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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

African-American Male Perceptions on Public Schooling after Discipline:

A Contextual Portrait from the Inner City

by

Kevin W. Smith, Jr.

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2019

African-American Male Perceptions on Public Schooling after Discipline:

A Contextual Portrait from the Inner City

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by

Kevin W. Smith, Jr

**Loyola Marymount University  
School of Education  
Los Angeles, CA 90045**

This dissertation written by Kevin Smith, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

4-1-2019

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## **DEDICATION**

For my maternal matriarch, Carolyn Holleman, whose gospel music and religion continues to keep my spirit near the cross.

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## ABSTRACT

African-American Male Perceptions on Public Schooling after Discipline:

A Contextual Portrait from the Inner City

by

Kevin W. Smith, Jr.

Literature shows that one of the major issues affecting the achievement of inner-city African-American male students in public-schools is the ineffectiveness of disciplinary procedures. These studies have shown a direct positive relationship between student behavioral problems and academic failure. This study was an attempt at answering Noguera's (2008) call for understanding more fully how African-American males come to perceive schooling, in particular their discipline experiences, and how environmental and cultural forces impact this perception of their behavior and performance in school. This was a qualitative study that heard the stories of inner-city African-American male students who were pushed out of public-schools through disciplinary measures. This study was based on racial components that fit directly into the structure of Critical Race Theory (CRT). The qualitative research method of portraiture was used to answer this study's research question because it was relative to the problems that African-American male students face in their inner-city schooling experiences. The participants in this study were at least eighteen years old, African American, and pushed out of an inner-city public

high school based on disciplinary consequences. Each participant shared environmental, cultural, and schooling experiences through a series of three interviews. The study found that environmental and cultural forces had a negative affect on the ways that these African-American males perceived their experiences in public-schools. The study concluded that these young men found success in private-continuation-schools, and that educators and policy makers should consider implementing the practices of these alternative schools in U.S. public-schools.

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

When everyone's story is told, then it makes for better art, it makes for better entertainment, it makes everybody feel part of one American family . . . "Are we making sure that everybody is getting a fair shot?"

Barack Obama (cited in Puente, 2016)

I was born in Southeast Washington, D.C., which, at the time, and still today, arguably houses one of America's most blighted inner-city communities. I was born to teen parents who were forced to marry before my arrival because they had already given life to one of my wonderful sisters earlier in their youthful years. My parents had strong family networks with pockets of affluence, culture, and deep religious roots that blinded me to the struggles they faced to maintain a normal family environment in the early 1970s, just after the height of the civil rights movement. I lived six years in a two-parent household, then six years with my mother and her family, and finally six years with my dad and his family to round out my development in preparation for independent life as an adult African-American male with an inner-city background.

As a teenager growing up in Northeast and Northwest Washington, D.C., I witnessed, first-hand, the onset of the crack-cocaine epidemic that led my home city to the title of "murder capital" of America. While I was not directly affiliated with the Gangster Chronicles, Soldiers of Fortune, A-Team, Hillboys, or the 8th-n-H Crew, a few of the gangs that dominated the streets of DC in the late 1980s, some of my friends and family were members. Rayful Edmond, III, one of America's notorious drug lords, lived in my immediate community at one point. I believe that through the grace of God, through strong Christian family values, gifted school programs, and

school sports in my youth, I avoided gangs, drugs, violence, and other stigmatized aspects associated with the inner-city streets. Others of my community were not so fortunate.

All things considered, I am satisfied with the education that I received in the D.C. public-schools system. During my four years at Theodore Roosevelt High School, I was a part of a humanities program and took advanced placement courses. I served as senior class president, track team captain, and science club president amongst other academic, athletic, and socio-cultural involvements. Even though I had mediocre study habits, I somehow graduated in the top five percent of my class. When I attended my Graves Hall dorm meeting as a Morehouse College freshman in the Fall of 1989, a student who read the list of meeting attendees yelled, “Damn, who the hell made it here from Roosevelt High School!” We laughed when I recognized him as one of the elite Benjamin Banneker High School students who use to salute me on our shared bus ride home during high school, because I outranked him as a Lieutenant Colonel in our Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) program that required him to do so.

When I graduated from Morehouse College after struggling with mediocre study habits and a flourishing social circle as a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., I was invited back to D.C. to teach at Walker Jones Elementary School in Sursum Corda, a small housing project in the Northwest quadrant of the city. Working with these beautiful bright young students made me realize that I had the potential to become a great teacher.

A couple of years later, I joined the Los Angeles Unified Schools District (LAUSD). When issues arose with the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) (2002), I began to question my purpose and abilities as an educator. I was initially invited to work with LAUSD by an excellent African-American principal. After choosing a credentialing path that led me away from the

security of her well-organized system, affluent Los Angeles Westside schools in my community were reluctant to hire me through the normal interview processes. On three occasions, I was hired after teachers reported to administrators on the excellent work I did as a substitute teacher. I also ventured southeast and was hired by schools that serve an overwhelming majority of African-American and Latino students. Los Angeles claimed to be in high need of science teachers, but I worked in extremely poor conditions where the discipline of African-American males was a daily dilemma. One of my most recent teaching assignments was at an LAUSD public high school in an affluent Westside neighborhood where many African-American students struggled with discipline, academic support, and other social aspects of public education. Thus, my perspective about the failed schooling disciplinary procedures, and their impact on African-American males, in particular, led me to this study.

Yet, despite the obstacles I have faced to succeed, I am still committed to that small African-American boy born in Southeast Washington, D.C., to teenage parents. That boy has fueled my desire to continue to lift up all the young African-American boys born with the odds stacked against them. I want to be a catalyst for their success, and to add to the literature and landscape that may bring about better outcomes for their schooling experiences, especially for those who have been impacted by the discipline process in public schools.

As an African-American male educator with inner city public-school roots and twenty-two years of teaching experience in secondary public education, I took the utmost precautions to avoid biases that may have arisen during the planning, execution, and evaluation stages of the following research study. I met with my advisor at length on multiple occasions to seek guidance that would ensure an unbiased study. My desire to execute a clean and honest study comes from

an exceptional passion for helping to improve education access and life quality for our underserved African-American populations.

### **Background**

First, statistics surrounding the nation's problems with effectively including African-American male student populations in academic settings that promote citizenship with respect to discipline and achievement continue to make headlines across the country at alarming rates (Hardiman, 2013; Livingston & Nahimana, 2006; Noguera, 2008; Romney, 2018). One example of these statistics can be seen in Los Angeles where only five percent of the student population is African American, but African-American students account for 18% of those being expelled from school, and African-American males represent over three quarters of that population (Wood, Harris, & Howard, 2018). In Chicago, African Americans are 45% of the student population, but account for 76% of those being suspended from school (Lewin, 2012). Headlines in Ann Arbor Michigan boast similar headlines (Slagter, 2017). Joseph Ryan, associate professor of social work and co-director of the Child and Adolescent Data Lab at the University of Michigan, found that African-American students comprised approximately 16.4% of Ann Arbor's high school student population for the 2015-16 school year and 43.5 % of suspensions for that year: These statistics nearly mirror those found for African American youth entering the juvenile justice system for the entire state of Michigan (Slagter, 2017). These shocking headlines and statistics suggest that African-American males are being disciplined at alarming rates. What is it about the discipline system in public schools that is causing these outcomes for African-American males? What is it about the lives of African-American males that leads them into situations where they are in a position to be so readily pushed out? How might more African-American males be given



the chances that I had, to rise above the challenges of my early years? More must be done to understand the complexities of this phenomena, and to advocate for better outcomes for the African-American males in our nation's public schools.

Secondly, Farmer's (2010) research asserted that the media perpetuates the criminality of African-American male students by using the power of language and fear to manipulate legislation, such as Zero Tolerance policies, in ways that push this population of students out of public schools and into the penal system. Deborah J. Vagins, senior legislative counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union's Washington office agreed, in a story by *The New York Times*, that zero tolerance, along with other loosely ambiguous discipline policies, pushes students of color out of the education system and into the penal system at alarming rates (Lewin, 2012). She suggested that the implementation of timely and important policies rolled out by former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and former Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. are possible solutions to the expulsion and criminality problems facing minority males in public schools (Lewin, 2012). Ironically, on the very day that the Government Accountability Office report revealed more recent public-school disparities for African-American students, current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos held a meeting to dismantle the Obama-era policies that showed progress in reducing these public school inequities (Klein, 2018).

A decade after the 1999 school shooting massacre in Columbine, Colorado necessitated a demand for safer schools in the United States, former Attorney General Holder found that schools had developed a pattern of suspending and expelling upwards of three million students per year under zero tolerance legislation (Loveless, 2017). Sadly, he found that African-American students were three times more likely to receive these consequences than their White

peers. According to Holder's investigation, suspended and expelled students were much more likely to drop out of school and enter the criminal justice system (Loveless, 2017). Seeing the significant impact of zero tolerance on the lives of suspended and expelled students, Holder encouraged a shift toward less severe consequences for students who violated school rules at the end of his tenure as attorney general, especially where these violations were considered minor. One significant outcome of Holder's initiatives can be seen in the collaborative documentary series between the Retro Report and the Center for Public Integrity that highlights major news stories from past social and educational injustices to reveal their long-term repercussions (Loveless, 2017).

Additionally, both Democratic and Republican politicians continuously refer to education as "the civil rights issue of our time" in the media. John McCain used the slogan in his Republican Party nomination acceptance speech in 2008; President Barack Obama reiterated the slogan during his speech at Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network in 2011; Mitt Romney used it during his 2012 presidential campaign; Former Secretary Arnie Duncan replicated the slogan in his speech to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and it was resounded by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her 2015 speech at a black church near Ferguson, Missouri after the Michael Brown shooting (Lewin, 2012; Robinson, 2016). In a series of lectures on what Harvard scholars are doing to identify and understand inequality, Former Governor of Massachusetts Deval Patrick further echoed these sentiments about education when he said, "Education has been the path to better opportunity for generations of American strivers, no less me" (Ireland, 2016, paragraph 5). The continuously heightened media and political attention towards problems with educating and

effectively including inner city African-American males in academic and sociocultural settings reinforces the need for research around perspectives regarding disciplinary schooling practices, and their impact on the success of this population.

Furthermore, the images portrayed by the media and politicians above unmask the troubles with public schooling for African-American males as a social justice issue. This can be seen in the multiple violations to the civil rights of low-income African-American male students that have occurred to help them reach their nadir in the American public education system since the Bush administration suspended the Department of Education's civil rights data gathering efforts in 2006 (Lewin, 2012). The fact that African-American students are the recipients of corporal punishment more often than their counterparts is a key example of these violations (Northington, 2007).

As a part of an investigation into the nationwide data collected by the Office of Civil Rights' Education Department during the 2011-12 school year, the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. revealed that African-American students were more than twice as likely to receive corporal punishment than their White peers. The data also revealed that even though almost all states practice some form of corporal punishment with students, the eight Southern, Southwestern, and Midwestern states which house the majority of African-American students in the country account for approximately 90% of all corporal punishment cases with students in the United States (Startz, 2016). According to *The Atlantic*, corporal punishment is banned in thirty-one states, but some of the states that have banned it, like Maryland, are still reporting cases of physical discipline (Anderson, 2015). In an interview with *Education Week*, Victor Vieth, the founder and senior director of the Gunderson National Child Protection Training Center, said

that more than 109,000 students in more than 4,000 schools experienced corporal punishment in the 2013-14 school year (Sparks & Harwin, 2016). The fact that corporal punishment in public schools is mainly occurring in those states where the majority of poor African Americans live, and had historically experienced slave culture the longest, can be considered a sign that racism is still deeply entrenched in the fabric of our American public education system.

### **Lack of Achievement for African-American Students and School Discipline**

Now that the Department of Education's civil rights data collection ban has been lifted by the Obama administration as of 2009, the relationship between school discipline and lack of achievement for African-American males is becoming more apparent. The civil rights data from the 2009-2010 Department of Education civil rights data report further validated the existence of the achievement gap between minorities and their white counterparts. The report revealed that schools in poor districts had more in-experienced teachers serving students of color. These schools also offered less honors, advanced placement, upper level mathematics and science courses, and gifted and talented opportunities for students of color. Where the aforementioned courses and programs were available, the ratio for students of color enrolled in these courses to students of color enrolled in these schools was highly disproportional (Lewin, 2012; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Young, Ero-Tolliver, Young, & Ford, 2017).

The schooling process for many African-American inner-city high school males is often hindered by disciplinary actions that punish without reform, and do not allow this population to achieve academically (Davis, 2017; Noguera, 2008). Many scholars believe that the malevolent treatment of African-American male students is directly linked to racism, slavery, and an

attempted genocide by the hegemonic group of White male policymakers directly in an effort to deny these students access to “American dreams” (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Haddix, 2009).

Sadly, the forces on student behavior have influenced African-American males in ways that have decreased their life expectancy more than any other population, made them the most likely candidates for suspension and expulsion from school, and substantially increased their likelihood to be incarcerated with respect to any other U.S. population subgroup (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017; Noguera, 2008). Amongst other negative statistics, these forces on behavior have deeply marginalized the education experiences for African-American males and made it extremely difficult for this population to find and keep employment (Cagle, 2017; Noguera, 2008), and thus lead successful productive lives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Literature shows that one of the major issues affecting the achievement of inner-city African-American male students in public-schools is the ineffectiveness of disciplinary procedures (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Cagle, 2017; Davis, 2017; Darensbourg et al., 2010; Skiba, Michaels, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). These studies have shown a direct positive relationship between student behavioral problems and academic failure (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Second, several scholars have asserted that the manner in which schools discipline African-American males is synonymous with the way adults are disciplined when they commit crimes in society (Cagle 2017, Duncan, 2005; French-Marcelin & Hinger, 2017; Losen, 2011; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Noguera, 2008; Northington, 2007; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). School policies that reinforce the adultification of these minority male students perpetuate the school to prison pipeline (Duncan, 2005). In addition, one of the main three functions of schools

is to operate as institutions of social control, which provide an important custodial function with respect to the care and movement of students (Noguera, 2008). Developing discipline practices that control student behaviors in a less punitive fashion can help schools carry out the other two functions of sorting children academically to prepare for future roles in society, and socializing them by teaching norms and values that are regarded as central to civil society and the social order (Noguera, 2008). Finally, the discipline problems that inner-city public schools face with African-American males is a social justice issue that must be corrected if America plans to uphold the promise of equality echoed in the United States Constitution. As the deconstruction of these discipline processes unfold, Pedro Noguera, a scholar whose work has focused on race in education, authored the book *The Trouble with Black Boys* (2008) where he called for an exploration of this phenomena. Noguera asserted:

Scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural forces have a profound influence on human behavior, including academic performance. What is less understood is how environmental and cultural forces influence the way in which Black males come to perceive schooling and how those perceptions influence their behavior and performance in school. (Noguera, 2008, p. 18)

This dissertation was an attempt at answering Noguera's (2008) call for understanding more fully how African-American males come to perceive schooling, in particular their discipline experiences, and how environmental and cultural forces impact this perception of their behavior and performance in school.

### **Research Question**

This study aimed to answer Noguera's (2008) question above, and add to the literature, with a particular focus on the discipline practices related to schooling, while still probing the environmental and cultural forces that are influential in the lives of Black males. Thus, building on the work of Noguera, this research asked the question:

How do inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how do environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of their schooling experience?

### **Purpose of the Study**

First, the purpose of this study was to investigate the lenses through which African-American male students, who have been marginalized by disciplinary procedures in inner-city secondary schools, viewed environmental and cultural forces as impacting their schooling where discipline, achievement, and sociocultural development were concerned. This study also considered the influence of these forces on the ability of these students to re-enter the public education system once they had been "pushed out" of that setting and into the penal system after school disciplinary processes. Additionally, this study examined the manner in which the aforementioned population perceived the dynamic intersection of school disciplinary practices with environmental and cultural forces affected their ability to achieve, both in the post-disciplinary school setting and beyond. Furthermore, in hearing the voices of these minority males, this qualitative study was an attempt at adding African American male students' views on the effects of cultural and environmental forces on their schooling experiences and how these

experiences have affected their lives, both in and outside of the school environment, to the current literature that exists on the topic.

### **Significance**

African-American males represent a major population of students that historically pose problems for the United States (US) public-school system (Wallace et al., 2008). Hence, there are several gaps in the literature on how to effectively include these minority males in the general public education setting in ways that will prepare them for the looming challenges of citizenship that await after graduation. This study captured the voices of these minority male students who were directly affected by current discipline policies, and the failing public schooling system and provided a forum for their perspectives to be heard. Further, much of the present literature on discipline procedures for African-American males is quantitative in nature (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Cagle, 2017; Davis, 2017; Ervin, Schaughency, Matthews, Goodman, & McGlinchey, 2007; Filter et al., 2007; Losen, 2011; Shah & Maxwell, 2012; Wallace et al., 2008) and does not capture the voices of the students. Therefore, this study was an attempt to address an important area that has been overlooked in recent studies on discipline in public education settings. This study was significant because very little research has been done on the ways in which school discipline policies can be modified in urban areas to promote more positive behavior in African-American male students. One of the reasons for gaps in literature on behavior interventions for African-American males exists is because analyzing the practice of discipline is seen as negative and reactive as opposed to reformative (Brown & Beckett, 2006); therefore, it was important to explore the nature of discipline for African-American males attending these public schools where the stigma of low socio-economic status issues exists. Discipline for this marginalized population



of African Americans must be understood in ways that promote achievement and socialization such that graduation and other opportunities that most American populations are afforded become realistic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This was a qualitative study that heard the stories of inner-city African-American male students who were pushed out of public-schools through disciplinary measures. It investigated the environmental and cultural forces that affected their encounters with school discipline and how this impacted these young men both in and beyond the academic setting. This study was based on racial components that fit directly into the structure of Critical Race Theory (CRT), as defined by its founders below. It was grounded in the idea that “[s]chooling is where racism is reinforced, taught, and ultimately fostered through policies, practices, and what is ultimately considered as knowledge” (Knaus, 2006, p. 40). It was also generated through the lens that an achievement gap will continue to exist between those who do not embrace Whiteness and those who do as long as a White model of success is used to determine and shape schooling within the US (Knaus, 2006). The CRT framework was vital to this study of environmental and cultural forces as they relate to schooling for low socio-economic status inner-city African-American males in public high schools because the founders of CRT believe that “racial analysis can be used to deepen understanding of the education barriers for people of color, as well as explore how these barriers are resisted and overcome” (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 9).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) investigates the role of race and racism in themes relative to the ways that class, gender, and sexual orientation affect the ways that minorities interact with

society (Crenshaw, 2002). This rebellious form of logic questions the experiences of White culture as normal and grounds itself under the experiences of people of color (Taylor, 1998). CRT originated as a tangent from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which centered on the ideas of pioneers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes who stood against US jurisprudence as an ideology that historically promoted economic, political, and social injustice (Taylor et al., 2009). In 1881, Dr. Holmes wrote *The Common Law* where he hypothesized that court cases were decided based on the judges' feelings about society and their positions in society rather than on the relative evidence presented in the cases. This sparked the Legal Realism movement that stressed the nature in which judicial judgments were made through the 1930s when Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Strategy supported relief for the poor (Taylor et al., 2009). Legal Realism re-surfaced as Critical Legal Studies during the Civil Rights Movement with the argument that, "the power of certain groups (White, male) over an unequal status quo was continuing, and social and political change was needed" (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 2). CRT started as retaliation from a central group of legal scholars against White critical legal theorists who ignored their own white privilege as they conducted research on hegemonic practices and the distribution of power relative to legal doctrine (Crenshaw, 2002).

The pioneers of the current CRT movement recognized that the racial disadvantages inherent in American society make racism so normal that these blatant differences in the treatment of African Americans and Whites are constantly over-looked, thereby perpetuating the marginalization of the African-American population (Bell, 1992). These legal scholars turned critical race theorists include Derrick A. Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw (Taylor et al., 2009). These scholars:

... began to openly criticize the role of law in the construction and maintenance of racially based socio-economic oppression. They also began looking for an explanation of why this seeming retraction occurred and how to formulate new strategies to affect transformation. (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 2)

In short, CRT contains an activist dimension that attempts to both understand racist social phenomenon and transform it for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

### **The Five Basic Tenets of CRT**

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), CRT has five basic tenets, which are:

1. Ordinariness
2. Interest convergence
3. Social construction
4. Differential racialization
5. Voice-of-color.

**Ordinariness.** “Ordinariness” deals with the idea that racism appears to be hidden because it is thoroughly intertwined, and normalized in US culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 5).

**Interest convergence.** “Interest convergence” describes a lack of incentive to abolish racism because it moves the material interest of the White elite while simultaneously moving the psychic interests of working-class people in the same direction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 6).

**Social construction.** “Social construction” refers to the notion that, “Race refers to no biological or genetic reality, and races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7).

**Differential racialization.** “Differential racialization” focuses on the dominant culture’s tendency to marginalize various races based on its view of societal needs and the conceivable contribution of a particular race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8).

**Voice of color.** Finally, the “Voice of Color” thesis holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, minority scholars may be able to communicate to their White counterparts matters that White people are unlikely to know (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9).

### **Relevance of CRT**

The “Voice of Color” thesis was crucial to this study because it strongly relied on CRT’s argument that counter-storytelling, as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told, can be a useful tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging dominant discourse on race, racial privilege, and complacency, while furthering the struggle for racial reform (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

In recognizing that the roles of institutions, systems, and policies are barriers to success for people of color, CRT scholars treat school problems, family instability, and other issues facing people of color as central to the ways that racial differences continue to promote profound inequalities that favor the White population (Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007). The scholars said,

If social inequality is to be addressed and remedied, students and their families must not be looked upon as the “problem”; rather, the system and institutions that the students are

in must be looked upon as the greatest culprit of inequality. (Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007, p. 50)

This line of thinking helped answer questions about why African-American males in inner-city public high schools are facing so many discipline issues. The fundamental ideas relative to CRT also helped identify some of the practices that can be changed to make discipline practices more effective for these African-American male students.

One could argue that punishing minority male students in inner-city settings more harshly than any other American racial or ethnic subgroup is an issue of racism as well as one of social injustice; thus a look into CRT can provide possibilities for changing the manner in which schools discipline these students (Duncan, 2005). CRT was important for this study because it provided a lens through which policymakers, critical educators, and other perspective audiences can view the ways in which African-American males who were directly affected by discipline practices in inner-city high schools perceived these practices as affecting their social development. Allowing CRT to provide critical educators and policymakers with a different view of discipline practices could lead to discipline practices that are more socially just for African-American male students in low income community schools.

