brought unique insight and perspective to the research setting. To begin, I will briefly introduce each of these young men.

LV[8] was a 16-year-old in Ms. Diggins's third-block inclusion class.[9] He was also the father of a 7-month-old little girl. Short and unassuming, LV was described as "more in tune with the music flowing through his earbuds than with the sounds of his peers and instructor" (Ms. Diggins, personal communication, October 2, 2014). I noted several times during observations that LV came in and sat at the back of the class. Once an assignment was given, he put in his earbuds and worked until it was time to move on to a different task. At times, LV was talkative with other students in the class, but his behavior was never disruptive. LV was clearly well-liked by his peers, and it seemed he had a lot of friends. During class discussions, LV rarely spoke up and when he did, he most often wanted clarification about an assignment. There were times that if I had not specifically looked for him, I would not have known he was in class.

Timothy was another 16-year-old in Ms. Diggins's third-block class. Although he was extremely quiet and easygoing, I often saw Timothy become irritated with many of his classmates. Ms. Diggins's third block class tended to be rowdy and rambunctious, and Timothy commented more than once that he wished his peers would take their education more seriously. Ms. Diggins described Timothy as a student "earnest in his quest for knowledge" (personal communication, October 2, 2014). His earnestness drove him to strive to excel in his academic work. Perhaps his earnestness could be explained in part

[8] All student names have been changed.

[9] An inclusion class includes exceptional children and regular education students in one room. In some cases, inclusion classes will have an additional teacher to assist the regular classroom teacher.

by the fact that Timothy was in foster care (a fact I learned from Ms. Diggins).The reasons for his placement in foster care where unclear and he never talked openly about his living situation. His conversation tended to focus more on the fact that he was ready to graduate from high school so he could begin to pursue a college degree in engineering. Timothy was enrolled in several of the engineering in technology classes at Stokes and his stated goal was to pursue a degree in either electrical or electronics engineering.

Thomas, another student in Ms. Diggins's third-block class, was 17 years old and should have been in 11th grade. He acknowledged his challenges in school but told me that he wants to graduate because he knows it would "make his aunt proud" (Field Notes, April 14, 2014). Thomas always looked serious in class and at times it appeared that he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Ms. Diggins described Thomas as both "hardworking and hopeful" and added that "his presence and absence affect the class in more ways than one can count" (personal communication, October 2, 2014). Ms. Diggins also shared that Thomas had a criminal record but that he was trying to stay on track to graduate. She mentioned on several occasions that the terms of Thomas's probation mandated that he attend school on a regular basis. As I got to know Thomas, I found him to be a very mature young man who recognized his past mistakes and who worked hard to stay out of trouble and remain in school.

Dwayne, the fourth student I interviewed from Ms. Diggins's third-block class, is perhaps the student who intrigued me most. Although he was quick with a smile and easygoing and affable, Dwayne was an enigma according to Ms. Diggins "One never knows which [Dwayne] will enter the room on any given day. At times his gaze is

shrouded by the cover of substance and he sits silent in the back of the room. Just as often, he is an articulate reflection of all the knowledge he's accumulated through learning and life" (personal communication, October 2, 2014). While conducting my second interview with Dwayne, I mentioned that one day when he came to class, he appeared to be high. Dwayne readily acknowledged that he and some friends had left campus to smoke weed because, in his words, "I got bored and was trying to fit in" (Field Notes, April 14, 2014). Interestingly, Dwayne took the longest of any of his classmates to complete the English II EOC, and I later learned from Ms. Diggins that he received one of the highest scores in the class. Dwayne told me that if he stayed focused, he knows he has the potential to be successful both in school and in life. My observations of Dwayne indicated that he was correct about his potential. He was a student who had enormous potential and his actions often belied the depth of his intellect. My interactions with him reminded me to be careful about making assumptions about any of the students as I sought to build relationships with them.

John, a student in Ms. Diggins's Honors English II class, was the most inquisitive of the students I interviewed. He wanted to know as much about me and my research as I was willing to share. Initially not part of my original interview sample, John was insistent that he had something to offer to the research process. An excellent football player and standout wrestler, John was a bit eccentric and tended to walk to the beat of his own drum. Highly conscientious and engaged during class discussions, he was described by Ms. Diggins as both "sensitive and calculated. He [could] often be seen contemplating

something—whether it is the content of the lesson or the content of his own mind" (personal communication, October 2, 2014).

Jacob and I shared a lot in common. We had both lost our fathers at a young age and had to rely on the support and encouragement of a strong mother. Serious, concerned about academics, and trying to figure out his place among his peers, Jacob was self-assured yet cautious. He was not afraid to raise opinions and ideas that differed from those of his peers, even if it meant he stood alone in his views. He held strongly to his convictions; he was clear that he wanted to go to college and major in business; and he was not shy about sharing his long-term goals, adding that he had no doubts that he would one day be successful. My observations of Jacob reveled that he was not afraid to be different. He appeared very comfortable in his own skin and in many ways he did not seem to care that he as viewed as somewhat of an "outsider" by his peers. Sometimes when I looked at Jacob, I saw myself.

Tray admitted he did not see the "value of school." As a student in Ms. Diggins's Honors English II class, he had trouble with the idea of compulsory education and often questioned the relevance of many assignments. Tray described himself as lazy and said that if it were up to him, he would quit school and "find something better to do with [his] time." Despite this disinterest in his classwork, Tray was an avid member of the school's Air Force JROTC. On the days he had to wear his uniform, which were at least once a week, Tray came to school prepared. Tray took pride in wearing his JROTC uniform and said that he enjoyed JROTC because the lessons were practical and could be used in everyday life. More concerned about how to survive in the world than mastery of specific

lessons, Tray had a keen awareness that “all perspectives are not valued by the current [educational] system” (Ms. Diggins, personal communication, October 2, 2014). Perhaps as a result, he seized opportunities to challenge others’ ideas about who he should be and what he should be doing.

Coby was considered a clown by his peers. He was well-liked and popular, and when he walked through the halls, it was not uncommon to see a crowd of people gathered around him. Described as a “pretty boy” by many of the students who knew him, Coby wore a diamond-studded earring in each ear and always seemed “well put together.” Coby’s dream is to be an actor, and he often lamented the fact that Stokes did not have more arts programming. Though he was obviously smart, Coby was disruptive in class, so much so that Ms. Diggins constantly had to call him down or ask him to leave. He rarely stayed on task and I sometimes wondered if he suffered from ADD or was simply more concerned about the attention he received from other students. Coby was a big source of frustration for Ms. Diggins because while she knew he could do the work, she often became irritated by his lack of attention and refusal to use class time appropriately.

Keith was technically an 11th grader, but he had failed English II the previous year and was classified as a tenth grader. The first time I saw Keith, I immediately knew that I wanted to interview him. At 6 feet 5 inches, with dreads that at times covered his face and eyes, 17-year-old Keith was a strong presence in the classroom. It was obvious when he was (or was not) in class. I got the sense that Keith recognized that his peers were drawn to him, and as a result he was careful with how he used his power and

influence. As Ms. Diggins described, "He is an unusual blend of street and school smarts. When he speaks, his peers listen" (personal communication, October 2, 2014). When I interviewed Keith, it was immediately clear that he was serious about his desire to graduate from high school. He said that it was important that his mother see him graduate because he would be the first person in his immediate family to do so. Perhaps in light of this goal, he approached school with a tenacious desire to disprove the "naysayers" who did not believe that he would ever graduate.

Deion, called "grandfather" by one teacher because of his wisdom and old-school mentality, was a quiet 15-year-old who sat at the front of the class and was always ready and willing to do whatever his teacher asked. Deion spent a lot of time with his grandparents, and this fact was reflected in both his demeanor and his behavior in Ms. Ferguson's class. He was always engaged in his classwork and never afraid to answer a question or engage his peers in thoughtful conversations. When Ms. Ferguson called for the class to divide into groups, it was not uncommon for other students to gravitate towards Deion's group. The students' desire to be grouped with him arose from the fact that they knew he would give thoughtful answers and thorough attention to whatever assignment the group had to complete. Ms. Ferguson stated that she never ceased to be amazed by Deion's knowledge and insight about topics discussed in class. She shared that his level of reflection with respect to assignments was often "above average." During his individual interview, I noted that Deion took a philosophical approach to how he answered my questions. He often paused before offering his thoughts and opinions, and his answers tended to reflect his broad knowledge and wisdom.

Cadet was described by Ms. Ferguson as one of the brightest students that she has taught. She had a lot of time to come to this conclusion, as she had taught Cadet on three different occasions. He was a student in her English I, Advanced Writing, and Honors English II classes. Ms. Ferguson shared that Cadet "has had to grow up a lot because his mom died when he was younger, and he and his dad have had to have a lot of heart-to-heart men talks" (Field Notes, March 17, 2014). When I interviewed Cadet, he talked openly about his mom's death and how it impacted him. He described his mother as an extremely bright woman who pushed him to work hard and to do well in school. It was obvious in both Cadet's demeanor and level of engagement in class that he was committed to achieving his goal of becoming an orthopedist. Whenever Ms. Ferguson gave the students an in-class assignment. Cadet would quietly put on his Beats headphones and immediately begin to work. He rarely needed teacher assistance, and Ms. Ferguson never had to worry about his behavior or level of participation. Very matter of fact and professorial in his approach, Cadet was clearly committed to realizing his long-term goal of becoming a medical doctor.

Michael, another student in Ms. Ferguson's Honors English II class, was initially guarded with me but gradually opened up. Tall and athletic, Michael shared with me that he lived with his grandparents, and both his father and grandfather heavily influenced his thinking. Though his mother lived in Bluetown, he only saw her from time to time and I got the sense that he had very little respect for her. He mentioned in our second interview that she "comes around sometimes" but never knew when he was going to see her. Though Michael never told me why his mother was distant, it was clear that he had been

deeply hurt and disappointed by her behavior. This may explain why Michael often had a serious demeanor that indicated that he was sizing people up to determine if they were okay. Ms. Ferguson also taught Michael in ninth grade, and she said that while he had matured between his freshman and sophomore years, she still had to monitor his behavior closely because at times he was inattentive and talkative in class.

Danny was a tall, lanky 15-year-old in Ms. Selma's first block Honors English II class. Outgoing and funny, Danny liked to laugh and enjoy himself, but he was very focused when it came to his academics. Of all of the students that I interviewed, I spent the most time with Danny. I interviewed him twice, and both interviews were over an hour long. After our first interview, I noted that "I was struck by Danny's seriousness and level of engagement in the interview as well as his deep understanding of the importance of family and the importance both his mother and grandmother have had in his desire to pursue academic success" (Field Notes, April 2, 2014). Danny's mother and maternal grandmother were a strong presence in his life and he shared that his mother would often remind him that she was not "raising a fool." Deeply affected by the fact that his father has served time in prison, Danny leaned heavily on his mother and grandmother for support. Since his father's release from prison, Danny and his father had slowly begun to rebuild their relationship. Danny constantly worried, however, that his father would return to prison. Danny's thoughts about his father sometimes caused him to be guarded and withdrawn because although he appreciated the relationship he had with his father, he struggled to believe that his father would not get into more trouble and that he would be available when he needed him.

Lamar was an active and disruptive student in Ms. Selma's first block Honors English II class who I noticed on my first day of observations. Ms. Selma described Lamar as a "smart young man who needs to learn how to behave himself in class." She had taught Lamar in 8th grade and knew him well. Ms. Selma often lamented that Lamar allowed himself to be "influenced" by another Black male in the class who was not as concerned about doing well in school. Several times, Ms. Selma had to stop class because Lamar's behavior was so disruptive. On a few occasions, his behavior was so inappropriate that Ms. Selma had to ask him to leave. It was obvious that Lamar was intelligent and that he sometimes appeared bored during class activities and lectures. When I initially interviewed Lamar, I noted that "he is an extremely bright young man who thinks a lot" (Field Notes, April 28, 2014). He would often answer questions that other students in his class could not answer and he would challenge Ms. Selma when he felt that he knew more about the topic than she did. While Ms. Selma appreciated Lamar's intellect, she often worried that she never knew what kind of attitude he would have when he came to class. As a result, she said, they developed a "give and take relationship." Ms. Selma worked hard to find ways to engage Lamar and on the occasions when he reciprocated her efforts, Ms. Selma looked past some of his disruptive behaviors. When negotiation did not work, Ms. Selma relied on the fact that Lamar had two strong parents who were committed to their son's education. Ms. Selma would often remind Lamar that if she had to call home, she knew that he would face consequences from both of his parents.

The Challenge of Positionality

In her discussion of the use of reflexivity in qualitative research, Pillow (2010) writes that "reflexivity as recognition involves the Cartesian belief in a unified essential self that is capable of being reflected on and is knowable" (p. 181). The "knowable self" can be elusive and go unexamined without a commitment to ask, "Who am I?" and more importantly, "How does who I am impact how I engage the world around me?" These are questions I wrestled with as I conducted my research at Stokes. As a Black male who is both passionate about and deeply concerned about the academic trajectory of young Black males, I constantly thought about how my personal experiences as a Black male informed how I approached my research. I reminded myself not to make assumptions about how my experiences might or might not mirror the experiences of the young men in my study. Conversely, I remained aware of how my commonality with the students impacted how we engaged each other. Doing so allowed me to recognize that my knowable self is both complex and multifaceted. I am "known" in different ways. How I am known does not always reflect how I claim to know myself or how others in different contexts might know me. I am not a static figure who can be easily classified or understood in a single way; rather, I am dynamic, a conglomeration of lived experience, social context, race and gender (as they have been socially constructed and as I understand them), religion, and educational experiences. The whole of my experiences yields the foundation from which I entered the research context and from which I begin to reflect on who I am as a researcher and how the particularities of this self-reflection

impacted the types of questions I asked with respect to the educational experiences of the Black males I studied.

At times, my self-reflection challenged me in ways that continually pushed me to ask, “Who am I?” Often as I conducted class observations and interviewed students, I found myself face to face with myself. I found myself nodding my head in agreement with many things the participants said, and I had a hard time not injecting myself into conversations between participants and other students. As a consequence, I repeatedly participated in a game of mental Double Dutch. I had to know when to enter conversations and when to listen. Likewise, navigating the terrain of individual interviews and focus groups was at times difficult. I had to know when to listen and when to push, and when to allow the group to create its own story and when to interject another question or comment. The more I got to know the participants, the more difficult it became to balance between my role as a researcher and my role as another brother trying to survive in white America. The students wanted to hear my voice and I wanted to hear theirs. They wanted me to share myself with them; in fact, some students demanded it. For example, John, a student in Ms. Diggins’s Honors English II class, asked, “Why are you sitting here in our class taking notes? What’s the point? What do you want to know and what are you writing about us?” John made it known that he initially felt uncomfortable that I was observing and writing notes about him and his classmates. Yet when I opened up to John and told him about my research, he jumped at the chance to participate. I am certain that his level of engagement was a direct result of my willingness to talk about my research and, more importantly, my relationship to the research.

Decisions about how much I should share with both the students and the teachers proved daunting. Those who know me well describe me as a “closed” person who shares very little about himself. Ms. Diggins told me that while I seemed to know a lot about the students and teachers, she did not feel that they knew very much about me. Although she did not intend to be critical, her words gave me pause and I could not help but wonder if I had been authentic enough with both the students and the teachers.

The question of authenticity is one with which I continued to wrestle as I focused on how to analyze the data for this study. First and foremost, I had to consider who I am in relationship to the young men I spent over three months observing and getting to know. I constantly questioned my own thoughts about education, school, and what it means to be a Black male. At times I was angered by some students’ behavior and what I viewed as their unwillingness to take their education seriously. At other times, I questioned the fairness of an educational system that allows so many Black and Brown children to attend a school so under-resourced that there are not enough textbooks for students to take them home. I struggled with whether or not I asked the right questions, observed the most important interactions, and paid attention to the most critical issues. I critiqued every interaction I had with students. I readily acknowledge that I wanted to be seen as someone the students could identify with. I looked for signs of acceptance and I did my best to “fit in.” When Jacob, told me that his father had passed away, I wondered if telling him about the death of my own father would help us make a connection. When Coby told me how strict and religious his mother was, I asked myself if I should share that I was raised in a family that held strict religious views. When Deion said that he

knows he is not like other students, my own feelings of academic isolation rose to the surface and I was compelled to consider an appropriate response. There were a number of times that I came face to face with myself, and each encounter helped expose parts of me that were unexamined and revealed realities about myself about which I was not fully aware.

It is impossible to capture in such a brief section on positionality the numerous ways that my research with the young men at Stokes has impacted me. A fuller description will be included in my Findings chapters, which will include reflections that offer insight into my thoughts and ideas about specific interactions I had with students as well as the insight I gained from my observations. I used a journal to capture my musings about the research process, and the reflections captured there have proved invaluable as I think about how young Black males navigate educational spaces. More importantly, my journal has enabled me to answer questions I have already asked, ask questions I have not yet answered, and consider new questions I had never thought about prior to my time at Stokes.

So then, I readily acknowledge that what follows is incomplete. It is only the beginning of what I believe will be a long journey full of exciting twists and turns. The findings and stories told here are only a microcosm of the numerous stories that the young Black males in my study, as well as young Black males across the country, have to tell. I have thought long and hard about how to honestly represent what all 14 participants shared with me. While I did not have the time or space to share the nuance of every story or the detail of every interaction, I have selected those quotes, stories, and interactions

that spoke to me and that I believe will add meaning and depth to the literature about Black males.

CHAPTER II

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION: UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS BEING SAID ABOUT BLACK MALES

Introduction

Although the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision declared the practice of "separate but equal" public education to be unconstitutional, school system administrators and teachers throughout the nation continue to struggle with how to effectively educate all children. Disparities continue to exist between rich and poor schools; entire school districts are slowly being re-segregated; and poor and minoritized students overwhelmingly attend underfunded schools that lack appropriate resources. As a result, many minoritized students continue to lag behind their white peers with respect to academic achievement. This reality is especially evident for Black children. Much has been written about the disproportionately high number of Black children in special education and, conversely, the disproportionately low number of Black children in gifted and talented programs (Bonner, 2000; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Grantham, 2004). In their study of gifted Black students, Ford and colleagues (2008) cited U.S. Department of Education statistics stating that "Black students are underrepresented by as much as 55% nationally in gifted education; although Black students compose 17.2% of school districts, they represent 8.4% of those identified as gifted" (p. 217). Moreover, the National Center for Education Statistics' most recent

report on the Black-white achievement gap highlighted the fact that "white students had average scores at least 26 points higher than Black students, in each subject on a 0–500 scale" (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). While the gap between Black and white students has narrowed, more must be done to ensure educational equity for Black and other minoritized students.

The need for greater attention to the Black-white achievement gap is particularly relevant when one considers the high rates of Black males who are labeled as underachievers or low-performing students. Too often, conversations about Black male achievement have been deficit-based and have failed to consider the strengths and the successes of this group. The need to focus attention to the successes of K-12 Black males is critical as researchers and educators think about how to improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable population.

As I reviewed the literature on Black males for this manuscript, I found limited research that addressed Black males' giftedness and high scholastic achievement. This unfortunate gap in scholarly literature propelled me to think about how the educational practices in many school environments function to minimize opportunities for Black male students to succeed and what it means to say someone is "smart," "gifted," or a "high achiever." Moreover, the gap in literature challenged me to think about how long-held narratives about Black males have influenced discussions about academic outcomes among this group. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of data that highlights the educational challenges Black males face. This discussion is followed by a discussion of how intelligence is measured in K–12 education and the importance of the need to

consider culture when engaging in conversations about Black male student achievement. I also explore popular frameworks and theories used to explain Black male achievement, and I offer some ideas about how my research might offer yet another perspective that can aid in conversations about how to educate Black males.

Reframing the Conversation: Stereotypes, Race, and Black Male Achievement

The *Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (Schott Foundation, 2012) reveals that in the 2009–2010 academic year, just 52% of Black male students graduated from high school within four years. This number represents a significant jump from academic year 2001–2002, when only 42% of Black males graduated from high school in four years (Schott Foundation, 2012). Despite this encouraging increase, the graduation rate among this group is still troublesome when compared to the 78% graduation rate of white, non-Latino males in 2009–2010 (Schott Foundation, 2012). Furthermore, according to data from the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, only 13% of Black males scored either proficient or advanced in reading in fourth grade; for eighth graders, the rate was 11%, and for twelfth graders, the rate was 13%. In comparison, reading proficiency rates among white males were 49% for fourth graders, 40% for eighth graders, and 45% for twelfth graders. These gaps in reading proficiency rates—taken together with the fact that Black males are suspended, expelled, and placed in special education at higher rates than white non-Latino and Latino males, while being less than half as likely than white, non-Latino males to participate in gifted and talented programs—indicate that the overall academic outlook for this group does not look promising (Schott Foundation, 2012).

Perhaps as a result of statistics such as these, Black male students unfortunately are too often viewed as problems, and little regard is given to their strengths and to the value of the experiences they bring to K–12 classrooms and beyond. As Ferguson (2001) pointed out:

> According to the statistics, the worse-behaved children in the school are black and male, and when they take tests they score way below their grade level. They eat candy, refuse to work, fight, gamble, chase, hit, instigate, cut class, cut school, cut hair. They are defiant, disruptive, disrespectful, and profane. These black males fondle girls, draw obscene pictures, make lewd comments, intimidate others, and call teachers names. They are banished from the classroom to the hall, to the discipline office, to the suspension room, to the streets so that others can learn. (p. 46)

The continual framing of Black males as hyper-masculine thugs and troublemakers who are "at-risk" and who need to be policed perpetuates a narrative that criminalizes the Black male body and likewise promotes the idea that Black males are uneducable. Moreover, the fact that the most recognizable Black males are those who are celebrated for their supposed superior athletic ability and lauded for their abilities as gifted singers and rap artists reduces Black males to individuals whose only value is our ability to entertain.

The unfortunate stereotypes and labels used to characterize Black males confine us to narrow understandings of how we should or should not act. Nowhere is the impact of these stereotypes more evident than in public schools across the country. Noguera (2008) captured the daunting realities Black male students face when he made the following claim:

> Rather than serving as a source of hope and opportunity, schools are sites where Black males are marginalized and stigmatized. Consistently schools that serve Black males fail to nurture, support, or protect them. In school, Black males are more likely to be labeled as behavior problems and less intelligent even while they are still very young. Black males are also more likely to be punished with severity, even for minor offenses, for violating school rules, often without regard for their welfare. They are more likely to be excluded from rigorous classes and prevented from accessing educational opportunities that might otherwise support and encourage them. (p. 22)

Noguera's claim calls attention to how commonly used discipline and educational practices adopted by teachers and other personnel in public schools function to facilitate the maintenance of environments where Black males face seemingly insurmountable odds when trying to do well academically. Rather than hearing a narrative of success, these students hear narratives that minimize both their educational options and their potential for academic achievement. The need to give attention to the successes of K–12 Black males is underscored by the lack of attention these successes have received until now: a review of the literature on Black male student achievement reveals that there is limited research exploring the grade school success of this group and that much of the literature on Black male students uses a deficit-based lens to explore the realties they face (Gordon, 2012; Howard, 2013b; Whiting, 2009). As such, the need exists for scholarship that reframes the discussion on Black male student achievement in an attempt to move the conversation about Black males towards one that acknowledges both the educational challenges and the strengths of this group.

Efforts to reframe the conversation about Black males must take into account the dominant narratives that have been perpetuated about us. While it is important to

acknowledge "that negative media portrayals of African American males as violent, hypersexual, disrespectful, lazy, unintelligent, and threatening are ubiquitous" (Collier & Bush, 2012, p. 83), it is even more important to consider how these stereotypes have come to influence broader social and political conversations about the Black males' experiences. In his discussion of the need for a "paradigm shift" in research on Black males, Howard (2013a) argued:

> Conceptual and theoretical frames that are centered on a discourse of Black males being endangered, extinct, or at risk lend themselves to identifying problems with the students, without any institutional or structural critique. This shift calls for researchers to dismiss deficit-laden frames and to move toward a more asset-based approach, which recognizes the strengths, promise, and potential of students, and can lead to opening up research approaches that delve into a more comprehensive, nuanced, complex, and authentic account of them. (p. 19)

Howard's recognition of the need for a paradigm shift suggests that research on Black male students move beyond the identification of "problems" and take the critical next steps towards a critique of how institutional frameworks operate to marginalize Black male student achievement.

While I agree that it is important to discuss the fact that Black male students disproportionately lag behind their peers in most measures of academic achievement, it is also important to seek to understand the causes of this disproportionality. It is irresponsible and unfair to Black male students to view their dismal academic outcomes as connected to intrinsic character flaws that somehow render them unable to learn and to do well in school. Such thinking dismisses how racism functions to limit these students' opportunities to do well academically. Moreover, the failure to discuss the role of racism

on Black males' academic achievement results in explanations of Black male student success that essentially place all of the responsibility for change on Black males.

Ferguson (2001), in her study *Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity,* discussed the salient role that race played in determining academic outcomes for the young men in her study. She pointed out that

> race continues to be a ready-made filter for interpreting events, informing social interactions, and grounding identities and interaction in school. One racial interpretation infusing several boys' accounts of the school day was that African American boys were singled out for punishment because of their race. (p. 17)

She went on to discuss the fact that many of the faculty in the school where her study took place failed to acknowledge the role that race played in determining how students were disciplined. These teachers' approach fostered the narrative that

> racial discrimination had come to an end with school desegregation; that in its everyday operations school was race-blind to the differences that had led to the need for busing in the first place. . . . The institutional discourse was that getting in trouble was not about race but a matter of individual choice and personal responsibility; each child made a choice to be "good" or "bad." (Ferguson, 2001 p. 17)

Ferguson's account offers one example of how an unwillingness to discuss and to acknowledge the role of race can have a negative impact on students' academic outcomes. The students in her study were clear that racism existed in their school, and faculty members' refusal to acknowledge the role of racism in the punishment of Black male students only perpetuated racist assumptions and stereotypes.

The example used by Ferguson underscores the need for a more nuanced conversation about Black male student achievement. Such a conversation must include honest and open dialogue about race and the role that race plays in the school experiences of Black males. Efforts to begin this conversation must begin with an acknowledgement that

> teachers cannot afford to embrace color blindness in their practices with students because teachers and their students' identities, experiences, worldviews, and consequently behaviors are intricately shaped be race. Teachers who do not view themselves as racist individuals can have trouble recognizing how racism works and how it can manifest through the curriculum, instructional practices, as well as in broader, systematic, and institutionalized structures that prevent particular groups of students . . . from succeeding in the classroom and beyond. (Milner, 2012, p. 868)

The refusal to discuss race creates a ripple effect that extends well beyond the classroom and impacts every aspect of a student's educational experience. When teachers and other school personnel who teach in racially diverse school environments fail to acknowledge the impact of race in the learning environment, they likewise fail to acknowledge the realities and the lived experiences of many of the students in their classrooms. Unfortunately, Black and Brown students who are taught in this way come to learn that their experiences are irrelevant in the context of the school environment. Black life as well as Black cultural experiences receive little or no appreciation, and Blackness becomes something that should be avoided rather than celebrated.

Rethinking Intelligence

Beth Hatt (2007), in her discussion contrasting "street smarts" and "book smarts," defined academic identity as "the way we come to understand ourselves with and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this shapes our own perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academics" (p. 146). Her definition underscores the fact that a student's academic identity is shaped in part by institutional definitions that often use very narrow measures to determine which students are considered "smart." These measures, while they have their place, often fail to recognize and to acknowledge students' multiple intelligences; instead, "the language, culture, and experiences of the individuals who construct these tests become the prevailing benchmarks of success" (Bonner, 2000, p. 646). The nuanced cultural values, experiences, and behaviors of minoritized and ethnically diverse students are often overlooked in favor of white, middle-class cultural norms and beliefs that overwhelmingly set the standards for how schools operate (Bonner, 2000). Efforts to improve academic outcomes for Black males, as well as other minoritized students, must disentangle these standards of intelligence from white, middle-class culture and reflect the reality that that "acts that constitute intelligent behavior vary from one culture to another" (Sternberg, 2007, p. 148).

Efforts to "disentangle" intelligence from white, middle-class norms involve a recognition of the achievement orientation intrinsic to Black culture. James Anderson's (1988) discussion of the education of Blacks in the South shed light on the fact Black people's commitment to education is not a new phenomenon. Black people have long

understood the value of education, and its importance has been a central component of Black culture (Anderson, 1988). However, the deck has been stacked against them. Even as ex-slaves worked tirelessly to ensure educational opportunities for their children and to advocate for a better system of education for their community as a whole, they had to constantly confront a social, political, and economic system that worked to deny Black children the right to equal educational opportunities (Anderson, 1988). Anderson's historical analysis is pertinent to the current discussion because his work offers insight into how, even as Black people have demonstrated and maintained a strong commitment to education, they have continued to be met with racist policies and practices that limited their educational opportunities. Such institutionalized racism functions to maintain a system of education that minimizes Black culture and the value that Black culture places on education.

The historical significance of Black people's emphasis on education offers an important context to think about current discussions of Black student achievement. Nasir (2012), in her work on academic achievement among African American youth, found that when students viewed academic success as part of their racial identity they "had higher levels of academic efficacy: that is, they felt that they could successfully achieve in school" (p. 85). Likewise, Spencer, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), in their work on identity and Black student performance, discussed how Black students' achievement orientation correlates with their view of Black culture and Black heritage. In so doing, they argued "that a lack of high Eurocentricity is associated with better achievement performance and particular components of self-esteem processes" (Spencer et al., 2001,

p. 29). Again, Nasir (2012) in her study of students at an urban high school, found that students understood their academic identities in two distinct ways. Students who exhibited what she terms the "street savvy identity" felt that being "African American meant being gangster and or being connected to the 'street' or 'the block.' . . . Additionally, some students considered this street savvy identity to be antithetical to doing well in school, but most saw it as simply being disconnected from the academic aspects of school" (Nasir, 2012, p. 91). In contrast, students who exhibited "the school-oriented and socially conscious African American identity" embraced a strong commitment to academic excellence and achievement (Nasir, 2012, p.99). They "were also deeply connected to their communities, but their conception of what their community was and what that commitment meant was different from the conceptions of the street savvy youth" (Nasir, 2012, p. 99). Nasir further stated that in the case of the school-oriented and socially conscious students in her study, "the schooling and classroom environments . . . supported their identities as both racially conscious and strong students" (2012, p. 103). Her findings emphasize the need for academic environments that welcome the unique and important cultural orientation that Black students bring to the classroom.

Understanding Culture

Sternberg (2007), in his discussion of school and culture, emphasized that "when children are taught in a way that better matches their culturally acquired knowledge, their school performance improves" (p. 151). He went on to argue that "teachers need to understand both that children's intelligence is socialized differently as a function of

culture and that children's and parents' conceptions of intelligence differ as a function of culture" (Sternberg, 2007, p. 151). As such, it is incumbent upon teachers to be aware of the value-laden judgments they make when they teach and more importantly, how those judgments impact students' ability to learn. Indeed, Hatt (2011), in her yearlong study of "smartness" in a kindergarten classroom, observed that the teacher in the study, a young white female, tended to identify with students in her classroom who came from a background similar to her own. Specifically, Hatt (2011) noted that the teacher was dismissive of the efforts of her poor white and African American students, but constantly celebrated both the efforts and achievement of white students who came from middle class backgrounds. In one instance, when referring to an African American boy who did not perform well academically and who came from a poor community, the teacher stated, "'His father is a janitor; all he will ever be is a janitor'" (Hatt, 2011, p. 15). In other instances, Hatt (2011) observed that the teacher's surveillance of one African American male was much higher than for any white males in the class, who in many instances exhibited more inappropriate behavior than their Black peer.

