Plessy Strikes Back or No Child Left Behind, and Beyond:  
A Study of African American Male Marginalization and Effects of Proposed Policy 
Prescriptions for Remedy

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract
This qualitative study was conducted with the purpose of examining the scope of the achievement gap as it relates to African American males, compared to their white and Asian counterparts, and the impact of No Child Left Behind as a policy impacting this performance disparity. The research was employed as an institutional ethnography, such that the emphasis of the work was not on the isolated experiences and outcomes of participants, rather, it considered the collective school and testing accounts of subjects within the broader context of comparing and analyzing the network of associated influences, events and ruling organization practices mitigating their academic performance. The cohort represented in the study sample was comprised of African American males ages 18-26 with varying levels of academic achievement and aspirations – with a research emphasis of ‘capturing the voice’ of this population in regard to their school and testing experiences. The students graduated from the same urban public high school but had varying K-12 schooling experiences, including suburban and lottery (selective school) contexts. Some of the salient themes emerging from the analysis of data included (a) Interpretation of Group Identity, (b) Expectation of Acceptable School Performance, (c) School Influence on Student Self-Perception, (d) Knowing How to Study, and (e) Emphasis and Awareness of Testing Format.
Dedication

This study is dedicated to Jesus Christ, in the expansion of His domain and in the advancement of justice, mercy and education that uplifts – to my wife, Kenyona, and my two children, Daniel and Terilyn.
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It is difficult to convey in writing my gratitude to my wife, Kenyona, who over the past 5 years, has been a constant source of encouragement in this scholarly endeavor. Her willingness to go above and beyond to provide a sense of balance for our home has afforded me the opportunity to be a scholar, and address the priorities of family and work. I look forward to providing a similar support to her as she embarks on her own graduate studies.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my committee, Philip T.K. Daniel, James Moore III and Scott Sweetland for their provocation, support and robust feedback in this work – an ongoing process of inquiry. Dr. Daniel, my dissertation advisor, was the impetus in my pursuit of a Ph.D., a journey which has proven to be both taxing and rewarding. His vast knowledge of the law and education policy provided the foundation for this study. Dr. Moore and Dr. Sweetland, both prolific scholars in their own right, have contributed valuable insight regarding the content and methodology of this dissertation. Dr. Moore’s considerable knowledge regarding the plight of African American males and their current status within the educational landscape, inclusive of impediments and supports, has provided me with a considerable knowledge base regarding this group. Similarly, Dr. Sweetland’s knowledge of economic factors impacting education has proven invaluable in my assessment of policy effects impacting African American males. Finally, I acknowledge both Dr. Ann Allen and Dr. Lafayette Scales, who though not formal members of my committee, nonetheless were
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Chapter 1

1 Statement of the Problem

1.1 Introduction: Research Focus

The irony of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is that, in seeking to create and hold schools accountable to higher standards it has, at the same time, enabled exclusionary practices which might lead to ineffective pedagogy regarding our most vulnerable populations. These ‘populations,’ in particular African American males, are those which, according its’ purported aim of closing the achievement gap, NCLB seeks to protect. Diane Ravitch and other scholars argue that rather than improve education NCLB narrowed curriculum and encouraged teachers to ‘train’ students to take tests, undermining culturally relevant pedagogy, as opposed to educating them. As a result, “the achievement gaps between black and white students narrowed more before the implementation of NCLB than in the years afterward. Black fourth-grade students had a 13-point gain in mathematics from 2000 to 2003, but only a 6-point gain in mathematics from 2003 to 2007” (Ravitch, 2010, p.109).

This study investigates the intersection of policy and practice as it influences the academic trajectory of African American males. Specifically, it provides an exploration of the marginalizing effects of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing mandates on African American male K-12 students by analyzing the broader context of high stakes and standardized testing practices which have impacted the academic aspirations and achievement outcomes of this population, and investigating the potential impact of Race to the Top (RTTT) and Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Flexibility as NCLB mitigating programs. NCLB, the latest version of ESEA, states as one of its goals, set forth in Title I section 1001, “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity
to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2001). To this end, the policy aims to close “the achievement gap between high and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers” (NCLB, 2001). This ‘gap,’ if we chose to conceptualize the difference in scores in this way, clearly persists. NAEP test results from 2009 indicate that while 64% of 12th grade African American males scored below Basic in Mathematics only 25% of white males scored below Basic (Lee & Ransom, 2011). Other Norm-Referenced tests, such as the Wechsler IQ and SAT show similar results, although some scholars debate the validity of these measures (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Gates, 1995). However, high stakes tests vary in their results from state to state, perhaps because states are permitted under the law to define ‘proficiency’ independent of one another, which is an issue discussed further in the Review of Literature (NCLB, 2001; Ravitch, 2010).

NCLB is designed to address the democratic aim of equity in that it seeks fairness. It acknowledges that certain populations are ‘low-performing,’ ‘disadvantaged,’ or otherwise affected by circumstances in such a way that it becomes necessary for a society concerned with social justice to seek to better their condition. In this way, the policy reflects an awareness of the need to help those who are unable (or less able) to help themselves by instituting support and accountability mechanisms which seek to buffer the effects of the disadvantaged conditions which lead to an uneven playing field. Pedro Noguera observes that “the experience of Black males in education… shows signs of trouble and distress” but also acknowledges that “some black males are doing quite well” (2003, p. 431). Still, the gap persists, and in some instances continues to widen. Research explored here considers it important to understand ‘how it is that some black males thrive under the same policy conditions under which so many others languish?’ This dissertation approaches NCLB from a platform which comingles the political and the individual. It assesses the testing requirements of the policy, augmentations under RTTT and ESEA Flexibility, and more
broadly standardized testing practices and related school experiences throughout the scope of K-12 education that might be said to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the achievement gap as it pertains to African American males.

The driving questions for this research revolve around the prevalence of the achievement gap in the face of the reform efforts of NCLB and the role that K-12 social influences, school bureaucracy, and school testing practices play both prior to and following mandated tests. Notably, high stakes tests retain force regarding individual student accountability under both RTTT and ESEA flexibility. Although certain structural requirements of NCLB have been supplemented or suspended by these programs, the types of test administered will likely remain the same – or increase in rigor (Jahng, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The Obama administration’s Blueprint for Reform is unclear how its proposed College and Career-Ready Standards, crafted to replace proficiency, will translate into measures of accountability for individual students and schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The central question in this study concerns how testing mandates triggered by the policy, and tests administered before and after them within the scope of the K-12 schooling experience, affect the aspirations and activities of African American males, as revealed by their reflections on their school and testing experiences, and how this phenomenon is complicated by SES, personal history and family dynamics. This is further articulated by 3 research questions. 1) How do differential social influences mitigate the school and testing experiences of African American males? 2) How do African American males’ interaction with disparate school bureaucracy and practices impress academic and test performance? 3) How do testing experiences vary between African American males who attain high ratings on school tests, in particular high stakes and standardized tests, and those who do not?

The emphasis of the research will be to examine the ways in which the policy, contrary to its purported aim, has hindered, or at least not advanced the educational success of the majority of African American males, and to consider proposed remedies as currently constructed and applied. This will be accomplished through an institutional ethnography
employing a comparative case study analysis to explore the ways in which varying degrees of capacity, revealed through interviewees' reflections on K-12 social, school, and testing experiences, demonstrate policy shortcomings and individual/group impediments and resiliencies. Within the scope of this goal, policy problems will be defined, relevant theories examined and extended, and alternative policies vetted for viability.

Much research has focused on how African American males are situated socially and psychologically in such a way that it prevents them from fully participating and engaging in the school environment but there is little research that focuses on ‘capturing the voice’ of African American males in relation to school achievement and none, of which the author is aware, specifically investigates the K-12 testing experiences of this demographic group in relation to NCLB. Noguera observes regarding the documented lagging achievement of African American males that “what is less understood [about the achievement of African American males] 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, 2003, p.433). The ultimate objective here will be to explore this particular issue in depth. This study seeks to accomplish this goal by analyzing the ways in which African American male reflections about their K-12 school and testing experiences both inform and support current research on the group. Further, the research endeavors to contribute to the on-going discussion on policy formation and implementation which seeks to enhance the achievement of this population. ‘Testing,’ in particular ‘high stakes’ and ‘standardized testing,’ is conceptualized within the context of K-12 education as an integral yet distinct component of school bureaucracy (administrative and teaching practices), and school bureaucracy is understood as being impressed by social influences. This framework is described more fully in Chapters 3 and 4 articulating Methodology and Analysis.

Studies, most prevalent in the 1980s, took note of what was then called the ‘performance gap’ between blacks and whites (Howard & Hammond, 1985; Crain & Mahard, 1978; Crain & Mahard, 1982, Eyler et al, 1983). Since that time scholars have continued to note the persistence of differential achievement between the two groups. However, more
recently there has been an acknowledgement that across the spectrum of experience borne by African American males is a range of occurrences fraught with challenge and difficulty at the one end and imbued with broad exposure and opportunity at the other (Noguera, 2003). Most recently, talk of the ‘achievement gap’ between minority and white students, with an emphasis on black and Latino males, has dominated the landscape of discussion in both scholarship and media. Framing the problem differently may be more accurate. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gloria Ladson-Billings suggest an ‘opportunity gap’ or ‘education debt,’ which places the onus of responsibility on society as a whole instead of with individual schools, students, and black families (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2008).

Another heuristic, an ‘expectation gap,’ is set forth by the author in the Review of Literature. However, whatever paradigm is used to interpret the achievement gap, it is undeniable that a problem exists.

It is difficult to reconcile how it is that, during a time when judicial commentary seems to be asserting that affirmative action has run its course, African American males continue to be grossly underrepresented, compared to their white and Asian counterparts, in programs of gifted education and post-secondary enrollment. They are also and overrepresented in prisons and mortality rates (Alexander, 2008; Daniel & Greytak, 2012; Jackson & Moore, 2008; Green, 2008; Lee & Ransom, 2011). Yet, many African American males thrive in spite of and despite seemingly overwhelming challenges and odds. Others are cultivated and nurtured in environments that would seemingly make it difficult for them to fail, but even with these advantages afforded them in such cases, often do not perform as well as one might expect. Researchers suggest that socio-economic status (SES) is not as great a predictor of academic achievement for minority students, particularly African Americans, as it is for white students. This may be due to the fact, as some studies have suggested (Gonzalez et al, 1996; see also Wilson, 1987, 1996; Dornbusch et al, 1991; Parish et al, 1996; Unnever, 2000), that neighborhood SES factors have a greater effect on African American student achievement than family SES. This is at least partially explained by the fact that, even when controlling for income levels, “most of these families, and fewer Whites, live in neighborhoods
with higher educational risk factors” (Sirin, 2005, p. 441). Nevertheless, taken as a whole, African Americans, most drastically males, continue to lag behind their white and Asian counterparts. This work is offered in the tradition of scholarship offering pragmatic resolutions and not temporary fixes or ‘band-aid’ approaches (Moore & Lewis, 2012).

1.2 The Scope of ‘Policy’: as ‘Text’, as ‘Discourse’, and Effects

Considering the fact that this study investigates NCLB as an education policy affecting African American males, the nature of policy as conceptualized is articulated here. A continuation of this initial exploration is included in the Methodology section. Stephen J. Ball’s work concerning critical approaches to education reform, and Andre-Bechely’s research on school choice, have had significant influence in this study. Ball notes that, as ‘texts,’ “policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set” (Ball, 1994, p. 19). They are not ‘prescriptive,’ per se, in that they do not tell organizations and individuals what to do, but they do ‘prescribe’ the limits in which proposed remedies are fashioned and, as such, influence the way in which solutions are framed. Furthermore, policies exist interdependently and compound exponentially. This occurs as different policies, or reiterations of the same policy over time, which is the case with ESEA, exert hindering and enabling influences over one another (Andre-Bechely, 2005; Ball, 1994). For this reason, later in this chapter, policies impacting African American males along a historical continuum are explored. Further, in the Review of Literature, the evolution of ESEA and related education policies, leading up to the current articulation of No Child Left Behind, are briefly examined.

As a discourse, policy pertains to “what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority” (Ball, 1994, p.21). Hence, not only does policy prescribe the limitations in which solutions are framed, as previously noted, but, as a discourse, also prescribes the language and concepts utilized to construct remedies and responses. This constrains the way in which individuals ‘talk’ about challenges and
remedies, who gets to ‘talk’ about them, and how they get ‘talked’ about. As it relates to NCLB and this present work, it is significant that the difference in scores between African American students and their white and Asian counterparts has been conceptualized as an ‘achievement gap.’ This creates a definite contour and context for ‘achievement gap’ discourse whereby its' problems are framed and its' remedies fashioned (Jahng, 2011; Foucault, 1995; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997).

In regards to policy effects, they are problematic in that they do not always align with intended outcomes. As previously noted, the appropriate framing of a problem is critical to an effective response. Moreover, "a straight line cannot be drawn between legislative policy mandates and [the] local results aligned to policy intents" (Terry, 2010, p. 81). This complexity has been well established by researchers (Darling-Hammond, 1990; see also Cohen et al, 2007). Couple this with the fact that, as scholars contend, the current educational system has been designed for stability and not with the flexibility necessary to achieve NCLB mandates, and the hindrances to the substantiation of policy effects are rendered salient (Hill, 2006; Hess & Finn, 2007; see also Christensen, 2008).

However, Ball explains that “it is not that policies have no effects, they do; it is not that those effects are not significant, they are; it is not that those effects are not patterned, they are. But [school and district] responses (as an evidence of effects) vary between contexts” (Ball, 1994, p. 24). Hence, even provided, and in some ways the result of prescriptive limitations and truncated language options emanating from NCLB – as well as noted implementation and systemic constraints – policy effects, whether intended or unintended, do occur. The challenge for consideration in this work is to differentiate between ‘how those effects reveal organizational capacity’ and ‘how they demonstrate the influence of policy in cultivating organizational behavior.’ This work is approached with an acknowledgement of this difficulty and utilizes concepts of ‘mindfulness’ and ‘mindlessness’ to articulate distinguishing characteristics (Langer, 1989).

To this end, ‘capacity,’ as it is conceived within this study, relates to the ability of an organization to effectively facilitate and implement a particular end as it relates to
organizational objectives. Langer sets forth capacity as a spectrum of individual and organizational ability ranging from mindlessness to mindfulness, where organizational mindfulness is conceptualized through 1) the notions of tracking small figures, 2) resisting oversimplification, 3) remaining sensitive to operations, 4) maintaining capabilities for resilience and, 5) taking advantage of shifting locations of expertise. Mindfulness is a term which describes a cultivated habit of mind. More broadly, the five conceptual categories of organizational mindfulness exist within two larger contexts of ‘anticipation’ and ‘containment’. Hence, mindful organizations, termed Highly Reliable Organizations (HROs) by Weick and Sutcliffe, unlike mindless ones, are so called because they possess both the ability to anticipate unexpected events and to contain or recover from unexpected outcomes. In this way, mindfulness refers to an organization’s tendency toward effective responses to external and internal pressures.

The hallmark of an HRO or mindful organization, as Weick and Sutcliffe conceive of them, “is not that it is error free but that errors do not disable it” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 21). Specifically, HROs are not as susceptible to being disabled precisely because they are practiced at mindful engagement. They are constantly examining the expectations that hold them together as an organization and shape their perception of organizational processes and products. This is significant, considering the fact that “expectations act like an invisible hand that guides you toward soothing perceptions that confirm your hunches and away from troublesome ones that don’t” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 32). Thus, individuals and organizations alike are not objective, but tend toward subjectivity, seeing what they are conditioned to see. Mindful organizations, and hence, mindful schools and districts, combat this propensity by cultivating an awareness of organizational assumptions which inform mindsets and practices. Thereby, such organizations contribute to their health and productivity.

Mindlessness, as conceptualized here, refers to a disposition which enables both ineffective policy construction and inept responses to policy requirements. Mindlessness is defined, in one sense, in terms of ‘mindset’ or what Langer refers to as a ‘premature cognitive
commitment’ (PCC). PCCs are cognitive dispositions which seek to “treat information as though it were context-free – true regardless of circumstances” (Langer, 1989, p. 3). PCCs form when an individual or organization, regardless of circumstantial or contextual differentiation, forms an initial interpretation of something and clings to that interpretation upon subsequent encounters of it. Another contributing factor for mindlessness is repetition. When a particular event is experienced repetitiously there is a tendency for the conscious activity associated with that event to drop into the subconscious – making it mindless. In such cases, it can be said that we ‘can’ do a certain thing but perhaps no longer know ‘how’ we are doing it, or even more disconcerting, ‘why’ we are doing it. It is asserted in this study that, because of the recurring iterations of educational policy over the last five decades, there is a propensity amongst American schooling organizations to regard and respond to policy change in a mindless way. Rather than assessing change mindfully, expanding and rethinking institutional capacity to maximize opportunity for organizational advancement, change tends to be interpreted and executed mindlessly.

With this in mind, one of the troublesome or complicating aspects of mindlessness is that, as Langer notes, "when we learn something mindlessly, it does not occur to us to think about it later, irrespective of whether such thoughts would be acceptable to us” (Langer, 1989, p. 26). Thoughts acquired mindlessly, such as the attitudes and dispositions of one’s predecessor within an organizational context, are often never reassessed unless the person is presented with new information. Even then, mindful processing occurs only if the person is open to receiving new information. One of the motivating factors for mindlessness is the fact that absolute categories that we create for ourselves, or accept from others, are often the result of an accepted worldview that resources are limited by the means available to accomplish organizational ends. In cases such as these, an inability to envision alternative pathways and new realities gives rise to mindless categorization which maintains deficit thinking. As such, educational leaders, inclusive of policy makers and administrators, must constantly assess whether their concepts are expansive or restrictive. Moreover, effective education policy must be constructed with an eye towards shaping organizational dispositions
to facilitate behavioral change (process orientation) – rather than focusing solely on outcomes (performance orientation) (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

1.3 Historical Context: ‘Education Policy’ and the Achievement Gap

As much as the institution of slavery, and later, institutional racism, have been based upon and imbued with notions of African inferiority, policies affecting the education of African American males have represented a complex convergence of deeply held political, social and economic beliefs in America. Thus, an analysis of No Child Left Behind, as the latest version of the Elementary Secondary Education Act impacting K-12 education, must take into account this legacy. ‘Education policy’ is conceptualized broadly within this section to refer to any policy, de jure or de facto, affecting either directly or indirectly the educational opportunities and outcomes of African American males. This serves to broaden the policy paradigm, concerning the academic achievement of black males, to include those influences existing outside of the scope of formal education policy, both historically and presently, which have also informed it.

Notably, it has been suggested by scholars that the physical mistreatment and subjugation of African Americans during slavery led to a different but equally malicious form of institutional racism in the decades following emancipation. Moreover, researchers suggest it continues to result in a systemic distorting of the psychology of many black males (Woodson, 1933/2005; Black, 1997). Carter G. Woodson proposes:

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (Woodson, 1933/2005, p. ix)

Sidanius and Pratto observe similarly, through the lens of Social Dominance Theory, that “social hierarchy is not maintained primarily by the oppressive behavior of dominants, but by the deferential and obsequious behavior of subordinates” (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 44). This is a process which they describe as ‘societal consensuality.’ Envisaged in this way, ‘education’ refers not only to formal schooling but also to ones access, or limited access, to
context specific information and opportunities which inform identity and impact the manner
and efficacy with which one applies himself to tasks, academic or otherwise, set before him.

As such, The purpose of this brief historical review is not to belabor or overstate the
implications of slavery, as it is admittedly complicated to calculate the effects that such a
history may have on the current experiences of individual black males from diverse
ancestries, but to explore its’ probable impact on current education policy affecting the
aggregate population. Embedded within this approach, there is an implicit acknowledgement
that the achievement gap is based upon group and not individual performance. Further, the
plight of African American males in this country over the last two centuries, as impacted by de
jure and de facto policies emerging from slavery, is examined. The presentation of this
trajectory is framed both by phenomenological and theoretical sources, which articulate
different lens through which one might interpret the ways that racial oppression has impacted
the education of black men over time. The former validates the salience of racism as a
historical reality, while the latter substantiates its’ resilience and pervasiveness as a current
impediment. A more detailed discussion of policy surrounding testing practices as they
developed in the United States, including the implications for black male intellectual
development, follows in the next chapter.

1.3.1 The Atlantic Slave Trade and the African American Male – Social Dominance
theory asserts that human societies all tend to be structured according to group-based
hierarchies and that systems of arbitrary-set hierarchies (inclusive of race) tend to emerge
where proper economic conditions allow (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Such was the case in
the ‘New World’ with the advancement of capitalism. Scholars note that “the concept of race
is a relatively recent development. Only in the past few centuries, owing largely to European
imperialism, have the world’s people been classified along racial lines” (Alexander, 2010, p.
23). In America, race emerged predominantly as a means of justifying slavery and exploiting
Native Americans. As much as development was a part of the institutionalization of
capitalism for Western Europe and Great Britain, “underdevelopment was the direct
consequence of this process: chattel slavery, share cropping, peonage, industrial labor at low
wages, and cultural chaos” (Marable, 1983, p.3). Eventually, conceptions of African inferiority became pervasive and took on a life of their own apart from economic necessity (Gossett, 1997; Takaki, 1952; Winthrop, 1962). DuBois explains the sentiment of slave shippers, slaveholders, and those sympathetic to the interests of the peculiar institution:

> Somewhere between men and cattle God created a tertian quid, and called it a Negro, -- a clownish, simple creature, at times even loveable within its limitations, but strictly foreordained to walk within the Veil… some of them with favoring chance might become men, but in sheer self-defense we dare not let them, and build about them walls so high, and hand between them and the light a veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through. (DuBois, 1940/2009, p.261)

The Atlantic Slave Trade or Middle Passage, as it is sometimes called, began the process of emasculation for African males in route to America. West Africans, usually captives of war, were sold to slave traders in exchange for weapons or other commodities. Once loaded on to ships, the African male was initiated “into a systematic degradation designed to strip away his humanity and make him ready for the seller’s block” (Black, 1997, p. 43). This ‘commoditization’ was an acute blow to both the sense of self and manhood of the African male, who prided himself on being able to protect and defend his wife and family (Smallwood, 2007; see also Gossett, 1997). This psychological shift was so intense that it induced deep depression and psychosis, which sometimes led to death. Some men threw themselves from ships, drowning themselves in the salt waters of the Atlantic sea, before they could be recovered by slavers. Others, mysteriously, were said to ‘will themselves dead.’ Black relates that “men who once stood in defense of their mother’s and father’s legacy, now, under extreme duress, simply sat down and died. They saw little reason to live, for their manhood had been rendered dysfunctional” (Black, 1997, p.49).

As damaging as this process was to African males, proponents of the ‘peculiar institution’ rationalized its justification through a platform of Manifest Destiny, which posited that it was the purpose of the white race to rule and, therefore, “the enslavement of blacks was essential to the freedom of whites” (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p. 127). This notion was supported theologically, referencing the curse issued by Noah on the descendents of Ham to become servants of servants, but also affirmed by scholars. Alexander Thomas observes
that “the black man, it was repeatedly claimed, was uniquely fitted for bondage by his primitive psychological organization. For him, mental health was contentment with his subservient lot, while protest was an infallible symptom of derangement” (Thomas & Sillen, 1972, p. 2). Hence, both religion and science conspired against the African American male in his subjugation by corroborating his inferiority, which reinforced his physical captivity in a psychological manner.

1.3.2 The Enslaved African American Male - The African American male in the ‘peculiar institution’ of slavery was no more able to cultivate a sense of self and manhood than he was during the Middle Passage. “Everywhere that [he] turned he met a law, institution, ideology, or individual that functioned to remind him of his inferiority, disallowing him agency, autonomy, or respect” (Black, 1997, p.63). Slave codes, expressing the view that “slaves are not people but property” (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p.140), served to reinforce the black male’s perception that he was indeed no longer a man but something else. As such, he lacked the autonomy, agency, or ‘purported’ nature to produce a self sustaining lifestyle.

Inevitably, dysfunction arose from the African American males’ thwarted ability to live out a healthy self concept of manhood. One such dysfunction was the distortion of fatherhood which, out of necessity, led black male fathers to focus more on training their sons to survive than teaching boys to become men. Consumed by the former, many times there was either little or no attention given to the latter. Black observes that “what black sons learned to value most was not the extent to which they understood the meaning and function of manhood, especially as it pertained to being a good husband and father, but how well they had mastered the art of survival” (Black, 1997, p. 89; see also Majors & Billson, 1992). In general, during his plantation existence, the entire system of enslavement was dedicated to the subservience and subjugation of the black male.

Regarding the cultivating of the slaves intellect, Alexander Crummell observes that:

There was no legal artifice conceivable which was not resorted to, to blindfold their souls from the light of letters…the legislatures of several states enacted laws and statues, closing the pages of every book printed to the
eyes of the Negroes; barring the doors of every school-room against them. (Crummell, 1897 p.10)

However, it is worth noting that some education, particularly reading instruction, persisted at the behest of sympathetic whites in defiance of the law. These persons were mostly clergymen, and the practice was especially present on the settlements of Quakers and Catholics. Woodson explains that “often opponents to this practice winked at it as an indulgence to the clerical profession,” but there was also in some parts of the South a growing sentiment that educated slaves were more loyal, subservient, and not prone to insurrection as was previously thought (Woodson, 1919, p.11, 14). Nonetheless, such circumstances were not ubiquitous and where they did exist, due to the restrictive policy climate and prevailing public sentiment, remained limited in scope.

1.3.3 The Free Black Male of the 19th and 20th Century - The reality of the free black man in the 19th and 20th century was not independent of a myriad of issues which had been carried over from his physical enslavement. Ever present were institutional and systemic constructs that served as a constant reminder of his inferiority and inequality in a white male dominated society. However, despite obstacles, the prevailing sentiment was that “the best way for a black man to secure his manhood [was] through education” (Black, 1997, p. 144; see also Woodson, 1933/2005; Dubois, 1902). However, the education of African Americans, in particular African American males, proved to be quite controversial.

James D. Anderson notes in his work, The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935, that “both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American Education… both were fundamental to American conception of society and progress, occupied the same time and space, were fostered by the same governments, and usually were embraced by the same leaders” (Anderson, 1988, p.1). Nonetheless, it was generally accepted by Negro leaders, admitting a difference in opinions pertaining to the type of educational programming to be embarked upon – academic or industrial – that the education of the black man was essential to the uplift and edification of the race. This was not a simple task. WEB Dubois notes of his educational experience at Harvard in the late 1890s that:
I began to face scientific race dogma: first of all evolution and the ‘Survival of the Fittest.’ It was continually stressed in the community and in classes that there was a vast difference in the development of the whites and the ‘lower’ races; that this could be seen in the physical development of the Negro. I remember once in a museum, coming face to face with a demonstration: a series of skeletons arranged from a little monkey to a tall well-developed white man, with a Negro barely outranking a chimpanzee. (Dubois, 1940/2009, p. 98)

As such, African American males of the 19th and 20th century faced two main obstacles. First, it was assumed in many cases that the black man was “overwhelmed by the destructive influences of the racist society” (Thomas & Sillen, 1972, p. 47). Perhaps, it was posited, the systemic influences of white racism had crippled the black man such that he could no longer function as a normal member of society. Second, it was assumed by some that African American males, constrained by genetic inferiority, were in some way culturally deficient and that their manifest deficiency was the result of their choices. Scholars observe, in contrast, that “it is a misconception ‘that people live as they do because they prefer their actual mode of existence and its consequences.’ In a highly stratified social system like that of the United States, poor people have a narrow margin of choice as to how they will live. It is risky indeed to infer a group’s preferences and potentialities from the adaptations forced upon them by their conditions of existence” (Thomas, 1972, p. 81). It was acknowledged scholars, both within and outside of the black community, that race and poverty were two separate entities. Hence, the characteristics and behaviors of the impoverished black male were not indicative of intelligence or capacity but learned experience, and to make judgments on this basis meant to invite inaccuracies and oversimplifications. Moreover, scholars explain, the symbiotic relationship between institutional racism and capital accumulation, along with pervasive ‘societal consensuality’ regarding African American (and especially African American male) inferiority, in general, impeded social progress during this time period (Marable, 2007; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Policy responses to racism and poverty proved difficult amongst a post-reconstruction black community, which vacillated between approaches of nationalism and socialism throughout the civil rights movement and post segregation eras. Notably, the benefits of integration were not equally distributed amongst an increasingly fractured black
community. Wealth and opportunities accrued disproportionately to the black elite while leaving the black poor, as a rule, unaffected (Marable, 2007). Furthermore, the availability and quality of education during this time period had a significant impact on the academic trajectory of African American males. Specifically, “at the dawn of the twentieth century... the infrastructure necessary for a viable black public school system did not exist... [This was] primarily because there were not enough school buildings or seating capacity to accommodate the overwhelming majority of these children” (Anderson, 1988, p. 110). Moreover, only long after common schools had been made available for other school children in America, during the first third of the 20th century, did public elementary schools become available for the majority of African American children in the South. This lack of access was even more pronounced at the secondary level:

Black children were excluded from this emergent system of public secondary education. The number of four-year white public schools in Georgia, for instance, increased from 4 in 1904 to 122 in 1916. At that time Georgia had no four-year public high schools for its black children, who constituted 46 percent of the state’s secondary school age population. (Anderson p. 196; see also Trigg, 1934)

This lack of access was compounded by what was often a poor quality of education. WEB Dubois relates that “high schools were doing little more than common school work, and the common schools were training but a third of the children who ought to be in them, and training these too often poorly” (Dubois, 1902, p. 291).

Even after integration, the great majority of African Americans continued to suffer the effects of institutionalized racism. Competing ideologies of Black Nationalism within the black community led to its’ eventual demise as a strategy and its’ impotency, on a national stage, as a policy driver. Black youth (especially poor black males) that had once expressed rage through the mantra of ‘black power’ turned that violence on their own communities, and the legal and criminal justice systems, as instruments of the hierarchical structure, responded in kind with mandatory sentencing laws which disproportionately impacted African American males (Marable, 1983; 2007; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Alexander, 2010). Amidst this climate, education funding suffered. Also, it became increasing unclear 1) what the ultimate goals of
integration, beyond the act of desegregation itself, might be, and 2) what benefits might realistically be attained from it (Marable, 2007).

1.3.4 Challenges for African American Males in the 21st Century – Provided African American males’ exclusion from and limitation to educational opportunity during slavery and in the decades following, it is reasonable that there would be an achievement gap between blacks and whites. Indeed, there was up until Brown v. Board of Education (1954) a legally sanctioned ‘education gap’ in the form of segregation (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896). However, as previously indicated, the achievement gap persists even today. This holds true despite the passage of Brown in 1954, which effectively repealed the Plessy doctrine of ‘separate but equal.’ Further, the achievement gap has been relatively unaffected by the remedial efforts of a long line of education policies, which culminated in the 2001 passage of NCLB. Scholars posit several reasons for this.

There is evidence that segregation persists de facto, which some practitioners and researchers point to as influencing the achievement gap. Other researchers, observing that academic achievement and intellectual capacity are influenced by challenge, mentoring, modeling, and instruction in the cultivation of cognitive strategies (Peck, 1997), suggest that “children who read books, visit museums, attend concerts, and go to the theater and cinema (or simply grow up in families where these practices are prevalent) acquire a familiarity with the dominant culture that the educational system implicitly requires of its students for academic attainment” (MacCleod, 2009, p. 14). Studying working class children in England, McCleod suggests that certain home activities are associated with the acquisition of the dominant culture.

We know that African American males are disproportionately affected by rates of poverty in comparison to their white and Asian counterparts (Sirin, 2005, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Research indicates that:

Because ‘one of the effects of the class system is to limit access to elaborated codes’ and because schools operate in accordance with the symbolic order of elaborated codes, working-class children are at a significant disadvantage. ‘Our schools are not made for these children; why should the children respond?’ To ask the child to switch to an elaborated code which presupposes different role relationships and systems of
meaning... may create for the child a bewildering and potentially damaging experience’... The result is that the black working-class children are not socialized to cope with the language patterns used in school and quickly fall into a pattern of academic failure. (McCleod, 2009, p.17, 18)

Though the class system in America may not be as rigidly defined as it is in Britain, scholars such as Lisa Delpit (1995 / 2006) and Ann Ferguson (2005) have documented similar disparities in cultural knowledge among minorities in America. African American males as a group, affected by higher rates of poverty than their white counterparts, will also disproportionately lack access to ‘elaborated codes.’ This lack of access often translates into academic failure and underachievement. While there are some children that are able to successfully navigate this challenge, many do not. Some scholars explain this phenomenon through the prevalence and persistence of ‘social dominance,’ which is brought about by aggregated individual and institutional discrimination (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Further, researchers point to the existence of a counter school culture as potentially detrasing from the academic experience of African American males. Beverly Tatum notes in her research that during the identity stage of development, typically occurring during the teen years, many black youngsters implicitly reject school and academic achievement. They perceive, at this developmental stage, that to embrace achievement would mean at least a partial rejection of their identity as African Americans (Tatum, 1997). Other scholars have taken note of the conflict that can exist between identity and academic achievement. McCleod in his research states that “the lads [poor working class black and white students] believe that their chances for significant upward mobility are so remote that sacrificing ‘a laff’ for good behavior in school is pointless” (McCleod, 2009, p. 19). The way in which students conceive of rewards and align their values with the school impacts students’ success and academic achievement. When students reject the school as a viable mechanism for achieving success, either because they believe it to be irrelevant to their lives or insufficient to help them overcome the impediments to attaining high performance, the result is a cycle of disengagement. Low efficacy leads to disengagement which is expressed through disruptive behavior and resistance to school authority. This resistance, in turn, impacts academic achievement and decreases efficacy.
In her work dealing with African American males Ann Ferguson observes that “in public, school people seemed to subscribe to explanations that the ‘at-riskness’ of children was a consequence of apathetic or dysfunctional families but in private conversations and interviews, black teachers and staff hinted that race, gender, and class made a significant difference in a child’s experience of school” (Ferguson, 2001, p.18). Linda Darling-Hammond explains this sentiment as an expressed acknowledgment of the historical impact of racism and the diminished educational opportunity which resulted from it:

> Enormous energy is devoted in the United States to discussions of the achievement gap. Much less attention, however, is paid to the opportunity gap – the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources – expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources – that support learning at home and at school. Compounded inequalities in all of these resources, reinforced over generations, have created what Gloria Ladson-Billings has called an ‘educational debt,’ owed to those who have been denied access to quality education for hundreds of years. (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.28)

Opportunities, or the lack thereof, mitigate achievement in that they position students differently as it relates to their ability to attain school success. This notion is supported by the current work of policy analysts and education scholars. In a policy brief analyzing the affects of school, teacher and leader affects on student attainment, Kristen Miller summarizes Marzano’s work (2003):

> A student scoring at the 50th percentile who spends two years in an average school, with an average teacher, is likely to continue scoring at the 50th achievement percentile. That same student, having spent two years in a ‘most effective’ school with a ‘most effective’ teacher, rockets to the 96th achievement percentile. The converse also holds: If this same student spends two years in a ‘least effective’ school with a ‘least effective’ teacher, that student’s achievement level plunges to the third percentile. (Miller, 2003, p.2)

Teacher expectations also influence the academic achievement of African American males. In fact, “a number of studies indicate that the placement of kids in high or low-track groups or classrooms within schools is not simply the result of test scores of student achievement but is influenced by such things as teachers’ perceptions of student appearance, behavior, and social background” (Ferguson, 2001, p.53, 54). Classroom teachers in the 21st century play a vital role in establishing for African American males images
of academic competence or incompetence. Also, teachers and cultivate a willingness on the part of these students to engage in the learning process and help them to develop skills critical to their academic advancement and achievement.
Chapter 2
2 Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

A brief overview of the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as revealed by the various monikers that have identified its reauthorization over the years, is pertinent to the subject matter investigated in this study. Specifically, as it relates to ESEA, this section reviews ‘Improving America’s Schools Act’ (IASA), as conceived under the Clinton Administration, and, most recently, ‘No Child Left Behind’ (NCLB), which developed under the George W. Bush administration. Further, as part of the research, an exploration of significant education reform initiatives, which influenced or developed alongside ESEA, are set forth. Here, as opposed to the historical analysis in the preceding chapter, the notion of ‘education policy’ is conceptualized more narrowly, referring to the formal policies and practices which accompany the act (ESEA). In so doing, NCLB is examined in light of specific equity considerations including: social justice, legal concerns, funding issues and systemic effects.

Both approaches are useful. In the previous section the educational experience of African American males was contextualized as influenced by socio-political forces prior to the codification of a uniform federal, and thus, far reaching education policy. In this section, the educational opportunities and challenges facing African American males are investigated amidst proposed federal remedies seeking to ameliorate lagging academic achievement. This historical analysis extends beyond the evolution of ESEA to examine the ways in which K-12 testing practices, and more broadly the emergence of the ‘achievement gap,’ have informed and shaped educational policy within this nation. This creates a backdrop for understanding the tension which exists between policy formation and implementation, and
contextualizes the evolving conceptual framework of this study: socio-political forces shaping 
education policy, the impact of policy on academic performance, and the relationship 
between testing practices and the achievement gap.

Lastly, RTTT, ESEA Flexibility and the proposed Blueprint for Reform are examined 
as the most recent policy initiatives seeking to address the achievement gap in K-12 
education. This analysis forecasts the direction of educational policies in the U.S. as both an 
‘end’ and a ‘means to an end’. These policies are conceived as an ‘end’ in that they seek to 
advance education aims, and a ‘means to an end’ in that they seek to extend federal 
authority and private interests. Furthermore, this section demonstrates, what is in the 
author’s opinion, both the U.S. Department of Education’s acknowledgement of NCLB 
deficiencies, on the one hand, and a lack of clarity regarding the fashioning of a more 
effective remedy, on the other.

2.2 Elementary Secondary Education Act: Impetus and Influences

It is well established that the 10th Amendment relegates responsibility for education 
as the function of states. However, over the last six decades, the federal government has 
exerted increasing influence in the educational landscape of this nation. As such, there 
arises more and more contention over ‘who controls our schools’ and ‘who can change our 
Within the scope of the history of educational policy in this nation these issues operate at the 
center of the reform process.

At their core, questions of ‘control’ and ‘change,’ more than being about change, are 
about two competing ideologies of education: essentialism and progressivism. Although they 
are sometimes conceptualized differently, as liberalism and pragmatism, respectively, the 
basic tenets of the philosophies remain the same. Essentialism purports that a proper 
education should provide certain ‘basics’ or core subjects and disciplines to be studied by 
students. Progressivism, on the other hand, advocates a ‘student-centered’ approach which 
focuses on the process of acquiring sound habits of inquiry which extend beyond the
acquisition of facts (Kessinger, 2011; Boisvert, 1998; see also Dewey, 1929). As such, essentialists often critique progressives for being impractical. They assert that students must know certain ‘things.’ Opposite of this view, progressives charge essentialists with inflexible rigidity. In their view an essentialist approach produces mechanistic automatons rather than students. John Dewey, considered one of the fathers of American education and a founder of pragmatism, as opposed to some of the more ardent and influential supporters of progressivism, was measured in his approach. He maintained that “it was not enough for progressive teachers to throw out everything the old [traditional] schools had done, to replace discipline by chaos, a rigid syllabus with no syllabus. And [he] was inclined to think that many schools had done exactly that and had used his name to justify it” (Ryan, 1999, p. 282). Such is the nature of policy reform, at times transitioning from one ideological extreme to the other, and in this way, just prior to the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the prevailing educational ideology in this nation changed.

2.2.1 National Defense Education Act – The successful launch of the Soviet space ship, Sputnik (1957), was indeed more than a mere aeronautical feat. It was, a fact noted by many prominent historians, a call to arms for the American public (Kessinger, 2011; see also Null, 2008; Spring, 2005). In the wake of Sputnik, many questioned whether the cause of the Soviet’s besting of America in this grand achievement was the result of a decline in the nation’s educational system. Progressive ideals since the beginning of the twentieth century, due to the influence of John Dewey and others, had taken sway in the educational arena. Although in some cases this was in rhetoric more than in effect, reformers, advocating an essentialist platform, found it convenient to blame America’s perceived slippage on progressive notions of education (Kessinger, 2011; Bagley 1936, 2006; Labaree, 2005). In retrospect, the assumption is not beyond contestation that progressive ideology was the sole cause, or even a partial cause of this particular American ‘under achievement.’ Perhaps mere chance or happenstance was the reason for the Soviet’s grand achievement. Nevertheless, the assignment of culpability to progressivism, beginning with the passage of
the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), set into motion a sequence of events which have shaped the trajectory of the American educational system for the last 50 years.

Kessinger observes “it is notable that the [National Defense Education Act] NDEA was passed by the U.S. Congress within a year of... the launching of Sputnik” (2011, p. 267). Amidst fears that America was losing its scientific edge, NDEA provided federal funding to institutions at all levels, but with the specific intention and focus of supporting disciplines and areas of study that would provide the nation with ‘defense-oriented personnel.’ These areas included foreign language scholars and engineering students. Also, it began what is now known as the federal student loan program, which provided college access to many students who enrolled in university programs in the 1960s and thereafter (Kessinger, 2011; see also Baily & Mosher, 1968).

2.2.2 Elementary and Secondary Education Act – Following NDEA, in 1965 congress passed the first version of what became known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The importance with which the policy was perceived in the public arena was illuminated by Lyndon Johnson, who stated at the time of its passage - “No law I have signed or will ever sign means more to the future of America” (Halperin, 1975, p. 5). This was high praise considering he had just one year prior signed into law the Civil Rights Act. ESEA represented a modest departure from NDEA in that its’ pursuits, although no less grandiose than its predecessor, were somewhat broader. Initially, the policy set out to accomplish a 5 pronged effort: 1) to help ‘disadvantaged’ children, 2) build community libraries, 3) promote community-wide projects for educational change; 4) spur research and development and 5) upgrade state departments of education (Halperin, 1975; Elementary Secondary Education Act, 1965).

While these goals may have been somewhat diminished by a lack of funds (The Vietnam War reduced expected expenditures from around $5 billion to less than $1.7 billion) and dubious mechanisms for measuring success, ESEA accomplished many things. It placed a spotlight on the needs of children, particularly special education, recruited quality personnel, and promoted the evaluation and accountability movement. However, one of its
most significant accomplishments was to open the door for large-scale federal involvement in public schools. This had previously been considered taboo for a variety of reasons, including: fear of federal control, desegregation, and church state struggles over the funding of parochial schools (Kessinger, 2011; Spring, 2005; Halperin 1975). Indeed, by tying federal aid to education, as it did with "other national concerns, the federal government was denoting the importance now given to education and that the federal government would be a major player in this relationship" (Kessinger, 2011, p. 268). The shift was in large part due to the advocacy of essentialist reformers who sought, as previously noted, to attach educational issues to U.S. defense, and additionally to economic capacity and global competition.

2.2.3 National Assessment of Educational Progress – Established in the 1960s as a national test to monitor the progress of students in the United States, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was a natural outgrowth of ESEA. As such:

It serves as a primary indicator of the impact of national and state educational reform efforts; it is a trustworthy information source about the condition of education in the U.S. for the general public, the U.S. congress, and the U.S. Department of Education; and, it provides student performance results used by professional associations and organizations, major newspapers, and journals. (Kessinger, 2011, p. 269)

NAEP, which is a norm-referenced test, provides results that wield enormous political capital in the shaping of educational policy within this nation. Specifically, they are the key data points relied upon, with some credence given to SAT results and less to IQ measures, in the identification and tracking of the ‘achievement gap.’ Testing in the content areas of reading, writing and mathematics, NAEP results compare student achievement across various states and local jurisdictions and track changes in national results at the 4th, 8th and 12th grade levels. NAEP testing has remained voluntary. However, all states receiving Title I funding from ESEA must participate in reading and mathematics testing at the 4th and 8th grade level. Hence, effectively, NAEP testing is rendered a ‘required opportunity.’ Provided this influence, legislative mandates require the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to periodically form independent panels of technical experts to review and monitor NAEP results. NCES panels, considering NAEP outcomes, provide accountability by ensuring the validity and reliability.
2.2.4 *A Nation at Risk* – Reaffirming the fears of essentialist reformers from the days of Sputnik, a policy brief known as *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) was released in 1983 which called attention to the deteriorating state of education in the U.S. Specifically, it warned that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (*A Nation at Risk*, 1983, p.5). President Reagan advanced the idea that it was the Federal government and not the state that, under such circumstances, bore “the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education” (ANAR, 1983, p. 33).

ANAR charged that America’s educational institutions had lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, as well as the high expectations and discipline associated with them. It advocated for ‘five basics’ instead of three Rs, which included 3 years of mathematics, science and social studies, a half year of computer science, and 2 years of foreign language. Creating a sense of urgency, the brief cited international comparisons which noted America’s lagging achievement and made predictions of a work force that would be woefully unprepared for the future demands of a knowledge economy. Whereas one might have questioned whether the Soviet’s achievement of aeronautical prowess via Sputnik was actually caused by a decline in the nation’s educational system, ANAR set out to ‘leave no doubt.’ Its’ findings and recommendations spanned across content, expectations, use of time and teaching. As a result of this information, there was agreement at the National and State level that student achievement and academic standards should be raised, and schools held accountable for results (Kessinger, 2011; ANAR, 1983; see also Bagley, 1936, 2006).

2.2.5 *Improving America’s Schools Act* – Following the release of ANAR and a general sentiment in the late 1980s that significant progress had not been achieved since its publication, in 1994 President Clinton reauthorized ESEA as *Improving America’s Schools Act* (IASA). The focus of IASA was to establish challenging content and performance standards with the goal of producing “a useful and competent individual” (Kessinger 2011, p. 274). IASA sought intensive and sustained professional development for teachers and flexibility for local initiatives with shared responsibility for student performance.
The challenge with IASA, and specifically with its’ Title I provision, which was the nation’s largest federally funded reading program, was the difficulty of integrating the teaching of reading into academic content standards which had traditionally been treated as independent silos. Indeed, considering the history of conflict between essentialist reformers and progressives, integrated interdisciplinary teaching of content standards, which was supported by advocates of IASA’s Title I, stood on risky ground from a policy standpoint (Plunkett, 1997; Spring, 2005). Furthermore, since the formation and implementation of academic content standards were left to states under IASA, its’ oversight in this regard was advisory and not compulsory.