### **Portraiture as a Research Design**

The qualitative research method of portraiture was used to answer this study's research question because it was relative to the problems that African-American male students face in their inner-city schooling experiences. This is an important new resource in qualitative research methods and educational research. This benchmark work gives readers a solid understanding of qualitative research and evaluation, and its great promise for evaluating and guiding educational

practice. It demonstrates how the same methods used by critics in the arts and humanities, such as observing performance qualities, setting, and interaction patterns, also applies to the classroom practice. Excellent examples are provided to show what this type of research looks like, and how it can be applied to the evaluation of teaching, learning, and the overall school environment.

According to its creator, Lawrence-Lightfoot, “portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). Although portraiture follows an approach that is very similar to ethnography, it combines narrative and analysis with an aim of reaching beyond the scope of academia to the broader community in a way that promotes social transformation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture was chosen for this particular study because of its connection to the storytelling tenant of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It was also chosen for this study because of its usefulness in examining processes, problems, and programs in education to understand and improve practices and policies (Merriam, 1998).

### **Portraits Five Essential Features**

Portraiture uses the following five essential features to paint its explanatory pictures:

1. Context
2. Relationships
3. Voice
4. Emergent Themes.
5. The Aesthetic Whole.

**Context.** First, context refers to the environment in which the vital action takes place. It sets the stage and provides an atmosphere through which to view the model or participant. Context also provides meaning to the participant's self-expression relative to the story that is being unfolded. Here, context involves the home and community environments that prepared participants for school holistically and guides their decisions on succeeding in public schools. Branches of participants' secondary context include an advocacy center where lawyers review case files and work with students who have been pushed out or locked out of regular public schools, continuation schools, and the juvenile justice system. Things that contribute to the context include how the participant arrived at a particular school re-entry point, what dynamics accompanied the participant along the schooling path, social norms that affect the participant's decisions, the guidelines that govern schooling, and the rationale for decisions made by schools with respect to the treatment of participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Relationships.** Second, portraitists develop nurturing relationships with the participants that are built on trust, understanding, respect, and the genuine concern for the participants' wellbeing. Relationships are constantly redefined and renegotiated at different stages of the portrait. As the relationship grows, the portraitist connects with other people in the models' lives who are relative to the picture being painted. The portraitist is aware of boundaries in these relationships that will keep the picture authentic. This study built relationships that generated information that informed an understanding of the disciplinary processes used in inner-city public schools. With advocacy centers that help African-American males regain access to these settings as a context, new relationships were formed with the people involved as needed (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Voice.** Additionally, voice refers to the story that the researcher eventually re-tells. Voice is omnipresent throughout every aspect of the data-collecting process. The researcher will act as an investigator uncovering every possible detail that sheds light on the solution to the problem. The questions being asked and data being collected supply words for the story being told and the portraitist uses voice to discern the true nature of the problem. Voice in this study refers in part to the interviews of the African-American males participating in reform programs that advocates for their achievement. It also refers to the parts of the story generated from data outside of the interviews such as case files, and information obtained from advocates and other investigatory sources (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Emergent themes.** Next, portraiture relies on emergent themes to create the best portrait possible. Emergent themes become visible when the portraitist collects enough data, sifts through the data for convergent patterns, and mulls the data over to pull out shapes and forms that give the image meaning. Image refers to the actual portrait that is being created. Emergent themes have their foundation in the chosen framework; once the researcher enters the field, the framework allows this artist to probe with dynamic interaction based on investigation prior to entering the field. This study is grounded in a CRT framework. Prior investigation in this frame has produced issues of race that pertain to the over-disciplining of African-American males in inner-city schools, the prison pipeline, their over-representation in special education, punitive versus reformatory discipline, push-out and drop-out rates, and under-representation in the college pipeline for this population of students. While this study listened for these headlines, it was not limited to the above listed expectations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).



**The aesthetic whole.** Finally, the portraitist, or researcher, brings all the data together to create the aesthetic whole, a portrait that depicts a true revelation. The aesthetic whole is pieced together by carefully connecting the themes that became prevalent through the research. Creating the aesthetic whole is not a forced process. It is a true depiction based on meticulous analysis of the data gathered over time. The themes mentioned relative to this study of inner-city public high school males were subject to change based on the triangulation necessary to validate the research during the data analysis process. As the data continued to reveal key patterns, it revealed findings that informed the understanding in the field about how African-American males are disciplined in inner-city public high schools, and the nature of the impact that school discipline had on these participants. Only then was the true aesthetic masterpiece unveiled (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Using portraiture to hear the stories of these African-American male students generated literature on school discipline for this population from their perspective (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). One of the main reasons that portraiture was beneficial to this study was because it captured the essence of voice from its participants. According to CRT's fifth tenant stated above, "Building an understanding of the essence of the lives of people not traditionally 'heard' is precisely what CRT asserts, and this understanding rests upon the power of voice" (Knaus, 2006, p. 40).

### **Rationale for Portraiture**

As this study was an attempt to hear stories on school discipline for African-American males in inner-city high schools, most of the literature pointed to race and racism as a large part of the problem with this population of students; therefore, it was decided that the ideas relative to

critical race theory could frame answers to the research question asked. CRT's tenants that emphasizes the use of experiential knowledge and employing storytelling to analyze problems led to the idea of conducting a form of case-study to gain insight on the problems facing inner-city African-American male students (Delgado, 1995). Portraiture was the ideal type of case study for this project because, like CRT, it has a storytelling aspect that allowed the researcher to connect with subjects and their environments in ways that can produce vivid description of scenarios that answer the proposed research questions above (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

As the data continued to reveal key patterns, it also led to findings that informed understanding about how these African-American males have been over-disciplined in inner-city public high schools, relative environmental and cultural forces that influenced over-discipline, and the impact of being over-disciplined on these participants.

In addition, portraiture is a tested method for educational studies, as suggested by Hackmann (2002). He asserted that "[a] review of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the Dissertations Abstract International (DAI) database over the past 13 years revealed that a minimum of 40 studies within educational organizations have been conducted using the portraiture method" (p. 55).

Further, the final decision to use the portraiture method, as opposed to other forms of ethnography and action research, was made by carefully looking into popular methods used to study schooling. Consideration was given to Eisner's Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism Model as an ideal quantitative method until it was eliminated for being more of an educational program evaluation method than this study required (Yuksel, 2010). In contrast, the use of

portraiture in this study ultimately allowed for more of a primary focus on the coupling of environmental and cultural forces that helped mold the ideologies of schooling for participants with the ideologies of the educational institutions in which participants were expected to learn and develop.

### **Limitations**

The scope of this project was limited to the perspectives of a very small population of four participants who encountered the consequences of school discipline. Originally the study called for five participants; however, difficulties related to transportation, incarceration, work, relocation, and other inner-city problems made the participant population difficult to access. Additionally, as this study offered perspectives on school discipline from students who were known as violators in a flawed system, it could be easy for some readers to dismiss their perspective because of questionable credibility. Furthermore, researcher biases must be taken into consideration for this study as it included a population that was very familiar to the portraitist-researcher. However, while some authorities on qualitative research believed the researcher's positionality is a limitation of a study, others asserted that a deep understanding of context is an advantage for the researcher (Bourke, 2014; Merriam, 2009). As an African-American male teacher who works closely with a similar population of students, my personal life experiences enhanced the data analysis and understanding of the participant's perspectives.

### **Summary**

As the statistics surrounding African-American male students continue to generate negative results across the country (Shah & Maxwell, 2012), this study attempted to hear stories that may reveal a deeper understanding around the complexity of the discipline problems that

help prevent these students from achieving academically and moving toward a more productive position in society. The study aimed to investigate the environmental and cultural forces involved in school discipline for African-American males from a critical race perspective that places racism at the root of the problem (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A qualitative research study allowed the voices of African-American male students to be heard over the amount of quantitative literature that currently helps to guide decisions on effective discipline practices in public schools. This study aimed to uncover possible solutions to the school discipline problems of African-American male students by listening for contributing factors including over-discipline, over representation in special education and remedial settings, push-out and dropout reasons, and the prison pipeline. Ultimately, this study sought to allow African-American male students a chance to share their stories with the hope that public education can somehow become more socially just for this marginalized population.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This study investigated the literature pertaining to the ways that environmental and cultural forces have helped shape the perceptions of schooling for inner-city African-American males who have attended inner-city high schools and have been disciplined to the point of suspension or expulsion. Analyzing this literature was also an attempt at understanding some of the ways that these male students regained access to public education and navigated toward a successful schooling experience. The ultimate goal of this literature review was to generate a line of reasoning that produced questions related to environmental and cultural forces that affected school discipline experiences that only African-American males who have walked the school discipline path could answer. These answers may lead to more positive school experiences for inner-city African-American males who have been tagged as behavior problems as well as those who have not yet been identified as troublemakers.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a guide, this review began with the historical treatment of African-American males in society, and continued with the trials and tribulation of African-American men at the onset of establishing their education system. The review further investigated the literature in search of discipline patterns, and possible abuse, related to pushing African-American males out of the public-school system and into the penal system. The review also examined the role of the juvenile court system in determining the fate of these young men with regard to their rights to a fair and just education. Last, the review concluded with a brief

exploration of resilience and how this critical element can make a difference in the educational and life success of African-American students.

### **Historical Treatment of African-American Males in Society**

Beginning to understand the environmental and cultural forces that affect perceptions of discipline practices that plague African-American male students in inner-city public high school settings today required a look into the distant past where the patterns of race and racism began to shape the perceptions of this marginalized population through the slavery system. When the first European-Americans began to develop the original 13 Colonies that led to the United States of America, they continued a European tradition of trade that involved purchasing Africans from the west coast of Africa as slaves. These slaves had brutal forces set upon them by their owners in an effort to gain the mental control necessary to produce free laborers. Slaves were expected to abandon any ideas of self on the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean and amass the characteristics of chattel, like any common farm animal, by the time they arrived in America (Johnson, 1999). These people that were chained, beaten, raped, starved, and made to suffer all sorts of additional deprivation and trauma during a passage that sometimes took up to four months, set the foundation for the African-American psyche that many scholars struggle to comprehend and express to others today (Johnson, 1999). It is a psyche that for over four centuries witnessed the horrific deaths of kindred spirits on its plight to become the consciousness of the enslaved ancestors of the population of students discussed in this study.

Some critical race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus 2006) argued that one of the reasons why racism continues to remain so ordinary in today's society, stems from the slave-master mentality that was developed by many White Americans during this period in America

(Dyson, 2004). In an effort to further lay the foundation for the ways in which African-American males have come to perceive school discipline affecting their school experience, consider the following quote:

Racism remains the central problem in our culture; its brutal persistence brings out the ugliest features of the national character. . . . We must clearly grasp the difference between race, the culturally determined base of identity upon which social benefit and stigma rests, and racism, the sordid expression of prejudice and hatred against a racial group with the sanction of law and social custom. Otherwise, we won't make much headway in understanding why it is sometimes helpful to take race into account, even as we continue to fight against [W]hite supremacy, one of the most destructive forms of racism in history. (Dyson, 2004, p. 35)

Attempting to do anything other than isolate race as an independent factor in the complication of assimilation for African Americans with mainstream cultural ideals neglects the reality of African-American oppression inherent in racial identity (Dyson, 2004). Racial identity for African Americans began to take shape at the onset of slavery and continued through the implementation of Jim Crow laws, structural unemployment, gentrification of Black living space, and deeply ingrained institutional racism. Recognizing the critical nature of race exposes the debilitating effects of racism on the psychological make-up of African-American personalities (Dyson, 2004).

The effects of race and racism developed during slavery left a profound imprint on the ways that African Americans are viewed and treated in America today, especially where African-American males are concerned. America's success depended in large part on the subjugation of

Africans in its beginnings. Painting a negative image of African males in America and severely punishing these males for showing any sign of self-confidence or healthy self-regard reinforced the subsequent malevolent treatment of African-American males during and after slavery (Dyson, 2004).

### **Early History of African-American Males and Schooling**

Education for most African-American children was non-existent prior to the Civil War. Less than 7% of the nations “free Negro children” were enrolled in schools (Meier, Stewart, Jr., & England, 1989). Between 1870 and 1910, enrollment of African-American children between the ages of five and 19 hovered around one-third of that of other populations (Meier et al., 1989). When segregation laws led to separate but equal schools after the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896, Black schools were often victimized by terrorism and transparently sub-par to White schools (Meier et. al., 1989).

However, once the slave codes were nullified in the south, where the largest population of African Americans resided after the Civil War, basic education of African Americans became possible. Thus, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities were established. Brown and Bartee (2009) gave many insights on the roles that these institutions of higher education played in shaping the intellect and socio-economic aspects of African Americans over the past few decades. As more African Americans became educated, the population began to spread to more recognized colleges and universities. Thus, African Americans began to examine education problems through a fine lens by dissecting the mammoth issue part-by-part so as to deconstruct the ways in which education was constructed for African Americans in general (Brown & Bartee, 2009).



## **Unintended Outcomes of Desegregating Schools**

The performance and achievement of African-American students was hindered after the *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 trial overturned the segregation laws based on the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1954 (Knaus, 2006; McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Eckes, 2014).

Theoretical and empirical research shows that desegregation of schools failed the African-American population by upsetting the comfortable atmosphere of culture, climate, and equity created in segregated schools by not affording African-American students the academic stimulation that was expected with this change, and afforded to white students (Brown & Bartee, 2009; Knaus, 2006). One indicator that demonstrated the lack of positive change in the education of African-American students over time through desegregation is visible in the under-representation of this population in both the public and private sectors of education on all levels (Brown & Bartee, 2009). This finding revealed some of the political and financial turmoil in African-American schooling during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s.

## **Reconstructing Education for African Americans**

The statistics accumulated from 1970 through 1990 showed a very stagnant increase in the African-American population related to all institutions of higher education. This led to several studies on the subjects of enrollment and access relative to higher education for African Americans. These studies (Aaron, 1990; George & Farrell, 1990; Sigelman & Kamig, 1977) revealed information about which African Americans were enrolled where and the types of lives they lived that allowed them to succeed or become marginalized in their particular academic settings (Brown & Bartee, 2009). Even though these studies could theoretically describe the characteristics of the African-American student, the statistics continued to show that an overhaul

of the entire way this group was educated remained necessary because of the racial undertones that were found to be embedded in the education system (Brown & Bartee, 2009).

As researchers and statisticians continued their work through the 1990s, they ultimately found that racism existed on all levels of education and began to plan its unmasking (Agnew & Codwell, 1971; Cotton, 1989; Powell, 1990). In breaking down these ideologies in preparation for reconstruction, these African-American scholars, who became the original theorists on critical race, decided to revisit the *Brown* decision of 1954 (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus, 2006). They argued that African Americans were not allowed to express themselves freely in efforts to expand their minds, and that eager students were forced into docility and made to remain behind hidden color lines. This led to leaders like Derrick A. Bell, Jr., a Harvard law professor and attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), being accused of radical behavior when he rallied for improved learning conditions for African Americans as opposed to focusing on integration issues (Brown & Bartee, 2009). Several theories on racism in education continued to be considered over the decades including the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, but the overall result remained the same. Something needed to be done to solve the problem of racism in America before African Americans could get the chance to learn on the same level as their White counter parts (Brown & Bartee, 2009; Rabaka, 2010).

The historical factors surrounding racism relative to the education of African Americans in the US form a general basis for recognizing the defects in the current system. Identifying these systemic errors is a step toward deconstructing ideologies that marginalize African Americans in schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Carrying out the monumental task of properly educating

African Americans requires strategies that aim to unmask the inconsistencies of the racially constructed public education system in the US. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus, 2006).

### **Early Problems with Achievement in Education for African Americans**

The problems with education and achievement for African Americans led to questions regarding the asymmetrical opportunities of a system that claimed equal rights for all of its members. The problems with the achievement gaps between African Americans and their White counterparts were addressed in many studies (Armor, 1992; Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991; Epps, 1995; Ikpa, 1994; LaFree & Drass, 1996), including an in-depth study of the importance of educating African-American males in the areas of math and science (Brown & Bartee, 2009). Research also suggested that several financial burdens on society would result from ignoring this population (Rabaka, 2010).

### **Effects of Discrimination on Schooling for African Americans**

Cognitive and social development theory argues that African-American male students in inner cities have developed a general mistrust for institutions such as schools as a defense mechanism against their general mistreatment caused by the racial overtones inherent in school practices (Irving & Hudley, 2008). This cultural mistrust formed by these African-American students is a phenomenon that negatively affects their academic motivation (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Whereas, African Americans generally value education as a means of improving their existence in society, lack of funding, poor maintenance, and untrained teachers can cause African-American students to doubt the motives of White-controlled schooling (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Research shows that African-American students in sub-par school settings pursue non-academic activities, devalue education, and have low expectations for educational benefits

due to the belief that inadequate education services are tools used to bar them from advancement opportunities that are afforded their White counterparts (Irving & Hudley, 2008).

### **Ideas Governing Public Education for African-American Males**

Paolo Freire (2010) believed that critical educators must view education from the focal point of students in order to move them into a direction of democratic citizenship. Instead, America's public education system has created policies that support a "banking" concept of education where "[e]ducation becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 2010, p. 72). The banking system prescribed education that lacked communication, creativity, transformation, and true knowledge. Freire said, "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 2010, p. 73). This line of reasoning in public education will continue to regenerate oppressive conditions for minorities if a student-centered frame of reference is not established (Freire, 2010).

### **Adverse Effects of Educating African-American Males in the Present System**

Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu (1983) spawned a national debate when he formally accused the United States of deliberately and systematically destroying African-American males (Haddix, 2009; Oliver, 1989). He continued to argue that solving the problems of African-American boys during their school years may eliminate the problems of these future men (Haddix, 2009). Dr. Kunjufu attributed what he called the "fourth grade failure syndrome" to low teacher expectations, peer pressure, and the lack of male teachers and role models (Haddix, 2009). This coincided with the ideas of Noguera (2008) who brought attention to the growing rates of

homicides and suicides, HIV/AIDS contractions, incarcerations and convictions, infantile deaths, declining life expectancy, unemployment, poverty, and the lack of social and cultural capital for African-American males.

### **Discipline and the Achievement Gap for African-American Males**

Noguera (2008) believed that an investigation into school discipline practices may help solve the problem of educational inequality as seen in the achievement gap that exists between African Americans and Whites in America. Closing the academic achievement gap is one of the most pressing issues facing policymakers and educators today (Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Cowan, 2014; Kotok, 2017; Mayer, 2008). The achievement gap exists in both the upper and midrange of scores. The High School Transcript Study (Shettle et al., 2007) revealed that the grade point averages (GPAs) for Mexican American and African-American students lagged behind their White and Asian counterparts significantly (Brown & Bartee, 2009). Since studies showed that African-American males are often suspended and expelled more than ten times the rate of their fellow White and Asian male counterparts (Cagle 2017; Davis, 2017; Klein, 2018; Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015; Malaki, 2009; O'Conner, R., Porowski, A., Passa, A., Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic (ED), & National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (ED), 2014; Shirley, 2017), discipline practices with respect to African-American males could account for much of this gap in achievement (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Cowan, 2014; Kotok, 2017).

Overall, compared to their White counterparts, fewer African-American and Latino students are enrolling in a college-preparatory curriculum, which also contributes to the achievement gap (Cowan, 2014; Flowers, 2015; Kotok, 2017; Mayer, 2008). According to

Brown and Bartee (2009), some experts believed the achievement gap between Black and White students was derived from low standards, poor curriculum development, and unqualified teachers who contribute to meager instruction at inner-city schools populated by African-American males. Still others attributed the gap to struggles over meaning and power relations in education, and a strategic attempt to teach White supremacy through White hegemony (Brown & Bartee, 2009; Colgren & Sappington, 2015).

The disciplinary treatment of African-American males must be considered in relation to the achievement gap if education for this population is to be made socially just. School discipline is a social justice issue because a lack of racial parity is one of the factors that hinders the performance of African-American male students' ability to achieve where unequal school discipline procedures affect the ability for this population to be included positively in school data (Edwards, 2016; Neal, 2017; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). The focus on discipline of large urban American schools does not allow African-American males to make mistakes without drastic consequences that further marginalize them (Edward, 2016; Malaki, 2009; Neal, 2017; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Shirley, 2017).

### **Department of Education Civil Rights Data Report of 2009**

The Department of Education's *Civil Rights Report of 2009* found that African-American males were suspended from school at double the rate of African-American females, and that these two subgroups were suspended more than any other student school subgroup (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These numbers have brought more questions to light than answers (Klein, 2018; Loveless, 2017). Some educators alluded to an opportunity gap that is fueled by archaic systems, while others point toward a lack of cultural awareness relative to

behaviors that stem from the students' impoverished conditions (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Davis, 2017; Noguera, 2008). Many of these educators were teachers of students with special needs, and their classrooms generally have African-American males as a majority (Darensbourg et al., 2010).

Shortly after the release of the Department of Education's 2009-2010 *Civil Rights Data Report* revealing the dismal statistics for African-American males, John Donovan hosted Russlyn Ali, the U.S. Department of Education's Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, and Matt Cregor, Assistant Counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, on National Public Radio (NPR). Ali described how data collection methods under the Obama-Duncan administration were revamped to include several hundred more indicators of disenfranchisement. She also explained that finer disaggregation methods are being used to uncover the hidden achievement gap feeders. It was also suggested that school systems look into how teachers can be more prepared to deal with misconduct in the school setting in lieu of simply sending this vulnerable group of students away from academia, and in many cases, into the justice system (Donvan, 2012; Loveless, 2017).

### **Ineffectiveness of School Discipline Policies for African-American Males**

An investigation into the role of school discipline policies in the achievement gap that currently marginalizes students attending inner-city public schools shows that one of the major issues affecting the achievement of inner-city students is the ineffectiveness of school disciplinary procedures (Brown & Beckett, 2006). Studies have shown a direct positive relationship between student behavioral problems and academic failure (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Schools treated behavior problems and academic failure as if they were unrelated; in fact,

they had a context-specific relationship. Modifying the climate was one recommendation suggested by researchers as a way of reducing problematic behavior as opposed to focusing corrective action on specific behaviors, which seems to be the norm (Brown & Beckett, 2006).

Over twenty states still use corporal punishment as a form of discipline in their public schools. In most cases, African-American students are the recipients of this physical abuse which comes in the form of paddling, body posturing, excessive drills, or prevention of urine or stool elimination (Northington, 2007). During his speeches at American University and Howard University, Secretary Duncan echoed findings by Noguera (2008) where he said that many adult educators unknowingly treat black male students like black men when these students seem to be breaking rules. This is defined as adultification, where African-American male adolescents are treated as African-American men, and society begins to treat these children with the same regard as it treats African-American men based on preconceived notions of misconduct (Noguera, 2008). As the American public education system is a subdivision of society, teachers and other educators are included as a part of the society that adultifies adolescents. Duncan also revealed that teachers reported that white defiance was different from black defiance and that black defiance was more intolerable (Bailey & Holter, 2012; Hodgkinson, Godoy, Beers, & Lewin, 2017; Wun, 2018).