The experiences of the Black males in Hatt's study yield an opportunity to peer into the realities many Black males face throughout our educational experience. Her research supports Lewis and Watson-Gegeo's (2004) discussion of how teachers often "unilaterally assign meanings and motivations to the behaviors of children with whom they do not share racial, ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and invariably, teachers' social and institutional power allows their meanings and interpretations to trump those of the child" (p. 6). Howard (2013b) called attention to this fact when he pointed out that "many

of the challenges that confront Black males . . . [are] directly located in classrooms, the lack of racial awareness and cultural ignorance among school personnel, apathetic teacher attitudes, and poor-quality instruction that they receive, be it in urban, rural or suburban schools" (p. 62). Howard's claim counters narratives in which people argue that the academic difficulties Black males experience are more related to issues of class and/or deficits within their communities. He discussed research by Gordon (2012) who reported that even when Black families live in middle-class neighborhoods and send their children to middle-class schools, Black students still do not perform as well as their white counterparts. This reality led Howard (2013b) to assert that "even the so-called privileges that accompany social and economic mobility do not seem to thwart the presence of race and racism when it comes to the schooling experiences of Black males" (p. 62).

Intimate knowledge of students' social environment provides teachers opportunities to help students understand how both their individual and collective realities connect to the curriculum. Too often, "a school's curriculum is unconsciously disrespectful of students' cultures and experiences" (Nieto, 1994, p. 401). Teachers can mitigate such disrespect when they take time to become familiar with what concerns their students and their students' families have about their school and community. For example, Duncan-Andrade (2007) described how a teacher in inner-city Los Angles used Open Court, a literacy program, to help students advocate for equity in their schools. Specifically, the Open Court teacher prompted his students to "identify an issue of concern at the school and to write a persuasive letter to the principal" (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 626). In response, the students wrote letters to the superintendent to advocate

that their permanent teachers not be pulled out of the classroom during instructional time and replaced with substitutes. This example represents one way teachers can work to help students translate what they learn in school into meaningful advocacy within the larger community. In the case example offered, the students learned that other schools in the low-income district experienced similar problems. As such, the letter writing campaign was so effective that a student was selected to represent the students' concerns throughout the district at a Californians for Justice educational rally (Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

Research also shows that teachers who are connected to the communities where their students live are also able to offer instruction that builds on students' cultural knowledge. The embrace of this cultural knowledge helps teachers "know" their students in ways that can significantly influence the students' overall educational experience. A teacher's willingness to get to know students functions as the critical first step toward his or her ability to foster relationships that communicate an appreciation for the various cultural differences students bring to school. Delpit (2006) underscored this idea with her declaration that

> if we do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside of the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students' strengths leads to our "teaching down" to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in school. (p. 242)

In her discussion of school failure, Villegas (1988) pointed out that "bias toward the language of the middle class is built into our teaching and evaluation practices. This bias

legitimates the privileged position of the dominant groups in society, and confirms the inferiority of minority groups" (p. 260). Similarly, research by Rist (2000) on "student social class and teacher expectations" suggests that teachers expect poor academic performance from students who come from low-income communities. During the course of his observations of an inner-city kindergarten classroom he noted that the

> students within [the teacher's] classroom who displayed those attributes which a number of studies have indicated are highly desired in children by middle-class educated adults as being necessary for future success were selected by her as possessing the potential to be a "fast learner." On the other hand, those children who did not possess the desired qualities were defined by the teacher as "low learners." (p. 295)

Like Rist, Hatt (2011), in her exploration of how "smartness" is culturally constructed, discussed how "a student's high performance is tied to how closely the student's parents have trained their children in a way that matches the teacher's conception of intelligence. Teachers tend to reward those students more often, but what a teacher attributes to students' general intelligence or ability might in fact be differences in cultural understandings" (p. 3). Attempts to bridge these cultural understandings require teachers to become "vulnerable" enough to appreciate and to recognize the cultural expertise their students bring to the classroom. In this way, the classroom becomes a place where teachers and students exchange and co-create knowledge.

The recognition of how class and cultural differences manifest themselves in the classroom gives teachers opportunities to teach in ways that invite marginalized voices to enter the conversation. This fact is especially important for Black students whose voices

have been consistently marginalized by the American educational system. Howard's (2001) claim that "instructional strategies situated in a cultural context consistent with African American students' home setting offer them a more equitable opportunity for school success" (p. 197) further calls attention to the need for instruction that is relevant to a student's culture. Black students need educational environments that help them make connections between what they experience at home and in their communities and what they learn in the classroom. Moreover, they need to be presented with a curriculum that both acknowledges and values the cultural orientation of Black experiences.

Explanations of Black Male Students' Achievement

The need for research that centers on the voices of Black male students and likewise examines the role of race and racism on their educational experiences is critical when we consider the literature used to explain why Black males are not more academically successful. Howard (2013a, 2013b) called attention to the fact that over the past four decades, scholars have attempted to explain the factors that negatively impact Black male students' success by focusing on oppositional identities, cultural and structural explanations, and the impact of teacher perceptions on school performance. Taken together, each of these cultural and structural explanations offers a unique and important lens to view the educational experiences of Black males.

Black family pathology. Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard (1994), in their discussion of social science literature concerning African American men, pointed to the fact that literature focusing on issues that face Black males is a relatively recent

phenomenon that began in the latter half of the 20th century—and that its portrayal of Black males was almost universally negative:

> From the mid-century until the mid-1970s this literature tended to focus on dysfunctional males and their contributions to what were considered to be the problems of Black families, the legacies of slavery and their impact on Black males (e.g., the killing off of the most assertive and smartest males, the disruption of family relations, the distortion of cultural traditions), and the continuing deprivation of opportunities for Black males to exercise responsibility for themselves and their families. (p. 508)

The pathological view adopted by early scholars who researched Black families and Black males in particular is evidenced in the writings of the late sociologist and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), who explored what he called the "tangle of pathology" in Black families (p. 1). Central to the thesis of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* which has become known as the Moynihan Report, was the idea that "the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure, which because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 1). Although Moynihan acknowledged the impact of slavery on Black families, his assertion that the Negro community's structure was "out of line with the rest of the American society" was cause for concern. Moynihan did not adequately address the structural realities that place Black men at a disadvantage. While he was correct that Black men were falling behind Black women in their level of educational attainment, he did little to probe the social and the political realities at every stage of Black men's existence that made—and still make—it difficult for us to receive quality educational opportunities.

Similarly, his report did nothing to offer suggestions about how to counter longstanding social, political, and educational practices that functioned to systematically dehumanize and emasculate Black males. Moynihan's analysis, while a breakthrough for its time, missed an opportunity to highlight the structural barriers that impeded Black males' educational experiences.

Brown and Donnor (2011), in their discussion of Black males, education, and public policy, pointed out that as a result of the Moynihan Report, "the 'absent father' and its effects on Black boys [became] the central focus of the discussion about the African American family." Moynihan (1965) viewed families where Black fathers were absent as a "subculture" and he argued that these families were "placed at a distinct disadvantage" (p. 1). Again, Moynihan's critique was flawed because it failed to consider how the social and political context of the time created realities that made it difficult for Black males to both remain in the home and provide for the well-being of their families. As William Ryan (1976) rightly argued in his critique of the Moynihan Report:

> If we are to believe the new ideologies, we must conclude that segregation and discrimination are not the terrible villains we thought they were. Rather, we are told the Negro's condition is due to his "pathology," his values, the way he lives, the kind of family life he leads. The major qualification—the bow to egalitarianism—is that these conditions are said to grow out of the Negro's history of being enslaved and oppressed—generations ago. (p. 73)

Ryan's words capture how a failure to examine the impact of both racism and social policy on Black families led Moynihan to make inaccurate claims about Black family

life. Unfortunately, Moynihan's claims helped perpetuate a narrative about Black males and Black families that was not grounded in the truth of their reality.

The post-Moynihan discussion of Black males continued to take on an increasingly negative tone. As Brown and Donner (2011) pointed out:

> While different methodologies and approaches to make sense of the cultural context of African American males emerged from the 1960s through the 1970s, the policy narrative of the impoverished Black family and the emasculated Black male remained the fundamental belief among scholars concerned with promoting policies to address African American poverty. (p. 19)

The result of this policy narrative is reflected in a book edited by Jewelle Taylor Gibbs entitled *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* (1987). In her description of an endangered species, Gibbs (1987) wrote:

> An endangered species is, according to Webster, "a class of individuals having common attributes and designated by a common name . . . [which is] in danger or peril of probable harm or loss." This description applies in a metaphorical sense, to the current status of young black males in contemporary American society. They have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system, and mistreated by the social welfare system. All the major institutions of American society have failed to respond appropriately and effectively to their multiple needs and problems. As a result, they have become—in an unenviable and unconscionable sense—rejects of our affluent society and misfits in their own communities. (pp. 1–2)

Nearly 30 years after her book was published, Gibbs' description of the realities faced by Black males remains dishearteningly accurate. Though the language of "endangered" is not used as readily as it once was, there continues to be an overwhelming sense that

Black males face an uphill climb and that their prospects for educational, social and political mobility are dim. As Anderson (2008) argued:

> [Black males'] social trajectory leads from the community to the prison or the cemetery, or at least to a life of trouble characterized by unemployment, discrimination and participation in what many are inclined to view as oppositional culture. (p. 6)

The reality of this trajectory continues to negatively impact Black male students and has functioned to decrease their opportunities for educational success.

Structural inequalities. Discussions of Black male students' academic achievement must grapple with the institutional policies and practices that impact their access to quality educational experiences. Wilson (2012), in his discussion of the structural factors that impact inner-city Black males, pointed to a plethora of inequalities that work against this group. Specifically, he discussed how "rigid district bureaucracies, poor morale among teachers and school principals, low expectations for students, and negative ideologies that justify poor student performance" (Wilson, 2012, p. 71) work together to create academic environments that lead to poor academic and employment outcomes for students. Wilson's discussion underscores the need for broader conversations about the barriers that impede Black males' opportunities for educational success. Specifically, he challenged his readers to wrestle with the problems of urban poverty and how the failure to address inequitable class distinctions contributes to the maintenance of school environments that fail to educate adequately Black students. This is similar to Massey, and Denton's (1998) and Kozol's (1992, 2005) examinations of

class difference, which shed light on how poverty operates to maintain neighborhoods and school environments that are deleterious to Black children's educational attainment.

Cultural ecological theory. John Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (CET) offers yet another theoretical lens that scholars have used to consider the academic achievement of Black males. According to Ogbu (1978), Blacks' status as involuntary or caste-like minorities leads to forms of social and cultural oppression that manifests in many Black students' failure to achieve academically. Faced with the prospect of limited job prospects and little opportunity for social mobility, Black students dismiss the importance of the need for high academic achievement. In so doing, "they compare themselves with whites whom they see as having more job opportunities for no other reason than their color" (Ogbu, 1978, p. 188). Ogbu (1978) argued that as a result of this comparison, many Black students "become disillusioned about the future and doubtful about the value of schooling" (p. 188). While Ogbu acknowledged not all students respond in this way, his implication was that the overwhelming majority fail to see the need to invest in an education that will yield few opportunities for future employment (1978).

In addition to limited job opportunities, Ogbu identified school structure as a significant barrier to Black students' achievement. His discussion of school structure was a critique of James Coleman's 1966 report to the U.S. Senate Select Committee, which identified students' home environments as the major barrier to educational equity. Ogbu (1987) theorized that "schools contribute to the academic problems of minority children intentionally and unintentionally because they operate according to the norms of American society and according to the norms of the communities in which they exist" (p.

319). In this way, schools reproduce social and economic injustices that are based on issues of race and class stratification, and they likewise reinforce existing systems of power and privilege. Teachers and school administrators alike become complicit in a system that diminishes the unique forms of cultural expression that minoritized students bring to the learning environment and, as a result, numerous Black students are unfairly tagged with labels that place them outside of what is typically identified as "mainstream" (Blanchett, 2006). Ogbu (1987) pointed out that "the failure of school personnel to understand and respect minority children's culturally learned behaviors often results in conflicts that obstruct children's adjustment and learning" (p. 319). His critique placed the blame for this gap in cultural appreciation and understanding squarely on the schools. It would follow, then, that schools and school personnel should be the ones who move to close this gap by learning and adhering to culturally sensitive practices that validate students' culture.

CET, while not impermeable to critique, represents a significant development in thinking with respect to Black students' academic achievement. Prior to Ogbu, theorists tended to link Blacks' academic performance to genetic inferiority (Jensen, 1969) and cultural deprivation (Deutsch, 1967; Gottlieb & Ramsey, 1967). Such theories reduce Black students' lack of school success to skin color and unfortunately subscribe to a view of Black people and Black culture as inferior to the standards set by members of the dominant society. CET pushes the conversation on Black achievement past issues of inferiority and highlights the importance of how social factors impact academic performance. The strength of CET rests in the fact that it seeks to "link the structural

conditions of life in this country to [the] . . . lived experiences on the part of minorities in U.S. public schools" (O'Connor, Horvat, & Lewis, 2006, p. 7). CET's focus on issues of social, economic, and racial injustice, particularly as they relate to the "job ceiling" for Blacks, underscores the need for educators to adopt a multi-dimensional approach as they consider how to address issues related to Black students' success.

While CET makes an important connection between academic performance and lived experience, one must be careful not to use CET to narrowly categorize Black peoples' lived experience. Like members of all racial groups, Blacks live nuanced lives that are impacted by a range of demographic and social factors. The Black experience is not monolithic, and any theory that attempts to explain Black academic achievement must acknowledge within-group difference. In addition to race, issues of gender, social capital, and cultural capital should be considered in any discussion of Black students' school success.

The "Acting White" Hypothesis

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) drew heavily on CET in their formulation of the "acting white" hypothesis. Popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the acting white hypothesis states that Black students develop a collective identity which "at the social level . . . discourage[s] their members from putting forth the time and effort required to do well in school and from adopting the attitudes and standard practices that enhance academic success" (p. 183). This hypothesis suggests that it is almost impossible for Black students to have intrinsic motivation towards high academic standards and school success. Furthermore, the hypothesis suggests that Black people's achievement

orientation is based solely on the standards adopted by members of dominant society. Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) analysis took a deficit-based approach towards "Blackness" and assumed that Black students and those who are a part of Black culture do not have values and standards that promote high academic achievement. Such claims run counter to research which shows that Black people have historically demonstrated a commitment to educational growth and advancement (Anderson, 1988). What's more, Fordham and Ogbu's research suggests that Blacks naturally have negative attitudes towards academic achievement while offering little discussion of the institutional forces that help shape these attitudes. Specifically, by locating their discussion of achievement in whiteness, Fordham and Ogbu failed to address adequately how schools' structure functions to validate the experiences and the knowledge of one group of students over another. Consequently, Fordham and Ogbu's inattention to structural inequity diminishes their claim that Black students act white because their hypothesis fails to take seriously the role of context in one's ability to learn.

Harper (2006), in interviews with high-achieving Black males at six predominantly white universities, found that peer groups functioned as a critical source of support and encouragement for students' academic achievement. Rather than labeling their peers as acting white, other Black students "encouraged the high-achievers, supported their leadership, and applauded their successes. In fact, the participants unanimously cited support from their African American peers as essential to their success in college" (Harper, 2006, p. 352). Furthermore, the students reported that the

encouragement they received started in high school and extended to their undergraduate peer groups (Harper, 2006).

Similar to Harper (2006), Stinson (2010), who also interviewed young, high-achieving Black males, found that the fear of acting white had little impact on their thoughts about academic success. The young men in Stinson's (2010) study, like those interviewed by Harper (2006), embraced their Black identity, and "none . . . equated school and academic success or success in general as anything but being successful; it was not equated with White, Black, Asian, Latino/a and so forth" (p. 59). The findings of both Harper (2006) and Stinson (2010) demonstrate that Black students have an achievement orientation that is not predicated on white standards of achievement, but rather on their own desire to be good students. Furthermore, the collective identity of the participants in both studies promoted high achievement and high academic standards. As such, one can argue that collective identity, while it may have negative consequences, can function to positively influence Black students' desire to do well and excel in school.

This positive impact of collective identity counters Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) claim that "the burden of acting white becomes heavier when academically able black students face both pressures from blacks [sic] peers to conform, and doubts from whites about their ability" (p. 199). Interestingly, although the students in Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) study feared being teased and called such names as "brainiac" or "pervert brainiac," subsequent research, much like that of Harper (2006) and Stinson (2010), supports Datnow and Cooper's (1997) claim that "African American students . . . develop[ed] criteria for success within their peer group that rewarded an academic

orientation yet reaffirmed the students' cultural identity as African Americans" (p. 59). Even in studies where students were cautious about openly sharing their academic success for fear of being teased and called names, high-achieving students were still able to find peer groups that developed a collective identity that promoted and affirmed a positive orientation towards school success (Horvat & Lewis, 2003). This practice, referred to as *sharing success,* "refers to [students'] willingness to reveal their academic success among like-minded peers. It also encompasses the ways in which the participants shared one another's academic success by supporting and taking pride in their peers' accomplishments" (Horvat & Lewis, 2003, p. 269). Students who "share success" and depend on their peers for affirmation and positive support demonstrate that Black students can achieve academically while simultaneously identifying with Black culture. Thus, academic achievement and identification with Black culture are not mutually exclusive as Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) theories would suggest.

Stereotype threat. Claude Steele's discussion of stereotype threat provides a framework to consider how labels, particularly those that relate to Black students, function to negatively impact academic performance. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) defined stereotype threat as "the concrete, real time threat of being judged and treated poorly in settings where a negative stereotype about one's group applies" (p. 112). Students who experience stereotype threat are disadvantaged in that their academic strengths and potential tend to be overlooked and because they face constant pressure to disprove the negative stereotypes that exist about them. Research suggests that the pressure to defy stereotypes can in some instances lead to decreased academic

performance (Spencer, 1999; Steele, 1997). Oyserman, Brickman, and Rhodes (2007), in their discussion of the impact stereotypes have on academic performance, reported that "middle and high school students are at risk of . . . incorporating stereotypes about their group as self-defining and thus relevant to their future possibilities" (p. 94). They cited research by Hudley and Graham (2001) that suggests "Latino and African American boys' assessment of their own chances for future success matched their low assessment of their racial-ethnic group as a whole" (Oyserman et al., 2007, pp. 94–95). Similarly, Perry, Steele, and Hilliard (2003) pointed out that in the case of "those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening" (p. 164).

The impact of stereotype threat is of great concern when one considers its impact on minorities and on Black males in particular. Discussions about smart Black males must undertake a critical analysis of how negative stereotypes about this group influence their interactions with teachers and other school personnel. As Noguera (2008) stated:

> The stereotypical images we hold towards groups are powerful in influencing what people see and expect of students. Unless educators consciously try to undermine and work against these kinds of stereotypes, they often act on them unconsciously. . . . Assumptions related to race are so deeply entrenched that it is virtually impossible . . . not to hold them unless we take conscious deliberate action. (p. 11)

Noguera's call for deliberate action underscores the need for culturally competent educators who seek to understand how stereotypes work to "racialize and marginalize [Black males] and structure their learning process, social opportunities, life chances, and

educational outcomes" (James, 2011, p. 467). Educators who seek to answer these questions broaden their definition of intelligence and likewise develop a sense of how the acknowledgement of a students' cultural background can positively impact their academic performance.

Even as Black males face a plethora of negative stereotypes about their ability to perform academically, their cultural background, and their general place in U.S. society, many demonstrate both the resolve and the perseverance to become high achievers. As a consequence, the young men's "academic resilience runs counter to . . . broader narratives [about Black males who are] not supposed to graduate with honors, be college bound and earn prestigious scholarships" (Gayles, 2005, p. 257). These Black males, rather than accept negative stereotypes about their personhood, seek to disprove that they are intellectually inferior to their white counterparts. For the young men who fall into this group, negative stereotypes associated with Black male achievement become objects of motivation rather than instruments of social and psychological control. Rather than accept negative stereotypes about Black male achievement, Black males who seek to defy stereotypes see "themselves as academicians, as studious, and as intelligent or talented in school settings" (Whiting, 2009, p. 227). Indeed, Gayles (2005), in his study of resilience among high-achieving Black males, pointed out that the achievement orientation of the young men he studied "was a response to the 'hegemonic narratives of everyday life' that address race, place, schooling, and the value and purpose of academic achievement" (p. 257). Although faced with the criminalization of the Black male image and low academic expectations, these young men resolve that high academic achievement is not some

foreign idea beyond their reach. Similar to Gayles, Stinson (2008) found that the counter-stories—that is, stories that stand outside of the master-narrative—of academically successful Black males reveal that they “accommodate, resist, or even reconfigure negative sociocultural discourses as they embrace those discourses that are positive” (p. 991). In both instances, the young men’s willingness to resist negative stereotypes propels them to rise above predetermined conceptions about their academic potential. Through the use of negative stereotypes as intrinsic motivation, participants in both studies demonstrate a sense of agency that allows them to redefine deficit-based ideas about their academic potential in favor of scholarly identities that both highlight and celebrate their achievement orientation.

Thorough knowledge and insight regarding the various suppositions used to explain Black student achievement function as a critical component to any research that wishes to explore Black males’ academic identity. One’s ability to understand this fact is fundamental to the design of research that seeks to offer a holistic approach to discussions of Black male students’ academic success. Howard (2013b) highlighted the fact that in his research on the educational challenges Black males face, “the terms that frequently came up . . . were phrases such as at-risk, endangered, remedial, in crisis, ineducable, extinct, and left behind” (p. 57). He went on to point out how “much of the literature has fallen short in providing a more holistic and affirming account of Black males in schools” (p. 57). Similarly, Howard and Reynolds (2013) argued that a major “limitation with the work on Black males has been a failure to unpack what it means to be *Black* and *male*” (p. 233).

The importance of racial identity. A strong sense of racial and ethnic identity is connected to the achievement identity of many smart Black male students. Despite awareness of the stereotypes associated with Black people and with Black males in particular, research reveals that smart Black males typically embrace their racial and ethnic heritage in ways that draw on the strengths of the Black community. Rather than viewing Blackness as something to shy away from, these Black males see their race as something to celebrate. Wright (2011), in his study of five eleventh- and twelfth-grade academically successful Black males, found that all of the boys exhibited a strong academic and ethnic identity. The boys did not distinguish their status as Black males from their academic success, and they associated good grades and high scholastic achievement with being "cool" (Wright, 2011). Similarly, Graham and Anderson (2008) pointed out that the Black males in their study "demonstrated a strong connection to their ethnicity, which seemingly strengthened their academic identity" (p. 484). These examples support research (Spencer et al., 2001) that suggests Black students who have a strong racial and ethnic identity are also successful academically. Moreover, these examples raise questions about Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) acting white hypothesis, which argues that Black students resist academic achievement for fear of acting white. Graham and Anderson (2008), in fact, highlighted that in their study, "Rather than 'acting white', [their] participants found 'Blackness' as a source of strength and inspiration. . . . [They] chose to exhibit positive behaviors of what they believed 'Blackness' was such as being visible and outspoken in the public eye, an undying and tireless work ethic, and a desire to serve their communities as servant leaders" (p. 493).

Spencer, Stoltzfus, and Harpalani (2001), in their work on identity and Black student performance, demonstrated that Black students' achievement orientation correlates with a positive view of Black culture and Black heritage. In so doing, they argue "that a lack of high Eurocentricity is associated with better achievement performance and particular components of self-esteem process" (Spencer et al., 2001, p. 29). Black students who adopt an *Afrocentric cultural orientation*, or what Asante (1991) defines as "a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person" (p. 171), recognize the importance of the Black experience in their educational experiences. Specifically, rather than acquiesce and accept the Black experience as inferior to the Eurocentric paradigms that dominate public school curriculums, these students locate their experiences "inside history, culture, science, and so forth rather than outside these subjects" (Asante, 1991, p. 172). In this way, they challenge "mainstream" ideas about Black intelligence and, more importantly, learn to function within an educational framework that emphasizes their strengths.

Black males' development of a strong sense of racial identity is important because the Black male image is under constant assault and Black males are continually degraded by social, political, and educational systems that do not acknowledge their contributions to the larger society (Noguera, 2008). This reality stems from the fact that African Americans in general have to "resolve prejudicial attitudes from society and . . . they must resolve an adoption of two differing sets of values, one from the majority culture and the other from their own minority one" (Corbin & Pruitt, 1999, p. 70). The conflict between these two value orientations creates a dissonance that challenges many Black

people to balance their lives between two worlds. Unfortunately, because Black cultural orientations are rarely if ever accepted by "mainstream" society, Black people sometimes develop a lack of appreciation for who they are and for the strengths associated with their culture. In the case of Black males, their ability to overcome the constant assault on their character involves building positive relationships with positive role models, teachers, and family members who affirm their identity and encourage them to embrace the richness of their culture. In this way, they receive the reinforcement and support necessary to be successful academically and they learn to affirm their culture and their race.

Conclusion

The current and past literature that examines Black male student achievement offers an important point of departure to think about my research. The theories and the perspectives used to explain Black male student achievement offer me critical insight as I consider how Black male achievement has been historically understood. While much has been written about the barriers to Black male student success, there continues to be a need for research that examines Black male students' experiences in K-12 settings and how these experiences shape Black males' understanding of their academic identity.

Drawing on the work that has already been done, this dissertation centers the voices and the experiences of Black male students in ways that allow them to share how their life and their educational experiences inform each other. Both my observations and conversations with the young men who participated in this research focused on who they are as both individuals and students. I sought to create a space that allowed participants to tell me how they view themselves and to likewise tell me how they understand what it

means to be "smart." I recognize the importance of research that explains the educational and social realities that Black males face, and I recognize the importance of and the need for scholarship that allows Black male students to share from the depth of their lived experiences. This dissertation adds to the existing literature on Black males by doing just that. Each student guided me through his own lived experience in ways that allowed me to gain new perspectives about how Black males understand and name the realities that impact how they view, school, education, and what it means to live as a Black male. The depth of the students' stories offers several important perspectives for thinking about how to improve educational outcomes for Black male students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: USING CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND AFROCENTRICITY TO INTERPRET THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS

Seeds of My Epistemology: Building Toward a Theoretical Framework

My study of Black males has been a personal journey that has compelled me to reflect on my experiences with both school and education. As a formally educated, Black male who grew up in a working- to middle-class family, I learned early on the importance of getting a "good education" so I could "make it out of" my racially divided, small, rural community. My mother and my aunts taught me that education was my "ticket" and that once I got my degree, no one could take it away from me. They did not want me to be stuck in "little Washington," as my hometown in North Carolina is sometimes called, with a dead-end job and no prospects for advancement or what they considered meaningful employment.

Not only did my mom and my aunts push me to get a good education, they also talked openly about their own struggles growing up in a rural, racist community, and they reminded me to always remember that I am a Black male in the United States. They were open about how they believed racism impacted the lives and the opportunities available to Black people, both in our community and in the nation. I was told that I had to be ten times better than white people to get ahead, and I was taught to be suspicious of white people and anything that white people controlled. My mom and my aunts were born

during segregation and, at some point in their lives, all but one of them attended segregated schools. They grew up watching my grandparents sharecrop and they were often required to help in the fields. As such, they were well acquainted with racism and understood the need to “stay in their place.” To be clear, they did not teach me to fear white people; rather they imparted to me a keen sense of awareness with respect to the realities Black people in America experience on a daily basis.

I share this background because it is relevant to how I have come to know and to understand the world. Both my mother and my aunts continue to play an important role in my life. I came of age nurtured by these women who themselves came of age in the segregated South. The loss of my father at age four left me with few examples of what it meant to be a Black man. As a consequence, I leaned on, depended on, and trusted the “sistas” to teach me what I needed to know to survive. They schooled me on how to navigate life and they gave me the tools to negotiate the rough terrain that I face as a Black male. Their lessons continue to resonate with me and likewise help inform how I understand, see, and know the world.

The lessons taught to me by my family, coupled with my experiences as an adult Black male, have led me to adopt an epistemological orientation that relies heavily on Afrocentricity and critical race theory (CRT). Together, both of these theories operate to form the theoretical framework for this study. Both Afrocentricity and CRT centralize the importance of race in any conversation and both use the experiences of Black people as the point of analysis. Similarly, they “both offer new discourses about the ways that people of color have been historically marginalized and oppressed in a race-obsessed

society that privileges white over Black" (Lynn, 2004, p. 162). Both Afrocentricity and CRT are liberatory epistemologies in that they recognize the subjective experiences of Black people as important points of analysis. As such, both Afrocentricity and CRT provide important points of departure for analyzing and understanding the experiences of the Black males in this study. In this chapter, I discuss how I hold Afrocentricity and CRT in conversation with each other as I analyze what each study participant shared with me. In so doing, I pay particular attention to how my theoretical framework helped me think about my approach to this research. I discuss the specific methods I used, why I used those methods, and how I ultimately decided to analyze my data. I offer an explanation of why I believe my work is credible as I discuss my efforts to maintain both trustworthiness and rigor as I worked to accurately represent the thoughts, actions, behaviors, feelings, ideas, and beliefs of the 14 young men who allowed me to enter their lives. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of my positionality and subjectivity.

Afrocentricity—Centering Black Males' Educational Experiences

Defined by Asante (1991) "as a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person," Afrocentricity seeks to make the African experience the center of any point of analysis (p. 171). Here it is important to point out that Asante (2003) used the term *African* to refer to both native-born Africans as well as Blacks/Africans throughout the Diaspora. Sefa Dei (1994) advanced this idea when he wrote that Afrocentricity "is about Africans taking up their right to the experiences of the continent, the enjoyment of their culture, the celebrating of their historicities, and the continued survival and togetherness of African peoples, irrespective

of where they have decided to reside" (p. 5). The move to put the African experience front and center demands that African people be viewed as subjects and not objects and that their experiences be understood from a place of strength. In this way, we come to understand the African experience as valuable and worthy of respect. Asante (1991) argued that this fact is particularly salient for Black students because

> by seeing themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of education—be the discipline biology, medicine, literature, or social studies—African American students come to see themselves not merely as seekers of knowledge but as integral participants in it. (p. 171)

As a consequence, Black students "can be made to see themselves as centered in the reality of any discipline" (Asante, 1991, p. 171). Efforts to help Black students recognize the critical role they have played and continue to play in education are fundamental to the development of pedagogy that offers an alternative to the hegemonic discourses perpetuated by white, Western educational practices.

Afrocentricity's critique of and rejection of Western discourse arises out of a desire to help Africans understand how white values and cultural norms are incongruent with the Black experience. When measured against these white values and norms, the experiences and the realities of African people are marginalized such that their voices and their perspectives are not validated by the dominant cultural perspective. The Afrocentric perspective, with its commitment to "[place] Africa at the center of the African people's world while stressing all people's entitlement to practice and celebrate their own culture as long as it does not interfere with the collective well-being," seeks to extricate African

people as well as members of the dominant culture from this deficit-based cultural narrative (Mazama, 2001, p. 389). The emphasis on the African experience underscores the need for *narratives of inclusion*—those that allow the voices and the cultural understandings of all people to be both valued and acknowledged. These narratives of inclusion challenge the supposed primacy of any discourse that seeks to place itself as the standard against which all other voices should be measured. In the case of the current research endeavor, the Afrocentric perspective enables me as the researcher "to put African ideals and values at the center of inquiry and . . . [to] analyze and criticize the rules governing Eurocentric inquiry that prevent accurate explanations of African and other non-European experiences" (Reviere, 2001, p. 713). In this way, the research brings attention to the voices of those who are overlooked in favor of the dominant narrative.