One of the most significant aspects of IASA, as a purported change agent of the nation’s educational system, was the infusion of dollars via Title I. This investment was conceived of as “dollars that could be used flexibly to accomplish site-based academic aims… Program staffs were given roughly 5 years to make the changes they needed to implement the act fully” (Billig, 1997, p. 331). This flexibility was envisioned for the purpose of providing state and local experts with the necessary autonomy to creatively construct and implement those policies and practices which would have the greatest probability for success within a given context. However, after 3 years of implementation, Billig notes in her research that many district-level respondents (teachers and administrators) felt that IASA flexibility had gone too far. She observes that “respondents wanted more parameters for performance, more advice and guidance, and more assurance that they [were] doing the ‘right’ thing. Some were concerned that Title I was being used for general aid and that children from high-poverty areas will fall through the cracks, especially in school wide program models” (Billig, 1997, p.336). This view is particularly interesting in light of the current policy climate. Specifically, educators are demanding greater flexibility and less accountability measures. As a result, ESEA flexibility was established. Nevertheless, IASA’s mechanism for Title I funding was widely recognized for promoting site based management, which enabled principals to engage in greater leadership roles and promoted teacher responsibility for student engagement.
2.3 Situating No Child Left Behind

As stated in the introduction, the importance of situating a policy within a historical context emerges from the fact that it is difficult to understand a policy, or frame its’ impact accurately apart from a knowledge of the policies which mitigated and complicated its’ origination (Bechely 2005; Ball 1994). As such, ‘No Child Left Behind’ is presented here, in light of its’ history and key components, as the current culmination – notwithstanding the recent emergence of Race to the Top and ESEA flexibility as supplemental programs – in a legacy of education policy in this nation dating back to the days of Sputnik and the National Defense Act.

2.3.1 History - The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – more recently known as IASA – which, as examined in the preceding sections, has been the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school since 1965. NCLB originated with the 2000 presidential campaign as then candidate George W. Bush made education a featured aspect of his political stumping. Promising reforms to a system in need of change, President Bush preached an end to “what he called the soft bigotry of low expectations” (Manna, 2004, p. 126). NCLB was his solution. Presenting his plans for school reform on January 23, 2001 he described his principles:

First, that every child should be tested every year in grades three through eight, using state tests, not a national test; second, that decisions about how to reform schools would be made by the states, not by Washington; third, that low performing schools would get help to improve; and fourth, that students stuck in persistently dangerous or failing schools would be able to transfer to other schools. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 94)

President Bush courted 3 groups that would be important in laying the groundwork to ensure the success of his reiteration of ESEA. First, in order to facilitate support from legislators in Washington, he met with a bi-partisan group of congressman. Included in this group were Republican John Boehner, chair of the Education and Workforce committee, and Democrat George Miller. Next, recognizing that successful implementation of his plan would require more than Washington backing, he met with state officials. Meeting with 19 Republican Governors at his Texas ranch, Bush, hoping to ameliorate the worry from state
officials of top down micro management from Washington bureaucrats, promised greater flexibility with federal dollars under NCLB. After taking office, he held another similar meeting with both Republican and Democrat Governors (Manna, 2004; see also Ravitch 2010).

Lastly, Bush met with business leaders. These individuals included members of the Business Roundtable and chief executive officers from some of the most influential corporations in the United States. The conversations led to the development of the Business Coalition for Excellence in Education, which was facilitated by National Alliance of Business president Milton Goldberg. This organization was formed with the explicit purpose of shaping the next ESEA.

When announcing his plan, Bush stressed the need for all students to achieve at high levels. He emphasized the importance for bipartisanship and, at the risk of alienating some conservative members of his own party, stated that “change will not come by disdaining or dismantling the federal role in education” (Manna, 2004, p. 128). To facilitate the effective implementation of NCLB, Bush maintained that bipartisan education reform would be a central aspect of his administration. Ultimately, this was a key component to the passage of the policy. During the legislative process of NCLB four distinct themes continually reemerged. First, Republican conservatives remained wary of the greater role of the federal government in education. This was a recurring concern from the initial days of ESEA.

Second, there was a question whether centrist Democrats, such as Joe Lieberman and Evan Bayh, from whose education plan (Three Rs – Reading, ‘wRiting’ and ‘aRithmetic’) Bush had borrowed in constructing NCLB, would be able to warm their party to Bush’s plan for education reform. Third, there was a significant challenge in creating a federal law that both held states accountable for results and provided the flexibility and resources needed to support states. This was a particular challenge as states were not similarly situated, regarding their prior preparation and fiscal positioning, in their capacity to rise to this new standard. Fourth, the legislation package of NCLB, foreshadowing and perhaps influencing the Obama administration’s more recent proposal, was couched in a blueprint versus a bill, which was facilitated by the leadership of the ‘big four’: Congressmen Boehner and Miller and
Senators Kennedy and Gregg. These legislative leaders were charged with the responsibility of developing the coalitions and political alliances that would be necessary for the passage of NCLB (Manna, 2004).

2.3.2 Key Components – While the focus of NCLB is increased student academic achievement, the scope of the act encompasses four pillars: 1) Stronger Accountability for Results, 2) More Freedom for States and Communities, 3) Proven Education Methods and 4) More Choices for Parents. The first pillar, accountability for results, conveys the focus on academic achievement that both educators and non-educators alike have come to associate with NCLB. However, NCLB also communicates an emphasis on social justice. Namely, "under No Child Left Behind, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Hence, NCLB not only seeks to increase academic achievement, but also aspires to narrow the margins between high achieving and low achieving groups. The second pillar, more freedom for states, seeks to provide unprecedented flexibility to states in regard to how federal funds are spent. The hope is that this will allow states and local districts to create and fund programming specifically tailored to their specific identified needs. The third pillar, proven education methods, places an emphasis on researching, identifying, and funding the implementation of educational programs and practices that have proven to be effective. Lastly, the fourth pillar of NCLB, more choices for parents, empowers "parents of children in low-performing schools [with] options… In schools that do not meet state standards for at least two consecutive years, parents may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district" (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). As such, NCLB seeks to have parents play an active role in selecting and monitoring the schools that their children attend.

Among the four pillars, the main focus of NCLB is accountability. This mechanism is "driven by two pistons: the insistence that states adopt systematic standards and testing for schools and districts, and the intervention in ineffective schools and districts, executed while
providing immediate relief for pupils” (Hess & Finn, 2007, p. 6). NCLB’s accountability plan includes several features. First, it is expected that states adopt performance levels and adopt their own conceptions of proficiency. Second, states are annually required to test students in grades three through eight and one time in high school. These test scores are required to be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, and limited English proficiency, which is meant to ensure that the progress of each group is measured and not concealed by the aggregate average. Third, states are expected to create timelines demonstrating how 100 percent of their students will reach proficiency in the areas of reading and mathematics by 2013-2014. Fourth, schools and districts are expected to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in NCLB subgroups. The goal is that they will achieve 100 percent student proficiency by 2013-2014. Fifth, schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress toward 100 percent proficiency are deemed as ‘Schools In Need of Improvement’ (SINI) and face a series of increasingly stringent sanctions (NCLB, 2001; Hess & Finn, 2007). The first year a district misses AYP involves being placed ‘on notice.’ In the second year, the district must offer students the option of transferring to a successful school. Failure to meet AYP for a third year places districts under a requirement to offer tutoring to students at the districts expense, and in the fourth year, ‘corrective action,’ inclusive of curriculum changes, staff changes, or a longer school day may be required. A school missing AYP for any NCLB subgroup for five consecutive years is mandated to ‘restructure.’ Further, in the sixth year, schools required to restructure are given five options: replace the principal and staff, relinquish control to private management, turn over control of the school to the state, or ‘any other major restructuring of the schools governance’ (NCLB, 2001; also see Ravitch 2010).

2.4 Testing and the Achievement Gap: Origins Affecting NCLB

Having provided a summary of the history of education policy and initiatives leading up to and developing alongside ESEA, this section examines the evolution of testing practices in the U.S. This provides an additional context for the analysis of the ‘achievement gap’ as it has been framed by educational executives and policy makers. Specifically, the
nature of utilizing the bell curve or normal curve as a mechanism for standardizing, and hence, comparing the performance of students is explored. Further, the author reviews the outcomes of standardized testing practices, as it relates to the academic attainment and matriculation of African American males in K-12 settings, and the implications of these results for NCLB and future education policy.

2.4.1 The Bell Curve: History and Implications – The history of the bell curve and its impact on the education of African American males does not begin with achievement tests but with the advent of IQ testing in the field of social science. Gould asserts that “racial prejudice may be as old as recorded human history, but its biological justification imposed the additional burden of intrinsic inferiority upon despised groups, and precluded redemption by conversion” (Gould, 1996, p.63). In other words, as forecasted by Frederick Douglas in 1854, “the evils most fostered by slavery and oppression are precisely those which slave holders and oppressors would transfer from their system to the inherent character of their victims” (Gates, 1995, p.94). More recently, scholars have proffered research that disputes the alleged inferiority of African Americans. Considering the impact of desegregation in the 1970s, Crain and Mahard discovered that desegregation did improve the achievement of African American students. However, they also recognized that these results were complicated by the fact that integration efforts often resulted in improved material resources and curriculum. Nevertheless, they observed that black achievement was highest in those schools that were 72 to 81 percent white, but dropped when school demographics fell outside of this ‘optimum’ mix (Crain & Mahard, 1978, 1982).

Horace Mann Bond argued that “[standardized] tests measured preparation, not ability, and unfairly applied the same standard to affluent children and poor children. The ‘environmental factor’ was a key issue” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.28). Hence, if the standard to which one is held accountable is a biased one, accountability alone is not enough in the quest for equality. This assertion is supported by notable scholars. Charles Willie, Professor Emeritus at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, "often quips to African American audiences, ‘Once you know what the dominant group knows, they change the test on you!’"
Jay Rosner, executive director of the Princeton Review Foundation, would most certainly agree. He calls the SAT ‘a white preference test” (Johnson et al., 2001, p.32). The culturally biased content of high stakes tests or at least the cultural knowledge of how to take the test renders them, in the opinion of many scholars and practitioners alike, dubious and incomplete measures of academic ability and achievement. This is particularly salient as it relates to the performance of a vast number of minority students.

S-bias and V-bias are important to an appropriate framing of the achievement gap. Stephen J. Gould explains the difference between S-bias and V-Bias in IQ tests, norm-reference tests utilizing the bell curve (as NAEP does), as a difference between predictability and validity. He explains that S-Bias relates to the predictability of a test. As such, when a test is predictable it consistently measures the same capacity between individuals from different groups. An African American male scoring 100 on a given IQ test, where there is no S-bias, would have the same ability for doing anything that a Caucasian male scoring 100 would be able to do. As he explains the difference between S-bias and V-bias:

V-bias… embodies an entirely different issue that, unfortunately, uses the same word. The public wants to know whether blacks that average 85 and whites 100 [on IQ tests] because society treats blacks unfairly – that is, whether lower black scores record biases in the social sense. And this crucial question (to which we do not know the answer) cannot be addressed by a demonstration that S-bias doesn’t exist. (Gould, 1996, p. 374)

The same challenge might reasonably be asserted as it applies to NAEP test results measuring the achievement gap. Knowing that standardized norm-referenced tests have predictable results and demonstrate disparate outcomes for members of certain groups in no way answers the question about validity – ‘what the source’ of the gap is, and, just as important, remedy – ‘what it might reasonably take to mitigate it.’ Rejecting outright the racist dogma that such performance may be owing to inferior mental capacity of the group itself, this research leans to the conclusions of scholars who consider inadequate preparation, poor teacher quality, or lack of fit between student culture and school culture as explanatory influences of the achievement gap.

Conversely, Herrnstein and Murray defend the validity of standardized tests and regard the achievement gap as an indicator of African American group inferiority. To
substantiate this claim they point to the presence of both external and internal ‘predictability.’ The tests, they assert, effectively predict the performance of black students in the ‘real world’ in the same way that they predict the performance for white students in the ‘real world.’

Moreover, as it relates to internal bias, they observe that black and white students perform similarly on items which might be considered easy or difficult (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). In assessing the possibility that race prejudice might pervade society to the extent that it produces the effect of an achievement gap, the scholars purport that “it is not good enough to accept without question that a general ‘background radiation’ of bias, uniform and ubiquitous, explains away black and white difference in test scores and performance measures” (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 285). This response provokes this author to ask of them, as other scholars have, ‘why not?’

Researchers have defined ‘racism’ as an “elaborate process of social and legal domination which maintains racial categorization and ideologies as the method for determining which group receives the best and least of society’s resources” (Lewis et al, 2008, p.128). Howard observes that a performance gap, resulting from the measurement of intellectual performance, entails ‘comparison.’ This comparison may be with others (i.e. the normal curve), or with some pre-established standard (via high-stakes graduation tests) (Howard & Hammond, 1985). As such, even the conceptualization of the black white achievement gap, reifying race and codifying racialized outcomes, might be seen as a product of racism which reinforces racist notions. Implications of these concepts are addressed in the following section.

2.4.2 Rumors of Inferiority: Outcomes of Testing and Policy – The 2000 National Center for Education Statistics report concluded that “by the end of the 12th grade, African American students’ demonstrated mastery of reading and mathematics concepts was similar to that of a white eighth grade student” (Lewis et al, 2008, p. 130). Regarding policy effects, Diane Ravitch notes that NCLB has not brought “about rapidly improving test scores. To the contrary, test score gains on the National Assessment of Educational Progress – the only national yardstick for this period – were modest or nonexistent in the four years after the
adoption of the law” (Ravitch, 2010, p.109). Moreover, some research indicates that the new accountability demands imposed by NCLB may be exacerbating the achievement gap for at-risk students (Langana-Riordan, 2009; See also Guisbond & Neill, 2004; Haney, 2000; K. Jones, 2004). Many states attempted to meet mandates of NCLB by lowering the standards of state tests. Thereby, rates of proficiency were inflated. One such state, Mississippi, although NAEP data indicated that just 18 percent of fourth graders in the state were proficient, produced a fourth grade proficiency rating of 89 percent on the state’s test (Ravitch, 2010).

In an attempt to understand the achievement gap, scholars have set forth various frameworks. The work of Lewis and others, who have framed it according to a matrix of achievement paradigms (MAP), articulates three ideologies which provide an explanation for the test score disparity between African Americans and their white and Asian counterparts. The ideologies include: 1) social-structural 2) deficit and 3) discontinuity. The social-structural inequality paradigm “argues that schools are born from, maintained by, and reproduced from racist philosophies, policies, and practices in education” (Lewis et al, 2008, p.138). This view conceives that it is the larger society – influenced by concepts of racism affecting historical, economic and political processes – that is responsible for the achievement gap (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

The deficit paradigm, in opposition to the social-structural paradigm, “seeks to blame the cultures of African American families and students as [being] diseased and deleterious of worth” (Lewis et al, 2008, p.140). Within this concept, the pathologies of black families and cultures, as opposed to the ills of society, are conceived as the impetus for the achievement gap. This frame reinforces notions of African American inferiority and can become particularly challenging in schools where the students and teachers do not share the same cultural background.

Lastly, the Discontinuity Paradigm “places the primary responsibility, not necessarily blame, for achievement and failure on members of the schooling system” (Lewis et al, 2008, p.141). This interpretive lens conceives that teachers, utilizing culturally responsive
pedagogy, are able to facilitate learning which leads to increased academic achievement for African American students. Discontinuity discounts deficit orientations by asserting that the achievement gap between African Americans and their white and Asian counterparts is the result of a misalignment of teacher pedagogy and student learning styles.

Whether the achievement gap is perceived to be the result of socio-structural inequity, deficit, or discontinuity makes a significant difference in the way in which conclusions are drawn pertaining to its’ origin and persistence. Indeed, the fact that the ‘gap’ is conceived of in terms of achievement is indicative more so of the deficit paradigm than either the socio-structural inequity or discontinuity frames. This places the focus on ‘what African Americans students achieve, in comparison to white students,’ and not on ‘how they come to achieve what they do, in comparison to white students.’ Howard and Hammond argue that this conception has lent itself to ‘rumors of inferiority’ pertaining to African American males. Further exacerbating the problem of lagging achievement, they assert that “the need of [African Americans] to avoid intellectual competition is a psychological reaction to an image of black intellectual inferiority that has been projected by the larger society, and a less than conscious process of internalization of that image by black people over the generations” (Howard & Hammond, 1985, p.3; see also Marable, 1983). These scholars propose that suppressed expectancy affects both the behavior (intensity of effort) and cognition (mental processing) of African Americans as it relates to academic preparedness and testing success.

In an attempt to shift this focus, Linda Darling-Hammond has proffered the ‘opportunity gap,’ which constructs the disparity in scores between blacks and whites in terms of an ‘education debt’ (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings frames the education debt in terms of 4 different but interrelated aspects: 1) the historical debt 2) the economic debt 3) the sociopolitical debt 4) and the moral debt. Arguably, the notion of a ‘psychological debt,’ as articulated in the preceding discussion regarding African American ‘inferiority,’ might be added to this list as well. Historical debt refers to education inequities which have impacted particular groups over time. These inequities were eventually codified in terms of race, class
and gender, and reinforced by institutional norms and practices. This is distinguished from economic debt, which relates to "the funding disparities that currently exist between schools serving White students and those serving students of color" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.6). While the differences in funding between urban and suburban schools do not prove differential funding on the basis of race, scholars note that, statistically, as the number of white students in a school rises funding also rises.

The socio-political debt reflects limited 'access to' and 'knowledge of' civic processes impacting the ability of marginalized groups to effectively advocate for their children. As a result, in general, African American communities have lacked the political capital, compared to that of their white middleclass counterparts, to influence educational opportunities and outcomes. Lastly, the moral debt "reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.8). This aspect of educational debt describes the moral obligation owed to those individuals who are the descendents of people groups that have been historically mistreated, maligned or otherwise abused.

Based upon the persistence of the achievement score disparity between blacks and whites and the legacy of failed policy efforts to remedy it, another heuristic may be appropriate. An 'expectation gap,' defined as a gap between the support individuals or groups need to achieve at a particular level and the ability of a remedy to facilitate the structural change necessary to provide such support, is manifested through both the permanence and resilient nature of the performance gap between African American males and their white and Asian counterparts. Considering semantic implications, the 'achievement gap' explains results most readily in terms of relative group ability or deficiency, the 'opportunity gap' in terms of various societal inequities, and the 'expectation gap' by way of effective or ineffective policy construction. Each approach is meaningful but more or less useful in variable contexts. However, in regard to NCLB and the work set forth in this study, which analyzes how the demands of an ineffective policy might exceed the capacity of an organization to respond to that policy's mandates, the expectation gap is rendered salient. In such cases, one of two things, or both, can become a reality for schools serving economically
disadvantaged and large minority populations. These options include: 1) cheating and 2) failure. Success is reserved – under such conditions – for those organizations, emphasizing improvement procedures aimed at practice over performance, that mindfully focus change efforts on processes rather than results (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Reeve, 2003; Langer, 1989). As scholars observe, such schools and districts are generally the exception more than the rule, emerging from a policy climate that privileges accountability over support. Underlying issues are discussed in the next section.

2.5 Equity: Closing the Achievement Gap under NCLB

Equity can be defined as different people being treated differentially. This notion takes into account the idea of equality but is not constrained by it. As conveyed by Brayboy – “by equality, we mean sameness and, more specifically, sameness of resources and opportunities… by equity, we mean a system where unequal goods are redistributed to create systems and schools that share a greater likelihood of becoming more equal” (Brayboy et al, 2007, p. 159,161). Hence, equity, as a policy aim, may actually incorporate distributive inequalities in order to reach the goal of equality. This creates a paradox of sorts as “equality may in fact mean inequality; equal treatment may require unequal treatment; and the same distribution may be seen as equal or unequal, depending on one’s point of view” (Stone, 2002, p.42). This is the nature of policy and the difficulty of policy formation and implementation. In regard to NCLB’s creation, Ravitch observes that “everyone, it seemed, wanted ‘accountability.’” By accountability, elected officials meant that they wanted the schools to measure whether students were learning and they wanted rewards or punishments for those responsible” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 95). The challenge, legislators would soon discover, would be to construct an accountability system which could preserve both equality and equity.

2.5.1 Social Justice Concerns - Policy makers often walk a fine line between framing policies with language that facilitates equity while at the same time avoiding an explicit call for
unequal treatment. At the heart of this tension is a debate over an issue of fairness. As Stone defines:

One major divide in the great debate about equity is whether distributions should be judged by criteria of process or of recipients and items. Robert Nozick… argues that a distribution is just if it came about by a voluntary and fair process. It is just if all the holdings in it – what people have – were acquired fairly… [This is in contrast] with what he calls the end-result concept. In the end result concept, one looks at characteristics of recipients or owners and characteristics of items, and asks whether there is an appropriate match. (Stone, 2002, pp.53-54)

Thus, policies constructed to ameliorate inequality may have decidedly distinct approaches. One approach advocates for a process oriented view which seeks to change the way in which resources are distributed based upon how those goods were acquired historically. The other, evincing a results oriented view, conceives of an appropriate distribution as arising from the ‘fit’ between expected behaviors and material possessions. The former approach seeks equity via systemic change while the latter via individual accountability. NCLB, in the author’s opinion, is clearly an outgrowth of the latter. Both approaches have merit because both systems and individuals might play a role in marginalization. However, a shortcoming of NCLB like policies which advocate for equity through accountability is that one must consider whether the ‘matching’ of individual characteristics and material possessions is presupposed by systemic hindering or enabling factors. In other words, ‘how do we know that the match is the result of individual merit, uninfluenced by systemic factors?’ In this sense, accountability would require more than the acknowledgement of ‘an achievement gap’ and a ‘commitment’ to hold people accountable to the same standard. As Brayboy states:

We believe that individuals certainly matter, and individual traits and actions can, in many circumstances, have an effect on individual outcomes. However, such individual distinctions cannot explain large-scale group realities. Large-scale inequalities are rooted in more pervasive, systemic, and structural issues rather than in the individual motivations or giftedness of the individual. Concomitantly, issues of motivation and giftedness often are tied directly to these larger structural factors… New Trier High School, located in Winnetka, Illinois, is 88.6% White, and the school has a low-income population of 1.5% in a state with an average 40% low-income population. The average ACT score for its students is 26.8 and its graduation rate is 98.5%... East St. Louis High School, located in East St. Louis, Illinois, is 99.6% African American and 93.3% low income. The average ACT score is 14.8, and its graduation rate is 61.2%. (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.160)
These statistics, demonstrating the current reality of the achievement gap, persist in the face of high stakes testing and other accountability mechanisms, which are the outgrowth of NCLB. In addition, while individual characteristics certainly do matter, scholars make the argument that the identification and cultivation of these traits are interconnected with systems and do not stand apart from them. As such, a portion of individuals within marginalized groups, inclusive of African American males, with greater capacities (motivation, ability, support) may overcome systemic barriers, but most will not.

Part of the difficulty for NCLB in seeking to achieve equity may be the way in which the policy is conceived. Tyack describes a backward mapping approach, which ‘begins with the end in mind,’ acknowledging that “it is easier to devise fashionable slogans about diversity in education than to develop coherent and just policies in schools… A place to start in understanding policies on diversity is to compare the social constructions of ‘race,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘ethnicity,’ and to explore the educational policies linked to these forms of social diversity” (Tyack, 2003, p.70). Hence, Tyack argues that beginning with a conception of what we hope to achieve, working from there to assess how the proposed policies might influence the end goal, is more profitable than issuing mandates which may or may not produce the desired effects. One might ask, according to this author quite appropriately, ‘what does it mean to leave no child behind?’ and ‘what will accomplishing this objective, as opposed to merely proclaiming it, reasonably require?’ In this way, NCLB attempts to close the achievement gap may fail, not by intent, but by structural design.

Historically, policies addressing inequalities tied to race were first non-existent, next mandates (via desegregation), and currently ambiguous. Much of this inequality can be traced to the discourse surrounding race. Tyack observes that “concepts of racial inferiority have formed what Horace Mann Bond called ‘a crazy-quilt world of unreality’ in a society that proclaimed equality, opportunity, and democracy as goals while it ‘brutalized, degraded, and dehumanized’ African-Americans ‘by every instrument of the culture’” (Tyack, 2003, p.71). Racism within the United States, from its inception, was the ultimate paradox. As such, it placed policy and other cultural mechanisms in the precarious position of subjugating some
while at the same time liberating others. This hegemony in the world of education is further exacerbated by the fact that “during the last century most of the prominent policymakers in public education and most administrators of public school systems have been U.S. born, white, prosperous, male, and Protestant. As ‘mainstream’ leaders, they have generally assumed that their own beliefs about social diversity were authoritative” (Tyack, 2003, p.73).

Hence, there was a dearth of perspective from the oppressed and a wealth of presumption from the powerful as it related to education policy. In fact, prior to Brown v. Board of Education (1954), school policies for people of color were often intentionally marginalizing.

Tyack relates that:

If assimilation was the keynote of policy for immigrants, discrimination was a basic theme of the education of people of color. Black, Japanese, and Chinese people were categorized as members of unassimilable and inferior ‘races.’ Until the Brown school desegregation decision in 1954, relatively few educators followed the lead of reformers like Horace Mann Bond, W.E.B. Du Bois, or Rachel DuBois, who demanded a frontal assault on racism in school and society. (Tyack, 2003, p.83)

In this way, a distinct caste of ‘unassimilable’ people was intentionally disenfranchised on the basis of race, which affected their ability to participate as fully engaged and productive members of society. This discrimination was implemented via policy in numerous ways.

Specifically:

The ‘science’ of education, on which many educators relied in making decisions about students, was riddled with racist assumptions. Culturally biased IQ tests [reflecting]… social differences that were the product of discrimination and poverty became validated as the way things ‘naturally’ were. It is thus not surprising that when Ellwood P. Cubberley classified library books on Negroes, he put them on the shelf next to those on the ‘education of special classes’ along with the blind, ‘retarded,’ and ‘crippled.’ (Tyack, 2003, pp.85-86)

Hence, the hindering effects of institutionalized racism were used to validate the false assumptions of racial inferiority. The impact of such practices, given the fact that generations of families have been affected, is difficult to measure.

2.5.2 Legal Implications: Until Brown, the courts did little to support the cause of racial equality. Brown signified the end of legalized disenfranchisement of blacks via segregation but the effects of past marginalization, exacerbated by continuing de facto practices and activities, persisted. Brayboy et al observe:
The equality sought by the court [in Brown vs. Board of Education] was in opposition to notions of White supremacy and did not advance individual White interests. It was strongly resisted through White flight from cities, the movement of students from public to private schools, the continued unequal allocation of resources within and between schools, and White control of desegregated schools. Despite changes in the law to ensure equal access to schools, the hoped-for equality has never reached a state of equity. Equity in this case would mean that every student has access to all the resources that they need in light of persisting historical inequalities, and it would insure commensurate educational opportunity and true integration. (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.168)

Hence, the goal of equity, in part, has proved elusive within educational contexts due to factors extending beyond the control of policy. More recently, “in a 1987 decision, [the courts] recognized that racial classifications and preferences might sometimes be necessary to overcome pervasive and obstinate discrimination. [However,] typically U.S. courts have ordered the use of [quota] bloc-based distributive systems only when they have seen evidence of egregious discrimination and flagrant violations of previous settlements or court orders” (Stone, 2002, p.47). In this way, policy, despite its needfulness, does not extend, according to the court, to every situation in which racial discrimination may have been a factor. The role of race in education policy continues to be debated. Researchers convey that:

Two recent cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court in the fall of 2006 have renewed a conversation among many of the citizens of the United States and educational researchers regarding the role of race in education and educational achievement... At the heart of these cases appears to be the battle between those who view the use of race in desegregating schools as a compelling state interest (supported by the 14th amendment) versus those who argue that admissions policies must offer supremacy to the role of ‘individualized consideration.’ The former position calls for race conscious policies, whereas the latter focuses on colorblind policies that are rooted in a stance that centers on the individual. (Brayboy et al, 2007, pp.162-163)

There are those who argue that racial diversity might be a compelling government interest in K-12 schools, one which might be said to extend beyond Brown, which sought to end ‘egregious discrimination’, and those who contend that it is not. The former conceives of race conscious policies, while the latter conceives of policies as colorblind. At the time of this writing, The Supreme Court has sided with the latter view, choosing to preserve the precedential notion that rights are conferred upon individuals. However, some have contended that “racism exists, in part, because policies and those who create and enact them
treat individuals solely as members of society, effectively negating any semblance of fairness by erasing the very real and powerful implications of their group memberships” (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.175). Hence, at least from a judiciary standpoint, a spirit of ‘rugged individualism’ within this country continues to hold greater sway than a spirit of ‘equity.’

Central to where one might stand on this issue is the understanding of the role of policy in undoing what has been done, particularly, when what has been done is so complex, affecting individual members within marginalized groups in differential ways and to varying degrees. Researchers have argued that, “given the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2008) and achievement gaps, the ideas of equality and justice are necessarily contradictory. Achieving justice, in light of the differentiation in academic achievement, cannot be done through equal means” (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.163). Thus, as articulated in the preceding section, individual equality is undermined, if equity is to be achieved, by the demands of justice. This may strike some as unfair. However, it has been suggested that “some members of racialized groups have fewer educational choices, which is the result of policies and practices that are imbued with Whiteness, creating and sustaining structural racism… Public schools were created in part to assimilate and Americanize the nation’s youth, and they have consistently discriminated against [certain] immigrants and students of color” (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.166). ‘To assimilate or discriminate?’ was the question posed, both implicitly and explicitly, during the policy making process concerning immigrant and minority groups. However, what is less clear, and certainly garners less agreement are the effects, if any, that such policies continue to have, and the need, if any, for further remediation of these effects by policy.

Education scholars suggest that “the irony of judicial and legislative measures promoting education equality is the way that they have been marshaled (as in PICs v. Seattle) to continue educational inequity through colorblind arguments for present-day individual equality, regardless of the effects of long-term historical inequality” (Brayboy et al, 2007, p.169). Hence, the courts reliance on colorblind arguments, and, as previously stated, its’ interpretation of rights as conferred upon individuals versus groups, has effectively
negated the ability of policy, inclusive of NCLB, to address historical race based inequities in an explicit and substantive way. As an outgrowth of the colorblind concept, “school systems rely on meritocracy, which is presumed to be an equalizing power, but when curriculum and assessment are grounded in Eurocentric knowledge paradigms and skills, students of color appear deficient” (Brayboy et al., 2007, p. 171). It has been suggested in this research that at least some of the achievement gap existing between African American males and their white counterparts may actually have more to do with the instruction of content and culturally exclusive knowledge than historical constraints. Equity, in this sense, means constructing tests which, to the greatest degree possible, are not culturally biased. Such assessments do not falsely reinforce the notion of black inferiority. Further, equity ensures that members of marginalized groups receive preparation for tests which is commensurate with that of the dominant group. Significantly, ‘preparation,’ or the lack thereof, may constitute at least part of the cultural bias in tests.

Some researchers assert that an "equitable democracy can exist only if we choose to see color and are attentive to it and conscious of our existence in all its nexuses" (Brayboy et al., 2007, p.181). Race, indeed, is a social construct "based on the notion that skin tones are a sign of intellectual and moral competence… Researchers have long known ‘that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups.’ Moreover, evidence from the analysis of genetics indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies within so-called racial groups” (Brayboy et al., 2007, p.173). Hence, the salience of race and its impact on equity stem not from skin pigmentation, per se, but from the historical effects of subjugation, deprivation and isolation, which were falsely based upon it. This impacts the access, opportunities, and aspirations of African Americans. The challenge, from a policy perspective, is how, considering the present disposition of the Supreme Court, to devise and implement a meaningful plan addressing these effects.

The court’s current conception of racial discrimination is predicated upon whether parties might be said to be acting in such a manner that is intentionally discriminatory, and thereby unconstitutional, or whether actions are unintentionally discriminatory, and thus
This concept is based upon three specific notions of race including: status-race, formal-race, and historical-race. These ideologies inform the courts view on colorblind constitutionalism. While status-race and historical-race maintain connectedness between race to the past and present, articulating social and political expectations as impediments to African American advancement, under formal-race, ‘black’ and ‘white’ are conceived as aesthetic demarcations which are devoid of political and social connectedness (Gotanda, 1992; Crenshaw, 1988). This effectively undermines the government’s ability to correlate social conditions and race, and thereby limits its’ ability to respond to racism. Any solution which includes racial classifications and remains constitutionally justifiable, the court has said, must pass the test of strict scrutiny, which is ‘narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling governmental interest’ (Metro Broadcasting v. FCC, 1990). This means that actions must fall within the scope of a compelling state interest where using race has ‘greater precision’ than any other means (Regents v. Bakke, 1978) and it is used to “promote the pedagogical and social benefits flowing from diversity in an increasingly pluralistic society and global marketplace” (PICs v Seattle, 2007). As it relates to African American males, gender based classifications require less scrutiny, where the means need be only ‘substantially related’ to achieving an interest rather than ‘narrowly tailored’ (Coleman & Lipper, 2011). However, provided the intersection of race and gender, as is the case with African American males, the stricter standard prevails. Scholars have observed that while “educational diversity may be a compelling governmental interest that justifies the implementation of policies designed to provide some level of racial balance in K-12 education… what constitutes a plan that is narrowly tailored to meet this interest – and thus what constitutes a constitutionally permissible plan – is the subject of judicial confusion” (Daniel & Gooden, 2010, p.101; see also Daniel, 2008). As the Equal Protection Clause of the 14 Amendment protects similarly situated individuals from being treated dissimilarly, articulating that no state may “deny to any person within its jurisdiction equal protection of the laws” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIV), it becomes unclear how racial diversity might be preserved in light of the court’s favored conception of formal-race.
Moreover, explaining the shortcoming of utilizing ‘diversity’ as a ‘Trojan Horse’ to address the issues of race in schools, Daniel and Greytak observe that the conversation of racial equality should “be informed by history, evidence, and the original aspirations of those working to achieve racial equality... Constraining the language of racial equality to arguments [of diversity interests] distorts the issues at play and sows seeds of failure” (Daniel & Greytak, 2012). Hence, scholars, legislatures and educators must work to ensure that the legal framework which guides the work of educational institutions pertaining to ‘race’ is both meaningful, in light of organizational objectives, and appropriately aligned, considering the tenets of a policy’s original intent.

As it relates to NCLB testing mandates, scholars contend that the fact “that racist measures are not only retained, but actually extended, suggests that policy-makers have decided (tacitly, if not explicitly) to place race equity at the margins – thereby retaining race injustice at the centre” (Gillborn, 2005, p.499). Indeed, for reasons previously discussed, race equity has been placed at the periphery of conversations around education policy. Notably:

> When racism is measured only by intent, rather than impact, policies such as standardized testing are seen as race-neutral rather than as institutionally racist. Even if one believes that the exams are not racist in their intent, the high-stakes attached to them create unequal racialized outcomes. What we know for certain is that standardized tests derive from racist origins and punish the victims of pre-existing inequalities. (Johnson et al, p.10)

The stakes are high, especially when one considers the fact, as “the Justice Policy Institute has indicated, that 52% of African American males who departed prematurely from school had prison records by their 30s” (Wyatt, 2009, p.463; see also Alexander, 2010).

From a judiciary standpoint “supreme court decisions have made the Equal Protection Clause an ineffective tool for combating the structural and unconscious racism that negatively affects the educational experience of African American males... the Court has required plaintiffs to prove that the government chose a course of action ‘because of,’ rather than ‘in spite of,’ its disproportionate impact” (Green, 2008, p.876). In this way, a strict standard necessitating a showing of ‘deliberate intent’ applies to cases which are attempting
to rectify racial inequality. This makes it difficult, if not virtually impossible, to prove racial discrimination and construct a remedy which directly addresses race via policy.

2.5.3 Fiscal Considerations: When discussing funding and education, scholars are reminded of Adam Smith’s conjecture that “the wealth of nations included the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of the society” (Smith, 1776/1952, p. 119). Most economists interested in education, following the ‘capitalistic’ tradition of Smith, have subscribed to the definition of economics as an ‘allocation of scarce resources among competing ends.’ This conceptualization renders the availability of fiscal resources a salient issue in the field of education (Brewer et al., 2010; Walberg & Bast, 2003; Becker, 1964). Furthermore, scholars since the time of Smith have set forth the idea of ‘human capital theory.’ Referring to the process of making investments in people that lead to economic benefits, human capital theory underscores “the correlation between income and educational attainment” (Sweetland, 1997, p. 41; see also Eide & Showalter, 2010; Schultz, 1963, 1981). As such, public education has been conceived by economists, in alignment with the historical analysis of ESEA presented earlier in this chapter, as an essential and viable mechanism for ensuring national security and economic advancement (Kessinger, 2011). Given the historical role of the states and the increasing federal role in providing education for the United States citizens, Sweetland’s framing of the educational landscape includes two dimensions: Political and Economic. As he describes the ‘taxonomy of school finance,’ the political dimension orchestrates educational policy and the economic dimension undergirds it. Further, it is implemented through the interplay of legal, structural, and technical components (Sweetland, 2006).

The Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution makes it clear that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment X). There is no mention of ‘education’ as a right in the Constitution, and as such, education has historically, with few exceptions, been left as a function of states to administer. Legislators make a law and it cannot be usurped or supplanted but it can be ‘exceeded.’ Once states
create the right for education, based upon the establishment of compulsory education, it is protected by the state. In Ohio, where this study takes place, education is compulsory and, therefore, students have a property right to education. Further, The Ohio State Constitution requires that the General Assembly provide and fund “a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the State” (The Ohio State Constitution). This was interpreted by the Ohio Supreme Court in Miller v. Korns, 140 N.E. 773 (1923). It was indicated in this case that a ‘thorough’ system is one that is not starved for funds and an ‘efficient’ system is one which is not lacking teachers, buildings, and equipment.

In its’ 1976 opinion, upholding the then current funding system, the court in Board of Education of Cincinnati v. Walter, 390 N.E. 2d 813 made room for the possibility of future ‘adequacy’ litigation. It stated that a funding system would violate the constitution if “a school district was receiving so little local and state revenue that the students were effectively being deprived of educational opportunity.” The lawsuit filed by the Ohio Coalition for Equity & Adequacy of School Funding in 1991, DeRolph v. State, was just such adequacy litigation. The court’s decision in 1997 declared that the state’s education finance system was unconstitutional on the grounds of an overreliance on local property taxes, issues with the state funded Foundations Program, forced borrowing, and insufficient state funding for school buildings. Despite efforts by the state to restructure the funding system and provide more state funding to local districts, three other DeRolph decisions followed the 1997 decision. In the 2003 DeRolph decision, after reiterating the unconstitutionality of the funding system, the court’s decision “stipulated that the high court no longer retained jurisdiction over the case’s final resolution and outcomes… For plaintiffs, the bad news was that, barring judicial oversight, perceived gains in winning an unconstitutional ruling could result in null financial outcomes” (Sweetland, 2011; see also Sweetland & Maxwell, 2000). Hence, the inequitable funding of schools in Ohio persists.

Public education has historically been conceived as both a public and a private good. It is a public good in that it benefits the overall economy and community to have a greater percentage of its citizenry well educated and a private good because it increases the
employability and economic capacity of individual recipients (King et al, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Levin, 1987). Provided these disparate conceptions, the processes through which they are maximized are not always seen as congruent. As it relates to educational funding, what is most effective in financing public education may not be most efficient. Viewed through the lens of pure economics, efficiency, which is the ratio of outputs (educational outcomes) to inputs (monetary investment), is desirable to ‘effectiveness’, which seeks output maximization without regard to the level of input investment (King et al, 2003). As such, education as a ‘private good’ lends itself to an ‘effectiveness’ model while education as a ‘public good’ is usually conceived of from an efficiency perspective. However, this is often not so neatly parsed out because educational recipients reside within communities that demonstrate varying capacities toward facilitating education as a private and public good. As previously noted, the funding system for public education in Ohio was deemed unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court in DeRolph v. State (1997) precisely because of “the system’s principal reliance on local property taxation as the means to fund public schools” (Sweetland, 2000, p.88). This exemplifies the conflict inherent in the concepts of education as a private and public good within public education. Namely, since most schools across the nation (like Ohio) are funded based upon local property taxes, where educational recipients reside in communities with neighbors exhibiting similar levels of economic capacity, a variable quality of education is created. This occurs as some communities generate greater resources than others and private/public educational interests coalesce within similarly and dissimilarly situated public contexts in diverse manners.

Part of the driving force behind funding receiving less attention in reform models emerges from the notion of the market as a ‘panacea.’ Diane Ravitch observes that “the lure of the market is the idea that freedom from government regulation is a solution all by itself” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 11). However, this is far from the case. Scholars note both the salience and the resurgence of race in the determining the quality of education received by minority students. Ladson-Billings, noting her concept of the ‘education debt,’ relates that:

For many of these [minority] populations, schooling was nonexistent during the early history of the nation, and clearly Whites were not prepared to invest
their fiscal resources in what were perceived to be strange ‘others.’ The fundamental question is why does the nation regularly allocate $10,000 per pupil less for African American and Latino students than it does for White, middle-class students? (Ladson-Billings, 2010)

Jonathan Kozol observes similar disparities when comparing the expenditures of several of the nation’s largest urban districts to their nearby suburban counterparts: Chicago’s $8482 per pupil expenditure (PPE) versus nearby Highland Parks $17,291, Philadelphia’s $9,299 PPE versus Lower Merion’s $17,261 and New York City’s $11,627 PPE versus suburban Manhasset’s $22,311. Perhaps even more revealing are the demographic disparities of these districts: Chicago’s 87 percent Black and Latino/a population as compared to Highland Parks 90 percent White population, Philadelphia’s 75 percent Black and Latino/a population as compared to Lower Merion’s 91% White population and New York City’s 72 percent Black and Latino/a population as compared to Manhasset’s 91 percent White population (Kozol, 2005).

There is a widespread notion gaining momentum among politicians in Washington, and driving the accountability mechanisms of NCLB (and the formulation of its’ successor) that perhaps money doesn’t matter. Others purport that it matters only to the degree that other programmatic factors are satisfactorily addressed. Kozol recorded former New York City principal Deborah Meier’s response to such opinions: “I’ll believe money doesn’t count the day the rich stop spending so much money on their own children” (Kozol, 2005, p.59). Indeed, disparities in educational spending amongst the rich and the poor are significant. It has been observed that “the most exclusive of the private preschools in New York… cost as much as $22,000 for a full-day program… [On the other hand,] of approximately 250,000 four-year-olds in New York State in 2001-2002, only about 25 percent, some 60,000, were believed to be enrolled in the state funded preschool program” (Kozol, 2005, pp. 50-51). Even those students attending state funded programs did not receive the same scope of preparation as their wealthier peers. On average, the received approximately 2 ½ hours in comparison to a full day of programming for their wealthier peers. The significance of resources in closing the achievement gap between African Americans and their White and Asian counterparts has been well established. Scholars estimate that eliminating funding
disparities could decrease the gap within urban districts by 24% to 40% (Lewis et al, 2008; see also Condron & Roscigno, 2003).

2.5.4 Systemic Effects: Based upon NCLB mandates, the “solution [to the achievement gap] is to hold students accountable to academic standards based on test scores, with little to no additional assistance to underfunded, underperforming schools… [However] this creates perverse incentives that undermine the goal of a quality education, and encourages ‘teaching to the test,’ remedial education tracking, forced grade repetition, and increased dropout rates” (Johnson et al, p.10). None of these outcomes expand access and opportunities for African American males. Hence, accountability alone is not enough.

It has generally been observed that NCLB reforms have exacerbated rather than ameliorated the marginalization of African American males and other minorities groups, which it purports to serve. Lipman and other scholars explain:

In some schools, these mandated interventions seemed to set up more cohesive curricula and academic standards, but they had deleterious consequences for others. In the [Chicago] district as a whole, there were initial gains in test scores, and the policies instigated the removal of some ineffectual teachers and principals. However in the low-income elementary schools serving children of color that Lipman studied, these policies also provoked an exodus of some of the strongest teachers and encouraged a test-driven pedagogy aimed at raising scores. (Lipman et al, 2007, pp.479-480)

Most schools were negatively impacted by NCLB, which produced a culture of accountability without a network of support. As a result, student centered pedagogy, which focused on learning that was narrow and deep, was replaced by test preparation. School leaders, inadequately prepared to translate testing accountability into a broader structure promoting lifelong learning, in many cases inadvertently succumbed to pressure for results. As such, they implemented superficial pedagogies which alienated strong teachers and led to short term increased outcomes with a ‘glass ceiling’ effect.

Furthermore, as explained by Gillborn:

A major reason for the different patterns of improvement shown by different groups is likely to lie in the ways that schools have responded to the pressure to ‘raise standards.’ There is anecdotal evidence, for example, which suggests that some schools have sought to limit the proportion of minority students they admit and to expel disproportionate numbers of Black students. By their very nature, such practices elude official documentation
and scrutiny, but it is certainly the case that Black students continue to be significantly more likely to be expelled from school than their white peers and that Black students are frequently treated more harshly than whites accused of similar offences. (Gillborn, 2005, p.495)

In this way, accountability mechanisms of NCLB have not only led to poor pedagogical practice, but also to the manipulation of discipline procedures, which create the perception of achievement. Scholars have observed that “fewer than 60 percent of the African-American and Latino kids who begin 9th grade in a Texas public high school make it to graduation. This strategy of ‘losing’ large numbers of Black and Latino students is one of the main ways [Texas] ’closed the achievement gap’” (Johnson et al, p.30). Thus, graduation rate became the ‘sacrificial lamb’ for attainment of pseudo equality and increased academic achievement.

One Researcher observes:

Schools’ responses to the incentives created by high-stakes tests can cause gaming that produces higher scores at the expense of vulnerable students’ education…Recent studies have found that the ‘Texas Miracle,’ which was the model for the federal No Child Left Behind Act, boosted test scores in part by keeping many students out of the testing count and making tens of thousands disappear from school altogether. The ‘disappeared’ are mostly students of color. (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p.253)

The emphasis or some might say overemphasis of NCLB on testing accountability has led to such perverse incentives via impotent pedagogy and minority exploitation.

Some have argued a process of re-segregation has contributed to the achievement gap. Point in fact – “a recent report by Harvard sociologist Gary Orfield indicates that segregation between and within schools has increased over the last 20 years. Two-thirds of students of color still attend schools that are predominantly ‘minority,’ most of them located in central cities and funded at levels substantially below those of neighboring suburban districts” (Johnson et al, p.39). This type of inequity has not been aided by NCLB, despite claims of equalization via accountability and standardization. This is, perhaps, in part due to the fact that:

The vast majority of intensely segregated minority schools face conditions of concentrated poverty, which are powerfully related to unequal educational opportunity. Students in segregated minority schools face conditions that students in segregated white schools seldom experience… The statistics on re-segregation painfully underscore [according to Bell] the fact that many black and Hispanic children are enrolled in schools as separate and probably
more unequal than those their parents and grandparents attended under the era of ‘separate but equal.’ (Dixson & Rosseau, 2005, p.18)

Evidence suggests that unfunded mandates, in an era of accountability, are powerless to produce sustained equalizing results. NCLB labeling practices, rather than addressing this issue, have largely distracted public awareness by shifting the policy conversation from racial equity to accountability. Furthermore, “while rhetorically appearing to address these problems, [NCLB] actually threatens to leave more children behind. The incentives created by an approach that substitutes high-stakes testing for highly effective teaching are pushing more and more of the most educationally vulnerable students out of school earlier and earlier” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p.255). Rather than strengthening educational opportunities and increasing access for minority students, the argument could be made that NCLB has actually adversely affected their status.