### **Fair and Just Education for African-American Males**

As one purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between schools and the juvenile court system where decisions to retain or expel students is determined on a legal basis, it was necessary to discuss relative discipline cases on which the courts have decided.

Discrepancies in the ways that courts decided discipline cases exposed flaws in the United States



justice system as they related to the academic achievement of impoverished students in general and African-American males in particular (Frydman & King, 2006).

According to Frydman and King (2006), the courts have been modifying their definition of due process rights of public-school students over the past five decades. The fourteenth amendment to the United States Constitution implies that schools have no right to deprive students of life, liberty, or property without due process; also, literature generated from education policies, court cases, and discipline practices as they pertain to inner-city public secondary schools will uncover legal analysis of the discipline problems facing the U.S. public education system with respect to students who are at risk of leaving the education system prematurely, many of whom are African-American males.

In the beginning, Thurgood Marshall argued the landmark Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 case that overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896 case which decided that segregating public facilities was legal as long as Black and White facilities were equal. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 consolidated cases that arose in Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, and Washington, D.C., that dealt with racially segregating public schools. All of these cases concerned African American students who were not allowed to attend public schools based on the “separate but equal” doctrine that racially segregated school these public schools. Led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Supreme Court unanimously decided that separate but equal educational facilities for racial minorities was inherently unequal and in clear violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Justices agreed that segregating public schools harmed the personal growth and education of African American children and encouraged an inferiority complex in these youth.

Overshadowed by the *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954 decision on the same day, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, 1954 established that liberty included a child's right to a public education. This case involved eleven African-American students in Washington, D.C. who were being segregated in the public-school system. These students were denied the right to attend John Phillip Sousa Junior High School with their White peers because the Fifth Amendment did not contain an equal protection clause; however, The U.S. Supreme Court determined that under the Fourteenth Amendment, segregating these African-American students violated their liberties in an unconstitutional way.

A few years later in 1961, the Fifth Circuit Court ruled in *Dixon v. The Alabama State Board of Education* that African-American students who were expelled for acts of civil disobedience be reinstated after proving that expelling students in good academic standing could deprive students of the right to education privileges that lead to good citizenship.

In 1969, due process based on the First Amendment for students was reinforced when the landmark Supreme Court case of *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* was decided. Here, parents successfully sued the school district for violating students' rights when it did not allow them to peacefully protest the Vietnam War by wearing solidarity black armbands. The court decided that "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the school house gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969 as cited in Frydman & King, 2006, p. 372). Subsequently, in the 1975 ruling of *Goss v. Lopez* due process was adjudicated when students argued that their 14th amendment due process rights were violated when they were suspended from school for misconduct without a hearing. The Supreme Court determined that

these students' rights were violated and that schools could not suspend students arbitrarily. Since 1975, several courts have made determinations based on the Goss decision that established education as a protected property by coupling it with statutes from the state constitution; however, equality of opportunity continues to pose problems in the American education system, especially for African-American students (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Young, et al., 2017).

### **Advocating for the Educational Rights of African-American Male Students**

Based on the historical findings above, Frydman and King (2006) further suggested a practical guide for representing students in expulsion and suspension cases. They suggested that knowing state suspension and expulsion laws is one of the first steps in creating school discipline procedures, monitoring student behavior, and protecting students' rights. They further indicated that educators must be familiar with all district regulations governing discipline practices in their jurisdiction when advocating for accused students. Advocates should collect data that is relevant to the case, as well as data on the student's daily life experiences. These scholars also believed that advocates should gather data from witnesses and people who can attest to the student's character. Most importantly, their research implied that advocates must be sure to obtain accurate information from the student and inform the accused student of his or her rights (Frydman & King, 2006).

Subsequently, if students are found guilty, research said that advocates or counsel begins the appeals process with the board of education as soon as possible, but definitely within thirty days. A decision to expel is generally accompanied by a written document that outlines the terms of expulsion. Advocates' knowledge of their jurisdiction's protocol for hearing cases helps to avoid impartiality. Research also stressed the importance of advocates knowing what services are

required for students once they are expelled, although a student's rights to a free and appropriate education should not end at expulsion (Frydman & King, 2006).

Many inner-city African American male public-school students with discipline problems were at risk of dropping out (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Bergeson, 2005; Wood et al., 2018). The frequency with which this population is disciplined for non-violent and routine discipline incidents influences the achievement gap (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Young et al., 2017). One way that educators were advocating for the rights of students who were expelled or suspended was through due process relative to student's 14th-Amendment rights (McCarthy et al., 2014). These education privileges have been enhanced over the years to include additional rights granted based on the outcome of relevant cases that have been heard to ensure that students' civil rights were protected in schools. The *Goss v. Lopez* 1975 set the precedent that has laid a foundation for student's educational rights that has informed student suspension and expulsion cases throughout the United States over the past three decades.

### **Push-outs, Dropouts, and the Prison Pipeline**

#### **Adultification of African-American Males**

Duncan (2005) described discipline in schools as a microcosm of discipline in society for African-American males. When African-American boys began to develop behaviors that were perceived as threatening to power structures such as schools, they are quickly judged and penalized by school officials and other societal authorities. These behaviors may have been culturally accepted as normal in the African-American community and were simply misunderstood by the dominant culture; therefore, African-American males were penalized for these behaviors without proper investigation and thus, adultification occurred. The lack of

investigation into African-American male student conduct led to these students being disciplined in the one-size-fits-all manner that ushered this population, which needs the most support, out of the education system and into the penal system (Johns, 2003). Many scholars (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Skiba et al., 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003; Zeiderberg & Schiraldi, 2002) have determined this path to be the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Darensbourg et al., 2010). These scholars have determined that the School-to-Prison Pipeline was used to alter the education path of African-American male students upon entering school using situational variables. These situational variables included more extreme discipline, being taught by ill prepared teachers, heightened special education referrals, and being made to feel ostracized in the school setting. Together, the aforementioned factors have been deemed as major contributors to the overrepresentation of African-American males in prison (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Solving the discipline problems of African-American male students during adolescence can help eliminate the problems that lead to disciplinary actions in the future when these boys become African-American men (Haddix, 2009).

### **School Disciplinary Trends for African-American Males**

Unfortunately, the statistics relative to the manner in which schools discipline African-American males across the nation show that this problem was not an isolated one. One national study examined the trends in racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline from 1991 to 2005. This study, which included White, Hispanic, Asian-American, American-Indian, and African-American students, found a decline in disciplinary actions for all populations except the African-American population for that period of time (Wallace et al., 2008). The statistics showed that even though African-Americans were disciplined far more than all other racial and ethnic

subgroups, as a whole, African-American males were disciplined more than any other group, and many of their consequences involved suspension or expulsion.

### **Lack of Democracy in Education as Causation for the School to Prison Pipeline**

Benjamin R. Barber (2003) believed that the lack of democracy in education was pushing African-American males out of schools and into prisons. Barber's assertion can be assessed in the following line of reasoning:

Texas skimps on education but passes a billion-dollar prison bond issue. California, which in 1980 spent roughly four dollars on education for every dollar it spent on jails, today matches every education dollar with a prison dollar. Yet nearly 85% of the prison population consists of school dropouts, and it costs three or four times as much to keep the young in prison as it does to keep them in school. It has almost become a cliché to note that one out of three young African-American men is either under indictment, in jail, or on parole and that more such young men are serving time in jail than are in college. (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997, p. 21)

### **Rationale for Exodus of Minority Students from Public Schools**

Fine (1991) developed a very convincing argument that suggested that students do not elect to leave schools, schools forced students out. She conducted research at a New York school where "discharges" were a major issue. According to the New York Board of Education, a discharge was a student who left school for a multitude of reasons including both academic and nonacademic categories such as misbehavior, pregnancy, work, health problems, and more (Fine, 1991). The school had staff members that performed the discharge process like a well-oiled and calibrated machine that exited former students in the smoothest ways imaginable. Phone calls

were made, truancies were documented, misconduct was recorded, and exiting protocols were followed through to the end, especially where Black students were concerned (Fine, 1991). Fine asserted, “Almost one-quarter of those interviewed claimed that they had been discharged coercively, forced to leave school prior to graduation” (Fine, 1991, p. 79). Unfortunately, these minorities lacked the proper support to advocate for their equity and access to a fair and just education (Fine, 1991). While Fine (1991) produced seminal research on how African-American students were forced out of public schools, 28 years ago, more current research showed that her arguments were still valid (Bell, 2014; Kafele, 2012).

### **Efforts to Change Disciplinary Practices for Minority Students**

In a 2012 NPR interview, Matt Cregor, an education attorney and an expert on school discipline law and policy, suggested that educators establish relationships that engage parents in the discipline process before there is an incident (Donvan, 2012). He believes that this is an important part of establishing behavioral norms that promote a successful classroom environment. Since the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB), the number of out of school suspensions has ballooned (Cook et al., 2018; Edwards, 2016; Neal, 2017). This was due in part to rewards that are tied to achievement. Getting rid of difficult students allows teachers to teach those students in the upper portion of the bell curve (NPR, 03/12/12). Unfortunately, when students are dismissed from school for discipline related issues, they are gone for good in most cases because pupil loss means funding loss, and funding loss means less resources to advocate for the return of those dismissed students.

Cregor (cited in Donvan, 2012) spoke of how the Zero Tolerance Policy is another means that has been used to force kids out of school. Thanks again to the incentives that were tied to

NCLB, some educators believed that pushing underachieving students out of school would result in their job stability. However, since the Obama administration introduced legislation to unravel the effect of the NCLB policy that ushered in Zero Tolerance practices to schools (Loveless, 2017), Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has been strategizing to change this legislation that has shown some inequities regarding school suspension (Klein, 2018). One of Secretary DeVos' strategies included meeting with groups to discuss possible ways to repeal Obama era guidance that was deemed to reduce suspension and expulsion rates in schools and hold school districts accountable for disparities in disciplinary consequences between students of color and their counter parts of other racial origins (Klein, 2018).

During this NPR interview with representatives from the Department of Education (03/12/12), some teachers expressed the belief that the underlying causes of the problems with African-American students have to do with cultural differences, school funding, the economy, and family involvement. Cregor referenced statistics previously evidenced by other scholars that showed how students who are arrested and appear in court are four times more likely to develop a pattern of arrests and court appearances (Donvan, 2012; French- Marcelin & Hinger; 2017; Lynch, 2017; Noguera, 2008; Rovner, 2016).

According to Losen (2011), subgroups that are often suspended lose vital instructional time and are more apt to leave school based on one of many reasons that disconnect them from positive school experiences. Losen (2011) went on to suggest that even though suspension is an indicator that students could be preparing to drop out, schools are not accountable for investigating or reporting statistics related to the effects of discipline on student achievement. Furthermore, he stated:



There is no research base to support frequent suspension or expulsion in response to non-violent and mundane forms of adolescent misbehavior; large disparities by race, gender, and disability status are evident in the use of these punishments; frequent suspension and expulsion are associated with negative outcomes; and better alternatives are available.

(Losen, 2011, p. 1)

### **Educating African-American Males in a Democratic Society**

Creating a student-centered frame of reference for educating minorities, and African-American male students in general, is a democratic approach to education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). According to reformers like Robert Maynard Hutchins and Allan Bloom (Goodlad & McMannon, 1997), education leads to the production of healthy human families that sustain the positive societal values and norms that allow communities to flourish. Educators must first deal with the fact that the American population is constantly changing to include people of diverse cultures and backgrounds; therefore, the face of the school must reflect the face of society. If the goal of education truly is a better life and a better world for all, the foundation must be set in the public-school system so that we can continue to fuel a democratic society (Johns, 2003). Henry Giroux (1988), a seminal researcher in education, suggested that teacher education programs are not preparing teachers in a manner that prepares students for upward mobility or socialization that creates politically aware citizens. He believed teachers are seen as routine laborers used to carry out specific tasks designed by specialists without deviation (Giroux, 1988). Though dated, this analysis still resonates today. Giroux also asserted that education programs should have a circular process that prepares students by exposing them to socio-cultural ideological aspects of teaching so that these teachers can in turn impart this

knowledge to their students, who will become politically aware citizens that will insure that democracy does not vanish from society (Giroux, 1988).

So how can schools become more democratic for inner-city African-American male students? Noguera (2008) suggested that schools should respond to the nonacademic needs of poor children. He uses statistics to show that the children who perform the worst in schools are the ones from uneducated families, broken homes, and environments that lack proper health care. In short, Noguera (2008) stated that “[t]he achievement gap is a reflection of the socioeconomic gap, the health gap, and the gap in opportunity” (p. 180). Moreover, schools need to search for models that provide these basic needs for all students under the provisions of current social welfare policies if possible, and tweak these policies where necessary to give all students a chance to be successful (Noguera, 2008).

### **Reformative Discipline for African-American Male Students**

While it is clear that some educators are well within their right to send students away from the classroom for continuous counterproductive behaviors, a system needs to be in place that buffers these students from the present realities of expulsion and prison. Education Attorney Matt Cregor’s suggested solution follows:

When it comes to this broader question of what are we going to do to protect the education of that one student in the room, this is where we need as teachers, as parents, as students and as advocates of all stripes to pull together and identify those best practices that are working. And they are. And it is up to us to share these and make sure they are working for every student in that classroom. (cited in Donovan, 2012)

Some school districts across America believe they have found solutions to the discipline problems with African-American males in their school settings. Perhaps the rest of the country could learn from these pockets of success. First, four school districts in the North Central United States implemented a program on the system level that reduced violence through school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) in four different elementary schools in two different counties (Ervin et al., 2007). The program called for proactive discipline procedures on three levels to prevent further student discipline issues and promote academic progress. SWPBS implemented a data driven intervention and behavior management process that required decision makers to monitor primary targets who were no longer experiencing immediate behavioral, social, or educational difficulties on one level; secondary targets whose settings determined them to be at risk of social and behavioral difficulties; and tertiary targets who were actually experiencing learning, behavioral and social difficulties. Over a course of four years, SWPBS improved target intervention ratings from 23% to 96% overall (Ervin et al., 2007).

In another study, an entire school district in Illinois claims to have reduced its problem behaviors significantly by using a Check in/ Check out positive behavior support (PBS) program as a secondary-level intervention strategy (Filter et al., 2007). Check in/ Check out involved a tier-two intervention where students who were no longer experiencing immediate socio-behavioral or educational problems were monitored with a daily progress report that was checked in school each morning and afternoon, and by parents at home each evening. Check in/ Check out claims to be different from most tier-two programs because they believe other programs lack the continuous progress monitoring of both students and the program methods involved in getting desired results. Progress monitoring of the Check in/ Check out program

showed significantly effective results by using data driven methods that required consistent practices on every intervention level both at home and at school.

Other research from Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) reviewed the development and implementation of a school-wide code of student behaviors that led to less suspension and expulsion (Brown & Beckett, 2006). The district showed that developing and sustaining a discipline plan where all stakeholders are held accountable for reinforcing discipline procedures significantly cut down on suspensions, expulsions, and disruptions in general (Brown & Beckett, 2006). This ongoing study of proactive discipline has found several reasons why behavior differences exist between inner city African-American male students and their White middle class counterparts; more importantly, the study has helped the school district reveal some of the consequences that were considered when attempts at altering disciplinary practices began to unfold. Intervention became necessary for CPS when teacher attacks, suspension, and expulsion reached crisis levels after a zero-tolerance decree failed to produce better schooling results (Brown & Beckett, 2006). An investigation revealed that the district was more savvy at dealing with White issues such as smoking and drug use than it was with black issues like fighting that caused the majority of its suspensions and expulsions (Brown & Beckett, 2006). Ultimately, pre-suspension programs were developed and a board approved district-wide code of behavior was adopted where all stakeholders were held accountable for upholding its practices (Brown & Beckett, 2006). The principal outcome of this study suggested that an instructional approach to discipline where teachers are given the necessary support to resolve conflicts in the classroom and focus on teaching leads to better self-discipline by students which causes these students to gain better self-perceptions (Brown & Beckett, 2006).

## **Restorative Justice Practices as a School Discipline Solution**

Many public-school districts are beginning to implement restorative justice practices as a primary discipline tactic instead of the normal suspension and expulsion methods that disproportionately affected minority students (Payne & Welch, 2015). Restorative justice practices involve discussions where students who are being disciplined are given an opportunity to talk about their infractions with all involved parties that include victims, school stakeholders, parents, and other student advocates (Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Restorative justice practices originated in the criminal justice system and made its way into the public education system after it was found to be effective in the former (Pavelka, 2013). The core principles of restorative justice are to repair harm, reduce risk, and empower community (Pavelka, 2013, p. 15). Restorative justice models seek to improve school culture by addressing disciplinary standards and creating a forum for peaceful resolution of conflict and misbehavior. These models seek to improve school culture by determining the impact of disciplinary incidents and establishing mutual prescriptive agreements for resolving and repairing the harm caused by these wrongdoings (Pavelka, 2013).

Issues with restorative justice as a school discipline solution. A recent study showed that restorative justice practices were ineffective as a primary disciplinary resource for public schools at present (Muhammad, 2018). Muhammad (2018) found that restorative justice practices had no effect on the suspension of African-American male third-grade students or the disparities between these African-American students and their White counterparts (Muhammad, 2018).

Teachers who were tasked with implementing these restorative justice programs had mixed emotions about its potential to improve public schools. While some teachers believed that

these restorative justice practices had great potential, many others expressed concern about the sheer volume of students requiring these services and the lack of personnel available to properly implement these practices (Muhammad, 2018).

### **The Role of Stereotypes in Developing A Positive Self-Concept**

It has been argued that the common thread in developing self-image in inner-city African-American youth involves forming relationships where peer and family interaction can help develop ideas about how this population perceives themselves (Powell, 1983). As this population of African Americans continues to develop relationships, especially outside of their race, stereotypes begin to negatively affect their self-esteem and self-concept (Powell, 1983). Berry and Asamen (1989) asserted that “[t]he nature of an individual’s self-evaluation has profound effects on an individual’s thinking processes, emotions, desires, values, and goals” (p. 71). Stereotypes can be defined as “exaggerated beliefs associated with a category. Their main functions are to justify or rationalize conduct in relation to that category” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 8). Critical race theorists suggest that these lingering forms of racism that work to disenfranchise African Americans be combatted using social deconstruction methods such as counter storytelling that promote positive self-concepts for African Americans (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus, 2006; Solorzano, 1997). Solorzano (1997) categorized stereotypes into three categories that include intelligence and education, personality and characteristics, and physical appearance. Research suggested that these forms of stereotypes have been used to marginalize populations, especially African-Americans, in society by normalizing ideas that they are less capable academically and socially, which can imply that they are less capable in the work force (Solorzano, 1997).

Some scholars suggested that the lingering effects of racism evident in stereotyping directly affect the educational outcomes of inner-city African-Americans in adverse ways (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Steele, 1997). Research suggested that the staggering statistics surrounding educational outcomes for inner-city African-American youth will continue to plummet unless these African-American families and communities invest in the positive self-concepts of their youth with continuous praise, high achievement expectations, and demands for excellence from their community schools (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Douglas, 2017; Rhodes, 2017; Richardson, 2012).

### **Stereotype Threat**

Recognizing the psychological triggers behind stereotypes that cause marginalized populations like African-Americans to perform poorly in seemingly normal conditions provided the first form of ammunition for combatting these social constructs (Steele, 1997). These environmental cues have been termed “stereotype threats” (Steele, 1997). Critical race theorists suggested that African Americans and other marginalized populations promote awareness of these stereotype threats as psychological tools that reinforce racial undertones that perpetuate negative self-concepts for their populations. Promoting awareness of this form of stereotype proliferation can be a step towards abolishing the mindsets that perpetuate the socioeconomic and educational gaps that exist amongst marginalized populations, like inner-city African Americans, and those who are perceived as having power (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Knaus, 2006; Solorzano, 1997).

## **The Resilient Nature of African Americans**

According to Merriam-Webster (2018), “Resilience is the capacity of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress and the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change (“Resilience”, 2018).”

African-Americans originated in America as slaves, property used to build a society controlled by Anglo Saxon Americans from England. Enduring slavery was the first sign of resilience for African-Americans (Tang, Jang, & Copeland, 2015). Gaining freedom, surviving as third-class citizens, and fighting for equal rights further defined African-Americans as resilient people (Obey, 2008). Now that African-Americans have been established as having rights that are equal to those of other American citizens, a lack of access to resources continues to burden the African-American community. Gaining resources and effectively using them to sustain a healthy existence requires education to understand the concept of sustainability. Some scholars believed that the Anglo Saxon Americans who control the resources are reluctant to share resources appropriately because sharing interrupts their imperialistic goals (Jimenez Fonseca, 2017). This unequal sharing of resources engendered a struggle for survival and wellbeing in African Americans (Berry & Asamen, 1989).

As education plays a major role in the resilience of African-Americans, it is important that African-American children understand that their resilient nature is a foundational piece of developing protective factors that support their wellbeing (Celico, 2008). While there are plenty of statistics on the academic struggles of African-America students, it is important for scholars to investigate those who have been successful, especially those males in inner-cities where the majority of struggling African-Americans live (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Celico, 2008).



## **The Resilience of African-American Youth**

Throughout American history, African-Americans have proven to be a resilient group of people. Irvin (2012) said, “Resilience refers to better outcomes when having some risk related to less positive outcomes, and is typically not measured directly, but is inferred when a better developmental outcome is apparent after having encountered some risk” (p. 177). One study measured the resilience of African-American middle-school sixth graders from a low-income rural area in the Southern region of the United States (Irvin, 2012). This study involving rural Southern African-American adolescents was important because it provided data on a population of people with one of the greatest resilience potentials. Irvin (2012) indicated, “Economic deprivation among children is a potential influence on various educational and social-emotional outcomes and a risk factor for achievement difficulties and aggression”(p. 176). African-Americans from low-income communities in the rural South are some of the most impoverished people in the United States, and middle-school students, being adolescents, underwent continuous change (Irvin, 2012). Since change is necessary for resilience to occur, understanding the contributors to the resilience of these particular sixth graders helped with identifying ways to support students from inner-city communities (Irvin, 2012). The study was based on the idea that aggression is inversely proportional to student achievements, and it searched for protective factors that formed the foundation for the resilience of these African-American students (Irvin, 2012). The results of the study found that high psychological engagement in curricular and extra-curricular school activities was associated with less aggression in adolescent African-American female students from low-income communities in the rural South, but the results were inconclusive for males (Irvin, 2012).

Other studies have shown that some factors including family composition, socioeconomic status, teacher expectations, values, parental expectations, and self-concept among others have consistently contributed to the academic success or failure of African-American students (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Richardson, 2012; Douglas, 2017; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Family in the African-American community extends beyond that of a normal nucleus. Since their arrival in the United States, African Americans have had to depend on the limited resources of their entire community for survival and cultivation. Developing a sense of self for African-Americans includes interactions with others, especially those with whom they have close personal relationships and those considered to be authorities (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Richardson, 2012; Douglas, 2017; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Research showed that, when inner-city African-American students from alternative family environments were encouraged to feel good about themselves and performed well in school through positive and consistent communication with their communal families, authority figures, and other role models, they developed the sense of self necessary to create and reach their goals (Berry & Asamen, 1989; Richardson, 2012; Celico, 2008; Douglas, 2017).