The use of Afrocentricity demands that the researcher think critically about the role of race in the production of knowledge. Afrocentric scholars recognize that the voices and perspectives of Eurocentric scholars are privileged in ways that marginalize the voices of Black people. As Reviere (2001) argued:

> There is a widespread refusal by most non-Afrocentric scholars to acknowledge that race can and does influence the construction of knowledge. This refusal to acknowledge the influence of race on knowledge construction finds it unremarkable that the Black presence is invisible in theories relating race to intelligence, for example. (p. 718)

Afrocentricity's intentional focus on race challenges me to explore more deeply every interaction to see how it is racialized and reminds me to keep in perspective that what the students shared with me cannot be disconnected from their experiences as Black people.

For someone like myself who was taught to always be mindful of the impact of race in every interaction, "the epistemological implications of Afrocentricity are far reaching [and] its applications are endless" (Mazama, 2001, p. 393). Asante (2003) advances this point with the following statement:

> Afrocentricity questions your approach to every conceivable human enterprise. It questions the approach you make to reading, writing, jogging, running, eating, keeping healthy, seeing, studying, loving, struggling and working. (p. 57)

In this way, it is an all-encompassing perspective that serves as a guide for how I see and read the world.

Countering the Majority: Critical Race Theory and the Need for New Perspectives

CRT's recognition of the "permanence of racism" in American society offers an important perspective to consider in my methodological approach (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Specifically, critical race theory advances a strategy to

> account for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25)

I selected CRT because like West (1993), I believe *Race Matters* and any effort to address many of the educational inequities prevalent in public schools must begin with a conversation about race. The failure to talk about race and racism and the impact of both on the educational outcomes of Black and Brown students stymies conversations about how to address educational inequities in public education. For example, Love (2010), in

her discussion of the "achievement gap," wrote that "CRT provides a useful theoretical framework for an examination of the current discussion of differences in academic achievement between African American and white children, as well as the context for . . . categorizing the 'achievement gap' discussion as majoritarian storytelling" (p. 228). Her discussion calls attention to the fact that research on Black students often fails to consider the academic strengths of this group. Specifically, she pointed out that the

> tools used in the construction of majoritarian stories serve to obscure white privilege and cause it to appear as normal, natural, and ordinary. These tools include such devices as fostering invisibility, making assumptions of what is normative and universal, promoting the perspective that schools are neutral and apolitical, promoting the myth of meritocracy, endorsing the notion that there is equal educational opportunity for all, [and] referencing dominants as "people" while "othering" subordinates. (Love, 2010, p. 229)

The use of CRT makes it clear when stories are majoritarian and offers an important lens from which to think about and to analyze the perspectives and the experiences of the students who participated in my research. Additionally, the use of CRT helps ensure that the students' voices remain the central element of analysis.

CRT's recognition of the need to tell counter-stories makes it an excellent framework to link with Afrocentricity. Specifically, Afrocentricity's focus on the centrality of the African experience aligns well with CRT's recognition of the need to share narratives that "can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2008, p. 32). Defined as "writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority," counter-stories shed light on "the contradictions inherent in

the dominant storyline that, among other things, blames people of color for their own condition of inequality" (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011, p. 5). Counter-stories, also called counter-narratives, offer alternatives to majoritarian norms and beliefs and expose the reality that peoples' stories, shaped by history, context, and lived experience, are not neutral. When members of marginalized groups are asked to tell their stories, they are invited to participate in the naming of the uniqueness of their experience. Moreover, they are encouraged to recognize how their experiences are important and worthy of consideration and respect both inside and outside of their specific community. Their voices are inscribed into a larger narrative that seeks to expand the conversation about the richness and the diversity of different people's experiences. This larger narrative

> challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color. It exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2008, p. 26)

In his discussion of "storytelling for oppositionists," Delgado (1989) stated that "the stories or narratives told by the ingroup remind it of its identity in relation to outgroups, and provide it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural" (p. 2412). He went on to argue that "the stories of outgroups aim to subvert the ingroup reality" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413). The subversive nature of counter-stories functions to call into question practices that seek to maintain systems of oppression and likewise positions the voices of the oppressed in ways that act to liberate

them from the various forms of institutional discrimination and social violence associated with dominant narratives. Research that uses counter-narratives makes a "deliberate choice to see the world from the point of view of socially subjugated groups" (Duncan, 2006, p. 106). In this way, counter-stories are political because they expose the privileged attitudes and behaviors associated with master-narratives. They are also activist, because they "[offer] a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender and class oppression" (Yosso, 2006, p. 74). When told, counter-stories defy the "norms" and the assumptions associated with master-narratives in favor of stories that create alternative spaces to understand and interpret the world.

At their core, counter-stories function to upend racism as well as any other "ism" used to marginalize specific groups of people. The use of such stories allows those who are oppressed to make their realities the central component of any meaningful discussion and analysis. Any analysis of counter-stories must be undertaken with the recognition that "it is crucial to focus on the intersections of oppression because storytelling is racialized, gendered, and classed and these stories affect racialized, gendered, and classed communities" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 31).

Although it is important not to underemphasize the importance of race as I report the stories of each participant, it is equally important to remain cognizant of how their stories embody not just race but also a specific gendered and classed narrative. For example, in her discussion of the educational experiences of Chicana college women, Delgado Bernal (2006) writes, "It becomes clear how the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism forms systems of subordination that create a different range of educational

options for Chicanas" (p. 116). The "options" Delgado Bernal mentions are not only a function of the Chicana students' status as women but reflect their class and race as well. In the same way, the Black males who participated in this study face oppression that is simultaneously raced, gendered, and classed, and such oppression directly impacts their educational experiences.

My use of CRT has challenged me to acknowledge my personal experiences as a Black male whose life has been impacted by majoritarian stories. Because of my own experiences with racism, I am conscious of the fact that the Black males who participated in this study live in environments that dehumanize their existence based in part on the color of their skin. CRT offered me the opportunity to conduct my research in ways that allowed me to talk openly with the participants about our shared experience. Specifically, several of the students gave me a knowing look when sharing experiences that they perceived as motivated by racism. Their eyes often searched mine for signs of commonality and/or affirmation. I was able to affirm the students' perspectives by sharing similar experiences or by simply encouraging them to talk openly about race. As a consequence, I was able to affirm the impact of racism in the participants' lived experience. When Ms. Diggins and I met after the conclusion of my study, she shared with me that that the students in her classes who I interviewed told her that my transparency was a key reason they wanted to speak with me. She commented that a number of the participants remarked that they never had someone come to school to talk with them about their personal lives or about their experiences in school. My conversation with Ms. Diggins reaffirmed my decision to use CRT and at the same time

underscored my desire to employ a framework that offered the students an opportunity to share their subjective experiences.

Black Males and Intersectionality

The use of CRT in the study of Black males is important because of its emphasis on intersectionality. Defined by Delgado and Stefancic (2012) as "the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings" (p. 57), intersectionality offers a lens to view how "racism, sexism, homophobia, and class-based discrimination, do not act independently of one another; instead these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the 'intersection' of multiple forms of exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination" (Howard & Reynolds, 2013, p. 234).

Intersectionality is particularly salient for this study when one considers the negative images associated with Black masculinity. The ubiquitous nature of media images that portray Black males as hyper-sexualized brutes and uneducated, senseless athletes must be understood in terms of their impact on how Black male intelligence is perceived (Collier & Bush, 2012). Because school environments tend to reflect the values and the beliefs of the people in the communities in which they are situated as well as the values and the beliefs of people in the larger society, the need exists for a conversation that probes how these communal and societal beliefs impinge on Black males' opportunities for academic success. Intersectionality sets the stage for such a conversation and opens the door to "problematize what it means to be Black in a White supremacist society and to be located as a subordinate, yet also what it means to be male

in a patriarchal society, where there are clear advantages of being male, yet not on the same level as other males" (Howard & Reynolds, 2013, p. 242). The privilege and oppression associated with an individual's status as a Black male is filled with many nuances that complicate discussions of Black male students' academic success. Efforts to understand the multifaceted and multi-layered experiences of Black male students, however, must not avoid these often difficult but necessary conversations.

The use of intersectionality is particularly important with respect to this study because most of the participants reported living in working-class and low-income communities of color. Several of the students commented that Stokes is a "poor" school and that the school is considered poor because most of the students who attend the school live in low-income housing projects. More than half of the students talked openly about their dislike for Stokes and some admitted to being ashamed of telling people what school they attend. Several of the students pointed out that because Stokes's student population is comprised largely of racial minorities, they do not believe the school receives the same funding as predominantly white schools in the district. The students' description of Stokes as a "poor" school and their ability to highlight what they viewed as unfair school funding underscored their recognition of the political and social realities associated with living in a low-income community.

The use of CRT compelled me to think beyond just issues of race and gender to also consider the structural nature of intersectionality. Defined by Howard and Reynolds (2013) as "the creation, operation, maintenance, and synthesis of various systems and structures in society that maintain privilege for some groups or individuals while

restricting or denying the rights and privileges of others" (p. 241), structural intersectionality offers a guide to examine how issues of poverty and the disproportionate distribution of resources function to keep individuals in low-income communities from having opportunities for upward mobility.

Critiquing Liberalism and Colorblindness

Liberalism and colorblindness are two primary components of the master-narrative that CRT critiques. Concerned with the ideals of "equality, freedom, individual rights and meritocracy . . . [l]iberalism equates the 'rights of man' with individual liberty and property rights, as well as with the freedom to pursue one's self-interest unrestrained or unfettered by government intervention" (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 15). Colorblindness, an idea that arises out of liberalism, "suggests that today everybody enjoys equal treatment without regard to race" (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 21). Taken together, both liberalism and colorblindness operate to sustain educational environments that fail to include the experiences of students of color. As a result, Black students and other students of color are forced to learn in school contexts that ignore how race impacts learning. For example, Yosso (2006) discussed how "deficit thinking" is used in many public schools to marginalize the experiences of minoritized children. She defines deficit thinking as an approach that "takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education" (Yosso, 2006, p. 75). Additionally, according to Yosso, such "schooling efforts usually aim to fill up supposedly passive students with forms of

cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society" (2006, p. 75). As a consequence, teachers fail to gain insight into the "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 1995) and other forms of cultural knowledge their students bring to the classroom. Students educated in public school contexts that rely on deficit thinking learn that significant aspects of who they are and what they represent are not valued in school.

Deficit thinking robs students of color of their voice and limits opportunities for them to see both themselves and their culture represented in positive ways. CRT's emphasis on the use of counter-stories gives researchers tools to create contexts that allow research participants to share their experiences in spaces that recognize and affirm the value and the need for multiple perspectives. Specifically, in the case of the current study, the use of CRT presents the opportunity to uncover and to critique the master-narratives associated with Black males in public schools. The young men who shared their stories had an opportunity to share the realities of both their educational and lived experiences and to reflect on how those realities shape their academic trajectories. Moreover, their stories have the potential to call attention to how institutionalized racism negatively impacts their educational experiences. Such stories are critical to social justice efforts that challenge white privilege and that seek to deconstruct master-narratives that perpetuate racist stereotypes about Black male school performance.

Duncan (2010), in his discussion of the use of critical race ethnography in the schooling of adolescent Black males, discussed how "research literature tacitly constructs black males as a strange population and contributes to the widespread perception that their plight in schools is unremarkable" (p. 133). He goes on to state that "the dominant

storyline suggests that black males are too different from other students, and oppositionally so" (Duncan, 2010, p. 133). Duncan's critique of the current literature on Black male adolescents points to the need for research that acknowledges the racism these young men face. Such research must uncover dominant narratives about Black males' school experiences with the recognition that "although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106).

As a Black male researcher who has experienced and continues to experience the constant marginalization of both my history and my experience, I am compelled to consider how the methods I employed offered the space for the study participants tell their stories. I am aware that the participants and I will use the stories they tell to co-construct knowledge about the educational experiences of Black high school males. Here again, I am forced to be introspective in that while I may share similar experiences with the study participants, I must be careful not to assign my own meaning to what the students shared. Rather, I must give students the space to share their stories and together we can negotiate how their stories are told. Both Afrocentricity and CRT operated as critical elements in how I ultimately decided to present the participants' stories because both acknowledge the disconnect that Black male students experience when they enter public school environments. Moreover, both Afrocentricity and CRT contribute to a framework that honors the particularities of the Black experience and that critiques practices and policies that marginalize Black youth.

Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected after I gained access to the school and met with both the principal and the tenth-grade English teachers to determine which classes I would be allowed to observe. I initially began this study with the desire to interview high-achieving Black male students who were in honors courses. Later I decided against interviewing only honors students because I felt that it was important to understand the perspectives of young men at multiple academic levels. I selected English classes because English is a class that all students must take, thus allowing me access to a wide cross-section of possible participants. During my initial visit with the principal, Mr. Harris, he explained that he would not force any of the teachers to give me access to their classrooms. He stated that he would introduce me to all of the tenth-grade teachers and it would be up to them to decide if they wished to meet with me or not. There were three teachers at Stokes who taught tenth-grade English and all three teachers welcomed me into their classes. During my initial meeting with the teachers, each agreed to meet with me. Later, we all agreed that it would be best for me to observe each class for a minimum of three weeks before approaching students about the possibility of participating in interviews and focus groups. The teachers were adamant that the students get a chance to see me and learn a little bit about me before I would be allowed to conduct any individual interviews.

Participant selection occurred in three primary ways. While observing each of the classes, I identified a few specific students who I knew I wanted to interview. For example, when I initially met Keith, I was struck by his presence, demeanor, and

popularity among the students and immediately wanted to know his story. Consequently, I reached out to Ms. Diggins and expressed my desire to speak to Keith about participating in this study. Ms. Diggins quickly facilitated a meeting with Keith, at which time I explained the purpose of my research and gave him the consent form. In addition to selections based on my personal observations, I also received suggestions from teachers. While making it clear that I could approach any of their Black male students about the possibility of participating in my study, each teacher suggested specific students to interview. For example, Ms. Diggins strongly recommend that I interview Dwayne, and Ms. Selma commented several times that she thought Danny would be excellent student for me to interview. Both Ms. Diggins and Ms. Ferguson were present when I met with the Black male students in their classes and explained to the students the purpose of my research. In contrast, Ms. Selma suggested that I approach the students in her class individually and she did not request to be present when I met with each student. In addition to selections based on my personal observations and teacher recommendations, students could also self-select to participate. John approached me during one of my visits to the school and asked to be interviewed. He was intrigued by my research and he shared that he would welcome the opportunity to talk with me about his experiences as a Black male. He also mentioned that he had already talked with Ms. Diggins to learn more about why I was observing and interviewing other Black males in his class.

I met with a total of 18 students and explained the purpose of my research and why I wanted to interview them. Of the 18 students I met with, 14 returned their consent

forms. Of the four who did not return their forms, two stated that they wanted to participate but were unable to get their consent forms signed and two stated that they did not wish to participate in the study.

Research Methods

In his book *Writing the New Ethnography,* Goodall (2000) stated:

> At some point it will become clear to you that new ethnographers have an obligation to write about their lives . . . because new ethnographic texts require that your observations and evaluations of others be firmly rooted in a credible, self-reflexive "voice," which is to say a believable, compelling, self-examining narrator. (p. 23)

As I stated in Chapter I, this dissertation is about me. It arises out of my experiences as a Black male and out of my desire to address both the social and educational inequities that impact Black male lives. As I contemplated the most appropriate methods of data collection, I continued to return to ethnography. I realized that I needed to employ a mode of inquiry that would allow me to immerse myself, as much as possible, into the lives of the individuals I studied. I wanted an opportunity not only to interview participants, but to spend time with them in ways that would offer me insight into the realities of their experiences in school. It has been almost 21 years since I graduated from high school, and when I graduated none of the participants had been born yet. As such, it was important for me to "go back to school" so that I could see what the students saw and hear what they heard. Even though I am connected to the participants by race and gender, I needed to be conscious that I did not approach this work as if I "understood" the participants' experience. While there are commonalities between my school experience

and the experiences of each participant, there are also significant differences that challenged me to think about how to interpret my research findings. I needed the students to guide me through the halls of Stokes High School as I set about trying to understand and interpret their school experience. Although I had read much literature about the educational experiences of Black males and although I had my own experiences from which to draw, I maintained a healthy awareness of the need to listen, to watch, and to ask questions when I was unsure or needed clarification.

Data Collection

This study necessitated the use of a combination of 17 approximately one-hour individual interviews, three approximately 90-minute focus groups, document analysis, and observations to collect data. Each method enabled me to approach the research in a manner that offered the opportunity to hear multiple voices and to gain insight into multiple perspectives. Specifically, the use of interviews and focus groups allowed me to understand how the students' definitions and recognitions of what it means to be smart impacted their understanding of their own academic achievement.

The use of interviews acted as a critical component to this study because they allowed me to probe the students about issues and experiences that were critical to my understanding of their school experiences. I regarded each interview as an opportunity for the students to talk openly about the experiences they felt were most important to know and understand. Seidman (2013) pointed out that such openness is important because "at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Although I developed

a list of questions to ask during each interview, I ultimately used them only as a guide because I wanted the students to speak freely about what they thought was important for me to know. As such, I began each interview with an explanation of my personal and professional interest in conducting research with Black males. I then asked the participants to share with me their understanding of what it means to be smart and also whether or not they considered themselves to be smart. In so doing, I paid particular attention to how the students framed their discussion of school and achievement, and I intentionally listened for opportunities to ask the students deeper questions about how they understood the role of race, class, and gender in their school experience. I was careful to remember Glesne's (2011) assertion that "questions may emerge in the course of interviewing and may add to or replace pre-established ones" (p. 102). My flexibility and the use of a semi-structured interview format enabled the students to share their stories, thoughts, and feelings on their terms. The students' ability to share their stories on their own terms made possible discussions that exposed majoritarian narratives and encouraged each student to share the "truth" of their experience in ways that gave them control over the stories they told, the feelings they articulated, and the experiences they shared.

The use of interviews also gave me the opportunity to ask students questions based on data I collected from class observations, interactions I observed in between classes and during lunch, and previous interviews. While I originally hoped to interview each participant twice, time constraints, class schedules, and student testing allowed me to interview only three of the 14 participants a second time. These second interviews

were important, however, in that I was able to share the transcripts of participants' initial interviews during the second interview. This "member check" gave the participants the opportunity to clarify previous comments and expand on thoughts and topics covered during their first interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second interviews also presented me with the opportunity to think through how to explore important issues that were not covered in the initial interviews.

The use of focus groups served as an important component in my data collection, because they offered me the chance to explore, in a more in-depth manner, themes and ideas that emerged during the interviews. Glesne (2011) pointed out the importance of focus groups when she discussed how their use allows researchers "to better understand how a group would discuss some issue and elicit multiple perspectives in the process" (p. 131). I found the three focus groups I conducted useful because they presented an opportunity for structured dialogue that allowed the participants to reflect on and share their experiences in ways that illuminated how different members of the group thought or felt about the specific issues discussed during each focus group. This point is especially salient for this study because before each focus group I showed the students a five-minute clip from the movie *Freedom Writers* (2007). Based on the true story of Erin Gruwell, a white female teacher who took a job teaching at an inner-city high school in Long Beach, California, comprised mostly of Black and Latino students, *Freedom Writers* chronicles Ms. Gruwell's first year teaching an English grammar course and her attempts to connect with a group of students whom other teachers, the principal, and district-level administrators had given up on. In the clip, Ms. Gruwell tries to get the students involved

in a class discussion about literature and when she is unsuccessful, she demands that the students take their education more seriously and become more involved in class. In the movie clip, Ms. Gruwell's admonishment is met with resentment, and the following dialogue ensues:

> **Student Eva:** You don't know nothing! You don't know the pain we feel. You don't know what we got to do. You got no respect for how we living. You got us in here, teaching us this grammar shit, and then we got to go out there again. And what are you telling me about that, huh?
>
> What are you doing in here that makes a goddamn difference to my life?
>
> **Ms. Gruwell:** You don't feel respected. Is that what you're saying, Eva? Well, maybe you're not. But to get respect, you have to give it.
>
> **Student Mario:** That's bullshit. What? Why should I give my respect to you? 'Cause you're a teacher? I don't know you. How do I know you're not a liar standing up there? How do I know you're not a bad person standing up there? I'm not just gonna give you my respect because you're called a teacher.
>
> **Student Eva:** White people always wanting their respect like they deserve it for free.
>
> **Ms. Gruwell:** I'm a teacher. It doesn't matter what color I am.
>
> **Student Eva:** It's all about color. It's about people deciding what you deserve, about people wanting what they don't deserve, about whites thinking they run this world no matter what. You see, I hate white people.
>
> **Ms Gruwell:** You hate me?
>
> **Student Eva:** Yeah.
>
> **Ms. Gruwell:** You don't know me.
>
> **Student Eva:** I know what you can do. I saw white cops shoot my friend in the back for reaching into his pocket! His pocket!! I saw white cops break into my house and take my father for no reason except because they feel like it! Except

> because they can. And they can because they're white. So I hate white people on sight.

I include this dialogue between Ms. Gruwell and the students because it provides context to understand how each of the focus groups began. Following the clip, I asked the students to share their thoughts about the interaction between Mario, Eva, and Ms. Gruwell. All of the students had strong reactions to the clip, which led to lively discussions about race, teacher stereotypes, violence, and the numerous realities associated with being both Black and male. The students shared personal stories of negative interactions with the police as well as stories about how they often feel disrespected by adults both inside and outside of school. The focus group discussions were important because the students were able to listen to their peers' stories and engage in back-and-forth conversation that led to deeply powerful insights.

The initial focus group was conducted after I had observed each class for six weeks. I decided to wait six weeks before conducting the first focus group so that I could get to know the students and likewise give the students the opportunity to get to know me. The second focus group was conducted two weeks after the initial focus group, and the third focus group was conducted two weeks after that. During the intervals between each focus group, I was able to review transcripts from the previous focus groups in an effort to determine the questions I wished to explore further with each new group. As I prepared for each focus group, I consulted with all of the teachers to determine which students would be most appropriate for each group. My consultation with the teachers arose from the fact that Dwayne was adamant that he not be asked to participate in a

focus group with Michael. As such, I relied on the teachers to make sure that I did not group students who were having conflicts or had the potential for conflict if they were in a group together.

An additional element of my data collection included observations of classes, class changes, lunch breaks, and numerous other activities associated with a typical school day. I spent a total of four months at Stokes and during this time period, I visited the school two to three times per week, typically for the entire school day. I often arrived at Stokes early so that I could sit in my car and watch students as their parents dropped them off or as they stood around talking and waiting for the first period bell to ring. From time to time, I would drive through the neighborhood that surrounded Stokes in effort to gain a sense of the rhythms of the community that made up the school's environment. I often saw students walking to or from school or hanging out at the McDonald's next to the school. My observations allowed me to watch how both the students and the teachers positioned themselves with each other and how they positioned themselves in the larger context of the school. The interactions I witnessed were informative because as the students became more accustomed to seeing me in their classes, they would start conversations with me or ask for help with assignments. Some students sought me out during class changes just to talk. Consequently, the students began to view me as a "normal" part of their English class. When I returned after being absent for a day or two, students would ask me where I had been and some wanted to know why I could not come to their classes every day. The sense of familiarity and comfort I gained with the

participants as well as other students in the classes proved invaluable as I negotiated the various interactions I had throughout my time at Stokes.

Document analysis was also an important component of my data collection. Although the Bluetown district's polices on student records prohibited me from reviewing the academic records of each participant, seven of the participants voluntarily showed me their report cards and all of the participants at some point during our interactions gave me the opportunity to review one or more assignments they had written. Some would allow me to read the feedback they received on assignments. For example, in all of the classes I observed, the teachers required the students to keep a journal. Some journal entries were based on students' responses to an assigned prompt, such as the student's beliefs about marriage, religion, the importance of school in their lives, and politics. Students were also given the opportunity to "free write" on a topic of their choice. When free writing, the students often wrote poetry and rap or song lyrics, which they readily shared with me. My review of the students' work allowed me to see their creativity and to understand the multiple different ways they demonstrated their intelligence.

Data Analysis

My data analysis began at the conclusion of my first visit to Stokes. After my initial meeting with the principal and the teachers, I took detailed notes about my initial impressions of the school as well as the people with whom I would have regular interactions. I immediately reviewed my notes in preparation for my upcoming visits and I was careful to make note of additional thoughts and questions that were raised from the

initial meeting. Once I began my weekly observations, I immediately reviewed my field notes at the conclusion of each school visit, and I coded those notes, paying attention to specific observations and interactions that stood out to me. Over time, I began to notice patterns in my field notes, and I kept a record of those patterns in my "notes journal."

Each interview and focus group was recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were coded for themes. Saldana (2013) defined coding as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). The use of codes enables the researcher to "look for patterns, make comparisons, produce explanations and build models" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 78). I found the use of codes essential as I organized all of the data for this study. After I initially coded my data, I categorized my codes as I sought to refine my analysis in an attempt to identify and better understand the most salient themes. Saldana (2013) argued that one should "expect—or rather, strive for— . . . codes and categories to become more refined" (p. 11). My attempts to refine my codes yielded important insights that helped me organize my findings and draw conclusions about what I witnessed in each classroom and heard during all of the interviews and focus groups.

Throughout the research process, I remained conscious of my need to be reflexive as I thought about how to represent the stories I heard as well as the experiences I had the privilege to be a part of. By *reflexive*, I am referring to "the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal" my personal connections to the research (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). I constantly thought about the "lens" through which I see and interpret the world and more importantly, how that lens

influenced the questions I asked and did not ask, the voices I gave prominence, the experiences I left out, the stories I felt most connected to, the relationships I cultivated, the decisions I made about what classes to observe, and the stories that confirmed or disaffirmed my analysis (Bettez, 2012; Goodall, 2000). In addition to asking these questions of myself, I talked often with the teachers, and we spoke openly about our views on education as well as how we understood the student-teacher interactions that took place. I also kept a journal about my experiences.

Research Trustworthiness

I sought to maintain trustworthiness through triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011), member checks (Glesne, 2011), and thick description (Glesne, 2011). Creswell (2013) described triangulation as the process in which "researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence" (p. 251). My use of individual interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis, and debriefing enabled me to examine my data in ways that allowed me to look for themes across the multiple data collection methods I employed. For example, the theme of "stereotyping" was common across each method. Several of the participants wrote in their journals about how they had been followed or stopped by the police because of the community they were in or the group they were hanging out with. When given the opportunity to discuss their journal entries in class, it was not uncommon for the students, especially the Black and Latino students, to discuss specific experiences in which they felt they were being profiled and discriminated against because of their skin color. The theme of being stereotyped was also common in all of the

interviews as well as all three focus groups. As such, I felt that it was both important and necessary to discuss the students' thoughts and feelings about stereotypes in the final analysis.

Although I was not able to interview all of the participants twice, I was able to follow up with most of the students to ask them about comments they made during their initial interviews as well as to ask for clarification about how I interpreted some of their comments. These brief follow-up conversations typically took place prior to the start of class, during lunch, during class, or after school. In some cases, I was able to provide the students with a copy of the interview transcript and ask them to read over it to determine if there was anything they would like to add to what we had already discussed. These member checks were an important tool that helped ensure that I represented students' voices accurately (Creswell, 2013, Seidman, 2013).

Throughout my analysis, I sought to employ thick description so as to ensure that I offered as much context as possible with respect to the setting and the degree of interaction I had with each participant. Denzin (1989) defined thick description "as description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action" (p. 39). The use of thick description allowed me to provide details that are necessary for a thorough and complete interpretation of and understanding of the research environment. My use of thick description also involved the use of data that contradicts my conclusions (Bettez, 2012). In this way, I sought to allow "the reader

to obtain the fullest picture possible in relation to each issue addressed" (Bettez, 2012, p. 16).

A Word on Positionality and Subjectivity

As I reflect on what it means to "write about my life," I must be clear about naming who I am. I position myself in this research as an "insider" (Chavez, 2008). The fact that I am both Black and male means that I entered the research space with some similarities to my research participants. Although we differed in many ways, my participants and I exist in a social context that traditionally has been hostile to Black males no matter their level of academic success. As Noguera (2008) pointed out:

> Throughout much of American history, Black males have served as the ultimate "other." In literature and film, they have been depicted as villains, con men, and feebleminded buffoons. . . . Most often, Black men have been regarded as individuals who should be feared because of their uncontrolled and unrefined masculinity. And their very presence, particularly when they are encountered in groups, has been regarded as a menace to innocents (particularly white women) and a potential danger to the social order. They are a threat that must be policed, controlled, and contained. (p. xi)

Such social stigmatization promotes a continual cycle that functions to sustain academic environments that perpetuate the stereotypical images associated with Black males. As a consequence, Black male students tend to find themselves in hostile K–12 classrooms that fail to acknowledge their unique perspectives and positionalities within the context of mainstream American society.

My status as an "advanced student" also acts as a key aspect of how I position myself. I was placed in advanced courses in my final year of middle school and in all four

years of high school. I often made the honor roll and my teachers, who were most often white, typically referred to me as the "good kid" who they wanted to make sure stayed out of trouble. When I got into a fight with another student in ninth grade, my white male biology teacher told me that he didn't want to see me get into any trouble, because in his words, I was "too good for that." Typically, I was one of only two or three Black students in all of my classes, and teachers constantly affirmed my status as a "smart" kid who had a bright future ahead of him. This reality was confirmed by members of my predominantly white high school's faculty during my senior year when I was one of four Black students selected for the annual Who's Who list.

Even as I share both a common race and gender with my research participants, my status as an advanced student in some ways positioned me more closely with the honors students in my study. Likewise, I had to be aware of how my status as an advanced student could potentially distance me from those study participants who did not excel academically. I was conscious of the fact that even as an insider (due to my status as a Black male), I needed to challenge myself to remember Chavez's (2008) assertion that insiders "need to get into their own heads first before getting into those of participants'; they need to know in which ways they are like their participants and in which ways they are unlike them; they need to know which of their social identities can advantage and/or complicate the process" (p. 491). As such, in my attempt to be critically reflexive throughout my data collection, I was cognizant that my positionality constantly shifted based on my interactions with different participants (Bettez, 2013). My flexibility and willingness to shift as I collected data allowed me to "disclose to [my] readers where self

and subject became joined" (Pillow, 2010, p. 182). In this way, I was able to "'disclose' [my] own subjectivity and write 'unshackled'" (Pillow, 2010, p. 182). Such freedom allowed me to be honest about both my assumptions and my perspectives and about how those assumptions and perspectives impacted how I interpreted, negotiated, and represented the data.

My status as a middle-class, formally educated, Black male from a rural, insular community is another aspect of my positionality that I often thought about during my time at Stokes. Stokes is a poor school, and nine of the 14 participants reported living in low-income communities that they identified as "unsafe" or heavily policed. Several of the students discussed the fact that the police are a constant presence in their communities and that it is sometimes better to not go outside because of the threat of trouble in their communities. As a child, I never felt unsafe. My mother owned our house and we had a big yard with a basketball goal and a storage facility for my bikes and outdoor toys. I had a trail behind my house that my friends and I used for "mud running" (i.e., four wheeling), and whenever I wanted to go down the road to a friend's house to play basketball or ride bikes, I would just yell through the window and tell my mother I was about to leave. Most of my closest friends' parents owned their homes, too, and their homes felt just as safe as mine. The community was close, everybody knew each other, and as a child I felt like everybody trusted each other. I was never concerned about what I was going to eat, where I was going to live, or if I could go outside and play without the fear of being shot or arrested. Home was a safe haven and a place where I did not have to worry.