Scholars observe education policies are, at their core, essentially political. As such, “the central problems with American education are not pedagogical or organizational or social or cultural in nature but are fundamentally political. That is, the problem is not that we do not know how to make schools better but that we are fighting among ourselves about what goals schools should pursue” (Labaree, 1997, p.40). This understanding is essential to an accurate knowledge of the ways in which education policy is informed and interpreted. Scholars articulate that “schools…. occupy an awkward position at the intersection between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, between political ideals and economic realities” (Labaree, 1997, p.41). As such, education policy serves an intermediary function, situated between intent and outcome, and between liberty and constraint. Not everyone agrees on what the goals of schooling should be. Some are interested in racial equity while others, as long as their children are receiving a ‘good’ education, could care less about whether or not schools are diverse. As conceptualized in this study, the common ground is found not in shared goals but in shared desires.

Labaree observes that “what parents want is not that their children have equal opportunity, but that they get the best that is possible, and that will always mean opportunities ‘better than some others get.’” This can only take place if education is structured in such a
manner that the social benefits of education are allocated differentially, with some students receiving more than others" (Labaree, 1997, p.52). As such, the competitiveness which is central to American individuality serves to mitigate the goal of equity in education. This ‘better than others’ mentality described by Labaree persists as a testament to the triumph of rugged individualism over equity in a society facially committed to both free market ideals and social justice.

In an age of globalization and increasing competition:

Students from the lower and working classes see the possibility of social mobility through education more as a frail hope than a firm promise, since the experience of their families and friends are that the future is uncertain and the relevance of education to that future is doubtful. As a result, they are less likely to delve headlong into the meritocratic fray within education, often looking at educational achievement as a lost cause or a sucker’s game. (Labaree, 1997, p.57)

African American males and their families, lacking successful models and practical experience, are often marginalized through the bureaucracy of educational processes, which they are less likely to participate in due to their lack of cultural capital and political knowledge (Andre-Bechley, 2005; see also Ball, 1994; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Furthermore, “NCLB has a number of limitations that might limit its efficacy as a tool for remedying educational practices that have a disparate impact on African American males. For instance, it is doubtful that NCLB contains a private cause of action… [and its] provisions make no explicit reference to the possibility that poor minority performance may be the result of intentional or unconscious racism” (Green, 2008, p.879). In short, NCLB is a color blind policy, acknowledging race, but without the capacity to address it directly. As such, it lacks the ability to address structural and systemic issues which produce racialized outcomes. Instead, its’ accountability measures often exacerbate rather than ameliorate the marginalization of African American males and other minority groups by neglecting the necessary supports needed to equitably increase the capacity of organizations to help them reach mandated standards. This evinces what the author has conceptualized as an expectation gap. Specifically, it facilitates "a decreasing focus on culturally responsive pedagogy in state policies, and the proliferation of interventions designed without regard for
the body of research on African American student achievement” (Lewis et al., 2008, p.138).
In these ways, NCLB, by virtue of its perverse incentives, has situated concerns of accountability above equity.

2.6 What’s next – Beyond NCLB?

An examination of recent policy developments affecting the future trajectory of ESEA must take stock of initiatives which seek to both refine and transform NCLB. This includes an analysis of Race to the Top (RTTT) and the ‘Blueprint for Reform,’ as articulated by the US Department of Education, and an exploration of the current opportunity for states to participate in ESEA flexibility. Lastly, policy affects are assessed in an effort to situate their anticipated impact on the educational opportunities of African American males in K-12 schools.

2.6.1 Race to the Top – In February of 2009, President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Part of this new law included a designation of $4.35 billion dollars for the Race to the Top program (RTTT). Thus, RTTT became the first initiative in a series of steps that the Obama administration would take in its efforts to reform the education policies prescribed by NCLB. Further, RTTT became a strategy for subtly undermining some of the shortcomings of NCLB and providing evidence in favor of proposed changes to current education law. This was done in lieu of a more direct attack through reauthorization, which would have been admittedly difficult provided the antagonistic climate on Capitol Hill.

Conceptually, RTTT emerged from the desire of policy makers to construct a system that rewards excellence in practice, supports teachers, and increases achievement. RTTT is “a competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes…; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas” (U.S. Department of Education RTTT, 2009). Notably, the amount of the investment from the federal government, 4.35 billion dollars, is unprecedented and sends a strong message
concerning the commitment from Washington (Hershberg and Robertson-Kraft, 2010). Core reform areas include: 1) adopting standards and assessments for post-secondary education and the workplace, 2) building data systems to measure student success, 3) recruit, develop, and reward effective teachers and principals, and 4) turn around low achieving schools (U.S. Department of Education RTTT, 2009).

Just as NCLB focuses on teacher quality, improved student progress, and closing achievement gaps, so does RTTT. However, RTTT utilizes a different approach. Namely, it focuses “on the growth that individual students make over the course of the year, rather than on their achievement level at a particular point in time” (Hershberg and Robertson-Kraft, 2010, p. 128). This measurement approach, widely known as value-added, has been criticized by some on the basis that teacher impact on student outcome cannot be measured without error. Thus, some contend it would not lead to a fair and accurate system for the purposes of evaluation and rewarding performance. However, research has demonstrated that the current system of performance compensation, which is based upon years of experience and level of academic accomplishment, exerts but a minimal influence on student achievement (Walsh & Tracy, 2004; see also Goe & Stickler, 2008; Hanushek et al, 2005).

States that wish to receive funds from RTTT must demonstrate a capacity through their proposals to implement systems which use student growth outcomes as part of their plans for teacher evaluation processes, compensation structures, career advancement, and tenure (U.S. Department of Education RTTT, 2009). To aid in this process, the U.S. Department of Education has provided funding to The Reform Support Network, which seeks to support “all reform-minded states by widely sharing information on the kinds of education policies being adopted as part of Race to the Top” (ICF International, 2011, p. 5). This objective is accomplished through four goals: 1) Building capacity to execute and sustain reforms and continuously improve outcomes, 2) Provide technical assistance, 3) Facilitate collaboration across states, and 4) Identifying and sharing promising and effective practices across states (ICF International, 2011). What remains to be seen, as the initiative is at the beginning stages of implementation, is how well the Reform Support Network will fulfill its
promise of support and to what degree states will effectively execute the tenets of RTTT as articulated in their plans.

2.6.2 A Blueprint for Reform – The Department of Education indicates that the priorities established in the Blueprint for Reform are created around “reforms already made in response to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009” (U.S. Department of Education, March 2010, p. 11). Building on the 4 goals of RTTT, the blueprint casts a re-envisioned federal role which focuses on 5 significant priorities: 1) College and Career-Ready standards 2) Great Teachers and Leaders in Every School, 3) Equity and Opportunity for All Students, 4) Raise the Bar and Reward Excellence, and 5) Promote Innovation and Continuous Improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Like RTTT, the Blueprint focuses on value added and rewarding progress, instead of identifying and sanctioning failure. However, like NCLB, low performing schools will likely still be subject to a myriad of consequences. Restructuring and closure remain an option. However, school turnaround grants are made available to “help states, districts, and schools implement the rigorous interventions required in each state’s lowest-performing Challenge schools” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p.12). These schools are comprised of the lowest-performing five percent of schools in each state and schools not closing significant and persistent achievement gaps.

There is some speculation by policy analysts that Title I funds under the reauthorization of ESEA (estimated at $14.5 billion) could be tied to the adoption of common standards which are currently a part of RTTT (Burke, 2010). Specifically, the Blueprint articulates that “beginning 2015, formula funds (inclusive of Title I) will only be made available to states that are implementing assessments based on college and career-ready standards that are common to a significant number of states” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, pp.11-12). In light of the fact that RTTT is currently being implemented in what might be called a ‘significant’ number of states, it is reasonable that the standards which apply in RTTT might also apply in the reauthorization of ESEA.
Notably, the Blueprint lacks specifics that will likely be a source of controversy in Congress prior to reauthorization. There is some question as to whether College and Career Readiness standards will be accepted as an adequate replacement for proficiency. Moreover, it is unclear from the Blueprint how the administration intends to use value-added as a mechanism to measure student progress and how these measurements will translate into graduation requirements. There will be some members of congress, mostly Republicans, who will feel as though accountability measures should be left to state and local institutions to decide. Others, mainly Democrats, will want a greater degree of federal control (Jennings, 2010; see also U.S. Department of Education, March 2010).

Commons Standards may also present a challenge in reauthorization. The Blueprint demonstrates the President’s inclination toward the adoption of common standards, or having states develop college and career ready standards in concert with their public university systems. However, some representatives on Capitol Hill will undoubtedly feel that this approach (especially common standards) represents an overreaching of the federal government into the affairs of states. Further inculcating this fear is the suggestion in the Blueprint that federal funds may be attached to such an adoption. As such, resistance from teachers’ unions, in addition to congressional misgivings, should be expected prior to reauthorization (Barnes, 2011; see also Burke, 2010; Jennings, 2010).

Issues surrounding school improvement and teacher evaluations represent paradigmatic shifts in the education policy agenda. As described earlier, Blueprint ‘Challenge’ schools are defined as those schools performing in the bottom 5% of the state test or those that fail to make progress in closing significant and persistent achievement gaps. As such, these schools are subject to reform models. At the same time, schools at the top are rewarded with incentives for making measurable progress and sustaining excellence under value-added models (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Schools occupying the middle ground, under the plan proposed in the Blueprint, as opposed to NCLB, will not be required to offer school choice and tutoring. Proponents of privatization in K-12 schooling as a reform initiative will likely offer resistance to this approach as it undermines the abilities of
charter, private schools, and ‘for profit’ tutoring companies to thrive and compete (Ravitch, 2011; Jennings, 2010).

Teacher evaluations and pay is complicating in that many teachers’ unions balk at the idea of having teacher performance and compensation, even in part, measured or based upon student growth models. This is because of perceived inaccuracies (Hershberg & Robertson-Kraft, 2010; Jennings, 2010; see also Goe & Strickler, 2008; Hanushek et al, 2005). However, as discussed earlier, current models of compensation are no more reliable in determining student gains. Further, many states, including Ohio, have already acquiesced in this area (utilizing value-added, in part, to evaluate teacher performance) in order to qualify for RTTT funds. Yet, resistance remains. Controversies may arise around definitions of ‘effective’ teachers and principals, which states must provide under the Blueprint, and the way in which states qualify to receive incentive funds based upon student results. However, in light of mounting evidence that student results are sensitive to good instruction, opposition to such measures is becoming increasingly difficult to substantiate (U.S. Department of Education, 2009; see also Marzano, 2003).

Federal aid in the form of competitive grants versus formula grant funding also represents a paradigm change that will likely provoke tension on Capitol Hill. While the Blueprint seeks to incentivize innovation and reward excellence, contentious issues will center around whether shifting federal aid predominantly to competitive grants, as proposed by the Obama administration in the Blueprint, will lead to too much federal control over resources (Barnes, 2011; Burke, 2010; Jennings, 2010). Add to this issue challenge of overcoming a political deadlock, with a strong republican influence in the House and Senate, and it is perhaps more clear why the Obama administration sought a path of least resistance through RTTT and ESEA flexibility. In lieu of authorization, the administration was at least temporarily able to preserve some of its objectives for reform.

2.6.3 **ESEA Flexibility** – During late September of 2011 the U.S. Department of Education offered the opportunities for interested State Educational Agencies (SEAs) to request flexibility on behalf of Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) and schools from some of
the provisions of NCLB. This flexibility was based upon a demonstration of systemic efforts which focus on improving student learning and increasing the effectiveness of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education, “flexibility is intended to build on and support the significant State and local reform efforts already underway [via RTTT] in critical areas such as transitioning to College and Career-Ready standards and assessments, developing systems of differentiated recognition, accountability, and support; and evaluating and supporting teacher and principal effectiveness” (2011, p.iii).

Additionally, as previously noted, ESEA Flexibility represents a pragmatic solution to the political factors delaying the reauthorization of ESEA by enabling the administration to implement some of its suggestions from the Blueprint without the establishment of a new law and policy guidelines. Flexibility can be requested regarding: 1) the 2013-2014 timeline for achieving 100 percent proficiency, 2) district and school improvement and accountability requirements, via ‘one size fits all’ reform models and school choice, and 3) the use of federal funds to meet student needs. Hence, ESEA Flexibility extends the reform efforts of RTTT by alleviating NCLB constraints that might hinder, or at least limit state and local districts’ abilities to align people resources and federal funds to achieve new goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

2.6.4 Policy Affects - Critics of RTTT and the Blueprint contend that the adoption of national standards, developed by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), would constitute “one of the biggest federal overreaches into education policy in nearly half a century” (Burke, 2010, p.393). Their objection arises from the language of the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which makes it clear that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment X). As previously articulated, there is no mention of ‘education’ as a ‘right’ in the Constitution and, as such, education has historically, with few exceptions, been left as a function of states to administer. Comparing the historic role of the federal
government in facilitating desegregation with its current activities via RTTT and the proposed Blueprint, Catherine Barnes observes that "while it is apparent that federal programs are sometimes necessary in times of great social unrest or crisis, a line must be drawn between government help and government control" (Barnes, 2011, p.396). Exactly where that line should be drawn is the source of much contention between lobbyists and Congressional representatives in Washington D.C. Further, it illustrates a widening gulf in this country between citizens who are more readily inclined towards either socialism or capitalism as an economic driver influencing the nation’s policy agenda.

Some scholars contend that the U.S. Departments of Education’s latest initiatives through RTTT, the Blueprint, and ESEA flexibility represent a legacy of failed efforts and ineffective programs. Specifically:

According to National Center for Education Statistics, the original budget in 1980 was $13.1 billion (about $37 billion dollars today). The budget in 2011 is $77.8 billion. However, while spending has risen, the improvement in education has shown little increase… [Notably,] between 1973 and 2004, mathematics scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress rose just 1% for 17-year-olds, while reading scores remained completely flat. Research suggests student performance is impacted by many variables (beyond school factors) not likely to be changed by the funding, including socioeconomic status, parents’ income and level of education, and race. (Barnes, 2011, p.397; see also Sonnenberg, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, Feb. 1 2010)

Those opposed to an increased federal role in education purport that school choice and privatization would produce more substantial results (Snell, 2003; The Commission on NCLB, 2007). However, scholars observe that a lack of familiarity on the part of some parents with regard to school culture and modes of communication limits the effectiveness of this mechanism as a vehicle for change. Specifically, it produces more of a shuffling effect amongst ‘relative’ haves than an integration of haves and have-nots (Bechely, 2005; see also Ball, 1994; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Furthermore, Diane Ravitch observes that research studies have found “no major differences between students in voucher schools and those in regular public schools” (Ravitch, 2010; Wolfe, 2008, 2009; Rouse & Barrow 2009). Thus, if student achievement is the goal, school choice and privatization have not evinced themselves to be more viable approaches.
Certain scholars have asserted that the lack of results achieved by policy initiatives seeking to enhance minority student’s agency and academic achievement emerges from “the problematization of normative assumptions that shape the educational policies” (Jahng, 2011, p.102). Within NCLB, RTTT and the Blueprint, minority children are characterized as being in need of intervention. Further, this association is concurrent with the identification of low-achieving students, economically disadvantaged students and children with disabilities. Categorized in this way, the assumption that an individual’s minority racial or ethnic status places them in need of intervention is normalized, which falsely indicates a subordinate position (Jahng, 2011; Popkewitz, 2008; Graham, 2005; Butler, 1990, 1993). In this way, Jahng observes that “despite the [policies] well-intended invitation of minority students into the mainstream society, the enumerated descriptions of high-need students, at the same time, convey the message that they are not qualified members of the society” (2011, p. 110). This extends into the classroom in that standards based instruction does not recognize the different ways of knowing and understanding that minority students often bring to the classroom (Delpit, 1996; Ferguson, 2005). While growth models (such as value-added) capture student progress toward a particular standard, they do not necessarily advance the goal of closing the achievement gap. African American males, as a group, would require greater rates of growth than their white and Asian counterparts to close the achievement gap. As such, an awareness of the danger inherent in the instrumental process of education policies to achieve equitable productive ends is warranted (Jahng, 2011; see also Foucault, 1990).

Some researchers indicate that the underdevelopment of Black America, inclusive of the achievement gap, will be ameliorated only through the occurrence of a ‘socialist type’ revolution. This conjecture is based upon the assumption of an ideological interdependence between capitalism and racism. Further, it is asserted that this ‘revolution’ will occur when a majority of the people, based upon the failure and misdeeds of the government and capitalistic system, rescind the government’s mandate to rule. Indicators of such a transition include the passage of anti-discriminatory legislation, affirmative action and universal
healthcare (Mandara, 1983). Short of such broad sweeping change, within the educational landscape, RTTT and the blueprint hold some promise as equitable assessments of school progress, which focus on the progress and processes of schools and local districts in concert with achievement (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). However, without more comprehensive social reform, including increased funding for the schools and districts with students exhibiting the greatest needs, current initiatives are unlikely to result in a ubiquitous amelioration of the achievement gap.
Chapter 3

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

At the outset of this dissertation the influence of Ball’s policy framework is acknowledged. His work on interpreting policy formation and implementation was referenced throughout Chapters 1 and 2. Andre-Bechely’s research was also cited. Her work, while primarily addressing the issue of school choice, was informative to this study in that she interpreted ‘policy,’ as in this research, by investigating the experiences of the people it purports to help. It has been a goal of this study to understand how policy, specifically NCLB, was experienced from the vantage point of dissimilarly situated African American males within the same educational context. Utilizing a similar methodological approach to that of the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, which investigated the higher education experiences of young men of color, this research examines the K-12 school and testing experiences of African American males by ‘capturing the student voice’ (Lee & Ransom, 2011).

This approach is in some ways the outgrowth of the work of theorists who conceptualize storytelling as an effective mechanism for facilitating change within an environment antagonistic toward the redress of racial discrimination. Lawrence proposed the use of storytelling as a viable strategy for addressing racial inequity within existing policies which do not meet the Court’s current standard of intentionality (Lawrence, 1992). However, no single theory or paradigm informs the theoretical framework of this study. In this chapter, theories and concepts which have been critical in the development of the research are examined with an eye towards providing an explanation of research design, methods of data collection, and approaches to sampling, representation, and interpretation.
3.2 Research Design

The research approach to this work was a qualitative study employed as an institutional ethnography. The study process began with the identification of a K-12 organizational process to be studied, which was testing practices. Then, utilizing an interview approach, individual school and testing experiences were accumulated. This was done as a means of explaining the network of associated influences which mitigated subjects’ interactions within K-12 institution. Hence, “through informant’s stories and descriptions, the researcher begins to identify some of the translocal relations, discourses, and institutional work processes that are shaping the informants’ everyday work” (DeVault, 2006, p.20). The goal was to understand the way in which organizational structures, related to and informed by testing, hindered and/or enabled the activity and responses of African American males under the scope of their influence. In a manner similar to Ball’s use of ‘critical ethnography,’ this research employs institutional ethnography as a tool to analyze the disparate impact, affecting African American males, that NCLB testing mandates have had in local settings (Andre-Bechley, 2005; Ball, 1994).

3.2.1 Institutional Ethnography – The institutional ethnography, as conceptualized by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith, is focused upon the intersecting points of an individual’s experience within a given context of work and life. However, individuals retain importance as “institutional ethnography takes for its entry point the experiences of specific individuals whose everyday activities are in some way hooked into, shaped by, and constituent of the institutional relations under exploration” (DeVault, 2006, p.18). An importance in this study, acknowledging that K-12 testing practices are situated in an organizational context, was placed upon the exploration and analysis of individual’s interactions within that setting. However, the ‘organizational context’ was also broadened to include social influences, which extended beyond the local school but remained salient to students’ school experiences. This approach was embarked upon as the study concerned the intersection of institutional school and testing processes with the elements of race and gender. African American males with differing SES, degrees of academic achievement, family dynamics, and community
interactions were interviewed with the goal of complicating notions of race and gender. The research also sought to analyze the diverse and complex network of translocal processes which impact this population. To this end, while each of the subjects in this study graduated from the same high school, they demonstrated significant variability in family dynamics, economic capacity, past schooling experiences and academic trajectory (Jackson & Moore, 2008, Strayhorn, 2009).

Regarding the use of an interview approach in an institutional ethnography, DeVault explains that:

> When interviews are used in [institutional ethnography], they are used not to reveal subjective states, but to locate and trace the points of connection among individuals working in different parts of institutional complexes of activity. The interviewer’s goal is to elicit talk that will not only illuminate a particular circumstance but also point toward next steps in an ongoing, cumulative inquiry into translocal processes. (DeVault, 2006, p.18)

As such, the interview process predominated with questions which prompted participants to reflect outward, which directed their responses toward processes and events rather than inward conditions. The goal of this approach was to identify and explore an ever expanding network of events which served to explain their testing performances within the context of complex bureaucratic structures and processes, and to articulate the interconnection of social activities occurring within and beyond the schooling organization.

The borders of ‘the school as institution’ within this study were expanded to include the social context from which school emerges, which informs and to some degree shapes schooling interactions, expectations and experiences. This framework, taken as a whole, included social influences, school bureaucracy, and testing policies and practices. It is in line with the work of institutional ethnographer Dorothy Smith. As Smith conceptualizes it, “institution… does not refer to a particular type of organization; rather, it is meant to inform a project of empirical inquiry, directing the researchers’ attention to coordinated and intersecting work processes taking place at multiple sites” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 17). Within the context of this research, these ‘sites’ included subjects’ homes, communities, and schools.
3.2.2 Using Comparative Case Study Analysis to Perform an Institutional Ethnography – As indicated above, the context of this research, as an institutional ethnography, seeks to understand the complexities of organizational functioning through the intricacies of individual experience. To accomplish this task, a comparative case study analysis was employed which investigated varied individual accounts as impacted by institutional ‘ruling relations.’ These were the complex field of coordination and control within local settings (Smith, 1999). The goal was not to “generalize about the group of people to be interviewed but to find and describe social processes that have generalizing effects” (DeVault and McCoy, 2006, p.18). As such, the subjects in this study became informants, knowledgeable about the school and testing experiences of African American males, rather than a population to be studied apart from institutional influences. The goal was to discover how African American males from diverse circumstances and situations are drawn into a common set of institutional processes, and to explain how these processes create inequities in school and testing experiences.

As part of the work of an institutional ethnography, this research sought to trace the impact of NCLB, as a macro-institutional policy, in organizing the school and testing experiences of local K-12 school settings. Some institutional ethnographers accomplish this by conducting interviews with individuals representing multiple standpoints within the organization. Within this study, African American male students were interviewed exclusively, with no data collection from parents, teachers or administrators. Part of the rationale for this approach was the focus of the research. This study was concerned with the ‘work’ processes of students, as opposed to those of parents or school officials, and their varied and similar perceptions and interpretations of institutional policies and practices. As such, this research reflects the ‘work’ of institutional ethnographers who seek to bring an ‘everyday life’ dimension to policy analysis. ‘Work’ is conceptualized in an informal way to explore what informants actually do.

Cases in this study are defined, in line with to Charles Ragin’s understanding, as ‘meaningful but complex configurations of events and structures’ that are “alike enough to
permit of comparisons” (Ragin, 2004, p.125). These comparisons are utilized, not primarily as a vehicle for distinguishing between subjects’ characteristics, consistent or inconsistent with a pre-conceived hypothesis, but as a mechanism for exploring the differential impact of institutional ‘ruling practices’ as they relate to school and testing processes. Hence, the presentation of data in the following chapter conveys a singular standpoint with multiple perspectives, describing a comingling of varied student experiences within institutional structures at differentiated levels. These levels include social influences, school bureaucracy, and testing practices. At each level institutional ruling relations become progressively narrow. As such, expectations are more formalized, and the consequences for ‘misalignment’ more detrimental. Indeed, part of this narrowing is due to the fact that students spend decreasing amounts of time involved in ‘work’ processes at each level which, in turn, decreases the opportunity for recovery and magnifies the institutional affect on student outcomes. One of the findings of this research was that the influence of processes at each level represented a complex intermingling of the theoretical frames. These interactions became cyclical and thereby created a spiraling effect of success or failure. (see Figure 1)

Institutional levels also operated within this study as overarching thematic frames, further described in the next chapter, which were synthesized from study sub-themes. Significantly, the overarching themes arising from sub-themes supported the study hypothesis of tiered ruling relations or institutional levels. This conception of institutional levels as overarching themes is diagrammed in Figure 1, which represents the framework of this study for interpreting the relationship between ruling relations in K-12 education and the way in which African American male students navigate within this context.

3.3 Sampling Criteria

Sampling strategies for research participants in the study included ‘maximum variation sampling’ and ‘network sampling.’ As described by qualitative researcher Corrine Glesne, maximum variation sampling occurs when cases are selected based upon criteria cutting across some range of variation. Network sampling utilizes the knowledge of
research participants to identify other prospective subjects who meet the proposed research criteria (Glesne, 2011). The research approach employed combined these strategies as tools for the selection and recruitment of participants. The subjects were African American males between the ages of 18-26, and their inclusion in the study was based upon their SES, academic achievement, family dynamics and community experiences. In selection, with the goal of striving for diversity, this criterion was considered in relation to the identified characteristics of other participants. As a high school administrator, the author had access to former students who met the research criteria for the study and were willing to participate in such a study, or knew others in the targeted group who might participate. As such, participants were selected based upon being known to the investigator to have met research criteria or having been referred to the investigator by other prospective subjects, and then vetted on the basis of study criteria. Access was gained to them via personal contact (i.e. phone, face to face contact, or email), and, even while some subjects demonstrated greater availability and accessibility than others, most had sustainable contact information and consistent interview participation.

As suggested by Becker (1998), sample cases were sought that challenged or extended current research on the academic achievement of African American males. Kuhn explains that one of the chief tenets of science is that progress only occurs when scientist agree on what a problem is (Kuhn, 1970). By seeking and discovering anomalous cases, the goal was to resist the tendency of uniformly conforming interviewee responses to the current body of research, and to extend or challenge existing concepts. This research focused on broadening the way in which the ‘problem’ of the achievement gap (between African American males and their white and Asian counterparts) is conceptualized, and the ‘context’ in which remedies to this problem are fashioned. As such, synecdoche, the individual subject representing the whole, is framed as an imperfect but necessary apparatus in the conduct of research conveying, simultaneously, both pertinent and partial information (Becker, 1998). The method was to approach the sample as an organic whole, rather than separate entities, which communicated a type of ‘collective’ knowledge which
emerges from and is distinct to each individual’s understanding of their own experience. This approach is similar to that of Everette C. Hughes. He explains - “I don’t know anything that someone in that group doesn’t know but, since I know what they all know, I know more than any one of them” (Becker, 1998, p. 99).

3.3.1 **Representation:** Considering the number of participants to be included in the study, this research acknowledges the fact that, in general, qualitative research is useful for studying a limited number of cases in greater depth (Ragin, 2010, see also Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This enables the researcher to illuminate complexities in phenomena and to investigate and sharpen the focus of certain concepts. The research here employed such an intuitive process, which seeks to simultaneously discover and complicate patterns (Erickson, 2004). Given this rationale, it was decided that 10 participants would provide a diversity of subject participants, investigating the patterns and complexity within the data, while still keeping the number manageable enough to perform an in depth study. This number included both prospective subjects and subjects from retrospective data previously collected (retrospective data collection was initiated in a methods course on qualitative inquiry). As previously stated, during the selection of participants, socio-economic status (SES), academic achievement, family dynamics and community interactions were considered. However, the greatest emphasis rested upon academic achievement. The conceptualization of academic achievement within the study was based predominantly to grade point average (GPA) but also took into consideration academic designations, such as ‘gifted and talented’ (GT) or advanced placement (AP), and academic attainment/aspirations (high school, college/technical, and graduate school). Academic designations and academic attainment/aspiration became mitigating criterion in the designation of a student’s achievement level. While students’ testing results became salient during the interview process, GPA was selected as a ‘baseline’ indicator of student achievement as it provided a broader conceptualization of students schooling performance. However, testing was a consideration as it informed GT and AP designations, which, as previously mentioned, played a role in selecting achievement level. Ultimately, in broad
terms, the study was comprised of 4 high achieving students (3.0 – 4.0 GPA), 3 mid-range achievers (2.0 – 2.9), and 3 lower achievers (0.0 – 1.9). Each achievement-group contained within it a degree of subject variability based upon the consideration of socio-economic status, family dynamics, and community interactions.

Since the focus of this study was on African American males, subject participation was also limited based upon the criteria of race and gender. Furthermore, only individuals between the ages of 18 and 26 were selected. This was done for several reasons. Significantly, this age group has been affected by the high stakes testing mandates of No Child Left Behind, which this study investigates. However, other influences were also rendered salient. Part of the rationale for limiting the study to this age group, as opposed to adolescents, was that their maturity and life experience, in general, would enable these students to process testing experiences with greater insight than younger students. Specifically, having experienced college, work, underemployment and/or unemployment provided a more complicated backdrop upon which to reflect about their school and testing experiences throughout the K-12 years. Also, for the college students in the study, it provided the advantage of additional testing and school experiences that could be leveraged as points of comparison when discussing prior events and circumstances. As a result, a contextualized understanding of testing consequences arose.

3.3.2 Setting – The site selection for research varied between two different contexts: A university campus and a high school. Since this study concerns an institution with which the author was familiar, K-12 schools, and an ethnic group of which the author is a part, African American males, this work operates in alignment with scholarship situated within a familiar local context or institution (Glesne, 2011). Several beneficial outcomes result from such work including: established rapport, applicability of research to professional and personal work, and reduced time spent in collecting data. However, such research also carries with it the challenge that study participants might be confused regarding what role the researcher is occupying. In the case of this study, the author occupied dual roles as administrator and researcher. Other emerging threats to research in a familiar setting
include ethical dilemmas, and the possibility that ‘dangerous’ or politically risky knowledge might be uncovered during research. However, this knowledge might also be conceptualized in a positive manner, enabling the researcher to add value to his/her professional and personal community or institution. Ultimately, it was concluded that the benefits of such a research endeavor superseded the detriments. In particular, the benefits that would accrue in adding value to the professional community of which the author was a part were deemed significant.

Selection of the two research settings was not based, per se, as Glesne recommends (2011), upon the setting in which a particular institutional activity took place. In regard to this study, the school and testing experiences being investigated took place within K-12 settings and the subjects were no longer members of that particular community. Rather, site selection was predicated on the identification of a geographic location which was accessible to subjects while still retaining a sense of formality. During the course of the research, it was discovered that some participants, mostly lower achievers, were reluctant to be interviewed in a school. As McCleod (2004) observes, this may be attributed to the fact that these participants saw little value in school while students, and thus, were hesitant to return to the setting. Ultimately, research interviews took place in a school setting, where the students had previously attended, or on a college campus, where they were currently attending.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

Concerning the process of interviewing, Barbara Czarniawska describes an interview as “two persons seeking knowledge and understanding in a common conversational endeavor” (Czarniawska, 2004, p.48). This concept was adopted within the research articulated here. Interviewing was employed as a shared practice, versus an individual one, which strove to expose new understandings through dialogue. This process of shared practice is challenged when interviews, such as those proposed here, are set in a research context. Czarniawska acknowledges this impediment. She explains that “the
practice of research interviewing... creates its own complications... [by assuming] a power asymmetry: the 'professional' interrogates the 'object' or, in psychological parlance, the 'subject,' who responds to the best of his or her knowledge” (Czrniawska, 2004, p.48). As she explains, the relationship of power in the interview process, when it is research based, has the affect of swaying disproportionately to the side of the researcher. The interviewee, in this scenario, takes on a subordinate role to the researcher, who is attempting to 'investigate' them. For the conscientious investigator, this effect can be mitigated by honoring interviewees' thought processes. This entails allowing them to work ideas through out loud, which is a significant component in the application of skill for effective interviewing. As such, the interviewer must 'listen more than he talks.’ The goal is not to argue with the interviewee; rather it is to accept their terms. This occurs, in successful interviewing, whether those ‘terms’ violate the researcher’s ethical and political standards or not (Seidman, 1998; Whyte, 1960).

3.4.1 Interpretation: It is notable that all research data acquired from interviewees, though meaningful, is limited in its ability to inform us about the world. As Czrniawaska describes:

> What people present in the interviews is but the results of their perception, their interpretation of the world, which is of extreme value to the researchers because one may assume that it is the same perception that informs their actions... [However,] it is important to understand that interviews do not stand for anything else; they represent nothing else but themselves... An interview is not a window on social reality but it is a part, a sample of that reality. (Czrniawaska, 2004, p.49)

Interviews, as utilized within this study, became part of the network of connecting data points which informed the researcher about the world of African American males in increasingly complex ways. However, they did not represent objective states in reality. The meaning derived from subjects’ responses was in the relationship of those responses to study endpoints. This meaning was not static but evolving, and contextual rather than immutable (Czrniawaska, 2004; Van Velsen, 1967). Furthermore, an attempt has been made in the application of this research methodology to remain cognizant of the ways in which the ‘process of interviewing’ impacted the substance of interviewee responses. Nathan Mizco
observes that the interview, as “perhaps the most commonly used methodological tool in social science research” (Mizco, 2003, p. 475; see also Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Briggs, 1986; Sandelowski, 2002), is often superficial in its application. Specifically, interviews often lack appropriate reflection on the existing social context and underlying influences impacting them. An effective employment of the interview, as a research tool, involves an analysis of participant linguistic repertoires and communicative norms within the research context.

Ontologically, the qualitative researcher seeks to uncover external influences to past and present conditions. It was discovered in this study that some interviewees were more likely than others to answer questions in this manner. It took patience and skill to allow interviewees to work through their answers without interruption and then reframe questions to focus their responses on processes rather than objective states. Also, qualitative researchers are at times confronted with interviewees who tend to use accounts (rehearsed generic representations) rather than focusing on processes, which are somewhat self-effacing (Czrniawaska, 2004).

3.4.2 Detailed Study Procedures: The duration of subject participation in the study lasted about three months. During the first month, with the exception of retrospective data collected, informed consent was obtained and the initial round of interviews was conducted. In the second month, the transcription of initial interviews was completed, which lasted about 45 minutes to 1 hour. Secondary follow-up interviews, lasting about 15 to 30 minutes, were conducted in the third month. Total commitment of time for subjects was approximately 2 hours. Ultimately, 19 interviews, including 10 primary and 9 secondary interviews (one study subject was unavailable for a follow-up interview) were conducted. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and then transferred to a computer for transcribing. For the purposes of protecting confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the transcription process and the names of identifiable people and places were coded to protect anonymity. Once transferred to the computer, digital audio recordings of interviews were destroyed, and interviews transferred to the computer were protected with a password. Identifiable information was then removed or coded on file directories. When transcription took place the
audio recordings on the computer were destroyed. Transcribed interviews were retained for data analysis, but no personal information was stored.

The procedures in the study respected participants’ privacy because prospective subjects had a previous relationship with the investigator, willingly providing the investigator with contact information, or willingly providing referrals to the researcher. Contacted individuals were under no obligation to participate in the study and participants could opt out of the study at any time. This was indicated to them verbally (at the time of initial contact), on the informed consent, and throughout the interview process.

Consent was obtained prior to the initial interview. Potential participants were required to read and sign the informed consent document prior to the interview session and some delayed the interview until they had sufficient time to consider participation. Furthermore, prospective subjects had the opportunity to assess their participation in the research study at several points in the consent process. It was explained to them that they could decide not to participate at any time during the research.

Sensitive information was at times collected during subjects’ recounting of their school or testing experiences. However, subjects were reminded verbally and on the informed consent that they did not have to share any information that they did not feel comfortable disclosing. Subjects were informed that it would be necessary to break confidentiality only under a circumstance where some abuse or crime was shared that had not been previously reported. Furthermore, it was explained to participants that they may experience some psychological discomfort during the interview process. However, it was communicated to them that this would not be beyond a minimal amount of discomfort, such as might be experienced in the course of every day conversation, and participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview session that they did not have to address any issues which they did not feel comfortable responding to. Further, they could stop the interview process at any time. None of the subjects followed this course of action. As indicated earlier, all interviews were completed with the exception of one follow-up session. This was a secondary interview for a subject with whom contact could not be reestablished.
3.5 Internal Validity

Threats to validity which were encountered in this study were the retelling of ‘narrative accounts,’ and ‘insider assumptions’ (Czmiawaska, 2004; Young, 2004). Accounts, as previously noted, are responses conforming to generic representations. At times they are also re-cycled counter narratives, which purport exceptionality to group stereotypes. Notably, there are certain techniques for avoiding narrative accounts during the interview process, but every interview is unique and techniques are not one size fit all. Czmiawaska observes that “what worked miracles [avoiding accounts] in one situation might cause trouble in another… I recommend a ‘recall check’: will I be able to retell this story? If not, what is missing?” (Czmiawaska, 2004, p.55) Utilizing ‘recall checking,’ the researcher is able to prompt the interviewee with tailored questions that ‘fill in the gaps’ of their story and focus their attention on articulating ‘missing’ information.

Another strategy for eliciting authentic responses, rather than narrative accounts or counter narratives, is to provide interviewees with the flexibility to answer questions in the manner which they choose. Czmiawaska supports this notion of adaptability during the interview process. She states that “it is important to elicit a narrative concerning the issue of interest to the researcher, but… sometimes another issue, brought spontaneously by the interviewee, turns out to be more interesting” (Czmiawaska, 2004, p. 55; see also Seidman, 1998; Whyte, 1960). This requires great patience and skill as people have different conversational patterns. During interviews, some subjects tended to address questions directly while others were more indirect in their responses. Knowing when to allow participants to talk and when to redirect them by reframing questions was a critical skill that was developed and employed throughout the interviewing process.

Insider assumptions, precluding full disclosure, emerge from the rapport generated when an interviewee perceives an interviewer as an in-group member (Young, 2004; De Andrade, 2000; Reinhartz, 1997; Song & Parker, 1995). Hence, race, ethnicity and gender, or some intersection of these descriptors, might all serve as indicators of the ‘in-group.’ In regards to this study, race and gender were rendered salient. The author is an African
American male who interviewed other African American males. Young indicates that, as a result of an interviewer’s inside status, interviewees at times may not elaborate on certain concepts or explain notions that are perceived to be part of their ‘shared understanding’ with the interviewer (Young, 2004). As a qualitative researcher, this is problematic in that the goal is to elicit responses from an interviewee that portray a rich portrait full of complexities and nuance, which is difficult to achieve without full disclosure. Ultimately, this affects the validity of the account.

Validity threats, retelling, and insider assumptions are addressed in several ways within the research. Strategies employed include: peer review and debriefing, negative case analysis, clarification of member bias, and member checking (Glesne, 2011, Creswell, 1998). As conceptualized and employed within this work, peer reviewing / debriefing and negative case analysis lent themselves most readily to addressing issues of retelling, while clarification of research bias and member checking were useful in working to resolve challenges associated with insider assumptions. Peer reviewing and debriefing refers to the process by which one’s work is subject to external reflection. Interviews and subsequent analyses were examined and subject to feedback from the principal investigator and other dissertation committee members. This feedback was utilized to ensure that the methodological approach was appropriately aligned to accomplish study objectives and effective in eliciting authentic accounts from interviewees. Negative case analysis, which seeks to complicate theories and assumptions, was employed as interviews were analyzed to reveal complexity and identify thematic patterns. To this end, interviewee responses were investigated by contrasting individuals with similar academic achievement and testing outcomes but with variable socio-economic status, academic achievement, family dynamics and community interactions. This was done, in part, in order to challenge narrative accounts and guard against counter narratives.

Clarification of research bias, as a process by which the researcher examines how their own subjectivity effects the collection and interpretation of data, was employed in the current study to address in-group membership. During data analysis, the author assessed
the possible influence that his past experiences, as a black male, may have exerted on the examination of research data when seeking to clarify and explain in-group norms. Also, member checking, which provided subjects the opportunity to review transcripts from their initial interviews, was employed as a means of challenging insider assumptions. Having interviewees review their transcripts provided them with the opportunity to further explicate any of their responses which, upon reflection, they felt may have been unclear or in need of additional explanation. Further, the study design of interviewing proposed subjects twice enabled the researcher to present interviewees with some of their responses from initial interviews. This was done with the expressed intent that they self-check and provide explanations for unclear or incomplete statements. This occurred throughout the secondary interview process as means of guarding against the affect of in-group membership.

3.6 Theoretical Development

The various theoretical and conceptual approaches which were evoked in answering research questions included: Critical Race Theory, Attitude Achievement Paradox, Secondary Resistance, Cool Pose, Acting White, Cultural Capital Theory, Stereotype Threat, Prove-Them-Wrong Syndrome, Human Capital Theory, Structural Functional Theory and Symbolic Interaction Theory. They are described here in an effort to specify and articulate their use as proposed analytic approaches.

If current policies are to be augmented and new ones developed to obtain a greater degree of racial equality in the educational system, theories must be evoked which account for racial disparities. Scholars observe:

There is a pressing need to view policy in general, and education policy in particular, through a lens that recognizes the very real struggles and conflicts that lie at the heart of the processes through which policy and practice is shaped. This is a radical challenge that calls into question many of the comforting myths that self-avowedly ‘democratic’ states tell about themselves. (Gillborn, 2005, pp.486-487)

The theories that are discussed here provided a mechanism with which to critique the effectiveness of existing policies, imbued with racist ideologies or propounding racialized outcomes, which ultimately impact African American males. Further, the goal of evoking
these analytical techniques is that NCLB, or its successor might be reframed or cast with closer attention paid to the conditions which impact the effectiveness of policy construction as it relates to this population.

3.6.1 Critical Race Theory - At the outset of an articulation of CRT it is essential to note that “critical scholarship on whiteness is not an assault on white people per se: it is an assault on the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of white identifications and interest. ‘So-called ‘White’ people’ do not necessarily reinforce whiteness any more than… men are necessarily sexist” (Gillborn, 2005, p.488). In fact, whiteness, as it is conceived by CRT, may actually be enforced by minority populations who, having been inundated with ideologies of inferiority, become complicit in their own subjugation. Furthermore, “one of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness” (Gillborn, 2005, p.490). Hence, one of the strengths of whiteness as a subjugating force is the shear fact that it is cloaked and masked by concepts of race neutrality and colorblindness. In this way, the mentioning of racism is often accompanied, in regards to both white and black Americans, by feelings of personal indignation, guilt, anxiety or anger, rather than a thoughtful reflection and analysis of policy structures which may intentionally or unintentionally result in racialized outcomes.

Historically and presently:

Racism plays a pivotal role in the accumulation of capital and it is a motivating factor in its own right, maintaining structures of racial oppression and white racial privilege. Critical theories of race in education draw attention to the role of educational policy and practice in the maintenance of these systems of power and in mounting challenges to them. (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p.477)

Thus, race, impacting the academic success of students as they matriculate into society at large, continues to operate as a salient factor. CRT provides an avenue for examining ways in which racism, propagated through policy, continues to produce damaging effects for children of color.
Some may argue that it is not the system which is to blame for the failure of African American males and other minority groups. This view is propounded by the advancing of race neutral policies and ideologies which advocate individualism and colorblindness. Notably, “blaming the victim… indicts students of color for their educational failure while protecting systems and bureaucracies from sustained criticism” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.6). Hence, it consigns marginalized groups to further disenfranchisement by neutralizing critiques of systemic factors which contribute to their status.

In the meantime, policies continue to be created and sustained which have a disparate impact on minority populations and, in particular, Africans American males. CR Theorists posit that the purported aim of NCLB serves merely as a façade, resulting in perverse incentives for black males and other minority groups, and masking interests that serve to maintain the status quo. Thereby it supports the existing power structure. This is conceptualized through the tenet of interest convergence which holds that a power structure will only act in the apparent interest of a minority group if it serves some real interest of its own. Scholars observe:

The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 [NCLB] mandates a major expansion in testing. Meanwhile, US Bancorp estimates that President Bush’s education plan will more than triple the $300 million annual testing market, while the National association of State Boards of Education estimates that these new testing mandates will cost as much as $7 billion. (Johnson et al, p.12)

This evidence suggests that the most substantial beneficiaries of NCLB might be the capitalist owners of testing corporations, who benefit from the proliferation of tests, and not the at-risk populations which section 1401 purports to serve. It is compelling, especially considering data revealing that the achievement gap has not narrowed and in some cases has widened (Ravitch, 2010).

3.6.2 Attitude Achievement Paradox - The Attitude Achievement Paradox model holds that:

There is a discrepancy between beliefs and subsequent behaviors [for many African Americans]. Mickelson found that Black high school students supported the belief that hard work plays a major role in one’s success (abstract belief); however, they also believed that hard work does not
necessarily result in success if one is Black because of such social injustices as prejudice and discrimination (concrete belief).” (Ford et al, 2008, p.220)

Inconsistent beliefs, evinced by a contradiction between discourse and behaviors, are explained by the dissonance associated with talk about ‘what should’ or ‘could’ be and talk about ‘what is.’ Policies, such as NCLB, seeking to ameliorate the conditions of African American males, must account for such phenomena in the construction and implementation of remedies.

3.6.3 Secondary Resistance - Another theory, Secondary Resistance, which is based in large degree on the juxtaposing histories of slavery and immigration, “display[s] itself in a low commitment [from minorities] to values and beliefs that are considered typical of mainstream Whites or those who have been their oppressors” (Ford et al, 2008, p.222). Hence, it is a rejection of what is perceived as ‘white’ normative values. As such, “black males often adopt behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure (oppositional identities). It is not just that they are more likely to be punished or placed in remedial classes, it is also that they are more likely to act out in the classroom and to avoid challenging themselves academically” (Noguera, 1997, p.437). In an attempt to cope with their oppression, black males, trans-generationally, have further entrenched themselves within a marginalized position.