Another qualitative study that supported the significance of resilience and academic achievement factors included eight African-American college students from Chicago, Illinois who were raised in alternative family settings, families that are composed of guardians other than dual parents (Williams & Bryan, 2013). The researchers designed the study to include four males and four females with average to above average high school grades. All participants lived with their mothers during high school except one, who lived with his grandmother. The study found that participants were encouraged to do well in school by a parent figure with tactics that

included a demand for best efforts using praise and consequences. Participants mentioned supports such as long hours of help with homework, college applications, and college tours from siblings, aunts, fathers who did not live with them, cousins, neighbors, and other community members. During their one-hour interviews, participants revealed that personal stories of hardship from their supporters, such as the limited opportunities that accompany limited education, encouraged their success. Outside of normal school hours, participants were encouraged to participate in a wide variety of extracurricular activities in their communities, at school, church, and sometimes paying jobs. The researchers suggested that school counselors should further support parent figures of at risk African-American students by recognizing non-traditional support that students receive from struggling parent figures and work with them to promote better student performance (Williams & Bryan, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

According to the available literature surrounding the discipline procedures for African-American male students attending inner-city public schools, the US public-school system is far from treating this population with the impartiality necessary to provide an equitable education with respect to their middle and upper-class peers. This unfair treatment stemmed from years of mistreatment based on the subordinate classification of African-Americans in society and related processes that remain from a time when this mistreatment was accepted by society. Schools continued to punish these African-American males with suspension and expulsion exponentially more than any other school population. Returning to a democratic way of public schooling can help change some of the inequities that currently plague the African-American male student

population. Some schools and school districts have already begun to investigate and apply strategies that may give these students a chance at success.

Even though schools bear much of the responsibility for mistreating their African-American male populations, the courts also played a major role in exacerbating the situation (Nelson & Lind, 2015). Some US school districts have resorted to outsourcing discipline to juvenile courts and officers in schools (Nelson & Lind, 2015).

When a school allows a School Resource Officer to arrest a student or refers a student to law enforcement or juvenile court as a form of discipline, it's turning that student over to the juvenile justice system. That makes it that much easier for a student to get a criminal record. (Nelson & Lind, 2015).

According to a Justice Policy Institute (JPI) report, this occurs five times more often in schools with officers than schools without officers (Nelson & Lind, 2015).

To the contrary, intervening in school discipline is not something that juvenile courts purposely advocate. After manning schools with cops resulted in eleven times more juvenile court appearances for students in his county, Clayton County, Georgia's chief judge became a spokesman against police in schools and the school-to-prison pipeline (Nelson & Lind, 2015).

Courts have been somewhat hands-off when it comes to interfering with school discipline policies. The line between student's rights in schools and student's civil rights still remain questionable. When courts decided to intervene in school-based decisions regarding discipline practice for these minority males, their decisions tended to vary from case to case (McCarthy et al., 2014). As there is still much to be done, it is necessary to hear from these African-American males who are directly affected by the discipline policies and practices in public schools as much

as possible in order to correct this injustice and give this population equitable access to a free education.

Further, the existence of the stereotype-threat phenomenon continued to be recognized as an impediment to the academic success of African-American students from inner-city communities (Steele, 1997). One method of deconstructing these social constructs was through counter narratives that opposed the ideas endorsed by the status quo surrounding the low achievement ceilings of impoverished African-Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Many scholars believed that investigating and sharing stories of the resilience of African Americans helped to develop a positive self-concept for African-Americans in inner-city communities that could promote their academic success and assist in closing the achievement gap (Irvin, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014).

In conclusion, critical educators must include all learners as a central focal point in addressing their needs to become critical thinkers and problem solvers (Freire, 2010). The democratic education of minorities, especially African-American males, in inner-city communities must replace the oppressive conditions of the status quo in marginalized areas (Brown & Bartee, 2009). The transformational leadership that must be explored by policymakers to put African-American males back on the education map must include parents as necessary agents to support this change (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Finally, the face of a democratic society continues to change and we must reimagine the manner in which we educate African-American males in inner-city communities to produce citizens who will help in keeping these communities simultaneously multicultural and prosperous.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

First, the purpose of this study was to investigate how inner city African-American male public school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how environmental and cultural forces impact this experience. Secondly, this study considered the influence of these forces on the ability of these students to re-enter the public education system once they had been “pushed out” of that setting and into the penal system after school disciplinary processes. Additionally, this study examined the manner in which the aforementioned population perceived the dynamic intersection of school disciplinary practices with environmental and cultural forces as affecting their ability to achieve, both in the post-disciplinary school setting and beyond. Furthermore, in hearing the voices of these minority males, this qualitative study was an attempt at adding African American male students’ views on the effects of cultural and environmental forces on their schooling experiences and how these experiences have affected their lives, both in and outside of the school environment, to the current literature that exists on the topic.

Using portraiture as a methodology was an attempt to offer the perspectives of these young men through a qualitative lens on a subject that has confounded society for decades, according to the quantitative literature (Caperton, 2010; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004) that currently exists on school discipline for African-American males. As these young African-American men shared their experiences about school policies and discipline on a case-by-case basis, this study aimed to highlight any modification that could be made to

enhance positive school experiences for African-American males in inner-city communities. As the voices of these students were heard in this study, it was expected that their perception of how these discipline policies have impacted their ability to achieve and adjust to the demands of society would become apparent.

### **Research Question**

This study answered the following question:

How do inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how do environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of their schooling experience?

### **Description of the Research Sites**

#### **Site One: The Legal Education Clinic**

A part of the study was conducted using a legal education clinic as one of its main research settings. The legal education clinic is situated on a university campus in Los Angeles County, California. It was a place where lawyer advocates in defense of students' rights reviewed student cases heard by the Regional County Juvenile Court. Goals of these legal advocates included supporting clients in continuing their education and helping them to establish better ways of living. Clients of the clinic were generally local, in that they spanned the Regional County area. The clinic had both open and closed cases. The open cases were those that lawyers were actively working to resolve. The closed cases were those that have been litigated and had been resolved. The cases chosen for this study were closed, which helped eliminate barriers to consent authorization. Clients of the clinic were students who were being, or had been, pushed

out or locked out of public education settings because of multiple violations of school discipline policies. Advocates were lawyers who did legal work for these cases at the clinic. Many of these cases involved students with special needs so they had individual education plans (IEPs) as well. The lawyers looked at the laws in relation to the IEPs in search of any misuse of its guidelines that might have assisted in penalizing these students.

### **Site Two: The Community Outreach Center**

The other part of the study used a community outreach center located in a heavily urban, underserved area in Los Angeles County, California. It had several branches within its setting that all worked to support the growth and development of its community members. The facility housed a job placement center, a small continuation school, a probation office, a counseling center, and a host of other community services for youth and adults. While the majority of the participants in this study were members of a youth outreach program at the center called *Aim High*, they also had access to all of the other services mentioned above.

Gaining entry to research site one. Knowing that I wanted to study the environmental and cultural forces that affect school discipline for inner-city African-American male students, I attended a symposium on the subject and contacted one of the presenters for possible research suggestions. The presenter that I contacted turned out to be a lawyer who advocates for the education rights of impoverished minority students. His name was Raphael and he was the director of the education clinic. During a discussion I learned that Raphael served as a mentor for a population of African-American males whose brushes with the judicial system mirror the staggering statistics that flood the data pool relative to discipline for African-American males. I



asked if it was possible for me to conduct research at his site, and we began to brainstorm possible methods for creating a study.

Raphael and I began corresponding by email on a regular basis over the next few weeks until we organized an appropriate study. He and I agreed on some practices that would help make the study meaningful. I described conducting a qualitative study that tells a story of the relationship between environmental culture and school culture from the perspective of African-American males to Raphael, and he gave suggestions on how to effectively make this happen. He agreed to contact possible subjects and make them aware of the opportunity to participate in my study. Raphael also agreed to act as a conduit in the study. As a conduit, Raphael agreed to deliver my welcome letter (See Appendix A.) that explained my research goals, consent forms, and the experimental subjects bill of rights document to interested participants. Having Raphael serve as a conduit facilitated my entry gaining process and gave me a sense of comfort in meeting prospective participants.

Raphael gave me a tour of his facility, provided a comfortable workroom for me, and introduced me to his staff who were very helpful in making sure that I had everything that I needed to conduct my research. Although I used the workroom to review case-files, interviews and meetings with Raphael took place in his office at the university and in my classroom after school. Raphael also introduced me to Rubi, the case manager for prospective participants. When meeting arrangements with prospective participants needed additional support, she was very instrumental in helping to retain the sole remaining prospective participant from the education clinic. Interviews and meetings with Rubi took place in a law library and a café. We agreed that

meetings with Brian, the sole participant from the education clinic, would take place in his home, and Rubi accompanied me on each of the four meetings.

Rubi and I met Brian and his grandmother, Elma, at their Southeast Los Angeles apartment on a Thursday evening at 7:30 p.m. for initial introductions. I brought fruit, snacks, water, and a gift journal for Brian so that he could record his thoughts. Elma, Rubi, and I talked briefly until Brian arrived from football practice around 8:00 p.m. Elma created a workspace in the kitchen where Brian, Rubi, and I began our meeting. Rubi eventually left the kitchen so that Brian and I could get more acquainted. After talking with Brian for approximately one hour, he was eager to join the study and share his story. As our initial meeting came to an end around 10:00 p.m. that night, I asked Brian to use his new journal to reflect on his social, academic, and disciplinary school experiences in preparation for our next meeting. Brian, Elma, and Rubi signed the informed consent document, I gave Brian the Bill of Rights, and we agreed on three bi-weekly Thursday meetings that would begin at 8 p.m. with the possibility of a final wrap-up meeting if necessary. Brian was actually the only participant from the legal education clinic that became a participant in my study. Issues with participant availability significantly impacted the timeline of this study and forced me to pursue other research site options.

**Gaining entry to research site two.** When issues with participant availability began to arise, it became necessary to locate a second research site. My advisor and I reviewed a list of possibilities, and I made daily phone calls and sent emails for several weeks until Jane, the director of *Aim High* agreed to have her program join my study. Now that I had the experience from gaining entry to the education clinic, entering the community outreach center was smooth. Jane and I spoke at length on the phone to organize an action plan. I emailed my study

announcement to her, she shared it with prospective participants, and we arranged a time for me to visit the facility to speak to a group of young men that expressed interest in participating in the study.

Upon entering the center at 9:30 a.m. on a Thursday morning, I was greeted by a receptionist, Brenda, and one of the prospective models, Patrick. Patrick asked if I was there to conduct the surveys, and I responded yes. When Brenda escorted me to Jane's office, Patrick eagerly rounded up the rest of the young men. Jane and I met briefly in her office before she gave me a tour of the facility, introduced me to a few staff members, and opened an office for my presentation. She gave me permission to use the office for all of my needs throughout the project and left to retrieve the prospective participants while I settled-in and organized the presentation setting. I came prepared with enough fruit, snacks, water, and journals for seven people. Although I expected five prospective models from *Aim High*, again the issue of participant availability became a problem, and only three models were present to participate in the study. Jane and the prospective participants returned approximately 15 minutes later and situated themselves around the meeting table for formal introductions, and then Jane left so that I could get acquainted with the prospective participants. The group of young men listened to the purpose and goals of my study and asked very good questions. Some of the questions caused me to raise my expectations as of what may be revealed in later interviews. We talked for approximately one-and-one-half hours and then Patrick, Raymon, and Myran agreed to join the study. I asked them to reflect on their social, academic, and disciplinary school experiences in preparation for our next meeting. Each participant signed the informed consent document (See Appendix B.), I distributed the Bill of Rights, and Myran left to retrieve Jane. Upon her return,

Jane admired the journals and commented on how official they made the young men appear. She signed the witness section of the informed consent document, asked Myran to make copies, and then asked me to stop by her office after I wrapped up the meeting. We agreed that I would spend every-other-Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with *Aim High* to collect the necessary data with the option of a final wrap-up session if necessary.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were at least eighteen years old, African American, and pushed out of an inner-city public high school based on disciplinary consequences. The cases used in this study were already closed by the court to circumvent any possible consent complications. The goal was to find five accessible participants who were willing to share their stories. Unfortunately, finding participants was a much more difficult task than I had expected at both sites. Each program director noted that some of the perspective participants could not be more accessible because of restraints such as further incarceration, lack of transportation, job responsibilities, and other relative financial burdens, even though these perspective participants liked the idea of participating.

Each participant received a \$25 gift-card for his contribution to this study. Participant information in this study remained confidential so as to protect them from any adverse consequences of their participation. The program directors gave me permission to access the participants' case files and interview participants based on their informed consent to participate along with IRB protocol.

## **Data Collection and Management**

Data for this study was collected on a voice tracer digital recorder and stored on a MacBook Pro. Both of these devices allowed me to create private mp3 files that were easily manageable on my locked computer, which is only accessible by me. I stored data in a private cloud as well as a locked cabinet that could only be accessed by me. These data collection and storage methods served to minimize the risk of leakage and maintain the confidentiality of the participants (Merriam, 2009).

The study began with audio-recorded interviews of each program director and each case manager. These director and case manager interviews were necessary to help generate an overall picture of what takes place in the facilities and a line of questioning, based on established questions (See Appendix C.) for the director and case managers, that helped participants answer my research question (See Appendix D.). A round of audio-recorded introductory interviews with the young men who have been impacted by school discipline followed, and then a review of the case files that led the participants to the education clinic and community center took place next. Case files were reviewed after the first round of interviews to avoid possible biases when getting to know the participants.

Next, a more intense round of audio-recorded participant interviews, based on pre-established questions, was conducted where I heard as much of their stories as possible. I took observation notes during each interview as needed to document behavior or expressions that were missed by the recorder to inform questioning for subsequent rounds of audio recorded interviews (Merriam, 2009). Then I interviewed each case manager. While interviews with case managers and directors served as guides for my lines of questioning during participant

interviews, they also served as evidence checks along with case files to triangulate the true nature of participants' stories. Using multiple sources of data as triangulation pieces when conducting qualitative investigations helps the generalizability, validity, and reliability of these types of studies (Merriam, 2009). A third round of audio-recorded interviews took place to close any topics that needed further explanation based on information from the second round of interviews, and the option of a fourth round of audio recorded interviews was optional upon necessity. The data collection process lasted approximately two months. Data collection was terminated when patterns of information began to repeat and the data appeared to be saturated (Merriam, 2009).

### **Case Files**

The client case files that were used in this study were compilations of school and court documents that were generated over the years to capture and summarize the reasons that pushed these students out of the public education setting. These files were used mainly to generate lines of questioning as I organized my interview protocols. I organized case note logs with respect to insights gained from literature reviewed from a critical race perspective on schooling with respect to the historical treatment of African American males in society. While I expected to find themes that were relative to the accumulated literature on the topic, I also looked for themes that appeared as anomalies (Merriam, 2009). Notes from these files helped formulate some of my interview questions. Included in these files were court records, school records, employment records and other personal information pertaining to the clients. I put extreme care into respecting the sensitivity of all case files by keeping them safe and confidential while they were in my care, and I agreed to return them upon completion of my investigations.

## **Program Director and Case Manager Interviews**

The program director and case manager interviews typically lasted approximately one hour each. It had been my experience in the past that planning meetings that last longer than one-and-one-half hours may cause participants to be less likely to participate; however, if things were going smoothly toward the end of the allotted timeframe, participants were more likely to share the extra time allotted by the approximation. These interviews moved from highly structured to more unstructured formats. My modest experiences in the research field thus far have shown me that carefully starting with specific questions generally creates a more relaxed atmosphere so that questions that require open-ended responses can begin to flow (Merriam, 2009). The program director and case manager interviews partially served as methods of getting descriptions of how the programs worked, what agencies and people were involved, and challenges that needed to be faced so that the expected results of the programs were forthcoming. These interviews also informed the protocols for the student interviews that followed. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) indicated that “[r]esearchers seeking integrity in their relationships with the subjects of their portraits must realize that the work done in preparation for the visit plays an important role in setting the stage for positive rapport (pg. 164).” While the study called for one round of formal program director and case manager interviews, I did check-in with these authorities on a regular basis with informal questions, concerns, and updates throughout the study.

## **Student Interviews**

The first round of interviews served as an icebreaker to become familiar with the participants and gain their trust. Questions surrounding their life experiences were answered here. Participants shared things like who they were, how they were raised, and what their goals

and hobbies included. This round of interviews became less structured as I got to know the subjects and began to gain the emic perspective from which to generate the stories of these African-American males (Merriam, 2009). This initial round of interviews also supported the development of protocol for getting the student participants to relax and share environmental and schooling information with ease (Hatch, 2002). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) asserted, “In individual interviews, the negotiation of boundaries plays a pivotal role in forging and protecting relationships. While most interviews are enlightening, in some, the chemistry that can develop between portraitist and actor is profound” (pg. 168). Each interview lasted approximately one and one-half hours. Interview rounds were conducted on a biweekly basis, leaving the week between interviews as time to process the interviews from the previous week and prepare for the next round. Each interview round informed the next. When this happened, participants began to share information that did not relate to questions in my interview guide, and I began to see other themes and patterns emerge (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009). I made careful arrangements with the program directors to interview participants in private meeting rooms at their program facilities or in their homes where necessary to insure privacy and make transportation, and participation as effortless as possible.

The second round of interviews focused on the participant’s issues with discipline at home, school, and in society. Questions were asked pertaining to causation of disciplinary actions, their unique experiences leading to these actions, outcomes, and possible outcomes relative to these actions. There were also questions relative to how they had grown from these experiences and how these experiences continued to affect their lives.



The third round of interviews served as a follow up to answer any questions that arose based on the first and second rounds. This final round of interviews was a fluid conversation where information was shared and processed with ease because by this time, the participants and I had formed a trusting relationship.

Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview that this study was about improving public schools. However, as the interviews progressed I began to see that their lives outside of school were intricately connected to their lives in school, and that each impacted the other. I could not ask about questions of discipline without hearing about the context of their lives. This will be discussed further in Chapters Four and Five.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to create the four portraits that informed the aesthetic whole, data collected from case-files, note logs, and observations were coded into emerging themes as they were collected to keep the study organized (Fetterman, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I sent the interview recordings to a transcribing agency at the end of each round of interviews and began coding the data in search of answers to my research questions as soon as the transcribed data was returned.

As themes began to emerge, the inductive analysis methods suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) and Hatch (2002) were used to process the data. These inductive analysis steps were as follows:

1. Read the data and identified frames of analysis.
2. Created domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis.

3. Identified salient domains, assigned codes, and put others aside.
4. Reread data to refine salient domains; took note of where relationships were found.
5. Decided if domains were supported by the data and searched data for examples that did not fit with or run counter to the relationships in the domains.
6. Completed an analysis within domains.
7. Searched for themes across domains.
8. Created a master outline that expressed relationships within and among domains.
9. Selected data excerpts to support the outline elements. (Merriam, 2009).

I continuously read interview transcriptions, repeatedly listened to approximately 20 hours of interview recordings, and diligently analyzed case-files and interview notes until 16 themes finally revealed themselves from upwards of 40 possible domains that showed some initial promise.

### **Internal Validity**

This research project was an attempt to hear the voices of African-American male students who have been marginalized by the American public education system. Being honest in my data collection and storytelling methods allowed me the opportunity to inform populations interested in correcting this problem on possible solutions to the US public schooling crisis and further research opportunities based on the student voices heard in this study.

Multiple data sources were gathered to develop the content of this study and protect its validity. While each of these cases fell under the vast schooling umbrella, they were unique and varied widely. I enacted several member checks as the study unfolded, so as to be sure that my interpretation of the data was as close to participant's interpretations of the data as possible

(Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Member checks included conversations with family members, program directors, or case managers to keep them aware that the study was going smoothly, and to probe for deeper understanding of data before or after each participant interview.

Triangulation of data occurred based on the multiple data collection methods that were inherent in the study, including interviews, observations, case-file reviews, and the member checks mentioned above. Choosing portraiture as a research design was done in part to allow for a rich and visual description of the participant's experiences with the hope that readers could connect with these stories in ways that made the findings transferrable (Merriam, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The methods used in this study were chosen based on their relevance to portraiture and the qualitative research design using CRT as its frame. When one research site could not produce enough participants that could be available for the duration of the study, it became necessary to include a second research site in the study. It was also necessary to investigate case-files for these participants and talk to their advocates so that their stories could be told more authentically.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

First, the purpose of this study was to investigate how inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of this schooling experience

Secondly, this study considered the influence of these forces on the ability of these students to re-enter the public education system once they had been “pushed out” of that setting and into the penal system after school disciplinary processes. Additionally, this study examined the manner in which the aforementioned population perceived the dynamic intersection of school disciplinary practices with environmental and cultural forces as affecting their ability to achieve, both in the post-disciplinary school setting and beyond. Furthermore, in hearing the voices of these minority males, this qualitative study was an attempt at adding African American male students’ views on the effects of cultural and environmental forces on their schooling experiences and how these experiences have affected their lives, both in and outside of the school environment, to the current literature that exists on the topic.

#### **Research Question**

This study answered the following question:

How do inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how do environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of their schooling experience?

## Participant Profiles

Participants in this study included four inner-city African-American male students who were chosen because they were expelled from inner-city public high schools based on experiences that were in some way related to disciplinary actions. These participants were Brian, Patrick, Raymond, and Myran. All participants were seniors who were at least eighteen years old and working toward achieving high school diplomas throughout the eight-week data collection process of this study. A preview of each of the participants is now provided, separated into the three phases of life that were addressed: Early history, school discipline overview, and current situation.

### **Brian**

**Early history.** Brian was born in St. Louis, Missouri where he lived until he was 11 years old just before he entered sixth grade. Brian then moved to Southeast Los Angeles with his grandmother, paternal aunt, and small cousin because his grandmother could no longer bear their lives in St. Louis. When Brian left for Los Angeles, his father was incarcerated in St. Louis. Also at that time, Brian had very little contact with his mother who was battling alcohol addiction (Brian, Interview 1).

**School discipline overview.** Brian remembered slamming a classmate's head into a marble table for taking his crayons in second grade. He shared that this kind of behavior continued through elementary school in St. Louis and subsided briefly during his sixth-grade year, which was his first year in Los Angeles (Brian, Interview 1). Brian recalled having a really bad attitude in middle school. He believed that his attitude caused altercations with peers, staff, teachers, and school administrators. Using the wrong language or bumping into Brian would

incite him to violence (Brian, Interview 2). Although Brian believed that his attitude was much calmer during high school, altercations with other students and gang-members ultimately led to his expulsion from the public-school system (Brian, Interview 3).