The relative safety of both my home environment and my community allowed me to focus on school, sports, and friends and not have to worry about where I was going to sleep, how I was going to get the things I needed, and whether or not I was going to live to see the next day. My conversations with many of the participants, teachers, and students in each of the classes I observed, indicated that many of the students often worried about issues and concerns I never considered as a child. Keith told me that he had to take care of his mother and that his home environment was not the best, so he lived with his girlfriend. John mentioned that he mostly stayed inside because his community was not the safest place to live. Tray discussed having to watch his back when he went out at night. Coby stated that his home life was not good because he and his stepfather did not get along. Each of the teachers told me about students who they knew had home lives that impacted their ability to navigate school successfully. Stories of students who had to care for sick parents or practically raise their younger siblings were common. In some cases, students who wanted to participate in this study were unable to do so because of issues at home. Specifically, one student, who held on to his consent form for two months, acknowledged that he wanted to participate in the study but he would be unable to do so because his mother was "doing her own thing" and his father "worked all night." In another case, the student's parents were never home to sign the appropriate forms.

When students shared aspects of their home life with me, I sometimes found it difficult to not pass judgment on their parents. Coby desperately wanted to be an actor, but his family seemed unwilling to help him pursue his dream. Keith wanted to be the

first of his siblings to graduate from high school, but his comments about his mother indicated that she did very little to help him realize his goal. While there were many stories I heard about parents and family members who made extraordinary sacrifices to help their child, niece, or nephew, there were many times that I walked away from conversations feeling angry because of a student's living situation. As a consequence, I found it necessary to pay attention to how my middle-class values influenced my interactions with the students. I was raised in a community where even in the face of racism and prejudice, I learned that I could be anything I wanted to be and I could do anything I wanted to do. My family instilled in me a sense of hope, yet when I listened to the teachers and students discuss specific aspects of the students' home lives, there was much that sounded hopeless. I often wondered if I came across as condescending or if I communicated judgment when students shared negative aspects of their home lives. I also wondered what type of Black man the students saw when they looked at me. Did they see someone they could relate to, or did they see someone who looked like them but did not understand them? Was I able to communicate my sincere interests in their lives and, more importantly, hear their stories for what they were? How did my own upbringing impact how I heard what the students shared, and did I represent what they shared accurately? Based on feedback from both the students and the teachers, I believe I did. Nevertheless, I was always mindful of the fact that I grew up far away from some of the harsh realities associated with living in a poor, urban community.

The time I spent with the students and teachers at Stokes served to reaffirm my belief in the importance of this research. The participants shared powerful and nuanced

stories that offer important insights into the experiences of many Black male high school students. My interactions with all of the students solidified my belief that the combination of CRT and Afrocentricity offer an important theoretical framework from which to operate when analyzing and thinking about the data that I was able to collect. One should not underestimate the power that comes from allowing individuals from oppressed and marginalized groups to tell their stories. I walked away from each interaction with the students enlightened and feeling that I was able to better understand the unique challenges they face and the important perspectives they offer. I entered the research space with personal assumptions and ideas about what I would learn from the students. My own experiences as a Black male growing up in the rural South gave me a particular lens through which to think about this work. My conversations with the students have broadened my lens and pushed me to think more deeply about the need to continue research that takes seriously the need to center the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and emotions of young Black male students. The next two chapters set out to do just that. I have heard the voices of the students, and what follows is my humble attempt to offer an additional platform to elevate their voices and tell their stories.

CHAPTER IV

UNDERSTANDING "RACE": HOW STUDENTS DEFINE "ACTING WHITE" AND "ACTING BLACK" AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR IDENTITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Introduction

During his keynote address at the 2004 National Democratic Convention, then-Senator Barack Obama challenged the Convention's delegates to recognize that "children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a Black youth with a book is acting white" (Obama, 2004, p. 3). Obama's words highlighted a more-than-two-decades-old belief that Black students who achieve and maintain a high degree of academic success are "acting white." Popularized with the publication of Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) article entitled "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of "Acting White,"'" the acting white hypothesis is invoked by individuals in both the academy and popular media to explain the achievement gap between Black and white students. Characterized by the idea that Black students reject academic achievement and view school as a "white domain," the acting white hypothesis locates high academic achievement within whiteness and diminishes the possibility that Black students can have a cultural orientation that leads to academic success. Central to Fordham and Ogbu's acting white hypothesis is their understanding of what they term "oppositional social identity" and "oppositional cultural frame of reference" (1986). They explained oppositional social identity as follows:

> Subordinate minorities like Black Americans develop a sense of collective identity or peoplehood in *opposition to the social identity* of white Americans because of the way white Americans treat them in economic, political, social and psychological domains including white exclusion of these groups from true assimilation. (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 181; emphasis added)

Similarly, oppositional cultural frame of reference refers to subordinate minorities' use of "devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and white Americans" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 181). The authors went on to explain:

> Thus subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior and other events, symbols, and meanings as more appropriate for them because these are not part of white Americans' way of life. To behave in the manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to "act white" and is negatively sanctioned. (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 181)

When taken together, Black students' oppositional social identity and oppositional cultural frame of reference, according to Fordham and Ogbu, lead them to reject academic achievement because they wish to be perceived as authentically Black. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) hypothesized that Black students develop a collective identity which "at the social level . . . discourage[s] their members from putting forth the time and effort required to do well in school and from adopting the attitudes and standard practices that enhance academic success" (p. 183). Ogbu (2004) built on that discussion by tracing the historical development of black collective identity, and he pointed out that

> Psychologically, some individuals trying to “act white” may experience psychological stress or what Devos (1967) calls affective dissonance. That is, because individual Blacks share the group’s sense of oppositional racial identity the would-be assimilationists may feel that by behaving or talking like White people they are, indeed, abandoning or betraying their own people. (p. 24)

Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) and Ogbu’s (2004) emphasis on oppositional social identity and collective identity appropriates a deficit-based model for how Black people think about academic achievement. According to their view, it is almost impossible for Black students to have intrinsic motivation towards high academic standards and school success. Furthermore, their hypothesis suggests that Black people’s achievement orientation is based solely on the standards set by white people. This conflation of achievement and whiteness leads me to question what it means to act Black and, more importantly, how high-achieving Black students learn to negotiate their academic identities in raced learning environments. These two questions helped guide me as I thought about how Black people, and Black males in particular, think about and understand what it means to be smart and what it means to achieve academic success.

White Boy

Throughout much of my middle school experience and early into high school, it was not uncommon for me to hear other Black students, especially other Black males, refer to me as a “white boy.” The students who called me a white boy did so to insult me and tease me because of how I was dressed, how I talked, or how well I did in school. Tracked into advanced classes when I was in fourth grade, I remained in advanced English, science, and math courses through my senior year of high school. I never tested

high enough to be placed in academically gifted (AG) courses, but I took some comfort in knowing that I was only one step behind the “really, really smart” students and several steps ahead of the “regular” and the “special needs” students. My closest friend, Ricardo, who lived down the road from me, was one of only three Black students in the AG track, and I was one of only five or six Black students in the advanced track. My mother and Ricardo’s parents knew each other well and because we were considered especially “bright” children, it was not surprising that after we met in fifth grade, Ricardo and I remained friends throughout much of grade school.

While I was never sure why I was teased more, at some point I accepted the reality that my relationship with the majority of my same-aged Black peers would never be what I wanted it to be. I would never be able to leave the house with one of my coverall suspenders hanging down, as was the style in the late ’80s and early ’90s. I would never be a member of the Smooth Connection, a middle school clique of Black male students who hung together after school and on the weekends. I would never be invited to dances or parties that were hosted outside of school. When I went to the skating rink for summer skate jams, other Black kids would be nice to me, but I would never be considered part of the “in crowd.” While I now realize that some of what I experienced had to do with my strict upbringing, there was another element at play. Many of my Black peers simply did not view me as “Black enough.” I was teased and called a nerd and a white boy. I came to accept the fact that I was going to be teased and over time, I embraced being called a nerd, but I never accepted being called a white boy. Whenever someone called me white, I was infuriated and felt the need to respond both verbally and

physically. I had and continue to have a great deal of race pride, and I was not about to allow anyone to insult me with comments that I knew were not true.

I share my personal experience of being called white because as I sat with the young men at Stokes, I was constantly reminded of how my achievement in school was stigmatized by individuals in my own community. Unlike the students at Stokes, my high school was not majority minority; rather it was more evenly split among white and Black students. When I looked around my high school, I saw clear distinctions in course enrollment between my Black and white peers. I noticed the lack of Black students in my chemistry and second-year biology courses, and it did not take long to realize that the students I sat with in the cafeteria looked nothing like the students in my classes.

As I began my dissertation research, I questioned whether the stigma I felt as a result of being called a white boy almost 20 years ago continues to exist among Black male students today. Interestingly, my data analysis revealed that the students I studied had strong feelings about what it means to act white and what it means to act Black, and their thoughts surprised me on multiple levels. Specifically, the students tended to view acting Black as negative and acting white as positive. When pushed to explain why they viewed acting Black as negative, none of the students' comments indicated that they viewed themselves in a negative light, but they were for the most part steadfast in their belief that Blackness is associated with negativity and being what many of them termed "ghetto." In this chapter, I present the participants' views on what it means to act Black and to act white as I seek to understand their conceptualizations of what it means to be smart.

Acting White vs. Acting Black: Student Perspectives

During each individual interview, I asked the students if they had heard the phrases acting white and acting Black and if so, what they thought the phrases meant. Of the 14 students I interviewed, all but three had heard both terms. Tray's comments capture the essence of all of the students' feelings about what it means to act Black and act white. He said:

> If you like rap music then you are acting Black. . . . The way that you carry yourself or if you start sagging, then you are acting Black. If you start going around saying the "n" word, then you are acting Black. If you start saying "brah" and the way that you talk, then you are acting black. . . . Many of the things they associate with acting Black [are] usually negative. Why can't they say, "Oh man, you are acting like you have pride," because you know Black pride, you are acting Black? They don't say something like that, they say something negative. If you go around with a gun, you are acting Black—as if white people don't have guns as well.

When asked to identify the "they" that he referred to, Tray explained:

> "They" is everybody, even Black people and especially white people and Mexicans. Any human being on Earth, they see a Black person. . . . Say I am a Black person walking down the street and say I don't like rap. All the other Black dudes are going to say "What?" because they already expect just because you are Black you should like rap, already. Just because you are Black you should not have your pants all the way up like a white dude and stuff like that. You should be sagging. They may not say that, but in their head they are not understanding why you are acting the other way, because as soon as you are born they say, "OK, when he gets old he is going to be acting Black." So when they see you, they already have stereotypes in their head already.

Tray made it clear that acting white or acting Black could be either positive or negative, depending on who is speaking. He explained:

> Now it depends on who it is coming from. If it is coming from a Black dude and he says that you are acting white, then most likely that is an insult because they are telling you that you are not acting your race. If it is coming from a white dude and they say you are acting Black, that is also most likely an insult attacking your personality because that just might be the way that you are. But really they associate that with a person of skin color. I feel that most of the time they might say, "Man, you are sagging" and if people view that as a negative thing to do, then you are acting Black. But if they say, "Man, you are smart and you got all these questions right and you are acting like a white dude," it is something positive and something negative. And I asked you earlier why couldn't it be something positive and then you say you acting black because they don't view Black people as something positive.

Similar to Tray, Dwayne explained that when someone tells a Black person that they are acting white, the individual is "downing" the person.

> If they tell me I am acting white and it is a certain person that is telling me that, then I mean like, they are not liking what I am doing. They is kinda downing me. But it is not really good.

Dwayne described the type of people who would accuse a Black person of acting white in this way:

> It would be like a negative person, like a hood person coming up to me. Because like I remember I was in fifth grade before, and then one of the papers fell off of the bulletin board and then I picked it up and told the teacher that it fell off. And there was a white kid, but he was bad and he was like, "You being a goody two shoes" because I was acting good. I guess because I was doing bad and now I am doing good, they tell me that I am acting like a punk.

To be clear, to act like a "punk" means to act white, Dwayne said. He went on to share that no one wants to be considered a punk even if it means doing the right thing and acting like what most people would consider white.

Cadet shared his personal experience of being accused of acting white in elementary school and middle school. When asked had he ever heard the term acting white, he responded:

> My dad told me about this a couple of weeks ago, actually. . . . I have been called that before because I went to Delany Hall (a predominantly white middle school). Acting white. You know, you got your shirt tucked in, you got on [a] polo, nice clothes. You have a fresh haircut almost every week. I mean you are speaking clearly. You do not speak any slang. You know, you play golf. If you are Black, you play golf. I think of those things when people say acting white.

When asked about why he thought he was accused of acting white, Cadet associated acting white with how he dresses. Specifically, he said:

> I have on [a] polo—the fresh polo or fresh loafers, clean loafers, especially when I was little—you know, in elementary school. Like having what they would call duck shoes. When I was little, they were like loafers. And yeah, stuff like that.

I probed Cadet about whether he was ever concerned about accusations of acting white and after pausing for a moment, he shared:

> I really did not understand what was so different about it because I grew up in Delany Hall's district or Simpson's district but [then] I moved down here. But, um, so I did not really see any difference in it. I grew up around white people most of the time.

When middle school students leave Delany Hall, they enroll at either Stokes or Simpson depending on where they live. In Cadet's case, his enrollment in Stokes in ninth grade was a new experience on at least two different levels. Not only was he attending a new school, he was also attending a predominantly Black school for the first time. Cadet's

recognition of the demographic shift in his educational experience offered him new perspective on the meaning of acting white and acting Black. Specifically, I asked him to reflect on his experience of being accused of acting white. He said:

> Yeah, I can see where they were going with that because . . . if I did not know any better, I would say that person was acting white as well. So, so, I could see it now. I could see myself like what it meant now, but then I had no clue because I always had [a] fresh polo or, you know, fresh penny loafers or um, you know, fresh haircuts almost every week.

Previous research has shown that in addition to the type of music a person listens to, their style of dress, and who they are perceived to associate with, speech patterns are often viewed as an important factor in determining whether a person of color “acts white” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The participants in this study are no different. Tray, Dwayne, and Cadet all mentioned speech patterns as an indicator for determining if an individual acts white. Similarly, when I interviewed Keith, he began his discussion of what it means to act white by stating:

> You know how people say Black people is hood, and the way we talk and we don’t use proper grammar. Well, I think when people say acting white, [they mean] using proper grammar, pants on your waist at all times, um maybe shirt tucked in, attending church on Sundays and having Sunday dinner, and basically just stuff like trying to live right.

When asked whether he thought Black people used proper grammar and acted in some of the ways that he describes, Keith readily acknowledged:

> Oh I know they do. It is not just ’cause acting white, ’cause there is Black people, too, that has the smart enough grammar to get at the stage that they want to be at.

> But you do have a whole lot of Black folks out here that don't know their English and that is the reason why it is not called acting Black to be smart; [instead] it is called acting white to be smart because most white people got their priority and everything straight. And most likely when you see somebody that is in the major business or stuff like that . . . eight out of ten times it is going to be a white person that has the business and is the rich. Because back in the day . . . they were the rich ones and we were the poor ones and they had more opportunities, so they want to keep that going. And Black people are not understanding that and they want to fall off and go to the streets or fall on to drugs or whatever while the white people are thinking smart. We are going to do this or do that and they are looking back at us and as an example of themselves to get to a higher standard.

Keith expounded upon his original comments, adding:

> To me—like now, modern day—to me, if somebody say you are acting Black, I am used to it. Like, "Oh, so you got to be ratcheted," and what is that supposed to mean, he acting Black? And they were like, "He ratcheted, he ghetto, his shoelace undone, he sagging . . . he got no proper English or no grammar." You feel me, stuff like that.

Similar to Keith, Michael explained:

> So if I went to a white school, and if I was trying to fit in with the white crowd, I guess trying to do what they do, act like . . . say, how they talk. . . . I guess that is when they would say that I was trying to act white. If you was in a Black school and a white kid is around a whole bunch of Black kids and start wearing your clothes like Black kids wear. [The] type of shoes like black kids wear. Stuff like that. Start talking like Black kids, like the slang they would use. Then I would see a Black person saying they are acting Black.

When I asked Michael for an example of the differences in how Black people and white people talk, he offered the following:

> Like "bop." If you say you bop, it means you have to take a long walk. If you say something is a "dud," you mean you are not doing it anymore. Like, something is dead, that is dead, I am not doing it. But usually white people, they don't have

> that. They don't say stuff like that. They would say like, "I am just not going to do it," something like that. They don't say that is a dud or that is dead and stuff like that.

Like his peers, Danny highlighted that the way people talk tends to be associated with acting Black or acting white. He pointed out that because he "talks proper," he is sometimes accused of "talking white." Danny explained that he believed that he was accused of talking white because he does not think he "talks Black" like many other students. For Danny, students who talk Black curse, don't pronounce their words clearly, and use the "n" word. Danny appeared exasperated when discussing talking Black and talking white, and he expressed anger as he described how he is sometimes accused of talking white. He summed up his frustration by saying that he believes that accusations of him talking white are "ignorant" and emphatically stated, "I don't speak white, I speak proper."

My conversations with the students revealed that by and large, anything associated with doing well in school, dressing properly, speaking properly, or acting in what would be considered an "appropriate" manner is considered acting white. Conversely, anything associated with not doing well in school or acting in what would be a "ghetto" manner is considered acting Black. These findings are similar to those of Carter (2005), who found that students of color "do invoke . . . [acting white] and use it as a form of social control in within-group interactions" (p. 116). Specifically, she discussed four categories the students associated with acting white. They include:

> (1) Speaking standard English in peer spaces and emulating the speech (tone, diction, and language) of whites; (2) sharing the dress styles of whites; (3) having primary social interactions with whites; and (4) acting uppity with or superior to a co-ethnic. (p. 116)

Carter's findings, while similar to those reported by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (1994), do not indicate that Black students develop an oppositional social identity and an oppositional cultural frame of reference as both suggest. Rather, as Carter (2006) argued:

> The students' invocation of acting white was not directly related to their values about education, but it did have direct implications for the symbolic boundaries they created to spatially and performatively demark different social groups. That is, the [label] acting white . . . signified the cultural distinctions students made among whites, [Blacks] . . . and other people of color. (p. 117)

I agree with Carter's (2006) argument because I, too, found that the students' discussion of acting Black and acting white was less about their values regarding education and more about their understanding of how different racial groups act socially. My observations of the students revealed that many of them were deeply concerned about their education and that they were determined to do well academically. Dwayne, Cadet, and Danny received some of the highest grades in their respective classes, and Keith demonstrated keen intellectual and academic abilities that Ms. Diggins acknowledged far exceeded any of his classmates. Even Tray, who by his own admission is "lazy" and does not always see the value of school, did not associate his poor academic performance with being Black. When asked whether or not he considered himself smart, he commented:

> I would say that I am pretty intelligent because like English and science and everything else, civics, I am good. I don't make good grades because I don't like to do work, but I am really good at that stuff. The only thing that I have problems in is math, and to me they consider the smartest people the people that be best at math. So you can be, you know, not too good in science and civics, but if you know how to read and if you know math, they consider you smart. But that is really not all I think it takes to be smart.

Tray went on to explain:

> Your grades is kind of like your clothes. When you see somebody on the street with raggedy clothes, they just put on some shirt or a T-shirt, you might think, "He don't have no money." And then he might go out of the store and get in a Mercedes! You know what I'm saying. So your grades might be Cs or Ds or Fs and you may be, you know, a very smart person. But like me, I don't like doing homework at all. I hate homework so I don't, I rarely do it, and you know I don't like to do work at school. I do just enough to get by. I know I can do a lot more.

Tray possessed considerable insight with respect to his academic abilities. During class observations, I noted that he is indeed very bright; however, his behavior in class confirmed that his characterization of himself as "lazy" is accurate. When other students worked on assignments, he would put his head down and sleep or open his composition book and write rap lyrics that he would readily rehearse to entertain his peers. He was a lyrical genius, and at times Ms. Diggins would acknowledge how Tray's rap lyrics fit with an idea or theme that was being discussed during her class.

The students' classroom behavior as well as their academic self-perceptions are important, because although many of them associated acting white with doing well in school, their actions in the classroom coupled with their ability to identify their own

intelligence and hard work indicates that they did not see high academic achievement as something exclusive to white students.

Defining Acting Black vs. Acting White

My interviews with the students as well as my observations of them in class made me even more curious about why they so easily associated whiteness with what might be considered positive and Blackness with what might be considered negative. As a consequence, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how the students' understanding of race as well as the messages they received about race impacted how they view themselves and their communities. To that end, I questioned the students in more detail about their understanding of what it means to act Black and to act white. Specifically, I asked the students to describe each of these terms in five words or less.

Danny used the words "content" and "favored" to describe what it means to act white, and he referred to acting Black as being "ghetto, ratcheted, and loud." He went on to explain:

> Black people, I feel like, are either, "Hey, you wanna go smoke, or do you want to go do" something that I don't want to do, that I don't feel is right to do. I am not saying that most of my Black friends [do this], because I still hang out with some Black kids, too, and we do fun stuff too. But I am saying, like, I am more comfortable around Hispanics and white people. I don't have a problem with any of them, it is just that big elephant in the room. Like hey, I am Black.

Lamar responded that to act Black means to be "loud, rude, disrespectful, not educated . . . and being a thug or something." He described acting white as "classy, respectful, smart, and bougie" or upscale. Similar to Lamar, John used the terms

"ignorant, stupid, thuggish, intolerant, and immature" to describe what it means to act Black. Interestingly, he described what it means to act white as "weird, curious, nice, always happy, and bipolar." John was so emphatic in his description of what it means to act Black that I felt the need to follow up with questions about whether he felt any of his descriptors could be used to describe him, leading to the following exchange:

> **Travis:** Do you consider yourself immature?
>
> **John:** From time to time.
>
> **T:** Do you consider yourself intolerant?
>
> **J:** No, I can tolerate most things.
>
> **T:** Do you consider yourself thuggish?
>
> **J:** Nowhere near.
>
> **T:** Do you consider yourself ignorant?
>
> **J:** Nowhere near.
>
> **T:** And I think, was "stupid" the other word that you [used]? Do you consider yourself stupid?
>
> **J:** Nope.
>
> **T:** So what makes you different from the Black folks that you described?
>
> **J:** Well, as I said before, I am smart. I like to progress and get better. Most of these Black people want to stay where they were. You know, just don't want to get better at all.

At several points during our interview, John alluded to the fact that he does not believe Black people, as a race, want "progress" or that we are not willing to put forth the effort

to better ourselves. Effort was a key element to understanding what John means by progress: When discussing what it means to be smart, John stated the following:

> My definition of smart is not necessarily a person that makes good grades, a person that put in the effort to make good grades. You know . . . you can make straight A's all you want, but some people don't try, and the person that actually tries and puts in work, that is a smart person to me.

For his part, John believed that he was progressing because he was in all honors classes and he was trying his best to get the best grades possible. He mentioned that he mostly made B's and a couple of C's and he stated that he was "okay" with C's because he had made effort in his math class and a C was better than a D. John also considered himself as someone who made progress because he was a member of both the wrestling and football team and college coaches had already began to evaluate him for possible athletic scholarship offers in football. John connected the possibility of getting an athletic scholarship and going to college to the fact that neither his mother nor father when to college and for him to be able to go to college would be a sign of progress. He spoke candidly about his belief that minimal progress is better than no progress at all, and he reiterated that Black people must do whatever is socially and educationally necessary to get ahead.

John used his aunt as an example of how Black people can work hard to advance themselves to become better members of society:

> My aunt on my dad's side . . . her mom died, and her dad since her mom died was a very depressing man. He was not in her life, either. And then she grew up to have a—she is actually a vice president of a company that makes mail, like they

> help with the letters and stuff. So, she went from that lifestyle as a child and progressed to a great woman.

John's discussion of his aunt's progression from growing up in a depressing household to becoming a vice president of a company is telling. In fact, many of the students pointed to members of their family as representative of the success they could have if they continue to work hard to achieve their goals. They shared stories of how their mothers, aunts, cousins, and other relatives were able to achieve "success" and build positive lives for themselves and their families. With these stories, it became obvious that even as the students demonstrated an understanding of the negativity associated with Blackness, they still expressed hope that they, too, would make progress even though they recognized the stereotypes about Black people. One example of this hope was expressed by Danny, who when asked if he was hopeful about his future, emphatically declared "I am!" When asked to explain the source of his hope, Danny said:

> Seeing the path that I am on right now, I have a lot to be proud of. I am about to be in the [International Baccalaureate] Program. I finished my credits early. Um, I have a lot of support. I have talents. I just—I don't mean to sound vain, but I am just proud of myself for the position that I am in and for where I might be in the future.

The International Baccalaureate or IB Program is a program at Stokes and select high schools across the country that offers advanced courses allowing students to receive college credit prior to entering college. Danny, along with Jacob and Cadet, were Pre-IB students who were going to complete most of their high school credits early but felt that the IB Program would be beneficial to their long-term career goals.

While it might expected that Pre-IB students would be hopeful about the future, this sense of hope was not confined only to students who were performing well academically but was common across all the students I interviewed—even those who might seem to have little to hope for. Dwayne expressed his hope in this way:

> I am hopeful about not being not having to go to the streets, and I am hopefully going to college and study some . . . architecture because I want to study that, and I hope to be good and successful in that.

Keith used the election of President Obama to explain his hopefulness:

> Well, I believe we were told that we would never have a Black president, and to me it is a miracle, because for the first time ever in our [time], especially in our time growing up as kids, we see a Black president. It was harder for other Black males and females back in the day because . . . there was 43 white presidents before the 44th black president. So I feel like we all have a chance right now knowing there is a colored male in the white house, and we have the chance to do anything we want before the white government takes back over.

Nearly all of the participants pointed to President Obama as a reason to be hopeful. His name came up during all but one of the interviews, and each time, it was to say that he is inspirational to their lives and to the lives of Black people who wish to defy both the stereotypes and the negativity they encounter on a daily basis.

Tyson (2011), in her discussion of the impact of academic tracking on student perceptions of acting Black and acting white, advances this idea of hope when she argues:

> Like many adults who strive to achieve despite knowledge of, and even personal experience with, racism and discrimination, disadvantaged youth, who are aware

> and critical of larger structures of inequality, do not necessarily hold fatalistic attitudes or behave in self-defeating ways. The dilemma is not, however, simply one of being both black and American. There is also a tension borne of the task of nurturing an individual self within a society in which persons with black skin, like your own, are viewed and judged as a single, undifferentiated group. In post-desegregation America, that means living one's individual life with hopes and dreams similar to those of other Americans, until something happens to remind you of your difference.

Tyson's argument for hope rang true with the young men I interviewed. Despite being faced with the realities of messages that repeatedly assault both their race and gender, all of the young men articulated that they are hopeful about the future. Even as they demonstrated keen insight into the messages that they receive about what it means to be Black in America, when asked about where they see themselves in the future, each affirmed their belief that they would have professional careers in distinguished fields including optometry, architecture, business, and the music industry, just to name a few. Interestingly, the students' belief in their ability to achieve their long-term career goals held true no matter how they were currently performing academically. Cadet, who was one of the top students in the entire tenth grade, believed that his goal of being a doctor was very attainable. Likewise, Tray believed that he would go on to have successful career in the Coast Guard if that is what is choose to do—despite the fact that he was not performing up to his academic potential. Also, Lamar, a student in Ms. Selma's Honors English class who described himself as a smart student who does not apply himself because he "keeps it real" (he reported that his grades on his most recent report card consisted of two A's, two B's, and one C), felt confident that he would graduate from

high school and attend North Carolina State University to pursue a degree in mechanical engineering.

Although the students expressed confidence in their ability to achieve their long-term academic and career goals, their characterization of what it means to act Black and act white troubled me. As I listened to their words, I questioned whether they could develop a healthy racial and academic identity while holding overwhelmingly negative views about their race. Similarly, I began to question how and where the students learned to appropriate such negative images toward Blackness. I raise these questions because like Delpit (2012), I believe that

> African American students are gifted and brilliant. They do not have a culture of poverty but a culture of richness that can be brought into classrooms to facilitate learning. . . . [As such], they must be helped to overcome the negative stereotypes about themselves and their communities that permeate our culture. (p. 25)

In the case of Black males, we are bombarded daily with stereotypes and images that portray us as thugs, criminals, and babbling fools who are to be feared and policed at the highest level. An exception to this rule is Black males who can jump high and run fast and who can bounce, throw, or hit a ball; instead of being vilified, these individuals are cheered for their athletic prowess and celebrated for their ability to help their team win championships. Unfortunately, the media often fails to show the numerous Black males who are doing well academically and who are just as intellectually gifted as their white peers. The impact of this one-sided portrayal of Black males helps perpetuate a view of

Blackness that fails to consider the multi-dimensional reality of Black males' experiences.

Efforts to overcome these stereotypes involve a recognition that Blackness and academic achievement are not mutually exclusive. Black students can do well in school, and their skin color has no bearing on their academic capabilities. It is incumbent upon parents, teachers, school administrators, and the numerous individuals charged with educating and caring for Black males to recognize that they have a responsibility to challenge the myth of Black inferiority. The young men I interviewed did not just recently learn to associate Blackness with negativity. The ease with which they responded to my questions indicates that their negative views of Blackness developed over time. As Tatum (1997) argued:

> Black [children absorb] many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that it is better to be White. The stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that reinforce notions of White superiority are breathed in by Black children. . . . . Simply as a function of being socialized in a Eurocentric culture, some Black children may begin to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of beauty represented by the dominant group more highly than those of their own cultural group. (p. 55)

Such thinking is dangerous because it reifies whiteness in ways that diminish the rich cultural history and heritage of Black people. When whiteness is reified, it is often inferred that cultural markers of Blackness are to be avoided at all cost. To be clear, I do not wish to claim that slang, "ghetto" behavior, sagging pants, or any other attributes positioned as negative that the students named are exclusive to or should be defined as Black culture. I do claim, however, that when whiteness becomes the standard against

which all other cultures are measured, it is more difficult, without proper guidance and support, for nonwhites to recognize the strengths inherent in their own cultural group. The inability among Black individuals to recognize the strength in their own racial or cultural group functions to perpetuate the myth that anything that is not white is inferior and should be avoided.

School and the Perception of Black Students

Although the students were hopeful about the future and could identify many positive qualities about Black people, the fact remains that the underlying theme that runs through all of their comments is that whiteness is more desirable than Blackness. To be clear, none of the students gave the impression that they wanted to be white or that they did not appreciate Black culture, heritage, and history. During class discussions of the Civil Rights Movement and apartheid in South Africa, several of the students offered strong viewpoints on race, racism in America, and race around the world. Many of them viewed President Obama as a role model and a hero and when given the opportunity, they engaged in passionate and sometimes heated class discussions about race and racial justice. When given the opportunity to "free write" (write about a topic of their own choosing, instead of responding to an assigned prompt), many of the students wrote about issues of racial and social injustice and how they were hopeful about their future as Black people. Nevertheless, the students' discussions of Blackness and whiteness contradicted how they claimed to view themselves and how they understood their prospects for the future. Moreover, their views on acting Black and acting white demonstrated how they believed strengths and benefits of Black culture are often diminished in public schools.