3.6.4 Cool Pose - The notion of the cool pose contributes to an understanding of both Secondary Resistance and the Attitude Achievement Paradox. As Jackson describes it, “the cool-pose culture is a paradigm that depicts African American males as individuals deeply embedded within a subculture valuing standards of coolness and hypermasculinity signified by identification with the hip-hop culture – hanging out, urban fashion, and hip-hop music” (Jackson & Moore, 2008, p. 849). Hence, the ‘cool pose’ acts as an oppositional identity, equipping the African American male with a ‘black’ standard of manhood that is both achievable and psychologically satisfying. However, it is not advantageous in positioning him for academic success.

3.6.5 Acting White - The concept of ‘Acting White’ is another useful technique for analyzing African American male testing experiences. Ford et al observe that:
Charges of ‘Acting White’ seem to be effective at hindering too many Black students from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them, including opportunities to participate in gifted education, especially AP classes, their chances to attend the more elite colleges and universities can be diminished, thereby contributing to the achievement gap [in secondary school and] in higher education. (Ford et al, 2008, p.222)

Those students not affected by oppositional identities, as previously discussed, might be threatened still by a conception of whiteness which falsely extends to include attitudes and behaviors of success. In this way, “students constantly struggle to navigate between two worlds – one that places a premium on maladaptive responses and normative expressions of masculinity and one that rejects such behaviors as dysfunctional, at risk, abnormal, and anti-intellectual” (Strayhorn, 2009, p.716). African American males who accept stereotypical views of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’ find it difficult to consistently exhibit those behaviors and dispositions which will lead to high academic achievement.

3.6.6 Cultural Capital Theory – Cultural capital theory purports that schools operate as entities which validate particular kinds of culturally generated knowledge, those emerging from the elite and middle class, over others, that of the poor. Thus, it constructs “instruments of knowledge… which are arbitrary,” imposing a type of “symbolic violence” on students with lower socio-economic status (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 115). Other scholars, explaining the process in terms of ‘cultural production,’ emphasize that culture is not static – rather it is a “continual process of creating meaning in social and material contexts” (Levinson and Holland, 1996, p. 13). Conceptualized in this way, schools not only reproduce cultural forms but also produce them. This makes it even more difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, cultivate and employ school codes.

Distinguishing itself from the notion of ‘acting white,’ cultural capital theory sets forth that:

Cultural styles associated with ‘acting white’ are not the same as dominant cultural capital. That is, a low-income Black or Latino high-school senior might speak Standard English, maintain friendships with White youths, and play in the school orchestra, and yet still not possess cultural know-how about how to best fill out a college application that will impress the admissions committee of a competitive college. On the other hand, some practices of ‘acting white’ can translate into dominant cultural capital. For instance, a student who befriends mostly White students and emulates their cultural practices might get recognized by a teacher or counselor, and if he or
she does well, be recommended for advanced placement or other college-preparatory classes. Enrollment in such classes could expose the student to educational resources that could help him or her in a top-notch college. Indirectly, ‘acting white’ brought the student some benefit in the long run. (Carter, 2005, p.160)

This is an important distinction to make for scholars advancing the notion of ‘cultural capital’ acquired through ‘cultural production.’ ‘Acting white’ in and of itself does not ensure that students will be knowledgeable about the dominant culture. However, in certain circumstances it does increase the likelihood that this knowledge might be acquired. For many African American males, as noted previously, the social costs of ‘acting white’ far outweigh the likelihood of accruing some benefit from it. As such, Carter and others argue that it makes sense, in appealing to marginalized students for increased academic engagement, to distinguish successful practices from those typically labeled as ‘acting white.’ However, the difficulty resides in the fact that, in some circumstances, they are perceived as one in the same.

3.6.7 Stereotype Threat - Another theory, stereotype threat, encompasses “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype… In various studies on stereotype threat… when told that the test was a measure of ability, Black students’ confidence and subsequent performance were depressed” (Ford et al, 2008, p.224). As such, anxiety associated with the threat of poor performance, thereby confirming stereotypes of racial inferiority, impeded minority students’ performance and resulted in disparate outcomes when compared to their white counterparts.

Contributing to the severity of the achievement gap is the prevalence of negative images associated with African American males. Strayhorn observes that “black men are often described using disparaging terms such as dangerous, endangered, uneducable, and lazy, which generally reinforce the negative stereotypes to which some peers and educators subscribe and inadvertently perpetuate the invisibility of Black men” (Strayhorn, 2009, p.712). This persistent ideology of invisibility contributes to the stereotype threat experienced by
African American males in that it serves as a reminder of the racist doctrine of inferiority.

Research indicates that:

   By Grade 4, Black men become keenly aware that schools do not invest in their learning process and many teachers-especially those who are non-Black-perceive them as incapable learners yet proficient and promising athletes. Unfortunately, Black, male youth tend to internalize these attitudes and develop negative perceptions about themselves, the schooling process, and self-efficacy or self-hating prejudices. (Strayhorn, 2009, p.713)

Internalized negative attitudes provide a real hindrance to African American males as they seek to situate themselves and thrive within the schooling environment.

3.6.8 Prove Them Wrong Syndrome – Situated opposite stereotype threat is the Prove-Them-Wrong Syndrome. This theory, as with stereotype threat, is motivated by a concept of minority or African American male inferiority, albeit in a different way. Moore et al explain that:

   The prove-them wrong syndrome was born out of ‘a psychological phenomenon that arises when the larger society projects an image of black intellectual inferiority’… [However,] rather than passively ignore the adversity, in the sense of their thoughts, feelings, and actions, the African-American males assumed a more assertive academic posture and a stronger sense of purpose, commitment, and confidence in their academic persistence and performance. (Moore et al, 2003, p.67)

Some African American males utilize the threat of being stereotyped as a mechanism to motivate them to achieve at an increased level of academic performance and attainment. Although this study was conducted on the level of higher education, it holds promise for the study of black males in K-12 settings via its exploration of “adaptive and non-adaptive coping mechanisms [employed by these students] that promote academic persistence (Moore et al, 2003, p.70).

3.6.9 Human Capital Theory – Within the field of economics, human capital theory represents an effort by scholars to explain the process of education in terms of supply and demand. Factors of production in economics including labor (human resource that goes into production) and capital (the produced means of production, i.e. computers, school buildings) were initially measured separately according to aggregate hours of use. Theodore Schultz challenged this notion by intimating that these two factors were interconnected. Specifically, human capital theory purports that “schooling endows an individual with knowledge and skills
that enable him or her to be more productive and thereby to receive higher earnings” (King et al, 2003, p. 39). This notion conceptualizes education as an 'investment' in an individual or group’s economic capacity. Whereby, acquired skills and knowledge enable them to attain higher earnings. Adam Smith explains that:

The acquisition of such talents, by the maintenance of the acquirer during his education, study, or apprenticeship, always costs a real expense, which is a capital fixed and realized, as it were, in his person. Those talents, as they make a part of his fortune, so do they likewise of that of the society to which he belongs. The improved dexterity of a workman may be considered in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labour, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit. (Smith, 1993, p. 166)

The presence or absence of this ‘educational’ investment which affects the quality and quantity of human capital, according to Smith and others, is to the benefit or detriment of individuals, groups, and societies who have attained or neglected to attain it.

3.6.10 Structural-Functional Theory – A sociological theory, structural-functional theory asserts that "society is a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability" (Macionis, 1998, p.10). ‘Structure’ within the context of the theory relates to behavioral patterns while ‘function’ denotes societal consequences for social patterns. Robert Merton has further refined the concept of function to include ‘manifest functions,’ which refers to recognized and intended consequences, and ‘latent functions,’ which refers to unrecognized and unintended consequences. Merton observes further that all consequences are not useful and some, such as social dysfunctions, are undesirable.

Structural-functional paradigm is represented by the theory of mass society which purports that “industry and bureaucracy have eroded traditional social ties. A mass society is marked by weak kinship and neighborhood ties so that individuals are socially atomized” (Macionis, 1998, p. 421; see also Berger, Berger & Keller, 1974). Within the mass society individuals typically experience feelings of powerlessness as a result of isolation.

3.6.11 Social-Conflict Theory – In opposition to structural-functional theory, social-conflict theory explains society in terms of inequality and conflict which generate social change, rather than stability. Conflict analysis strives to discover how societal institutions perpetuate inequality and conflict by reproducing class structure. Specifically, the analysis
seeks to track how an individual’s societal standing interacts with organizational bureaucracy to produce disparate outcomes and trans-generational conflict (Macionis, 1998; Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

The Social Conflict paradigm, as articulated by the theory of class society, sets forth that society is driven by capitalism which leads to pronounced social stratification. As explained by Macionis, “the increasing scale of social life in modern times stems from the insatiable appetite of capitalism. Because a capitalist economy pursues ever-increasing profits, both production and consumption expand” (Macionis, 1998; see also Marx & Engels, 1972). This leads to individuals and groups being reduced to sources of labor for the marketplace or consumers for material productions. The proliferation of class society leads to feelings of powerlessness emerging from the prevalence of inequality.

3.6.12 Symbolic-Interaction Theory – Also a sociological theory, symbolic-interaction paradigm is a framework that “envisions society as the product of everyday interactions of individuals” (Macionis, 1998, p. 14). It is concerned primarily with questions of ‘1) How society is experienced?’ and ‘2) How individuals’ behavior changes from one situation to another.’ The Thomas Theorem and Ethnomethodology articulate the concept of a social construction of reality within the context of symbolic-interaction theory. The Thomas Theorem states that “situations defined as real become real in their consequences” (Thomas, 1966, p. 301) while Ethnomethodology is concerned with the way that people make sense of their surroundings.

Symbolic-interaction is also concerned with the notions of ‘status’ and ‘role,’ which Macionis defines, respectively, as a ‘recognized social position that an individual occupies’ and ‘behavior expected of someone who holds a particular status’ (1998). Embedded within the concept of status, as articulated by Macionis and other scholars, the notions of ‘ascribed status’, ‘achieved status’ and ‘master status’ are rendered salient in the current research. Ascribed status refers to social position received at birth or received involuntarily, while achieved status connotes a position assumed voluntarily which reflects a substantial measure of personal ability and choice. Lastly, master status is identified as a social position with
significant importance for a person’s identity which exerts considerable influence on the shaping of a person’s life (Macionis, 2008; see also Orlansky & Heward, 1981).

3.7 Data Analysis

During interview sessions subjects were asked to talk about the events, people, and places surrounding their experiences with testing. Study endpoints for analysis included: influence of family dynamics, formation of academic identity, impact of transience on school life, racializing and racialized experiences emanating from school, affect of early testing experiences on academic trajectory, experiences surrounding high stakes graduation tests, experiences with college entrance exams, teacher characteristics and rigor of coursework associated with schooling, school engagement affecting interest and achievement, community interactions influencing school achievement, and aspirations impacting disposition toward future education.

Within the context of these foci, the research inquired about a) school demographics, b) the subjects students were tested in and how they were prepared in each, c) the explanation and/or build up provided for them by teachers (counselors, principals, etc.) about the tests, d) the types of questions and scores they received if they were told, e) their recollection of the way that parents, or other family members, and teachers talked about the results, f) the type of school that they attended, g) the way in which tests were structured and the way in which testing played out, h) who made the highest scores / lowest scores, and how this affected course placement (AP, gifted ed., remediation, etc.). These questions, along with tangent inquiries emerging during the interview process, constituted the central focus of the study investigation. Subsequently, the analysis of interviewee responses revolved around constructs of imagery, logic, and concepts.

3.7.1 Imagery – Scholars have observed that “not everything our concepts would, in principle, let us see actually turns up in what we look at… [As such,] ‘Not accepting a story’ means believing that the story’s imagery of how this thing really works is wrong in some important way” (Becker, 1998, p.18; see also Blumer, 1969). Conversely, accepting a story is
an implicit acceptance of 'how a thing really works.' Both of these understandings became important as subjects’ responses to study interview questions were analyzed. This was particularly salient as it related to the way in which participants conceptualized their abilities, opportunities, and experiences. This process, in part, began during the interview sessions, where the researcher strived to present subjects with ‘how’ questions, versus ‘why’ questions, in order to illicit responses which were rich in detail and reflected interviewees’ understanding of not only what ‘thing’ had occurred but also the people, circumstances, and events which they believed influenced a particular occurrence (Becker, 1998).

3.7.2 Logic – Howard Becker defines logic as “ways of manipulating what we know according to some set of rules so that the manipulations produce new things” (1998, p. 146). Throughout the interview process it was discovered that subjects employed logical frames within their responses to research questions. As such, it was thought advantageous to investigate these mechanisms as a means of understanding assumptions and presuppositions driving their rhetoric. The application of logic in data analysis involved the use of syllogisms – classical logical arguments consisting of a major premise, minor premise and conclusion (if A and B then C) – and truth tables, which reveal the explicit and implicit conditions embedded in the way one makes sense of their experiences.

Hughes’ application of syllogism in his work investigating racism in the 1940s provided a model for the way in which logic was utilized in the analysis of the research data. He asserted that many times the major premise of a subject’s response tended to be suppressed. Implied major premises, according to Hughes, could be identified by observing a respondent’s conclusion, and the statement of fact used to support it – then utilizing the logical exercise of syllogism to identify the hidden major premise. Moreover, he identifies the implicit nature of the hidden premise as ambivalence or obfuscation, which results either from conflicting values or cultural inculcation, respectively. Concerning the former, the scholar is tasked with uncovering within subjects’ responses a set of contradictory positions while regarding the latter, the researcher aims "at finding the patterns of daily life that produce that
kind of common-sense certainty among people who share the characteristic problems, constraints, and opportunities of a social situation” (Becker, 1998, p.150).

3.7.3 Concepts – Concepts are regarded within this work as “generalized statements about whole classes of phenomena rather than specific statements of fact” (Becker, 1998, p. 109). Admittedly, there are several ways of identifying concepts, including deduction and the identification of model types. However, in this study concepts were developed through the summarizing of data. Namely, it considered subjects’ responses to interview questions within the context of a qualitative study. Concepts may be defined as a collection or example of things indicating the ‘concept,’ or as indicators of a phenomena, but “the point is that concepts presuppose that you have inspected the full range of things they cover when you formulate and define them” (Becker, 1998, p. 116). The way in which we define concepts is limited or expanded by the cases that are available to us in consideration of a particular issue. Often time, researchers allow a particular concept to define the cases which they are studying. However, this has the adverse affect of limiting the way in which we might think about a particular issue. This approach was utilized in data analysis, but the research also sought to expand or challenge conceptual understandings through the data emerging from cases.

As generalizations, cases typically are inclusive of multiple criteria. However, empirically, it might not be the case that all criteria are necessary, or that a certain grouping of criteria is necessarily sufficient for a concept. Conceptual understandings are sometimes limited by a false adherence to unexamined relations within a criterion set. As such, ‘concepts’ were employed here as an analytic tool to explore the relationships between the concepts exhibited within the responses of case study subjects (cases) and the criterion (examples and phenomenal indicators) which they used to make sense of these concepts.

Concepts are also relational in that many times they have meaning only in relationship to other concepts. Such is the case with the concepts of ‘black’ and ‘white’ or African American and Caucasian. Becker explains that “we all have all sorts of traits, only a few of which are socially marked as important because of the way they are embedded in a
system of relations. They become important when the organization of physical and social arrangements makes them ‘necessary” (Becker, 1998, p. 135). In the study analysis, both the way in which subjects conceptualized identity and other personal characteristics, and the way in which their conceptualizations were situated and influenced by peers, family members, and school authorities were considered.
Chapter 4
4 Analysis

4.1 Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, this research was conducted via interview sessions with college age African American males (ages 18-26) regarding their K-12 school and testing experiences. During these interview sessions, subjects were asked to talk about the events, people, and places surrounding their experience with testing. Specifically, the research inquired about a) family dynamics, b) school demographics, c) the subjects they were tested in and how they were prepared in each, d) the explanation and/or build up provided for teachers (counselors, principals, etc.) about the tests, e) the types of questions and scores they received if they were told, f) their recollection of the way that parents and teachers talked about the results, g) the type of school that they attended, h) the way in which tests were structured and the way in which testing played out, who made the highest scores / lowest scores and how this affected course placement (AP, gifted ed., remediation, etc.). As stated in the preceding chapter, these questions along with related inquiries emerging during the interview process became the central focus of this study.

The young men that were interviewed provided diverse perspectives on the current research involving African American males and testing experiences. Their commentaries validated, broadened, and complicated many theories and concepts as set forth in other studies. Analysis of interviewee responses through the process of indexing revealed that the data tended to be grouped thematically according to descriptive topics. The approach and methods used to facilitate this process are further explored in the following sections. The central questions guiding the research, as articulated in the statement of the problem and methodology, remained salient and guided the work of analysis: 1) How do differential social influences mitigate the school and testing experiences of African American Males? 2) How do
African American males’ interaction with disparate school bureaucracy and practices impress academic and test performance? 3) How do testing experiences vary between African American males who attain high ratings on school tests, in particular high stakes and standardized tests, and those who do not?

4.2 Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of subject participants in the study, as alluded to in the research design, are not categorized as meaningful within themselves. Rather, they are employed as methodological constructs which facilitate an understanding of the way in which the various situations and experiences of individuals account for the differential impact of institutional practices on their educational experiences. To this end, the characteristics which are included in the Tables below are inclusive of both well defined and more broadly conceived descriptors. This section is concluded with a brief description of the high school, Freedman, from which all subject participants in this study graduated. This was done as a means of contextualizing the exploration of differential outcomes from same-group members situated within an identical setting (Jackson & Moore, 2008).

Table 4.1 describes the Age at time of study, Social Economic Status (SES), and School-Type Experience. For the purposes of this study, SES was defined according to Free/Reduced Lunch status, a typical record maintained by schools and information readily accessible to subject participants. The concept of school-type experience refers to the self reported urbanacity of schools attended by subjects during their K-12 school experience. In other words, it indicates whether they considered the schools they attended in elementary and secondary school to be urban, suburban, rural, or some other category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>SES (Free/Reduced Lunch) Yes or No</th>
<th>School - Type Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban, Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Urban, International (Europe), Lottery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Urban, Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban, Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban, Lottery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Urban, Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban, Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Urban, Suburban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 Age, Socio-economic Status and School-Type Experience of Study Participants

Table 4.2 displays subjects’ Grade Point Averages (GPAs), school-type experience and school-level aspiration. As a point of clarity pertaining to GPAs: A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0, D=1.0, and F=0.0. For the purposes of this study, high achieving students are identified as Adrian, Ricky, Bishop, and Josh (4.0, 4.0, 3.8, and 3.2) – mid-level achievers as Craig, Jason, and Sean (3.0, 2.0, and 1.9) – low-level achievers as Greg, Jacob, and Reggie (1.9, 1.7 and 1.6). Although GPA played the primary role in this determination, school level aspiration was also a consideration. The descriptor ‘school-level’ aspiration indicates the level of schooling – including high school, technical, 2-year college, 4-year college or graduate professional – which subjects were currently pursuing or planning to pursue.

‘Guardian status’ refers to the parent(s)/guardian(s) responsible for the student during his K-12 school years and their highest level of academic attainment. Note: within this table, an asterisk next to the subject’s name indicates that they were a student identified as having special learning needs. Implications are explored in data analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>School-Level Aspiration</th>
<th>Parent/Guardian Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Graduate/Professional</td>
<td>Mother, Aunt &amp; Uncle, Grandmother / Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>Graduate/Professional</td>
<td>Father, Mother / Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Father, Mother / Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Aunt, Child Protection Services / High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craig</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Father, Mother / Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason*</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Step-father, mother / High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Mother / High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Graduate/Professional</td>
<td>Father, Mother / College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Mother / High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie*</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Step-father, Mother / High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 GPA, School-Level Aspiration, and Parent/Guardian Status of Study Participants

The high school from which study participants graduated was situated in an urban Ohio school district. The average daily student enrollment from the school during the years in which the study participants graduated from the school (2005-2011) fluctuated between approximately 930 and 770. In general, enrollment trended downward. The school is designated by the state as ‘high poverty’ with a percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranging from 64 percent to 81 percent – demonstrating a steady increase. The student population is predominantly African American. Demographic data consistently indicates an enrollment of African American students around 90 percent, Caucasian students at around 6 percent, with Asian and Hispanic students representing the remaining 4 percent. The percentage of students with disabilities, hovering between 16 and 19 percent, has remained relatively the same.
4.3 Theme Emergence

Within the context of this study it has been a principle objective, as an institutional ethnography, to capture the voice of African American males. In so doing, this research has endeavored to expand their voice so as to richly and fully articulate the intricacies of meaning present therein. This work is similar to the approach employed by Ann Manicom in studying the experiences of women:

The work to be done is to help them think more deeply, first about the notion of 'women's voice,' and secondly about the notion of 'experience' arising in any one of us as individuals; the second brings into view how the traces of social relations are already in women's accounts of their experience. Thus, what is called for in [institutional ethnography] is not so much 'going beyond' as it is tracing more intently what is already there to be heard. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006)

Further, in analysis of data, the research sought to 'intently trace' the voice of African American males through their recounting of school and testing experiences, which included interconnected social situations and events. Ultimately, the goal was to trace the impact of K-12 ruling practices on the shaping those experiences.

To this end, the study sought to identify emergent themes which were based upon the responses of subjects as rendered salient during the interview process. Themes, as they arose from the data, were constructed as sub-themes situated within the context of overarching themes. Rather than coding interview data, the data was 'browsed,' with the intent of tracing specific events and interactions which were contextualized as emergent patterns (sub-themes), and then 'cut and shuffled,' as a mechanism for situating 'sub-themes' within more generalized patterns (overarching themes). This first approach, browsing the data, leverages explanatory patterns derived from everyday life, conversations, media and academic materials as a resource to provide different frames from which to view and talk about research findings. In this way, the multi-faceted nature of the content is exposed. Further, the method was used to identify and refine sub-themes within the data by looking at the material closely for aberrations in subject responses which exposed the inadequacy of certain explanatory patterns while rendering others salient. As such, emergent sub-themes within this study were constructed and deconstructed according to a 'dialogue' between data
and ideas, and according to the ability of prospective theories to explain material. This process of ‘sensitizing concepts,’ as Herbert Blumer conceptualizes it, is not akin to a researcher imposing any preconceived notion on research data. Malinowski explains:

If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of molding his theories according to facts, and seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work. (Malinowski, 1922, pp. 8-9)

Further, this method does not lead to the ‘reduction’ of data into categories, as with grounded theory. Rather, it creates expectations for “the scrutiny of facts which, even in the moment of their interrogation, change their form [or meanings] or dissolve into other facts… They display extreme elasticity and allow for great irregularity” (Thompson, 1978, pp. 61-62). Sub-themes (and overarching themes) are not considered absolute categories but guiding posts exhibiting malleable tendencies. As such, the goal is not to validate findings but to “provide a spur for deeper and richer analysis” (Bloor, 1997, p. 395).

In addition to the process of browsing the data, there was a focused attendance on experiences within the data which subjects considered salient. Within the context of this approach, it was a particular challenge to separate out in subjects’ responses those issues which interviewees raised themselves from those which were introduced through questioning. Themes, as conceptualized within the study, would only arise from the former and not the latter. Ultimately, a process was settled on whereby subjects’ responses were utilized in the identification of themes when they arose either from a significant and robust extension to a question which was initially proposed, or an original line of thought interjected by the subject.

The cut and shuffle approach, an old style method dating back to the European Renaissance, was utilized in the study both as a mechanism aiding in the construction and deconstruction of emerging sub-themes and as vehicle for identifying overarching themes which arose from sub-themes. As articulated previously in Chapter 3, the institutional ethnography is concerned primarily with the way in which organizational structures seek to shape the experiences of individuals living and working within them. K-12 educational
institutions, as conceptualized here, are comprised of ruling relations exhibited at the levels of Social Influence, School Bureaucracy, and Testing Policies and Practices. Within the context of this research, considering the sub-thematic patterns identified from research data, these institutional constructs also emerged as overarching themes. (see Figure 1) Further, since the goal of the institutional ethnography is to identify “translocal relations, discourses, and institutional work processes that are shaping the informant’s everyday work,” the objective was not only to identify emerging sub-themes and overarching themes, but also to utilize them as mechanisms for analyzing the K-12 institution (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p.21).

‘Cut and shuffle,’ sharing conceptual similarities with a technique articulated by Erickson (2004), describes a pragmatic approach to analysis in which the organization and re-organization of data is derived from the common elements emerging from it. Hence, the process of identifying overarching themes in this study, in accordance with this method, arose from the convergence of similar thematic attributes – what Erickson calls ‘reoccurring phenomena of interest’ (Erickson, 2004). Identified sub-themes were synthesized into overarching themes according to a process which utilized multi-colored highlighters to differentiate, within and between transcripts, emergent sub-themes which evinced the attributes of one overarching theme or another. This process was not without some degree of ambiguity. There were some instances where sub-themes exhibited elements which might, to a greater or lesser extent, substantiate the emergence of two or three overarching themes. This was the exception more than the rule. In such cases where there was some degree of ambivalence, an overarching theme was identified which it was thought, considering the weight of the data, most accurately contextualized and embodied the essence of the sub-theme.

4.4 Presentation of Findings

The presentation of findings is explicated in the following three sections. As discussed previously in Chapter 3, data collection reflects subject engagement at multiple institutional levels. These levels included: Social Influences, School Bureaucracy and
Testing Practices and Procedures. In data analysis, each level emerged as an overarching theme, and overarching themes were synthesized from sub-themes, which were identified through patterns in subjects’ interview data. Further, the experiences of subjects at each institutional level, evincing thematic similarities, demonstrated a progressively narrow scope of required skills and increased formalization of expectations. This provided a window into the way in which ‘ruling relations’ in K-12 education shape the academic experiences of differently situated individuals within this group. In the first section, ‘Social Influences’ as an overarching theme relates to the ways in which prior school and extra-school activities, which are conceived of as an extension to the schooling regime, impact students’ learning experiences. It considers the interaction and interconnections of the school with home and community as the basis for interpreting both students’ understandings of school expectations and their responses to them. In the next section, the overarching theme of ‘School Bureaucracy’ reflects the operations of the school, inclusive of authoritative posture, pedagogical practices, and structural elements. It conceptualizes the way in which these components enable or hinder student participation and engagement in the academic process. Lastly, ‘Testing Practices and Procedures’ as an overarching theme articulates those facets of schooling, including testing preparation, interpretation of results and response to results, that are most intimately connected with the practice of assessment. In particular, it considers standardized tests and high stakes graduation tests. In this section, the ‘every day lived realities’ of students’ testing experiences, affected by the organizational and text-based mediated practices of the schools which they attended, were identified and explored (Andre-Becheley, 2005).

Having a diverse group of students as research subjects, each with different educational histories but having graduated from the same high school, provides a complex backdrop for a qualitative study considering the persistence of the achievement gap. The goal was not to report on isolated student experiences or school events but to tell a story about how the school and testing experiences of African American males has been shaped by ruling practices across institutional levels with increasingly dense expectations. This
research sought to explore how these experiences revealed the expansive and restrictive capacities within K-12 structures as facilitated by NCLB. Utilizing a pattern model, the study investigated the manner in which emerging sub-themes and overarching themes, identified by the methods described above, demonstrated a propensity towards explaining research data. Essentially, the research sought to give data meaning by explaining it in different ways (Kaplan, 2004). Following this approach, subject quotes were employed, both in isolation and in concert, as mechanisms for describing and explaining the participants’ interactions with K-12 institutional processes. To preserve the integrity and authenticity of oral responses in the presentation of this data, including intonations and interjections of thought which conveyed shades of meaning, subject quotes, as much as possible while retaining written comprehensiveness, have been left unaltered. Parentheses and brackets were utilized, on occasion, where it was deemed helpful in clarifying the meaning of subjects’ responses, or where the addition of certain words would assist in the written presentation (which translated oral communication to text) of what an interviewee communicated verbally.

4.5 Social Relations and Situations Influencing Students’ Different Experiences with Schooling – Overarching Theme #1

This section addresses the overarching theme of social relations as an institutional extension of K-12 education. As indicated in Figure 1, this organizational level and the ‘ruling practices’ which emerge from it are a students’ initiation to the school as an institution. As indicated by the graphic display, students spend most time at this level and, thus, its’ influence – as conceived within this study – predominates over other institutional levels. The focus is on the ways in which family and community demands, as an extension of the schooling institution, operate in concert with or in opposition to ruling relations within the school as revealed by differential home and community situations. Most students, even those that relied more heavily on explanations of school performance that combined personal characteristics and social experiences, understood the impact that home and community situations had on their academic life. This section begins to uncover the students’
experiences with schooling and how those experiences connect with the local knowledge systems that students use in the context of navigating, interpreting, and responding to formal school and testing experiences (Andre-Bechley, 2005).

The data shows some similarity in the ‘work’ that students do. In this section and in the two that follow, student interviews, articulating experiences with schooling, are utilized as a way of remaining faithful to the ‘real world’ of students. However, this section, as opposed to the other two, focuses on where students live and the way in which their extra-school experiences extend institutional practices. Thereby the home and community are interconnected with the K-12 institution. The presentation of the data shows students making inferences and drawing conclusions about school based upon family experiences, interactions with friends, and neighborhood influences. This section is organized around eight sub-themes which evince the overarching theme of social influence. It has been assumed within this study that students are a legitimate source of knowledge regarding school and testing experiences. Also, students’ responses to ruling relations emanating from K-12 institutions, informed by the ways in which they are personally and socially situated, are regarded as interconnected with both the nature of these institutional demands and their interpretation of them.

4.5.1 “They did their job. They responded but I yet still needed help.” Jason (2.0 GPA): Use and Availability of Support – The issue of available ‘support’, both in type and quality as relating to academic performance, was a subject raised by most participants. Students’ experiences ranged from having robust networks of support to very little support. Some identified the presence of support, or lack thereof, as being highly significant while others (subjects who were high academic achievers) seemed to indicate that it was of little importance. These high achievers pointed to ‘personal drive’ or self-reliance as more relevant to their school success. This tension, between support and self-reliance, is a thread which runs throughout this theme.
Ricky (4.0 GPA) conveyed both the importance and availability of support in his academic life stating, “If I don't understand something then I would ask for help at home and I would most of the time get help.” He explained this process in detail:

If I needed help they were there and could tell me. If there was something that my dad didn't know how to do, which I don't think there probably was, he would say get help at school. It's the same thing I tell my sister. When you don't understand something at school that's where it's being taught so ask questions. Don't wait till you come home cause if I don't know it or if I don't remember how to do it you would have done better to just ask in school. Now if it's something that I can help her with - and most of the stuff she's working on I can help her with – [I will].

Later, in his academic life, during college, Ricky related an independent use of this approach. Discussing how he deals with the emotional strain of performing academically, as an African American male, he explained:

Yeah, it does create pressure, but I think it all depends on how you handle it and if you use your resources to get around it. [You can't] let it influence you and break you down.

Ricky conceptualized support in terms of ‘resources’ and considered whether he had observed similar behavior amongst other African American males:

Walker: Do you feel that people, other African-Americans, do you feel that they are less aware of resources than others might be - Or more hesitant to use their resources?

Ricky: Yeah, but I think that also falls back into pride. I don't feel like it’s just African Americans that struggle through things and don't get help. I've encountered other people who don't know what they're doing and I'm like 'well I found out through my early arrival program. That this is where I go and you can go there too.' So I don't think it has anything to do with race, in general, but I can only speak for African Americans to an extent. But I can speak for those [people] who I've encountered from other races as well. I mean I just feel like sometimes people don't get help because they feel like they can figure things out on their own. I can attest to that because I know sometimes I feel like if I study this or if I put more time into it [I can get it] - but it's more so that you sometimes have to hear it from someone else or see it from someone else's perspective.

Although not a high academic achieving student, Sean (1.9 GPA) also indicated a high level of academic support at home. He explained, “So like at home my mom would always work with us - she always worked with us in our academics.” He further discussed his experience of support:

Walker: So what's your first memory of her working with you in your academics?

Sean: Uh well maybe like second grade. I'm sure it was earlier than that but [that’s] from what I can remember. Every day we came home, me and my brother and
sisters, we had to do some type of math. You know she would do something with the chalkboard: ‘1 plus 1, 1 plus 2, 1 plus 3’ - like we did a different number every day and then when we had our snacks. It was divided up. She would make us do like ‘put 10 in here, 10 in here, 10 in here - how many is that?’

Walker: So did she do that with other subject areas or was it mainly math?

Sean: She would do everything. Everything was on the refrigerator - ‘refrigerator, cat, and dog’ - all different spelling words. She's a teacher.

Different from Ricky and Sean, Greg (1.9 GPA) noted the relative lack of support that he received throughout his K-12 education. He explained the challenges that it presented:

Greg: If we needed to come home and get some help sometimes that would be a problem. It would be a problem for us because maybe our work wouldn't get done because we needed help. Because my aunt she worked night shift and she'd go to sleep during the day and then she'd have to go to work again that night. So it was like really kind of difficult [to get help]. It was bad but it wasn't. The only thing bad was that it impacted us going to school because if we needed help at home there wasn't always help. Maybe our work wouldn’t get done and our grades would drop because there wasn't always help when we needed help. You see what I'm saying?

Walker: Yeah. Were there other places other than home where you could go to get help?

Greg: After school tutoring or after school programs. And we actually did go to some of those and get help. So that was helpful a little bit.

Walker: Where did you go if you had questions with homework? Did you have places or people you could ask or did you just wait until you went to school?

Greg: Sometimes I would wait until I went to school; other times I would ask my parents or my guardian [at the time] and if they didn't know the answer they would say 'skip it' or 'ask a teacher' and some would say ‘oh you don't have your notes’ but you know sometimes (even with notes) you still don't understand and sometimes when [someone] restates the question it is a little bit different. So they would just say ‘wait until you go back to school’ and ‘just ask the teacher’. So I would wait and ask the teacher.

Craig (3.0 GPA), who attended schools in both urban and suburban contexts, indicated that students that came from feeder schools in the suburbs had a privileged status in which they were positioned differently to understand the way in which support could be accessed in that particular setting. He related that, “It seemed like they had a connection going on from middle school to Jefferson - like they knew brothers or sisters or other family members. It seemed like they knew like a connection. They already knew what they were coming into.” Craig conveyed he didn’t feel comfortable asking questions:

Craig: Honestly, I didn't.
Walker: Why not?

Craig: Because either they wouldn't answer, or like they gave me an answer that didn't help me at all, so it was like purposeless for me - so I just tried to figure it out myself.

Craig, unlike Ricky, interpreted the issue of support as occurring along racial lines. He indicated that most of the students who were white, and only a few of those who were black, came to the high school from suburban feeder schools. He talked about the support that he might have received from other students:

Walker: Did you have friends in your classes that were white students that you talked to about courses?

Craig: I did but I did not. I was cool with them but I didn't feel like I had that type of relationship with them that I could ask them for help. I'd rather just try to figure it out myself so it would be on me - I guess - if I did or did not get it.

Jason's experience with support in school was different from Craig in that he received support but the support was not offered with a frequency or quality to render it adequate. In particular, relating to his elementary school experience, he described the type of help that he needed as extending beyond academics. Ultimately, he was identified as a special education student:

Jason: They did their job. They responded, but I yet still needed help in elementary.

Walker: When you say 'I yet still needed help' - how do you describe the type of help that you needed?

Jason: I wouldn't get the help really and sometimes they wouldn't help me because I would be bad or out-of-control. So I would always get kicked out. I would always learn something in In-School Suspension (ISS) but how am I going to (really) learn something in ISS. That's not learning – they would just give me a sheet and that's not learning. So I had to tell myself 'I have to stop being bad so I won't be kicked out and I can start learning.'

Walker: Do you think that the teachers knew that you needed more help?

Jason: I think they did because they started putting me in tutor classes and I started getting more and more help.

Walker: Did that help you to be a more successful student?

Jason: Yeah, yes sir.

4.5.2 “Yeah I need school – I need it. I just don’t want to go to school right now.” –

Reggie (1.6 GPA): Exposure, Skills Sets and Aspirations – Students in this study articulated
varying levels of aspiration. In many cases students’ aspirations were connected to cultivated skill sets and/or exposure to particular activities. Students discussed rationales for aspirations and explained the perceived relevance or irrelevance of school in achieving their objectives. Commentary was framed around an understanding of work as a means to fulfilling personal / family needs by achieving 'success,' and maximizing potential.

Greg (1.9 GPA) explained his desire to work in the medical field. At the time of this interview he was a post non-graduate student still attempting to pass the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) in Science. He related, "I'm doing STNA (nurses assistant) so I would like to go further in that, work my way to an RN. You know get a good paying job and just take care of my family. That's one big major thing." He explained how he settled on becoming a nurse:

Walker: You talked about wanting to be a nurse. Did you ever think about wanting to be a doctor? How did you think about or settle on the idea being a nurse?

Greg: It's just me personally - I like helping others. I'm not the best person in the world but I like to help others. I would want to help someone who was probably almost dying. I could be there to help support them and just help out. I just like helping people so being a nurse would be the best field for me. So I just decided to take a STNA class and I liked it. Yes, you have to read books and study but it's a good experience. You learn a lot and meet new people and I went to 'clinical' where I actually had the opportunity to be in a nursing home and see how they run their setting. For me it was a good experience because I like helping others. I thought about being a doctor. If I did become a doctor then I'd just be a nurse for a while and then just work my way up. I would just go to school some more and learn some more skills.

Walker: How did you settle on [being] a nurse versus a doctor?

Greg: My aunt was always telling me to be a doctor or a lawyer but I didn't want to take it up [that far to be] a doctor. So you know I just [settled on being] a nurse.

Todd: Why not (a doctor)?

Greg: I don't think I'm ready to be a doctor - you know running a business or however doctors do it. I was told if a nurse works in a nursing home they are kind of over everybody - which they are because they give meds. There is a loop level that they do - this person has to report to this person.

Jason's (2.0 GPA) aspirations, while less pragmatic than Greg's, no less pointed at his desire to give back and make a difference in his community. He indicated a desire to use his employment as a vehicle to help others:

Making it in the music industry and giving back and setting up basketball programs down here where I'm from – maybe [I could] set up a condominium or something to give back to Jackson because Mr. Jo Jo (a popular rapper) didn't do that. I want to
give back to my people because I see my people every day. You know how you seeing people in boxes. I hate seeing people like that, black and white. I just hate seeing it and I will give them change (money) every time. I just hate seeing that and I want to give back so all the people will know who I am and respect me, where I'm from, and what I do.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) reported that his career goals emerged from exposure he received as a student. He related his desire to be an automotive engineer of some sort:

Jacob: I want my own car place. I don't know if I want to do customizing or just fix cars but I will probably know pretty soon.

Walker: Have you known that you wanted to do that for a while?

Jacob: Yeah, I always wanted to become a mechanical engineer ever since I was like six but the police thing came about when I was probably 12 or 13 because when I used to see the SWAT people I thought that was cool. But the mechanical thing was serious because when I went to Johnson my freshman year I joined a competition team called robotics and we would go out of town and compete. So I was always into mechanical things.

Not every student had a clearly defined career objective. Josh (3.2 GPA) explained his aspirations in terms of personal fulfillment:

Well I see myself being successful. It does not have to be what I am going to school for. I just want something that is going to help me live life right... I just feel like I'm going to do the best I can and however far I go there it is. I can't get discouraged over being black and thinking I'm not going to make it far. I'm going to just go as far as I can and do whatever I can to make it as far as I want to go. That's it.

Reggie (1.6 GPA), like Josh, was not altogether sure what his career goals would be. He conveyed a desire to better his current social standing, but he was not inclined toward utilizing school as a vehicle to accomplish this. This was due in part, according to Reggie, to the way 'school' was conceptualized amongst his peer group. During the interview he expressed some regret about this disposition. As he explained it:

Reggie: Yeah I need school - I need it. I just don't want to go to school right now.

Walker: Do you think that if you had the understanding that you have right now you would have done things differently when you were in school – in high school and even in middle school?

Reggie: Yes. I definitely would've done more. I would have done all my work – all my work.

Walker: So the people that you know - [the ones] that you hung with that are on the negative path - how do they see school now?

Reggie: They still don't think they need school, and even though they don't have a job, they still have money - the wrong type of money.
Reggie explained that there was a change within his peer group in the way in which school was viewed, in terms of seeing school as a priority, from middle to high school. During this transition period the ‘need for school’ as a value was replaced amongst his friends with the ‘need for money.’ He related:

Reggie: Well when I was in high school my friend dropped out and he started getting money and making money and I started feeling like ‘I don't need school.’

Walker: Okay, so the people who you know who left school are involved in a negative way of getting money - I know you said you had been locked up - have you seen them receiving negative consequences?

Reggie: Yeah.

Walker: Does that affect you or did it at that point? Had you seen people receive negative consequences for getting money the wrong way?

Reggie: It’s just about how you're doing it. If you're getting money the wrong way you don't have to get caught – it’s just if you get too greedy or money hungry that you will get caught. My cousin, he's been doing it for a minute and he never got caught. He only got caught for guns but he always has crack and stuff.

Walker: Okay, so in your mind there are ways to get money the wrong way and not get caught?

Reggie: Yeah.

Walker: And what separates people who get caught from those who don't is greed?

Reggie: Yeah, that's exactly what I was saying. They're just ‘too thirsty.’

Reggie went on to explain that for him the economic benefits of an education were not guaranteed and, perhaps, not worth the effort it would take to reach an accomplishment of notable reward:

Walker: Okay when you look at a lawyer or a doctor or someone who's making a nice bit of money, but they're making it from a profession how do you feel? They spend a lot of time in school versus somebody who is making it the wrong way. Do both of those options seem equally available to you, in your mind?

Reggie: Yeah. Like one is just the lazy way. The wrong way is just the lazy way instead of just working for it like a doctor or lawyer. They just do it the easy way. They just go out and rob somebody and then sell stuff. Now he's got as much money as a doctor.

Walker: So going back to what you said a little bit earlier. You talked about whether your need for money was greater or your need for school, and at this point you said that your need for money was greater. How do you explain that, in terms of what you just said about a doctor or lawyer, versus the person who is getting money the illegal way?
Reggie: I could get the money the illegal way but I don't want to. I want to get it the right way, and I just choose to do that and keep moving.

Walker: Have you ever thought about or given strong consideration to going back to school?

Reggie: Yes. I actually did think about going to Maxwell State. My friend, he did it and said I should do it but I just didn't do it.

Walker: What would stop you from doing that? What would be the things that would be hindrances or roadblocks to you making a decision to go back to school?

Reggie: It all depends - like the location because of my family and my friends.

Walker: How do you see school, or do you see school, affecting your future in the next 5 to 10 years?

Reggie: I don't see it affecting my future but I can further it (my future) if I enter college or something.

Walker: Is that a desire of yours? Is that something that you aspire to do? Is that something you want to do?

Reggie: Oh yes - for sure. I would do it but I'm just so busy right now.

Walker: What's taking most of your time right now?

Reggie: Really just working. Really that's all. I know you can work and start school but I like ‘doing me’ a lot. So I work and then when I get off of work I don't want to do anything. I just want to do what I want to do.

4.5.3 “Don’t judge me, don’t make assumptions about me. Ask first.” – Josh (3.2 GPA)

Group Identification – Within the study, the way that students identified with the group, in general, influenced their propensity towards academic engagement. Some subjects displayed a significant amount of group affinity, while others down played group connectivity. They chose instead to emphasize their individuality or a more eclectic identity. Students managed racial stereotypes associated with the group in a number of ways which ranged from disengagement to embrace.

Ricky (4.0 GPA) conceptualizes his experience of being stereotyped as follows:

I don't think that it is just because of being African American, but I think it is just a way of life. If you are not the same as everyone else around you, it's not that everyone else is watching you, but if you do something it kind of speaks to an extent, if it's taken overboard, to your race as well.

Throughout his interview he conveyed the personal importance that he placed on embracing other cultures. He expounded on this disposition:
Walker: You mentioned earlier about embracing other cultures. Have you always found it easy to embrace cultures other than the African American culture?

Ricky: Easy, I would not say easy, but part of it really stems back to how I grew up. I grew up being the only African American around a lot of white people so I never really saw the whole black versus white - the whole African history type thing. When we came to the states [from Europe] have I seen discrimination, yes, but it was also when I was at [a young enough] age where I did not see it as (race) discrimination.

Sean (1.9 GPA) conceptualized his identification as an African American male as a catalyst:

Being an African American male just pushes me to where I want to be in the education field or knowledge field. So, I guess, no. It doesn't hinder me but it keeps me on my toes. I'm always being looked at since I'm an African American male trying to get my degree in criminology and my degree in early childhood development. There will be costs because I am a black male.

Sean clarified what he meant by 'keeps me on my toes':

Sean: Basically by keeping me on my toes I mean I'm always looking at situations as though I'm being judged. So in that sense I'm always thinking that someone is trying to hinder me. I'm always going to be on my toes to make sure that I know what I need to know, so that whenever I'm put in a situation where I'm being confronted about something or asked about something, I know it. So I don't think race matters - that's just the type of person I am.

Different from the opinion offered by Sean, Craig (3.0 GPA) related that he felt that he was hindered by his group status as an African-American male. During his interview he offered a frank appraisal of the 'world' and depicted it as limiting his present and future opportunities. Craig explained:

Craig: Honestly I think that it's a Caucasian ran world and I'm going to always have to be on my best and keep my grades as high as possible. I feel as if, in reality, if I have a 4.0 and a Caucasian has a 4.0 or if I have a 3.6, then they are more likely to get the job at a more corporate place than I would [be]. If we both had the same type qualities, the same backgrounds, the same job experiences - if it is a Caucasian ran business - I feel that they may lean more towards a Caucasian (getting the job) rather than me, no matter what I do to get the upper hand.

Walker: Why do you feel that is?

Craig: That's just the feeling I have. I don't know why. African Americans have like a step back and Caucasians have the upper hand. But that's just my opinion - I really can't speak for everyone else, I guess.

Walker: What do you think would cause them to want to go with a white candidate over a black candidate? I know they aren't the same color, per se, but is there anything else specifically?
Craig: Maybe they just want an all Caucasian ran business and me being an African American might take away from the business or make people want to go away from their business. Just little things I guess.

Walker: Do you often feel stereotyped as an African American male in dealing with individuals who are white?

Craig: Yes, I do. Say if I’m with a group of African Americans and we go to a Caucasian place – say we go to a store like Hollister or Aeropostal or Abercrombie, more like a Caucasian ran businesses where they expect them (Caucasians) to buy their clothes rather than African-Americans - then they would look and keep an eye on you thinking that you might try to steal something. It will be little stuff - nothing really spectacular or major comes to mind, I guess.

Walker: Do you feel as comfortable around a group of Caucasians, or a group that is predominantly Caucasian, as you do in a group that is predominantly African American?