Most recent situation. At the time of this study, Brian was 19 years old and living with his grandmother in Southeast Los Angeles. Although they shared a small one-bedroom apartment, they made room for visitation from his two-year-old son when necessary. Brian was collecting his final high school credits from a local Los Angeles alternative high school and planning to enroll in a local community college, where he had already begun to practice with the football team, upon completion of his high school requirements (Brian, Interview 1). Aside from playing football, Brian planned to study business and journalism at a community college. Brian believed that his mother now wanted a relationship with him for selfish reasons that included her recent battle with cancer, the accidental death of his younger sister who was in his mother's care at the time of her death, and his own recent academic and athletic successes (Brian, Interview 1).

### **Patrick**

Early history. Patrick was born and raised in the inner city of Los Angeles. He lived in several different housing projects, apartments, and small houses throughout the city during his development. Patrick has 12 siblings. He has six sisters and one brother from the union of his parents, who never married. Then he has two more brothers and three more sisters from the union of his dad and another woman, who also never married. Patrick's mother worked as a nurse and hairstylist during his early years. His dad never held a steady job. He did some construction work, but mostly stayed in the streets during Raymond's early childhood (Patrick, Interview 1).

Patrick remembered a house filled with un-rest, as his parents seemed to never stop arguing. The family was separated by misfortune during Patrick's middle-school years when his dad was incarcerated and his mom became addicted to drugs. He and some of his siblings moved in with his paternal aunt. Some siblings moved in with the other mother, some with their maternal grandmother, and the oldest ones became independent. During this period of flux, Patrick's oldest brother, who is eleven years older than Patrick, became an important father figure and role model for him (Patrick, Interview 1).

School discipline overview. Patrick said that his first suspension happened in eighth grade when he defended himself against a bully after being picked on for several years in elementary and middle schools. Patrick spent his final middle-school days in jail because of his continued gang involvement. Disciplinary actions forced Patrick to attend five different schools during his high-school career before a final expulsion led him back into the prison system where he spent the majority of his eleventh-grade year (Patrick, Interview 1).

**Most recent situation.** Patrick was eighteen years old and living with his mother and younger sister in the inner city of Los Angeles at the time of this study. He worked with one of the mayor's gang reduction and youth development programs at this time. Patrick planned to attend a four-year college, play football, major in Criminal Justice, and become a probation officer after high school. He wanted to help fix the corrupt juvenile system and support youth with backgrounds similar to his own (Patrick, Interview 1).

## **Raymond**

**Early history.** Raymond was born in Los Angeles. He currently lives with his mom and his sister, who is a little more than one year younger than him. Raymond also has a half brother

from his mom who is a little more than one year older than him. Raymond was forced to transfer amongst schools often in his early years because his brother got expelled from school often and his mother saw a convenience in keeping all of her children in one school. Also according to Raymond, he had never lived in any place for more than one year. Raymond's dad lived with the family during Raymond's early years. His dad was eventually incarcerated. Although his father stayed with the family briefly after he was released, Raymond believed his dad left the family and moved to Mississippi when things became too dysfunctional in their home (Raymond, Interview 1).

**School discipline overview.** During elementary school, Raymond did not get into trouble in school or form any significant bonds with his peers because of the limited time that he spent attending different schools. Raymond started getting into fights in middle school, and he blamed racism for these fights. The fights were mostly with Mexican boys who, Raymond believed, did not like Black boys. Raymond's association with gang-related Black boys from his neighborhood, even though he himself was not a gang-member at that time, led to fights with gang-related Mexican boys at school. These fights often broke out between different gang-sets at his middle school and typically led to school suspension. When Raymond was not suspended for fighting, he chose not to attend school because he lacked interest and did not see the point of school. His mother tried to stress the importance of school, but instead, Raymond said that he developed the idea that money, girls, and drugs were the only things worth having (Raymond, Interview 1).

Other than enrolling in his local high school, Raymond doesn't remember much about school aside from his visits to the principal's office. The principal was the only adult with whom



Raymond developed some form of a rapport because gang activity led him to the office on the rare occasions that he attended high school. He was eventually incarcerated and attended the prison school for almost two years (Raymond, Interview 1).

**Most recent situation.** Raymond was nineteen years old during this study. His freedom hinged on his ability to produce clean urine during his probation office visits and to attend school regularly at that time. Raymond was on track to graduate from an alternative public high school in June of that year. He mainly wanted to become a better person because he wanted to begin setting better examples for his younger sister. After graduation, Raymond wanted to go to college and become an actor (Raymond, Interview 1).

## **Myran**

**Early history.** Myran was born in South Central Los Angeles near Compton. While he has twelve siblings, his mother only has three children. He and his older sister shared the same father, and his younger brother has a different father. Myran's father had children with four different women and married one of them. Myran could not claim that he knew his father because his father died when Myran was very young (Myran, Interview 1).

**School discipline experiences.** Myran said that he was in third grade when he first got expelled from school. It was then that he began bouncing from school-to-school getting in trouble and getting expelled often. Even though he was getting expelled from these schools, he remained in the same school district. Standing at six feet and four inches tall today, Myran was always one of the tallest kids in his classes. He said that average sized kids teased him for being tall and special. Myran also shared that he was the main topic of jokes, and that other students often called him big and dumb. It was these types of taunts that pushed Myran to anger where he

would often go into what he called “violent attack mode”. Students would go as far as hitting him because they knew in many cases that there was a chance that Myran would not retaliate because he would usually get caught and punished for hitting smaller kids. Myran believed this unbalanced discipline angered him and made him react with more vengeance toward both students and staff, which often led to expulsion. He said that his school disciplinary record made him look like a menace. Myran believed that school staff thought that he was usually at fault in most conflicts, and his mother eventually became frustrated at constantly having to deal with the aftermath: A big part of this aftermath included missing work to enroll him in new schools, advocating for him at hearings, and supporting him during his stints in and out of jail for misconduct (Myran, Interview 1).

**Most recent situation.** Myran was nineteen years old and living with his mother and his little brother at the time of this study. He credited them for being his reasons for wanting to do better. While in prison, he obtained a supportive counselor. She guided Myran to an alternative high school after he served time in jail. Myran was planning to graduate at the end of the school year that this study took place. His post-graduation goals included going to college, legally buying and selling guns, and working in all aspects of the film industry (Myran, Interview, 1).

### **Context of Schooling**

In order to see how the participants in this study perceived environmental and cultural forces as impacting their schooling experience, it was necessary to get a sense of the context in which they lived, and how this impacted their definition of right and wrong choices regarding schooling and discipline from their homes, communities, and school environments. The

following information details the contextual aspects of the participants' lives that impacted their perceptions of schooling where discipline, achievement, and social development were concerned.

**Poverty and its consequences.** All participants in this study expressed how being impoverished affected their ideas about school or their habits relative to attending school in general.

When describing a robbery that took place during school hours in which he was involved, Patrick said, "It's a bunch of inner-city kids. Most people don't have what they need. They did it for football equipment like visors and gloves and stuff" (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 5). According to Patrick, it was a normal practice to engage in crime during school because all of the students were in need of possessions that they thought they needed but could not afford to purchase (Patrick, Interview 1).

Raymond also spoke of how poverty drove him and his friends to participate in neighborhood break-ins after school. He said, "We didn't have a lot. We could wait for the mother, we could try to get a job, or we could try to get the money the fast way. So we chose to get it the fast way" (Raymond, Interview 1, p 15). Getting money the "fast way" for Raymond involved skipping class, and meeting up at school or a friend's house to plot future break-ins (Raymond, Interview 1).

Myran had a similar response when he described how poverty affected his schooling. He said, "I ditched school a lot because I was mad at always being accused of doing something wrong. I would just hang out smoking, drinking, and the whole nine, because that's what you do when that's all that you see" (Myran, Interview 1, p. 17). For Myran, "the whole nine" included the gang involvement that eventually led him to prison (Myran, Interview 1). Each participant

spoke powerfully about how his experience of deprivation impacted his ability or his desire to faithfully attend school. However, there were other reasons that attendance at school was challenging, but getting there and staying there topped the list.

**Negotiating travel to and from school.** All four participants in this study experienced difficulty traveling to and from school. Brian described walking to school with four of his peers during sophomore year of high school and being accosted by gang members. He said, “We were walking to school and they just banged on us for no reason, ten of them. Then one of them walked up on my friend and they started fighting. They tried to jump him so we all started fighting” (Brian, Interview 3, p. 2). According to Brian, this happened often in his neighborhood (Brian, Interview 3).

Patrick discussed similar issues with traveling to school in the inner-city. He said, “When you’re on your way to school, you have to carry something that you can hide because of the school security guards. You have to carry some kind of weapon because if you don’t, most likely, you will get shot, stabbed or brutally beaten” (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 35). Patrick was certain that always being ready to protect one’s self at school was just a part of life when one lived in neighborhoods like his (Patrick, Interview 1).

Raymond put financial problems at the root of his issues with traveling to school. He said, “Sometimes there’s not enough money for both me and my sister to ride the bus to school. I usually let her go if we can’t both go because she is better at school than me, and I want her to stay on that path” (Raymond, Interview 1, p. 61). When asked to describe a typical bus ride to school, Raymond said the following:

Today for example, I'm on the bus and a Black woman got on, and sat next to an Asian woman. The Asian woman got up and accidentally hit the Black woman with her bag and the Black woman started an argument. A Latino man jumped in and said to the Black woman, "bitch shut the fuck up". So I told him not to call the Black woman names and he pulled out a box cutter and said, "Mind your business nigga", and then we started arguing. (Raymond, Interview 3, p. 8)

Raymond shared that incidents like the one mentioned above often left him angry and unfocused upon reaching school (Raymond, Interview 3).

Myran also talked about the difficulties of getting to school. He said, "If there are a few of us walking or riding in a car with a certain look, the police will stop us, ask us where we're going, search us illegally, and talk to us any type of way" (Myran, Interview 2, p. 8). Myran spoke at length about being a part of the random stop-and-searches that police frequently conducted in his neighborhood. He said that in his experience, all of the police officers in his neighborhood are disrespectful to Black boys, no matter what their race may be (Myran, Interview 2). Self-protection against gangs was one of the most frequently mentioned subjects concerning travel to and from school for participants. Sometimes it was so pervasive that participants talked about feeling pressures to join the gangs in order to negotiate life in their neighborhoods.

### **Impact on Schooling Experience: Joining the Gangs**

All four participants had some interaction with gangs. Three of the four participants actually joined gangs, and all of them were affected by gang violence on many levels that impacted their schooling experiences. I asked Brian whether he was solicited to join a gang in

the neighborhood or at school. He said, “There’s always going to be that one person that’s going to make somebody join a gang... but it’s not for everybody. I’ve seen too many of my friends and teammates die from gangbanging or some gang related incident to join” (Brian, Interview 1, p. 33). Brian said that some of his schoolmates were killed just for associating with gang members, and some of them developed a kill or be killed mentality (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick shared the following when asked to describe his gang affiliation, “After I graduated from eighth grade, I got tired of losing fights and getting picked-on in school so I joined a gang because I was scared” (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 25). One of Patrick’s homies from the gang in his neighborhood saw him lose that last middle school fight and suggested that he join the gang. Patrick said, “My friend said I needed to learn to fight because he wasn’t always going to be around to protect me. Once I was accepted as a gang member, they taught me how to fight instead of just getting punked [bullied and beaten]” (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 34). Patrick only shared a glimpse of the setting and violence of his gang initiation, but being “jumped-in” (initiated) was a major part of it.

Similarly, joining the gang came natural for Raymond. He said, “My brother was a gang member, and he took me around his friends who were gang-members in the neighborhood a lot” (Raymond, Interview 1, p. 40). He also shared that “[p]eople at school always wanted to fight him because of the gang members with whom he associated from his neighborhood” (Raymond, Interview 1, p 16). Raymond said that there were always fights in the middle of the quad between different gangs at both his middle and high schools, but he and other gang members generally ran away before school staff could catch them and issue any consequences. He also

recalled the ease with which he and other gang members accessed school campuses undetected by school personnel to hang out and handle gang business (Raymond, Interview 1).

Myran also recalled not being able to deal with conflicts at school as the reason that ultimately led him to becoming a gang member. He said:

My cousins all gangbang so it's not like I haven't been around that. I just didn't want to be a part of that lifestyle. But, I was tired of being bullied at school, and I felt like if nobody is going to help me, then I'm going to help myself. I knew gangs would have avenues to help me with what I wanted to accomplish (Myran, Interview 1, p. 18).

According to Myran, some of the things that he wanted to accomplish included having better clothes and other materials for school and having protection from bullies at school. But navigating the gang experience and attending school simultaneously was a challenging endeavor (Myran, Interview 1).

### **Impact on Schooling Experience: Dealing with Gangs**

All of the participants in this study were faced with hard decisions about how to deal with gang-members in their neighborhoods and their schools. Brian never chose to join a gang, but shared a school related experience that reinforced his decision not to do so when he said, "My pretend god-brother and I were close from ninth until tenth grade. He was shot five times by gangbangers at a house party. Earlier that day at school, I told him that I was not going to the party when he asked" (Brian, Interview1, p. 33). Brian recalled being really emotional at the funeral because he had just been with his god-brother talking and working out at school a few days earlier (Brian, Interview 1).

Conversely, Patrick argued to keep his gang membership against the request that he leave the gang by other gang members. Patrick, who was a student-athlete, remembered being upset when he was originally asked to leave the gang to focus on athletics (Patrick, Interview 1). He said, “Everybody in the projects knew I was an athlete growing up. So one member was like ‘I’m about to tell them to put you off because this is not for you’” (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 36). Patrick argued that the gang helped and protected him, which convinced the gang that he should remain a member. Not only did Patrick stay in the gang, he used the skills learned from the gang in *The Brotherhood Crusade*, a school leadership club that promotes excellence, to recruit more gang members (Patrick, Interview 1).

Raymond said that he often hung out with other gang members instead of going to school. He described a typical day when he said:

If we weren’t robbing somebody or stealing because we already had enough money, we would just chill, and rap. We did whatever we could not to be in school, but I swear to God, in my head, I was guilty as heck. I was like why am I sitting here and not in school. My mind is saying get up and go, but my body is telling me to sit here. (Raymond, Interview 1, p. 28)

Raymond said that no one from the school reached out to convince him to return to school or to give him consequences for his absences (Raymond, Interview 1).

Gang influence had a particularly pernicious effect on Myran after his initiation. He said that he became the thing from which he sought protection, a school bully. When asked to elaborate, Myran said:



We would wait by the bathrooms and bang on students that didn't know any better for their money and anything else they had that we wanted. They knew better than to tell somebody. From there, I started breaking in houses, selling dope, and buying guns.

(Myran, Interview 1, p. 4)

However, Myran spoke of eventually feeling guilty about the way that he bullied students at school. He said that he never wants to be that person again, but leaving the gang was a difficult experience (Myran, Interview 1).

### **Impact on Schooling Experiences: Leaving the Gang**

All four participants in this study spoke of reasons and consequences for leaving gangs that affected their schooling outcomes on some level whether they were directly or indirectly associated with the gangs. Even though Brian did not join a gang, he came to the following realization after his god-brother's death and seeing thirty-one of his peers die over the course of his high school career:

I don't think I'm special until after I reach the age of twenty-one. Most black boys in this type of neighborhood are dying before they finish high school or reach the ages of eighteen to twenty-one. I just want to go further in life and see where God's going to take me. (Brian, Interview 1, p. 34)

Brian said that staying in school and out of trouble could lead him in the right direction and that trying to focus on schoolwork and playing sports were the main ways to stay out of trouble (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick had a change of heart a few years after begging to keep his gang membership, and he shared the following realization as his motivation to finally leave his gang:

When I went to jail during eleventh grade, I thought about how my dad said he never wanted me to see the inside of a jail. My mom was crying. My grandma and grandpa passed away while I was there. I witnessed my best friend get killed. My cousin, his baby and his baby momma got killed for gangbanging. That's when I decided that gangbanging was not for me. (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 36)

This story made Patrick very emotional, especially where he vividly recaptured the part where his cousin's whole family was brutally murdered in the street. He said, "I'm playing football and going to college. I want to do something to better myself. That way I can show some people from my project that there is a way out" (Patrick, Interview 1, p. 37).

Raymond said, "Getting shot at, going to jail, my mom, and my little sister made me want to change into a better person" (Raymond, Interview 1, p. 42). He elaborated when asked by saying the following:

A few months after I got out of jail, I was in the train station on my way home from school and I got banged on because a dude from another hood recognized me. I saw him reaching in his backpack and I started running, then I heard those shots. When I got home, I started thinking about everything my mom said about how I should associate with better people and all those letters she wrote when I was in jail, and that was it.

(Raymond, Interview 1, p. 43)

Raymond said that he mainly socialized with girls and students from his new school that also wanted to graduate and make something of themselves after the incident on the train (Raymond, Interview 1).

Myran described his decision to leave the gang when his counselor from jail helped him get a job shortly after his release. He reported:

My after-care counselor came to see me while I was in jail. She introduced me to another counselor at the continuation school, they gave me a job, and I've been on the straight and narrow ever since. I fought it at first and refused to come to the program, but she finally made me see that they could use my help and I could use theirs. (Myran, Interview 1, p. 79)

Myran believed that feeling needed by the staff at the continuation school helped him change into a better person and motivated him to explore options for his life beyond high school. The sense of belonging and feeling needed was one of the main reasons that sports provided a positive coping mechanism for some of the participants (Myran, Interview 1).

### **Sports and the Schooling Experience: A Coping Mechanism**

“Sports carried me away from being in a gang, or being associated with drugs. Sports was my way out.”

Le Bron James (cited in King, 2010)

Three of the four participants in this study expressed the importance of being involved in sports at school as a way of coping with their daily struggles in poor homes and communities. Brian learned that his father was incarcerated during his senior year in high school, and he turned to sports as a stress reliever. This happened after Brian's dad had been released from jail at the end of Brian's eleventh grade year (Brian, Interview 1). He gave the following account of how sports helped him deal with the news of his father's imprisonment:

My dad got locked up when I was in eleventh grade at the beginning of football season and at the end of eleventh grade he got out. Going into my senior year he came out here. I

was excited, couldn't sleep, and stayed up the whole night just knowing my dad was here. Then, two months into my football season my aunt and my grandma came up to the school and said "I need to talk to you". (Brian, Interview 1)

When asked to elaborate, Brian became very emotional as he described the following details of his family's visit to the school that day:

It was my football coach, my grandma, my auntie, and me. My grandma couldn't say anything so my auntie was like "your dad's gone". I was like what do you mean. And she kept saying he's gone. She said he's locked up for life and I snapped. Tears started falling. I started punching on stuff. I felt hurt, and I couldn't do anything about it. (Brian, Interview 1)

Brian's aunt and grandmother suggested that Brian go home, but Brian said, "I'm going to just stay, go to practice, and take out my anger on the football field" (Brian, Interview 1). When asked if that worked, Brian said that playing football and basketball always helped him during stressful times at school and in general (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick also spoke of taking his frustration out on the field when he said:

Being transferred from school to school really made me feel like I didn't belong anywhere, especially at those rich Valley schools. I'm wearing urban clothes like South Pole that students out there didn't even know about and they're wearing True Religion like it's nothing. The only time anybody ever really said anything positive to me was on the football field, basketball court, or the track, and even there I got called names. I barely got compliments from the coach. It was hard, but I stuck it out because I didn't want to go back to jail. (Patrick, Interview 2)

Patrick said that he would rather deal with the anger from racist comments, isolation and other forms of unfair treatment at these Valley schools as opposed to going back to jail where he had no freedom (Patrick, Interview 2).

Myran expressed feelings of being “left out” when there were no sports or activities at his alternative school. He said that after sharing these feelings with the staff, he was allowed to return to a regular public high school where he was allowed to play basketball and take advantage of more social activities related to being a student. Unfortunately, the stimulus became too much for Myran and he fell into old habits of truancy and misconduct that caused him to ultimately get expelled (Myran, Interview 2). He said the following when asked to describe the transition:

When I first got to the continuation school, there were no fun activities. All we did was come in for meetings with teachers and counselors, get packets to complete for credits, complete the packets, submit the packets, or take them home as homework. This was boring and I needed some physical outlet. When the staff saw that this was important to me, they let me go, but I still came here for counseling. (Myran, Interview 2)

After Myran was expelled from his regular public school again for carrying a weapon, the continuation school welcomed him once again. When Myran returned to continuation school, changes were made to include opportunities for exercise, field trips, and other more interesting activities (Myran, Interview 2).

### **Sports and the Schooling Experience: A “Way Out”**

Three of the four participants in this study described their involvement in school sports as playing a major role in their ability to overcome obstacles associated with poverty, gang

membership and the discipline problems resulting from unexpressed anger. Brian said, “Honestly, if it wasn’t for football, I would have checked into continuation school a long time ago because earning credits is a lot easier” (Brian, Interview 1). Since Brian could not play sports at his continuation school, he stayed in public school for as long as he could. Brian described being hurt that his mom and dad never got to see him play sports at school when he said the following:

I’d just look up in the stands, like, I wish my mom and dad could be here. Being angry and sad pushes me to go harder and harder and harder. I’m like; I’m not doing it just for me. I’m “doing it” for me, my grandma, my son, and my auntie. (Brian, Interview 1)

For Brian, “doing it”: meant staying focused as a student-athlete on the field and in the classroom. Brian shared that keeping his grades good enough to play football in high school would eventually allow him to be scouted by a college football team (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick expressed mixed emotion when asked to describe the ways that sports affected his schooling. He said, “As you can see from my transcript, they kept switching me from school-to-school at the end of each season, and I was like why y’all keep doing that” (Patrick, Interview 1)? His transcripts showed him attending three different schools outside of Los Angeles in the neighboring valleys. He said, “They didn’t ask about my academics. Even though my grades started to fall [to], like, Ds and they still let me play football” (Patrick, Interview 1). Patrick believed that he was allowed to play football because:

[t]hese Valley schools are all about their sports. I never got to enjoy *freshman ball*, they threw me in varsity as soon as I got there. It was mostly Asians, a few Whites, a few Mexicans, but I was the only Black person on the football team. (Patrick, Interview 1).

When asked if he thought his reputation as a good athlete preceded him in the coaches' varsity placement decisions, Patrick said, "I think they just assumed I was a good athlete because I was Black. They saw an athlete instead of a student-athlete. 'You're an athlete'" (Patrick, Interview 1). He believed that the coaches had attitudes of "once the season's done we're kicking you out" (Patrick, Interview 1). Patrick explained that school personnel in the Valley did not seem to care about his wellbeing as a student. He believes that his grades fell because they overworked him during practice and gave him no academic support, even when registering for classes that may have benefitted him as a student (Patrick, Interview 1).