In his classic work *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson (1933) forcefully argued:

> In history, of course, the Negro had no place in this curriculum. He was pictured as a Human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for others. . . .
>
> Unlike other people, then, the Negro according to this point of view, was exception to the natural plan of things, and he had no such mission as that of an outstanding contribution to culture. The status of the Negro, then, was justly fixed as that of an inferior. (p. 19)

Woodson's words are an indictment against educational policies and practices that function to disadvantage Black people both educationally and socially. His criticism of the educational system highlights the fact that educational equity has been and continues to be elusive for Black people. Members of the dominant society have, throughout history enjoyed privileges that allowed them to create and proliferate educational polices that are inadequate to meet the needs of Black students. Be it during slavery, when the education of Blacks was illegal, to the passage of Jim Crow laws that upheld the idea of separate but equal, to the modern-day practice of school redistricting based on race and socioeconomic status, Black students have been consistently marginalized with respect to their access to equitable educational opportunities. Such marginalization has functioned in ways that have negatively impacted Black people's ability to build and to maintain socially and economically viable communities. As Watkins (2001) argued:

> Socially and politically, those who hold power attempt to forge a society ideologically accepting of the economic and cultural agenda, which is often

> inimical to the vast majority who remain propertyless [sic]. [Consequently] public education becomes a useful ideological tool in creating social consensus. (p. 11)

Watkins's claim calls attention to why those with power seek to create and to maintain methods of instruction that inscribe inequality into every level of the educational system. The maintenance of power requires a system that controls who receives access to that power. The current structure of many public schools fulfills this task with the use of institutionalized policies and practices aimed at sorting students based on standardized measures of achievement. Sadly, these measures, often fueled by the unrealistic expectations of such policies like No Child Left Behind, do little to offer a holistic view of the strengths that many students, namely minorities and the poor, bring to school.

It should not be a surprise that students who do not see something of their culture reflected in the classroom find it difficult to excel in school. Minoritized students are bombarded daily with negative stereotypes and images that continually remind them of their "second class" status. The critiques of their style of dress, patterns of communication, and culturally nuanced worldviews are often harsh and dismissive and fail to recognize the strength that such diversity offers their school communities. As a consequence:

> Many have internalized the beliefs of the larger society that they and people who look like them are less than the intellectual norm. From media portrayals of African American criminals, to news broadcasts which ignore the positive models of African American maleness, to a focus in schools on slavery rather than on the brilliance of the African American intellectual legacy, children come to believe that there is nothing in their heritage to connect to schooling and academic success. (Delpit, 2002, p. 46)

This disconnect between school and culture leads many Black students to feel that teachers do not care about the realities of their lives and that they are not welcomed at school. The students' motivation to learn and to develop new skills is often replaced with ambivalence and a frustration with and rejection of the white, middle class ethos that permeates many schools. As such, efforts to effectively educate Black students must be intentional about the need to embrace both the vibrancy and richness of the Black cultural tradition.

I offer this discussion of the disconnect between school and culture because efforts to counter the negative images associated with Blackness and to reconsider what it means to act Black must involve an intentional conversation about how the current structure and environment within many schools does little, if anything, to encourage the academic achievement of Black males. While many of the students in the current study were motivated to do their best academically, they carried with them the burden of being perceived as less than their white peers, and they likewise carried the burden of attending a school that has a poor reputation in the community. The students talked openly about their school's reputation, and an analysis of their comments revealed that their understanding of how their school is perceived in the community contributed to their perceptions of Blackness and whiteness. The students' critique of their school environment demonstrated their recognition of how various elements of their school setting do little to empower Black males to be academically successful. Tray's comments about how the environment at Stokes impacts students' perceptions of what it means to

be smart sums up the frustrations that many of the students expressed about Stokes. Tray shared:

> The school that I am in, the environment is horrible, and I can tell you exactly why. . . . Say we are doing some math or something. Now if you are not up there with those . . . whizzes that can do it in their head, they will ignore you. They definitely would ignore you. They don't want to put in the time; they say you should have learned that in seventh grade or something like that. They won't put in the time or the effort to assist you. They won't stay after school [to help you]. . . . I have experienced this. Instead of helping me, the teacher would help, you know, somebody else that was already smart and needed to make up something, and I was like, "Why are you not helping me?" The school environment influences you to say, "You know what, I don't want to do this work anymore because the teachers are not helping me; my mama don't know how to do it anymore because she has not been in school and doing it; so I am just going to be lazy." And I think that is another reason why I do that and makes my grades go down.

Tray added:

> You see all these people arguing and people getting mad, and you get in fights you don't even want to be in, and you get suspended and your grades get lower and lower. And as far as showing you smart, I feel like at [the] school that I am already at, people already think that we are not smart, just because we are in an African American-based and Hispanic-based school and just where we at right now.

Timothy echoed Tray's concerns about the lack of control in the school, and his comments illuminate how perceptions of race influence how people perceive and understand who should be considered smart:

> [Stokes] is like a disorganized school and, like, the assistant principals and principals don't take control of the school. And students do what they want and don't [wear] SMOD [standard mode of dress] [like they should]. Stuff like that. . . . White people don't normally act up like us Black males because they have a

> more . . . well, I don't know how to say it. . . . I am not really sure, but I think it would be easier to get a better education if I was with white people at maybe a white school or something.

Both Tray's and Timothy's comments call attention to the fact that Stokes's reputation is tied to its status as a predominantly Black school. Both students' references to race signal that they recognize that attending Stokes causes them to be viewed negatively and, in some people's eyes, devalues the education they receive.

Coby, who wanted to be an actor and did not believe that there were any resources at the school to support either his short-term and long-term educational and career goals, underscored how the education he receives at Stokes is devalued when he offered the following critique of the school's environment:

> If you mention this school to another student who goes to a different school, [the response is], "Uh, you go *there*." And when people haven't even seen it, they have never even stepped foot in this school and they already have an image of it and it is not a very good image . . . it bothers me, because I go here and I am part of this school. But then you hear what they are talking about, and then you come here and you wonder what it is like if you went to another school.

Michael echoed Coby's concern about how Stokes is perceived in the community when he shared:

> I don't like the Stokes name. Like, 'cause when you go to other schools, sometimes I am embarrassed to say that I go to Stokes because other kids like laugh and say, "Eew, Stokes!" They usually say the word "eew," and I don't like that either.

Thomas, who also found perceptions of Stokes frustrating, commented that when students from other schools hear that he goes to Stokes:

> They say, “Oh, that is a ghetto school,” or, “That is a ratchet school.” I am not going to send my kids there because people gossip about the school so much and they make it seem like a bad school. . . . Mainly the people who go here are from Thompson Homes, Stiles Homes [low-income housing projects]. So that make it look like this is a bad school.

The students’ discussion of the negative perceptions of Stokes both directly and indirectly highlighted the role that race plays in how the school is perceived by members of the larger community. When discussing perceptions of Stokes, the students’ frustration with being in a school that has such a negative reputation was evident. Dwayne, who had transferred from Simpson, a majority-white school, said that he had transferred because he needed a “fresh start” but had heard from many of his friends that he should not attend Stokes. Even Danny, Lamar, and Cadet, who were excited about their pending enrollment in the IB program, recognized that even with that esteemed program, Stokes’s overall reputation was negative. Jacob, who also planned to enroll in the IB program, offered a poignant analysis of the role that race plays in how students at Stokes are perceived and treated by members of the community. When asked to share his understanding of others’ perceptions of Stokes, he laid much of the blame on the school board:

> I believe that our school is not funded as it should be. . . . Like we don’t have the nicest lockers or the newest stuff. . . . I feel that the board looks down upon Stokes because of [low] test scores. . . [Like] they don’t feel that . . . we need the same funding as other schools.

Jacob went on to explain that in addition to students' low test scores, Stokes's poor reputation is due in part to the school's racial makeup. He described the role of race in the school's reputation by saying:

> Because in America, Black as a culture has been looked down upon . . . by the way we act, because some people want us to be like everybody else, but that is not how God intended it to be. He allowed people to be different, different creativity, different mindsets so we could get things done.

The students' critical and honest analysis of their school environment provides an important opportunity to contemplate how to establish and to maintain learning environments that celebrate Black students' experiences and that draw on the strengths inherent in Black culture. Furthermore, the students' comments illuminate the fact that discussions of acting Black and acting white must move beyond the idea that Black students don't do well in school because they adopt an oppositional cultural frame of reference. My time with the students at Stokes indicated that many of them care deeply about their education and their future. All of the students were committed to bettering themselves and to finding ways to prepare for the next phase of their life. Nevertheless, they were aware of the uphill struggle that they face as Black males in America. Their ability to articulate their understanding of acting Black vs. acting white, as well as how the current racial makeup of their school influences perceptions of Blackness, are two important indicators that the students are keenly aware of the role that race plays in perceptions of what they can achieve academically.

Reflections on Acting Black vs. Acting White

Even as I write this section and share my personal reflections on the students' understandings of what it means to act Black and act white, I continue to be amazed and perplexed by what I heard in the individual interviews and focus groups. Amazed because of the level of insight the students demonstrated, and perplexed because even as the students were able to articulate their understanding of acting Black and acting white, they for the most part continued to make negative associations between both their educational and life experiences and their own race. The students' understanding of the impact of race on education gave me pause and offered me greater perspective with which to understand how race influences learning and achievement. As the students shared their perspectives, I was saddened that the students still felt that way I did over 20 years ago. , As both a teenager and a young adult, I too associated Black with being "ghetto" and white with being smart and successful. As I listened to the students, I wondered how they could hold such divergent beliefs. It was not until I started graduate school that I began to question the validity of the public school education I received and began to question how I was "schooled" to fit into a specific set of rules and roles that were accepted by the larger society. As such, I wondered how the students' perspectives might change as they get older and progress through high school.

As I continued to listen to the students, I came to realize that their understanding of acting Black and acting white was something that had developed over time. They are victims of an educational and social system that for the most part has played a successful role in the disenfranchisement of Black people across these "yet to be United States," as

the late Maya Angelou so eloquently described this country. In this way, I agree with Woodson's (1933) argument that

> The educational system as it has developed . . . in America [is] an antiquated process which does not hit the mark. . . . The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. . . . The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (pp. 4–5)

Unfortunately, the educational disenfranchisement of Blacks that Woodson witnessed in 1933 continues to exist today. Authors such as Kozol (2005, 2012) and Noguera (2003, 2008) have written extensively about how Black students across the country continue to attend schools that are overwhelmingly Black and Brown and are significantly underfunded. The expectations for students who attend these schools are often low, and the teachers who teach them are most often the least qualified. This was especially true at Stokes, where many of the teachers had been teaching for less than five years and had little experience with or understanding of the needs of the students sitting in their classrooms. One has to question the intentions of local- and district-level leaders who promote an educational system that allows an overabundance of new and inexperienced teachers to teach in a school that is underfunded and largely made up of minoritized students from poor, disenfranchised communities.

To be clear, I believe the participants in this study, like so many other Black students, are victims of educational, political, and social systems that are built on ideologies and practices designed to disenfranchise people of color. As a result, Black people are constantly reminded of what is wrong with us, and we rarely see or hear positive affirmations of who we are or what we can accomplish. What struck me about the students' discussion of acting Black and acting white, however, is that while they were able to name the negative perceptions of their community and their school, and while they recognized that they are fighting an uphill battle in a society that does not believe they have the ability or the skills to excel at the highest academic levels, they did not always make explicit connections between how systems of oppression and racism operate to perpetuate negative images about how Black people act or do not act. The students still very much believed in the "myth of meritocracy" (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Their comments indicate that they for the most part believed that if they worked hard and followed all of the rules, they could somehow be the exception to the rule. Although the students were hopeful and believed that their lives could be better if they just worked harder, I came away from the interviews and focus groups with the recognition that they were not yet fully aware of or not yet able to articulate how racism and discrimination can impact their academic progress.

Despite the fact that I recognize the students will face struggles as Black males, I took some comfort in the students' hope, because my own experience has taught me that without hope, the realities faced by Black males can seem debilitating. As I sat with each of the participants, I wondered what it would be like to interview them again in 10 years.

Would Dwayne be an architect? Would Cadet be an optometrist? Would Tray be in the Coast Guard? Would Keith have produced his first album? Would Coby have starred in his first feature film? No one knows for sure what lies ahead for these young men, but the realities faced by Black men past and the present suggests that all of them will face expectations that they conform to a specific set of ideas about what it means to be Black. They will have to intentionally seek out images of Blackness that celebrate both career success and academic success. Furthermore, they must learn, as Toure (2011) reminds us, that "if there are forty million Black people in America, than there are forty million ways to be Black" (p. 20). Within those 40 million ways are numerous examples of Black males who have achieved a high degree of academic success and gone on to accomplish their greatest hopes and dreams

Finally, when discussions about student achievement, and Black student achievement in particular, take seriously the institutional practices that normalize whiteness, teachers, students, and administrators alike can engage in conversations designed to effectively address Black students' academic needs. These conversations can engage such questions as:

> How did academic achievement become defined as exclusively White behavior? What is it about the curriculum and the wider culture that reinforces the notion that academic excellence is an exclusively White domain? What curricular interventions might we use to encourage the development of an empowered emissary identity? (Tatum, 1997, p. 64)

Answers to these questions are multifaceted and demand those charged with educating students from all racial backgrounds to challenge narrowly held constructions of what

behaviors and actions are associated with an individual's racial identity. One must acknowledge that "fixed meanings and controlled identities for any racial or ethnic group—generated from both within and outside of the communities—disregard the multiplicity of identities held by members of any group" (Carter, 2005, p. 162). As such, it is incumbent upon school personnel to engage the multiple intelligences and multiple identities their students bring to the classroom. Moreover, educators must be careful not to unfairly label Black male students based on what they perceive as ability or inability. Such labeling leads to practices that facilitate the underrepresentation of Black males in advanced courses in predominantly white and mixed- race high schools (Tyson, 2011).

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) acting white hypothesis continues to generate much discussion with respect to the academic success of Black students. Specifically, their work offers one of many important lenses through which to consider how Black students think about academic success. Likewise, their hypothesis provides an important starting point for future generations of scholars concerned with how to address Black students' academic needs. Although the acting white hypothesis relies too heavily on white notions of achievement and success, it does offer a foundation to consider how practices of institutional racism function to negatively impact Black students' school experiences. Moreover, the acting white hypothesis pushes scholars to think critically about how Black students' achievement orientation is supported by strengths present in the Black community. We must be careful not to assume that Black students who are academically successful are not "acting" Black. Both current headlines and past history yield rich

examples that underscore how Black students and Black people in general are deeply concerned about education.

A Word About Hope

As I listened to the students discuss acting white and acting Black and as I thought about the hopefulness that they articulated, I found myself having mixed emotions. I was encouraged because to live as a Black male or any racial minority in this country, one needs to be hopeful in order to survive. As racial minorities, we have to believe that even in the face of constant racism and discrimination, our lives can and will be better even as we struggle from day to day. I was also concerned, because while hope is necessary and important for survival, hope can only take a person so far. The truth is, Black people live in a society that perpetuates a narrative that teaches us that everything that is not white is inferior. The students' discussion of the acting white hypothesis indicates that while they have not entirely bought into this narrative, they have accepted it on some level. They have in many ways accepted the master narrative about what it means to be white and to be Black, yet I am not sure that they fully understand the impact of this narrative on their lives. Specifically, the students failed to connect what it means to act Black to themselves. For example, both John and Danny's discussion of what it means to act Black is noteworthy. During interviews, both young men expressed disgust with what they believe is "ignorant" behavior by some of their Black peers. In Danny's case, his strong feelings about other Black students carried over into his social life as he made it clear that he did not feel "comfortable" hanging out with other Black students. In John's case, there were times when I watched him become visibly upset with is Black

classmates because he felt they were acting “ignorant.” During my interview with John, I asked him about one particular instance in which he became very angry with two Black students in the class. He responded:

> You know the teacher was talking and then two Black students started burning on each other [i.e., making fun of each other]. I think that is just stupid, like I don’t know why you do that. I mean just pay attention, get good grades, that is me.

To be clear, John viewed the students’ “burning” on each other as commonplace among Black students and he believed that they should spend less time talking and acting “ignorant” and more time focusing on their education and trying to improve their grades.

John and Danny’s feelings about many of their Black peers, as well as the rest of the students’ discussion of what it means to act Black, stood in stark contrast to the hopefulness they articulated. Although their characterizations of what it means to act Black were negative, they were still hopeful. Interestingly, this hopefulness was not connected to the students’ academic performance. Again, both Danny and John, along with Cadet, Jacob, and Michael, were doing fairly well academically and were on track to attend college. As such, I was able to easily understand why they were so hopeful. In the case of students like Tray, Thomas, Coby and Keith, however, the source of their hope was a little more difficult to gauge. Though they all identified themselves as “smart,” it appeared, at least based on their academic performance, that none of them had as much to look forward to with respect to college and professional careers after high school. Although Tray wants to go into the Coast Guard, his grades suggest that he may not graduate from high school. Like Tray, Coby’s grades were not good and he failed English

as well as several other classes, and Keith, although smart, seemed to have unrealistic expectations of what it would take to make it in the music industry.

With respect to all of the students, I wondered how and why they disconnected themselves from what it means to act Black. Specifically, they were able to name what it means to act Black but they did not believe that they acted in the negative ways they named. More importantly, I wondered if they recognized how practices of institutional racism operate to influence the negative and racist narratives that hinder the opportunities of Black people.

The fact that the students did not readily name the impact of institutionalized racism on their understanding of "acting Black" and "acting white" should not be understated. As I listened to the students share their thoughts, I reflected on how the current makeup of the U.S. educational system operates in ways that celebrate whiteness while at the same time diminishing Blackness. For example, schools and school systems are increasingly becoming more segregated and as demonstrated by the Supreme Court's ruling in the PICS[10] case (2007), there is little legal will to ensure that practices of de facto segregation will end. Likewise, as Noguera (2008) points out:

> Were the problems confronting Black males regarded as an "American" problem, meaning an issue like cancer or global warming that must be taken on by the entire society in order to be addressed, the plight of Black males would be a subject that policymakers and research centers would embrace in an effort to find ways to reduce and ameliorate the hardships.

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[10] For more on the Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS) case and the United States Supreme Court's decision in 2007 to limit the use of race in school integration see Linda Greenhouse's 2007 New York Times article at http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/29/washington/29scotus.html?_r=0

Noguera's discussion of the need to see the problems facing Black males as an "American" problem underscores the fact that efforts must be made to recognize that many of the issues Black males face are rooted in the institutional policies and practices that celebrate whiteness in ways that maintain racism and discrimination. Until issues of institutional discrimination are addressed in ways that help ensure equity and equal access to quality education for all students, Black male students and all students of color will continue to be educated in a system that upholds the standards associated with whiteness as the markers of academic success.

CHAPTER V

JUST ANOTHER BROTHER TRYING TO MAKE IT: NEGOTIATING STEREOTYPES WHILE LIVING AND LEARNING

> I feel that it is a lot of stereotypes, too, because two things that we already got against us is that we are males and we are Black. And I feel like we go through a lot just because of those two things. (Coby, focus group participant)

Coby made this statement with a directness and resolve that demonstrated his perception of how he is viewed by many in the larger society. When he shared his thoughts, other focus group participants nodded in agreement. The students were keenly aware of the stereotypes associated with living as a Black male in American society. There was a strong feeling among the participants that Black males are treated unfairly and constantly face suspicion because of both their race and their gender. They recognized how stereotypes about Black people in general and Black males in particular impact how they are viewed socially and academically. Many participants were able to articulate their understanding of stereotypes based on both their lived experiences and what they have seen in the media. They discussed how they have to negotiate the numerous stereotypes they continually face, and their comments demonstrated that they understand the role that race and racism plays in how they are perceived in the context of the larger culture.

I found the students' discussion of stereotypes compelling, and I recognized much of my own experience in the stories they shared. Their comments forced me to be

introspective and to consider how even as an educated, professional, Black male, I continue to live under the weight of oppressive stereotypes about what it means to be a Black male in this society. In my case, the stereotypes are sometimes reversed in that I often don't fit the neatly defined boxes into which many Black males get lumped. For example, a white female colleague at the university where I work told me that I am "safe and non-threatening," which is why I was selected to lead my unit's diversity committee. She said that I was not like other Black male faculty who tended to be more vocal and assertive when discussing race and issues of social justice, adding that this fact alone made me an excellent candidate to lead such an important group within the school. Sadly, my colleague's comments play into the insidious and unfortunate stereotypes that are too often perpetuated about Black males. I wondered what, in my colleague's eyes, made me "safe and non-threatening"—and more importantly, what made other Black males supposedly unsafe and threatening. I asked myself who gets to decide how vocal or how assertive a person can be, and I wondered why Black males with strong opinions tend to be viewed as dangerous or seen as a threat. I questioned who gets to make the call about who is safe and not safe and what are the markers used to make such determinations. Obviously the answer to these questions will vary depending on who is asked; nevertheless, my personal experiences—as well as the experiences of many of my closest Black male friends and those of the students in this study—indicate that the constant threat of stereotypes negatively impacts our potential for academic and career achievement. I readily acknowledge that Black males are not the only group that experiences the realities associated with being victims of stereotyping; however, the

limited scope of this dissertation demands that I speak directly to how stereotypes function to negatively impact Black males' educational experiences.

In this chapter, I discuss the participants' understanding of the negative impact of stereotypes on their lives. Although the students discussed a number of stereotypes associated with their status as Black males, I uncovered two dominant themes during my data analysis: 1) how the media influences stereotypes about Black males, and 2) how Black male bodies are criminalized in the context of American society. The students were keenly aware of how Black males are portrayed by the media and how those media portrayals are connected to narratives that overwhelmingly portray Black males as criminals and thugs. In my discussion, I consider both the historical and the current discussions of Black male stereotypes and how those discussions frame Black males in ways that contribute to the troubling and disappointing realities Black males face every day.

In her book *Bad Boys: Public Schools and the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ferguson (2001) argued:

> We do not experience individuals as bearers of separate identities, as gendered and then as raced or vice versa, but as both at once. The two are inextricably intertwined and circulate together in the representations of subjects and the experience of subjectivity. (pp 22–23)

Ferguson's comments highlight the importance of intersectionality when discussing Black males. To view me as only Black misses a significant part of my identity. Likewise, viewing me as only a male dismisses the realities associated with my

experience as someone who is Black. Unfortunately, when my race and gender are combined, they are read in ways that make me a target for racial profiling and other forms of racial injustice and discrimination. The threat of such discrimination creates an enormous amount of fear and stress that leaves me feeling fearful, frustrated, overwhelmed, and disappointed. This same sense of fear, frustration, and disappointment was conveyed by the students as they shared how they felt they were stereotyped and unfairly profiled in all aspects of their lives. Lamar's comments capture the essence of all of the students' feelings about how stereotypes impact their lives:

> They [white people] probably think, like, all Black males probably are angry or something, they are going to steal something, rob somebody, try to kill each other. That is mainly the main stereotypes.

When Lamar made this comment, he did not appear angry, upset, or troubled by the stereotypes he named. He was instead calm and very matter-of-fact as he articulated his thoughts. This lack of emotion was striking but not unusual. Throughout my time at Stokes, the young men participating in my research readily shared how they felt they have been misunderstood and judged unfairly because of their race and gender. As they shared their experiences, most of them seemed resigned to the reality that they will more often than not be viewed as individuals who deserve to be policed at all times. Although there were a few instances when the students appeared angry as they spoke, they typically took a "this is how it is" approach when recounting their experiences with stereotypes and injustice.

Media Portrayal of Black Males

Entman (2006), in his discussion of the impact of media on young men of color, wrote that Black males "are particular objects of stereotyping, fear, anger, misunderstanding, and rejection" (p. 5). He went on to argue that "public attitudes and emotions restrict their lives and keep them from enjoying the full range of opportunities and benefits of American society" (Entman, 2006, p. 5). These public attitudes are skewed because "many important dimensions of black males' lives, such as historical antecedents of black economic disadvantage and persistence of anti-black male bias, are largely *ignored* by the media" (Opportunity Agenda, 2011). As a consequence, the images of Black males that do make it into the media are overwhelmingly negative and usually presented with no discussion of the contextual factors that impact Black male lives. These incomplete images often lead to the perpetuation of narratives that misrepresent many Black males' realities. hooks (2004) furthered this point:

> Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, Black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence, they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the 19th century, but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day. Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of White supremacy is that Black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. (p. xii)

Such narratives fail to consider Black males' strengths as well as the impact of racial injustice on their lives. Moreover, these negative media images perpetuate racist

ideologies that promote the idea that Black males are troublemakers, thugs, and threats to the "American" way of life.

The students were not oblivious to how Black people are portrayed in the media—far from it. In both individual interviews and focus groups, the students' insight into media portrayals of Blackness was abundantly clear. When asked about media portrayals of Blacks, John quickly commented:

> Yeah, I think they set that up. I really think they set that up. Why don't they show the Black people that are dressed in the suits and driving the Bentleys . . . why don't they show that? They made a movie about Scarface and he was a Cuban guy, and they make movies like King of New York, [a] white dude. Why can't it be a Black dude who is the big-time mogul and stuff like that? It is always a Black dude with the dreadlocks or the braids or the nappy braids selling drugs, get[ting] killed, sit[ting] in the projects. It is never the Black dude that is the good protagonist; he is always the antagonist.

Coby was emphatic about how stereotypes about Black people are "embedded" in our culture. He said:

> You can't stop, like, the stereotypes that go around about Black people and stuff like that because it is embedded in people, and if you were raised to believe in this, then this is what you are going to believe.

When I questioned Coby about what he meant by embedded, Tray quickly spoke up and shared:

> I feel like people put that into our brains and they let that marinate and they let that sit there, and then some people succumb to that and submit to that and start to believe that. . . . Well I wouldn't say everybody, because I don't like to make a huge generalization statement like that, but some people do succumb to that and

> they have their own stereotype in their own mind. Like, oh yeah, we are Black people, we drink Kool-Aid and we eat chicken. They put that into their head.

The “that” Tray refers to are the negative stereotypes that both Black and white people learn and often come to accept about Black people. Keith acknowledged that there is some truth in stereotypes about Black people, but he was quick to point out that stereotypes about Black people are often more negative than reality. Specifically, Keith noted:

> I am not going to lie. I mean, some of the things that they say on TV about Blacks is true, but it is not as bad as . . . the whites see it. Because like for instance . . . how white people say Black people is trying to get money in illegal ways. Like Black people will say, like, “I am going to be on the corner today selling; come through,” and whatever like that. White people automatically think it is drugs. . . . They could be going out there selling clothes, shoes, rims, tires, and you never know, but based off what the Black people say and what their skin color is, and the white people are going to automatically think, “Oh, he is about to sell drugs or go sell some beer or some liquor or something like that,” but that is not always true.

Keith’s statement calls attention to the economic realities in many poor urban communities. It is not uncommon to see individuals of all ages selling items that they have been given in an effort to make extra money for themselves and their families. In some cases, individuals in these communities must resort to selling drugs or engaging in other illegal activity in an effort to provide for themselves and their families. William Julius Wilson, in his book *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (1997), highlights the difficult realities that many people in these communities face when they are unable to find employment opportunities to help meet their families’ needs.

John’s suggestion of a setup, Coby’s suggestion that stereotypes are “embedded,” Tray’s suggestion that stereotypes “marinate,” and Keith’s recognition that stereotypes perpetuated about Black people “are not always true” demonstrates that these young men understand how stereotypes about Black people are endemic in our society. The young men were under no illusion about how Blacks are portrayed in the media and perceived by many members of the dominant society. Even as they recognized the unfair stereotypes that they contend with, the students also recognized and were able to articulate how those stereotypes are perpetuated by negative media portrayals of Black males. The students were very much aware of how imagery and other negative media representations impacted their daily experiences and left them vulnerable to the numerous unfair characterizations of what it means to be a Black male. For example, Tray stated:

> I feel like if you wanted to be a Black male, basically you just can’t take nothing. You can’t let these stereotypes into your brain and corrupt your mind and feel that is how it is, because I feel that a lot of celebrities they do that and they don’t even know that. If you watch the movie *Don’t Be a Menace,* I think they was portraying Black people in a negative way but they knew it. And I feel that they were getting paid money to disgrace their own race because that is what they seen on TV. That has been implanted into their brains, so now they are just accepting the stereotypes, and they can’t do that.

Thomas connected his understanding of the stereotypes that Black males face to how we are perceived by white people in general. When asked to explain how he thinks stereotypes impact Black males, he shared a recent conversation with his mother in which he said that some White people don’t trust Black males:

> Some white people think they are too good to hang around Black people. . . . Like, I be honest with my mama sometimes [about] why some white people treat us different. Some white people, you be cool with them and they will be your bestest friends, but there is some out there that is prejudiced and stuff and they will treat you different. They see you walking toward them [and] they will walk the other way because you are Black and they don't know what you got on your mind that you will do, but you really aren't gonna do nothing.

When I asked Thomas where he felt some of the prejudices Black people experienced come from, he cited popular music and movies:

> I don't know—some of the music. Some black people be dropping. Some of the music they be talking and like their lyrics, and I know the white people hear them and they feel they can't trust them and stuff. . . . [And] movies. . . . Like it is basically in everything—some books that you read and all of that. Like when they describe the Black character, they over-exaggerate.

Thomas went on to explain that the stereotypes that he faces frustrate him and often leave him at a loss as to how he should respond to the negative images he knows white people hold about him, particularly when he knows that those images don't correspond with his reality. Specifically when I asked Thomas how he feels about many of the stereotypes about Black males he responded:

> It makes me mad a little bit because when you get to really know us, we are . . . harmless. Like you have to do something to make us real, real mad to make us do something to you.

I could tell that Thomas was deeply impacted by the stress he endured from being negatively stereotyped. Like many of the participants, he was frustrated and disappointed by the fact that Black people are so readily discriminated against in most all facets of

their lives. I was particularly struck by his use of the word “harmless” because it illustrates the stark contrast between his feelings about himself and the gangsta, thuggish, hyper-masculine images so readily associated with Black male bodies. Thomas had already been involved with the criminal justice system and was on probation at the time of his interview. He admitted that he made some mistakes and that he knew that he had to take responsibility for his actions. He was clear, however, that his criminal record did not make him a bad person and that he is troubled by the constant surveillance that he feels he must endure because he is a Black man. Thomas also shared that even though he is on probation, he should not be judged negatively simply because he made one mistake.

Interestingly, John, who among all of the students tended to render the harshest critique of Black people, offered a view that differed slightly from those of Tray, Keith, and Thomas:

> You know, when you usually see a Black person, you will usually think that they are going to do something bad to you because that is what Black people do. And if you see a white person, you think they are going to be kind and gentle to me because that is what they mostly see white people do.

John’s comment, made during a focus group, prompted Jacob, who was sitting next to him, to interject:

> [White people] think that way because [of] what they see in movies, like that is all they see. It is just the environment, your exposure to what is going on is going to trigger some of your thoughts and how you would react to different people. I grew up around different races, and I have no problem and am not racist towards any group.

Jacob appeared agitated by John’s comment because of what he perceived as John’s failure to link the negative stereotypes associated with Black males with media imagery. After Jacob spoke, John quickly said he agreed with Jacob’s assessment.

The students’ comments about the impact of media on Black male stereotypes underscore the fact that they are highly aware of the constant cycle of negative images about Black people. Many of the students were able to take it a step further, making the shift from talking about media representations of Black males to a discussion of how those representations directly impact their daily lives. Coby pointed out:

> Well, one stereotype that people have against Black males is that you are automatically going to be doing 20-to-life or something like that, and they put that on you not knowing who you are. You know, it is just a Black person from the projects, from the street, from the hood and that is all, and that is not true either and he is foolish. He does not have it all together upstairs and stuff like that.

Similar to Coby, Danny shared:

> For minorities there are stereotypes where we end up in jail or have kids or dead, and I don’t want to be, like, put into that stereotype. So I try every day to prove my worth. . . . It is a day-to-day struggle to fight against the stereotypes to prove your worth.