Craig: I mean, I feel more comfortable around African Americans, of course. When I’m around Caucasians I have to act a little different, like more professional in a sense, because to me they’re already judging me because I’m an African American. So I don't want to give them any other type of reason why the stereotype should be what it is. So I try to make sure to keep everything ‘everything’ (non-stereotypical) and not do anything out of the ordinary. [I try to] act as good as possible ‘behavior wise’ and in my word choice not use slang, like when I talk to my friends. I try to just be as simple as possible and not do anything extra or out of the ordinary.

Bishop’s (3.8 GPA) appraisal of his in-group status as an African American male vacillated between recognizing it as a potential roadblock, similar to Craig, and conceptualizing it as a ‘call to action’, which was more akin to Sean. He conveyed:

You know me being an African American at Jordan College – [when I was applying – with it] being a predominantly white school I wondered ‘will I get accepted compared to that kid over at Northtowne, the kid over at Weston or in Jackson, Ohio, and the kid from California. How do I compare to them?’ I had confidence about getting accepted into Jordan College, but there was still that statistic (in my mind) like ‘oh he’s an African American. He’s not good enough for Jordan College.’

During the interview with Bishop, he made mention of some of the prevalent stereotypes pertaining to African American males. He explained how he interpreted these images personally and as applied to others:

Walker: I hear you talking [about] and mentioning some of the stereotypes and perceptions that are out there about African American males, as they relate to other groups. [I wonder,] has there ever been a thought in your mind that maybe that stereotype is true, or did you always reject it outright?

Bishop: At times I thought it was true because when you see stuff (in the media), it always, [at least] the majority of the time, has to do with an African American person who has done something. Whether it was shooting somebody, getting killed robbing somebody, or selling drugs - it would always have to do with an African American. You really don't see in the news half of the time, or that often, that it was a white man
or male who just killed this other white male. It is always a black male killing a black male. Whether it had to do with a ‘gang related thing’ or just a simple thing like being at the wrong place at the wrong time, when I saw those things I started to accept it, but then I started to reject it at the same time because there are successful black males out there doing good things. Seeing people and knowing people like athletes, but also businessman, people who are lawyers and judges, like Judge Joe Brown, and mayors, like Mayor Coleman, and governors, and President Obama – there are a lot of black successful people to help me reject the stereotype. Society seeing African American males as successful is usually [involves them] being an athlete or a rapper. They really don't think that African Americans are supposed to be businessmen and lawyers or even a president - who ever would've thought that. I would not have thought that, a black president, I would not have thought it until it actually happened - so seeing the successful people and even going as far as my dad working two jobs. He's not the richest man in the world but he's doing something nice and productive, giving back and doing stuff that helps the family. That makes him successful.

Josh (3.2 GPA), who experienced school settings in both urban and suburban contexts, conceptualized race less as ‘historic’ (the effect of culture) and more as ‘formal’ (a demarcation of appearance):

I just feel I'm a person. You can't tell me, or make me who I am, or put me in a category with everyone else. You have to really know me... I don't really put myself in a category like ‘oh I'm black.’ I just think of myself as being my own person. I'm going to stand out and make it regardless.

During the course of the interview he discussed how he interpreted his membership as an African American male in relation to his academic experiences:

Walker: Have you ever experienced a situation where you felt like your identity, or who you were as an African American male, caused someone to underestimate your ability - your academic ability - to do well as a student?

Josh: More in suburban schools because they would be surprised that I was the person I was or they would make assumptions about me. It's just that they don't know and they already have this view of black people in general, so they just feel like we all should be like that.

Walker: Can you describe a situation where something like that happened?

Josh: It was my seventh grade year and I started at a new school. I was at Acorn (in the suburbs) and they were singing black music to me and I was like 'well all black people don't listen to that type of music.' I felt like they were just saying that I was supposed to know this song, and they were saying ‘Are you from the hood?’ or different things like that. They asked: ‘What's the hood like?’ [I was thinking,] ‘How did you know I was from the hood and how are you just going to assume - ask me. I didn't tell you I was from the hood.’ They would ask ‘What's the hood like?’ ‘How's the hood - are there really gangs?’ and I just wondered how they knew that I was from the hood. They made assumptions about black people, in general.

Walker: And what was your response to that?

Josh: [I would say] ‘you don't know me’ – ‘You don't know anything about me so don't judge me. Don't make assumptions about me. Ask first.’
In stark contrast to Josh, Reggie (1.6 GPA) abdicated responsibility for who he had become and what he hoped to be:

Reggie: It’s not something that I choose to be. It’s just like all my family is gang members and I don’t choose to be one. I just hang around them and you got to be one. That’s just how it is. Like most of my family are Crypts and I’m the only Blood. It’s awkward. It’s just weird.

Walker: Is there anyone that is different than them in your family, [anyone] that is not involved in gangs and choosing to do some different things?

Reggie: My mom.

Todd: How about in terms of the males?

Reggie: No, there’s nobody.

Todd: How do you explain that?

Reggie: I can’t explain it.

Todd: Have you ever given it any thought?

Reggie: No. My nephew, he used to not be a gang member and then all of a sudden he got older and started coming home late and I saw him running with some Crypts.

Further, Reggie expressed an awareness of his limited exposure to cultures other than his own:

Reggie: Yeah I’m cool with them (Caucasians) as long as they’re cool. I mostly hang around African American girls and boys - men I should say.

Todd: And how do you explain that?

Reggie: Well that’s who I mostly grew up around, so basically that’s all I got.

4.5.4. “My parents always stressed that school was important.” – Ricky (4.0 GPA):

Home Expectations – Students in the study had a diversity of home and school experiences but most indicated some level of home involvement when it came to schooling. Subject responses revealed varying degrees of engagement and differing levels of expectation in regard to school performance. Most students shared that there were consequences when expectations were not met. These ranged from spankings, which were generally reported during the elementary years, to restricted privileges. Subjects indicated a change in behavior in response to consequences but the degree and permanence of the change varied somewhat from student to student.
Ricky (4.0 GPA), who for the majority of his K-12 years grew up with both his father and mother in the home (his parents separated while he was in high school) shared that the expectation regarding school performance in his home was more or less ‘understood’ and enforced based upon consequences:

Well with academic performance... my parents always stressed that school was important. I feel like unless you have a good home structure you are not going to believe that. I feel like it’s something that is groomed into us ever since we’re born... You don’t want to go home and bring like a bad grade, but at the same time what determines bad? I think that could stem from home - like your parents could influence [you] and tell you Bs aren’t good and they might only want you to get As. I don’t remember ever getting in trouble for getting a B.

Sean (1.9 GPA), like Ricky, also explained that consequences played the chief role in communicating expectations regarding school. However, the standard that was relayed to him, in comparison to the one communicated to Ricky, was different. Sean told of an experience when consequences had been administered by his father:

Sean: No I changed my behavior. I had to. I couldn’t do the whooping so when you get threatened with them (whooping) then I was like ‘ok I got to do this.’ So yeah, it changed. I got done with my work - I sat there and I reviewed it again. You know I saw a couple of mistakes that I made and changed them. So it worked out for the good... My dad was more of the disciplinarian. You know he tells us ‘I want good grades - I want you to be disciplined and I want you to be respectful.’ That’s what he wanted out of us. So when a parent has to come up to the school for a problem he was the one and he wasn’t happy. He supported us, and as long as we were doing right he was he happy, but when he had to come up to Freedman for anything (bad) he was going to let it be known that he was upset.

Todd: Okay so you said that he expected good grades - so did you get good grades?

Sean: Absolutely, absolutely.

Todd: So you said he was kind of the disciplinarian. Did you try harder because you knew that if you didn’t he would be upset, or did that affect you?

Sean: Absolutely, I remember when we used to do grade checks, and this is more so in high school, when we had grade checks I would see that I was at a D or something I would be like ‘Awh well no I can’t do this.’ So I would go and talk to whatever teacher and ask ‘What can I do to bring this up?’ There was a lot of extra credit going on to get those grades up because anything below a C - he wasn’t having it, and a C was pushing it. So anything below that he was like ‘Naw you got to make some changes’ - phone going to get taken and you going to be in your room till you get it right.
Greg (1.9 GPA), who grew up with his aunt as a guardian but also spent some time as a ward of the state, related his experience of limited exposure and expectations regarding reading:

I'd say in elementary school I would like to read a lot, but after that I just really wasn't reading. I didn't really read a lot after that. I mean, I know how to read, I just don't think anybody really ever read anything to us when we were little. But now I'm just not a big fan of reading. But I also don't really have the patience to sit down and read a book.

Craig, unlike Greg, received significant support from home regarding his academic pursuits. Craig told of incentives coupled with consequences that were used by his parents to reinforce performance expectations:

Craig: When I was little I used to get games or little rewards for getting on honor roll.

Walker: Did that motivate you?

Craig: When I was little it motivated me but as I got to middle school I had to do it. If I didn't get honor roll in middle school [then] that would mean punishment for the whole nine weeks. I remember in seventh grade I had like a 3.8 and then it dropped to a 3.0. My parents did not accept Cs unless it was reasonable. I always took advanced classes too. I had algebra in seventh grade, and geometry in eighth. [Also] I had like high school sciences in eighth grade. In basic classes I got Bs or As - Cs I got in trouble for.

Jason (2.0 GPA) commented on the role that his step father played in communicating academic expectations:

Well, he's a good father and that tells you a lot. Everything that I've done he's done it. He would tell me ‘You better leave it alone and do it’. He would say ‘You better get those books - you want to rap and all this other stuff but you better get those grades because that's not going to open any doors for you. You got to get those grades.’ So I had to get it together. I was getting bad grades and things like that and when I got bad grades he was like ‘Okay, give me those shoes and TV.’

Jason discussed how his stepfather defined ‘good’ and ‘bad’ grades and described what the response from home was when the expectation was not met:

Walker: So for you what was good - if you were doing 'good' what types of grades was that?

Jason: Oh Cs, all Cs and a couple Ds.

Walker: And what was bad?

Jason: Ds and Fs - it was all bad.

Walker: And what was the response at home?
Jason: They would let me know what I could do and what I couldn’t do – and say ‘Come holler at me when your grades are together.’ That would be a long nine weeks - a long nine weeks.

Walker: And was that effective for you?

Jason: Yeah, it helped out because everyone around me was getting stuff and you get that feeling like I want that [stuff] too. You have to get it together not only because you want something, but for yourself. So that’s what I learned.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) related the academic standard used by his mother, which was similar to that of Jason’s parents:

Well, if I wasn't performing to my best then she would cut off everything. There would be no TV or games and I would have to stay in the house all day until she said stop. Because of that I would just stay on top of everything. I would try to stay on top of everything but she was always there in case I fell off and would give me a life lesson. [She would] give me the straight hard facts. I would just look and think ‘I really need to sit down and study.’ It was like she just stopped everything and made my mind get back on track because the stuff we talked about was real serious. She was saying if you don't do ‘this’ then you can’t get a house because you won’t have ‘that’… Cs is when she would start talking to me and telling me that you have fallen off a little bit and Ds is when she would cut off everything.

Bishop’s (3.8 GPA) home expectations regarding school more closely resembled that of Ricky. He shared his pattern of communicating with his parents regarding academic performance:

Bishop: I started talking more with my parents about my grades when I got into fourth or fifth grade. Back then when I was in the first, second, and third grade, I wouldn’t talk to them about my grades.

Walker: When you did start having conversation with them about grades? How did those conversations go?

Bishop: They would say I expect As and Bs - Cs are not allowed in this house. So if I brought a C home I got in trouble and I would get put on punishment. It was more like they expected grades from both me and my sister and failure was just not accepted here. If you get a C or lower there was bound to be some consequences for it. Basically, once we knew that, me and my sister put our foot down and started bringing home As and Bs. There were gradually a couple Cs but we still had a chance to change it (the grade) going into the next grading period. And it ended up helping in the long run. It was really my mom who was so strict on grades. My dad was cool with it. He didn't want any Ds or Fs. My mom was the one that didn't want any Cs so she pushed more on that.

Josh (3.2) talked about how his mother set a standard, not so much in terms of specific grades, but more so relating to his personal potential. He tried to make sense of how his performance results were different from that of some of his siblings:
Josh: She always tells me that she sees something in me and she knows I’m going to make it. She just put that in me and I just brought it out.

Walker: Does she say the same things to your other siblings?

Josh: Yeah, she says the same thing to all of us. She always wants the best for all of us. It’s just they don’t always take it in or make an extra step. I’m sure they have the ability.

Reggie (1.6 GPA), like other subjects in the study, also received consequences when grades dropped below the expected standard in the home. However, he reported only a temporary change in school behavior and performance:

Reggie: She did a lot. She spanked me, punishment - she took away all the stuff I had. At first she would just take away my TV and then she would take little stuff, but it would get to me. She would take one of my nice shoes - just one of them - so I couldn’t wear them and stuff like that.

Walker: Would that work for you?

Reggie: Yeah it would. I’d have to change because I wanted those shoes.

Walker: But you said that your grades still were going down - so how do you explain that?

Reggie: Well there were certain days that I would do good until I could get my stuff back.

Walker: Okay, and how would she know that you had done good?

Reggie: The teacher called her and said ‘oh he has changed and he’s doing so well.’ But then, after I would get my stuff back, I’d be like ‘okay’ and go back to the same behavior.

4.5.5 “So it was like you have to do this and do that because I’ve done that already.”

– Jason (2.0 GPA): Role of Male Influences – Most of the subjects in the study indicated the presence of male influencers, either at the mentor or peer level, as having a significant impact on their academic motivation and performance, or lack thereof. Friends, fathers, uncles, and other males were positioned prominently in narrative accounts offered by students as either enhancers or detractors.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) noted the difference that it made for him having a positive male influence surrounding him during a transient period in his life:

There was a lot of stability there. Seeing my older cousins on a more frequent basis, as my great aunt had all boys, seeing them on a more frequent basis, as well as my uncle, it was a lot more positive. Seeing that male role model, and then those
gentlemen also reinforcing for me to continue to do well academically in school [made a difference].

In his follow-up interview, Adrian further explained the importance of male role models both in his life and in regard to other African American males:

I think that for black males what's true is that many times you want to be what you see, or you may feel like you can [only] become what you see. So the media plays a huge role. When I was younger of course I wanted to be the next Michael Jordan and go play ball at North Carolina, but I also did a lot of reading to learn about historical figures like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and even the black males who were in my community. There was a teacher named Mr. Johnson in my school and the way he dressed every day I was like ‘wow that is very impressive - I want to dress to that degree one day.’ I never had him in class but I noticed him just because of how he dressed. The way he carried himself was a positive influence. I don't think there are many students who went to Jackson who can say they remember how Mr. Johnson dressed but it was one of those things that I paid attention to. I saw him every week and other teachers as well. Also, there was my pastor. So taking those examples and taking bits and pieces of all of the positive examples that I have encountered - whether it be through literature, or what I've seen in the community and from the experiences I've had with teachers, especially in high school – that impacted me. Mr. Gregory, who was a computer teacher in high school my freshman year, was unapologetically Christian and unapologetically black. For someone [like me] who was growing in their faith and seeing what it looks like in the ‘real world’ and not just at church - that helped me. I mean these are examples that I have taken and just picked bits and pieces from here and there to actually apply to my [own] identity. It really helped me shape who I was and who I am today. So those are, I guess, the main sources. And I can't forget my uncle - he was probably the first real example [to me] of what it meant to be responsible as a man. That's what I learned from him. So those little lessons instilled along the way have helped shape my identity to a degree.

Sean (1.9 GPA) mentioned during his interview that he thought of himself as 'responsible' and as a 'good citizen.' Explaining how he came to be one of these, his responses indicated the presence of a positive male influence:

Walker: And what do you think contributed to making you one of those? What gave you this sense of responsibility that you have for taking care of your kids and doing these things that make you a good citizen?

Sean: My dad. My dad played a big role in that. I just always looked up to him – I always looked up to him. People at ‘show and tell’ used to be like ‘who do you want to be like?’ and I would be like ‘my dad.’ And seeing the example that he left for me made me want to make it and go beyond [what he did]. He was the reason for it and still is.

Walker: How was that example set? Was it through word, or deed, or a combination of those?

Sean: Yeah, a combination through word and deed. He just gives so much. He started a program, an after school program, at my middle school. And it was just a place for the youth to come and do their homework and you know play basketball. And he always made sure that we understood that education isn't a right. It can be taken from us and we need to respect it. For black history month we would always
have programs and acknowledge those before us who got us to where we are now. That was important for him.

Walker: You did this during this after school program.

Sean: Yeah. And then we had you know different trips like to the historical black museum in Atlanta - just different programs. He started the basketball team, step team, and dance team. It was just a place where people could come and be positive. And that's where my leadership came from. He made me the coach of the step team there.

Walker: At the middle school?

Sean: Yes. Now mind you I'm a seventh grader and it's an after school program for middle and high - so all ages were there. And he told me that I was a leader - he saw a leader in me and wanted me to be the leader of the step team. That started my leadership role of wanting to help and give back and I was like 'ok, I like the feeling of this.' So he was a big part of that.

Greg (1.9 GPA) shared the difficulties he experienced from not having his father present in his life:

I would say it was just hard. Not having that fatherly advice in your life, not just at school - in anything. If you're doing sports your father is a role model helping you practice or giving you advice on this or that, or you know different things that your father can be involved in and they're not there to see that. Then they wonder why we don't show that love to them like we should, but they weren't around most of our life. You know I don't really show it to him. I say 'hi dad' and tell him that I love him but I don't really talk to him or see him that often. You know I see him every blue moon. But you know he wasn't there for me to ask him for help with anything, [with things] that I needed. That's a big part of it (being a father) to me.

Craig, unlike Greg, had his father living in the home with him, but indicated that the advice he received from an uncle and neighborhood friends had a greater impact on him academically:

Walker: So these friends that were in middle school [with you] that had these different trajectories, [the ones] that ended up dead or in prison - how was your experience different from theirs or how do you perceive that your experience was different from theirs such that you ended up where you were, versus where they were?

Craig: Like their backgrounds in terms of where they stayed and the people that were around them in their homes was definitely different. They would have fathers that weren't there or drugs going on around them - I don't know. Their parent was not home. Their mom was not home [maybe] working all the time. So they basically had to grow up on their own with their brothers and sisters. They taught me stuff they learned from that and I would teach them school stuff, like how to get good grades and little study habits that you have to do to get good grades. It would be little stuff they would teach me to balance things out.

Jason shared in his interview that the accomplishments of his male role models served as standard and operated as a catalyst in his life:
Jason: So it was like ‘you have to do this and do that because I've done that already.’ You're getting older now and it's not a game because if your dad was here right now ‘you already know.’ So it (the conversation) stuck for me.

Walker: You mentioned that your father was killed when you were six - do you have strong memories of him?

Jason: Yeah. I really can't remember like actually seeing him walking or whatever but I just remember Christmas and stuff when he used to bring in a lot of presents and stuff - I can't remember seeing his face or whatever. I do see pictures but I really can't remember.

Walker: How do you understand your stepdad saying 'if your dad was here?' How do you explain him saying that?

Jason: Because if he was here it would be a totally different story because he graduated. He walked the stage so he would look at me like ‘you're not doing what?’ So it he (my stepdad) was like you're not about to do that (not graduate). It would be ‘all bad’ basically. Yet he would give me motivation to do what I have to do to walk that stage just like he (and my dad) did. I have walked that stage just like he (and my dad) did so my dad is looking down at me, smiling at me right now.

Bishop (3.6), a first year college student, explained the significant role that his great grandfather played in shaping his life and influencing his academic aspirations:

Yeah he [great grandfather] did a lot (for me) because he was one of the first persons to actually buckle down with me and tell me about school. He used to teach me about my ABCs and I would do a crossword puzzle with him. He taught me a lot of life lessons. When I had a lot of food on my plate he would say your eyes are bigger than your mouth and I just [helped me] realized life decisions. He used to take me out to places all the time. He is the one that told me I could go to Jordan College. He said ‘you're going to go to Jordan College one day. I can see that because you're very intelligent.’ So when I got older and saw I could go to Jordan College I thought I could really do it.

While Josh's (3.2) father was not altogether absent from his life, he was not a consistent presence. Based upon his experience with his father, Josh conveyed a sense of ambivalence:

Josh: The person he is I think he would've [just] put a damper on things. He would not have encouraged me. He's just not been that kind of person - that's just not who he is. So I don't even know how I got that drive where I could pull out [from the crowd] to be the person that I am because I really didn't have an extra push from a father. People say if you have your father it pushes you more. I think he would have put a damper on things.

Walker: How did you make sense of the type of man that you wanted to be in comparison to him?

Josh: I would just see other families and [watch] television. I just knew what I wanted. I would say ‘Okay so since he's like this I don't want to be like this.’ Everything he was I wanted to be opposite.
While Reggie (1.6 GPA) mentions the presence of his step father in the home, he also indicated that all of the males in his family were ‘gang bangers.’ He told of the influence of gangs in shaping his school experience and academic life:

Reggie: I was a good student in elementary, but in middle school I started ‘gang banging’, and in high school I was just terrible.

Walker: How do you explain that change occurring or happening?

Reggie: It was something that I was never supposed to be. This wasn't supposed to be happening to me. I was supposed to be a good boy, a good student, and all of a sudden it just changed.

Walker: And what were the reasons for the change as you think back on it?

Reggie: It was friends. People that I thought were my friends. I was just with gang bangers a lot of the time. It wasn't a good change. When I started gang banging I didn't really care about going to school and I would just go and do what they did - chill on the block, or at home or something.

Walker: And how were the other people that you associated with? How was their attitude toward school? Was it similar to yours or different?

Reggie: It was worse. They didn't even really want to come to school or get on the bus. I would at least get up, get on the bus and come to school.

Walker: So how do you explain those attitudes toward school? And I guess I'm asking more so not to judge the attitude, but [I'm wondering] how that attitude came about? Particularly for you, what caused that attitude, or that shift in attitude, to come about?

Reggie: Going into elementary, I don't know if there was a real gang or not, but they had a lot of popularity. I would listen to them and [then] in middle school I just started being bad.

Walker: So as far as ‘popularity’ you mean [what] - I might be thinking something different than you?

Reggie: That attention from the honeys (girls). The students that had popularity, the poor students, they affected me because I was trying to be like them. I used to be like ‘I will do my work’ but then I would be harassed by them. So they messed me all up. They ruined my focus, and everything, and I started clownin’.

Walker: It seems like that was something that you willingly gave up, eventually, to hang with them?

Reggie: Yeah.

Walker: Did you ever question whether that was a good thing to do?

Reggie: No.
4.5.6 “I just remember that it always felt good to bring home good grades.” – Adrian

(4.0 GPA): Self-Esteem and Self Efficacy – Some students in the study described a connection between self esteem and academic performance, while others indicated that self esteem emerged from other activities. As students shared their experiences around schooling and testing experiences, those who derived their self esteem from high grades and test scores displayed a common thread of having experienced academic success early on, which created a strong sense of academic efficacy.

Adrian (4.0), who was valedictorian of his senior class, but who also experienced great instability in his home life, made it a point to share how his grades and test scores, early on, impacted him personally and provided motivation for future academic success:

I just remember that it always felt good to bring home good grades. I was recognized at school and I was recognized by my family. So that was the standard that I set for myself at a very young age.

He talked further about there being a noticeable difference between his own school experience, as the middle child, and that of his older and younger brothers. This contradiction, Adrian shared, was somewhat bewildering to him, but he ultimately explained it in terms of personal characteristics. He conveyed that he considered writing a book about it:

We came through the same exact environments and we have these three different outcomes and so it (his book) was going to be based on excuses. I look at my home situation and either one of us could have an excuse to not perform optimally, and to do whatever we wanted, and to be what is considered a stereotype of African American males - in those kind of situations. And I think that my brothers got used to using that kind of a situation as an excuse whereas I wanted to prove people wrong. I wanted to continue to succeed and do those things [which make for success]. The reinforcement in my opinion was worth it.

Adrian went on to explain how his early academic success created a high expectation, in terms of his personal beliefs and the beliefs of other family members, and a desire for continued academic success:

Adrian: Now they had an expectation that ‘Adrian has to bring home good grades because Adrian does that.’

Walker: So did that expectation start with you or did it start with someone outside of you? Where did that expectation come from, for you, but not for your brothers?

Adrian: For me, I had the expectation very early because I knew what I was capable of doing. I was proud of doing good work.
Ricky (4.0 GPA), also a valedictorian, described similar experiences of high self-efficacy as it related to academic tasks:

I took Calc when I was a senior so I felt like ‘I made it through this far - I already know that I’m smart,’ but it was a challenge. It was definitely a challenge… Not even smart I just realized that whatever I had to do I could figure out how to do it and if I had to get tested on it I could do what I had to do. Nobody really wants to study but you know if you have to [study something in order to do well]. I knew that if I was given the material I could learn. I could do it… if you're struggling in the subject it is not because you're a certain race. It’s just that you don’t get it.

Ricky shared his attitude in regard to the obstacles that he faced with academics throughout his K-12 experience:

If someone has something to prove that counteracts what you want to do then prove them wrong and if you can’t [then] there has to be a reason why you couldn't do it. You just can't lay back and say ‘I didn't pass this’ or ‘I scored like a 13 on my ACT because African Americans are only expected to score a 13.’ It just happens that you’re an African American and you scored a 30. You can take it again and get something higher.

Sean (1.9 GPA) shared that his self esteem – his belief that he could perform academically – provided a buffer against negative experiences or comments from others:

Sean: Those times when I used to get done with my work and my teacher would get upset or be mad at me for doing other things, I just looked at myself as one of the smart kids. When I got home and talked to my parents it was like ‘Yeah, I was done with my work.’ ‘She tried to be mean.’ ‘She thinks I can do better.’ It was always that I thought highly of myself so I didn’t really pay attention to all of the negatives that probably happened. It was something that went over my head.

Walker: What do you contributed to you feeling highly about yourself?

Sean: I thought I was a smart kid.

Sean explained how he arrived at that conclusion and talked about how he received encouragement from his parents and extended family members who told him that he was smart:

Sean: My grandparents said ‘you're a smart young man.’ It just always was going to be said ‘you're smart’. And that was with all my siblings.

Sean went on to describe how this reinforcement led him to persist and persevere through challenging academic situations:

There were certain situations and certain times where you could tell that the teachers or the people in upper classes thought that they were better or that because I was a black male I was not supposed to know certain things. So me being the person that I am, I like to prove people wrong. If you think I don't know something, I like to go over and beyond to get the information so that I can dish it back to you and tell you. So I
would say that being in those types of situations, where I felt that people thought that I was not smart enough, just pushed me to know the information so I could make them think harder - like 'maybe he's not as dumb as I think he is.'

Craig (3.0 GPA) described an attitude similar to Adrian:

I mean it is motivation honestly. If you don't think I can do something and I can, then I would just be happy at the end of the day when I get it done. I don't get mad too much off of words. If you don't think I can do it and I know I can, then I will get it done. It's motivation.

However, Jacob (1.7 GPA) explained his response to academic adversity differently:

When people don't have high expectations for me or when they think that I can't do something because of how I look, it makes me not want to do it because I feel like if people are going the keep thinking that of me I might as well not do it. I might as well do something else. So it makes me fall back and take longer to do what I need to do.

Bishop (3.8 GPA) described his sense of academic self efficacy as emerging from hard work and past success. He talked about how this impacted his expectation of getting into a major university:

I had confidence because I knew that I had been working hard and even though another student might have a 4.0 and I might have a form 3.8 there is something about me that would set me apart and let me get selected over him. So it was a half and half situation.

He shared how his motivation for achieving academically, rather than to 'prove people wrong,' came out of his value of family and the importance that he placed on their expectation of him:

It wasn't more of me trying to break the stereotype or go against the stereotype - I was doing more of 'I want to make my family proud'. The stereotype was there and sometimes it got to me but it was never about the stereotype. It was more about 'I want to make my family proud - I want to do this and better my life.' Of course I knew the stereotype but it wasn't always about the stereotype. I wanted to get down to business so I could make my mom proud and put her in a nice house. So this is what I need to [do to] be able to help my family out, and also to help myself.

Josh (3.2 GPA), like Adrian, pointed to personal drive as one of the primary influencers of his academic success:

I put in the time to get the job done. I was determined to get my work done. She [my mom] made sure I got here but I did the rest of the work.

He went on to describe that he perceived the difference between himself and his younger siblings to be the context of their educational experience:

Josh: I work hard for the top - I want to make it. If you want to make it you have a feeling that you have to work to your best ability and I feel they don't use their best
ability. They usually slack off or they lack that extra push. I tried to put it in them but you can't put it in them unless they want to. It has to be a want. You can't really make somebody do something.

Walker: So you don't think they want to be successful?

Josh: Not [that they don’t want to be] successful, it's just that they allow people to influence them. I'm sure everyone, I think everyone wants to be successful but I think you really have to want it. You really have to work for it.

Walker: So you were the only one [of your siblings] that had the experience at Acorn (a suburban school). Do you think that has made a difference on your outlook, on life, and your drive for success?

Josh: It helped me a lot. It definitely helped me a lot. I felt like everyone should get that experience because, little did they know, they [the Caucasian students] helped me want to make it [even] more. Even because of the fact of how they looked at me as a person (through stereotypes) – [that] made me want to prove them wrong and to get everything correct.

Josh, showcasing his high self esteem, saw his abilities as on par with anyone in the world. Part of this feeling emerged, as he described it, from his work ethic:

I feel like I can compete with any other race - with anyone in my race. I'm not going to slack off because I'm black or because I am a male - I feel I can compete with anyone in the whole world.

Unlike the high academic achievers in the study who, to a greater or lesser degree, derived their sense of self esteem from their academic achievement, Reggie (1.6 GPA) talked about a different source:

Reggie: They [the popular students] had respect from the teacher's.

Walker: Oh really. Talk to me about that.

Reggie: Well the teachers wouldn't snap on them like they would snap on a regular student because they would think they're going to ‘go hard’ on them in response (cussing the teacher out) - that they would say something [back] ‘out of the blue.’

Walker: So that was appealing to you - that was something that you wanted?

Reggie: Yeah, because I didn't like the way they used to talk to me when I was little.

Walker: What type of things would they say?

Reggie: They used to cuss me out. They were saying 'sit your ass down' and I would be like ‘alright’ and just sit down.

Walker: When did that start - that type of interaction?

Reggie: Elementary.

Walker: Was their response like that to everybody or just to certain people?
Reggie: Just to certain people. You know I used to be kind of hyper so they would say that to me.

Walker: Did it work?

Reggie: Yeah, it did.

Walker: But at some point you liked (admired) the fact that other people didn't get talked to the same way?

Reggie: Yeah.

Walker: So they were up and [walking] around and the teachers would just let them do it?

Reggie: Yeah. [Well] they would tell them to 'sit down please' but there wasn't no 'sit your ass down.'

Walker: Okay. So there was the respect, and that was something that you felt like you wanted. So how did they do in school? Were they good students or were they poor students?

Reggie: They were poor students.

Walker: Was that something that you thought about in terms of wanting to hang with them?

Reggie: Not so much. I never wanted to hang with them I just wanted to get to where they're popularity (respect) was so the teachers wouldn't talk to me, but I still used to do my work.

4.5.7 “Seeing students that were serious it made me want to sit down and, instead of being like everybody else, learn and study harder.” – Jacob (1.7 GPA): Exception Status – Several of the high achieving and mid-range achieving students in my study demonstrated a propensity towards articulating concepts of exception and heroism. This was also expressed by one lower achieving student. As it emerged within the research, exception status was a social disposition by which students conceptualized their identity, in relation to the group, as being an outlier or aberration. Rather than seeing themselves as part of the group, students envisioned their identity as a contradiction. They saw themselves as connected to the group by virtue of ethnic make-up while also being set apart by their ‘exceptionality.’ Several subjects indicated that this ‘exception status’ often worked to their advantage, especially when compared to the stereotypic norm often associated with African American males.
Adrian (4.0 GPA) explained the phenomena of exception status as relating to his future aspirations:

I definitely don't think my being a black male has changed my perception of what I wanted to be in life. And in some ways it has worked in my advantage. There has never been a situation that I can recall that made me feel inferior, or that I could not do something about, because I was black. There's nothing that I can recall that I feel would have limited [my ability] to excel in the classroom just based on my skin color.

Similar to Adrian's conception, Ricky (4.0 GPA) shared how he used his exception status to his advantage in the context of his experience at a predominantly white college institution:

As to whether race would hinder me, I don't think it would. I definitely think it would be a plus because of my background, and what I am studying (Political Science). In most of my major classes I have been the only African American, and in my global studies classes I have been the only African American most of the time. But I’m at a PWI, a predominantly white institution, so for us (African Americans) I think it's good. It's like having a joker just because of the fact that as long as we maintain a good academic standing and can kind of figure out that it is not just about the African American culture itself, but it's about embracing other cultures, it could also allow us to use that card as a plus. If not, the counter would be to use the fact that you're African American as an excuse. It would be to say that 'I'm not doing this (not performing well) because there are all these white people here' or 'I can't get along because they don't want us to succeed.' I think this college in general wants all of its students to succeed, regardless of the race. But if you rely on this excuse I think that's what creates the problem.

Sean (1.9 GPA), referencing media statistics, noted that his posture – as an African American male that is responsible and taking care of his family – was reinforced by the prevalence of negative stereotypes:

We as in young black men - it's a lot of statistics that say we are supposed to be in jail or we're supposed to be dead, but it's a lot of us that is going to school and taking care of our families... Being an African American male made me want to be greater because that's not what is expected.

Craig (3.0 GPA) explained how the perception of his exception status affected how he was treated by other people in the group. He shared how friends and other in-group members treated him differently because of this status:

Craig: A lot of people that I went to school with in middle school are in jail and I guess that helped me with real world type situations - stuff that could happen in the street. Not that I was doing anything negative but I was just learning by having older people to teach me what was happening – 'what to do and not to do.' Older brother type figures would teach me 'don't do this' and 'don't do that.' I've always had positive people in my life that I'm thankful for to keep me on the straight and narrow line. If I fell out of line they [always] got me back on. I guess I was always one of the ones (African American in-group members) that they wanted to see be successful.

Walker: These were people that had made mistakes?
Craig: Yeah, like my uncle. He would tell me little stuff and he was just a real positive figure [for me]. Some of my family doesn't like him but he calls me and we talked a lot. I have older friends that have kids right now and they have been in jail and done negative things like sell drugs. They don't want to see that for me. They just want me to stay in school and be successful. They just want the best for me.

Not all students referencing exception status were high or mid-level achievers. Jacob (1.7 GPA) noted the presence of exception status as he transitioned from a lottery school to an urban school:

Coming to Freedman was better for the simple fact that when I was at Johnson I was playing around but then when I came to Freedman and started seeing [some of the] students that were serious it made me want to sit down, instead of being like everybody else [in the school], and learn and study harder.

Jacob, however, related a more balanced perspective as he communicated the impact that he thought race might have on his future aspirations:

Walker: Do you feel that your identity as an African American male hinders you in terms of what you want to achieve in your life or do you think that it helps you - or neither?

Jacob: It depends on how you look at it. Some people actually do judge you based off of how you look so [in some cases] it would be kind of hard for me to work my way up. They may think ‘why would I help him because he will help people like him get their way up too.’ So they would just hold me back. But in some cases people would be more helpful because they would think that you were not able to do it or their expectations would be low so [that] they would give you harder stuff to do, thinking that you would not be able to do it. Then when you end up doing it some people will hold you down, but some people would help you [because they are impressed].

Walker: Do you see it as a good thing?

Jacob: Yeah, I see it is a good thing.

4.5.8 “I’m able to dispel some of those stereotypes that might exist for black males.” – Adrian (4.0 GPA): Hero Status – Hero status, as an extension of exception status, was an identity disposition which further privileged subjects as ‘change agents.’ It communicated that they had a responsibility to augment the stereotypical imagery often associated with African American males. These individuals, each a high or mid-level achiever, conceptualized themselves as more than exceptions. Rather, they carried a mandate to reach out and strategically addressed issues amongst their peers and with mentees.
Adrian (4.0 GPA) described the way in which, as an individual, he sought to promote change with people that he came in contact with:

Once I am able to build a relationship or [if I can] prove my work is good, then many times I'm able to dispel some of those stereotypes that might exist for black males and society as a whole.

Operating in a strategic way, Adrian told of several ways that he attempted to produce change in the culture at large:

I think there are a couple different ways that it has manifested itself. At my job I am in charge of a retreat ... and we have speakers who talk about preparing for graduate school, how black males are treated in the media, and what can be done to really make a stand to [influence] people to change their perceptions. And so we talk about being able to navigate different type populations of people and being the talented 10th (of African Americans) - being a good reflection of what African Americans truly are and the diversity that exists within us (as a group). Because the perceptions and depictions that the media gives don’t always account for who we are as a complete population. And so I think it's almost my responsibility to be a positive reflection of a black male, regardless of what situation I find myself in or what environment I find myself in. So no matter what and whoever I encounter, they can always say that they had a positive relationship or experience once they've met me. I am black and I can't hide the fact that I'm black [so] that will be part of their connection. 'Yeah he was a black man but at the same time was able to do something and was able to achieve something and was a good person.' So really combating some of that (negative imagery for black males) and giving young men the charge to reflect those opposite images of what [the] media might portray of black males. [This] is why I've taken on mentor roles to talk to middle schools and address topics such as this. So the way you speak, the way you act, the way you carry yourselves - all those things participants can take and actually apply, and hopefully be those positive role models and positive examples of black males in the future.

Like Adrian, Sean (1.9 GPA) saw it as his responsibility to be a role model to others:

A lot of us are trying to be role models and I can say I'm one of those... [Step team] started my leadership role of wanting to help and give back and I was like 'ok, I like the feeling of this.'

Josh (3.2 GPA) also shared that he saw himself as a role model for others. He explained how his understanding of being a role model and leader was communicated to him:

Walker: So in terms of being a role model for others - who were the people that were telling you this?

Josh: Teachers, administrators, my parents. I really had to be a role model, not just at school but also at home because we didn't have a father. So at a young age I had to be the role model because it was all of us at once. I could say I grew up fast because I had to take care of my siblings and I had to be a role model and set an example for them.

Walker: So you think being the oldest sibling you had more responsibility placed on you?
Josh: Yes.

Walker: Did your mom specifically say to ‘you you’re the oldest?’

Josh: No, I took on that responsibility. I think I was the closest thing to a dad [my siblings had] so I had to look out.

4.6 The Schooling Organization as a Bureaucracy Mitigating Students’ Learning Experiences and Academic Trajectory – Overarching Theme #2

This section addresses the overarching theme of the schooling bureaucracy as an institutional construct. Previously, social influences were discussed. The exploration here is markedly different in that it investigates school demands and the way in which they are interpreted and responded to by students with differential home and community experiences. By ‘school bureaucracy’ this study is referring to all aspects of ruling behavior within the school that a student would be likely to come in contact with. Most readily, this indicates teacher practices, but also extends to counselor and administrative activities. In general, students realized the influence that school practices exerted on their academic performance. Some students pointed to school practice, in particular teacher pedagogy, as the most significant influence on their academic success. This section reveals students’ experiences with schooling from the ‘inside,’ as they experienced ruling practices first hand, and represents how differently and similarly situated students both interpreted and responded to identical bureaucratic manifestations within the school.

Data from this section reveals the great influence that schooling practices, whether understood by subjects as producing positive or negative effects, impose on academic preparedness and trajectory. As such, it demonstrates both compounding and persistent effects. As opposed to the preceding section, which focused on extra-school practices, student interviews illuminate the inner-life of schools as experienced from the perspective of students. The presentation of data exhibits students evaluating school and teacher quality based upon their ‘lived school experiences.’ It evinces seven sub-themes emerging from data as contextualized within the overarching theme of school bureaucratic practices. It
assumes, as in the previous section, that students are ‘legitimate sources of knowledge’ and that student behavior is ‘shaped’ by institutional ruling practices.

4.6.1 "Sometimes you’d be scared… Once you got to the school it was nothing. It didn’t bother me." – Sean (1.9 GPA): School as a Stabilizing Influence – Some students, particularly those experiencing a degree of transience in the study, indicated that school throughout their K-12 experience served as more than an institution of learning. In addition, it offered stability and a sense of belonging. Subjects describing school as fulfilling multifaceted functions portrayed the complex role that schools occupy in the lives of students with diverse needs.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) explained how school became a place of solace amidst a turbulent transition occurring during his elementary school years:

I can remember there being 5 or 6 different elementary schools that I attended between kindergarten and 5th grade. So bouncing around and different things was a little difficult. I think my brothers responded a lot differently than I did. They acted out behaviorally, [and] didn't really do too well in school, but my great grandmother—my mother's maternal grandmother told me that I had to go to college, that I had to do certain things, and so I needed to keep that 'getting good grades thing up.'

Adrian described his school experience as being qualitatively different than his brothers. He went on to explain how it differed from his own:

Adrian: I know that it wasn't reinforced for them at school the same way that it was for me. Meaning that the school systems, the teachers, the administration, which ever school I was at recognized my ability to excel in the classroom - where as behaviorally my brothers were trying to cope with moving so they would act out. And so inside the schools it looked like the Donald boys, as we were referred to from time to time, had 'two bad eggs and a good one.'

Walker: Why didn't you act out?

Adrian: I think I did act out. It's just because I performed well and did the work that was required of me I got away with a little bit more. And so I kind of pushed a lot of limits and enjoyed some freedoms that most students wouldn't get away with. [My brothers] sought attention in other ways, like acting out and getting in fights. It was better than no attention.

Sean (1.9 GPA), who described his community growing up as 'urban,’ shared that the school represented a safe haven for him:

Walker: Why would you describe them (your schools) as urban?

Sean: The areas. The areas they was in and the things that we seen coming and going from school.
Walker: What would some of those things be?

Sean: Like people on the corners selling drugs, riding down the street with the flashy cars and the music real loud. Sometimes you’d be scared. We had a few Caucasian students, but not a lot at all of them actually.

Walker: Did that environment that you were talking about, and that feeling that you had - did it affect your schooling in any way?

Sean: I would say no - not really. It was like you thought about those things when you were walking to school, or whatever, and we would see certain things. You would only think about that while you were out there at the moment. Once you got in school it wasn't nothing. It didn't bother me. I wasn't worried about it.

Jason (2.0 GPA), who had an identified learning disability, told about how school provided a context for him to learn about appropriate behavior:

Once you put little kids in a room with tables you’re bound to be thinking it's playtime. They're going to want to be getting up running around just like everybody else does – they are not going to want to sit and write every answer. You (teachers) put that work ethic in them and they learn that it is not playing time. That’s how the other students learned that, but I learned it in ISS. I had to get myself out of that hole so I could participate with other students. I had to learn that so I could stop going to in school suspension. So I realized that and I had to get it together.

He shared further that, for him, school was as much a positive social gathering place as it was an institution for learning:

Jason: I always loved going to school. I always loved waking up and coming to school - perfect attendance and everything. I love being somewhere good and doing something good - not crazy stuff or whatnot, just something positive to lead into something else good.

Walker: Would you say that you enjoyed school?

Jason: Yeah, I wish that I could go back.

Walker: What did you enjoy about it?

Jason: People. Meeting new people, seeing new people and learning new things and basketball - stuff like that. Where else can you find all that but school? I just liked it. I mean at first when you’re a little kid you not going to like school, but as you move up toward middle school and high school you want to know what’s out there. You’re excited freshman year, and you're ready to go. I was excited to go to school.

Sharing similarities with the description of school provided by Sean, Greg articulated a conception of school which represented it as a ‘safe place.’ In addition, he conveyed how it represented a sort of pseudo-home:

For the most part I really wasn't in trouble at school. Most times I loved being at school. I would say that my elementary and high school years were my best years of
school. I [still] know teachers and administrators or principals that have been in my life from the schools that I've been to. I mean I felt safe. They talked to me when I needed ‘talked to’ and they helped me when I needed something, and that helped me keep my grades up. That helped me stay in school. So I felt that, by me having good positive people around me, I was above average.

4.6.2 “For me I was just thinking I'm going to do this work so I can get out of high school.” – Greg (1.9 GPA): Academic Competition – One of the reoccurring themes that emerged from subject responses was the presence or non-existence of academic competition. Several high and mid-level achieving students shared that they had cultivated and participated in this mode of academic engagement but no mention of academic competition, in the course of their academic program, was made by low-level achieving students.

Adrian (4.0 GPA), valedictorian of his senior class, related that his classmates in school knew that he was intelligent. He explained that this perception had emerged from his competition with other high achievers:

Walker: What was the evidence that you were intelligent to other people?

Adrian: Oh, just the accolades. We talked about grades. This competitive nature that I have with some of my friends – we have the same tenacity in the classroom.

Walker: You would talk about that with whom?

Adrian: Other students. Some of my best friends, and friends I have to this day, whether they played sports or not, we still competed in the classroom. A lot of my competition though was with girls. And so a lot of the African Americans girls, also other races as well but mostly African American because I was at a predominantly black school, would be having those competitive conversations. You know girls would talk, and if I was trying to hide something from other guys, especially the pure jocks, it would be made known because the girls were talking to other girls saying ‘you know AD’s smart.’ Then we would compare grades and sometimes talk to teachers about who went the longest time without getting a problem wrong in the classroom. My name was brought up in those types of conversations and it just became known that ‘AD is one of the smart kids too.’

This ‘competition,’ Adrian shared, drove his selection of academic courses:

I didn’t want to just take a regular course in high school and just breeze through it because I couldn't call myself the best if I wasn't in the best classes, or the hardest classes.

Adrian conveyed that his desire for academic competition was not shared by his older and younger brother, who preferred to compete in other ways:
My older brother was more of an artist so when he drew he was the best. I used to get mad because I draw a little bit as well, but it just came so effortlessly for him. I had to work at it to get better. So he exercised it in that way. But now my younger brother- He was more into connecting with people and he could get the prettiest girl whenever he wanted. We tried to compete in that way.

Ricky (4.0 GPA), also a valedictorian of his senior class, demonstrated characteristics of academic competition similar to those displayed by Adrian. Further, he shared his belief that academic competition facilitated his high achievement in school:

I think some of it has to do with competitiveness. I just feel like some of it is recreated in the classroom. You might have a teacher that says ‘if you guys get As you get stickers.’ You want to get the most stickers. Things like that. I definitely remember that. I think a lot of people have probably grown up with the little sticker scenario where whoever gets the most As or gets the most points on something gets a sticker and at the end of the week or maybe a prize.

Sean (1.9 GPA) described how, as a young student, his teacher used competition to facilitate learning in school:

Early on we use to have little contests where my teacher would write on the board ‘what’s 2 plus 2, what’s 5 plus 7’ and we would have to run up to the board, add it up, write it on the board and hit the little button. I would win like every time. I would win.