Myran also believed that his involvement in sports was key to his success in high school, but the injury he sustained because of gang violence after leaving one of his school basketball games early one day shattered his goal of becoming a college basketball player. However, for the most part, school sports were not enough to keep the participants from getting involved with authorities and entangled in the justice system (Myran, Interview 2).

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

All participants in this study discussed their experiences with some form of incarceration or possible incarceration because of violence tied to their school experiences in some way. Brian said that he avoided the pipeline twice: once when he said, "[m]y battery charges for accidentally hitting a teacher with a tennis ball during an altercation with another student were dropped in court" (Brian, Interview 1, p. 26); and another time when, "[t]he charges for knocking another student's tooth out at school did not stick" (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick was incarcerated for what he considered a minor incident. He said that he went to jail following a petty theft incident with a phone in the locker-room. However, because Patrick

did not attend school properly while he was in jail, he received all fails on his report card (Patrick, Interview 1). Patrick shared that the seven-month period that he spent in jail for this “petty theft” was the reason that he did not finish English 11 when he was scheduled to make-up the course. Even though the class was offered at the jail school, and he could have completed it there, Patrick reported that he was too busy trying to protect himself to focus on school while he was in jail (Patrick, Interview 1).

Raymond recounted one of his experiences with prison when he said, “I was the follower type. Instead of going to school, because there wasn’t really anything there for me, I would find “the big homie” [an older gangster] and we would rob somebody, but eventually we got caught” (Raymond, Interview 1). While Raymond was being interrogated, the police pegged him as an accomplice to another robbery that had taken place. He said, “Instead of naming anyone else that may have been involved, I just told them to take me to juvenile hall” (Raymond, Interview 1). According to Raymond, this was his way to avoid naming others in the crime and protecting himself from gang consequences in his neighborhood (Raymond, Interview 1).

Myran was also incarcerated and described two incidents that put him in the prison pipeline. The first one was an extension of a situation where his gun jammed during a robbery when he was ditching school as a 14-year old and the second one happened when he was expelled from school for carrying a gun as protection against gang members (Myran, Interview 1). He described the first incident as follows:

In the first semester of high school in the ninth grade, I tried to rob somebody. He refused to give up the goods, so I tried to shoot him and my gun jammed. We fought for the gun, he ended up with it, and I ran because I heard those sirens. (Myran, Interview 1)



This incident led to Myran's arrest, and he said the following about his trial for attempted murder:

I gave away my rights as a minor to avoid getting a felony. I was probably going to the state penitentiary. After I signed the paper that waived my rights as a minor, they began sending me to court with the grown men. Instead of going to the state pen, I was sentenced to the county jail. (Myran, Interview 1)

Myran further explained that he was waiting to get on the bus with the adult convicts that were headed to the county jail when he luckily got directed to the less offensive juvenile hall bus in error (Myran, Interview 1).

Using the background and context above, the answers to the research questions asked in this study revealed themselves in a manner that shed light on schooling in relation to environmental connections for inner-city African-American male students in public schools. The following themes were exposed in the data collected during this study about how students perceived discipline in their regular public schools, how they regained access to public schools after being expelled, and how discipline practices were put in place to support their abilities to finish high school.

### **Perceptions of Lack of Care and Class Size Leading to School Discipline**

All participants perceived a lack of real care from the school system as a major part of why they were suspended or expelled from inner-city public high schools. When asked if he believed that the public high school was generally supportive when things became difficult, Brian said, "I didn't really tell anybody about my problems because honestly they don't care what we go through" (Brian, Interview 1). When asked if there was anything that made him

believe that the staff at his public school didn't really care about students, Brian said, "My twelfth grade counselor made my schedule and told me that I was not going to graduate without any discussion about the credits I needed, senior responsibilities, or future plans" (Brian, Interview 1). Brian also shared that one of the main issues around the discipline process is that there are too many students in his classes (Brian, Interview 1). When asked to elaborate, he said:

It was around sixty kids in my English class and the majority of them were having problems. When we try to ask for help, the teacher just tells us to get your textbook, go to a page and work it out. It's like they don't know what to do. Some days I don't even get to talk to the teacher: I get an assignment, work on it for 55 minutes, turn it in, and get it back with a grade. (Brian, Interview 1 & 3)

Brian shared that even though his work was graded, his teachers neglected to explain the grades in most cases (Brian, Interviews 1 & 3).

Patrick said that he felt as if his inner-city high school disciplined athletes less harshly than it disciplined other students. He said that from his perspective, in past situations when football players got in trouble or any athletes got in trouble, they suffered little to no consequences, but he experienced many consequences, some minor and some major (Patrick, Interview 2).

Raymond based his perception of school discipline in part on the fact that his high school experience was mainly limited to the principal's office because of fights with rival gang members on campus (Raymond, Interview 3). He had this to say:

School was super dangerous. It was just an open field. Anybody could go into the school, high school and middle school and do anything. There wasn't really much security so we

fought, smoked, gambled, and did all types of things on campus. If staff or security did come, we would just run away. (Raymond, Interview 3)

Raymond said that if schools took proper care, schools would have better security, and do a better job at making students feel comfortable to attend school and go to class (Raymond, Interview 3).

Myran believed that his perceptions of school discipline came from the many ways that he had tested the system over the years (Myran, Interview 3). He elaborated with the following statements:

First, teachers have to know their students because everybody is different. You need to have a relationship with your students like a parent figure or role model. If I don't respect you as much as I respect my momma, then you get nothing from me.

(Myran, Interview 3)

Myran did not believe that his teachers knew him or cared about him. Nor did he believe that they were willing to engage in a relationship with him, and so his commitment to school waned (Myran, Interview, 3).

When asked what he would change to make schools better, Myran said:

It's going to be obsolete to keep trying the same stuff and expect different results. Instead of building all these prisons, we need to build more schools so class sizes can get smaller. That will create more time for teachers to work with their students and give them the correct attention that they need because some people need help all the time. (Myran, Interview 2)

Clearly, Myran felt that he did not get the attention he needed, and he blamed that in part, on the large and chaotic classrooms, where teachers had difficulty managing so many students. Myran believed that students did not ask for help in the current overcrowded school design because they didn't want to feel dumb or get scrutinized for not being as smart as everyone else, so they chose to misbehave instead (Myran, Interview 2).

### **Perceptions of Academic Challenges Leading to School Discipline**

All participants in this study experienced disciplinary challenges in the regular public-school system in one form or another that stifled their academic achievement and caused them to get expelled. Brian said the following when asked about some of his academic and discipline support challenges: “Every time I have an IEP meeting, everybody keeps telling me that the lead poisoning affects the way I learn, but that’s not true. I know more than some of my classmates, but they keep trying to put me in special classes and get me extra help when I don’t really need it” (Brian, Interview 2). Brian referred to his family and school personnel, when he used the term “everybody” in the last statement (Brian, Interview 2). He continued with the following:

It’s frustrating when everybody is telling me what I have to do and the way that I have to do it, so sometimes I stop talking at the meetings, or leave, or just not go at all. They’d say I need extra help with reading, counseling, and all that. When I say I don’t, they recommend it anyway. (Brian, Interview 2)

Brian believed that even though he brought home some good grades, they unfairly accused him of needing counseling and support every time he showed a lack of progress in some areas. This lack of progress, and lack of support for Brian’s capacity as a student, he believed, caused him to neglect his schoolwork, and become involved in unhealthy activities (Brian, Interview 2).

Patrick described the major drop in academic performance on his freshman transcript from fall to spring semesters by saying, “They throw me in classes, like, okay let’s get you enrolled. This is the class you’re going to take and this is the road you’re going to take. Never once did they really sit down [and say] this is the class we need you to get as a student” (Patrick, Interview 1). He also went on to say:

During football season, I was taking so much wear and tear on my body that it was really hard for me to recover and focus on classes and homework. It was hard for me to sleep at night because I was so sore after the games. I didn’t really have free time like everybody else did and nobody really cared. (Patrick, Interview 1)

Patrick said that when he tried to finish assignments on the long bus rides to and from school, there were always distractions from students just being students on the bus (Patrick, Interview 1). Thus, Patrick’s commitment to sports, while laudatory, caused his grades to suffer, which in turn resulted in his inability to play the game, and a reduced commitment from teachers and administrators to allow him to continue as a student. His expulsion followed (Patrick, Interview 1).

Raymond said that he became such a follower in high school that he never wanted to go to school, so when he got there all he did was fight and hang out behind the buildings instead of going to class because that’s what his friends were doing (Raymond, Interview 1). He said, “I fought Blacks because they were from a different hood. I fought Mexicans because they didn’t look like me and they didn’t like me. So I stayed in the principal’s office” (Raymond, Interview 1). Raymond’s expulsion ultimately landed him in jail, where he attempted most of his high school (Raymond, Interview 1). There he reported that “[p]rison staff forced me to attend classes

to learn from the teachers instead of doing whatever I wanted to do” (Raymond, Interview 1).

Raymond spoke of how the teachers in his prison school tried to tell him why it was important to attend school, but he didn’t really see it at first. Ultimately, prison school did for Raymond what public school could not: motivate him to complete his studies (Raymond, Interview 1).

Myran had the following to say about academic challenges that he faced because of discipline issues in the public-school setting:

I felt like I needed help all the time and it wasn’t really available the way I needed it. The school was set up in a way that if you had problems, then you would keep having those problems. It was too many people and always something going on. There was never really a quiet time. It didn’t really feel like support most of the time. (Myran, Interview 2)

Myran felt that even though he was in special classes, the teachers and assistants could not help him learn because they were too busy dealing with students that were causing problems. This lack of support for Myran’s academic challenges, discouraged him from engaging in school, and ultimately led to his expulsion (Myran, Interview 2).

### **Perceptions of Discipline Procedures that Resulted in Suspension and Expulsion**

All four participants were suspended or expelled from public school for reasons relative to some form of altercation.

Brian remembered being expelled from school after an incident in eighth grade where someone took a tennis ball that protected the classroom floor from the bottom of a damaged desk and threw it at him. He said that he in turn threw the ball back toward the door that led to the hallway where the teacher was re-entering the classroom at the same time and the ball hit the

teacher. This led to a trial where pending assault charges were dropped because the teacher did not attend the hearing (Brian, Interview 1). Brian elaborated when he said:

Two days after the ball hit the teacher, the school policeman came to my class, put me in handcuffs and took me to the police office. When he finished writing the report, he escorted me out of the school, put me in the back of the police car and took me to the police station. I sat in the police station for over two hours before a police officer called my grandmother to pick me up. (Brian, Interview 1; Interview 3)

Brian said that his grandmother filed a complaint because he should have never been put in handcuffs and taken from the school. He also said that this discipline experience impacted his abilities to attend school and to feel safe at school as well (Brian, Interview 1). The fact that police were called to handcuff Brian and take him away from the school site caused him to lose faith in the protection by adults in charge at the school (Brian, Interview 1). Later in high school, Brian was expelled again for fighting with gang members at school. In the altercation, he broke his fingers, and this prevented him from playing sports for the school. Brian believed he was expelled after the injury because he was no longer able to play on the school sports team (Brian, Interview 3). In fact, the first time that he recalled talking to his guidance counselor about his failing academic performance was after the incident where he broke his fingers. Previous to this, no one had ever addressed his academic standings (Brian, Interview 3).

Patrick spoke of a time when he was overwhelmed with work from a Spanish teacher when he transferred back to his public school from the Valley and the following happened:

I knew I had done the work, but my transcript had not arrived yet. I yelled at the teacher. She sent me to the office and I threw a chair on my way out. They talked to me, and told

me that I was going to be suspended for one day. I went back and apologized to the Spanish teacher and she said that she was not mad at me and that I just needed some space. Now I'm suspended. That's just discipline. (Patrick, Interview 2)

Patrick believed that a one-day suspension seemed like a light punishment for his misconduct. Other participants who were expelled or suspended from school because of altercations perceived a significant impact on their schooling because their misconduct required their removal from public-school, and a placement into a jail or prison facility. This disrupted their learning and distracted them from the goal of completing their high school education in a timely manner by normal means (Brian, Interview 1; Raymond, Interview 1, Myran, Interview 1).

### **Perceptions of School Personnel Support**

All participants in this study had someone they could depend on for support when discipline affected their academic achievement. Brian's public-school coach remained as a significant support person in his life throughout high school. He said, "I work with my coach after school as a way to stay out of trouble. Instead of walking home after practice, I help grade papers and organize equipment and stuff until my grandma comes to pick me up" (Brian, Interview 1). Brian remembered that his coach asked him hard questions at very pivotal times, for example, after his dad's lifetime jail sentence. After Brian's father died, his coach asked the following questions: "I know you're going to be going through a lot during the whole season, do you actually want to finish this season out? Do you want to play?" Brian's response was "Yes, because that's what's going to keep me motivated" (Brian, Interview 1). He continued with the following:



That's what's going to keep me focused on reaching my goals because honestly, if I was to sit out that season, anything could've happened. I could have gone out and started gangbanging. I chose to take a good route. I chose to stay in school. I chose to play football. I chose to stay focused. (Brian, Interview 1)

Brian shared that the time spent working with his coach helped him to be more organized and responsible (Brian, Interview 1).

Patrick described his main support sources when he said,

My brother's girlfriend, the probation officer here at school, and my former public-school coach really helped me see that I can be successful without gangs. My brother's girlfriend talks to me a lot about her work as a probation officer. When I talk to my probation officer about how I would like to do the same thing, he encourages me to study criminal justice in college, and my coach, who is also my Brotherhood for the Crusade mentor shows me skills to combat gang involvement. (Patrick, Interview 1)

Raymond said that when he got out of jail the last time, he was angry at how his mom had to be with him everywhere just so that he could stay out of trouble (Raymond, Interview 1). He was nineteen years old and just then able to go to school without her. He said that he was angry at how everybody kept graduating before him, and he felt like they could have helped him more. Then he said "I realized that I have to do it for myself" (Raymond, Interview 1). Raymond expressed how being in continuation school is helping him to get his life together when he said:

The teacher and the counselors are really helping me a lot. They check to make sure I get my packets done so I can get my credits. They send me to work programs that help me to figure out my future, and they bring people like you here. I also see a probation officer

here that reminds me to stay clean because otherwise I could go back to jail. (Raymond, Interview 3)

According to Myran, he had been in special education classes for as long as he could remember being a student. He was prescribed Adderall XR in elementary school to help control his behavior. His IEP goals often included anger management and other counseling. Myran said that his mother would often refer discipline matters to his godfather (Myran, Interview 1). When the elementary school called Myran's godfather, he would often get spanked as a consequence. He said that he eventually learned to tolerate these beatings and they became ineffective. Myran said that he finally landed at an elementary school where the counselors and teacher's assistants gave him the support that he needed to be successful during fourth grade. He was assigned a one-to-one assistant that year, and he graduated during the following school year (Myran, Interview 1).

When Myran was asked about his main support sources, he said,

Hands down, my after-care counselor, Dr. Jackson. She is my mentor now and kind of like my second mom. Just like the female school counselors back in public school, I felt like I could open up to her because she talked to me and gave me the kind of support and attention that I was missing. It was nurturing. It was love. I felt it. I clung to it. She does all the stuff that I want to do like own a business and wear nice clothes. (Myran, Interview 1).

## **Regaining Access to Public Education**

All participants in this study received some form of support with completing their high school education after being expelled from their regular public high schools. When asked to describe this support, Brian shared the following two scenarios:

When I was kicked out of school in the eighth grade for assaulting a teacher, I had a court hearing. The judge gave me fifty hours of community service and told me that I had to find a new school. He didn't want to hear my side of the story or anything. My grandma and I met with the principal who kicked me out, and he shared a list of schools that I could attend so I just picked one. (Brian, Interview 1)

Brian said that he felt mistreated by the principal that kicked him out of school. He believed that the anger from being mistreated at the old school helped him to focus on finishing the year with no problems at the new school (Brian, Interview 1). Focus for Brian meant refraining from talking to staff about his feelings and going to school just to pass his classes. He also said that not really knowing the students at the new school helped him to stay out of trouble and get his work done (Brian, Interview 1). The second scenario that Brian shared described his introduction to continuation school. He said the following:

After my fight where I got injured and couldn't play sports during the first semester of my senior year at my public high school, the counselor called me into her office and told me that I should go to continuation school because I was too far behind in credits to graduate at the end of my senior year. She told me that the earliest I could graduate from my public high school was the following December, but if I went to continuation school, I could finish in June. (Brian, Interview 1, 2, & 3)

Brian said that he would have taken the option to go to continuation school earlier if sports were not an issue. He said that playing high school sports was the best way for him to get into college (Brian, Interview 1).

The other three participants were introduced to an alternative school through the juvenile justice system. The alternative school was a part of a much larger organization that advocated for the success of inner-city youth. While all three participants shared very similar stories of their introductions to alternative school as a term of their probation, Myran elaborated a bit more than the others when he said:

The organization sent a representative to see me before I got out of jail. The representative talked to me about the program and enrolled me in school. Once I got out of jail, I didn't start school right away because I wasn't ready, but the organization set me up with an aftercare counselor who eventually got me on the right track. (Myran, Interview 1)

Myran indicated that it was a good thing that he was introduced to the organization because in addition to its programs giving him the support that he needed, they allowed him to support the programs by putting some of his skills to use in a job capacity (Myran, Interview 1).

### **Conclusion**

All participants in this study talked about the challenges of growing up in poverty, how it affected their academic and social experiences at school, and how they dealt with the many faces of discipline at school based on the social norms developed by their home and community environments. Each time that things became dismal with respect to school, there was always some way to move forward. When discipline procedures in the public-school setting fell short of

being able to support the needs of these African-American male students, the link between schools and the judicial system provided more forceful discipline that ultimately pushed these young men back into public education that encouraged their well-being through alternative school settings. Raymond said, “My mom always told me to put more positive people around me, but I never listened. Even her ex-boyfriend told me that negative people bring negative energy, and negative energy brings about negative things” (Raymond, Interview 1). Myran said that he started hearing the same thing from more and more people when he kept getting in trouble, but ignored the advice that he thought was just talk (Myran, Interview 1). He also said that he later realized that he should have taken the advice as he continued to watch other students graduate. Myran reported that the support of his counselors at the continuation school has helped him to become a more honest person (Myran, Interview 1). Myran continued by saying the following:

When I’m dead and gone, I don’t want people to remember me as a thief that nobody could control. I’m not that type of person now. Even though I got that side still tucked away deep inside, I have compassion. I have a heart. (Myran, Interview 1)

Myran said that he would like to be remembered as someone who was helpful to others (Myran, Interview 1).

Finally, all of the participants in this study showed an ability to be resilient in the face of adversity when given both opportunities and support. Each participant wanted to succeed for reasons other than just for themselves. Even though these participants experienced impoverished conditions in schools and in their communities that led them away from school and toward the criminal justice system, they all accepted opportunities to re-enter alternative school settings in

attempts to better their lives so that others like them could see that success was still possible after expulsion and brushes with the criminal justice system.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

First, the purpose of this study was to investigate the lenses through which African-American male students, who have been marginalized by disciplinary procedures in inner-city secondary public schools, viewed environmental and cultural forces as impacting their schooling. The study found that though disciplinary procedures did influence African-American male students' ability to succeed in school, ultimately the environmental and cultural forces that intersect with this dynamic were just as powerful in determining student outcomes. Secondly, this study aimed to shed light on the impact of these experiences on the ability of these students to re-enter the public education system once they had been "pushed out" through disciplinary procedures. The study found, in this situation, that it was difficult to impossible for African-American male students who had been pushed out to be successful re-entering the traditional public-school experience. However, participants did find success in alternative schools, as detailed in chapter four. Additionally, this study examined the manner in which this population perceived school discipline practices as impacting their ability to achieve beyond the school setting. The study discovered again, that while the "pushout" was impactful for African-American males, more significant, perhaps, was the community around them that supported them once they had been disenfranchised by the school system. Furthermore, in hearing the voices of these minority males, this qualitative study was an attempt at adding African-American male students' views of the effects of school discipline on their lives, both in and out of the school environment to the current literature that exists on this topic.

Surprisingly, as the study unfolded, the focus shifted more toward the environmental and cultural contexts that molded the ideas that these young men developed surrounding schooling, and how these ideas affected their perceptions of their interactions with the public-school system that failed them. This will be discussed further as this chapter unfolds.

### **Research Question**

This study answered the following question:

How do inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how do environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of their schooling experience?

### **Critical Race Theory as Frame**

The idea for this study came from questions about the achievement gap and the under representation of black men in higher academic settings that arose during my doctoral course work. An intense search for answers began and continued to lead me in the direction of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a frame for possible answers. The five basic tenets of ordinariness, interest convergence, social construction, differential racialization, and voice-of-color posited by CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) assured me that I was on the right path. When I came across literature that stated the following:

A close examination of the current state of education for African-American males in PreK-12 schools revealed that these students' under-achievement and disenfranchisement in schools and society seemed to be reaching pandemic and life-threatening proportions. (Howard, 2008 p. 956)



I realized that this was a social justice issue that had to be addressed if this population had any chance of succeeding. The more I read and reflected on my own life and educational experience as a Black male educated in the public education system, the more tenets of CRT became real to me. As an inner-city African-American male student and STEM educator, I believe CRT scholars who assert that the remnants of racism derived from our slave ridden beginnings in this country are so intertwined with the fabric of our public education system that a total reconstruction of the American public education system is in order, if America really wants to include this population in the “American Dream” as defined by its founders. However, 40% of African-American males drop out of high school yearly at this time when the majority of the global economy is requiring post-secondary education to compete in a job market where STEM careers outnumber the rest (Cagle, 2017; Klein, 2018; Myers, 2017). The population that I studied had all been pushed out of the regular public-school setting in one form or another before dealing with the juvenile justice system and taking the alternative public education route to complete high school and earn high school diplomas. Raymond actually dropped out of school by simply not attending school, and he said that no one from his school actively encouraged him to return (Raymond, Interview 1). Myran expressed interest in having a STEM career in both the film and weapons industries, but at the close of this study, interactions with the juvenile justice system still impacted his progress toward a high school diploma (Myran, Interview 1).

### **Using Portraiture**

One of the central tenets of CRT that can have important implications for educational research concerning African-American males and other marginalized populations is the importance of counter-storytelling and counter-narrative theory as a methodological tool

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This led me to use the qualitative research method of portraiture, which is a newer form of qualitative research that allowed me to hear the voices of African-American male students who were being affected by the seeming ordinariness of racism in American society as they grappled with the present conditions of American public schools. The five features of portraiture; context, relationships, voice, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole, gave me the tools to develop a snapshot of the current state of education for African-American male students in inner-city communities (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This snapshot involved attaching meaning to the self-expression of participants by uncovering intricate details of their life experiences relative to schooling issues (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997). I formed relationships with participants based on trust to interact with them enough to recognize patterns of information that unveiled environmental factors as key issues with schooling perceptions for these young men through the lens of school discipline (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In order to form relationships with my participants, I had to first establish rapport and gain the trust of their advocates.