Keith focused on the fact that Black males tend to be unfairly judged based on how they are dressed or how they wear their hair:

> One main thing that I do know about being Black is when you walk into a room full of white people . . . one of the things that don’t always come to mind is that he is an athlete or he is a rapper or nothing like that. The first thing that comes to their mind—depending on how you are dressed, or how is your hair, or talk with

> your grammar, if you got tattoos—oh, they think he is a gang banger, he sells drugs, he is a street dude, he is a dropout.

Similar to Keith, John stated:

> It is worse to be a Black person, but with dreads you are just the main suspect to most white people, ’cause if you got dreads, I mean, people think nine times out of ten you are a drug dealer. But like Keith said and Coby say, you only see what is on TV, you can’t base what is on TV with real life.

It should be noted that both John and Keith had very long dreadlocks, which they said always put them at a disadvantage in terms of how they are viewed by white people. They shared that their hairstyle caused people to make certain assumptions about who they are and about how harmful they may or may not be. Both young men made it clear, however, that even though they are aware of the negative images associated with Black males who have dreadlocks, they are committed to not getting their locks cut just so they can “fit in” with images of what people consider most acceptable.

When discussing how stereotypes impacted his everyday life, Tray made the connection between stereotypes about Black males and classroom interactions:

> Like, I have a Caucasian female teacher [and] she had a phone on her desk and I walk over there and she hurries up and get it. Now she might not think that I am going to steal it because I am Black, but in my mind that is what I am already thinking, because you know . . . that is how it is. So . . . they evoke these stereotypes and don’t even know it. They might go around and say, “Well, why didn’t you do your homework last night? Were you out with your homies?” or something like that. They might not think that is wrong, but to you, a Black person, hearing a white person saying it, why you saying that—because I am Black? So that is just a couple of stereotypes that they put out there and don’t even know it.

Tray's discussion of how his teacher responded to him calls attention to how Black males are forced to remain aware of how their movements and interactions are read by their white peers. Although Tray acknowledged that his white teacher may not have thought he was going to steal anything, the fact remains that her behavior did not go unnoticed. Tray experienced an example of what Pierce (1970) termed *microaggressions,* which are "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66).

Michael discussed how Black males are constantly stereotyped as good athletes and in so doing, he discussed how if we are not viewed as capable of playing sports, we are all too often viewed as engaging in some form of illegal activity. He shared:

> All you are going to be doing is balling, playing basketball, football, running track. If he is not doing that, [then] selling drugs. If he is not doing that, [then] in a gang fighting a lot. If not doing that, just getting in trouble. If not doing a sport, he is doing something bad.

Similar to Michael, Tray also made the connection between stereotypes about Black males and athletics. During the focus group he said that people are confused when they see him playing soccer.

> I play soccer or whatever, and when people see me play soccer they don't understand it. But if they knew me and know my background, my families, they would understand. They don't know that, they just see somebody with brown skin go over there and play soccer and automatically [are] like, "What is going on?" If you are not Mexican or not white and you are playing soccer, you are always the oddball in the group. I feel that is kind of rude and disrespectful.

The “background” that Tray refers to is that fact that his father is from Brazil. Tray maintains strong connections with his Brazilian roots. He does not often see his father but when he does, they bond best over their mutual love for soccer. Tray made it a point to tell all of his peers that his father had secured World Cup tickets and once school ended he would be traveling to Brazil to watch many of the matches in person.

Tray’s comments also highlight a larger issue. He was aware of how his love for and interest in soccer are not shared by an overwhelming majority of Black males in the United States, and he was sensitive to the fact that he did not fit the stereotypical image of Black males who are basketball players or football players. Tray commented on a number of occasions, both in class and during our meetings, that he wished people would be more open-minded about what is considered acceptable behavior for Black people.

Similar to Tray’s experience, Coby, who had a strong interest in performance and acting, shared the following experience when he auditioned for a play at the large drama center in downtown Bluetown:

> I told you how I wanted to pursue acting or whatever. . . . I was . . . auditioning and I was basically the only Black one there, and so when I got a callback everybody was just staring at me like, “What was he doing there?” Like I was an outsider, I felt like an outsider. And then when they seen me perform, then everybody started acting different.

Coby went on to discuss the fact that he felt added pressure to prove himself because he knew that the white students who were auditioning did not believe that he had the same amount of talent as they did or that he deserved the same opportunities as they did. Coby made it clear that once the other participants saw his audition, they were impressed with

his skills and they started treating him with the respect that he believed he deserved for simply being a part of the larger group.

I found Tray's discussion of his experience with soccer and Coby's discussion of his experience with acting auditions insightful and instructive. Even as both young men participated in activities that are not stereotypically associated with Black males, they were readily able to identify how common stereotypes about Black people and Black males in particular continued to impact them negatively. They recognized that no matter what they did or did not do in terms of extracurricular activities, sports, and academics, they would always be judged first and foremost as Black males. Tray poignantly summed up this reality when he shared:

> It kind of brings you down in a sense. Because, I mean, if it was up to me, I don't think race should exist. I think it is just types. As far as race, we are the human race and I don't see how you can have a race within a race. I feel like there is types—you know . . .the bulldog and the poodle. That is not two different races, they are two different dogs. Black and whites, we are not two different races, we are two different types of humans. I have brown skin and your skin is white, you have less pigment in you. I don't understand why we have these stereotypes. I mean our brains are the same, just our skin color is the only thing and maybe our hair texture; that is it. . . . I hear a lot of negative things about skin color—like, nowadays it is this thing about light skin, dark skin, brown skin—I mean, you are still Black. So what are you arguing about?

I noted that Tray had strong feelings about being viewed negatively simply because of the color of his skin. During one class discussion, he got into a heated debate with Keith and other class members about whether or not race actually exists. Tray argued that that there is no such thing as race and that racial categories are "made up." Keith dismissed Tray's claims and argued that race does exist and is determined by one's skin color. As Keith

and Tray argued back and forth, several students joined the “debate” and they all agreed with Keith. I was struck by how quickly the students’ conversation became heated, and as I listened to Keith and Tray passionately argue, I wondered what was at stake for them. I knew from my conversations with both young men that they did not want to be judged and treated unfairly because of their skin color. I also knew that they both understood how race and gender impacted their lives and that both were reminded daily that they cannot escape the realities associated with racial discrimination. At one point during the conversation, Keith was almost yelling at Tray and demanding that Tray acknowledge that racial categories are real.

As this event unfolded, I was reminded of how Black people are forced to consider the role that race plays in every aspect of their lives. Although Tray and Keith tended to think about race differently, the fact remains that they both constantly thought about how race impacted their lives. Tatum (1997) underscored this fact in her statement that Black youth learn to think of themselves in terms of race

> because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies. (p. 54)

After listening to Keith and Tray argue and watching almost the entire class gang up on Tray, I gently asked if I could participate in the conversation. I shared that I believe that race is socially constructed and that racial categories are used in ways that marginalize specific groups of people. I also acknowledged Keith’s point that people experience

specific realities based on their skin color. While my explanation seemed to satisfy the students, their conversation challenged me to reflect on how racial stereotypes define all aspects of people's lives. All of the participants were able to recognize how racial stereotypes worked against them and they were able to name specific experiences in which they were discriminated against because of their race and gender.

I was impressed that the teacher, Ms. Diggins, did not immediately cut off the conversation between Keith and Tray. The fact that she gave them the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings suggested she recognized that both young men, as well as the other students in the room, had few opportunities to discuss issues of race and racism in their other classes. Ms. Diggins and I talked often about how Black males face specific challenges because of their race and gender and she understood that the students needed an opportunity to share how their lives were impacted by race. She welcomed vigorous, respectful debate between the students and while she shared her personal feelings about both students' argument, she did so only after multiple students in the class had the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions.

Always a Suspect: Criminalized Black Bodies

The students talked openly about their negative interactions with the criminal justice system and how they believe stereotypes that function to characterize Black males as criminals influence many Black males' interactions with law enforcement. Several of the students shared that they were not surprised that George Zimmerman was not convicted of murdering Trayvon Martin and they also shared how they were not surprised

that Trayvon Martin was shot and killed while walking home in his neighborhood.[11] They offered personal stories of how they were racially profiled in their communities, and several of them reported feeling that they were perceived as a threat even when they had done nothing "threatening" or "suspicious." As the students shared their personal experiences and thoughts about the criminal stereotypes associated with Black males, I was constantly reminded of this claim by Anderson (1995):

> Crime news in America's cities portrayed an apparently endless parade of young black men under arrest, on trial or headed for prison; it did not take too long for the automatic barely conscious association of blacks with crime to become an assumption of urban life. (p. 52)

Like Anderson, Ferguson (2001) suggested that

> The image of the Black male criminal is more familiar because of its prevalence in the print and electronic media as well as in scholarly work. The headlines of newspaper articles and magazines sound the alarm dramatically as the presence of Black males in public spaces has come to signify danger and a threat to public safety. (p. 78)

Similarly, Welch (2007) asserted that "because media presumably have the power to help construct the meaning of race in our society, it is apparent that they play a significant role in defining Blacks as criminals as a result of the way they are often presented to readers and viewers" (p. 283). The result of these prevailing images, according to Jenkins (2006), "has been that of the Black man as a perpetuator of violence. From his being stereotyped

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[11]Trayvon Martin, a 16-year-old African American, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in a Florida suburb in February 2012. Zimmerman, a 28-year-old mixed-race Hispanic man, was the community watch coordinator for the neighborhood where Martin was temporarily living and where the shooting took place. For more on George Zimmerman's trial and its fallout, see http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html?_r=0

as an animal and brute in the years of American enslavement to his current stereotypical image as a gangster and thug, the Black male has maintained the stereotypical status of menace to society" (p. 139). Such disproportionately negative representations of Blacks in the media may explain why research by Oliver and Fonash (2002) found that Blacks are more likely to be identified with violent crime than whites.

The pervasive nature of criminal stereotypes about Black males was not lost on the participants. They were very aware that at any moment they could be stopped, frisked, or accused of a crime they did not commit. Perhaps more disturbing, their discussion of the criminal justice system and stereotypes associated with Black males suggests that the participants view themselves as "guilty until proven innocent" with respect to their interactions with law enforcement. Keith's recounting of an incident while walking in his neighborhood with his brother provides an important example of his point. When asked if he had ever been searched, patted down, or put in handcuffs, Keith shared:

> I have never been pulled over. But I have been walking, me and my older brother, and two police came up behind us [and said], "Yeah, we had just got a report on a breaking and entering and a stolen vehicle." Okay, first of all I am walking and you are talking about a stolen vehicle. If I had a stolen vehicle I would not even be on this side [of town] right now, I would probably be on the north side somewhere living it up with the car I got. So I already know they stopped us basically because what we were wearing, how we was dressed, the hair we got—the dreads, because we both got dreads. The tattoos, because he got one on his shoulder. . . . I already know what they stopped us for based on what we dressed, but at the same time I don't think that is what they should do. There is plenty of people out here that are different race, different color and they look like they about the life of doing what other people do but they are on the low and keep it on the DL and they get passed so good with it and all the attention is on us because

> of what we are doing and they are doing it the smarter way by having their pants up and everything and they don't look guilty or anything; they look innocent.

Keith made it clear that the "plenty of people" he referred to are white people who are never harassed by the police or searched because of the color of their skin. He further explained his point this way:

> Just 'cause of skin tone, my dreads, because I got beads on or I am sagging, I am Black, I got tattoos. . . . I have seen a cop drive straight past a white guy that was walking with whatever in his hand . . . and come straight to me. . . . I already know you came to me because I am black, I have dreads, I am sagging, and I got a tattoo. Like Officer Harrison might see me standing beside a bus stop one day and he might assume that I am selling drugs just cause of the way that I am dressed. . . . I don't think that is right, but I can't prevent that from happening. . . . It is going to happen and that is not really our fault. It is just the time period.

It is important to point out that Officer Harrison is a Black, male police officer who is assigned to Stokes as the student resource officer. The fact that Keith mentioned Officer Harrison cannot be overstated. For Keith, it did not matter if the officers who accosted him were white or Black; he, like most of the other students, tended to lump all members of law enforcement together. As such, the issue was not the race of the officer, but rather how he felt he was perceived because of how he looks and how he chooses to dress.

As I listened to Keith's insightful and forthright analysis of how his body is criminalized because of gender, skin color, hairstyle, and style of dress, I was clear that he was under no illusion as to why he had been stopped and frisked while walking with his brother and as to why a police officer passed by a white suspect and immediately came over and began to search him. Keith articulated what many Black males who come

of age in the United States face every day: our freedom, our liberty, and our lives are constantly threatened because of who we are and because of what some people fear we represent. The constant stream of negative images perpetuated about Black males adds to the role that implicit bias and racial discrimination plays in the stereotypes that characterize us as criminals who are worthy of constant surveillance. Furthermore, Keith's claim that he "can't prevent it from happening" illuminates the sense of powerlessness that many Black males feel as we negotiate the difficult realities associated with criminal stereotypes. Furthermore, Keith's comment about individuals who "look innocent" underscored his recognition of how Black skin was policed in ways that white skin was not. He understood that even when he had done nothing, that fact that he is a Black male automatically makes him a suspect if he is anywhere near where a crime is committed or if he simply "looks suspicious" while walking down the street minding his own business.

Like Keith, Tray provided a similar example of how criminal outcomes differ based on race:

> I heard the story from my [Black] friend and he told me how he went to a building with a white friend of his and he opened a door by accident or something . . . and an alarm went off and the cops came and arrested both of them. And they were both in the courtroom getting tried at the same time and [my friend] . . . had an attorney and the white kid had nothing, and the white kid, his charges got dropped and [my friend] got charged with a felony and he did not even do anything. I feel that is the kind of stuff that we go through. If we get caught doing something—whether we did it or not—we are probably going to get in trouble for it.

Tray went on to explain that as a Black male, he must constantly remember how he is perceived and how his behaviors might be interpreted by those around him, especially by police officers. He explained:

> You ain't ever gonna be able to drive down the street, windows tinted with a very expensive car . . . and not get pulled over. It just is not gonna happen. . . .You won't ever be able to be around police officers and not be pulled over if you are in an expensive vehicle and you are a Black male. Because there is always going to be that thing in the back of their head saying, "Something ain't right," just because you are a Black male.

I was struck by Tray's comment, because as someone who owns an all-black Honda Accord Sport, I have often thought that my car would look nice with tinted windows. I have refused, however, to tint my windows for the very reasons Tray mentions. The thought of being pulled over or stopped and frisked simply because of the car I drive and how I choose to accessorize it is a scary proposition. Black males cannot take for granted that when they leave their homes for any reason that they will not be stopped, illegally searched, and humiliated because they "fit the description." Our efforts to remain alive must take into account the clothes we wear, the places we go, the manner in which we wear our hair, and the general ways that we carry ourselves when in public. To wear a hoodie or oversized sweatpants or jeans is to invite the possibility of police harassment or death. Even for Black males who dress professionally, there is no guarantee of not being subjected to some form of police misconduct or outright brutality. As such, Black males experience a tension that forces us to live in a heightened state of awareness with regard to our general being and existence in this world.

Like Keith and Tray, Thomas also spoke about how he has been profiled by the police because of his style of dress and his race:

> It was also one time where it was me and my cousins . . . walking to [their] grandmother's house. . . . So we were walking over there and I guess what we was wearing attracted the police officer. Because I was wearing black, my cousin was wearing a white t-shirt and black, and my other cousin was wearing black, and they told us to come here and they searched us. We wasn't doing nothing but walking to the store and they said, "Come here, can we search you?" . . . We got searched just because of what we was wearing.

When I asked Thomas if he thought the police would have stopped him if he and his cousins were white, he said no. I asked Thomas to elaborate and he shared:

> Because . . . white people always go by sometimes but I am guessing they are always innocent. They never do nothing. . . . I got a little white homeboy that go here, and he is really bad, but his parents are, "Oh, he is so innocent" and he never gets in trouble.

Thomas said that Black people, on the other hand, "always stay in trouble. They are always getting locked up. Most of them don't got a diploma and most of them don't finish high school."

Like Keith, Thomas connected innocence with whiteness; however, he then went a step further and connected Blackness to getting into trouble and going to jail. What was clear to me as I listened to Keith and Thomas as well as the other participants is that they understood and in some sense bought into the high value placed on white skin. Throughout my time at Stokes, it was evident that the students were able to recognize how whiteness is privileged in ways that leave Blacks vulnerable to attacks on both their

character and their right to exist without suspicion. The students were clear about how racism impacted their lives, especially when it came to their understanding of the criminal justice system, and as a result they learned and in some ways accepted the stereotypes that exist about Black males.

Keith, who was extremely vocal during both his individual interview and the focus group discussion, offered insightful and thought-provoking commentary about how racism impacts the lives of Black people in general when he shared:

> Racism is going to always exist no matter the time and how old earth gets. There is always going to be a different person—not just white but all races—that has their own opinion about the color of people they like. . . . I feel like one thing we can't do as Black males [even though] Obama is in the White House . . . we will not able to walk down the street and not be accused of something that happened—say a week ago and not even in your own town or where you live in the south or the north [side of town] or whatever. There can be a cop come from the south side to the north side and say, "Well, oh, I see you with dreads and you match the description of someone on the south side that broke into these two or three houses and you got to go to trial."

Keith's comments underscore the permanence of racism in the United States, which is one of the major tenets of critical race theory. The fact that he recognizes that racism will always exist cannot be understated. He acknowledges that as a Black male he will be racially profiled, marginalized, and oppressed because of the color of his skin for his entire lifetime. Keith also calls attention to the fact that he understands that the United States, even with the election of President Obama, is not a post-racial society. Race continues to matter, and Black and Brown bodies continue to be dehumanized and demonized on multiple levels.

Keith's comments are especially important when one considers the current Black Lives Matter movement, which began after the killing of Ferguson, Mo., teenager Michael Brown and has continued as a response to the seemingly weekly killings of unarmed Black males throughout the United States. While I agree that Black lives do matter, Keith reminds me that in many contexts, Black lives do *not* matter. He and the other young men in the study continue to face overwhelming odds because of the color of their skin. They recognize that they will always be viewed as suspects and that they will constantly be measured against a set of unfair standards and practices that function to invalidate the experiences of anyone who is not white.

"You Have To Have Pride in Yourself": Hope in the Struggle

It is important to point out that even as they understood how the negative stereotypes associated with Black males impacted them, many of the participants were also able to articulate the strengths associated with being Black and, beyond that, could articulate a sense of hope for their future. This point is especially salient because even as the participants were clear about the struggles they face on a daily basis, they were quick to articulate how they plan to go about achieving their hopes and their dreams. In almost every case the students sincerely believed that they would accomplish their goals in spite of the racism and constant discrimination that impacted their lives. This fact is important because even as the young men recognized and understood how they are perceived in the larger society, they refused to allow those perceptions to shake their confidence or deter them from pursing their career goals and life aspirations. Keith called attention to this important fact when he shared:

> To be a young Black male, you have pride in yourself. You can't base yourself on what other people think about you. You have to try hard for what you believe in and don't let anybody else tell you [that] you can't or can do something, because everybody . . . has the ability to complete any mission or goal they want to achieve.

Similar to Keith, Jacob was adamant in his belief that he would achieve all of his goals even in the face of discrimination. He stated:

> The most important thing is that as we are looked down upon, we should strive to do our best to stay encouraged while what is going on and being said behind our backs. To be better people and to not fall into the image that was created . . . . The best thing that I like to prove [to] my non-colored associates [is] that I am doing better than them. Not to brag, but to just prove them wrong about what they are saying.

Like Jacob, Deion shared his desire to prove people wrong and to not be boxed into the dominant narratives about Black males. In so doing, Deion shared that he believes he is part of a different generation and that just as he accepts people from different backgrounds, he likewise hopes that he will be accepted. In his discussion of his hope for a better world, he shared:

> This is a whole different generation that will grow up and leave a younger generation to a better world, hopefully. I can only hope. . . . I don't want people to actually think one way of a particular race but actually have an expanded thought of what anybody can be of that particular race because I mean, I have friends who are Asian, Asian-Indian, European American (as in white Caucasian), Mexican and from South America and all corners of the world. I accept them as who they are and not of a particular group themselves.

Deion followed his initial comments by pointing out that just as he accepts people for who they are, he hopes that he will be accepted for who he is. Deion connected this hope to his professional goals for the future when he stated:

> I want to be a bio-technician and that is why I took an interest in science to begin with. I wanted to study genetics and what goes into your body and how this reacts to something else. What causes this? What makes you, you. . . . Nobody really expect this for me as a Black person until I actually tell this, and it takes them by surprise as they hope for me that I can become something like this. And so I make a promise to myself that I am going to be this one day, and I am going to show them that even because I am Black I can do that.

Dwayne's remarks were similar to those of his fellow students. When asked what makes him hopeful he shared that he is hopeful about "not being in the streets" and about having the opportunity to go to college and study architecture, a career in which he believes he can achieve a great deal of success.

In each of the above examples, the students articulated a commitment to their personal success even in the face of marginalization and discrimination. The students' ability to articulate their hopes, dreams, and career aspirations shows that they understood that they were much more than the negative images of Black masculinity perpetuated by the individuals who control the media. This fact is important because although the participants remained keenly aware of how Black males are demonized in the media, they maintained a high sense of dignity and self-worth that allowed them to maintain a positive outlook about their futures. Keith summed this point up best when stated:

> To be a young Black man, you got to have pride in yourself. At least try. And don't say "I tried"; try harder. Because I give it three different types of tries. You

> try, you try harder, and you try very hard. . . . Because if you try and don't get it . . . . you need to push the level until you get it. But, to tell somebody what it would be like to be a young Black man. You have to have pride in yourself, believe in yourself, don't let nobody tell you what you can't or can do. You got to try everything for yourself and experience the world for yourself. Don't listen to what somebody is going to tell you if you are going to experience it for yourself. . . . Survive out here off what you know.

Tray also emphasized the importance of the need for Black males to continue to try even in the face of racism and unfair stereotypes. He said:

> All you can do is try because in my opinion, it has been so far gone that racism is never—*never*—[going to end]. The only thing that is going to end racism is the end of the world. Racism is not going to stop. Stereotypes is never going to stop. That is forever and that is never going to stop. So all that you can do is just try. Deal with it, you can't decrease it. There is always going to be somebody that is racist, always somebody. And that is just how it is.

I found both Keith and Tray's comments instructive and insightful as I thought about how Black males can work to address the constant stereotypes and repeated discrimination we face. Both students are correct in their assessment that we must continue to "try" when faced with the difficult and overwhelming reality of living in a society where unfair and unfounded stereotypes about Black males abound. The refusal to try essentially amounts to giving up when faced with racism and discrimination. To be clear, I understand how the realities that many Black males face can cause us to question why we should even continue to "try" in the face of policies and practices that function to strip us of our sense of dignity and self-worth and tell us that we have no value or importance. Likewise, I recognize why many Black males have lost hope when faced with the myriad injustices that demean and devalue Black life. The young Black men who participated in this study,

as well as many young Black males across the country, have to fight an uphill battle just to gain the respect and to have their experiences validated. The struggle to find this validation is both overwhelming and frustrating and can lead to a loss of pride and self-respect. Keith's recognition of the need for pride is a reminder, however, that the stereotypes so often used to vilify Black males can be overcome. The young men in this study were adamant that they are much more than the negative media images of Black males that have become so ubiquitous. Even as they understood how unfair and unfounded stereotypes complicated and disadvantaged their lives, they approached each day with a resolve to move forward even as they understood that their efforts to make progress would constantly be met with resistance.

It's a Setup: Why the System Must Change

As I write this chapter on stereotypes, police are conducting an investigation into a shootout outside the Twin Peaks restaurant in Waco, Texas, that left nine bikers dead and several others wounded.[12] The shootings were the result of an ongoing feud between several rival motorcycle gangs, two of which (the Bandidos and the Cassocks) are the largest in the country. All of the motorcycle gangs involved in the shootout are primarily made up of white members, and the manner in which the media has covered their actions has been nothing less than intriguing. As I listened to media reports of the deadly shootings, I did not once hear a pundit or commentator refer to the bikers as "thugs" or "gangstas," and I did not hear any commentary on whether or not the bikers came from

[12] For analysis of the May 2015 biker shootout in Waco, Texas, see Akiba Solomon's opinion piece at http://www.colorlines.com/articles/no-thugs-scene-biker-gang-rumble

single-parent homes where their fathers were absent and/or unconcerned. I raise this point because an examination of the commentary that occurred following the protests in Ferguson, Mo., and in Baltimore after the shootings of Michael Brown[13] and Freddie Gray,[14] respectively, were much different. New York Times columnist Charles Blow (2015) called attention to this point when he wrote:

> In Waco, the words used to describe the participants in a shootout so violent that a local police spokesman called the crime scene the bloodiest he had ever seen included "biker clubs," "gangs" and "outlaw motorcycle gangs."
>
> While those words may be accurate, they lack the pathological markings of those used to describe protesters in places like Ferguson, Mo., and Baltimore. President Obama and the mayor of Baltimore were quick to use the loaded label "thugs" for the violent rioters there. That the authorities have not used that word to describe the far worse violence in Waco makes the contrast all the more glaring.

Blow (2015) went on to point out:

> The words "outlaw" and "biker," while pejorative to some, still evoke a certain romanticism in the American ethos. They conjure an image of individualism, adventure and virility. There's an endless list of motorcycle gang movies. A search for "motorcycle romance" on Amazon yields thousands of options. Viagra, the erectile dysfunction drug, even has a motorcycle commercial.
>
> While "thug life" has also been glamorized in movies, music and books, its scope is limited and racialized. It is applied to—and even adopted by—black men. And the evocation is more "Menace II Society" than "Easy Rider." The pejorative is unambiguous.

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[13] Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., in August 2014. The incident prompted nationwide outrage. For a timeline of events compiled by *The New York Times,* see http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/09/us/10ferguson-michael-brown-shooting-grand-jury-darren-wilson.html#/#time354_10512

[14] Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American, died of injuries sustained after being taken into police custody in Baltimore, Maryland, in April 2015. See coverage by *The New York Times* at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/22/us/another-mans-death-another-round-of-questions-for-the-police-in-baltimore.html

Blow's analysis of the commentary surrounding what happened in Waco, Baltimore, and Ferguson is important when thinking about the constant barrage of negative stereotypes Black males face. It seems that the media never gives us the benefit of the doubt and more importantly never takes into consideration the circumstances that lead to both our frustration and our outrage. We are too often cast as menaces that need to be controlled and unfortunately held at bay by police in full riot gear who beat us with batons, spray us with tear gas, threaten us with guns and patrol our communities with military-style armored vehicles. The unfortunate, unfair and untruthful lies perpetuated by the media have created a trope that criminalizes almost all aspects of Black males' behavior. Seldom are we portrayed as model students, proud family men, upstanding citizens, or budding scholars. The crippling stories told about Black males have perpetuated a narrative that has socially constructed us as violent criminals who pose a threat to the "civility" to Eurocentric ways of knowing and being (Love, 2014). As Wacquant (2002) argued:

> In the era of racially targeted "law and order" polices . . . the reigning public image of the criminal is . . . that of a black monster, as young African-American men from the "inner city" have come to personify the explosive mix of moral degeneracy and mayhem. The conflation of blackness and crime in collective representation and government policy (the other side of this equation being the conflation of blackness and welfare) thus re-activates "race" by giving a legitimate outlet to the expression of anti-black animus in the form of the public vituperation of criminals and prisoners. (p. 56)

Wacquant's discussion of the manner in which Black males are criminalized in the media offers yet another important departure point to think about how Black males are

constantly assaulted and disparaged by conversations that caricature us in ways that do nothing to offer a fair and truthful assessment of our overwhelmingly positive traits and qualities.

My consideration of the negative media images of Black males, as well as the students' discussion of the negative stereotypes they encounter, challenged me to think more deeply about the role that both stereotypes and media play in Black males' educational experiences. Many of the disciplinary polices enacted in schools and school districts around the country operate to the detriment of Black students and Black males in particular. In their discussion of how Black males are overrepresented in exclusionary school discipline, Darensbourg, Perez, and Blake (2010) emphasized the fact that Black males are suspended at rates two to three times higher than their peers. In so doing, they highlight research that shows that Black males who experience some form of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion, or disciplinary alternative education programs) "may be more likely to associate with deviant peer groups which may lead to an increase in criminal activity" (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010, p. 198). The authors called attention to the fact that "many of the students who experience exclusionary discipline do so as consequence of zero-tolerance policies" (p. 198). Instituted with the inception of the War on Drugs and a desire to curb violence in public schools, zero-tolerance polices rely "primarily upon school exclusion—out-of-school suspension and expulsion and increases in security and police presence" (Skiba, 2014, p. 28). As a result, whenever students engage in or are perceived to engage in specific behaviors, they can in many instances be easily excluded from the school environment.

While none of the students who participated in this study had ever been suspended long-term, Thomas, Keith, and Dwayne's time at Stokes was tenuous. Each had experienced short-term suspension and they knew students who had been suspended long-term. Thomas, who had a criminal record, was on probation and risked going to jail if he did not attend school. Members of the administration were aware of Thomas' situation, and he felt that they used it against him in ways that made his time at Stokes more difficult. Dwayne was caught coming back on school grounds after having smoked marijuana and was suspended for five days, but could have faced a much longer suspension. Keith's previous history with law-enforcement always made his time at school stressful; he knew that he was being watched even when he was not doing anything that would have warranted discipline.

Ms. Diggins and I talked often about discipline issues at Stokes and she was especially sensitive to how students were treated by the administration. She often mentioned that in the 12 years she has taught high school (three of which had been at Stokes), uneven discipline has been something that she has had difficulty witnessing and explaining to students. She shared that when administrators have decided that they no longer want to "deal with" a child, they begin to look for ways to "get rid" of them. Ms. Diggins felt this fact was especially the case with Thomas, whom she believed one administrator at Stokes was ready to suspend long-term. To be clear, she acknowledged that Thomas had some behavior issues in the past, but she was concerned that the administrator had personal issues with Thomas and was looking for ways to suspend him rather than ways to help him be successful. She shared that both during her time at Stokes

and as a teacher in general, administrators often found ways to kick students out of school rather than trying to find ways to help them do well. She stated that many of the students she has seen suspended, expelled, or sent to alternative schools tended to be Black and poor. As result, Ms. Diggins stated that she sometimes found herself coaching students about how to interact with specific teachers and administrators. For example, she often pulled Keith to the side to remind him that he needed to come to school and stay out of trouble, and she questioned Thomas intently anytime he was late or did not attend her class. Her message to her Black male students was always the same: a reminder that they had to be careful about how they were perceived and to remain aware that they were possibly one discipline referral away from experiencing some form of discipline that they did not feel would be appropriate.

The unfortunate reality of zero-tolerance policies is that they disproportionately impact students of color. Black students are given discipline referrals more quickly than their white peers, they are expelled from school at higher rates, and they "are punished more severely for less serious and more subjective infractions" (Skiba, 2014, p. 30). Scholars such as Vavrus and Cole (2002) have attributed this disproportionate assignment of discipline to what they term "cultural mismatch." While we should not discount the importance of cultural mismatch, it is also important to not discount what the students in this study have shared. They were clear that negative stereotypes about Black males impact every phase of their lives including their experiences in school. Interestingly, however, even as they recognized the impact of negative stereotypes, they were adamant that they had to "try harder." While I don't want to discount the students' stated desire to

try harder, it is important to acknowledge how institutional racism has fashioned an educational system that places the burden of "trying harder" and "doing better" on the very students who are marginalized and oppressed. No matter how hard Black males try, we will always find ourselves living in a society that discriminates against us simply because of who we are and because of what in some peoples' minds we represent.