Craig shared a similar approach to teaching used in an elementary school that he attended:

I remember in third or fourth grade we used to have five problems in math and at the end of the nine weeks, like the top 10 [students], whoever had the most problems right, would get candy and a movie. The first couple of weeks I didn't get it and I was mad like ‘why can’t I get this’ and that motivated me. Math eventually became my favorite subject [I think] just because of the rewards from my teacher.

Later, Craig described further how the competition influenced his academic behavior:

Walker: When you said that you weren't achieving the particular score that you needed to qualify for the award – was that something that you talked about with your parents or how did you prepare to do better? How did you try harder?

Craig: I honestly don't remember. I just remember that it was just a motivating factor - like all my friends got to have the candy party so why shouldn't I. It just did something in my brain and I said 'I just have to do this to get the candy so I won’t have to be mad again.' Eventually Math became real, real easy to me. Math is like my favorite subject and that might have been the determining factor on why I like math so much.

Low achieving students made no mention of academic competition during interviews.

Greg and Jason talked about this in a direct manner. Greg (1.9 GPA) shared that he was more likely to engage in cooperative activities than competitive ones:
Walker: Did you enjoy the competition of the classroom, or did you connect competition to being in school? And when I say competition I mean academic competition-grade competition.

Greg: Right. I don't know. I would say in the classes that I was in, and the classes that I knew that I was really good at, the other students would come and ask me for help. We would help each other. That's what we would do. It would make me feel good just to help someone else in the classroom because they always came to me. If I needed something I could ask them, and they would be able to help me [as well]. So I think in my classes that's what it was really about. It was just us helping each other. There would be some classes where some students would just sit in there and 'clown' and the teacher couldn't teach. That would upset the [other] students who were trying to learn. But other than that we were pretty much helpful [to one another].

Walker: So did you feel that you could compete with the best students in your school, in terms of academically, or is that something that you were interested in doing?

Greg: Not really. No. For me I was just thinking 'I'm just going to do this work so I can get out of high school.' Because as it got closer to the end (graduation) I just wanted to hurry up and finish high school. But I really wasn't a competitive person. I'd just go in there (to class and school) and do what I had to do to get the job done.

Further, Greg explained that he felt cooperative methods of learning were more help than competitive modes:

I felt that we are all there as one, learning together, and if we don't know the answer, or if someone doesn't understand, then we should be able to help them the best way we can - if the teacher is not available - instead of competing against each other. So when it comes to a test we will be prepared. I feel that if the teacher is not available to help at the time, and another student is, then why not help each other. That's what we're in the class for - to all learn and to all understand.

Jacob (1.7 GPA), like Greg, did not engage in academic competition but also did not engage in cooperative activities. He preferred to work in isolation. However, he did participate in extra-curricular activities that were both cooperative and competitive:

Walker: You said you were a B / C student and more into the social but did you ever get involved in academic competition - competing for grades?

Jacob: No. I was more the student who was there to get the grades I need to get and move on.

Walker: Did you know the types of students that were involved in those activities?

Jacob: Yeah, at Johnson I had a couple of friends who were on the math team and they would go to competitions. They would have math competitions, but other than that no.

Walker: But you did get involved in robotics?

Jacob: Yeah.
Walker: Were there competitions with the robotics club?

Jacob: As in positions?

Walker: Yeah, I guess or with other teams?

Jacob: We had competitions with other teams. In the first competition we had to build a 6 foot robot and had to throw a ball over a 6 foot wall and then it had to roll around the rink a couple of times and block another robot from passing him.

Walker: Was there competition on the team between members?

Jacob: Yeah, there was a lot of competition. Every year there was a different task that had to be done and everyone wanted to be the driver. So everyone was in competition for that - to be the driver. Mr. Jones was a leader. He said that we had to have a good attendance record, good grades, and we couldn't have any suspensions in order to apply to be a driver. The driver was like the top position for everybody. Everybody wanted to be the driver.

Walker: So did you ever get to be the driver?

Jacob: Yeah, I got to be a driver that first year.

Walker: Was that motivation for you?

Jacob: Yeah, that was very motivational. That year I got rookie of the year.

4.6.3 “The teachers there thought the curriculum wasn’t challenging enough for me.”

– Ricky (4.0 GPA): Course Placement – Some students, including high, mid-level and low achievers, shared their experiences in regard to course placement. Each indicated that they had been selected for certain courses or programs based upon teacher identification, test scores, previous course grades and/or self-selection.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) told of how he was placed into advanced classes in middle school, which ultimately led to his eligibility for AP courses in high school:

I had to have the pre-characteristics to take those classes. In 8th grade I moved from a different middle school. When I got there I was just in regular math, regular Language Arts, and regular everything else but my teacher, who was my soccer coach, recognized [my ability]. He was like ‘AD, man is this easy for you’ and I was like ‘yeah’. I was thinking that this was the hardest class. They ended up introducing me to Algebra 1 and Spanish 1 as an 8th grader so I was getting high school credit as an 8th grader. So getting As in those classes it was like ‘okay this guy, when I got there (high school), has to at least consider taking the challenge courses.’

Ricky (4.0 GPA) related a similar story of teacher identification:

It was suggested that I go there from Graves middle school because the teachers there thought that the curriculum wasn't challenging enough for me... So it was suggested that I apply to the lottery to get into James and I got in and after the 2nd day of 7th grade.
Sean (1.9 GPA) qualified for the school’s gifted and talented program on the basis of his test scores, which he thought was an IQ test. He noted how this placement created the opportunity for taking Advanced Placement courses later in his academic career:

They had this Gifted and Talented program. I got put in the Gifted and Talented program in the 5th grade for Math and for English, so in middle school that gave me the opportunity to take high school classes like Spanish and Algebra. Once I took those, as I was doing my schedule [in high school], they told me that I was able to take AP classes- Advanced Placement classes. So then from that point on I took all AP classes.

In contrast to the experiences of Adrian, Ricky and Sean, Greg (1.9 GPA) told about how he self selected general education courses for his academic program:

Greg: I didn't take college prep. I took like all the basics pretty much.

Walker: Why didn't you take college prep?

Greg: That was probably a little too difficult for me. I thought college prep was a little bit more challenging. I never took a class but the way people would talk about it made it sound like it was more college bound.

Walker: What would they say?

Greg: I mean it wasn't really bad things. They would be saying ‘college prep classes are a little more difficult than our regular classes that we take.’

Walker: Okay, so did you not take the classes because you didn't want to? Could you have taken those classes if you wanted to?

Greg: I probably could have if I wanted to. I just chose not to.

Contrary to Greg's experience, Bishop (3.8 GPA) shared that his placement in accelerated courses was the result of test scores rather than teacher recommendation:

Bishop: Most of the time I was in regular classes for English, Science and Social Studies but in Math I was advanced. I started in pre-algebra in the sixth grade and that ended up putting me a step ahead of the class throughout my whole middle school career. As I moved to high school I wanted to start challenging myself and so I ended up getting into Humanities and I took AP calculus. I ended up taking all the AP classes my senior year. I also had PSEO [Post Secondary Enrollment Option] to help prepare me for college and I was in AP Calculus, AP Biology, and AP Government. I was in Humanities freshman and sophomore years.

Walker: Did your parents push those classes?

Bishop: They knew I would be in advanced classes as far as Math because I was advanced in middle school.

Walker: How did you get into those advanced classes – do you remember how you were selected to be in them?
Bishop: We took a test that placed us into it [in middle school]. In terms of high school, they placed us in it based off of the teachers. The teachers told me about it. I wanted to take a computer class my senior year and my counselor told me ‘don't take that we have AP biology.’ Another teacher that I had my freshman year approached me my senior year and asked me about taking AP biology. So it was more off the teachers [recommendation] for other subjects, but in math it was because I had [taken] advanced classes in middle school.

4.6.4 "It seemed like you got it or you didn't – they never would tell you certain things." – Craig (3.0 GPA): Teaching Style and Perceived Quality of Education – The types of schools that students attended determined, to a great extent, the style of teaching that they received. Students who had attended multiple schools in varied contexts – urban, suburban or lottery – were particularly aware of the way in which teaching style impacted the facilitation of instruction and shaped the learning environment. Further, students shared their opinions and perceptions regarding the quality of education that they received in each of these educational settings at varying levels.

Ricky (4.0 GPA), who attended urban, lottery and international schools throughout K-12, shared an experience in which (as a senior at Freedman) he participated in a student exchange program with a student from a suburban school. The purpose of the exchange, initiated by the suburban student as part of a senior project, was to provide insight into the differences and similarities at each sight. Ricky conveyed that the experience was ‘eye-opening’ for him:

Ricky: Well going to classes with Greg and some of his friends [I found] the classes were cool. His teachers were nice - I just saw that the curriculum was different than the one that I had received and knew that I could receive at my school.

Walker: In what way?

Ricky: Like the courses they offered and the activities that they had. They had a lacrosse team. We didn’t have a lacrosse team. They had a pool. We didn’t have a pool. But one thing that Greg told me - after the project was over we met and kind of discussed the similarities and differences that there were - was that they admired our school because almost everybody knew each other. It's just like ‘hey what's up.’ He'd be with us and I'd introduce him to like 20 people before the class. And I was just like ‘yeah, we all know each other.’ But at his school it’s like you'll graduate with a million kids and you’ll only know like 10. It was a ‘togetherness’ [at Freedman] that he wished that his school would have had. There (at his school) you may graduate with people that you have never even seen before.

Walker: In terms of being in the classrooms, was there anything that you observed that would lead you to the conclusion that someone graduating from that school
might be more prepared for a college scenario than someone that went to the school that you graduated from?

Ricky: Did I feel like they did that they had the better preparation?

Walker: Yeah, did you get a sense that they had a better education or that they would be better prepared for college?

Ricky: I mean I loved all my teachers that I had in high school so I don't want to say 'better prepared,' but I think that they might have had a broader knowledge. It might have expanded better than what I would have probably got or could get where I was?

Walker: Ok. How would that 'broader knowledge' have been built?

Ricky: Not ever broader- Like the opportunities that they had - they had better opportunities than we did. Like for example if I wanted to be a journalist I would never have an interest unless I read a lot and if that was probably what I wanted to do. That would probably be the only way going to the school system that I went to that I would have that love for journalism. They had a class [for journalism], like the school newspaper or something like that. That kind of sparks a student’s interest like ‘maybe this is something that I want to go to college for.’ You realize that you’re good at more things when you have more opportunities to test what you’re good at. So like at their school - one girl knew she wanted to go to school for communications. One of the guys wanted to go to school for communications and he was one of the talk show hosts on their news show. I probably wouldn't know that I wanted to be a talk show host. I could only watch ESPN and be like ‘I want to be just like him.’ You're not thinking [though] and you're not going to be moved - there's not going to be that urge. Frankly we didn't have anything like that. I mean, unless somebody wants to start it. Now I think there’s a newspaper or like a news show [at Freedman] because I know somebody I played soccer with that was on it. [By doing that] you're exposing people to so many things that we might only see on TV.

Walker: Did you feel that the curriculum there, in terms of the class content, was more difficult or challenging, or about the same? Maybe you didn't get a sense of that.

Ricky: It was probably- I don't want to say more difficult - It could have been more difficult – [but in my mind] not even more difficult. It was just at a higher standard than what I was used to. I don't want to say more difficult because I feel like if we switched schools. If we took 300 hundred kids from their school and switched I have confidence that most of the students, depending on who the students were, we could groom ourselves to go through their curriculum. I definitely don't want to say that there school is harder. It’s just that maybe the bar is set at a different level.

Walker: Why do you think that was?

Ricky: Again going back to opportunities that are provided to the students at that school district or at that school. There [opportunities] are more than the ones [opportunities] that I was exposed to.

Craig (3.0 GPA) attended two different high schools in an ‘urban’ district (ultimately graduating from Freedman) but described one school as urban and the other school as
suburban. He discussed how the teaching style in the ‘suburban’ school differed from the style more prevalent in the ‘urban’ school that he ultimately graduated from:

Craig: Academically [Fisher] was harder but it wasn’t harder in the sense that I couldn’t do it. I could still get honor roll there. That was one of the few times I had less than honor roll. I had like 2.9s 2.8s and 3.0s, but it was different though. Like the teachers were different – [they were] real strict to an extent to certain people and more lenient on others.

Walker: So you felt there was a difference made. In what ways was it harder and in what ways wasn't it harder?

Craig: There it seemed like either you got it or you didn't. They never really would tell you certain things. They wouldn’t tell you when things were due. It was just when you get it, get it done. They had a weekly plan and it was more like college syllabus. If you don’t know it and you don’t turn it in then it is on you. They would remind you but they wouldn't tell you when it was due.

Walker: So there was not as much support?

Craig: No. Not to me at least I would say.

Walker: Is that what you think accounts for the fact that maybe your grades were not as high there?

Craig: Yes, I would say so. The teachers [I had] before I got there cared and knew me personally, but when I got there they didn't really try to talk to you and see how you were doing. They didn't do things at the beginning of the nine weeks [such as] ask you what’s your favorite color is, your favorite sport, or your favorite hobby, and it didn't seem like they had a support system really.

Walker: So not as much relationship?

Craig: No, not at all. The teachers (at Freedman) knew how to talk to and be with people like me. They would let you know who they are and you would tell them who you are and they would relate to you more and try to get to know you better. [Also, they would] try to get to know your family. They would call your mom and let her know who they are and what subject they teach. A lot of my teachers knew my parents personally. They would see them and say ‘how are you doing Mr. James’ and have conversation with them, and my mom or would sometimes come up to the school. Kids would know them too.

Craig talked about the type of work connected to each instructional style and whether he perceived it to be of a similar challenge and difficulty:

Craig: It (the work at Freedman) was slightly less challenging but it still was challenging.

Walker: How do you account for the difference in the degree of challenge?

Craig: It seemed like if you did not fully understand something they would break it down to you - like Mr. Gore specifically. After he got done teaching if you raised your hand he would break it down and come and let you know a little trick.
Walker: So you were talking about this idea of how a teacher would break things down. My question is - how were the students’ different, or were they, at Fisher versus Freedman?

Craig: The students at Fisher were more like laid back and I guess, nerds, whereas at Freedman they were intelligent as well, but they would be more active and more talkative - is that kinesthetic learners? More than just sitting and doing the work. Basically [having] more fun in learning.

Walker: You thought that the learning environment at Fisher was more static or not a lot of movement versus Freedman?

Craig: Yes, it was kind of 'do your work, get done and see you tomorrow' type stuff. It wasn't like 'now were going to do a group project or watch a learning movie.'

Walker: Did you have higher grades at Freedman than you did at Fisher?

Craig: (At Freedman) I had like a 3.5 and up.

Walker: Did you feel that the difference in your performance was based off of teachers, or your comfort level, or to what do you attribute doing a little better at Freedman?

Craig: I think it might have been a combination of both. If you're more comfortable somewhere then I think you would [tend to] do better where you are comfortable at and where you fit in. I just didn't feel like I fit in at Fisher - you know it was a different kind of vibe. But I guess it was a learning experience as well. To see a different type of learning and [a different type of] school and then coming back to Freedman, to what I was used to, I guess I just liked it more.

Further, Craig shared that the study habits of students in each environment were compatible with the teaching style of the school and that, in his view, the learning style was not better or worse but just different. He shared it that each style provided advantages and disadvantages:

Craig: The study habits seemed pretty much similar. I just feel that they were adapted to the type of learning that was there. Say if my teacher or coach taught me something and it was the same thing but in different ways - there are different ways that your coaches could teach you and I'm adapted to learn from some type of teaching way or strategy and they are adapted to their way. They were more successful because they were used to it [the same way that I would have been] in my type of environment. If they would've come here (to Freedman) then they might not [have been] as successful as if they were there. The environment there wasn't anything that I couldn't adapt to, but if they came here then they would think 'this is something different' and it might distract them from the type of learning that they like. So there just pros and cons to learning (styles and environments) I guess.

Walker: So in terms of the different learning styles, do you feel that one was better than the other?
Craig: No. I don't want to say that. I mean it was better for me but I wouldn't say that Fisher is better than Freedman or [that] Freedman is better than Fisher. It's just [that there was] a different type of learning that was there (at Fisher) than I preferred.

Walker: Is the expectation of learning in college more similar to what you got at Freedman or what you got at Fisher?

Craig: Honestly, it would be more like what I got at Fisher - it was like a college environment, real fast paced and everyday something different. A new 'something' happened every day. I don't know, it's just there it seemed faster.

Walker: So in that way, do you think that it has benefited you having that type of experience - being in college now?

Craig: Yeah, that experience helped me get adjusted, but being at Freedman helped me learn how to break stuff down in college with different strategies that I've learned that I can do - just little stuff like that.

Walker: Do you feel that learning style is based off of one's race or gender? As an African American male, do you feel that learning style is a part of being an African American male - that you learned as you say from a kinesthetic style [because you were are an African American male], or do you feel that it is more about where you grow up or were you come from?

Craig: It's where you grow up from. If I was an African-American and grew up in Wellsburg and had that type of education, then that's the type of learning environment I would like to be in. If I came into a city type school I might not like that type of environment like I did the more suburban type school. It's wherever you start from – it's that type of environment [that matters in the development of one's learning style]. I guess that would be my opinion.

Part of the difference in teaching style, as Craig explained it, was in the way that students were expected to acquire answers to questions about academic content:

Craig: It wasn't necessarily more difficult, it was just there, at Fisher, they would give you something and it would seem like they would halfway want you to figure it out. Whereas if I was at an urban school and I had a question I could ask them 'what is this' and they would help me go through step-by-step, or at least start [me] out on the right path.

Walker: So that being said you made a comment about the fact that you felt that your current schooling situation in college is more similar to what you experienced at Fisher. Do you feel that if you had not had an experience at Fisher, do you think you would have been as prepared for college?

Craig: I think that helped a little bit. Coming from the eighth grade to the 9th, and basically, from getting help to getting very little help, was very difficult at first and I struggled a little bit at first... [Ultimately, though] that experience helped a little bit.

Walker: Do you recall if other students had similar experiences of struggling a bit with that?

Craig: Yeah, I do. I just had a conversation with somebody the other day about what happened freshman year at school. [We were] talking about how teachers were. I had a teacher that - I don't know what was wrong - but he wasn't there like half of the
year and then he tried to give me a D. He tried to give the whole class low grades and I don't understand how you give low grades and you haven't even been here. So it was just difficult. It helped and it didn't. It helped me to know that college is going to be like this. My mom would tell me ‘This is how college is going to be.’

Greg (1.9 GPA), who attended only urban schools, pointed to a variance in teaching styles amongst different subject area classes within urban settings. This was similar to the contrast noted by Craig between urban and suburban contexts:

Greg: I would say that I learned the most in Math. I mean I learned a lot in all of my classes but I think my math teacher put a lot of work on us, and I think I learned the most in that class.

Walker: What was it about the way that he taught the class that caused you to learn so much in that class - maybe more so than others?

Greg: To me other classes were really just easy, and I knew it. I really wasn't learning. But I like to learn how math operates. The teacher would give us the work. He would help us to understand, or do it in a way that would help us to understand. He would give us homework. There was just math everywhere at this point in time in my life. I learned a lot and I think the teachers that I had weren't really attacking us with math. They just taught us where we could understand and we learned a lot from them.

Walker: So how would he help you understand if you were having difficulty?

Greg: If we had a problem with a [math] problem we would raise our hand. [When] he would get to us he would ask us [the issue]. I would tell him ‘I don't understand this or I don't understand what this problem means.’ Then he would take the time out to explain it to us until we got it or until we understood. He would explain it until we understood what the problem was really asking us.

Walker: And your science teachers didn't do that?

Greg: They did but not all the time. Some of them I felt like they [could] just teach the class from a book.

Walker: So they expected you to read the book? Help me to understand what the issue was.

Greg: Some teachers will take the time to actually sit down and give you one on one [attention], if you need the help, but some teachers won't always do that. They just feel like ‘we got a book’ or ‘it's up on the board’, or something like that. You know they weren't always helping.

Craig discussed the manner in which students at Freedman had conversations about school work in comparison to those which he described occurring at Fisher:

Walker: Now in the urban schools you were in did you ever have conversation with your peers about coursework?

Craig: All the time. Senior year we had blocks because of AP classes. The teachers would go over the work the first period and the second period we (students) would go
over the work. If we had a question the teacher would tell us to ask the group first. That was more of a teamwork type thing that helped us out I guess.

Walker: So how would you describe the difference in engagement in terms of the group collaboration that you experienced at Freedman versus Fisher? What do you think contributed to that?

Craig: I think at Freedman there were just more people like me - I guess people that I could relate to. Even if we weren't doing work we could talk about sports or new fashions that would come out over the weekend.

Walker: You didn't feel comfortable having those conversations at Fisher?

Craig: I mean, I did, but I just would choose not to I guess. It wasn't really anything, but I just felt more that I could talk to them (other students) at Freedman.

Jason (1.9 GPA) expressed definite, yet somewhat contradictory opinions regarding the quality of education that he received in the suburban and urban schools that he attended. This seemed to change from elementary to secondary school:

Jason: Suburban is like quality and urban is more [of a] low standard. So they didn't really meet the suburban standard: like a Wellsburg type quality.

Walker: How did you come to your understanding of urban versus suburban?

Jason: Learning. Learning. At the school I was going to, Acorn elementary school (urban), they would teach you stuff but then I would go to Stuber (suburban) and they would teach you at a whole different level - but 10 times better.

Walker: So you went to Stuber elementary too?

Jason: Yeah.

Walker: So talk to me about the differences. Can you give me a specific example of how learning was different in those settings?

Jason: I think you don't get much help in the urban schools as the suburban schools. As far as the work ethics to help you get to that goal (of learning).

Walker: Now as far as 'work ethic,' do you mean the 'teachers' work ethic' or the 'students' work ethic'?

Jason: The 'teachers' work ethic'.

Walker: So you felt like maybe you were pushed more? How was the teachers’ work ethic in the suburban school different from the teachers’ work ethic and the urban school?

Jason: They would listen to you. They would pay attention to you and help you with anything that had to do with anything at all – whether you were talking about basketball or if it had to do with tying your shoe. But in urban schools if you wanted something done you had to do it yourself. They wouldn’t help you as much as suburban schools to give you that motivation [to learn].
Walker: Okay. So what differences did you observe in your academics then? Was there a difference in the learning environment?

Jason: All of it was the same as far as middle school and high school. They stepped it up [there].

Jason: Freedman taught me a lot more things versus Foley (suburban). Freedman made me grow up more. My head was in on straight at Freedman because of the teachers and the people I was around.

Walker: What do you mean ‘your head was in on straight?’

Jason: Well I was a young guy, but when I was at Freedman I was surrounded by people who cared and that made me turn myself around.

Jason explained his affinity for a particular teacher at Freedman, Ms. Donley:

But the reason I like Ms. Donley is because she's a cool teacher - she loves to work with you. She's just one of those teachers that gives you what you need to [help you learn] and I like being around positive people.

Jacob (1.7 GPA), who attended a lottery school within the district for two years prior to attending his home school, Freedman, conveyed that he felt the difference in the educational settings was related more to student behavior than teacher style.

Well my experience at Johnson was like more educational - I learned a lot more. But when I came to Freedman it was like people did not really pay attention to the teacher and did not respect the teacher as much. Kids at Johnson took the opportunity to learn and pay attention and their graduation rates are better because of the simple fact that they (the students) respect the teachers. When I came to Freedman they'd give work, but it wasn't really like paperwork. It was more like we [would] speak it. When I was in Ms. James class we didn't really write about what we were doing. We didn't really write unless we were doing notes. At Johnson you would get like four sub assignments and then a major project on top of those. So you would keep getting work, back-to-back, and they would never tell you when to turn it in. They would remind you, but it was up to you to remember. Then, when I came to Freedman, they would always be on you about getting your work done. But to me they were never serious because the students never really did it, and they would give students too many chances to turn in work. At Johnson, you would get probably like one or two [chances] and that was it.

In terms of the rigor of coursework, Jacob, like Craig and Greg, attributed the greater challenge of work at Johnson to the teacher’s presentation of content and the type of support provided in the classroom:

Jacob: The work at Johnson wasn’t really more challenging; it was just the way that they worded the questions. It was more difficult to read [the questions at Johnson] and at Freedman I could better understand it. Also, the teachers actually helped you to understand it. At Johnson, it was more college prep, so they would just give you work and leave you out there hanging. They would help you a little bit but not as much as they would help you at Freedman.
Walker: So you thought there was more support at Freedman?

Jacob: Yeah.

Walker: But you also expressed that you felt that there were not firm deadlines. Do you think that was good, or how would you interpret that?

Jacob: In a way no, [it was not good] because students would just take advantage of that. Teachers would [just] keep pushing things back.

Walker: You said you thought that the way the material was presented was better for your learning style at Freedman than Johnson - how so? You were saying that you felt that you were able to learn better at Freedman than you were at Johnson - what do you think contributed to that?

Jacob: The teachers - I would say the teachers. The teachers would take time and give you individual study [sessions]. That was very helpful. And they would give me other things to help. They would give me pamphlets and other things that would help me to learn.

Walker: So did you appreciate the fact that you got reminders versus being given the assignment and it being expected you to remember [the due date]?

Jacob: Yeah, I did.

Jacob also explained the pros and cons embedded in the teacher practice of providing reminders for students:

Walker: So in terms of preparation for college - how do you feel about the giving of reminders?

Jacob: Well it's kind of bad too because when you get too used to teachers telling you to turn in your work assignments, and how many work assignments you have to turn in, you can get kind of lazy. Then you won't keep up on your work because you will expect the teacher to remind you all the time. So it's kind of bad [in] that way.

Walker: How was it helpful?

Jacob: It was helpful a lot also because if I was having some tough times out of class, homework or assignments, or if it was too much of a [work] load, I could always go to my teacher and find out what [work] I was missing. They would help you so that was kind of good. But at Johnson (a lottery school), when you would ask [a question], they would tell you to ask one of your fellow students what work assignments you needed or what work assignments you were missing. They would tell you to concern yourself with them.

Walker: So when you asked [other] students, did they help you?

Jacob: Yeah they helped you - some students did, at least. Not all students. Some students would just ignore you.

Walker: Would you say it (receiving help from students) was the same, or different, from receiving the type of reminders that you received from teachers at Freedman.
Jacob: It was different. It was different.

Walker: In what way?

Jacob: Teachers don't judge you, but students do. They would look at you and like [notice] you are a different skin color. Some Caucasians, they would be afraid to talk to you, or they would just think that you're trying to 'mess with them,' so they would just blow you off.

In addition to teacher style, Jacob shared how, in his experience, students also played a role in shaping the classroom environment.

When I went to Jackson (middle school) I wasn't learning anything at all because of the fact that none of the kids respected the teachers, and the teachers did not seem like they really wanted to teach. All they wanted to do was their job and the social atmosphere of the school was more about what you have on and who you hang with. There was always something going on and you couldn't really focus on your work. And when I went to Flagstone high school (in the suburbs), that's when I started learning, and that's when I had to really settle down because I noticed that I didn't really know anything - after a month or two of being there my grades really started getting better.

Josh (3.2 GPA), who attended several urban and suburban schools throughout his K-12 experience, echoed these sentiments as well. He related how distractions by students in urban environments made it difficult for teachers to instruct and students to learn. He described students from suburban areas as having a greater ‘push’:

Josh: There were definitely differences. I'd say they (suburban schools) were more challenging - they put you up for a challenge. They forced you and put more into you. That's why I wish that I would've stayed out there, because I would have been more knowledgeable.

Walker: In what ways is it more challenging - how so?

Josh: I really can't explain. I just knew that it is harder. When I went to Reed (middle school – an urban school) I flew through school and it was super easy. I can't explain it. Really, you just have to see it.

Walker: How would you describe the way that teachers taught? Did the teachers instruct in a similar fashion in both schools?

Josh: I think there are less distractions in the classrooms (in the suburbs) or more of a serious environment because it is very rare to run into disturbing students or just any distractions. There's more of a serious environment, so you learn more.

Walker: What do you think contributed to there being lesser distractions in the suburban environment versus in the urban?

Josh: In the suburbs more people knew their purpose for being there. In urban schools people feel like they have the need to do whatever they want at school and school is supposed to be for learning. [It's not] just to come here and see your friends or something like that.
Walker: Do you think that race played a factor in that, or how did you understand those differences?

Josh: I think black people buy in to the whole stereotype that they have to act like that. Because in the more suburban areas I think they push more or they have that extra [push]. But they just know their purpose. It seems like in urban schools they just don't want it or they are just here to be here or they are here because their parents made them come to school. It's not a 'want to' it's more of just a 'well my mom sent me to school so I have to be here, but I'm still going do the wrong thing.'

Walker: In terms of teaching style and in terms of the expectation for learning, in your mind, what was the biggest difference? Maybe there wasn't a difference?

Josh: I don't think there was a difference. I think it was the students that made the difference, because in more suburban school it was like the kids wanted to learn. They knew their purpose for being there [while] in urban schools some kids don't know how to act. A lot of kids don't want to learn. So the teachers are not the problem. The students make it hard for the teachers.

Walker: How do you explain the difference in the students’ motivation, or in their understanding of their purpose?

Josh: Well, I'd say it comes from their parenting. Most kids know their purpose for being in school. Other people don't know but you don't know what they're going through. They probably have been taught [it at some point] or were brought up to know the purpose of school, so I think they just abuse it and just come [to school] and do whatever. In a suburban school you barely find students that are always disruptive in class. You can learn more when you don't have someone interrupting class and disturbing you.

4.6.5 “Once you’ve shown that you do good in school it’s kind of hard for you to fall off and not do.” – Ricky (4.0 GPA):  

Formation of Academic Identity – Not all students in the study referenced experiences that shaped their academic identity or self perception as a student but many did. Those who did articulated events in their lives that influenced the way that they saw themselves as students. These self-perceptions included the degree of confidence or lack of confidence with which they approached academic tasks and their willingness to ask questions and leverage resources when engaged in a difficult academic task.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) shared how he managed his identity as an academic achiever in high school by developing his skill as an athlete:

I kind of distanced myself from James, because he didn't do anything outside of the academic thing. I didn't want to be pegged as a nerd or anything. I will never forget one of the most favorable compliments [I received] when I was in seventh grade. One of my best friends at the time told me ‘you're the coolest nerd I've ever met.’ You know, by that time I was wearing glasses. I had to wear glasses. I was still
getting grades but I made all the sports teams. I played soccer because the school didn’t have football. I played soccer in the fall, basketball in the winter and ran track in the spring. This was an all year thing [for me] in seventh grade, eighth grade and all through high school. I did those things to distance myself from the guys, the guys and girls, who were just smart… It wasn’t until I got to college that I really embraced being intelligent, and that alone - not focusing or coupling [my intelligence] with, ‘oh and I can dunk,’ or ‘oh and I can hit a homerun on the baseball field.’

Ricky (4.0 GPA) told of how school success, for him, came out of his early achievement expectations that, once created, were reinforced by others:

Once you show that you do good in school its kind of hard for you to fall off and not do [good]… it’s just like after a while, in maybe kindergarten through middle school, if you seem to bring home pretty decent grades - like As and Bs – within ourselves we develop an understanding, an unspoken understanding, of what is the best grade and what is ‘okay’ [as far as academic performance is concerned].

Along the same lines, Sean (1.9 GPA) described how his teachers reinforced his strong academic identity, which strengthened his resolve to ask questions when he did not understand something:

Most of the situations that I’ve been in [where people made comment about me as a student] it was always said ‘you’re a smart student, you’re a smart student,’ not ‘you could be doing better or it doesn’t matter you can’t get it’ or ‘maybe next time.’ Like it wasn’t like that for me. If I didn’t get it they helped me. It wasn’t that we’ll work on it at a different time, ‘Nah, I don’t understand so I want you to explain it to me now.’

Greg (1.9 GPA) told of how his academic identity, rather than coming out of academic performance, as was the case with Adrian, Ricky and Sean, emerged from behavioral expectations:

Greg: I would just say that I was an above average student - you know for the most part.

Walker: Ok. And what contributes to your feelings of yourself as a student.

Greg: Like- what do you mean?

Walker: Well, you said that you considered yourself to be an above average student. What contributed to that feeling or what draws you to that conclusion?

Greg: I mean, for the most part I really wasn’t in trouble at school. Most of the time I loved being at school.

Walker: Ok. So what type of student were you? Did you get mostly As, Bs, Cs or a mixture of these? What were your grades like?

Greg: It was a mixture of, I would say, Bs and Cs. I got some As but mostly Bs and C’s.
Articulating a concept of academic identity similar to Greg, Jason (2.0 GPA), identified as a student with special needs, indicated that he was ‘bad’ in elementary school. He explained this notion in terms of gender expectations:

Walker: When you say that you are bad were you in trouble a lot at school?

Jason: [I was being] a boy, just being a boy.

Walker: Were you in trouble fighting, or what was the issue?

Jason: Well this one time at daycare I had stabbed a teacher in the hand. I don't know why I did it. I think I was just watching too much Michael Myers and Chucky. Yeah, I was in trouble. I pulled a girl’s braid because she had pulled my braid. I was bad, but after sixth grade I started realizing a lot of stuff. I started learning stuff, as far as what we are supposed to be doing.

Walker: Did you have teachers that worked with you even before sixth-grade, when you were still having those behavior challenges?

Jason: Yes sir. They helped me a lot actually because I really always had an attitude. I would give them a look and they would be scared. They would call my mom every time and say ‘he always has a look in his face like he wants to kill me’ and I would be like ‘I don't want to kill you.’ It was just that face.

Walker: How do you describe or how do you explain that look?

Jason: The look. Upset maybe. I had been upset sometimes at school. I didn't want to do anything.

Walker: What were you upset about?

Jason: I don't really know at the time. I was just being a boy really.

Jason shared further that for him learning in school was not an academic task, or at least not strictly an academic task. For him, it was connected to the acquisition of social and behavioral skills:

Jason: I think I did pretty good. Yes, I think I did pretty good for a little guy growing up in elementary and stuff. Because learning is the key and I think I did pretty good throughout my life learning and doing what I had to do.

Walker: So you mentioned earlier that a lot of your learning was about how to discipline yourself. Would you say that was a lot of your learning or no?

Jason: Discipline?

Walker: Yes you mentioned about this plan of sitting still and learning to read instead of playing and you talked about not going to in school suspension. I was just wondering, when you said learning, what type of learning you were talking about? [Did you mean] strictly the books and academics, or other things as well?
Jason: Like mistakes - getting in trouble and stuff like that. [I was] trying to set that goal to be good.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) said that his academic identity, as an average student, was influenced somewhat by desire and focus:

Jacob: To me, my ranking is more like more like a C and B student. I was more of a C and B student. I have the potential to get As but my head was somewhere else at times so I wasn't really getting straight As, but some.

Walker: So you said your head was somewhere else - where was it?

Jacob: I'd just think about girls, games - things like that.

Jacob described his mother’s response to this disposition. He shared that she recognized that he was not living up to his potential as a student:

She would say things if I was failing a test or failing a class and she knew that I could do it. She would just argue with me and say ‘what's going on in school, why are you not studying, I know you can do this, what are your distractions, what do I need to do put you on punishment.’ You know mother stuff.

Bishop (3.8 GPA) also shared that his mother was involved in the shaping his academic identity:

Bishop: My mom would be telling me that I was a smart kid and if I put my mind to it and focus I can make myself better as a person and student. So it was just time.

Walker: Would she tell you that often?

Bishop: She would tell me that often. It wouldn't be like an everyday thing but when it looked like I was struggling. I would go and talk to her and she would tell me ‘if you focus now and get more prepared you can have your social life but don't let it overcome your school life.’ It was more often when I went to go talk to her about stuff that she would give me motivation.

Josh (3.2 GPA), like Jacob and Bishop, shared that one of his academic influencers was his mother but also indicated various other persons, including teachers, counselors, and administrators, that played a significant role throughout his K-12 experience:

Mostly everybody told me that I have the whole package. As far as having the whole package you have to shine and show others that it's possible [to make it] - that it can be done. So I looked at that like if I do good then somebody who looks up to me would want to do good. So mostly what I do for others is try to make an impression that it (success) can be done.

Reggie (1.6 GPA), a special education student, told of how his concept of academic achievement was connected with his understanding of 'whiteness' and 'blackness,' as well as geographic location:
Reggie: Yeah just because I had been there (a suburban area) for a minute I turned low-key white?

Walker: Okay. By that you mean what?

Reggie: I mean preppy. I don't know, I was just more focused and down to work.

Walker: Did this change right away. You were there for how long?

Reggie: One year.

Walker: Then were did you go from there?

Reggie: I moved back to Jackson and then went to James Middle School.

Walker: Would you say that your behavior changed immediately?

Reggie: Yeah.

Walker: And how did it change?

Reggie: It changed because [when] I came back I would see all of my friends.

Walker: These are people that you went to elementary with?

Reggie: [Yes] I know I can be myself around them, instead of just preppy.

4.6.6 “It was just too difficult for me to focus on work and then my personal life.” – 

Greg (2.0 GPA): Academic Engagement – Students in the study indentified varying levels of academic engagement, which also sometimes fluctuated throughout their K-12 education. Some subjects enjoyed excelling academically while others connected more readily with extra-curricular or extra-school activities.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) indicated that from early on he connected to the schools’ system of rewards. He stated that the he “enjoyed excelling, you know, academically.” Sean (1.9 GPA) indicated a high level of engagement as well, but also recalled periods of disengagement:

Sean: I would say [that] I was a pretty good student - pretty decent. I just got bored easily. So you know once you get to that stage when you’re bored, you’re then not listening, and you’re doing other stuff. So that became a problem. You know teachers would come to me like ‘I’m going to need you to pay attention. I’m going to need you to do this.’ I would get irritated like ‘well I already did it’ and ‘what else is there for me to do.’

Sean related that his engagement varied somewhat based on the subject matter he was engaged in. It was particularly high when it came to the study of Mathematics:

I don't like it [science]. I don't like the content so I really wasn't a big fan of paying attention. I did the work. Don't get me wrong. I did the work, but it was just
something that went in and went out. It wasn't something that I really kept in and studied and I didn't want to do all the science fair stuff. It just wasn't me... I love math... Fifth grade when we would be in math class they would tell us to do something. I would get done and then I would be bored. Then I would just start throwing stuff at kids, and doing other stuff like taking out other books, looking at comic books, or going through my book bag. [Now] you know that was a distraction to the other kids. The teachers would always get on me like 'you gotta sit here and be quiet.' [I would be] like 'I don't want to sit here and be quiet' and 'I did the work. I want to move on let's do something else.' I had a whole lot of times like that from that grade on. That's just how it was. I would get done with the work, be bored and then maybe start trouble.

Similarly, Jason (2.0 GPA) conveyed varying levels of interest based upon the subject matter studied:

I don't like biology because biology is more of the study of science. I like more hands-on activities. I like chemistry [more so].

Greg (1.9 GPA) related that his engagement in school was impacted by a high level of transience – particularly during his elementary school years – which, in turn, affected his school performance and interest level in academics:

Greg: You know the going back and forth here and there it kind of impacted us going to school a little bit. It kind of threw us off. For me personally, it kind of threw me off. You know being in and out of foster care, and being sent back home with a different family member. It was kind of difficult to deal with that, and with school, at the same time.

Walker: And in what way was it difficult?

Greg: Trying to keep my grades up, and have good attendance and everything. Attendance wasn't really a big part. It was just my grades. Trying to keep my grades up [was difficult].

Walker: And what was the challenge with keeping your grades up, given the situation?

Greg: I would say [that] for me being in foster care was hard because you're not around your family like you want to be. You can't see your family like you want to. At that time my daughter was on her way to be born. I was actually dealing with that too. I didn't want to be in school. Sometimes I just didn't feel like doing work or I would come to school and just not go to class. So I just roamed the halls. You know there was just a lot on my mind and it was just too much for me to try to focus on work and then my personal life too. So that was just a difficult time for me.

Greg explained that for him there was a difference between liking school and being engaged in school, especially as mitigating circumstances became distractions:

Greg: I don't know. In elementary and middle school I was in school every day. It did not go as well in high school because the baby came about and I would come to school but I would leave. I would skip school more often. I really didn't want to go to class. But at the same time the teachers from Freedman, when I would skip or when
I wouldn't go to class, they would know about it. You know they didn't say much. It was weird because I still passed my classes.

Walker: Okay. As far as your interest in school, as a middle and elementary student - were you interested in school? Did you like school? I mean I know you said you were there.

Greg: For the most part I did like school. I liked school period. I think [that because of] what I was going through I didn't want to be there at that point and time (during high school), but other than that I did like school. I loved to be at school… Before we found out she was pregnant I was in school. I would go to class. After she went to the doctor and told me she was pregnant that kind of through me off and I really wasn't focused on school. I was to a certain extent, but then I really wasn't because I was focused on what I had to do, or what I would have to do, to focus on the baby. I knew that was going to be a big part of our lives. So school is more important, actually, but when it comes to being a parent you have that responsibility [as well].

Jacob (1.7 GPA) told about how as a young student in elementary school he was in trouble frequently – spending a lot time in ISS (in school suspension). Like Greg, he shared that he had a high level of affinity for school but a low level of academic engagement.

However, eventually, he related that his desire to participate in athletics increased his level of engagement:

Walker: So your first experiences with school don't seem positive for the most part?

Jacob: It wasn't all the way positive. It was somewhat positive because I got to meet new people, but in regards to tests - I did not like tests. Work wise, I would do the work, but tests were hard for some reason.

Walker: Now do you recall what your impression of you teacher was? Do you remember at all?

Jacob: My teacher was real nice but she wasn't that helpful. She was one of those teachers that, when you needed help, it would take her a while to get to you. But she would contact a parent to tell them that you were failing [quickly]. She would try to help sometimes, but we had a big classroom, so she wasn't really all that much of a help. But my mom, she helped me most of the time.

Walker: So what made you take advantage of the tutoring?

Jacob: I wanted to start playing sports, so I had to get serious and study.

Reggie (1.6 GPA), who attended school in both urban and suburban settings, shared that his engagement in school was higher in the suburbs than it was in the urban schools he attended and that it decreased as he matriculated towards secondary school:

Reggie: I did good, but all of a sudden when I got to high school I started doing terrible.

Walker: How do you explain that?
Reggie: It was just lack of focus - just lack of focus.

Walker: I know you talked about the middle school where it was predominantly white in Southtowne. You mentioned that that you were more focused there because it seemed like you were getting more immediate help. Do you think if you had that help throughout your schooling - when you went back [to your urban school] - that you would have been a different student?

Reggie: Yes. A little bit, but also it was just where I was (situated geographically). It was the location.

Walker: By location you mean what?

Reggie: More white people and people I just don't know, so I didn't want to be friends with them.

Reggie conveyed that he enjoyed school. Given this, it was notable that his grades were better in elementary school, Bs and Cs, than they were in high school, Ds and Fs. He talked about his ‘enjoyment’ throughout his K-12 school years and periods of change. He explained that his enjoyment changed as ‘school’ changed. Reggie offered several explanations for this:

Walker: It seems like your performance was better, as you described, in elementary [school], and then went down a little bit in middle school, and went down quite a bit [more] in high school. Did you enjoy school as much in middle school and high school as you did in elementary?

Reggie: In high school I enjoyed it because of my friends. I didn't really enjoy the work because it was getting harder.

Walker: How was your enjoyment different in high school than it was in elementary school or was it?

Reggie: In elementary we sat down on carpet and I used to think that was fun. You're in a group. In high school it started being more individual and the work was getting harder.

Walker: So how did you handle it if there were things in class that you didn't understand? How would you handle that? It might've been different throughout school [considering] in elementary and middle versus high school?

Reggie: In elementary school I would just ask a lot of questions of the teachers until I was right about it. In high school I didn't really care as much as long as the work was turned in... For real, I thought I didn't need school. It is not like turning in papers would get me paid. You just have to get a job. I didn't think you needed education as long as you had money. But you have to have an education to get money.

Walker: When did you come to that understanding?

Reggie: When I graduated.
Walker: You say that you now feel that you needed school. So at this point is your need for school greater or your need for money - in your mind?

Reggie: Money.

Walker: Okay. When you were in high school was your need for school greater or your need for money?

Reggie: Money.

Walker: Okay let's say in middle school - would you say your need for school was greater, at that point, or your need for money?

Reggie: School.

4.6.7 “Where are you from, why do you act like that, why are you so corny or why do you act white?” – Jacob (3.2 GPA): School Racializing Experiences – Most students communicated experiences in their K-12 school settings and beyond which either made them aware of race, heightened their awareness of race, or sensitized them to the functioning of race within their school settings. Issues arose from varied circumstances including conflict with school officials or other students, extra-curricular and extra-school activities, and school experiences.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) related an experience that occurred when he was in elementary school that he later recalled as one of his first experiences with racism:

I can recall a couple of occasions where I was almost reminded that I was black. Although I didn't understand the differences between people at that time because I was so young, reflecting on them now, I can see that in this particular situation [race] had a great impact on what was happening at the time... Everyone who was bused was pretty much African American, and the walkers, for the most part, were Caucasian students... On one particular occasion I remember bringing in this approval from my parents stating that I could go home with Greg (my white friend). The note said that I could walk home to his house Friday [after school] and spend the night. I recall being maybe two blocks away from the school and the principal of the school at the time, my bus driver, and the entire bus came turning down the street that we were on and told me that I had to get back on the bus to go home. It didn't make any sense to me then... I just know that the way that I felt, based upon my perception of that situation, was not a good feeling at all. And I felt like it had nothing to do with anything outside of the fact that I was this black kid in this all white neighborhood.

Indicating a racializing experience that occurred in an academic setting, Adrian shared an incident that happened while he was a college freshman attending a predominantly white institution:
I guess the first time I encountered anything that was based on perception [of race in the classroom] would have probably been college when a math instructor challenged me on an equation. He's writing on an overhead and I raised my hand to let him know that he miscalculated something and he would not look at what he was writing - he only looked at me and what I was saying. He combated what I was saying but he would not look at the actual problem. Then everyone else started seeing [it] and here I am one of maybe two black males in the class and I am in my first quarter. But I didn't back down because I knew that he made this miscalculation. And it could have been perceived that there was a racial tension here. This black kid [was] calling out this professor who has probably been on campus for a long time [and] calling him out in front of his class of 150 students.

Ricky (4.0 GPA), who was born in Europe, internalized what he described as a more eclectic and less polarized understanding of race. He did not recall ever having an experience demonstrating the affects of racism until he was a senior in high school:

I don't think I've ever really felt that way until maybe high school. I don't think it was until high school that I saw a true divide on how school systems are different - how living in one area of the city could affect you because our senior year I did an exchange... [During my exchange visit in a suburban high school I noticed that] there were not a lot of African American kids there (the suburban high school), probably like 2 or 3, and they kind of didn't fit your stereotype. But you'd see them and they would say 'hey what's up.' I don't think I saw that many of them - I mean probably three or four [and] that was it.