### **Context: Emic and Etic Perspectives**

I knew going into to this study that while my own inner-city and public-school backgrounds were similar to those of my participants, they were also quite different because of the time periods in which we were raised, variations in the inner-city settings, and available resources that provided opportunities for different choices. Taking these into consideration as a researcher allowed me to put more care into maintaining the boundaries of both emic and etic perspectives. It was important for me to build trust with my participants so that they could see that my true intentions were to hear the details that made their lives unique and process their rich

data in ways that could help educators and policymakers consider making changes to public schooling that could benefit others with similar backgrounds as ours.

### **Relationships: Building Trust and Establishing Rapport**

Some of the signs that showed the trust gained between participants and me included the following:

After I carefully asked about his interests, Brian became excited to share his creative writing stories with me during our meetings (Brian, Interview 2). Patrick eventually invited me to attend a ceremony where he expected to give a speech related to his recent achievements after a certain comfort level was reached where he freely shared some of his accomplishments with me (Patrick, Interview 2). Raymond sought my advice on how he should handle situations with his girlfriend (Raymond, Interview 2). Myran invited me to view his latest filmography work (Myran, Interview 2). Jane, the *Aim High* program director, invited me to become a part of the *Aim High* family through data processing and mentorship opportunities, and she invited me to feed the homeless on Thanksgiving with her team. Jane also introduced me to the program coordinators as well as other important members of the conglomerate organization. The most memorable form of trust came from Rubi, Brian's case-manager from the education clinic, when she asked if she could sit in on the first portion of each of my meetings with Brian because he had never opened up to anyone anywhere close to the ways that he did with me. Finally, when I asked each participant if he felt that our discussions had been helpful and what I might do in the future to get appropriate feedback, each said that he enjoyed our sessions and that I should continue on the same path with as many participants as possible.

Portraiture also allowed me to put my innately caring nature to use in connecting with participants on many levels that made data collection seem effortless at times. The honest attempts made at valuing and respecting their time and information by being punctual, prepared, and consistent throughout the data collection process with all parties allowed supporters of my participants to aid my data collection efforts in ways that encouraged participants to freely share information with me and look forward to our meetings that took place in their homes, schools, offices, and other public settings. When the participants began to invite me to their games, presentations, and celebrations that I wished I had had the time to attend, I knew that a good rapport had been established. In addition, program personnel at the continuation school where three of the participants were enrolled expressed the benefit of having the support of universities and other organizations that could provide resources like me who could contribute to the growth of their programs through mentorship, data analysis, and further studies.

### **Voice**

Portraiture's storytelling nature, and the voices of the young men allowed, perhaps even required, this study to become more about the stories of young black men in schools, rather than specifically focused on discipline practices, as my initial purpose suggested. It was naïve of me to assume that one could divorce the discipline practices and their effects on the participants' lives from all that they experienced on a daily basis. Their lives are complex webs of family, society, school, and community, linked to lack of resources, transportation, and support networks. Thus, hearing these young African-American men from a perspective of simply students as targets of discipline in a public-school system only revealed a small portion of their complete stories. Telling the more complex stories of these young men may help shed light on

some of the ways that society can change schools in a manner that will benefit students like them from future marginalization on a large scale.

## **Emergent Themes**

### **Elusiveness of Perspective Participants**

When I began to search for participants that fit the description of the population described in my study, I was surprised at how elusive these young African-American male students were. During a wide search of Los Angeles County with the help of the Education Clinic, it turned out that life circumstances kept these prospective participants from consistent availability to meet with me. Situations like incarceration in the middle of the study, relocation for small wage jobs, lack of funds for transportation, and other social norms associated with poverty persisted in the early stages of this study. My battles as a teacher in an underperforming inner-city high school whose administration put unrealistic demands on me during the same time that I began this study further hindered the development of a solution to my participant problem.

During a discussion with my project advisor about the difficulties in finding participants that were consistently available, we decided that I should use an additional research site. Including the *Aim High* program in my study gave more insight as to why the population I sought seemed to be so elusive. The *Aim High* program is a community outreach program geared directly toward youth, whereas, my initial research site, the education clinic, supported people of all ages. Many of the seemingly available prospective participants from the education clinic had adult responsibilities like families, full time jobs, and other obligations. Even though the population from the *Aim High* program was a generation younger than the majority of those with limited availability from the education clinic, similar social problems affected their availability

to participate in my study with ease. One of my prospective participants fell victim to gang violence during the early stages of the study where he barely escaped death and became wheelchair bound. This, and other incidents, led me to see that the issues that these young men experienced in schools were completely intertwined with the social dynamics of their lives that stemmed from being raised by a broken community and a broken education system.

### **Willingness of Participants to Participate**

Each time that I reached out to an agency to recommend participants for my study, I was surprised at how receptive it was to the possibility of participating. When I was granted the opportunity to share the purpose of my study with possible participants with the hope of having them consent to participate, their energies indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard, and they reminded me how this type of work was very necessary. These young African-American men were well aware of the sub-par conditions in which they have had to live and learn. They presently have the media and social media to remind them of these conditions every day. Whenever I expressed to them that my study was an attempt at improving schools and learning outcomes for the US public-school population, they were eager to begin. This let me know that these young men yearned for change and were willing to do what it took to help make it happen.

### **Effects of Family Structures Resulting in Obstacles to School Success**

All of my participants were raised in matriarchal households because their fathers were either dead, in jail, or absent for some other poverty related reason. When their mothers became victims of drug use, lacked of employment, abuse sufferers, or afflicted with other poverty related issues, other family members or foster agencies had to step in to give support to these

young men with limited resources. When these young single mothers were forced to leave one of their multiple jobs, in some cases, on a regular basis to see to the well-being of their sons at school for misconduct, in hospitals for gang violence, or at police precincts for reasons which they believed sometimes included racial profiling, it became more difficult for them to maintain steady employment and raise children at the same time. As school is a social requirement by the US government and one of its responsibilities is to prepare students for society and citizenship (Freire, 2010; Noguera, 2008), education must be transformed at its foundations to do that job for those in our impoverished American communities who need it most. This research revealed that, in today's world, schools were being required to do this job independently with very limited resources (Muhammad, 2018; Payne & Welch, 2015). Most of my participants lacked fathers, and some lacked mothers, that were able to be home, so they lived with extended family, or others whose investment in them was tenuous. Can schools perhaps prevent these young men from repeating the paths and patterns of their absent fathers that were failed by the same broken system?

Young African-American males need to be taught how to interact with other populations of Americans in society and in schools for their general wellbeing. It is no secret that African-American males have been targeted by police, pre-judged by the larger community, and tracked into failing academic settings on a large scale. I have personal experiences that prove these assertions. While this education should ideally start at home, it is a difficult task to put on overwhelmed single mothers who in many cases were products of a broken education system if they were fortunate enough to make it through the education system at all. As these students

spend the majority of their waking hours in or preparing for school, school has to become a place that truly develops them holistically (Noguera, 2008).

### **Context as a Driver of Behavior in School**

The first sign of social crisis for my participants came when I began to set up an interview schedule that involved meeting with them after my normal daily work hours. The program director of *Aim High* informed me that any meetings with participants had to be conducted within a timeframe that allowed them to be home before sundown as their transportation paths were riddled with gang violence that increased after dark. When these young men had to face the realities of an impoverished community on a daily basis, it was no wonder that concentration on normal school goals as set by the present system's standards was an issue for them. These young men dealt with basic survival and bore witness to events like the murders of their friends and family members. These preoccupied young men showed up for school soon after such incidents because it was supposed to be a safe place for them to grow, in addition to it being a mandatory requirement by the US government. When my participants and their families lacked the materials that were necessary for what society deemed as normal necessities such as daily fresh food, clean and functional housing facilities, proper clothing, communication and entertainment devices, as well as access to proper and updated learning resources, their basic survival instincts generally told them to get these things by any means necessary. Thus, many of them turned to the streets for both guidance and to prey upon those people and establishments that had what they believed they needed to function normally.

In the absence of an effective family structure, many inner-city African-American communities develop social support networks that relieve some of the responsibility of making



sure their children are safe and nurtured (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Richardson, 2012). When these communities suffer from generations of poverty and broken education systems, the networks break down. There is a need for a type of schooling and community structural support in today's American society that prevents this degenerative repetition in our most vulnerable urban communities (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Noguera, 2008; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Examples of support networks from my study included Brian, who was raised by his grandmother, with the support of his aunt when necessary, and his football coach served as a father figure in the absence of male family members during the high school stage of his development. Myran, who spoke of staying with his female neighbor next door until his mother made it home from work during times when his older sister would mistreat him while they were home alone (Myran, Interview 3), and Patrick, who mentioned living with the mother and grandmother of some of his siblings in the absence of their father when he could not live with his own mother at times (Patrick, Interview 1).

### **Present School Culture as a Harbinger of Student Failure**

The young men in this study expressed several concerns on how the present public-school system had failed them. Some of these concerns pointed to a lack of care by school personnel for their wellbeing. While I know firsthand that the majority of teachers as well as some other school personnel have the best interest at heart for students in these failing inner-city schools, the top-down manner in which these overpopulated establishments are run prevents educators from doing their jobs as change agents that promote the successful matriculation of the students who need them most (Klein, 2018; Loveless, 2017). These students believed that educators are careless about their needs because we lack the proper environments that are

necessary to help them succeed. For example, Brian talked about how counselors placed him in classes without considering his wants and needs. He mentioned being given poor scores on work that he completed and not being given any explanation as to why these scores were low, or what he could do to improve. He also talked about being allowed to play football while having subpar grades and being counseled out of his public-school after sustaining an injury that prevented him from playing football (Brian, Interview 1).

### **Stereotype Threat**

Three of the participants in this study spoke of reasons for not wanting to attend school regularly that were tied to issues of self-esteem. The culture of the school allowed these young men to be teased and made to feel less than others because of their lack of materials and resources. Their very presence at school made them feel as if they had failed, because of the bullying and negative attitudes that peers, staff, and parents held about them. Participants expressed that there were no formal consequences given to bullies and they believed that bullying was not addressed with any significance in general at their schools. This is a concern

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because research showed that positive peer relationships have a positive effect on academic achievement, self-esteem, and resilience (Boston & Warren, 2017; Butler-Barnes, Estrada-Martinez, Colin, & Jones, 2015; Irvin, 2012). Myran said that he was teased by more fortunate African-American students, as well as by students of other ethnicities, for not having proper clothing, materials, and resources that those students had (Myran, Interview 1). Patrick spoke of his White coach having him play varsity sports as a freshman because he was African-American and perceived to be better at sports than his more varsity-eligible peers of other

ethnicities. He also discussed being called racial slurs by White parents who attended football games, having to play through these racial taunts while dealing with the mental anguish they caused, and being told that these parents were asked not to attend subsequent games as a consequence, but these parents, however, showed up at subsequent games anyway with no apparent consequences (Patrick, Interview 1).

### **Overcrowded Classrooms**

The participants talked about classrooms and laboratories filled with fire hazard amounts of students of all different behaviors, needs, and capabilities. This overcrowding is tied to per-pupil funding. Overcrowding brings additional resources to many school districts without regard for available space and the control necessary to properly guide students (Good & Lavigne, 2018). Frustrations showed up in a number of classroom behaviors demonstrated by students under these conditions (Adam, 2016). Even though most teachers receive some training on ways to support urban students, they were far from equipped to deal with the battery of behaviors that many of our urban students demonstrated on a daily basis.

In most cases funding for support in US public-schools is either missing or misallocated. I understand why the participants believed that their teachers performed their duties poorly. While this may be true of some teachers who simply give up, or have bad intentions for different reasons, many teachers are simply overwhelmed with responsibilities (Daniels, Radil, & Goegan, 2017). School communities expected teachers to break up bloody fights, to feed hungry students, to recognize and to report neglected and abused children, to clothe and sometimes to find or provide shelter for students, while correcting many years of misguided learning practices to magically bring students up to grade level on a very limited budget and with very limited time to

plan, execute, and assess lessons. Teachers are performing all of these duties while earning low wages, despite their education levels, and in conditions that further show a disregard for their safety and wellbeing by the school-system (Britton & Propper, 2016). Further, after many of these teachers somehow perform their duties as best they can in these unfavorable conditions, they are hit with low evaluation ratings because students are not passing the standardized test that measure the schools' progress. School-level administrators, counselors, deans, school police, security, and all other support staff members faced challenges that are similar to those of teachers who deal with overpopulated dysfunction in the present US public-school model (Edwards, 2016; Neal, 2017; Shirley, 2017). The participants intuited all of this and did not feel treated as individuals (Neal, 2017). Rather, they saw themselves as part of a problem that resulted in disciplinary outcomes, which actually worsened their ability to be successful in school or in life.

### **Tracking of African-American Males**

One of the major issues with having overwhelmed staff in schools is the misplacement or unreasonable tracking of students (Bell, 2014; Kafele, 2012). The participants believed that this was one of the ways that African-American males were silenced, or ignored. The participants were tracked into remedial classes or classes that claimed to provide special services, when in reality they turned out to be dumping grounds for students that were seen as too difficult to place for reasons linked to behavior or some other issue that caused low performance to show up on their records (Lott-Daley, 2013).

All of this ultimately led to dissatisfied students and parents who in turn demanded better results. When students and parents are frustrated with the system outcomes where discipline and achievement are concerned, they generally blame teachers and either sue the system or demand

special placement that may or may not ultimately benefit the progress of the student (McGee & Spencer, 2015). Brian and his advocates talked about how difficult it was to even gather all of the necessary people together that were a part of his student success team (SST) when it was time to reevaluate his IEP learning goals, and how systems were not in place to help him meet these goals in the regular public-school setting (Brian, Interview 3).

### **Discipline as a Pathway Towards Success**

The participants in this study were all pushed-out or locked-out of public education and forced to deal with the judicial system on some level that ultimately guided them to alternative public-school settings called continuation schools that better supported their needs. These continuation schools were either privately or publicly funded, and the extent to which discipline was a pathway toward success in these different types of continuation schools varied.

### **Discipline and Success in Public Continuation-Schools**

While public-schools had discipline procedures in place for participants, these procedures were often misused because of sheer volumes of students needing support in that area and lacked the staffing that could effectively provide the adequate support needed (Shirley, 2017). Even though public continuation-school settings associated with the local school districts housed smaller populations, there were still issues that carried over from the mainstream public schools for participants that hindered their progress (Brian, Interview 3). Brian talked about how his public-continuation-school lacked proper counseling services to properly guide him toward the college curriculum that he sought without additional assistance from his advocates (Brian, Interview 1). He also mentioned that the gang members with whom he had conflict at his regular public school were pushed into the same public-continuation-school that he attended and further

conflict ensued (Brian, Interview 3). In other words, while the learning that took place in these smaller settings was more effective than it was in regular public school, experiences in these public-continuation-school settings were still short of ideal.

### **Discipline and Success in Private Continuation-Schools**

Participants who attended private continuation-schools described school support as being effective. The private continuation-schools had resources for participants such as properly allocated funding for useable materials, diverse counseling, individualized teaching and learning methods, a variety of opportunities for cultural and career development, and most importantly, a safe environment where students could feel comfortable learning and expressing themselves on many levels. The private continuation-school visited during this study had key search aspects that sought participants in the most obscure places, including jails and maternity wards, for students to support. They showed evidence of providing consistent probation services where necessary, appropriate mental health services, planned-parenthood resources, career and personal-development opportunities, and other forms of support that encouraged success.

All three of my participants who attended the private continuation-school spoke highly about the services they received. Myran talked about how conflicts with gang members in the community where their physical education needs were being met led decision makers to arrange physical education services outside of the community that housed the school and funded transportation to the new facility to keep the students safe (Myran, Interview 3). Raymond talked about his issues with marijuana use and how counselors talked to him about the importance of coming to school with an achievement mindset and how self-medicating could be offsetting. He

said that the probation officer on sight randomly tested his urine for cleanliness because clean urine was a stipulation for his attendance (Raymond, Interview 2).

## **Resilience**

### **Optimism Despite Being Over-Disciplined or Misplaced**

All of the young men in this study possessed a belief that they could ultimately achieve success in their lives despite the impoverished conditions that led them away from public education that should have been designed for their success. These participants were aware of the stigmas that came with their humble beginnings and the challenges that they would continue to face as they developed and worked toward their goals. Participants realized the importance of developing a positive self-image after journeying through the school and judicial discipline systems through interactions with advocates who helped them to develop protective factors such as sports and career mindsets (Irvin, 2012; Williams & Bryan, 2013). They recognized their roles in the discipline processes that took place and voiced changes that they needed to make if these goals were to come into fruition. Participants also expressed that, even though their actions were less than ideal at times, better support could have been given by the public-school system to correct their paths. It was quite interesting to hear each of these young men express how they wanted to achieve to show others that they too could achieve. They clearly had something to prove. So many others had said that they could only fail, but all of these participants were determined to prove that they could succeed. Participants also mentioned wanting to achieve so that people who supported them could feel proud (Boston & Warren, 2017; Butler-Barnes et al., 2015; Irvin, 2012). This suggested a caring generosity and gratitude toward those that supported them, no matter how limited the support.

## **The Role of Extended Families and Community in Participant Resilience**

Though all of my participants had difficult family circumstances, the family that they did have was important to them. In this study, participants were given some form of support by parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents, godbrothers, girlfriends, and friends, at times when they needed it most (Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012; Williams & Bryan 2013). Participants also likewise supported their friends and families in similar ways that helped develop their resilient natures. Troublesome circumstances certainly tested the patience and limits of these torn young men, in the streets and in schools, but, ultimately, they chose to take education paths that would help them to become productive citizens (Boston & Warren, 2017; Butler-Barnes et al., 2015; Irvin, 2012).

Support also came from community leaders and establishments such as churches and outreach programs that reminded participants of their value and encouraged their values by affording them opportunities to develop character through active participation in programs that helped build their self-awareness and confidence (Boston & Warren, 2017; Butler-Barnes et al., 2015; Irvin, 2012).

## **The Importance of Coaches, Club-leaders, and Other Support Staff**

The same supports given to the participants by their families and community members were provided in alternative schools to some degree to encourage their growth and development where discipline and achievement are concerned. While most participants spoke highly of at least one school-related supporter, team coaches stood out as very valuable resources that encouraged well rounded success in the absence of an otherwise lackluster school performance in guiding these young men. I believe that coaches play a remarkable role in the development of our inner-



city African-American youth because one of their main foci is to bring out the best talents in their team members so that team members can develop a winning spirit (Douglas, 2017; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Rhodes, 2017; Richardson, 2012). Coaches experience ups and downs with their players that allow conversations on valuable life lessons in which players are encouraged to move forward regardless of the outcome, because there is always that next game. One of the reasons that many of our inner-city African-American males naturally gravitate toward coaches for guidance is because they often see successful athletes that look a lot like them, and they develop a belief that they, too, can achieve in sports (Rhodes, 2017). These coaches often take on the roles of absent fathers in a variety of mentorship ways out of necessity and care for their athletes, and athletes develop skills that transfer to other forms of success that also include academics and better decision making to avoid conflicts in the process (Rhodes, 2017). Three out of four participants in this study expressed having coaches who played major roles in their school successes. Brian spoke at length about the supports that he received from his football coach. He said that instead of walking home through his gang-ridden neighborhood after school, he would hang out with his coach and assist him with closing procedures while waiting for his grandmother to pick him up (Brian, Interview 1). Patrick's Brotherhood for the Crusade mentor taught him conflict resolution skills and gave him a job to support others in need of those skills (Patrick, Interview 1).

Other school personnel also provided pockets of support that gave participants encouragement in the public-school setting (Douglas, 2017; Williams & Portman, 2014). In some cases, instead of being disciplined and suspended from school for bad behavior, they were sent for guidance to other support staff with whom they had some rapport. This guidance

sometimes gave them encouragement to behave and perform better. Accepting this advice, and remembering it years later, said a lot about their appreciation for the supporters and their advice. Though there were very few accounts of this type of support in the public-school setting, this is exactly the type of mentoring that these African-American males need on a more consistent basis.

### **Portraiture's Aesthetic Whole**

Based on the emergent themes above, the images that came into focus for participants in this study developed into an aesthetically whole portrait of my participants that included a collage of absenteeism, anger, craftiness, strength, resilience, and success. Absenteeism spoke to the elusiveness of African-American males in the public education system that generates our nearly nonexistence in the workforce, which places us on the margins of society where poverty, imprisonment and death survive. An image of Raymond exiting the empty school grounds to meet with gang-members instead of going to class with the rest of the students when the bells rang was vivid here. Anger spoke to the frustrations that raged inside of participants because their voices were trapped by the seemingly successful noise of those that blocked their tones. Myran's battles with gun violence were pictured here. Craftiness caused them to reevaluate their positions and devise plans to change their situations with the support of others. All of the young men in this study recognized that they were headed down the wrong path and ultimately accepted support offered to improve their wellbeing. Strength provided the resources to actualize their goals. Making it through high school under impoverished conditions was difficult for these participants, but they were strong enough to make progress, and they represented a whole population of students who were experiencing similar life trajectories. Resilience provided the

coils that sprung them into action. After experiencing the directives of the juvenile justice system, these young men developed a strong belief that they could succeed with the proper support. A courtroom filled with caring advocates was pictured here. Success was the goal that lay beyond the margin. All of the participants in this study made significant progress toward their goals, and where they sometimes fell short of reaching these goals, I have faith in their abilities to reevaluate and try again with proper support systems in place. A lush football field with its goal posts and boundary markings surfaced here with players dressed in cap and gowns on the in-bounds side of the margins.

### **Future Studies**

Based on careful reflection on the emergent themes of this study, educators that advocate for the American public-school system should consider the following studies:

#### **The Importance of Counter-Narrative Approaches in Developing Self-Concepts for African-American Youth**

Participants in this study expressed issues with self-esteem and acceptance at school relative to race. While some studies suggest that counter-narrative approaches to teaching and empowering African-American students is effective, there are very few studies that show results of counter-narrative approaches or of the approach being used. I recommend more studies using the critical narrative approach.

#### **Mentorship for At-Risk African-American Male Students**

Participants in this study benefitted greatly from male role models where their fathers were absent from their lives. I recommend more studies on the success of mentorship programs for African-American males who are at risk of dropping out of school.

### **Discipline Practices that Promote Academic Success**

Participants in this study benefitted from the support of male coaches, teachers, and other role models that encouraged them to reach their schooling goals. The alarming absence of fathers and father figures in inner-city African-American homes suggested that these young men need consistent developmental support, and researchers should investigate reasonable methods of including this type of mentorship and holistic development in school programs.

### **The Resilience of Young Black Males Who Have Been Disciplined out of the Public Education System**

While there were several studies that discussed the astounding dropout rate for inner-city African-American males and reasons for their mass exodus, there were no studies discussed that were focused on their re-entry or academic success following the dropout as a main focus. I recommend more research on success for African-American males who rejoin academia after dropping out of school.