A recent decision by the Governor of Maryland demonstrates how institutional racism works to place an enormous burden on Black and Brown students. After the Maryland legislature voted to use taxpayer funds to build a $30 million youth prison, the Governor made an executive decision to reallocate $11.6 million from the Baltimore city school system's budget and use it to fund government employee pension plans. It is both sad and maddening that in a city where there was so much unrest as a result of the killing of Freddie Gray, the Governor would make such a decision. What's more, the children impacted the most by this decision are Black children from poor inner city communities.

The convergence of polices such as zero tolerance as well as the decrease in funding to poor, primarily minority school districts has helped facilitate what scholars and researchers have come to term the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Archer, 2009; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gregory, Sikba & Noguera, 2010; Noguera, 2001). Characterized by educational policies and practices that focus more on criminalization than education, the school- to-prison pipeline functions to funnel Black and Brown children from school to prison. As Allen and White-Smith (2014) have pointed out, "There is evidence showing the connection between the punitive practices and restrictive culture of the public school system and the prison system, which

focuses on criminalization rather than education and rehabilitation" (p. 445). Too often, Black males are the individuals most impacted by these "punitive practices." We are consistently viewed as criminals, constantly portrayed as thuggish brutes, and narrowly defined as athletes and gang bangers. This reality leads to systematic trends that "suggest that teachers may be implicitly guided by stereotypical perceptions that African American boys require greater control than their peers and are unlikely to respond to nonpunitive measures" (Monroe, 2010, p. 47). As Ladson Billings (2011) has pointed out, "From the moment Black boys enter school, who and how they can be is predetermined" (p. 12). Efforts to address pre-determined constructs of what it means to be a Black male must begin with an acknowledgement of the systematic injustices that operate to criminalize and dehumanize us.

As the students' comments demonstrate, they were aware of how negative stereotypes operate to shape the dominant narrative about Black males, and they were clear about how those narratives negatively impact their lives. It was also clear that the three teachers whose classes I observed had a keen sense of how Black males are negatively stereotyped and more importantly, how those stereotypes manifest themselves in schools in ways that are overly punitive. Each teacher made a point to share with me that they preferred to handle discipline in class so as to not send students to the office where decisions about discipline would be out of their control. This was especially the case for Ms. Selma, whose experiences with her two sons who had been in prison made her work that much harder to give her Black male students every possible opportunity to be successful in her classes. She was careful to not label her students as criminals or

thugs and she was hesitant to refer any of her students to the office, especially Black males. My observations of Ms. Selma as well as Ms. Diggins and Ms. Ferguson indicated that their careful and intentional approach to discipline was very much informed by their desire to be mindful of how Black males are unfairly treated.

Ms. Diggins's desire to not stereotype her Black male students was noticed and questioned by several of her Latino students. Specifically, three Latino students met with Ms. Diggins after school one day and shared that they noticed that she seemed to be harder on white and Latino students of both genders as well as Black females, and not as hard on Black male students. They named specific examples of how they thought Black males were treated differently and they asked Ms. Diggins why she did not treat everyone the same. Ms. Diggins shared this conversation with me and she asked if I felt the students' observations were accurate. I said that I had witnessed similar behavior from her, which led to a discussion of what appeared to be favoritism as it related to her treatment of Black students. She again explained to me that her experiences with her sons, who are biracial but appear Black, sensitized her as to how Black males are perceived and criminalized in the context of public schools. She acknowledged that sometimes she has to be mindful of the fact that her treatment of the Black males in her classes arises from a very personal place with respect to how she recognizes and understands how Black males are treated in school and the larger society.

The teachers' and students' reflections on school discipline practices is important because even though none of the students in this study had ever been expelled long-term, several of them were clear about the fact that they were often viewed differently than

their white peers and they felt that the bar for being either suspended or expelled was set much lower for them than for other students.

When examined through the lens of CRT, the manner in which Black males are criminalized in the media and through multiple forms of systemic racism underscores how majoritarian narratives that characterize us as undisciplined troublemakers generally unconcerned about their education cannot be understated. The general rhetoric about Black males consists of unfounded stereotypes that do little to advance conversations about how to meet both our social and educational needs. Allen and White-Smith (2014) are correct in their assertion that "when examining school polices and Black male achievement, a critical race theory of education exposes the reality that Black boys are disproportionality likely to attend inequitably funded public schools and have unequal access to school knowledge, making them more likely to be sorted into lower ability academic tracks" (p. 446). Unfortunately, conversations that address the inequities in Black males' educational experiences are often dismissed in favor of narratives that advance stereotypical images of our intellect and our masculinity. As a consequence, "the socially constructed racial and gender identity of Black males has permanently cast [us] as violent criminals, too aggressive to educate" (Love, 2014, p. 300).

The students who participated in this study were not under any illusion about the stereotypes that exist about them. As I listened to them and watched them move about their school and interact with their peers, teachers, and other school personnel, I quickly recognized that they represent the stories that rarely get told. All of them were intelligent, thoughtful, insightful brothers who despite the daily struggle that comes with being a

Black male recognized that they were much more than what is typically said or written about them. Although only four or five of the 14 students in this study would have been recognized as "smart" based on their academic record, I intentionally label all of them as smart and highly intelligent. I do this because as I sat with each of them, they were able to engage in thoughtful and insightful conversations about their experiences as Black males. Although they were not always able to name some of the institutional forces that impact their lived experiences, the experiences the students shared helped solidify my belief that conversations about "smartness" must extend beyond students' academic performance. Based on his grades and his previous test scores, one would consider Cadet a very intelligent student with a bright future ahead of him. Conversely, Tray barely passed his classes, but the depth of his discussion during class conversations, in his individual interview, and during one of the focus groups, indicated that he was one of the smartest high school students I have had the opportunity to meet. As such, the students' stories are important because in them, one finds the nuanced realities associated with growing up as a Black male in the United States. Their experiences shed light on the fact that there exist counter-stories to hegemonic discourses perpetuated about Black males. Moreover, their stories further support the fact that there are multiple stories to be told about Black males, and the one-dimensional narrative presented in the media does little to capture the multidimensional nature of their stories. Coby's commitment to pursue his acting career even in the face of discrimination, Keith's refusal to sell drugs so he could be the first person in his family to graduate from college, Dwayne's desire to be an architect, and John's commitment to make the best grades possible so he could go to a

"good college" are all counter-stories that must be told. Many of the young men in this study came from low-income families (over half faced abject poverty), lived in some of the worst neighborhoods in Bluetown, and entered school with three strikes against them—they are Black, male, and poor—yet in the face of the deck being stacked against them, they were determined to not allow the common narrative about Black males to define them. As Lamar shared:

> I got to prove sometime that I am better. . . . If you prove that you are not like what they expecting you to be, then you can prove them wrong and will make them look stupid. . . . Not everybody is the same. Everybody is different, that is what I think.

Lamar's comments sum up the sentiments of many of the young men in this study. They were committed to moving beyond the common stereotypes about Black males as they endeavored to achieve their goals and their dreams.

Reflecting on Pride

As I thought about the hope that each of the students held onto despite the many challenges they faced, I was reminded of Keith's comments that you must have "pride in yourself." As I listened to Keith talk, I wondered what he drew upon to have this sense of pride. My thoughts led me to follow up with Keith about his pride and the following exchange occurred:

> **Travis:** Why do you think that so many Black people are not proud of who they are?
>
> **Keith:** Maybe because they have been abused and neglected and told that they were stupid most of their time, and all those other names that you can hear people

called. Like Black people call other Black people or other races call other Black people and stuff like that. And they just really drop their self-esteem to a low point and get their brain to believe that they are nothing, and they just go on from that point.

T: Have you ever had difficulty having pride? Have you been in situations when you really didn't have pride in who you were as a Black person?

K: I would say nah, I wasn't. I have seen too many people do that and to me, I think that is stupid to actually sit there and think that yourself is nothing when at the end of day you are the only one that is going to be there to provide for yourself because nobody else is going to provide for you or anything. So, I don't think it is a smart thing to say about yourself, especially your own culture.

What was clear from Keith's comments is that he has a great deal of intrinsic motivation that pushes him to not give up on himself or his goals. When Keith graduates from high school, he will be the first person in his family to do so. He discussed the personal struggles he has encountered being raised by a single mother and the fact that even though he has tried to "do the right thing," it is sometimes difficult for him to remain focused when he has so many "distractions" pulling him in different directions. He also discussed the fact that he has many "haters" who believe that he will be like other members of his family and not graduate from high school.

As I talked with Keith, I was again reminded that life for Black males is hard. We are misunderstood, misrepresented, and caricatured in ways that function to strip us of our pride and dignity. The hostility we face is multifaceted and operates within a system that questions our abilities, undermines our potential, and challenges our right to exist. As a consequence, we live in a society that fails to honor, respect, or recognize us beyond

overblown, uninformed, and misguided stereotypes. Education scholar Duncan (2010) expounded on this point when he argued:

> Because black males are constructed as a strange population, that is, a group with values and attitudes that are different from other students, their marginalization and oppression are understood as natural and primarily of their own doing. (p. 136)

When faced with such reality, the ability to maintain a sense of pride is no easy task. As Black males we must constantly grapple with this sense of “double consciousness” which DuBois (1903) defined as a

> sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness: an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Whether through “pride” or “dogged strength,” Black males in the United States of America must make a consciousness decision to strive and push forward in a context where whiteness is held up as the standard for all that is right with the world and Blackness is viewed as all that is wrong. In a society where we face “the personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries . . . through the fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism, privilege, and power” that try to murder our spirit, we cannot lie down simply take what comes our way (Love, 2014, p. 306). I am under no illusion that the task at hand will be easy. I recognize that every day we have to fight just to stay alive. We have to fight just to breathe in a society that is slowly and systematically trying to

choke us to death. We have to fight to be the very conscience of our nation and declare boldly that no matter what is said or written about us, our lives really do matter. As the students so eloquently pointed out, the decision to press forward must be made with the sober recognition that racism is not going anywhere. Racism will always be a part of our society. Even as we press forward, the system of oppression that operates to stereotypes, marginalize, disenfranchise and diminish so many Black boys must change! The students' stories and experiences help shed light on this fact and likewise offer a number of perspectives to consider how to help them achieve positive outcomes. More importantly, however, the fact that the students continue to hold their heads up and push forward even in the face of daunting realities is a testament to their strength, resilience, resolve and, most importantly, their pride.

CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS

As I sit to write this chapter, fires burn in the streets of Baltimore, Freddie Gray's family continues to mourn, Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin's parents continue to search for answers, and the police officers who choked Eric Garner to death remain free. I have shed countless tears and become angry more times than I can count as I watched the news, followed social media, and thought about how the lives of my Black brothers mean nothing to so many people. I am sickened and heartbroken by the tragic realities so many Black males face, and I am disappointed by what I perceive as the lack of care and concern for Black life in general. Black people in this country have never known what it means to live in a nation that truly lives out its mantra that "all men are created equal." A review of our history—slavery, the enactment of Jim Crow laws, the brutality associated with lynching, the disenfranchisement of women, the manufactured "war on drugs," the practice of stop and frisk, and the systematic and intentional murder of young Black males—makes it painfully obvious that the United State of America has never had social, political, and economic structures that are equal. As a Black male who studies Black males, I am concerned about how this lack of equality, lack of respect, lack of dignity, and lack of appreciation for Black males' experiences impacts the lived experiences of Black people, and I am particularly concerned about the impact of so many injustices perpetrated on young Black males.

As I began my research, I was not sure what I would learn or even if I was asking the "right" questions. I knew that I wanted to study people who looked like me, and I knew that my research arose from a place of deep concern and passion for the lives of young Black men. The numerous injustices that Black males have experienced over the years remained at the forefront of my mind as I formulated my research questions and considered how to begin collecting data for this study. Nevertheless, I was constantly worried that this work would not yield anything meaningful to reflect on or write about.

I began with a desire to study "smartness," and as a result, I conducted this study in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do Black males understand what it means to be smart?
2. How do Black males' views and assessment of their own intelligence affect their engagement in the classroom?
3. How do Black males understand what it means to "act white or "act Black"?
4. What impact, if any, do their understandings of "acting white" and "acting Black" have on their academic performance?
5. How do Black males understand the stereotypes associated with Black males?

I readily acknowledge that what I have here is incomplete. These questions cannot be fully answered in one dissertation. They are questions that require a lifetime of work and commitment to addressing the issues that impact so many Black males. Nevertheless, this work does offer several important perspectives which are useful when thinking about how to improve the lives of young Black males. In this chapter, I reflect on and begin to answer each of my research questions as I consider what implications they have for

improving educational outcomes for Black males. I also discuss additional questions that arose for me while completing this work, and I share my thoughts about the future direction of this work with a recognition of the need to continue to engage in research aimed at improving educational outcomes for Black male students.

How Do Black Males Understand What It Means To Be Smart?

While the question of what it means to be smart continues to challenge me to think about what young Black males learn in school as well as society in general, this dissertation is not confined to exploring what it means to be smart. Nonetheless, in answering this question, I can state that the students primarily identified smartness as something that tends to be associated with whiteness. As such, the majority of the students connected their ideas of smartness to what it means to act white, and they used such words as ignorant, dumb, and stupid in their discussions of what it means to act Black. In so doing, they named how Blackness has come to be understood as something that is negative and whiteness as something positive. The students also made clear that even as they are able to name the negative associations with Blackness, they do not readily accept those negative associations for their own lives. The fact that students did not accept the negative associations of Blackness for their own lives is a fact that cannot be overlooked. Specifically, if a white person told a Black person, “Black people are gangstas, thugs, ignorant, stupid, and criminals, but you are ‘different,’” the white person would immediately be labeled a racist. Conversely, if a Black person said that same thing about himself but argued that he does not see himself that way, one must ask if his thinking is internalized racism.

I raise this point because some of the students' comments indicated that there was a disconnect between how they viewed themselves and how they viewed other Black people. For example, both Danny and John viewed themselves as very different from the other Black students in both their school and their community. Danny made clear that he seldom socializes outside of school with other Black students because they get in trouble and are always doing "stupid" things. John did not feel that the Black students were "progressing" enough, so he did not engage with many of his Black male peers. In the case of both young men, acting Black tended to be something that other people did, but not them. Similarly, the other 12 participants also did not see themselves as acting Black, although the distinctions they made between themselves and other Black students were not as sharp as the ones made by Danny and John.

I raise the concern about internalized racism because the fact that the students connected what it means to be "smart" to acting white and acting Black, suggests that that they learned early in their K–12 education what smart children look and act like. To be clear, even though some students, such as Keith, Michael, and Jacob, were able to name some of the strengths associated with Black people, the overwhelming majority of their comments about Blacks were negative. As I considered the students' comments, I was again reminded of Hatt's (2011) discussion of how smartness is a cultural construction that can be understood based on race and social positioning. In the case of the study participants, most lived in impoverished communities, all attended a school that many of them termed a "ghetto," and all were Black. Each of these factors impacted their understanding of what it means to smart and likewise impacted how they viewed Black

people in relationship to smartness. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative they heard regarding what it means to be smart excluded Black people. Their comments suggest that on some level, they adopted this narrative as a frame to measure the intellectual abilities of many of their Black peers and, to an extent, Black people in general. People who the participants saw as exceptional, namely President Obama and those who they saw as having "good jobs" and careers, were able to escape being labeled as acting Black, but in their minds, a large majority of Black people fit the acting Black frame.

How Do Black Males' Views and Assessment of Their Own Intelligence Impact Their Engagement in the Classroom?

Before I go on, I need to point out that that my assessment of each participant's classroom engagement is based only on what I saw of them in their English classes. It should also be noted that the three teachers whose classes I observed were phenomenal teachers—not always the norm, particularly in Title I schools like Stokes. That said, the students in this study, with the exception of Tray and Coby, tended to be very engaged in the classroom. It is important to point out that Ms. Diggins and Ms. Ferguson were well-liked by students and all three teachers demonstrated an investment in their students' success. Additionally, with the exception of Lamar in Ms. Selma's class, all of the students got along well with their English teachers and actively participated in classroom discussions. Even Lamar, who did not always get along with Ms. Selma, actively participated in class discussions and completed most of his in-class assignments. When the students discussed what more teachers could do to help students improve their educational outcomes, they were not so much talking about their English teachers as they

were about their experiences in other classes as well as their educational experiences as a whole. In all of the classes I observed, I witnessed students participating in conversations about race and social justice. I watched as they discussed Macbeth and considered the meaning it brings for contemporary times. I listened as they discussed news stories on CNN and articles from *Newsweek* magazine. When social issues such as marriage equality and racism were discussed, the students were deeply involved in the conversation and readily shared their thoughts and opinions. When given the opportunity to read from their journals, they raised issues that were important to them and that they had been contemplating for some time.

The students' in-class discussions about the news and about their journal entries allowed me to see that they were deeply engaged in learning and had many ideas they wished to share. While not all were considered "stellar" students based on their academic transcripts, my assessment of their classroom behavior indicated that at different points, they all believed that they had something meaningful and important to contribute to their learning experience. It was clear from my observations of the students that they believed that they were "smart" and that they believed that they had something meaningful to add to class discussions. This point cannot be understated because the students' comments about what they believed being smart looked like, stand in contrast to how they presented themselves in class. That is, when describing what it looked like to be smart, the students described behaviors and stereotypes that are white. Yet these students were displaying "smart" behaviors—e.g., high engagement in the classroom—even as they very much identified with being Black. Their actions matched their description of "smart"—and by

extension, white—even while they embraced their Black identity. As such, each student intentionally found ways, no matter how large or small, that he could contribute to the classroom experience.

The commitment, care, and concern of the teachers helped facilitate the students' engagement. As previously mentioned, the three teachers I worked with while completing this study were exceptional. It was obvious that they cared for the welfare of each student and wanted the students to be successful beyond just their English classes. The students by and large reciprocated this care, and in many ways this reciprocity impacted the students' engagement in the classroom. As such, the students' engagement in their English classes was a result of their teachers' willingness to use their authority in ways that communicated respect for and appreciation of the various perspectives, experiences, and opinions the students brought to the classroom. For example, Thomas was clear that Ms. Diggins was not like other teachers and that she respected him and treated him fairly even though she knew he had a criminal record. Similarly, Danny gravitated to Ms. Selma because she gave him the opportunity to discuss ways to resolve issues in his personal life. I offer both of these examples because in each case, the student's classroom engagement resulted from the fact that he felt that he could have open and honest dialogue with his teacher. This fact should not be lost on anyone when considering the important role that teachers play in student engagement. My discussions with the students revealed that they were willing to speak up, participate in class, and give their best effort if they believed teachers were concerned about them beyond the classroom.

How Do Black Males Understand What It Means To Act White and Act Black?

One of the more astonishing findings of this research is the fact that the students tended to associate acting Black with negativity and acting white with positivity. Even as the students made these associations, they were clear that they did not appropriate their negative associations with Blackness to themselves. Yet it was notable that the students quickly rattled off such descriptors as “ghetto,” “ignorant,” “stupid,” and “ratcheted” when asked what it means to act Black. The ease and consistency with which the students named what it means to act Black gave me pause. I began to question where they received messages about what it means to be Black and more importantly, how their understanding of what it means to be Black influenced how they perceived their own academic skills and abilities. These questions were raised for me in light of Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) *acting white hypothesis* or claim that Black students eschew high academic achievement because of the fear of acting white. The participants who did not do well academically made it clear to me that their academic performance had nothing to do with their fear of acting white. Conversely, the participants who performed well academically did not consider their academic performance as somehow disconnected from their Blackness.

The students’ discussion of what it means to be Black challenged me to look beyond their school environment as I considered the messages they receive about race. To be clear, I believe that the students received messages about race in school. My conversations with them, however, revealed that their understandings of race were not based solely on what they learned and experienced in their school environment. Efforts to

understand their conceptualizations of Blackness and whiteness must take seriously what students learn in school, but they must also take seriously the wider institutional practices that normalize white ways of knowing, being, and understanding. As O'Conner, Horvat, and Lewis (2006) pointed out:

> We must further explore how the culture and organization of local schools reify race and impose specific meanings of Blackness. Race is more than a product of how African Americans make sense of themselves as racial subjects and then enact this sense-making in relation to school. It is also a consequence of how schools and their agents racialize black subjects.
>
> Schools are not, however, the only institutions that racialize Black bodies and frame Black actions. The culture and organization of communities (physical and effective) and neighborhoods also can operate in ways that reify race and make sense of and shape Blackness in ways that inform Black achievement. Those charged with educating students from all racial backgrounds must challenge narrowly held constructions of what behaviors and/or actions are associated with an individual's racial identity or particular community. For Black students, it is important that they understand what it means to lay claim to such descriptors as "intelligent," "smart," "speaking properly" and "dressing nicely" when discussing what it means to be Black. In this way, they learn to celebrate Blackness and to move beyond one-dimensional notions of Blackness. (p. xx)

O'Conner and colleagues make a powerful point here in that they underscore the fact that the current structure of schools maintains the status quo with respect to how race is understood both inside and outside of schools. Their discussion calls attention to the fact that educators must be careful not to help maintain this status quo by teaching in ways that fail to challenge the hegemonic curricula and pedagogical practices prevalent in many public schools.

Efforts aimed at helping students celebrate and appreciate Blackness require an approach to teaching and learning that embraces the opportunity to center and to reflect

on one's experience as a Black person. Asante's (2003) notion of Afrocentricity is instructive here because at its core, "it seeks to enshrine the idea that Blackness is a trope of ethics. . . . To be Black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism . . . and white racial domination" (p. 2). It is a way of life "associated with the discovery, location, and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture" (Asante, 2003, p. 3). Moreover, Afrocentric educational practices challenge the hegemony associated with Eurocentric notions of dominance and individualism in favor of pedagogy that recognizes and respects how multiple cultural groups contribute to the educational process. As Sefa Dei (1994) said:

> For Africans of the diaspora, Afrocentric learning calls for the critical examination of the contradictions lived out at the juncture of being Black in a white-dominated society, and how an Afrocentric worldview can assist them in dealing with questions of race, class, gender, and sexual oppression. (p. 4)

I agree with Sefa Dei's claim and assert that if we are to challenge the Eurocentric bias in school curriculums, there must be a concerted effort to expand the lens through which children are asked to learn. Expanding this lens involves engaging in serious discussion about whose culture is "oppositional." Specifically, the use of Afrocentricity challenges the notion that Black culture is somehow "oppositional," as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) assert. The students' discussion reveals that they daily experience aggressions that function to diminish the realties and perspectives they bring to the learning environment. Thus, stepping back, it is the institutionalization of whiteness and white supremacy that creates the opposition that these students experience daily. Efforts to address these

aggressions must be intentional about embracing the students' perspectives in ways that celebrate their cultural knowledge and lived realities.

Attempts to help Black males succeed must embrace and advance curricula and pedagogical practices that aim to move beyond deficit-based, narrowly defined ideas about Black people's intelligence. Perhaps the participants in this study so readily associated Blackness with negativity because they have been educated and "schooled" in a system that does little if anything to centralize and acknowledge the important cultural knowledge that Black people possess. The students' poignant discussion of race suggests that educators have a responsibility to be proactive in providing students with positive and affirming images of Blackness. As Tatum (1997) rightly argued:

> If young people are exposed to images of African American academic achievement . . . they won't have to define school achievement as something for whites only. They will know that there is a long history of black intellectual achievement. (p. 65)

Helping students understand the history of Black achievement functions as a critical component to reframing the conversation around what constitutes academic success. Afrocentricity can be a critical component to helping frame this conversation in ways that offer Black students opportunities to move beyond Eurocentric models of teaching and learning.

The students' discussion of what it means to act Black and act white forced me to think about how messages they receive both in and out of school impact how they

understand who they are. Tyson (2006), in her discussion of Fordham and Ogbu's acting white hypothesis, discussed the fact that

> it leads to a narrow focus on attitudes and behaviors as primary explanatory factors. That focus, in turn, diverts attention from important contextual, school-based factors. These include institutional patterns of segregation based on race and socioeconomic status (SES) in courses, programs, and achievement (e.g., honor roll, junior marshal) which appear to give rise to the idea of a relationship between race and achievement. (p. 59)

While this dissertation does not have as its focus the institutional practices implemented and carried out in schools, one cannot think about the implications of the information students shared without some consideration of how the practices and polices instituted in many schools and school districts negatively impact Black male students. For example, the students were sensitive to the fact that they attend a majority Black school that lacks the resources found in the predominately white schools in the Bluetown district. The students said they believe that they are perceived negatively because of the school they attend, and they connected these negative perceptions to the fact that the large majority of Stokes's student population is Black, Brown, and poor. They, like many of their peers, live in low-income communities and they recognized the advantages that white students from middle- and upper-income communities receive.

While efforts to address the negative feelings that Black students have about themselves and their communities is not the sole responsibility of the teachers and others who work in public schools, one must take seriously the role that schools play in helping shape students' self-perceptions. So then, certain questions must be asked: What role

does the academic environment at Stokes play in hindering or promoting the academic success of Black male students? Does the current curriculum at Stokes build on the strengths of Black male students and likewise, does the curriculum address the needs of the community in which the school is located? Efforts to address these questions and others like them can help create school atmospheres that are better able to meet the needs of Black male students.

What Impact, If Any, Do Their Understandings of Acting White and Acting Black Have on Their Academic Performance?

My interactions with the students indicated that their understanding of acting white and acting Black did not have any impact on their academic performance. In the case of Pre-IB students such as Cadet, Danny, and Jacob, they did not believe that their academic success in any way reflected on them as acting white. Additionally, for students who did not do as well academically or for those students such as Tray and Coby who were failing, they did not attribute their lack of academic success to acting Black.

I questioned the participants' stated belief that their understanding of what it means to act Black and act white had no impact on their academic performance. Specifically, although the students did not label their academic success as acting white or, in the case of Tray and Coby, their poor academic performance as acting Black, they did label whiteness as "smart" and "intelligent" and Blackness as "dumb" and "stupid." The disconnect between what the participants viewed as smart and how they viewed themselves was striking and challenged me to think about why they located what it means to be smart outside of Blackness and as a consequence outside of themselves. My

analysis of the students' comments reveals that what they described as acting Black and acting white was related to how they view their school and how they believe Black people are portrayed in the media. For example, the students recognized that they were often looked down upon because of the school they attended and the communities in which they lived. They were aware of the low expectations set for them, and their discussions of acting Black and acting white revealed that on some level they bought into those low expectations, even if they did not fully accept those expectations for themselves. As such, one has to question how the students' "read" on others' perceptions of their communities and their school influenced their engagement in the classroom. My discussions and interactions with the students suggest that the stigmatization they faced at times left them feeling as if their efforts and their successes would never be viewed in the same way as those of their white peers. Students such as John and Keith were adamant that they had to try hard given the adversity they faced, but sometimes when I listened to them, I wondered if they recognized that no matter how hard they tried, they were being educated in a system that was supported by racist policies and practices. As a consequence, their commitment to "try harder," while noteworthy and important, could only take them so far.

The students' "read" on their teachers was an important factor in their engagement in the classroom. I am convinced that the majority of the students in this study performed well in their English classes because they were able to "read" that their English teachers genuinely cared about their well-being. The students recognized that their teachers were concerned about them beyond just English class. I witnessed several

of the students “hanging out” with their English teachers during lunch or after school—not to talk about school work but instead just to discuss general topics not related to class. The teachers were always willing to listen to the students and to offer guidance and support when appropriate. Keith would often discuss his living situation with Ms. Diggins, and she would listen when he was having relationship difficulties. Danny often sat in Ms. Selma’s room before school and talked about random topics, and it was not uncommon to see Ms. Ferguson giving Michael advice about his behavior or about how to stay out of trouble beyond school. My observations of the students and their teachers suggest that the teachers’ efforts to engage in meaningful interactions with the students enabled to the students to find spaces where they could engage their education in ways that allowed them to feel comfortable and as if their contributions were valuable.

How Do Black Males Understand the Stereotypes Associated with Black Males?

In addition to their discussion of what it means to act Black and act white, the students provided thoughtful analysis of how stereotypes impact their lives. Their insight into how images in the media impact how they are viewed and treated allowed me to understand the depth of their knowledge about the deleterious effects negative stereotypes have on young Black males. Connected to the students’ understanding of stereotypes is the reality that Black males are often portrayed as criminals and thugs in popular media and that these portrayals often influence real-life interactions with law enforcement, teachers, principals, and the general public. Many of the students noted that they would always be viewed as suspects and that because of their race and gender, they would never receive the “benefit of the doubt.”

The sobering conversations I had with each of the students have challenged me to ask, “So what?” While my time at Stokes gave me the opportunity to hear important perspectives and gain valuable insights, the students really only confirmed what on some level I already knew. The fact is that Black males in the United States live under the constant burden and continued threat of social, political, economic, structural, and educational systems that characterize them as socially deviant criminals and thugs who represent at multiple levels all that is wrong with society. Black males are in crisis. All too often, our “social trajectory leads from the community to prison or cemetery, or at least to a life of trouble characterized by unemployment, discrimination and what many are inclined to view as an oppositional culture” (Anderson, 2008, p. 6). Our efforts to navigate these perilous circumstances are both overwhelming and disheartening and are filled with conflict and tension that can lead to hopelessness and despair. Thankfully, the young men who participated in this study continued to express hope and affirm their strongly held beliefs that nothing can stop them from achieving their dreams and goals—even in light of the very real challenges they face.

I do not take the students’ hope for granted. It is imperative that efforts to improve the social and the educational outcomes for Black males build on their strengths. My personal experiences as well as my experiences with the students at Stokes and other young Black males have taught me that even in the face of blatantly racist and discriminatory practices and policies, many Black males continue to believe in their prospects for a better and brighter future. As such, I believe that this research offers an opportunity to think critically about how to help young Black males negotiate the

oppressively treacherous terrain that has stolen the hopes and dreams—and more importantly, the opportunities and possibilities—of so many Black males who have gone before them.

The impact of negative stereotypes on young Black males serves as an important takeaway from my work with the participants in this study. The students felt marginalized by stereotypical images of Black males and were able to recognize and to articulate how those stereotypes impacted their everyday lives. Yet the students rejected for themselves the negative images perpetuated in the media about Black males, and in so doing, they offered both a thoughtful and nuanced analysis of how their bodies are criminalized in ways that limit people from learning about and understanding who they are as individuals. The participants wanted to be recognized and appreciated for their individual gifts and talents, and they did not appreciate being lumped together in ways that failed to acknowledge the diversity they represent. Interestingly, even as the students wanted to be appreciated for their individual gifts and talents, their discussion of acting white and acting Black suggests that they often times failed to appreciate the gifts and talents of other Black people.

The students were clear that they are not the thugs, gangstas, and troublemakers Black males are often portrayed to be. They believed that their strengths, talents, and humanity were often obscured by unfair characterizations that left them vulnerable to police violence, unfair school discipline, and constant surveillance that misjudged both their character and their intentions. They were frustrated by the stereotypes they experienced and viewed these stereotypes as obstacles designed to keep them from

achieving their goals. Whether it was Coby working to prove himself as a capable actor, Tray trying to gain respect for his soccer skills, or Keith trying to prove that he is not a gangsta just because he has dreadlocks and wears baggy jeans and oversized shirts, all of the young men communicated that dealing with stereotypes about young Black males leads them to feel frustrated and overwhelmed.