Ricky explained how this experienced affected his outlook:

I wasn't really aware of their being a barrier or any difference, but now I have a different outlook. I think a lot of it has to do with our economic makeup. Just because, depending on where the inner-city school or urban school was, it is comprised of mostly African Americans and that may also tie into what is going on economically around the school. [This includes] who lives in that area, and whose home school it is. So if it's predominately African Americans, then it kind of makes a statement... The school that we switched off with was Jamesburg [which was mostly white], and most of the people at that school may be in a better social standing than where I was coming from. So it's like an uncontrollable factor that African Americans get tied into.

Ricky also recalled taking note of the military recruitment process within his school as having potential racializing effects:

I don't think race was on the list, but at the end of the day, I feel like race can be taken into account but I don't think race was the original agenda. I just feel that some people probably got suckerized into it just because of the way that it was systematically put together. I don't think race had anything to do with it. I think most of the time race is just a plus, a coincidence, and not more so 'hey there's a whole bunch of African Americans here and they can be easily targeted and probably fall susceptible to whatever we have to say.' I don't think it's on the agenda but I just feel like it is a factor that gets tied in at the end of the day.
Craig (3.0 GPA) shared several experiences he had at a suburban like high school which he interpreted to be outright racist or harboring racial undertones. He related that these events, in part, were the reason he ended up transferring back to Freedman:

Craig: I really didn't like it. I mean the people were cool and the teachers but it just seemed kind of racist to me. It was different than what I was used to. It seemed like they gave more attention to other students than to me, so I just transferred back to what I was accustomed to I guess.

Walker: When you say they gave more attention to other students - what other students are you talking about?

Craig: Predominantly white students, and a lot of foreign students - like that school was basically mostly Caucasians and Muslim Africans and Asians. It was like a real diverse school in a sense.

Walker: So you didn't feel like you got the attention that you were used to getting?

Craig: No, not at all. Maybe it was just a different type of environment. I don't know exactly what it could've been, but I just performed better around people that were more like me I guess - people that I could more relate to.

Walker: So you mentioned that the environment may have even been racist - how did you come to that conclusion?

Craig: I would not say that it was racist to a super extent, but it would be the little stuff. If I didn't have an assignment in on time, compared to another student of a different race, they would get to turn it in late and it would be full credit or partial credit - but with me it would be partial credit or no credit. That was something that I recognized I guess.

Walker: So you recognized that there was a difference in how you were being treated?

Craig: Yeah - a difference in behavior or how teachers felt towards certain students I guess.

Walker: Do you have any specifics examples - do you recall any specifics?

Craig: I remember in my humanities class we had to have books for readings and if you didn't bring your book to class or if you didn't have your book that day, then it was supposed to be points deducted. I would bring mine in on Wednesday or Thursday and there would be points deducted, but another student would bring it in and there would not be points deducted.

Walker: And your perception was that this [difference in treatment] was based on of race?

Craig: Yes. That's what I thought - but I could be wrong.

Craig told of how these racializing experiences extended to extracurricular activities as well:

Craig: The other thing that I thought was somewhat racist was that there were some black girls at our school and we did not have a drill team. The black girls wanted to
try to start up a drill team. So they gathered up a few African-American females from around the school and asked the principal and the principal kept brushing it off. They kept asking and [when] football season came they asked her again and she told them ['No', because] it was ‘too urban’. So whatever ‘too urban’ may be - you tell me what ‘too urban’ may be?

I asked Craig whether his friends that were African American had similar experiences in suburban schools. He shared that some of his friends had adapted to the ‘white’ culture while others had not:

Craig: It just depends who it is I guess. I know some people that have adapted into predominantly white schools. A couple of my friends have moved from urban schools to suburban schools and they have adapted and [I have] others [that] don't like it. They want to come back. So there's a mixture of both.

Walker: So your friends that went to the suburban schools - do they seem different to you [after] having been in that environment?

Craig: Yeah, the way they talk and the way they acted a little bit. The way they dressed was a little different. Other than that, if I know the ‘real them,’ then it's just like ‘okay he's been around them (Caucasians) for whatever amount of time so he's going to adapt to it.’ Anywhere you move your going to adapt to some of the things which you are around.

Walker: Do you feel that personally [that] adapting to some of those things would be a betrayal of how you see yourself?

Craig: No. As long as you stay real to yourself and know who the ‘real’ you is. Don't forget where you came from and how you used to be. If we were friends in kindergarten but in ninth-grade you go to Wellsburg or Bloomington, and we've been cool, [then] don't try to act different. We could just not be friends. If you don't want to be cool, then we can [just] go our separate ways.

Jason (2.0 GPA) indicated that he felt that suburban schools were better than urban schools. He described the way in which he understood ‘urban’ versus ‘suburban’ based upon his own experiences:

Well, urban in my eyes is more towards African-American people or maybe even a mix [of people] but more African-American. Suburban is more whites. There it was more Asians and a lot of foreign students. It seemed like the students leaned more towards that direction (white) since we were in the minority at the school. I don't know, maybe 10% of the school, if that, was African-American.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) noted from his experience in a lottery school that students were often given the responsibility of helping each other rather than receiving direct teacher assistance. He told of how often times students, even other African American students, were opposed to helping him:
Jacob: Some black students acted like they were too good to help you. It just seemed like it was kind of a racist angle (view) [that they had] at times.

Walker: Because of how you looked people were less willing or likely to help you?

Jacob: Yes.

Walker: Even other African-American students?

Jacob: Yes.

Josh (3.2 GPA) told about how he was marginalized by other African American students after returning to an urban school from a suburban school:

Josh: I got less respect because they thought I was corny. They looked at me as different because they thought I was not from the hood.

Walker: How did they know that?

Josh: Because of the way I came off as a person. They thought I was corny or whatnot.

Walker: What types of things were said to you?

Josh: ‘Where are you from, why do you act like that, why are you so corny or why do you talk white?’ I didn't understand that. ‘Why do you dress like that?’ Everybody wore baggy clothes and I dressed [in] kind of my style and they didn't respect it - but I got involved at the school anyways. I was on the basketball team and the track team and I got known in the school.

Josh explained that he had observed, from his diverse school experiences, that white students tended to be more focused than black students – but not to the exclusion of all black students:

Josh: White individuals are more about their stuff - that's what I think. I enjoy being around them because I like to meet people that are on the same page as me. When I went to more urban schools it was just like people are there for the wrong thing, or they come to school for the wrong thing. That's not what I want. I want to make it somewhere. So if you are around more white individuals, or [around] black individuals that want to do stuff, it helps you out more than being around people that don't want anything – [people] that don't have a reason for going to school or come to school for the wrong reasons.

Walker: Were there black individuals at the urban schools that you went to that were ‘about being positive’ and similar to yourself, in your opinion?

Josh: Yeah. Well not really in middle school but when I got to high school [there were some]. In middle school there were very few, and if there were more I barely hung around them.
4.7 Testing Experiences in the World of Students Revealing Preparation, Interpretation and Response – Overarching Theme #3

In this section the K-12 overarching theme of testing practices and procedures is explored. Figure 1 demonstrates testing policies and practices as having the least amount of influence in regard to time of engagement. However, as the final institutional level in a students’ recursive progression through K-12 education – it exhibits the greatest amount of formalization, in terms of prescriptive processes, and the ‘highest stakes,’ in terms of specificity of outcomes and rigidity of consequences. The focus in this section is on the way in which testing requirements and results are communicated and interpreted by students with variable academic histories, social backgrounds and school experiences. Each student, within the course of interviews, demonstrated an understanding of the relative importance of testing outcomes. However, there was a varying degree of understanding, amongst subjects, regarding the significance of testing preparation and the interpretation of testing results. This section discloses students’ experiences with testing as a subset of the schooling experience within the context of their K-12 education. This research distinguishes testing, in part, from other school practices largely because of the emphasis which has been placed on high stakes and standardized tests by local, state and federal agencies, but also because, provided the focus of this study, testing is the chief measure and indicator of the achievement gap.

The data indicates that there are marked differences in the way in which students approach testing situations and respond to testing results. This section is distinguished from those preceding it in that it has a singular focus, testing, but is similar in that subject interviews revealed a broad array of influences. Data presented shows students preparing for, participating in, and making sense of testing scenarios in variable ways. They also experienced disparate outcomes. The section is organized around five sub-themes, which were rendered salient as revealed by student responses, and which inform the broader context of testing practices as an overarching theme. As in the previous two sections,
students are assumed ‘legitimate’ as sources of information and ruling practices, arising from testing policies and procedures, operate as ‘shaping’ forces in the lives of subjects.

4.7.1 “I probably didn’t study thirty minutes [a day].” – Reggie (1.6 GPA): Studying Practices – Students at each achievement level discussed their studying practices as it related to school and testing. Studying practices varied from little to no studying, on the one hand, and strategic studying, on the other. Responses indicated diverse experiences regarding studying practices. Some subjects indicated direct efforts on the part of teachers and tutors in the facilitation of testing practices and some developed studying practices individually. Others, admittedly, did not study at all.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) discussed his experiences with studying for the ACT test as a high school student. He described a growing understanding of studying as he engaged in multiple administrations of the test:

So as a junior I took it. I didn't study a day for it. I just went in blind one morning and took the exam… [The second time] I did not study, but I was prepared for the way the test was operating. I knew what to expect when I got there… based off the first time. So I knew that I needed to spend more time here on ‘this section’ versus ‘that section,’ and pace myself at a better rate. You know the first time I was a little nervous, but the second time I went in and took the exam, I didn't study a day for it, and I got a 25 on those results. So I remember that the math, I got a 29 in that section, so I felt like that was close to 30. For whatever reason, I did not study. This is indicative of how I did my first quarter in college. I didn't study. I just felt I could get it, and that wasn't the case, so I had to reevaluate my entire life. Going through my first quarter [in college] I didn't study and I got a 2 point something, but I had to keep a certain GPA for scholarship purposes. So I got back on ‘the grind’ and had to do better. But getting back to the ACT - that third time [I took the test] I knew it was my senior year and I was like 'I'm not taking this again, this is it.' I remember challenging a couple of friends of mine. I bet one friend 20 dollars that he wouldn’t get [a score] better than [the score I got] the first time I took the exam.

Craig (3.0 GPA) also described his experiences taking the test multiple times:

I had a 17. I took it three times. First I had an 11, and I don't like to make excuses but the ACT was over at 1:00 PM and I had a basketball game at 2:00 PM. This was my 10th grade year, 10th grade summer, so I wasn't thinking anything about it and I didn't take it serious. And then junior year right after football season I took it and had a 14. I don't know, something about that test was a little challenging or different. Then I got this 17. So I did do better as I went. I got into all the colleges that I was looking at so I guessed that [my score] was fine. When they (my current college) offered me money [I decided] I was going and I stick with it [my score and not test again].
Sean (1.9 GPA) shared that he only took the ACT twice but, unlike Adrian, did not prepare either time. He told of how he was unprepared and lacked focus when he first took the test his junior year and then had less time to prepare as a senior:

I just took it. No preparation. Given the [limited] time I didn't prepare for it. I wasn't fully aware of what was going on. I was sleepy. It was just everyone was saying that it was something that needed to be done. So seeing how it was something that 'needed to be done' I was just like 'alright I'm going to take it.' I was not really caring - again now I'm a junior so I was like 'whatever' because I have time to take it next year. And then the time was passing - it was like 'I'm a senior now.'

Some students shared about studying practices in relation to class work. Greg (1.9 GPA) shared that he did not spend much time at home working on school work:

Walker: So describe for me, and this can be throughout your [school] experience (elementary, middle, high), what your routine was in terms of outside of school. Did you spend a lot of time at home, you know, working on school work?

Greg: Outside of school I worked a lot. In high school I did. In elementary, when I wasn't in school - I'd say elementary and middle school - when I wasn't in school, [when I was] on a break or you know or after school - I would spend time with family. I would go out of town with my family - you know family time. In high school, I would work or spend time with the baby.

Similarly, Reggie (1.6 GPA) indicated that he studied little, if any, throughout his K-12 schooling experience. He described his habits after arriving home from school:

Walker: How much time would you say that you spent outside of school actually working on school related projects or homework, on a daily basis? An hour or less – or was it more?

Reggie: I probably didn't study 30 minutes.

Walker: Describe for me a typical day when you got home from school?

Reggie: I probably put my stuff away, then ate and played a game. And in the late, late night I'd probably do some more work.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) described how his mother played an active role in getting him to study as an elementary school student:

Jacob: I was one of the kids who were playful and didn't really want to learn. I was just trying to play. So for me to study was really kind of hard because I couldn't focus really good sometimes. My mom, she would have to make me stay in my room and study. When I took my first test it was like I would know it, but when it was time to take the test and [when] I read the question it would be different or seem different from what I had studied, or what they had taught us. So it was hard for me. So then it would be as if I lost all the information in my head. I would take the test and the scores would not come out how I wanted them to.
Walker: So how would you describe the experience? Was it positive or was it stressful?

Jacob: It was somewhat stressful but positive at the same time because it gave me a better 'look on life.' I had to study. I had to sit down and learn how to study.

Walker: As a kindergartner?

Jacob: No - as a kindergartner I was thinking 'I hate school.'

Jacob shared how, despite his mother’s emphasis on studying, he resisted the process. He talked about how tutors helped him to ameliorate his antagonistic disposition:

Jacob: Not all testing experiences were bad - most of them were all right. It was just after a while I would have to study and I would [have to] keep going back to it (the study materials). It was just that the studying part was hard - and I didn’t want to study. I did not want to take the time out of my day. So the testing was hard at times.

Walker: So what was the issue with not wanting to study?

Jacob: Just taking the time out.

Walker: Did anyone ever work with you on how to study?

Jacob: Yeah, I had a tutor from sixth grade to seventh grade and I had a tutor from sophomore year to freshman year.

Walker: Now was this someone that your mom connected you with or was this through the school?

Jacob: Through the school.

Walker: And was that helpful?

Jacob: Very helpful.

Walker: And what type of things did they talk to you about?

Jacob: They just basically talked to me showing me a way that they studied and they said that I didn’t have to follow it, but they gave me a couple of examples. Then they told me I could make up my own way to study. For some people they can study by just reading it and just know it, but for people like me I have to read it, and read it, and read it to understand it and get it. My mom can write it down a couple of times and give herself a pop quiz - that's how she studies. She writes questions and answers down for herself.

Further, Jacob, who attended both a lottery high school and an urban high school, described how the studying practices of students in each of those settings differed:

Jacob: At Johnson (lottery school), when he came to work everybody worked together, but like outside of school or at lunch, when it came to walking in the hallways - races stick together. There were some cases when people did hang with each other [races] but in most cases people stayed to their own race.
Walker: Okay – out of school did work people work together though?

Jacob: Yes.

Walker: Was this something that teachers stressed or that students just did?

Jacob: Students just did [it].

Walker: Did you have people that you studied with?

Jacob: Yes.

Walker: When you came to Freedman, did you have people that you studied with?

Jacob: No. It was just me and maybe like a teacher - no students.

Walker: Do you think it was helpful to you to be able to study with other students?

Jacob: In some cases yes and [in others] no. It depended on who you're studying with because some people would study for 5 minutes and then say like 'okay I'm bored let's go' and then others would just say 'no let's sit down and keep doing this for a couple hours.'

Bishop (3.9 GPA) shared how a negative experience with testing results caused him to adjust his studying habits:

I was just like 'I have a test tomorrow. What do I do?' and I was nervous. I just forgot stuff. But from that I learned that I have to take a little time to study 'this' and study 'that' and don't think so much about the test that it makes you forget what the test is about. Focus on the test, but don't be overwhelmingly thinking about the test. That's how I learned about it. Especially going into a test like the proficiency test - the OGT, and [the] ACTs. I learned not to stress myself out about the test. Study a little bit and then do an activity to get your mind off of it so your brain won't be running through crazy things and thinking about the test all the time.

Bishop, a college student at a predominantly white research institution, shared that he felt relatively unprepared for college, although he was more proficient in math, because he lacked study skills. He described how he acquired additional skill sets for studying:

Bishop: In certain subjects I felt more prepared, but I'm really not taking the stuff that I took in [high] school. We had an African American studies class at Freedman, but I didn't take it. Psychology - I just didn't learn a lot of psychology there. [In] math I was well prepared because I was in AP calculus and that prepared me a lot. As far as being prepared for college, I didn't know how to study. I didn't know how to study and I had to learn that. The whole first semester I had to talk to my counselors about where to study and talk to my teachers about where to study. But now I understand how to study and I'm getting better.

Walker: So how do you study?

Bishop: When it's something that has to do with definitions out of a book I get note cards and study note cards and in Math I do practice problems. I do the homework
problems, but also pick out random problems from the book that will help you practice. [Studying for] African-American studies meant just going over the materials that we learned in class because our teacher would upload his notes that we went over in class on-line. So it would be easier. I just printed them out and went over it… Note cards are very helpful in college.

Walker: Did you ever use those in high school?

Bishop: At some point, but it wasn't all the time so I didn't think that note cards were a good way to study.

Bishop described his process of learning to study through his first semester in college as a process of self-discovery:

Bishop: I started to study more with somebody who was in my class. I met this other classmate and she had took this class last year so she was able to help me. And then I met this one dude who is actually a psychology major. I ended up going to ask for help and I got tutors. But if it was at a time when we didn't have tutors I would study by myself. I like studying with music and with my headphones on. I either stayed in my dorm or I went to the library. I can't be in a loud setting to study. It's just not going to work for me.

Walker: Did you just learn that? Is that something that you knew about yourself, or is that something that you learned in college?

Bishop: I actually thought I would be able to study in a louder environment because I'm a person who likes to talk and hang around people. But when I got to college I went to the commons to study and there were a lot of people, and I would end up stopping and talking to them, so I was like 'I can't do this.' So I would go to the dorm room or go to the library. I have to be in a more closed environment.

Walker: So, getting to meet other people, do you think that some people that you've met have been more prepared or have stronger study skills, based off of their experience, than you? Did you have that sense from anyone?

Bishop: As far as people knowing more stuff than me, no. Freedman prepared me as well as the suburbs. I really don't think it's a big difference. It's just the stereotype that you came from a city school so they don't think you know as much as other people. I feel like I knew as much as everybody else. I was in a class full of sophomores and I had one of the top scores [as a freshman]. So Freedman prepared me - it was just the stereotype. It was more that people went to different schools (suburban schools) were able to adapt to college more than me because they had a graduating class of 400 people in their high school and I had a graduating class of 150. So it was more about me having to prepare myself [seeing] that I'm in a bigger school.

Walker: How about from a study skill standpoint?

Bishop: Study skills was probably the biggest difference because I studied in high school but I didn't really study in high school because, especially in math, I could just go over the material and be prepared for class. I didn't really have to [study]. I had to, but it wasn't to the point that I knew how to study. I studied at times, but there were people who were more prepared than I was [in college], as far as studying goes, because they would go, after class, right to the library and study. I would go to the dorm room after class and play videogames, and then study. So they were more
prepared in terms of knowing what they had to do [to study], but that all changed after a couple of weeks. You can adjust real quickly. It all depends on the person that you are.

In addition to acquiring studying strategies and learning his study preferences, Bishop shared how he became aware of the benefits of group studying. He talked about how this awareness evolved:

Walker: How did you get involved in that study group?

Bishop: We had a list of e-mails for the class so I ended up e-mailing and sending out a joint message, a joint e-mail, and asked who wanted to start a study group. I got a few responses so we ended up starting a study group. It really helped for the final because when I went to take the test I knew the test inside out because of the study group. I didn't use the study group my first semester in college but, after someone told me it was the best way, or another way [to study] I tried it out. So I tried it out. I plan on using study group for the rest of my college career.

Like Bishop, Ricky (4.0 GPA) said that he did not feel as prepared for college as he thought he otherwise might have been. He talked about needing more practice with study skills:

I don't think I was prepared. I don't know. Studying is a basic tool that we should all have but I feel like depending on where you come from that could be your major handicap. You could have flown through high school and that could have been because the curriculum was easy, but maybe it was because you weren't tested as hard as someone somewhere else. So I feel like, I don't want to say that I 'skated' through high school, but it wasn't hard. I got challenged. I'm not going to say that I've never was challenged, but I definitely could have been challenged more than I was.

A couple of students discussed their studying practices in relationship to graduation tests. Jason (2.0 GPA) talked about struggling to pass the graduation test as a senior. He shared that he received assistance from a tutor to aid in his preparation for the test. Ultimately, as a special education student, after meeting the state testing requirement for test participation he was exempted from the test. However, he does not convey this understanding:

Jason: The OGT. I'm not going to even lie - the proficiency test - I had to take that four [or] five times, over and over.

Walker: This was in high school or middle school?

Jason: Middle school - when I was going to Milestone (middle school). I was always getting low scores because I wasn't participating or studying. Stuff like that.

Walker: So how were you prepared for those test? How did the school prepare you? Or was there preparation?
Jason: I got tutoring.

Walker: Was that everybody?

Jason: No, not everybody but there were some people [there]. During tutoring for the OGT and proficiency test it (the pressure) was a lot. I was like 'what, I don't get this' and they were like 'here is the study guide.'

Walker: So as far as your high school graduation test, did you pass all of those the first time that you took them?

Jason: The second time. The first time no - not at all. At the time, sophomore year, I didn't really pay attention at the time and that's why I had failed the first time, but the second time I had to pass. The second time I had to pass because there was negative stuff coming home. When you're growing up you realize a lot. You want to graduate and you have to pass that [test] to graduate. There is no way out [of school] without [passing] that.

Walker: So you passed those (the OGTs) the second time you took them?

Jason: Yeah.

On the other hand, Josh (3.2 GPA) described utilizing different approaches to studying. His approach depended on the tasks that he was engaged in:

Josh: I never had to take the tests seriously. In middle school and elementary school you didn't have to study. It was just something that you had to know.

Walker: Did you study at all in middle school?

Josh: No. I can't remember studying in middle school or elementary school, but in high school - yes.

Walker: How often would you say you studied in high school?

Josh: Before tests. They [would] tell us 'okay you're going to have a test on such and such day' as the test was coming up. So you prepare yourself like the week before, and especially the night before.

In regard to the graduation test that he was required to take, Josh described a higher level of preparation and engagement with studying:

Study, study and study – I almost studied to where my brain stopped working. I studied so much for the OGT because that's what they told me I needed to graduate. So I knew I had to get the job done.

He shared that he had not prepared for the ACT:

Josh: The ACT- like you don't need to study for that. It is just something that you need to know. It's just something that you have to get done in the classroom, or just know. I feel the ACT is something that you have to just know. Like [you have to know] how to do math and read and all that type of stuff. I don't think that you can study for tests like that and know what's going to be on there (the tests).
Walker: And where did you gather this opinion from?

Josh: When I first took the test. Because I knew that I didn't really know anything on there. I was just saying 'now I need help on this.' So I would tell my teacher what type of question was on the ACT and he was like 'I wouldn't think that they would put that in there,' because I wasn't learning that in his class. Then he would help me out a little bit and I would do better. I took it again and I did better. So I figured I know I can do it better the next time.

Walker: So your teachers prepared you for some of the concepts that you had not come across yet. Do you recall any specific situations like that with Math or Science or English?

Josh: I needed help on Math. I'm not a big math person. I really needed math help. That was my biggest problem – the Math section.

Walker: And what type of help did you receive?

Josh: I went to [my] teacher and asked 'can you help me out with this' or 'can you show me this.'

Walker: Do you think that helped you to perform better on the tests that you took after [receiving] that [help]?

Josh: Yes. Definitely [it did].

4.7.2 “It was kind of a ‘what should I conquer next kind of thing?’” – Ricky (4.0 GPA):

Testing Posture – Students in the study discussed different attitudes and dispositions toward testing. Some students displayed a high level of confidence when it came to approaching assessment tasks while others were despondent. Students explained their postures in a variety of ways, which ranged from past successes and mastery experiences to academic failure and apathy.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) described his response to the message communicated by school officials that students who did not pass the proficiency test would not be able to graduate:

Adrian: It was said that if you didn't pass the proficiency test you wouldn't graduate.

Walker: What was your response to that as an 8th grade student?

Adrian: My response to that - I didn't think it applied to me honestly. I knew I was going to graduate and I was just like this is just one more test that I have to take.

Adrian shared his attitude as it related to the test:

It was kind of a ‘what should I conquer next kind of thing?’ That was the mentality that I had so it was like ‘ok this 8th grade proficiency test is the next thing.’
Further, Adrian told about how his dissatisfaction with his ACT results led him to continue studying and retaking the test:

I got my results and it was a 21. But I mean I wasn't satisfied. I was like ‘what is the best that I can get on this exam’ and I know someone who got a 30 who was in my AP Calculus class. He was a senior my junior year and I was one of 3 juniors taking AP Calculus. I kind of felt like there wasn't much to do afterwards [in high school after this class] except for look forward to college courses. so I felt like I had to do better. I knew that he got a 30 and I was like I have to go back and take it again.

Another high achieving student, Ricky (4.0 GPA), showcased confidence similar to Adrian as he reflected on his elementary school testing experiences. He stated, “I don't remember really taking any tests. If I did I passed them all.” His comments pertaining to the OGT reflected a similar attitude:

Ricky: I don't know. You know I still kind of ask myself like, you know, ‘how did some people fail it?” I know somebody that didn't pass it forever?

Walker: You didn't feel that it was difficult?

Ricky: Not really. I mean it was challenging. It was challenging, yeah, but just because it's challenging doesn't mean that it's not hard, or that it is hard. I mean I didn't expect it to be a ‘cake walk’ so it was cool.

Sean’s (1.9 GPA) posture towards testing was in stark contrast to that of Adrian and Ricky. He described a testing situation that he found himself in as he transitioned from elementary school to middle school:

I believe we had to take a test for us to transfer from elementary to middle school. Let me say I am a terrible test taker, or I used to be. I'll say that. I'll see stuff and it will go blurry and I remember in the fifth grade when we had to take that test. It was the reading part, and you had to answer the questions. I remember they said we had so much time left and I was still like on the first story. I'm like ‘what, we got what, how much time left.’ So then I got to the point where I just wanted to fill stuff in.

Regarding his experiences with taking the high school graduation test, he shared how the experience brought about anxiety:

Sean: I passed all of them except for the Science [portion], so that was hard on me. That was hard on me.

Walker: Why was it hard on you?

Sean: I went through that stage, I guess, when I would be scared and would look at words and I would take them the wrong way. So after going through tutoring and paying attention more, I was like ‘oh I got this, I got this’… I was a little shaky with the Science [test] but I thought I was going to pass it. So when I didn't that that kind of hurt me. Again it was more tutoring. I became a freshman and I took the test again and I passed it… It was frightening. It was frightening. They told us that this test
was going to make us or break us. If we didn't pass this test we weren't graduating high school. It put the fear in cause' we were scared. I just remember sitting there in that room and them talking about it.

Walker: Who was talking about it?

Sean: The teachers - it was the teachers. You know then they start being lenient saying like 'well you should be prepared for this. All your schooling up to now should come forth on the test and you should be able to at least maneuver your way through it' and I'm like 'ok.'

Walker: So that conversation changed at some point?

Sean: Yeah, yeah.

Walker: Why do you think it changed? Do you know why?

Sean: I think they wanted to get our attention first, so they had to like bring it on hard and then once they got our attention we quieted down. We were looking like 'we can't graduate? What?' Then they start breaking it down like 'well you know everything that you did up to now is a going to be on the test. There are maybe going to be a couple of things that we haven't went over yet but the majority of it is going to be on things we have gone over so you just got to focus and remember everything. You should be able to work through it though.'

Sean conveyed that his personal difficulty with the ACT exceeded that of his challenge with the graduation test:

Sean: The ACT was like the hardest test I ever took in my life. I literally felt like I didn't know anything on there...Anything. Like from the moment I opened the book and started reading and the questions that were asked I was just like 'what is this foreign language?'

Walker: So the vocabulary wasn't familiar to you?

Sean: Nope - not at all.

Greg (1.9 GPA), similar to Sean's experience with the ACT, described having challenges with the OGT emerging from a lack of content mastery:

I think it was a little challenging. I think it was a challenging test for me. I think reading the passage, and not really understanding what it was saying, was just challenging for me.

In addition, Greg said that he had never taken the ACT:

Walker: I know we talked a little bit about the OGT test. Did you take the ACT test in high school?

Greg: I actually didn't. That was about the only thing I didn't do was take the ACT test in high school.
Greg related that, as a post non-graduate, the impact of not passing the graduation test had multiple ripple effects:

I would say me not passing (the OGT) on time [was difficult]. I was wanting to go to college to be a nurse. I think it has held me back just a little bit. I just really want to get it out the way because a lot of jobs now want a high school diploma, which I won't have until I pass the Science part of the test. So other than that I would just keep trying and keep striving towards that, and making sure that I do pass the test.

Craig (3.0 GPA) shared his experience with a fourth grade standardized test and the way that his teachers and parents helped him to work through the disappointment of not performing up to his own expectation:

Craig: The fourth-grade proficiency was the first major one. I just remember that I didn't pass the science, [in] fourth or sixth [grade], and I was a little down. In fourth-grade I didn't pass and I was a little down on myself and [also] in sixth grade I did not pass.

Walker: What subjects were you tested in?

Craig: Social Studies, Science, Math, Reading and Writing - just like the OGT. I really can't remember preparation for it. We had little writing assessments and some stuff like that but those were the major tests.

Walker: You said that you were down after you didn't pass the science test. What was your response? Did you talk to anyone?

Craig: I talked to my teachers and they helped me and told me 'it's okay. It's just an assessment. It won't make or break you.' But like all my friends, I was in advanced classes, so all my friends passed and they would get rewards for it. They would get a pizza party and I would have to be dismissed to another class. So that made me distraught a little bit and brought me down.

Walker: Did you talk to your parents about it?

Craig: I did talk to them about it and they asked me if I tried my best, and I did. They said 'well that's all you can really ask for.' In 10th grade [with] the OGTs I passed all five the first time - so I guess I progressed.

Jacob (1.7 GPA) related that his struggles with standardized tests centered on the presentation of content and exposure to the testing format:

Jacob: I did fairly well on standardized tests. There were some parts, when I took that test, I studied for that I knew, but then there were questions in there again that I had never seen before. Just the way they worded it (the question), it looked different. I couldn't really focus on it because I couldn't think of anything that resembled it. So it was kind of hard trying to pass it but I think I did good on that test… The SAT was like really hard. I didn't understand anything, and the ACT was very easy. It was a lot easier to understand. But with the SAT I felt like I didn't want to be there. I had to skip a couple of sections because the time limit wasn't long enough.

Walker: And how many times did you take each test?
Jacob: You are only permitted to take it (the ACT) once, but you get two chances to take it.

Walker: What do you mean you are only permitted to take it once?

Jacob: I was told when I was in high school that you could only take it once for free and then the second time you have to pay for it. I took it twice because my junior year I took it for free and in my senior year I took it again, also for free, because the junior year, they said, was a trial.

Unlike Greg, based upon his prior testing experiences, Josh (3.2 GPA) expressed that he had a great amount of confidence regarding a successful performance on the OGT:

I really didn't take it that serious because I was most likely going to pass them because I'm a good test taker. When I take tests I easily pass because I’m a good guesser but I also hold knowledge about a lot of things. But taking the OGT, I took that took very serious and I passed all of them the first time. I felt like that's what I needed to do.

Reggie (1.6 GPA), like Josh, also expressed not taking the test seriously but for different reasons:

Reggie: My first test I didn't take it seriously - it was kind of long and I just wanted to get it over with.

Walker: What grade were you in?

Reggie: I was like in elementary.

Walker: Do you remember how you did?

Reggie: I did pretty good even though I was just guessing.

Walker: How did you know that you did well?

Reggie: When she passed the papers back I saw it.

4.7.3 “Upset. I was hurt and upset kind of.” – Josh (3.0 GPA): Understanding Results – Many students, during interviews, discussed the way that they responded to test scores. Subjects’ interpretation and subsequent behavior in regards to results varied widely. Scores that for some students might be cause for jubilation were for others a source of frustration. Further, behavior in response to these results exhibited great disparity as well. However, in general, a similar interpretation and response, in regard to results, was exhibited by students with similar levels of achievement.
Adrian (4.0 GPA) described his reaction to receiving high test scores as a young student:

At the end of that grading period I remember it saying 'above level' and I took pride in seeing that.

In contrast to Adrian's specific recollection of an achievement level, Sean (1.9 GPA) could not remember the test scores he received on the ACT. However, he conveyed that they were not good:

Sean: Terrible. How did I do? It wasn't good I know that. Really it wasn't.

Walker: Well it was good enough to get into college.

Sean: By the third time - yeah.

Walker: Do you remember what your third score was?

Sean: I don't actually. I don't.

Greg (1.9 GPA) described his experience of frustration at having to continually retake a school test in elementary school and then jubilation when he was successful on it:

I think (the test) it was just for that class if I remember but I would never pass it. That was difficult you know and I had to keep taking it at different times throughout the year. This one time I finally passed it and the teacher looked at her roster. She called my name and she said that I scored high on it. She saw my name and she just looked and she congratulated me. I felt good after that, but to keep taking it over was just frustrating for me.

Greg shared that to his knowledge his family did not know about the testing difficulty he experienced until after he had passed – when he informed them:

Greg: No, actually I didn't. I think when I finally passed is when I said something to my family about it. Through the time that I didn't pass I didn't say anything. The teacher would talk to me to see what was going on.

Walker: So the teacher talked to them or did they know at all?

Greg: I don't think they knew at all.

Expressing hurt rather than frustration, Josh (3.2 GPA) described an experience during elementary school in which he performed poorly on a classroom test:

Josh: When she brought the paper to me she said I didn't do so well on this one and we would just have to work on it.

Walker: Were you embarrassed or how did you feel?

Josh: I'm not really sure if I was embarrassed. I don't think I was.
Walker: So how would you describe what your feeling was when she said that?

Josh: Upset. I was hurt and upset - kind of.

In regard to the graduation test that he took in high school, Craig (3.0 GPA) related how he was satisfied with passing and only had to take the test once:

I got a 400 and as long as I got over a 400 I was cool with that. I was perfectly fine with whatever score I had [that was passing]. I think my lowest score was Science -like a 407, and that was a relief. In fourth and sixth grade I didn't pass it and in 10th grade I passed it. I was like real, real glad about that. As soon as it happened I told my mom and dad that I passed all five parts of my OGT and they were real happy and said congratulations. We talked about it when I got home and I got a dinner. They took me out to eat just because they were happy for me and proud of me. [They wanted] to congratulate me.

Craig further discussed how he interpreted his results from college entrance exams. He shared that it qualified him to receive money for a college scholarship:

Walker: Did you take any college entrance exams - ACT or SAT?

Craig: ACT - I did.

Walker: How did you do?

Craig: I got a 17 but I had a 3.0 GPA so I guess that got me a scholarship.

Walker: What type of scholarship did you get?

Craig: I forget what it was called but basically they are paying for my tuition. All I had to pay for was room and board.

Unlike Craig, Jason (2.0 GPA) could not remember whether he had taken the ACT or SAT. His discussion about his performance was couched in terms of college admittance rather than a particular score. He was planning on attending community college:

Walker: Did you take any college entrance test in high school - ACT or SAT?

Jason: I took one.

Walker: How did you do?

Jason: I couldn't get into any good college. I got a good score but not to get into any university or anything.

Walker: Is that something that you wanted to do or see yourself pursuing - a university degree?

Jason: I really wanted to go to Weston University because I like the basketball team. I really wanted to go there but I really didn't score well so I guess I won't be seeing Weston.
Bishop (3.8 GPA) described how he struggled with math tests as an elementary student but used it as an opportunity to get focused:

My first testing experience that I can remember has to be first grade. I was completely nervous and I think it was a math test. I actually failed it… I was upset. I knew I didn't want to do that again so from that point I was like really paying attention in class. My mind frame was just everywhere sometimes, paying attention in class [one minute] and the next minute drawing, so I knew that I had to start paying better attention in class so I could do better. Gradually I started getting better and I ended up being real good at math. So it helped out in the long run.

Bishop shared that his scores on school tests were consistently high in both middle and high school. He described how he understood these results:

Bishop: Me getting good grades on tests didn't make me feel like I was more capable. The results that I got showed that I was able to learn the material. Being from a city school and passing that test, knowing that everyone else was taking that test as well, showed that I could compare to the other students outside (in the suburbs and in other cities). I didn't do much comparison with students inside the city. I was doing more comparison with me and students outside of the district, and especially the suburbs outside of the city, because we were not supposed to be as good as them. So when I got the results from the test I was like 'I can do what these other students can do even though I'm coming from the city.' It was more of a self-confidence thing.

Walker: Have you had some experiences where you didn't perform as well on tests, particularly as far as K-12, but it could be some college? How did you interpret those in terms of the conclusions that you drew from a performance that was not up to the level of your expectation?

Bishop: I have two (examples) of them. The AP tests in Bio and Government. I ended up getting 1s on them (on a scale of 1-5, where 3 is passing) and it wasn't what I expected. They were really challenging tasks, but I ended up getting 1s [which I was disappointed with]. I also ended up getting a 1 on my AP calculus test, the first year, but then doing it again the next year I practiced more and ended up getting a 3 on it. It (poor testing performances) didn't really put me down but it was more of 'okay next time when I go about doing this I can do better if I practice more and learn more about the subject.' The ACT was another one. I got a 21 and I expected to score higher on it, being that it was a college entrance exam. That 21 held me in the long run but I wish I could've got higher [score] because I go to college now and people tell me that they got a 28 on their ACT or a 30 on their ACT and I'm like 'wow, I got a 21'.

Walker: How does that make you feel?

Bishop: It doesn't make me feel like I am below them but I think of it as though maybe they were better test takers than I am. I can now work on test taking strategies - but at the same time I'm at this college just like they are. So I'm worthy enough and I'm as worthy as you (the students that scored higher) because we are both here doing the same thing.
4.7.4 “If there was anything that we hadn’t already covered then we would just cover it in class.” – Ricky (4.0 GPA): Addressing Testing Content – Subject participants shared that there were a variety of different methods utilized to prepare them for testing content.

Students all reported having some formal measure of school level preparation for graduation tests but support for other standardized tests, including the ACT, was diverse. Some students received direct instruction in school, while others utilized private tutoring or test prep materials purchased by parents. Some students prepared individually and a few did not prepare at all.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) shared that he received direct instruction regarding the testing content for the graduation test that he had to take:

We stopped that lesson to focus on another aspect of language because she (the teacher) knew [the importance]. She said if you get this then you'll do well in this section.

Ricky (4.0 GPA) described a similar experience with test preparation for graduation tests:

[Preparation was] not individual. It was just more as a class like 'hey we're going to be going over this much material. If there wasn't anything that we hadn't already covered then we would just cover it in class within x amount of time.' It wasn't anything to where it was a cheat sheet [or] where teachers knew exact questions. It was more so [preparation regarding] general knowledge [about subject matter] that they would expect us to have at that moment, or up to that time.

Ricky shared further though that he did not believe that the preparation had a great impact:

I don't think that there is anything that any teacher could have done in the time leading up to the test that would have affected us. It probably would have affected [students] a miniscule amount, but not a lot. It's not like they could have taught us all of that information in like x amount of months [leading up to the tests]. Some of it is just stuff you know.

Relating to the ACT, Ricky shared how his father gave him a practice test booklet to look at prior to taking the exam:

It gave me something to look at. It gave me something to play around with. Like I can't ask myself 'hey maybe they'll ask me about the revolution so what type of multiple choice questions could I ask myself.' I would have just 'dumb it down' to stuff I already knew. So knowing what I already had [when I took the test previously] I could look to the book and say 'hey I got a question that was similar to this so maybe I'll trust the book.' Other than that it's not like it was the Holy Grail or anything. It was just something to get practice questions for myself.

Greg (1.9 GPA) shared that, in regard to the Science part of the graduation test, he lacked sufficient conceptual knowledge:
If it was something dealing with an article I could always go back and read it, and get the answer, but if it was just a question out of nowhere, or if it was just a question that was dealing with science - just any part of science - and it’s really nowhere to be found, then that was a problem right there for me.

Unlike Greg, Bishop (3.8 GPA) conveyed that he passed the OGT the first time, and unlike Ricky, he talked about how the test preparation he received in school made a difference in regard to his performance:

I passed both of them the first time. I think that what really helped was that in the school system they really pushed hard on the OGT and the material that was taught in classes is what was going to be on the OGT. The curriculum in the school system really helps to get you prepared for the OGT test. I'm a test-taker, so when the test comes I'm able to remember stuff better. Some people are not. So me being a test person, a test-taker, in the curriculum they also taught us the other stuff that you do before you take a test - like eat a good breakfast.

Bishop talked about how his experience with the ACT was different than his experience with the graduation test:

Bishop: The ACT was sort of hard - especially the science part because it wasn't really stuff that we were learning in school. It was more like 'straight knowledge' and just knowing that it was a college entrance exam makes it three times worse than what it really is. Knowing that if I don't do well on this I won't be able to go to college.

Walker: So you said that it wasn't things which you had learned, it was 'straight knowledge' - what do you mean?

Bishop: It was 'straight knowledge.' The reading was more 'you read this passage, what sentence is best at this point, what would be a better way to say this sentence, what is a better word to use in this sentence, what is a word that matches this sentence' - you know stuff like that.

4.7.5 "I felt like I had never seen it before or as though they had not taught us this method of learning." – Jacob (1.7 GPA): Teaching Test-Taking Strategies – Some students in the study related that they employed the use of test taking strategies. These students differentiated the use of strategy from an understanding of testing content both in preparation for tests and in response to achievement results. Others conveyed little awareness of strategy in their approach to test taking but noted disparities between teacher-created test formats and the formats of standardized and high stakes achievement tests.

Adrian (4.0 GPA) related how his teacher took time out of classroom instruction to focus specifically on reading strategies for the graduation test:
Adrian: We would spend a little bit of time when class started to focus on reading comprehension. [The teacher would say] ‘So how do you know what you're reading for? Read the questions first so you know what answer your looking for.’

Walker: These were test taking strategies.

Adrian: Right, right - so stuff like that.

Walker: Was that helpful?

Adrian: For me, yeah. I think the reading comprehension was. I loved to read. I didn't think that I read fast but I think that I remember everything that I read. Because it (the test) was timed I think that strategy definitely helped me to say ‘ok this is what I'm reading for let me go find it.’ So it helped out. It helped out.

Ricky (4.0 GPA) shared how taking the ACT more than once and utilizing a study booklet that his father gave him helped him to be better prepared for how to approach the exam strategically:

I remembered the format, kind of how the exam was, and I was trying to understand in what ways it will ask me questions. Because I wasn't exposed to questions like that before [I took the test]. I took it once and I did ok so I already knew the stuff that I needed to work on. So I took the book and those are the things that I focused on this time. It's not like the same questions will come up, but I knew what I needed to work on. So I just worked on that a bit.

Sean (1.9 GPA) related how working with a tutor at his school helped him to hone a better strategy for taking the graduation test:

Sean: I talked to my parents about it. I mean I let them know that I didn't want to be one of those people waiting at the last minute pass it. I wanted to get it done. So they was like ‘ok so then we are going to find you some tutoring.’ The high school that I attended they had proficiency testing tutoring during the summer, so I went to that and took it (the test) the following year.

Walker: So you said you passed the next year. Was the tutoring helpful?

Sean: Very, very helpful.

Walker: How so?

Sean: The teachers breaking it down - like telling me how I should go about reading things. I don't have to read it all and take all of the time. I could to get key words. It was helpful. It was helpful for me. And then, I guess, [also] being in the atmosphere of just focusing on that one thing [helped].

Like Sean, Greg (1.9 GPA) shared how teachers were able to help him with his use of strategy for taking the graduation test:

Greg: [I had a difficult time with] trick questions. To me there would be two answers that could be the answer, and I wouldn't go with my instincts. I wouldn't go with my first instincts. I'd just choose the one that I thought and then the one that I didn't
choose would be the right answer. And that's what messes me. I don't always go with my first instinct. That's what messes me up.

Walker: Okay. And going with your first instinct, is that something that a teacher told you to do, or how did you decide?

Greg: Yeah, teachers have told us that – ‘if you feel it's your first instinct then you should go with that.’ And so I'd say about 90 percent of the time they are right when they say that.

Jacob (1.7 GPA), who attended a lottery high school and an urban high school, indicated that the teacher- created tests at the lottery school were formatted in a way that was more similar to the graduation test than the teacher- created tests at the urban school:

It was more like when we take tests (at Freedman) it was a test that the teacher made. It was easier because it was about stuff that we studied over the past weeks. But when we had a state test, the way they worded the questions I had never seen before, or I felt like I had never seen it before. [I felt] as though they had not taught us this method of learning - how to analyze this [type] question. That's how I felt. So I would get kind of nervous and start putting pressure on myself.

Walker: So the way that they worded the questions at Johnson was more like the way that it was worded on those [state] tests?

Jacob: Yeah.

Walker: And it wasn't that way at Freedman?

Jacob: No. I never felt that way at Freedman.

Walker: Do you think that was helpful, or how do you think that affected your performance in class?

Jacob: It affected it a lot because I wouldn't work as hard. I was discouraged from doing the work because I felt like if I do this I'm going to fail [the assignment or test] but if I don't do it I'm going to get a zero. It was very discouraging.

4.8 Summary: The Conceptualization of Institutional Levels as Overarching Themes within the Context of an Institutional Ethnography

This institutional ethnography has sought to explore how the network of associated events initiated by institutional ruling practices has shaped the educational experiences and outcomes of the African American males within this study. As referenced in Chapter 1, little research has focused on ‘capturing the voice’ of the African American male population in regards to school experiences and none, of which the author is aware, focuses on their K-12 high-stakes testing experiences. Their needs are not one dimensional, as prevailing
stereotypical messaging about the plight of African American males tends to communicate (hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2008). Scholars have articulated that “African American males are first seen as part of a group rather than as individuals” (Jackson & Moore, 2008). Strayhorn’s work suggests that “black males vary in terms of SES, academic achievement, and degree aspirations, which likely affect other outcomes” (Strayhorn, 2009). Within the present study, this ‘variation,’ as explained by the preceding analysis, arises from the interaction of diverse ruling practices at multiple institutional levels. These institutional levels, during analysis, emerged as overarching themes through the synthesis of sub-thematic patterns. Study sub-themes surfaced as participants’ interactions with ruling practices evinced repetitious similarities in students’ experiences. (see Figure 1)
Figure 1. Representation of Ruling Relations within K-12 Education as Overarching Themes

Social Influences
(Extra-school activities)
_Overarching Theme #1_

School Bureaucracy
(Administrative practice &
teacher pedagogy)
_Overarching Theme #2_

Testing Policies and
Practices
_Overarching Theme #3_
Chapter 5

5 Conclusion

5.1 Education Policy Research Must Operate in Fidelity to the Lived Experiences of Students

This dissertation assembled considerable evidence from different African American male students within the same age group (18-26) but with differing experiences regarding school and testing. Utilizing the standpoint of these students it was further explored how it happens that, after a legacy of education policy purporting to close the achievement gap, the academic outcomes of African American males continue to lag behind their white and Asian counterparts. Notwithstanding significant gradations of in-group academic success, as the education of individual African American males has been shaped by varied social and historical forces influencing school context and academic disposition, the phenomenon of black male underachievement remains prevalent.