### **African-American Girls and Academic Success**

During my investigation into the educational needs of inner-city African-American males, some of the studies also expressed a growing concern for the educational development for inner-city African-American females. The needs of these young women often differ from the needs of these young men, and researchers should consider investigating the needs of these young women to affect the status quo with respect to their population in higher education, as well as in the professional job market.

## **Private-Continuation-Schools as a Model for Public Schools**

Educators should explore the private-continuation-school model as a possible alternative to the public-school model that currently exists in the US. The support that my participants received in their private-continuation-school had many positive affects on their missions to graduate from high school with a high school diploma after being entangled with the justice system. Perhaps the use of this model in place of the current model could circumvent the use of the justice system in disciplining students, especially African-American males, on such a large scale.

## **Recommendations for Practice and Conclusions**

### **Restructuring Public Education**

In a time where opportunities for free and competitive education abound with alternative education settings such as charter-schools, home-schools, and niche-schools, the structure of American public-schools has to be revamped to fit the needs of today's societal demands. Bureaucrats need to hear the voices of educators when we say that the current model is too archaic to support the diverse cultures and free thinkers that compose America's present society. The data on achievement gaps both nationally and internationally spoke volumes about the poor conditions that currently exist in US public-schools (Reardon, 2011; Simms, 2012; Young et al., 2017). If America expects to return to the forefront of societies that produce students who are qualified to compete in the global job and post-secondary education markets on a large scale, public-school policymakers must create a system that works for all marginalized populations. Specific recommendations for a new way to think about public education follow.

### **Properly Educating African-American Males in Smaller Settings**

The participants in this study suffered from low academic performance for a variety of contextual and academic reasons. Studies have shown that inner-city African-American males have been tracked into sub-par academic settings (Cook et. al., 2018; Edwards, 2016; Neal, 2017). Studies have also shown that inner-city African-American males have specific learning needs that are not being met in the present public-school design (Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Kotok, 2017). Two reasons that are given in these studies for their lack of progress are overcrowding and a lack of resources (Shirley, 2017). Perhaps, scholars and policymakers can solve the problem of effectively educating these students by designing, staffing, and allocating funds for these schools with African-American male students in mind.

### **Alternative School Designs for Inner-City Populations**

It is important to understand the dynamics in which inner-city African-American male public-school students have to function. Schools need a practical communication system where the concerns of all stakeholders are heard and addressed in transparent, satisfactory, and timely ways. Where budgeting is a concern in developing this new school model, a think-tank comprised of appropriate innovators should be employed to complete this monumental and necessary task. Consider the work of David C. Banks (2014) and *The One Hundred Black Men* in the direction of alternative-public-schools in New York City. Dr. Banks and his team were fueled by statistics from a study showing that “75 percent of the prison inmates for the entire state of New York were taken from seven neighborhoods in New York City” (Banks, 2014, p. 14). They founded an all-male alternative-public-school in a “prison pipeline” neighborhood of the South Bronx in part to counter beliefs that inner-city African-American male students from

low-income communities should accept their place at the bottom of the achievement rankings of American student subgroups (Banks, 2014). After overcoming start-up obstacles placed by bureaucracy, The One Hundred Black Men started its school with community and government support. The school's success blossomed into a conglomerate spanning all seven "prison pipeline" neighborhoods in New York City and is now being used as a model in Los Angeles (Banks, 2014).

### **Providing Consequences that Support Forward Movement**

Schools should consider the broad spectrum of ideals embedded in the term discipline. While students need discipline to solve problems effectively, manage time, express ideas, and demonstrate growth both academically and socially, they also need consequences for misconduct and poor performance. When US public-schools can provide the time and space for these facets of discipline, such as restorative justice practices, we may begin to see more positive schooling results (Muhammad, 2018; Payne & Welch, 2015). One study suggested that school counselors should further support parent figures of African-American students by recognizing non-traditional support from struggling parent figures and working with them to promote better student performance (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Where consequences for students who demonstrate behaviors that suggest a lack of discipline are concerned, an effective system of correcting these behaviors should be in place and monitored for consistency (Pavelka, 2013). Poor behaviors that lead to poor academic success should not be tolerated in school learning environments on any level. These counterproductive behaviors create safety concerns and stifle the teaching and learning that would otherwise take place. However, schools need to have proper counseling channels available for diverse forms of misconduct. One of the problems with the

current public-school system, according to some studies (Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007), is that schools treat African-American students and parents as if they are the problem. Contrarily, CRT scholars treat school problems, family instability, and other issues facing people of color as central to the ways that racial differences continue to promote profound inequalities that favor the white populations (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007). This form of counter narrative view of public-school reform can provide possibilities for changing the fundamental structure of school discipline for under-served communities of African-American students (Duncan, 2005; Muhammad, 2018; Pavelka, 2013; Payne & Welch, 2015).

### **Changing the Way Public-Schools View Their Students**

Public schools need to view all of their students as future leaders, creators, and overall contributors to a productive global society. The faces of school personnel should reflect the faces of the culturally diverse student population. Participants in this study generally attended public-schools that lacked diversity, and their interactions with school personnel created perceptions of carelessness by these schools for their wellbeing. Policymakers should consider changing the public-school model to reflect a progressive multicultural society where the boundaries of racial and gender biases are lifted and all students are given access to fair and just public education. Studies showed that America is failing at preparing students to compete in the global market (Klein, 2011). African Americans only make up six percent of the accelerating STEM professionals market (Landivar, 2013). Countering the usual methods of relying exclusively on students who have already demonstrated high achievement to pursue STEM education in this way could help support the national concern with diversifying the STEM workforce and engaging African-American students (Young et al., 2017).



## **Providing Wrap Around Services**

There are plenty of data expressing the fact that inner-city African-American male public-school students have diverse counseling needs that include depression, homelessness, divorce, early parenthood, incarceration, death, self-esteem, failure, and a variety of other coping needs (Griffin & Steen, 2011; Hannon, 2016). A part of educating students includes helping them function in ways that benefit them holistically. Schools need to be the first line of service for students who need this kind of support. The participants in this study required alternative support for a variety of reasons related to impoverished African-American communities. All of the participants in this study could benefit from effective counseling services. One participant mentioned that he disliked the counseling services that were tied to his IEP because he felt that the counselors were insincere with their efforts to support him. Public-schools should consider the models of continuation-schools and outreach programs that are having positive effects on supporting over-disciplined students in a variety of ways. Students from inner-city communities carry stress from being impoverished that can manifest itself in a number of ways that not only affect their academic performance, it affects mental and physical health as well (Hodgkinson, et al., 2017). Hodgkinson, Godoy, Beers, and Lewin (2017) stated, “Research indicates that compared with higher socioeconomic status children, children of low socioeconomic status experience higher rates of parent reported mental health problems and higher rates of unmet mental health needs” (Poverty and Compromised Mental Health, para. 3). Another participant in this study described being put on behavior modifying medication that caused more negative side effects than it did benefits, and no one did anything to change his medication before he began to self-medicate with marijuana (Myran, Interview 1).

## **Enhanced Mentoring Programs**

Inner-city African-American male public-school students need to interact with successful people who look like them and have similar backgrounds as them on a regular basis to show them that they can succeed against all odds. These students should also see and hear from culturally diverse successful people that have similar interests as they do who can encourage them to pursue their dreams. These mentors should be able to offer practical applications of living and learning that provide students with tools that prepare them to survive and compete. When students with limited social opportunities gain access to resources that come from mentorship, it broadens their perspectives in ways that promote more advanced goal setting ideas. Studies show that mentorship results in better overall outcomes for inner-city African-American males (Sanchez, 2016). Both formal and informal mentoring programs have proven to promote racial, cultural, and gender awareness for boys of color who may not otherwise be exposed to such knowledge (Sanchez, 2016). These mentoring programs have been associated with improved academics, attitudes, and decision-making. One participant from this study was involved in the Brotherhood's after school mentoring program. A study of the Brotherhood showed "an increase in GPAs from 2.43 to 2.83 over a three-year period among 307 participants" (Sanchez, 2016, p. 5).

## **Limitations**

The findings and recommendations in this study came from interactions with a very small group of inner-city African-American male students who were afforded the opportunity to regain access to some form of alternative-school education through community outreach programs that helped them move toward earning high school diplomas and having better life experiences.

These experiences were seen through my lens, and informed by my own experiences as an educator and member of that same population. This datum is far from transferable to the general population of African-American male students; however, it does add to the limited data that currently exist on the topic.

### **Epilogue**

At the conclusion of the data collection portion of this study, all participants were making progress toward graduating from high school and pursuing their post-secondary education goals. As for me I was still battling the struggles that come with teaching in an overcrowded academic setting while attempting to finish this study. Since then, most participants have made significant progress, and so have I.

Brian has graduated from high school. He is playing football at a local Los Angeles community college and helping to raise his son.

Patrick has graduated from high school. He has joined the retail work force at a department store in Los Angeles.

Raymond has graduated from high school. He was accepted to a four-year historically Black college (HBCU) in the Southeast region of the country where he is pursuing a degree in criminal justice.

Myran was still a few credits short of receiving his high school diploma, and the *Aim High* program continued to support his needs.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggested that discipline practices made school an inhospitable place to be, and to learn, and thus, African-American males were forced out of the institution that

was to protect them and forced into an environment that endangered them. Yet, these same students came to school with attitudes and histories that made it difficult for them to focus and make the most of the opportunities presented.

### **Closing Remarks**

Conducting this research has transformed my ideas about educating students in a number of ways. Knowledge gained from this study has affected the ways that I support students. While I have always practiced patience with students who require additional support, I find myself becoming more sensitive to the needs of struggling students. Evaluating students who have very limited access to educational resources and materials has become a moral issue for me where equity and fairness are concerned. I find myself using “mastery grading” techniques where judgment replaces grading scales to provide a means to rationalize moving students with limited access forward.

This study gave me the opportunity to interact with a variety of different types of students and advocates from a non-teacher perspective. Dissecting the education path of impoverished African-American males that present a challenge for the US public-school system has shown me that racial inequalities in public education reinforce a cycle of under achievement that will continue to marginalize the African-American community. This study reinforced my desire to do more than just teach to support students, it made me want a more direct role in overhauling the antiquated practices that bar African-Americans from getting fair chances to succeed in America. Becoming an educational leader, conducting meaningful educational research, exploring mentorship, and investigating financial solutions for functional public-school education are some

of the ways that I would like to support changes in public school education for African-American males.

Most importantly it was good to see that there are discipline programs and processes that work for some public-school systems on a small scale; however, the need to nationalize these successes for African-American students is crucial to positively affecting the achievement gap between African-Americans and their peers, which would also positively affect the achievement gap between American students and the international community of students in developed nations. Finally, considering and positively altering the environments that prepare inner-city African-American males for success in public-school is paramount for supporting their general success in life beyond school.

## APPENDIX A

### Participant Recruitment Flyer

# Participants Needed!

- ❖ I am Kevin Smith, a student at Loyola Marymount University studying Educational Leadership for Social Justice.
- ❖ Beginning January 2016, I will be conducting a study on the discipline and achievement relationships for African American males who have experienced disciplinary consequences from a California public schools system.
- ❖ Expect an introduction and three one-hour interviews over the course of six to eight weeks where we will discuss the effects of school discipline on your wellbeing.
- ❖ This study is an attempt to demand better education practices for all students, especially African American males.
- ❖ If you are an African American male, who is 18 years or older, and have experienced disciplinary actions during your schooling process in a California public school, your participation is needed!
- ❖ Please contact me at [ksmith67@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:ksmith67@lion.lmu.edu) with any interest or questions regarding this very important study.

I look forward to meeting you soon!

**Kevin.**

## APPENDIX B

### LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

#### Informed Consent Form

Date of Preparation: Tuesday, February 9, 2016

#### Loyola Marymount University

- 1) I hereby authorize Kevin W. Smith, Jr., Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice to include me in the following research study: Discipline and Schooling: Perceptions of African American Males.
- 2) I have been asked to participate in a research project which is designed to help inform disciplinary procedures for public schools and which will last for approximately two months.
- 3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my inclusion in this project is that I am an African American male who has been failed by the public education system.
- 4) I understand that if I am a subject, I will be audiotaped during three interviews.

The investigator will audiotape me three times.

These procedures have been explained to me by the investigator, Kevin W. Smith, Jr.

- 5) I understand that I will be, audiotaped in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my identity will not be disclosed. I have been assured that the tapes will be destroyed after their use in this research project is completed. I understand that I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.
- 6) I understand that the study described above may involve the following risks and/or discomforts: nervousness, embarrassment.
- 7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are to help make discipline and achievement practices better for public school students.
- 8) I understand that Kevin W. Smith, Jr., who can be reached at (310) 963-0572, will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.
- 9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent re-obtained.

- 10) I understand that I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without prejudice.
- 11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my participation before the completion of the study.
- 12) I understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.
- 13) I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question that I may not wish to answer.
- 14) I understand that I will receive \$25 (per interview) for my participation in this study; I further understand that if I withdraw before the study is completed I will receive only \$0.
- 15) I understand that in the event of research related injury, compensation and medical treatment are not provided by Loyola Marymount University.
- 16) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact David Hardy, Ph.D. Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 258-5465, [david.hardy@lmu.edu](mailto:david.hardy@lmu.edu).
- 17) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

Subject's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

OR

Subject is a minor (age \_\_\_\_\_), or is unable to sign because \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_.

Mother/Father/Guardian \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C

### **Program Director and Case Manager Interview Protocol:**

#### Getting To Know The Research Sites

The goal of these questions was to become familiar with the research sites and how they support the general wellbeing of participants and their clients in general. These questions sought patterns that were statistically associated with environmental and schooling relationships for participants and other data that could inform the following research question:

How do inner city African-American male public-school students perceive the impact of environmental and cultural forces on their schooling experiences?

#### Facility Background

- 1) Please tell me about yourself and your roll in this facility?
- 2) What kind of services does your facility offer?
- 3) Can you describe things like client's socio-economic status, other supports they may receive, ethnicity, and general struggles they may face?

#### Clients and Their Families

- 1) Tell me about the typical clients that receive services here.
- 2) Can you describe the general family lives of the clients you serve?
- 3) What kind of support family members offer?
- 4) What burdens might family members cause?
- 5) How does the clinic interact with family members of clients?

The following questions were directed toward your African-American male clients in an attempt to answer the research questions above:

### Social or Public Life

- 1) Can you describe social influence from peers and community members that affect the well being of clients both positively and negatively?

### School Life

- 1) Please describe schooling for clients that receive support here.
- 2) What kind of school services do they receive?
- 3) Describe the subjects that they liked in school.
- 4) Why did they like the subjects that you mentioned?
- 5) Describe the subjects that they disliked.
- 6) Why did they dislike the subjects that you mentioned?
- 7) In what subjects did they perform well?
- 8) Why did they perform well in these subjects?
- 1) Describe the typical set up of their classroom environments.
- 2) Describe the general setup of their physical education environments.
- 3) What sports did they play?
- 4) Describe their athletic abilities?
- 5) Describe sports that they were interested in playing, but chose not to play?
- 6) Why did they choose not to play certain sports?
- 7) How did they relate to other students at school (both in and out of class)?
- 8) How did they relate to adults at school (both in and out of class)?
- 9) Which adults did they feel that they could turn to for support, and how were they supported?

- 10) Which adults, did they feel, made things difficult for them, and how did those adults make things difficult?
- 11) In what ways have school experiences affected their lives as they are today (both positively and negatively)?

#### Accomplishments and Good Behavior Practices

- 1) Talk to me about the accomplishments and good behaviors of some of your clients.
- 2) Describe a few times when clients practiced good behavior.
- 3) How did they recognize that they were practicing good behavior?
- 4) Describe times when clients were praised, awarded, or rewarded for their good behavior.
- 5) What are some memorable accomplishments of some of your clients?
- 6) What did they do to celebrate their most memorable accomplishments?
- 7) How were others involved in celebrating the accomplishments of your clients?

#### Behavior Problems At Home, In School, and In Public

- 1) Describe the school, court, and clinic process for your clients.
- 2) Can you describe a typical situation that causes a client to need your services and the advocate process that leads to completion of your services?
- 3) How are interaction between schools and your office?
- 4) How are interactions between courts and your office?
- 5) How accountable are schools for the welfare of student clients?
- 6) What kind of solutions result from your interventions?

## Behavior Problem Consequences

- 1) Describe some of the ways that clients were disciplined when they were believed to cause trouble at home.
- 2) Describe how discipline for your clients might have been different from the ways that their siblings were disciplined.
- 3) What were conversations like when clients talked to their families about how they were being disciplined?
- 4) Talk to me about consequences that clients received for behavior problems at school.
- 5) Who was involved in giving consequences, and how were they involved?
- 6) Describe the differences in the ways that you were disciplined and the ways that other students were disciplined.
- 7) How were other African-American boys disciplined compared to your clients?
- 8) How were boys from other races disciplined compared to your clients?
- 9) How were African-American girls disciplined compared to your clients?
- 10) What were conversations like when clients talked to other students, school staff, or friends about how they were being treated at school?
- 11) How has school discipline affected the wellbeing of clients beyond the school setting?

## Accountability For Behaviors at Home, In School, and In Public

- 1) Discuss times when clients believed they were not at fault for their behaviors in incidents that occurred at home in school, or in public.
- 2) Describe consequences that clients believed were fair and explain why clients believed they were fair.

## Round 2: File Check And Recurring Themes

These questions will be based on available participant files and patterns that emerge as a result of round 1.

## APPENDIX D

### Participant Interview Protocol:

#### Round 1: Getting to Know The Participants

The goal of these questions was to seek patterns that were statistically associated with the environmental and schooling relationships for participants and other data that could inform the following research questions:

How do inner-city African-American male public-school students come to perceive schooling, in particular their disciplinary experiences, and how do environmental and cultural forces influence their perceptions of their schooling experience?

The following topics will be investigated during the first round of interviews:

- 1) Personal Identity
- 2) Family life
- 3) Social or Public life
- 4) School Life
- 5) Accomplishments and good behavior practices
- 6) Behavior problems at home, in school, and in public
- 7) Accountability for home, school, and public behavior problems
- 8) Home, school, and public behavior problem consequences
- 9) Behavior problem solutions and outcomes

#### Personal Identity

Tell Me Who You Are:

- 1) How do you identify your self?

- 2) Tell me about your personal life?
- 3) What do you like to do?
- 4) Do you have any hobbies?
- 5) What kind of things do you dislike?
- 6) What kind of entertainment do you like?
- 7) What are your dating practices?
- 8) What major events stand out as highlights that have molded you into the person that you are today (both good and bad)?
- 9) Describe how you imagine the next five years of your life unfolding?

### Family Life

Tell Me About Your Family Life:

- 1) Describe growing up surrounded by both of your parents, your siblings, pets, and any other family members that were a part of your immediate household.
- 2) What kind of work has your family done to support you?
- 3) Describe your neighborhood.
- 4) How often did you move around?
- 5) Talk to me about your extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins) and how they were involved in your life.
- 6) What were holidays like?
- 7) How was your extended family included in celebrations and as support when necessary?
- 8) Did religion play a major roll in your early life?

- 9) Talk to me about what family members you may turn to for support when you have struggles or concerns.
- 10) What values and beliefs do you have that stand out as contributions from your family (both good and bad)?

### Social or Public Life

Tell me about your social or public life in General:

- 1) Who are your friends?
- 2) Why do you value your friends?
- 3) What kind of things do you do with your friends?
- 4) What kind of influence do you have on your friends?
- 5) Describe a time when your friends positively influenced you.
- 6) Describe a time when your friends negatively influence you.
- 7) What kinds of things do you do with your friends?
- 8) Tell me about the last three places that you visited?
- 9) Describe your interactions with public. For example: Grocery store clerks, bank tellers, fast food or restaurant servants, or simply people walking down the street.
- 10) Describe your feelings about the kindness or unkindness of people in general.

### School Life

Tell Me About Your School Life In General:

- 12) Describe the subjects that you liked in school.
- 13) Why did you like the subjects that you mentioned?
- 14) Describe the subjects that you disliked.



- 15) Why did you dislike the subjects that you mentioned?
- 16) In what subjects did you perform well?
- 17) Why did you perform well in these subjects?
- 18) Describe the typical set up of your classroom environment.
- 19) Describe the general setup of your physical education environment.
- 20) What sports did you play?
- 21) Describe your athletic abilities?
- 22) Describe sports that you were interested in playing, but chose not to play?
- 23) Why did you choose not to play certain sports?
- 24) How did you relate to other students at school (both in and out of class)?
- 25) How did you relate to adults at school (both in and out of class)?
- 26) Which adults did you feel you could turn to for support, and how did they support you?
- 27) Which adults, did you feel, made things difficult for you, and how did they make things difficult?
- 28) In what ways have school experiences affected your life as it is today (both positively and negatively)?

#### Accomplishments and Good Behavior Practices

Talk To Me About Your Accomplishments and Good Behavior:

- 1) Describe your idea of good behavior.
- 2) Describe a few times when you believe that you practiced good behavior.
- 3) How did you recognize that you were practicing good behavior?
- 4) Describe times when you were praised, awarded, or rewarded for your good behavior.

- 5) Tell me about your most memorable accomplishments.
- 6) What did you do to celebrate your most memorable accomplishments?
- 7) Who else was involved in celebrating your accomplishments, and how were they involved?

### Behavior Problems At Home, In School, and In Public

Tell your discipline story. Start from the beginning, as early as you can remember getting in trouble, and continue until you've described every incident that you can remember until you're satisfied that you have told your discipline story.

### Behavior Problem Consequences

Discuss times when you were punished for your behavior.

- 1) Describe the ways that you were disciplined when you believed to cause trouble at home.
- 2) Describe how discipline for you might have been different from the ways that your brothers and sisters were disciplined.
- 3) What were conversations like when you talked to your family about how you were being punished?
- 4) Talk to me about consequences that you received for behavior problems at school.
- 5) Who was involved in giving consequences, and how were they involved?
- 6) Describe
- 7) Describe the differences in the ways that you were disciplined and the ways that other students were disciplined.
- 8) How were other African-American boys disciplined compared to you?
- 9) How were boys from other races disciplined compared to you?

10) How were African-American girls disciplined compared to you?

11) What were your conversations like when you talked to other students, school staff, or friends about how you were being treated at school?

#### Accountability For Behaviors at Home, In School, and In Public

Discuss times when you know that you were at fault for your actions.

- 1) Describe times when you were at fault for poor behaviors that occurred at home, in school, or in public.
- 2) Discuss times when you believe that you were not at fault for your behavior in incidents that occurred at home in school, or in public.
- 3) Describe consequences that you believe were fair and explain why you believe they were fair.

Round 2 and Round 3 interview follow-up questions were generated based on responses from initial interview responses.

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