As I listened to the participants discuss the stereotypes they face, I reflected on the many aspects of Black males' lived experiences that often go untold. Unfortunately, the lies perpetuated by the media have become the standard by which Black males are judged. Outside of the ability of some of us to play sports, sing, dance or otherwise entertain, we are viewed with disgust and disdain. The media is quick to report sensationalized stories about Black males who are involved in some form of illegal activity. Rarely, however, do we hear about or read about Black males who have done well academically or who are making a difference in their communities. Delpit (2006) called attention to this fact when she pointed out:

> We live in a society that nurtures and maintains stereotypes: we are all bombarded daily, for instance, with the portrayal of the young Black male as monster. When we see a group of young Black men, we lock our car doors, cross to the other side of the street, or clutch our handbags. We are constantly told of the one out of four Black men who is involved with the prison system—but what about the three out of four who are not? (p. xxiii)

Efforts to overcome this unflattering narrative demand spaces where Black males can share their experiences, dreams, hopes, and fears on their terms. Places must be created that offer us the opportunity to talk openly about the issues we face and how those issues

impact our lives. Howard (2013a) underscored the need for spaces where Black males can talk openly when he wrote:

> There is a clear need for them to talk, emote and share some of the daily challenges they confront. Ideally, these spaces would be facilitated by school personnel, who are able to listen to, engage with, and offer meaningful support to these young men in a nonjudgmental way. Issues around trust and expressing emotions can be a challenge for any student, but tend to be more difficult for males of color. (p. 107)

The move to foster safe spaces for Black males to share freely their emotions, thoughts, and feelings requires school personnel to be creative in how they engage the Black males in their schools. If schools are to be places where these students can grow and thrive, the current pattern of uneven discipline, including excessive suspension and expulsion rates among Black males, must be rejected in favor of efforts that seek to understand our experiences beyond the classroom. Showing sensitivity to these experiences means teachers and other school personnel “must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow [their] world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into [their] consciousness” (Delpit, 1988, p. 297).

Delpit’s words capture the essential yet difficult task school personnel must undertake as they seek to create environments that are intentional about offering Black male students opportunities to learn. We do not enter the classroom as “blank slates”; rather we come with a unique personal and cultural history as well as our own nascent and developed ideas about the world in which we live. How teachers engage these ideas will have a significant impact on how we come to understand our educational experience.

As such, teachers and other school personnel have a responsibility to wrestle with what it means to have their worlds turned upside down. In this way, they can begin to explore how schools can become inclusive communities that recognize and embrace the experiences of Black males rather than hostile places that perpetuate stereotypes that further marginalize and diminish our voices. Moreover, when teachers and other school personnel allow their worlds to be turned upside down, they will recognize the importance of and need for spaces that acknowledge and respect the stories and experiences that their Black male students share.

One of the reasons that I believe the English teachers I observed commanded so much respect from their students is that they allowed their worlds to be turned upside down. They invited the students to engage in vigorous discussion and debate and they did not mind sharing some of themselves with their students. For example, Ms. Ferguson talked openly and honestly about the fact that she tends to "bend" gender, and she did not shy away from the students' questions. Specifically, when students asked Ms. Ferguson about her style of dress and her relationship with her partner, she readily engaged their questions in a respectful and honest manner. She shared with me that she does not want to "hide" who she is from students because she believes that the more she is honest with students, the more they will be honest with her. My observations of Ms. Ferguson's interactions with the students revealed that they did trust her and their trust was, in part, borne out of mutual respect and trust. Ms. Selma, when appropriate, discussed the fact that both of her sons had spent time in prison. Ms. Diggins was able to connect with many of the Black males in the class because of her own experiences raising two "Black"

sons. The teachers' honesty created spaces where the students could share their feelings, thoughts, and emotions in what I believe they deemed a "safe" space. Danny and Ms. Selma were very at ease with each other and talked openly about their weekends and their lives beyond school. Keith would come to see Ms. Diggins before and after school just to talk, and Ms. Ferguson reported that Michael, who she was teaching for the second time, had matured a lot since the ninth grade, which she believes is due in part to the honest and forthright conversations they had about his maturity level. Even Tray, described by Ms. Diggins as not her best student on paper but one of the smartest students she ever taught, connected with Ms. Diggins while discussing his rap lyrics and poetry. The connections the students made with the teachers were connected to the fact that they felt like the teachers cared about them and created opportunities for them to share thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and ideas about life both inside and outside of school.

Reading the World and Being Read by the World: Negotiating Black Life

My interactions with the students challenged me to think about how they made sense of the multiple realties they faced. The students were often aware of how they were perceived and as already discussed, they recognized the impact of stereotypes on their lives. Interestingly, whenever the students discussed their perceptions of acting Black and acting white, I was clear about how they made the distinctions between what they considered "Black behavior" and "white behavior," but I was not always clear about how they made those distinctions in relation to themselves, their friends, and other Black males they knew. Specifically, I wondered how the students read and understood the behaviors of their Black peers. For example, did Keith view Cadet as acting white simply

because he wore “fresh Polo” and loafers, got a “fresh haircut” every week, and made good grades? Did Cadet view Keith as acting Black because of his dreadlocks and baggy pants? How did individual factors converge to determine if someone was viewed as acting Black or acting white? These are issues that I never fully explored with the students, yet their discussion of what it means to act Black and act white offers some insight into the complexities of what it means to be Black. To be clear, all of the students, on some level, recognized how they were being read within their school and within the context of the larger society. Keith recognized that he was perceived as a “gangsta” by both his peers and many of the administrators at Stokes. Similarly, Danny recognized that as a Black male, he was viewed as both as a criminal and as delinquent simply because of his race and gender. Danny did not believe that those stereotypes represented who he was, and he worked hard to defy those stereotypes. Interestingly, just as the students recognized some of the ways in which they were being read, my observations of and discussions with them revealed that they were conducting their own read on the world. In so doing, they were constantly negotiating the tension between how they understood themselves and how they felt they were being read by others.

The students’ read on the world directly impacted their level of interaction with teachers, administrators, and other peers. For example, Dwayne stated that he was “different” depending on which teacher’s class he was in. He said that he felt “relaxed” in Ms. Diggins’s class but that he was not as “relaxed” in his math class because he felt like his math teacher was always “looking for something” to send him out of class.

Dwayne's discussion of being "relaxed" was something that all of the students communicated in multiple ways. When they referred to teachers as "understanding" or "cool," they were essentially communicating the same sense of being "relaxed" that Dwayne spoke of. This fact is important because each student was "reading" whether or not they were being treated fairly and with respect, and their responses to how they perceived they were being treated often impacted their engagement with their teachers and with other students. The idea that students' perceptions impact their engagement is critical, because when considering what it means to act Black and act white, attention must be given to students' "read" and/or perception of how they believe they are being responded to by others. The students were not all static figures who acted only in specific ways. Instead, they were complex individuals who remained keenly aware of the stereotypes they often encountered and reacted accordingly. I raise this point because recognition of the students' awareness and responses allows them to be viewed as multidimensional and complex individuals who cannot be defined based on narrowly held ideas about what it means to be Black. Even as the students articulated what might be considered narrow definitions of Blackness, it is important to remember that their discussion of Blackness results from their own complex read of the world around them.

The students' "read" on the world, while in part about race, was also connected to class. The majority of the students in this study were from low-income marginalized communities. The students' class is an important point to consider because they often connected being Black with being poor. Their descriptions of what it means to act white often included notions of wealth and power that were not a part of their lived experience.

Conversely, their discussion of "acting Black" only included discussions of power and wealth if they were referring to President Obama, Black athletes or their favorite rapper or R&B singer. Connected to the students' discussion of power and wealth was the fact that they viewed their school as "less than" white schools in the district and, as articulated by many of the participants, they believed that they were looked down on because they attended a poor school. Further research is needed to gain deeper insight into how students associate being Black with being poor. What is clear, however, is that efforts to address issues of academic achievement and academic identity among Black students must take into account how students' perceptions of their class status impacts their perspectives on academic achievement.

Challenging Whiteness

In addition to making curriculum changes and offering spaces for Black males to talk openly about the realities they face, efforts to address the crisis that is killing so many Black males must challenge and dismantle systems of whiteness. Donnor (2013) highlighted the fact that

> [w]hite people over time and by virtue of their existence have come to expect and rely upon a unique and exclusive set of benefits, predispositions, and socioeconomic privileges associated with their whiteness, which have been established through a legacy of conquest and domination of people of color globally. Stated more pointedly, through force, coercion, consent, custom, and jurisprudential edifice, white skin and whiteness have become exclusive forms of private property. (p. 199)

Donnor's discussion of whiteness, which was first theorized by legal scholar Cheryl Harris in a Harvard Law Review article (1995), calls attention to the fact that whiteness is

seen as property that carries with it certain rights and privileges that are not extended to non-whites (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). When understood in this way, whiteness can be viewed as a system of ideals, beliefs, and practices that work together to exclude non-white people from resources and opportunities that can enhance their well-being. This system functions to marginalize, undermine, and discriminate against non-white values, norms, and ways of knowing and being. As a result, whiteness becomes the standard by which all people are measured. In this way,

> the racial disparities and inequalities created, reproduced, and reified by whiteness, like property, not only establish a unique set of explicit and tacit rules, expectations and practices regarding access and deployment, but governing institutions, such as the judicial and educational systems, are also instrumental in assigning their societal value. (Donnor, 2013, p. 200)

If schools are to be places where Black males are respected, appreciated, valued, loved, and educated, the insidious system of white domination so pervasive in school districts and communities across the country must be addressed. Black males will always struggle to meet our academic potential as long as we attend schools that constantly assault our character, question our ability to learn, and challenge our right to exist. Moreover, color-blind ideologies that deny the importance of race but allow for the continuation of institutionalized racist policies and practices that attack Black males' character, must be challenged (Bonilla-Silvia, 2013). This point is furthered by Lewis (2006), who argued that

> a strong commitment to colorblind racial narratives makes it possible to exist with the contradictions of living in racialized ways while ignoring or refuting

> whiteness. These narratives provide a seemingly progressive discourse for avoiding race generally ("we are all colorblind; race doesn't matter") and supply a seemingly non-racial language (racial code words) for those occasions when it is necessary to express racial preferences or explain one's behavior. (p. 194)

As I stated in Chapter V, race does matter, and if whiteness is to be addressed and ultimately dismantled, white people must be compelled to examine race and more importantly examine how they benefit from the privileges associated with their race.

Efforts to challenge whiteness must begin with a commitment to address the inequalities that exist in schools and school districts across the country. Kozol (1992, 2005) pointed out that when schools and school districts are separated along racial lines and districts with majority-minority populations are underfunded, it becomes increasingly difficult for Black students to succeed academically. As such, policies that segregate school districts and fail to advance meaningful diversity polices that help bring about equity in schools must be addressed.

Final Thoughts

The process of completing this work has been exhausting. As I reflect on the many hours of research and writing that have gone into this dissertation, I realize that my exhaustion stems from the very nature of the topic presented here. Specifically, this dissertation is not just about the 14 young men with whom I spent almost four months. Neither is it simply about the countless young Black males whose stories go untold. This work is personal. It is about my experiences learning how to navigate the world as a Black male. It is about the questions raised for me based on my lived experiences and the questions that continue to be raised for me as I navigate the often tenuous realities

associated with living as a Black male in the United States of America. Also, it is about my desire and motivation to engage in research that will make a difference in the lives of the young brothers who come behind me. As I listened to the young men tell their stories, I could not help but think about my own experiences as a Black male. Although I graduated from high school 21 years ago, I heard elements of my personal story in the stories of many of the participants. I was able to recognize myself in their hopes and dreams as well as their fears and disappointments. As I interviewed each participant, I thought about how even 21 years later, Black males continue to deal with some of the same troubling issues that plagued me as in high school. Even as I recognize the similarities, I also recognize the differences. I was raised in a rural community that was relatively safe and where I could walk down the street without fear of being stopped or pulled over by the police for no reason. All of the young men in this study live in urban neighborhoods where crime rates are high and their homes are sometimes not safe. The criminalization of Black male bodies was evident to most all of the participants and they discussed their anxieties, concerns, and fears for their safety in ways that I could have not begun to imagine when I was their age. As such even as I acknowledge that there is much in this dissertation that is about me, there are also many aspects of this work that do not include my story. The students' voices are powerful reminders that the terrain for Black males is filled with many unsettling realties that must be cautiously navigated and constantly challenged. Black males have never been "safe" in this country, and it is incumbent upon scholars and researchers to pay attention to and to examine how each new generation of young Black males understands and negotiates these challenges.

My time with the students at Stokes humbled me and left me wanting to spend more time learning with and from them. While I believe that what is presented here will positively contribute to the literature on young Black males, completing this dissertation has allowed me to see and to understand just how much work is needed to address the needs and realities young Black males face. As a consequence, I am compelled to continue to think critically about what conversations still need to take place, what questions still need to be answered, and what experiences still need to be shared.

The scope and magnitude of work with Black males requires future research to examine not only the experiences of Black male students, but also the experiences of teachers and other professionals who educate them. Additional research is needed that engages important questions about schools. For example, how do school environments (to include classroom experiences, teacher expectations, school rules, and expectations) function to affirm and/or deny the experiences of Black male students? What are effective practices for engaging and educating Black males? Future research must also explore how factors beyond the school environment impact Black males' academic identity. All of the students who participated in this work were interviewed during or immediately after school hours. Given the nature of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions they shared, I wondered what it would have been like to spend time with them in their homes and in their communities. As I listened to all to the students, I quickly realized that there was a large part of their story that was missing, and that story included their life outside of Stokes High School. As such, what is presented here, although valuable, needs

to be expanded upon in ways that offer a more holistic view of the experiences and realities of young Black males.

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APPENDIX A

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before we begin with the interview, I would like to inform you that in an effort to preserve confidentiality, I ask that you do not use names when discussing both positive and negative experiences that you have had with teachers.

1. What is your definition of “smart”?

2. Where did you learn what it means to be smart?

3. Name two people who you consider to be smart and tell me why you think they are smart. These can be people who attend your school or people who do not attend your school.

4. Do you consider yourself to be smart? Why or why not?

    a. How smart do you think you are?

5. Do you think your teachers think you are smart? Why or why not?

6. Do you think your principal/counselors/other school staff believe that you are smart? Why or Why not?

7. How does the environment at your school influence your definition of what it means to be smart? How does the environment influence the way you think about how smart you are, or how smart you think you are?

8. What are some of the things that you like about your school environment? Why?

9. What are some of things that you dislike about your school environment? Why?

10. What does it mean to you to be Black?

11. What is it like to be a Black male in this school?

    a. How are Black students treated in comparison to students of other races at this school?

    b. How are Black males treated in comparison to Black females in this school?

c. Give me a specific example of how you think your race impacted your interaction with a teacher or teachers. Why did it have this impact?

d. Give me a specific example of how you think your gender impacted your interaction with a teacher or teachers. Why did it have this impact?

e. Give me a specific example of how you think your race impacted your interaction with non-Black students. Why did it have this impact?

f. Give me a specific example of how your think your gender impacted your interaction with non-Black students. Why did it have this impact?

12. What does the phrase "acting White" mean to you?

13. Name some of the stereotypes that you think your teachers, counselors, principals, and peers have about Black males.

14. If you had to tell your non-Black teachers and/or non-Black peers about what it is like to live as a Black male, what are some of the things that you would tell them? Why?

15. What are your career goals after you graduate from high school? How do you think your race might impact your ability to achieve your career goals? Why or why not?

16. How do you think your gender might impact your ability to achieve your career goals?

17. Given that I am interested in understanding what Black males think it means to be "smart," is there anything that you want to share with me that I might not have thought to ask you?

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Before we begin with the focus group, I would like to inform all of you that in an effort to preserve confidentiality, I ask that you do not use names when discussing both positive and negative experiences that you have had with teachers.

1. In what ways if any can you relate to young men in the film? What do you think about Marcus' comment to the teacher, "you don't know nothing home girl"?

2. In the clip, the students talk about the idea of respect. Mario asks the teacher, "why should I give you my respect" and Eve follows up by stating, "it's all about color". Do you ever feel disrespected by teachers and because of your race? If so, in what ways?

3. What is your definition of what it means to be smart?

4. Where and how did you learn what it means to be smart?

5. How does the environment at your school influence your definition of what it means to be smart?

6. Describe a positive experience you had with one of your teachers. What made it positive?

7. Describe a negative experience you had with one of your teachers. What made it negative?

8. What does it mean to be Black?

9. What is it like to be a Black male in this school?

10. What are some of the challenges that Black males face in this school? What are some of the things Black male students can do to address and to overcome these challenges?

11. Name some of the stereotypes that you think teachers, counselors and principals have about Black males.

12. What does the phrase "acting white mean to you?

13. If you could tell your non-Black male and female teachers what it is like to be a Black male, what would you tell them?

APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION GUIDE

Note: The information listed here is meant to help me think about what areas I need to consider when beginning my classroom observations. The guide may change once I am in the field and I have a better idea of what specific behaviors/items I should observe. In my role as a participant observer, I will focus on several areas as I conduct classroom observations, these areas include:

1. The general classroom environment to include the overall design of the classroom, the images posted on the walls and on bulletin boards, the demographic makeup of students in the class, and the interactions between the students as well as the students and their teachers.

2. The extent to which Black male students are called on and asked to participate in class discussions and other class activities.

3. The "performances" that Black males give to teachers, peers, and other non-Black students.

4. The messages teachers send students about who is "smart" and what knowledge is valued.

5. The peer to peer interactions between Black male students.

APPENDIX D

IRB TRAINING CERTIFICATE

Certificate of Training

in

Protecting Human Participants in Research

A Workshop for Student Researchers

presented by:

Dr. Carl Lashley, IRB Member

and

Melissa Beck, ORI Assistant Director

Participant: Travis Albritton

During this workshop, researchers were prepared to:

- *understand the necessity for protecting human participants in research,*
- *understand the procedures and processes of the IRB,*
- *understand how these procedures can assist with research design and implementation,*
- *understand how the procedures reflect researchers¡¦ interests in ethical research practice, and complete a successful application to the IRB.*

Valid March 27, 2013 through March 26, 2018

Location: EUC Dogwood Room

APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM FOR MINORS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT FOR A MINOR TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: <u>What Does It Mean to be Smart? Black Male Perspectives on School and Academic Identity</u>

Project Director: <u>Travis J. Albritton</u>

Participant's Name: _____

What is the study about?
This is a research project. Your child's participation in this project is voluntary. The study involves research with Black boys. I would like to explore Black male high school students' perceptions of themselves and their school environment. Specifically, I would like to understand how schools see and understand Black male students and how this affects the way Black male students think about how smart they are and if they are good students.

Why are you asking my child?
I would like your child to participate in this study because he is a Black male high school student who has been identified by the school's principal as someone who might have something important to say about this topic. As part of this research study, I am required to focus on the unique and specific experiences of Black male students. Your child's participation in the study will give me the opportunity to learn more about factors that influence how Black males think about school and how they see themselves academically.

What will you ask my child to do if I agree to let him be in the study?
Your child will be asked to participate in 2 or 3 individual interviews. The first interview will be a flexible or less formal interview designed to help me learn about your child's understanding of what it means to be "smart" while Black. I hope to learn from the initial interview how your child understands the role that his school environment plays in supporting and/or denying the Black male experience. During this first interview, I will ask your child a series of questions that focus on his understanding of what it means to be smart and what it means to be Black. I will conduct additional interviews with each child to clarify responses from the first interview and to clarify themes that might arise during

the research process. The interviews can be conducted at a community center, public library conference room, or another appropriate place where your child feels comfortable. All of the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Each interview will last about 1 hour. You and your child must consent to your child being audio recorded in order to be in this study.

In addition, your child may be asked to be in a focus group with four or five other male students at ____ High School. These students will have also completed individual interviews. The purpose of these focus groups is to further explore ideas that come up during the individual interviews. As part of the focus group, your child will be shown a 20 minute clip from the film the *Freedom Writers*. The goal of this clip is to help generate conversation among the participants about how issues of race and gender impact the learning environment. If you would like to view the clip prior to your child viewing it in the focus group, I am happy to make it available to you. I hope this group will generate important information about how schools help or hold back the academic achievement of Black males. Each focus group session will last about 90 minutes. In addition to the interviews and the focus group, I will also observe your child's classroom

Is there any audio/video recording of my child?

If you allow your child to participate in the study, all of his interviews will be audio recorded. Each interview will be private and face-to-face and last about 60 minutes. Should your child participate in a focus group, please be advised that the group will be audio recorded. The focus group will last for about 90 minutes. Because your child's voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things said during the interview cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

What are the dangers to my child?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. Please be aware that some of the research questions I ask your child may make him feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. Your child does not have to answer any questions that make him feel uncomfortable, and he may withdraw from the study at any time. Also, none of the focus groups or individual interviews will occur during school hours, so your child will not miss any class time. If you have any concerns about your child's rights and how he is being treated or if you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at 855-251-2351. Ask about study number 13-0253.

Questions about this project or about the benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Travis J. Albritton, who may be contacted at 919-451-1962 or at tjalbrit@uncg.edu. You may also contact Mr. Albritton's faculty advisor, Dr. Silvia Bettez at 336-256-0156.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of my child taking part in this research?
Research has shown that there is a troubling difference between how well Black students succeed in school compared to how well White students succeed. This "achievement gap" has shown that White students generally perform better academically than Black students. This study has the potential to offer important information into ways to help narrow this achievement gap and improve the educational experiences of Black male high school students.

Are there any benefits to *my child* as a result of participation in this research study?
Your child will have the benefit of sharing his stories about his experiences in school to someone who genuinely wants to listen. Other than that, there are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will my child get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything for my child to be in this study?
Your child will not be paid to participate in this study. However, all participants who complete at least 2 interviews will have the opportunity to choose between a $15 iTunes card or a $15 Wal-Mart gift card. Also, students who participate in at least 2 focus groups will receive either a $15 iTunes or $15 Wal-Mart gift card. There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study.

How will my child's information be kept confidential?
All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. All participants will be assigned a fictitious name so as not to reveal their real identities. Additionally, the school's location will be described based on its regional location in the United States (e.g. Southeast, Northwest, Midwest) as opposed to the specific city and state in which it is located. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. If your child tells us that someone is hurting them, or that they want to hurt themselves, we will need to tell someone.

All of the interviews will be transcribed, and I will keep the transcripts in a locked file cabinet in my home office. The master list used to identify students by their fictitious names will be kept in a separate locked file cabinet in my home office. Additionally, all electronic data including the audio recordings will be stored on my password-protected laptop computer. No information from this study will be kept outside of my home office. All of the handwritten data for this study will be shredded and all of the digital recordings will be deleted after a period of 3 years from the end of the study.

What if my child wants to leave the study or if I want him to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to allow your child to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. If your child does withdraw, it will not affect you or your child in any way. If you or your child chooses to withdraw, you may request that any data, which has been collected, be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. Please be aware that

students must complete at least 2 interviews or at least 2 focus groups or a combination of 1 interview and 1 focus group to be eligible for one of the iTunes or Wal-Mart gift cards.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to allow your child to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form, you agree that you have read it or that it has been read to you, you fully understand the contents of this document, and that you give consent to your child to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you agree that you are the legal parent or guardian of the child who wishes to participate in this study described to you by Travis J. Albritton.

_________________________________ Date: _______________
Participant's Parent/Legal Guardian's Signature

APPENDIX F

ASSENT FORM FOR MINORS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

ASSENT FOR MINORS 12-16

Project Title: What Does It Mean to be Smart? Black Male Perspectives on School and Academic Identity

Principal Investigator: Travis J. Albritton

WHY AM I HERE?

I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. Research studies are done to find better ways of helping and understanding people or to get information about how things work. In this study I want to find out more *about how Black boys understand what it means to be smart and how schools influence what Black boys think about how smart they are*. You are being asked to be in the study because you have been identified by your principal as a Black male student who has something important to say about this topic. In a research study, only people who want to take part are allowed to do so.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

If it is okay with you and you agree to join this study, you will be asked to participate in 2 or 3 individual interviews with me. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group interview with 3 or 4 other Black male students from your school. As part of the focus group, you will be shown a 20 minute clip from the film the *Freedom Writers*. The goal of this clip is to help start a conversation with you and other students in the group about how issues of race and gender impact the classroom environment. Your parent/caregiver has given permission for you to participate in both the interviews and the focus group. The individual interview will last 60 minutes and the focus group interviews will last 90 minutes. Both the individual interviews and the focus groups will be audio-taped. I will also be conducting classroom observations in some of your classes.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY?

You will be in this study for approximately four months, beginning in January.

CAN ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO ME?

Sometimes the questions I ask you might seem strange or might make you feel uncomfortable or sad. If a question bothers you or makes you uncomfortable, please let me know and we will stop or do whatever we can to make you feel better. You can skip a question if it makes you feel bad and no one will be upset. We'll just move on to the next question.

CAN ANYTHING GOOD HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

I do not know if you will be helped by being in this project. However, I may learn something that will help other Black male high school students be successful academically in the future.

WHAT IF I DO NOT WANT TO BE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

You do not have to be part of this study. It is up to you. You can even say okay now, but change your mind later. All you have to do is tell us. No one will be mad at you if you change your mind.

WHAT ABOUT MY CONFIDENTIALITY?

I will do everything possible to make sure that the things you tell me are kept confidential (private).

You will be assigned a pseudonym (fake name) so as not to reveal your real identity. The master list used to identify you by your fake name will be kept in a separate locked file cabinet in my home office. I will not tell anyone what you tell us without your permission unless there is something that could be dangerous to you or someone else. There are only a few things that we would have to tell someone else. If you tell us that someone is hurting you, or that you want to hurt yourself, we will need to tell someone. I will not ask directly about these things, but they may come up. Please be aware that at the beginning of each focus group I will ask other focus group participants not to discuss the issues that we talk about. I cannot guarantee, however, that other participants will respect my request that the group discussion remain confidential.
I and my research advisors at UNCG are the only ones who will read the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups. My research advisors are required to keep your personal information confidential.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

If you complete at least two interviews, you will be offered a $15 iTunes gift card or a $15 Wal-Mart gift card for taking the time to be in this study. You will receive either the iTunes card or the Wal-Mart gift card after you complete your second interview. Also, if you participate in one interview and one focus group or two focus groups, you will be offered a $15 iTunes gift card or a $15 Wal-Mart gift card.

DO MY PARENTS KNOW ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

This study has been explained to your parent(s)/guardian(s), and they have given permission for you to be in it.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You can ask *Travis J. Albritton* anything about the study. Travis can be reached by phone at 919-451-1962 or by email at tjalbrit@uncg.edu. You can also contact Travis' advisor Dr. Silvia Bettez. Dr. Bettez can be reached at 336-256-0156 or by email at scbettez@uncg.edu. You can also direct any questions to the Director in the Office Research Integrity at UNC-Greensboro at 336-256-1482 or 855-251-2351.

ASSENT

This study has been explained to me and I am willing to be in it.

____________________________________ ____________________
Child's Name (printed) and Signature Date

Check which applies below:

☐ The child is capable of reading and understanding the assent form and has signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

☐ The child is not capable of reading the assent form, but the information was verbally explained to him/her. The child signed above as documentation of assent to take part in this study.

____________________________________ ____________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent Date

APPENDIX G

LETTER INFORMING PARENTS OF RESEARCH STUDY

[University of North Carolina at Greensboro Letterhead]

Department of Educational Leadership & Cultural Foundations

School of Education Building, Rm. 358
1300 Spring Garden St.
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, NC 27402

My name is Travis J. Albritton, and I am a student in the Ph.D. program in Educational Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. For my dissertation research, I plan to study Black males' perspectives on school and their understanding of their academic identities. I have selected Name of School ____________ as my research site; and based on conversations with the Principal ____________________, I believe your child would be an excellent candidate for my study.

My interest in Black male high school students is two-fold. First, as a Black male, I am aware of the many challenges Black male students face in public schools. Black male students have told me that they often feel misunderstood and that they sometimes question whether their teachers care about them as students and individuals. My lived experience, as well as my experience with other Black males, has taught me that Black males are smart and possess the ability to make positive contributions to the learning environment. I am confident that my current research will highlight the contributions that your child and others like him bring to (Name of School ____________________).

My decision to study Black males also stems from my desire to expand our knowledge about Black male students. There is a need for more studies that both explore and share positive images of Black males. Educators who teach and learn from Black males should be exposed to images of these young men that identify positive aspects of Black males' educational and cultural experiences. My study will do much to aid in this task.

Your child will be asked to participate in 2 or 3 individual interviews. The first interview will be a semi-structured interview designed to help me learn about your child's understanding of what it means to be "smart" while Black. I hope to learn from the initial interview how your child understands the role that his school environment plays in affirming and/or denying the Black male experience. During this first interview, I will

ask your child a series of questions that focus on his understanding of what it means to be smart and what it means to be Black. I will conduct additional interviews with each child to clarify responses from the first interview and to clarify themes that might arise during the research process. The interviews can be conducted at a community center, public library conference room, or another appropriate place where your child feels comfortable. All of the interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Each interview will last about 1 hour. You and your child must consent to him being audiotaped in order to be in this study.

In addition, your child may be asked to participate in a focus group with four or five other male students at _________________ High School. These students will have also completed individual interviews. The purpose of these focus groups is to explore, in a more in-depth manner, ideas that come up during the individual interviews. As part of the focus group, your child will be shown a 20 minute clip from the film the *Freedom Writers*. The goal of this clip is to help generate conversation among the participants about how issues of race and gender impact the learning environment. I hope this group will generate important insights about how schools help or hinder the academic achievement of Black males. Each focus group will last about 90 minutes. In total, your child should expect to spend between 3 – 4 hours participating in both individual interviews and focus groups. In addition to the interviews and the focus group, I will also observe your child's classroom.

Please be advised that your child will not be paid for participation in this study; however, all participants who complete at least 2 interviews will have the opportunity to choose a $15 iTunes card or a $15 Wal-Mart gift card. Also, students who participate in at least two focus groups will receive either a $15 iTunes or $15 Wal-Mart gift card. There are no costs to you or payments to you or your child as a result of participation in this study.

I would appreciate the opportunity to work with your child and to have him participate in my study. If you have questions, please feel free to email me at tjalbrit@uncg.edu.

Sincerely,

Travis J. Albritton, MSW, M.Div.

APPENDIX H

ORAL RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

My name is Travis Albritton and I am a *graduate student* in the School of Education at UNCG. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study entitled *What Makes You So Smart: African American Male Perspectives on Academic Achievement*. I am asking you to participate in this study because you are a Black male in the 10th grade and you are between the ages of 13 and 18. Through my observations and discussions with the principal, you have been identified as someone who might have something important to say about my research topic.

If it is okay with you and you agree to join this study, you will be asked to participate in 2 or 3 individual interviews with me. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group interview with 3 or 4 other Black male students from your school. Both the individual and focus group interviews will be audio-taped. The individual interviews will last for 60 minutes and the focus groups will last 90 minutes. You will not have to miss any class time in order to participate in this study. I will also conduct classroom observations in some of your classes.

If you decide to participate in this study, there is minimal risk to you. I do not know if you will be helped by being in this project. However, I may learn something that will help other Black male high school students be successful academically in the future.

You do not have to be part of this study. It is up to you. You can even say okay now, but change your mind later. All you have to do is tell me. No one will be mad at you if you change your mind.

If you would like to participate in this research study and you are under the age of 18, your parent/guardian must sign a consent form which explains the study in more detail. Also, I will ask you to sign an assent form agreeing to participate in the study. If you are 18 or older, you will be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the study.

Do you have any questions now?

If you have questions later, please contact me at tjalbrit@uncg.edu or (919) 451-1962 or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Silvia Bettez, at 226-256-0156 or by email at scbettez@uncg.edu.