The paradigmatic approach which was employed in this study asserts that there are reasonable grounds for the re-assessment of educational policy from the standpoint of African American males. These students find themselves situated at the center of a policy agenda purportedly seeking to close the achievement gap but yielding null results. Research has indicated that there is insufficient systemic support for African American males to achieve at the level articulated by policy aims in a ubiquitous manner. Further, provided the reality of students’ situations relative to the current capacity of education policy, it is doubtful that the group will achieve significant remediation. This issue has been articulated in this study by the author as an ‘expectation gap.’ Outcomes such as this are more than likely shared by other groups but the present research extends only to black males.

It has also been suggested that the ‘real’ educational needs of African American males have to a great degree been supplanted by a policy agenda which has, intentionally or unintentionally, elevated accountability over support and articulation over execution. This
research endeavor sought to answer the overarching question: **How do testing mandates triggered by NCLB, and tests administered before and after them within the scope of the K-12 schooling experience, affect the aspirations and activities of African American males, as revealed by their reflections about their school and testing experiences, and how is this phenomenon is complicated by SES, personal history and family dynamics.** This general question was further articulated in the form of three questions. Namely: 1) How do differential social influences mitigate the school and testing experiences of African American males? 2) How do African American males’ interaction with disparate school bureaucracy and practices impress academic and test performance? 3) How do testing experiences vary between African American males who attain high ratings on school tests, in particular high stakes and standardized tests, and those who do not? Each of these three questions is addressed in the following three sections.

As previously stated, this study was a qualitative study employed as an institutional ethnography. It was approached from a singular standpoint (the student perspective) articulating interaction on multiple institutional levels: 1) Social Influences 2) School Bureaucracy and 3) Testing Policies and Practices. During the analysis of data, these institutional levels surfaced as overarching themes. In Chapter 4 they were synthesized from sub-themes and utilized as mechanisms for organizing, characterizing, and analyzing interview data. The presentation of findings, organized by question in the sections that follow, demonstrates the presence and comingling of Social Influences, School Bureaucracy, and Testing Practices as salient within the research and details how each of these overarching themes was the foundation of this study.

5.2 Question 1: *How do differential social influences mitigate the school and testing experiences of African American males?*

**Social Influences: Asking for Help and Using Resources.** Students described varied perspectives on their understanding of seeking help. High academic achievers talked about receiving help at home and being encouraged to ask questions. These students described
how they were instructed by parents to ask questions until they understood the material that was taught. Even when students had well educated parents at home, if the level of content exceeded the knowledge base of parents, they were instructed to return to the teacher and ask questions. One student described how this process carried over to his academic posture as a college student. Such descriptions of being instructed to ‘relentlessly question’ were present in the depictions of most high and mid-level achieving students.

Not all students in the study demonstrated this propensity toward questioning. This might be explained by ‘cool pose,’ which sets forth a black standard of manhood, promoting values which are prevalent in media stereotypes and readily accessible for African American males, but not advantageous for attaining academic success. The high academic achievers in the study exhibited cultural pride and a strong sense of cultural identity but also related a ‘scholar pose’, achieved through questioning, which mitigated or exceeded ‘cool pose.’ Ultimately, for those students, ‘scholar pose’ became a master status which significantly shaped their school life (Macionis, 1998).

Students with high academic success in the study also reported being instructed to seek out and use resources. They did not see the need for help as an issue of individual or group pride. These students, based upon the direction and insistence of parents, guardians, or other influential persons, sought out extra help from teachers, tutors, counselors, and other support personnel at the school. This help assisted in their understanding, and ultimately, their attainment of academic success. Hence, the mantra, ‘get the help you need,’ became an implicit mode of operation for these high achievers.

Most students received instructions to seek out resources, but some, including high achievers, chose not to get help, or pursued and received only limited help. One plausible explanation for this might emanate from Stereotype Threat, which is conceptualized as a fear of confirming negative stereotypes that leads to depressed testing performance (Steele, 1995). Stereotype threat might be extended, in this case, to circumstances of academic disengagement in which detachment from needed resources is seen (subconsciously or consciously) as a disposition protecting the group from further disrepute. High achievers in
the study thought about support differently. Rather than avoiding help to protect the group, help was seen as an opportunity for individual advancement and increased understanding.

**Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Early Exposure to Academic Content and Competition.** Student descriptions of academic history indicated that early exposure to academic content and competition led to academic success in school. Most high and mid-level achieving students described instances where they learned content in a competitive manner. This occurred at home or early in the primary grades and deeply engaged them in the learning process. Student depictions revolved around game-like or incentivized scenarios that motivated their participation. As a result, these students talked about having the sense that when they confronted a difficult task they would be able to master it.

Students with high academic efficacy, with the confidence to stay engaged with new and difficult academic tasks until they had learned the prerequisite skills to successfully navigate them, developed a master status which informed their identity as ‘academic conquerors.’ They exhibited strong academic identities, developed from a history of past school successes, that enabled confidence as they confronted increasingly complex and/or unknown tasks. As such, the fear and anxiety associated with the academic posture of low achieving students, when approaching new tasks, was replaced by faith and confidence (with high achievers) that success would once again be achieved.

**Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Aspiration Formation.** Students in the study expressed varying levels of aspiration ranging from the non-specific to the specific, and from general interests with overarching goals to identifiable careers. Sources informing aspirations were diverse, and included parents, teachers and other school representatives. Media was also an influence. Descriptions indicated that, particularly for low achieving students, aspirations may be limited by misinformation and misunderstood career expectations.

Students’ rationale for career selections sometimes appeared to be misguided, demonstrating unexamined relations within their conceptual understandings. Specifically, one student explained that he did not want to be a doctor because of the business
responsibilities of private practice but was then unable to provide any details pertaining to operating a medical practice. Hence, a diminished acquisition of cultural capital might be seen as suppressing both aspiration level and academic achievement.

Students also told of how aspiration formation, emerging from passion and skill set, was mitigated by peers and exposure. Several students shared how different imagery associated with the value of an education as an investment, and the perceived nature of the ‘return on investment’ for education played a role in determining their academic trajectory. For low achieving students, education was seen as having little to no value or as being so remote in accessibility, provided the effort that would have to be expended to attain it, that it was rendered untenable.

**Social Influences: Interpretation of Group Identity.** Students offered diverse interpretations of group identity ranging from an acceptance of prevalent media stereotypes to an outright rejection of them. Depictions indicated that the way in which students constructed and connected their identity in relation to the group impacted their academic performances and successes. Students who were low academic achievers conveyed that when confronted with group stereotypes their motivation and drive to perform was depressed, while others told of increased motivation and drive under such circumstances. Academic high achievers shared that when confronted with stereotypes they were motivated to ‘prove people wrong’ (Moore et al, 2003).

The logic of lower achievers tended to convey that since they were African American males (minor premise) they would not perform well academically (conclusion). On the contrary, the students that were high achievers, including most mid-level achieving students, indicated that being an African American male (minor premise) would lead to increased efforts on their part to perform well academically. In each case, students’ logic demonstrated a hidden major premise in their reasoning. Low achievers conceptualized that ‘African American males do not perform well academically,’ while high and mid level achievers reflected the notion that ‘most African American males tend not to perform well academically.’ High and mid level achieving students demonstrated a drive to achieve in which ‘stereotype
threat’ became a ‘stereotype challenge.’ Their academic response was supported by an unstated major premise which made room for the possibility of their own academic success. In general, this approach demonstrated a flexible mindset versus a fixed understanding of intelligence (Dweck, 2006).

_Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Expectation of Acceptable School Performance._ Students within the study indicated that the expectation for acceptable school performance influenced academic success. Whether low or high, expectations generally came from home but in some cases also emanating from school officials. Whether communicated through modeling, discipline, or encouragement, it became clear to students what the acceptable standard for academic performance was in their home. Some students told of corporal punishment during elementary school, which later converted into ‘restrictions.’ Others conveyed experiences where encouragement was expressed from a parent or mentor. Additionally, some students indicated a combination of encouragement and punishment that was coupled with modeling.

Acceptable standards of performance, indicating ascribed status, ranged from ‘As and Bs’ to ‘Bs and Cs’ or ‘Cs with an occasional D.’ In general, students tended to maintain the level of expectation and, as such, the standard influenced and significantly shaped their academic life. For some it became a master status. Several students indicated, when confronted with discipline or restrictions, that they ‘had to change.’ However, results of the change for some students were shorter lived than for others. Results tended to be sustained or improved for those whom punishment became a consistent progressive reality throughout their academic life. One student indicated that his temporary academic adjustments emanated from a cycle of changing, just long enough to get ‘off restriction,’ only to resort to the same behavior again. This, according to the student, would lead to a similar parental response with no escalation.

_Social Influence & School Bureaucracy: Shaping the Academic Identity._ Most students described the presence or absence of male role models, positive and negative, as playing a significant role in shaping their academic identities. This influence was conveyed
through affirmation, challenge and accountability. Students at every level of achievement described how positive male influences aided in their academic progress throughout school.

One important aspect of the role repeated by several students was that these individuals made them believe that they could achieve more than what they previously thought they could. This caused them to extend beyond their own pre-conceived limitations. Others described how challenge from parents or mentors to do and accomplish something ‘more’ than what the parent or mentor had previously achieved motivated them to stay focused academically. In regard to negative role models, one high achieving student reported that his father’s absence was probably a good thing because of the negative lifestyle he was involved in. He described his drive to succeed academically as a desire to be ‘completely different from him’. Another student, who was low achieving, shared that he wished his absent father would have been present despite his failings. His depiction focused on how the lack stability and accountability in his developmental experience, which he felt an active father would have addressed, diminished his ability to achieve positive outcomes as a young man. Specifically, he conveyed that he felt he would have performed better academically with greater support. A third student related that the only male models around him were negative influences, mainly gang bangers, and as such he had no choice but to become what he saw. This greatly depressed his academic drive and, subsequently, his academic achievement.

Student descriptions of their interaction with male role models depicted the shaping of what they understood to be their master status, which significantly informed their academic identity. Most saw themselves as needing to achieve a social position which exceeded that of their father or another male role model. This occurred either because this was the challenge set before them or because of a desire to achieve different results from what they perceived to be the negative outcomes emanating from that person’s life choices.

Conversely, a couple of lower achieving students told of being ‘victimized’ by the male role model’s absence or negatively influenced by their presence.

**Social Influences: The Desire to be Different.** High achieving students and some mid level achievers talked about a desire to be different from the group. Most readily, this
exceptionality was communicated to them by family members, especially parents, or by other
‘non-exceptional’ in-group members. Several students discussed how parents, grandparents,
or other significant adults had communicated to them that they were ‘special’ or in some way
‘destined for greatness.’ These students’ descriptions of themselves revealed a logic
suggesting that ‘most African American males are not academically successful’ (major
premise), ‘I am academically successful’ (minor premise), therefore, ‘I am an exception to
most African American males’ (conclusion).

Encouragement to achieve academically from non-exceptional in-group members
suggests an attitude achievement paradox, which reveals a discrepancy between beliefs and
behavior. One student noted how he had received academic encouragement from his uncle,
who had spent time in and out of prison, and from friends, who were themselves poor
academic performers. Such encouragers, like low achieving students in the study, exhibited
an understanding of what it might take to achieve academic success but lacked the desire
and efficacy to carry through with this behavior in their own personal lives. On the other
hand, high achieving students, who were encouraged to be exceptions, expressed a drive to
‘prove others wrong.’ In some cases, this was expressed as a desire to ‘prove their family
right.’ However, these approaches undermined solidarity as they tended to emphasize
individual achievement and advancement over group access and equity.

Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Aspiring to Change the Group Image. In
addition to displaying exceptionality, some high achievers demonstrated a propensity towards
heroism. Hero status was conceptualized by these students as an aspiration to change the
negative stereotypical images associated with African American males as a group. This
notion was communicated to these students by parents, teachers, and school administrators.
These individuals indicated to them that they were not only exceptions as African American
males, but also had a responsibility to lead and reach out to other African American males
who were not similarly situated. These conversations focused on how they must be leaders
and models for others that were coming behind them. This approach was reminiscent of the
talented 10th model espoused by WEB DuBois during the reconstruction and pre-civil rights eras.

However, it was discovered in this study that students striving to change the group image, while providing strategic direction to the group as leaders, also enabled group stereotypes. These students inadvertently contributed to societal blaming of the victim – non-achieving African American males – ‘proving’ that low performers must be doing something wrong since some have achieved success (Gillborn, 2005). Also, students conceptualizing themselves as heroes and leaders, when focused on changing the societal image outside of the context of addressing marginalizing processes, ran the risk of alienating other group members who possessed latent leadership potential but lacked sufficient support to realize it. As such, this made it more likely that disenfranchised group members would be mislabeled as subversive or further marginalized.

5.3 Question 2: How do African American males’ interaction with disparate school bureaucracy and practices impress academic and test performance?

School Bureaucracy: Appropriate Support Structure. Most students, especially those that had experienced differing school contexts and demographics, discussed the nature and level of support that they received from the schools that they attended. In particular, those students with little support available at home noted that, without appropriate support structures, schools decreased their academic engagement and success. Several students across achievement levels noted that learning was most impactful when questions were answered as instruction was taking place. Those having attended different school contexts depicted suburban and lottery school support as tending to rely more heavily on student interdependence as a mechanism for getting questions answered. Further, they (suburban and lottery contexts) were, in general, more structured and implicitly understood or self-guided environments. Urban schools, on the other hand, were described as teacher dependent environments which offered greater flexibility, explicit instructions and frequent reminders to students.
Students, regardless of school context, noted the importance of the inquiry process—namely, asking and receiving answers to questions—in learning and attaining school success. However, several students observed that when expectations of teacher supportive learning environments and relational interactions were met with classrooms norms which emphasized self-reliance and task-orientations, or vice versa, the results were complex. Some students adapted more readily to norms in suburban schools and one shared that he preferred them. However, this student had some difficulty interacting with peers when he returned to an urban school as it was frequently commented to him that he was ‘acting white.’ He told of how both his urban and sub-urban school experiences were valuable, but indicated that he felt students in the suburbs were more serious or ‘about their business.’ Most students who experienced both urban and suburban or lottery contexts preferred their urban experience, relating that they did not receive the type of support that they needed to be successful in other environments. In their suburban and lottery school experiences they talked about teachers who were disengaged and students who were reluctant to interact with them. Ironically—exhibiting an attitude achievement paradox—even high achieving students, who said that they preferred urban methods of instruction, admitted that suburban methods in some ways better prepared them for their college experiences. However, they shared that it was the support and instruction style prevalent in the urban environment that enabled them to achieve success throughout their K-12 years, and to some degree, in college as well. It was noted by several students that the urban environment supported their development of academic self-efficacy, which was expressed by students as the confidence their efforts would result is success.

**School Bureaucracy: School Alignment of Expectations.** Several students indicated that the academic expectations they experienced were different at varying levels of school. In particular, they observed changes from middle to high school. Both high and low achieving students indicated that different expectations at the high school level, in terms of support offered and expectations around completing work, led to decreased engagement and lower academic performance. One student indicated that he felt that the students who were more
successful in his high school came from the same middle school, sharing that it seemed like they had an ‘inside track.’ Another student indicated that the expectations for studying and collaboration were completely different at the lottery school he attended than they were at the urban middle school which he came from.

Student experiences with the discrepancy of ‘school level academic expectations’ points to ‘misalignment’ as, perhaps, an unintended consequence of open enrollment within large urban districts and substantiates the presence of differential cultural capital within schools operating in variable contexts. Student descriptions indicate that while certain types of knowledge are required in all school settings, cultural capital associated with ‘ways of knowing’ in schools is not static and equally validated in each context. Students within this study experienced this dissonance as they took advantage of open enrollment options within the district, and/or across districts as they migrated between urban and suburban settings.

Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Learning Focus. Students achieving at lower levels and some mid level achievers talked about their conception of school as an organization serving multiple purposes. For some students, school was as much a place for socialization as it was an institution of learning. Several students indicated that they enjoyed coming to school because it was a positive place and it served as a location to connect with friends. Other students shared that school was a place where they were able to learn appropriate behavior. Low achieving students, in particular, shared that the concept of ‘learning’ and being a ‘good student’ did not revolve around grades but around improvement in behavior and in the creation of sound relationships.

For these students, learning that focused primarily on academics, to the exclusion of behavioral and social elements, presupposed their needs for the latter. When these needs were not met by schools, they became places of social conflict, disenfranchising students and reproducing class structure. In such cases, students were unable, or limited in their ability to access the learning environment because they lacked the essential understanding which made learning in those settings possible.
Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Experiencing Mastery. Most students shared that experiences of academic success or ‘mastery experiences,’ where learning and understanding occur at a deep level, played an important role in school achievement. Students experiencing early mastery in school engaged in academic competition more readily and exhibited greater academic efficacy throughout school. Each high achieving student and some mid level achievers in the study shared early experiences of academic success that built their confidence and expanded their capacity for academic resilience.

These students related how during tough times in their academic careers they were able to persist because of the confidence they had gained from previous academic successes. Other students, those who had not experienced mastery, tended not to persevere when faced with difficult academic tasks. Instead of seeking to ‘prove people wrong’ these individuals espoused a viewpoint which acquiesced to prevailing stereotypes. One student told about how, under great pressure, his motivation tended to decrease and he preferred to ‘let them be right.’

Students with mastery experiences in the study, including high achievers and some mid level achievers, were also more likely to seek positive school and extra-school mentors. Several students indicated how they sought out positive role models at school and through media outlets, which displayed successful African American male images, in order to reinforce the positive academic and social behaviors that they were engaged in. One student noted how he emulated black male teachers in his high school, although he never had them as instructors, and utilized them as passive role models. Another shared how he leveraged the image of well known African American professionals, when confronted with negative stereotypes, as a way of establishing that they (the stereotypes) had already been ‘proven wrong’.

Students with mastery experiences also indicated having an increased sense of belonging at school. These students shared that they enjoyed school because it was a place of affirmation where they were acknowledged for their academic prowess and seen as significant because of it. The academic identity that these students developed revolved
around performance and efficacy, which increased their desire to excel and compete academically.

**Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: School as a Safe Place.** Not all students articulated feeling a sense of belonging at school because of mastery experiences. For some students school, in addition to being a learning center, was a safe place. Several students shared that school was the most, or one of the most stable environments in their lives. One student talked about feeling a pronounced sense of fear as he walked to school each day and then feeling secure once he arrived at school. Other students conveyed experiences in which they came to school and stayed out of trouble but did not perform academically.

Some students told about how schools provided stability during very tumultuous times in their lives, but admittedly, they did not engage academically. As a consequence of this dual functioning, the urban schools these students attended were, in general, less able to hold them accountable for academic work. One student shared how, when he was living in foster care and preparing for the birth of his daughter, it was all he could do to come to school, let alone engage in the schooling process.

**School Bureaucracy: School Associations.** Many students participating in the study shared about the importance of associates in school and academic life – albeit for different reasons. Students described how the nature of school relations led either to academic competition or cooperation. High achieving students tended to have associates who were academically inclined and discussions that centered on school work and performance. Although some high achievers described having two sets of friends, articulating a disposition which Prudence Carter describes as ‘cultural straddling,’ in their classes these students told of being highly competitive with other academically inclined associates.

School associations for low achieving students, including some mid level achievers, tended to revolve around social relationships or cooperation. Some students told of how their associations were established on the basis of solidarity, articulating a power struggle between students and teachers which emanated from some students’ needs for cultural validation (Bourdieu, 1974; MacCleod, 2009). One student described how he envied certain
classmates who were able to stand up to teachers that attempted to ‘disrespect’ them. This power dynamic, while socially satisfying for some students (articulating elements of ‘cool pose’), was academically disadvantageous. Specifically, it further entrenched them within a marginalized position as a ‘non-learner.’ Other students, who were lower achievers, told of students cooperating and helping each other in class, but the emphasis and nature of the relationships was directed more toward helping each other ‘make it through’ class than it was on mastering academic concepts. These students described an interdependence based upon ‘survival’ rather than ‘mastery.

School Bureaucracy: School Guidance Emphasis. High and low achieving students in the study noted different levels and types of guidance participation in their K-12 school life. Particularly in high school, high achieving students described a high level of guidance contact from counselors, teachers, and administrators. Their contact with these individuals centered on selecting course placements and establishing academic trajectories. However, students that were low achievers described very little contact with school officials for academic reasons. What contact these students did have with counselors tended to revolve around providing social support rather than academic advice, while administrative and teacher conversations were focused primarily on discipline.

Students that were high achievers told of how teachers and guidance counselors encouraged them to take more challenging courses in middle school that would enable them to access higher level courses, such as AP courses, in high school. One student even shared how teachers in his middle school suggested that he apply for a lottery middle school in the district because the content at his current school appeared to be ‘too easy for him.’ While schools’ provision of academic guidance was helpful for high achievers in expanding their academic capacity, it also promoted social conflict by facilitating a structure of inequality in regard to the academic experiences of lower achievers.

School Bureaucracy: Opportunities for Extra-Curricular Exposure. Some students in the study observed that certain schools, increasing academic engagement and achievement, created greater opportunities for exposure to extra-curricular activities. One student told of
an exchange program that he engaged in as a high school senior where he visited a school in the suburbs. While at this school he observed that, compared to the urban school he attended, students there had increased opportunity (both during and after school) by way of participation in extra-curricular activities. In his opinion, this was the greatest distinction between the schools. It created, in his opinion, a broader incentive for students to achieve academically in the suburban context. In line with this observation, several students shared that the relationship between academic performance and eligibility to play sports led to increased academic achievement during their athletic seasons. One student told of his experience in a lottery school where his greatest academic engagement and achievement in that context emerged from his participation in a school robotics club which had a grade eligibility requirement.

Students’ experiences in school demonstrated that cultural capital accrues not only in relationship to content knowledge but also as it relates to knowledge of cultural activities which students access through participation in extra-curricular opportunities. One student observed how early exposure to career pathways provided suburban students with a greater advantage (compared to their urban peers) because it enabled them to more appropriately position themselves academically. Further, students involved in extra-curricular activities tended to be higher academic achievers. However, extra-curricular offerings were expanded and, in general, more aligned with dominant culture expectations in suburban and lottery schools than in urban schools.

School Bureaucracy: School Influence on Student Self-Perception. Students in the study indicated that school had a significant impact on the formation of their academic identities. High achieving students who experienced early academic successes and those who received positive affirmations regarding their academic ability indicated a compounding effect on future results. These students experienced an ‘Achievement Threat,’ rather than a ‘Stereotype Threat,’ which caused them to ‘live up’ to prior results and the expectations of family, associates and school authorities.
Students attending schools in both urban and suburban contexts noted differential expectations, surrounding student achievement and behaviors, based upon educational environment. One student noted how his behavior and academic achievement changed when he attended school in a suburban setting and then changed again when he returned to an urban environment. He described his academic focus in the suburban environment as ‘acting white’ and his lack of focus, when he returned to his previous urban school, as ‘being himself.’ Another student told of how his suburban school would not allow African American young ladies to form a drill team for the school. It was described by a school official as being ‘too urban.’ However, demonstrating the presence of interest convergence, he noted that the majority of the skilled position players on the football team were African Americans males.

5.4 Question 3: How do testing experiences vary between African American males who attain high rating on school tests, in particular high stakes and standardized tests, and those who do not?

School Bureaucracy & Testing Practices: Test Preparation. Each student in the study told of having to take high stakes graduation tests and most took college entrance examinations – usually the ACT. However, students displayed varying understandings of how high performance on tests was achieved. Some students, including one high achiever, stated that they did not study for graduation tests or college entrance exams because they thought that they could ‘just get it.’ Essentially, they felt that their best efforts would be enough to achieve satisfactory results. Another high achieving student stated explicitly that the ACT was not the type of test that you could study for, although, ironically, he admitted to studying intensely for the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT).

Other high achieving students, driven by academic competition and high efficacy, did not prepare for the ACT the first time that they took it but took the test multiple times in an effort to achieve higher scores. Some did prepare, prior to subsequent test administrations, by leveraging teachers as tutors and utilizing test preparation books as study sources. In general, higher achieving students did not need to study for high stakes tests, such as the
OGT, although some did, while lower level achievers noted receiving structured support via school and district initiated programs. One high achieving student indicated, relating to the OGT, that 'you either know it or you don't.' Regarding college entrance exams, students in the study exhibited a lack of cultural capital. This was exemplified, in general, by high achievers’ limited understanding of how to take and prepare for tests, as well as mid and low level achieving students’ laissez-faire attitude toward test taking. This sentiment among high achievers was expressed by one student who proclaimed that the ACT was ‘straight knowledge,’ which indicated that there was little that could be done to prepare.

**Social Influences & Testing Practices: Priority of Studying.** Regarding school work and home work, students indicated various priorities for studying outside of the school context. High achievers, with almost no exception, conveyed that there was minimal need for them to study in high school because they were able to achieve excellent marks without doing so. One student, who was a high achiever, indicated that he studied only right before tests. Another high achieving student shared that he did most of his studying during the school day while in his classes.

Low achieving students also conveyed a consistent pattern of minimal or no studying. These students related that socializing with family and friends, as well as work responsibilities, consumed most of their after school hours. During the school day, academic engagement varied amongst mid level and low level achievers. However, even those low and mid level achieving students who demonstrated higher levels of engagement in the classroom indicated that they did not spend time studying at home.

Students attending suburban or lottery and urban schools, while articulating differences in instruction and school classroom practices, related that they did not exhibit different at home study behavior while in those contexts. For these students, cultural capital acquired at school did not translate into knowledge of dominant cultural practices which emanated from home life. Ultimately, several high achievers noted that their ‘need’ to study did not receive a higher priority until college, when academic performance began to lag, and thus, the necessity for studying became increasingly salient. Also, it was during the college
experience, as observed by several high achieving students, that the extra-school study practices of students from suburban and lottery schools, or other rigorous K-12 contexts, were made evident to them.

**Social Influences & School Bureaucracy: Knowing How to Study.** Students described diverse understandings of study tactics and strategies. Knowledge of how to study varied between high and low achieving students and across school contexts. Several students expressed the importance of understanding study strategies and personal preferences for studying. They told of explicit instruction from parents, tutors, and teachers regarding helpful ways to process and master information. Several high achieving students expressed that they never really learned how to study until they went to college. At that time, professors and student resource centers became advantageous. In some cases, parents purchased study materials and tutoring services for students in an attempt to support their learning and academic achievement.

Other students described how they leveraged one another’s mastery experiences to increase the collective capacity and understanding of the group. One high achieving student told of how he developed a study group in college where the emphasis within study sessions was placed on ‘mastering material’ over ‘helping each other.’ Students in the study group, with similar drives for academic success, understood the goal of the group to be ‘facilitating interdependent and not co-dependent learning.’ Several students indicated that explicit instruction in study skills was essential to them acquiring the necessary study habits to achieve academic success in college.

**School Bureaucracy & Testing Practices: Building Capacity to Address Testing Format.** A number of students in the study noted that familiarity with testing format increased testing performance. Students that experienced suburban or lottery schools and urban schools discussed how class work in suburban and lottery schools was, on balance, more aligned with the way in which questions were presented on high stakes and standardized tests. However, students did not necessarily see this as a good thing. One lower achieving student shared how he tended to struggle with the wording on high stakes tests and how this
often led him to disengage from the testing process. As such, he acknowledged his lack of understanding regarding these formats. However, he indicated that the practice of formatting class work in a manner similar to high stakes and standardized tests, which was common at the lottery school that he attended, was one of the things that caused him to struggle academically.

Other low and mid level achievers also indicated the need for practice with testing formats present in high stakes and standardized tests. They conveyed their challenge with the fact that the use of these formats in the facilitation of classroom instruction was, in general, less accessible to them. High achievers struggled less with testing format, relying predominantly on prior knowledge during testing scenarios. However, in regard to college exam formats, they made independent inquiries of teachers or utilized test prep booklets as models for testing preparation.

**Social Influences & Testing Practices: Emphasis and Awareness of Testing Scores.**

Most of the students in the study recounted receiving test score results from school officials pertaining to high stakes tests and standardized tests. Students across achievement levels placed a differential emphasis and demonstrated a diverse awareness of testing results. Students achieving high levels of academic success were more aware of scores as correlated with social status and their impact on access to opportunities, while lower achieving students tended not to recall scores. If they did recall them, these students placed less emphasis on the importance of scores, in connection with their academic or career trajectories, than their more high achieving peers.

Several high achieving students related the importance of scores. They conveyed how performance on tests tended to dominate their conversations with peers once they had received results. One high achieving student talked about how it was announced by school officials and discussed among his classmates that he and another student had received a perfect score on the math section of the graduation test that he took in the 8th grade. Later in his academic career, this same student discussed how his awareness of his test scores on the ACT, in comparison to other students, motivated him to continue to take the test even
after he had received a full tuition scholarship to college. Other high achievers related that their testing performances were a matter of pride. These students indicated that they ‘took it personal’ when they did not perform to the level of their expectation.

On the contrary, low achievers were either not aware of scores or only aware of them to the extent that they knew when they had not performed up to a minimal level of proficiency. These students were more reactive than high achievers, engaging in academics and test preparation in response to the threat of a severe consequence, but otherwise remaining relatively disengaged. This might be at least partially explained by the fact that, within the study, higher achievers tended to view scores flexibly, as a representation of preparation, versus viewing scores as concrete indicators of ability, which was the common disposition of lower achievers (Dweck, 2006).

5.5 Study Limitations and Constraints

As an institutional ethnography this study proposed to analyze some of the practices of K-12 institutions in response to NCLB efforts to close the achievement gap. This research represented the ‘voice of African American males’ from a singular standpoint within the context of the K-12 institution, and sought to disrupt the notion of African American males as a homogenous and non-differentiated amalgam. While purporting to accomplish this end, the research presented here is not without limitations which, if explored, might further the understandings thus far articulated.

Study limitations and constraints emerge from both the representative sample and methodological approach as employed in this work. The research explores a representative sample of African American male students graduating from the same high school in an urban district. While the group was differentiated by SES, family dynamics, academic achievement, and community experiences, the diversity represented within the sample does not fully capture the broad spectrum of educational experiences in which African American males are currently situated. Casting a wider net to include subjects, within a qualitative study similar to this one, that are at greater extremes of the spectrum in terms of SES, school setting, and
academic achievement, will provide further insight into the way in which study findings might be challenged, extended, and validated.

Further, another institutional ethnographer might choose to expand this research by including parents, teachers, administrators or other district officials as subjects of additional inquiry within a similar study. Such an approach might enable researchers to gain greater insight into the way in which the institutional structure of the school impacts and interconnects with multiple stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success of African American males. Further, analyzing the perceptions of these individuals may support or challenge current findings with the possibility of producing new findings that extend the research in a meaningful way.

5.6 Policy Recommendations

There are several recommendations, regarding the education of African American males, which might be made based upon the preceding analysis of research and presentation of findings. From a policy perspective, one of the great contradictions in our current system of education is that we assess performance on the basis of group status but remedies are fashioned according to the judicial interpretation that rights are conferred on the basis of the individual – such that rights are conferred to individuals and not groups. The employment of an institutional ethnography as a methodological approach within this study sought to provide a critical lens from which to assess the construction, interpretation and implementation of NCLB. This exposes the policy in the light of the lived experiences of students interacting with institutional practices. As such, this study serves as an agitation not only to policy formation but also policy execution. It addresses scholars, policy makers and practitioners, alike. Moreover, in light of the expanded historical and policy explorations articulated in Chapters 1 and 2, it is also acknowledged within this study that formal ‘educational policy,’ within the broader context of American society, does not stand alone as the progenitor of pervasive African American male underachievement. It must be coupled with a broader social agenda, addressing capitalistic exploitation, if meaningful and
sustainable remediation is to be achieved (Marable, 1983). Specifically, there must be a fiscal investment supported by a legal disposition that appropriately funds mandates which emerge from an effective policy structure. Without this, even the most promising institutional constructions and endeavors are rendered impotent.

As educational change agents, RTTT and the Blueprint hold some promise as strategies refocusing the efforts of educators on the processes and supports needed to address the educational needs of African American males – but certain aspects of policy, inclusive of graduation requirements, remain ambiguous. Hence, in many ways, NCLB testing mandates continue to hold sway. The following section articulates policy alternatives supported by study findings. They are presented as potential and promising solutions to the persistent marginalization of African American males, and address some of the shortcomings or ambiguities, as articulated in this research, of NCLB, RTTT and the Blueprint.

According to Johnson et al, “The negative consequences of high stakes tests and militarized schools seem to be reserved for children of a darker hue. To replace these misguided policies with racial equity and academic excellence we recommend the following: Eliminate Exit Exams… Refocus Our Priorities [on implementation and institutional support mechanisms]… Racial Equity Report Cards” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.25). These considerations, examined in the light of our current political and educational climate, exhibit varying degrees of practicality. For example, given the booming testing market, accompanied by the political presence of testing company lobbyists, it is unlikely that Exit Exams, adversely impacting African American males and other minorities, will be repealed in the near future. In addition, Racial Equity Report Cards, while having merit would be too politically polarizing, in all likelihood, to be actualized. However, refocusing reform efforts on the implementation of institutional supports would be a viable and valuable option to pursue in the present and foreseeable future. In general, building capacity in schools and districts by adopting ‘opportunity to learn standards,’ which articulate and create optimal conditions for learning, has proven successful for several industrialized nations outperforming the U.S. including: South Korea, Finland and Singapore (Schott Foundation, 2009; Boykin & Noguera,
Specifically, findings from the research suggest that providing African American male students with ‘mastery’ school experiences, as opposed to or in addition to traditional school letter grades, would prove helpful to increase student efficacy, engagement, competition and, ultimately, academic performance. Also, developing school structures, both during and after the school day, which allow for the direct instruction of study skills and structured study time to support classroom instruction and student learning would aid in addressing some of the academic challenges of African American males (Noguera, 2003).

Another policy recommendation emerging from study findings is for school districts to implement an on-going teacher professional development program. Researchers’ explain that “If we are to educate instead of incarcerate, our teachers will need ever more access to knowledge about how to meet higher expectations with a more diverse student body. This requires both ongoing improvements in teacher education and serious attention to the [current] teacher labor market” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.42). Hence, there is a need to further empower teachers, provided the current climate in urban districts and some suburban districts, with strategies to increase their capacity for educating (pedagogically and pragmatically) an unfamiliar population. In part, teacher education and “professional development could focus on cultural misunderstandings that arise from different styles of communication among the predominantly White educators in schools and their African American students” (Fenning et al, 2007, p.552). This is critical because there is a need for teachers in districts with diverse student populations to increase their understanding of minority group communicative norms, learning styles, and academic needs. This understanding aids teachers in avoiding unneeded escalations within the classroom.

Some conceive that professional development should be directed toward novice teachers but “professional development for veteran teachers can also improve student achievement. A recent study commissioned by the U.S. Education Department shows that progress for 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders was 20 percent higher in reading and 50 percent higher in math when teachers gave high ratings to professional training programs” (Johnson et al,
Hence, evidence suggests that quality on-going professional development would be positively correlated with a goal of reducing the marginalization of African American males.

In support of this finding is the fact that “recent studies have found that the difference in teacher quality may represent the single most important school resource differential between children of color and white children” (Johnson et al, p.40). Thus, teacher quality is demonstrated to be a critical factor in achieving equity. However, minority children often have a dearth of access to quality teachers. Johnson conveys that:

A Tennessee study found that elementary school students who were assigned to ineffective teachers for three years in a row scored nearly 50 percentile points lower on achievement tests than those assigned to highly effective teachers over the same period of time. Strikingly, in that study, minority students were about half as likely to be assigned to the most effective teachers and nearly twice as likely to be assigned to the least effective teachers. (Johnson et al, 2001, p.41)

Educators and educational policy makers seeking equity for African American males and other minority groups must demonstrate a fidelity to attracting, and retaining the most high quality teachers. This is especially needed in hard to staff urban schools where most minority children in the nation attend.

Research also supports the need for a policy of teacher diversity such that “a recent study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research has found that students of color and white students alike score higher on exams when they are taught by teachers who share their racial background… Teachers who share their students’ culture and life experience bring extra knowledge to the classroom about those students, which they can use to fashion teaching that works” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.22). This does not mean that white teachers cannot effectively instruct African American children. An African American middle class teacher may have similar or greater difficulty instructing low income African American children as a white middle class teacher. However, it does acknowledge the salience of culture in the classroom and its intersection with the social construct of race. Given this connection, it makes sense that, in general, African American teachers would tend to be more aware of the culture of most African American children and white teachers more aware
of the culture of most white children. As such, a policy for teacher diversity should demonstrate an understanding of this propensity without overstating its intended effects.

Thirdly, study findings indicate that a policy should be devised for the promotion, creation, and maintenance of small schools. Johnson et al note that “as a necessary prod to systemic change, organizing must take place at different levels of the public education system. Educators, parents, activists, and students across urban America are beginning to push three strategies: Reform existing schools… Create new schools… Declare a moratorium on large schools” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.48). Current schools should be assessed and analyzed to identify ways in which they might be restructured to create smaller communities (connection points within schools) and future schools should be built with the knowledge that student engagement is increased by limiting the scope of individuals for which administrators and teachers are responsible. This has proved effective, coupled with other strategies, in decreasing the marginalization of minority groups. Small schools meet the need for increased accountability and support for some students while advancing the achievement of all students.

Scholars observe that “small schools enhance academic achievement of youth, urban youth, youth of color, and poor youth, in particular… [However,] while small schools outperform large schools across contexts, it is equally true that ‘small’ is a necessary but not sufficient condition for educating all students to high standards” (Johnson et al, 2001, p.47). Hence, small schools, which provide students with a sense of community and increased individual attention, support, and accountability, can be a catalyst, coupled with other support mechanisms, to decrease marginalization and thereby assist African American males in attaining higher levels of success.

Another policy recommendation suggested by this study is to create and duplicate empowerment programs for African American males which focus on addressing academic identity and developing academically oriented school associations. Strayhorn supports this assertion noting that “research has shown that students’ achievement is strongly correlated with the educational histories and aspirations of their peers… To the extent that this is true, it
may be possible to ‘off set’ certain neighborhood effects by establishing ‘academic neighborhoods’ or learning communities that incite, if not instigate, the aspiration of Black men in urban and rural contexts” (Strayhorn, 2009, p.724). Thus, school leaders and policy makers should seek ways to create structures within schools that allow for the installation of such empowerment groups in order to create and cultivate attitudes of success for African American males.

Scholars note, “drawing from social-psychological frameworks such as Majors and Billson’s ‘cool pose’ analysis and from role model theories, two of the more common educational policy solutions have been (a) rites of passage and manhood programs and (b) all-male academies and classrooms” (Fultz et al, 2008, p.855). Research has indicated that “mentoring programs have proven to provide benefits to youth and are expanding rapidly in schools… The key to the effectiveness of the mentoring program is following best practices based upon monitored program implementation” (Wyatt, 2009, p.464). Hence, when programs geared at mentoring young African American males are properly initiated and sustained, effective results ensue.

For example, in a Chicago based group entitled Brotherhood, “grade data indicate that the GPAs of program participants are higher than nonparticipants, thereby supporting the benefits of membership as a strategy to support academic achievement” (Wyatt, 2009, p.467). Hence, evidence suggests that the utilization of such programs, taken to scale, will provide assistance to African American males in closing the achievement gap. Furthermore, “Federal reports, most recently a report by the U.S. Surgeon General, have found that it is possible to reduce youth violence through preventative programs that teach students alternative strategies for solving their problems” (Johnson et al, p.37). In this way, mentoring programs serve the dual purpose of both increasing academic achievement and curtailing disruptive behavior. Wyatt conveys:

There are six steps for implementing an action-based program like the Brotherhood: (a) Survey the student population for a need for themed counseling groups, (b) seek professional development in the area of the theme, (c) create a mission and purpose for the themed group, (d) create a creed or code of honor that represents the purpose for the themed group, (e) recruit students who can benefit from the themed group, and (f) collaborate
with students to identify the goals and objectives that include activities and events for the themed group. (Wyatt, 2009, p.469)

These indicators can serve as guideposts to those seeking to create policies to cultivate the development and maintenance of such programs within schools.

Finally, study findings suggest that policies should be developed which are aimed at increasing the capacity of the parents or guardians of African American males to effectively engage in and monitor the education of their children. Researchers observe:

[The fact] that teacher’s perception of parental involvement and student ability are more predictive of later achievement than parents’ actual involvement or a student’s actual ability is a clear sign that teachers have entirely too much control over the education of African American males. Therefore, policy and interventions must focus on making parents the most important factor in their sons’ education by increasing parents’ control of their children’s education. (Mandara, 2006, p.219)

Parents of African American males must be made aware of the ways in which they might influence educational policies and educational professionals for the benefit of their student(s), and the ways they can support the academic development of their sons at home.

Furthermore, as it relates to increasing parental capacity, the most successful African American males are able to embrace cultural heritage and academic success, as opposed to those who accept the false conception that embracing productive academic behaviors must equate to ‘acting white.’ In general, high achieving African American males in the study demonstrated the ability to see themselves as ‘citizens of the world’ first and African American second. As such, “public policy directed at … stressing to parents the need to monitor the negative messages that their children receive will help reduce this erroneous belief” (Mandara, 2006, p.219). Parents of African American male students do much to dismantle stereotypical views in the mind of educators and their children by reconciling a healthy concept of ‘blackness’ or ‘African-ness’ with academic success.

5.7 Implications for Further Study

Much work remains in the study of African American male students. Significantly, policies and programs developed to decrease the marginalized status of the group must be developed with an understanding of the politics of the organizations in which they will be
implemented. In this way, they should be both theoretically sound and pragmatically constructed. Furthermore, as suggested in the discussion of study limitations and constraints, policy makers should utilize and leverage the experiences of successful African American male students in the crafting and refinement of initiatives. As such, it is important for educational researchers and policy makers to understand that not all black males are doing poorly. Noguera notes that, “even if few in number, there are students who manage to maintain their identities and achieve academically without being ostracized by their peers. Understanding how such students navigate this difficult terrain may be the key to figuring out how to support the achievement of larger numbers of Black students” (Noguera, 2003, p.446). Identifying best practices to create and cultivate indicators of success, such as ‘opportunity to learn standards,’ and then implementing these findings within scalable policies and practices is critical to the goal of achieving equity for African American males. Such a goal begins with knowledge that may be acquired via institutional ethnographic interviews, which is proposed in this study, along with participant observations and continued quantitative analyses.

Researchers note that:

Efforts to improve the academic performance of African American males must begin by understanding the attitudes that influence how they perceive schooling and academic pursuits... Investigations into the academic orientation of Black male students must focus on the ways in which the subjective and objective dimensions of identity related to race and gender are constructed within schools and how these influence academic performance. (Noguera, 2003, p.441)

As set forth in this study, it is critical to the understanding of the African American male condition that the voices of both lower achieving and higher achieving African American males become salient within research and in the formation of policy. This knowledge, coupled with the understanding that “students can be unfairly victimized by the labeling and sorting processes that occur within school in addition to being harmed by the attitudes and behaviors they adopt in reaction to these processes” (Noguera, 2003, p.442), equips educators with the ability to infuse policies and practices into schooling which identify, cultivate and transfer resiliency.
5.8 Final Comments

The author endeavors to continue the use of institutional ethnography in the study of ruling practices emanating from the K-12 institution which impact the academic performances and trajectories of African American male students. This method of inquiry, as articulated by Smith and others, has enabled this study to first ‘capture’ and then ‘employ’ the voices of African American males as a tool for critiquing the construction and implementation of current policies and practices.

Institutional ethnography has been used by other researchers in the investigation of K-12 institutional practices which impact marginalized populations. Specifically, Andre-Bechely’s work, which was referenced throughout this study, employs institutional ethnography as a mechanism for exploring the nature and relationship of school choice programs on the choice practices of parents who were dissimilarly situated within an identical school district. This research took up a similar approach in that it was interested in the school and testing practices of African American male students who were situated (ultimately) within the same educational context, Freedman high school, but had diversity of experiences leading up to that point. Further, it was concerned with the way in which K-12 school programs, influenced by NCLB, structured and affected their academic experiences. The study reflects the perspective of Boykin and Noguera, who suggest that:

If racial categories are indeed social and not primarily biological in nature, then it should be possible to fundamentally alter the predictability of racial patterns related to academic ability and performance if we can eliminate the ways in which those patterns are entrenched within the structure and culture of a school, [...] addressing] the institutional practices and social conditions that produce, perpetuate, and give meaning to these disparities. (Boykin & Noguera, 2011)

While the current research is an institutional ethnography, mapping out and analyzing institutional practices and ruling relations emerging from K-12 institutions in relation to school and testing practices, it is grounded in the lives and experiences of students and the ways in which organizational structures and tests differentiate and mitigate their academic experiences.
This study sought to demonstrate and explain how diverse school settings and testing practices, informed by NCLB, interacted with 'dissimilarly situated' African American male students to produce disparate institutional outcomes. This opens the opportunity to explore and engage in further research that can, perhaps, begin to transform African American male engagement and achievement in K-12 schools and beyond. Smith supports the use of institutional ethnography in this way. She conveys the desire for:

A sociology capable of exploring and mapping actual organizational relations that are invisible but active in the everyday/every night sites where people take up resistance and struggle, capable of producing a knowledge that extends and expands their and our grasp of how things are put together and hence their and our ability to organize and act effectively. (Smith, 1993, p. 96)

The author hopes that this work encourages others to pursue the use of institutional ethnography in analyzing the ways that policy construction and implementation affect the experience of African American males throughout their K-12 education. The experiences of African American males within K-12 institutions are as complex as the institutional settings through which they matriculate. As such, particularly in urban settings, we must employ a diversity of research strategies, inclusive of institutional ethnography, in an effort to capture the nuances and broad range of challenges which face this population, so that indeed – no child is left behind.


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